LOVE'S MEINIE

"Il etoit tout couvert d'oisiaulx."
—*Romance of the Rose.*[1]

LECTURE I*

THE ROBIN

1. AMONG the more splendid pictures in the Exhibition of the Old Masters, this year, you cannot but remember the Vandyke portraits of the two sons of the Duke of Lennox.[2] I think you cannot but remember it, because it would be difficult to find, even among the works of Vandyke, a more striking representation of the youth of our English noblesse; nor one in which the painter had more exerted himself, or with better success, in rendering the decorous pride and natural grace of honourable aristocracy.

Vandyke is, however, inferior to Titian and Velasquez, in that his effort to show this noblesse of air and persons may always be detected; also the aristocracy of Vandyke's day were already so far fearful of their own position as to feel anxiety that it should be immediately recognized. And the effect of the painter's conscious deference, and of the

* Delivered at Oxford, March 15th, 1873.

[1] [See below, § 35, p. 41.]
[2] [No. 117 in that Exhibition. Portrait group of Lord John and Lord Bernard Stuart; exhibited again (by the Earl of Darnley) at the Academy in 1900 (No. 54).]

equally conscious pride of the boys, as they stood to be painted, has been somewhat to shorten the power of the one, and to abase the dignity of the other. And thus, in the midst of my admiration of the youths' beautiful faces, and natural quality of majesty, set off by all splendours of dress and courtesies of art, I could not forbear questioning with myself what the true value was, in the scales of creation, of these fair human beings who set so high a value on themselves; and,—as if the only answer,—the words kept repeating themselves in my ear, "Ye are of more value than many sparrows."[1]

2. Passeres, *στρουθοί*,—the things that open their wings,[2] and are not otherwise noticeable; small birds of the land and wood; the food of the serpent, of man, or of the stronger creatures of their own kind,—that even these, though among the simplest and obscurest of beings, have yet price in the eyes of their Maker, and that the death of one of them cannot take place but by His permission, has long been the subject of declamation in our pulpits, and the ground of much sentiment in nursery education. But the declamation is so aimless, and the sentiment so hollow, that, practically, the chief interest of the leisure of mankind has been found in the destruction of the creatures which they professed to believe even the Most High would not see perish without pity; and, in recent days, it is fast becoming the only definition of aristocracy, that the principal business of its life is the killing of sparrows.

Sparrows, or pigeons, or partridges, what does it matter? "Centum mille perdrices plumbo confecit;" * that is, indeed,

* The epitaph on Count Zachdarm, in *Sartor Resartus*.[3]

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[1] [Matthew x. 29, 31.]

[2] [*Passer*, for *panser*, from *pando*; *στρουθός*, possibly from *στορέννυμι*, to spread out.]

[3] [Quoted from memory from the end of book ii. chapter iv. ("quinquies mille," etc.).]

too often the sum of the life of an English lord; much questionable now, if *indeed* of more value than that of many sparrows.

3. Is it not a strange fact,[1] that, interested in nothing so much for the last two hundred years, as in his horses, he yet left it to the farmers of Scotland to relieve draught horses from the bearing-rein?* is it not one equally strange that, master of the forests of England for a thousand years, and of its libraries for three hundred, he left the natural history of birds to be written by a card-printer's lad of Newcastle?† Written, and not written, for indeed we have no natural history of birds written yet. It cannot be written but by a scholar and a gentleman; and no English gentleman in recent times has ever thought of birds except as flying targets, or flavourous dishes. The only piece of natural history worth the name in the English language, that I know of, is in the few lines of Milton on the Creation.[2] The only example of a proper manner of contribution to natural history is in White's *Letters from Selborne.* You know I have always spoken of Bewick as pre-eminently a vulgar or boorish person, though of splendid honour and genius;[3] his

* Sir Arthur Helps. *Animals and their Masters,* p. 67.
† *Ariadne Florentina,* § 101 [Vol. XXII. p. 362].

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[1] [The MS. draft has an additional passage here:—

"I have several times told you it gives me trouble to write or speak; —that I don't do either gushingly or with liberty. Still I am not often actually at a loss for words; but only, of two words I doubt which is the clearest, or, of many words which should come first, and so on. But to-day I am actually at a loss for words; and, what is worse, were I to look through all my dictionaries, I could not find them. For there are no words in any language, living or dead, which are bitter enough to speak the guilt, or scornful enough to express the shame . . ."

And then follow the criticisms of "an English lord," much as in the text.]

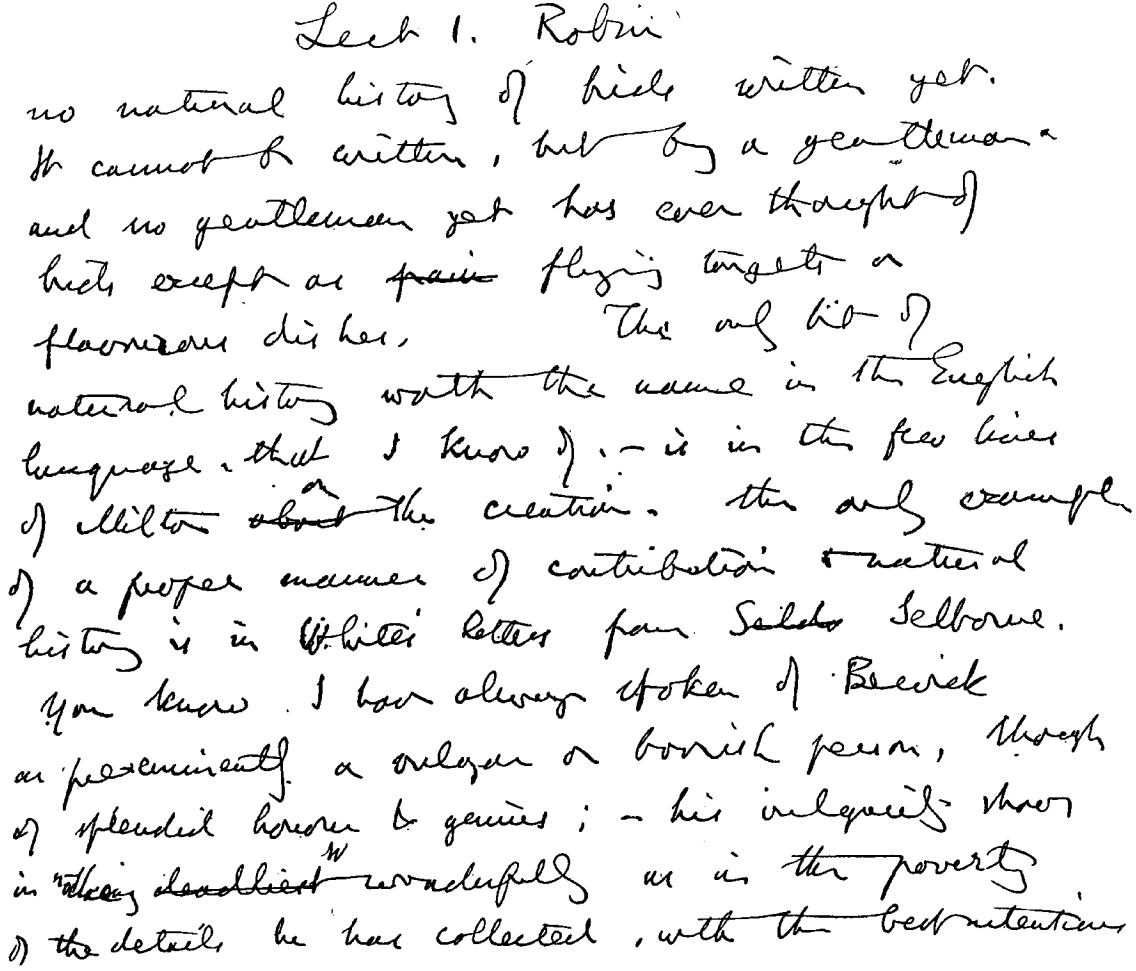
[2] [*Paradise Lost,* book vii. Lines from the book, describing the creation of birds, etc., are quoted in Vol. XVII. p. 249 (compare below, p. 50; and lines, describing the creation of plants, in *Proserpina* (see below, p. 365).]

[3] [See *Aratra Pentelici,* § 210 (Vol. XX. p. 355), and *Ariadne Florentina,* § 101 (Vol. XXII. p. 362).]

vulgarity shows in nothing so much as in the poverty of the details he has collected, with the best intentions, and the shrewdest sense, for English ornithology. His imagination is not cultivated enough to enable him to choose, or arrange.

4. Nor can much more be said for the observations of modern science. It is vulgar in a far worse way, by its arrogance and materialism. In general, the scientific natural history of a bird consists of four articles,—first, the name and estate of the gentleman whose gamekeeper shot the last that was seen in England; secondly, two or three stories of doubtful origin, printed in every book on the subject of birds for the last fifty years; thirdly, an account of the feathers, from the comb to the rump, with enumeration of the colours which are never more to be seen on the living bird by English eyes; and, lastly, a discussion of the reasons why none of the twelve names which former naturalists have given to the bird are of any further use, and why the present author has given it a thirteenth, which is to be universally, and to the end of time, accepted.

5. You may fancy this is caricature; but the abyss of confusion produced by modern science in nomenclature, and the utter void of the abyss when you plunge into it after any one useful fact, surpass all caricature. I have in my hand thirteen plates of thirteen species of eagles; eagles all, or hawks all, or falcons all—whichever name you choose for the great race of the hook-headed birds of prey—some so like that you can't tell the one from the other, at the distance at which I show them to you, all absolutely alike in their eagle or falcon character, having, every one, the falx for its beak, and every one, flesh for its prey. Do you suppose the unhappy student is to be allowed to call them all eagles, or all falcons, to begin with, as would be the first condition of a wise nomenclature, establishing resemblance by specific name, before marking variation by individual name? No such luck. I hold you up the plates


Leech 1. Robin

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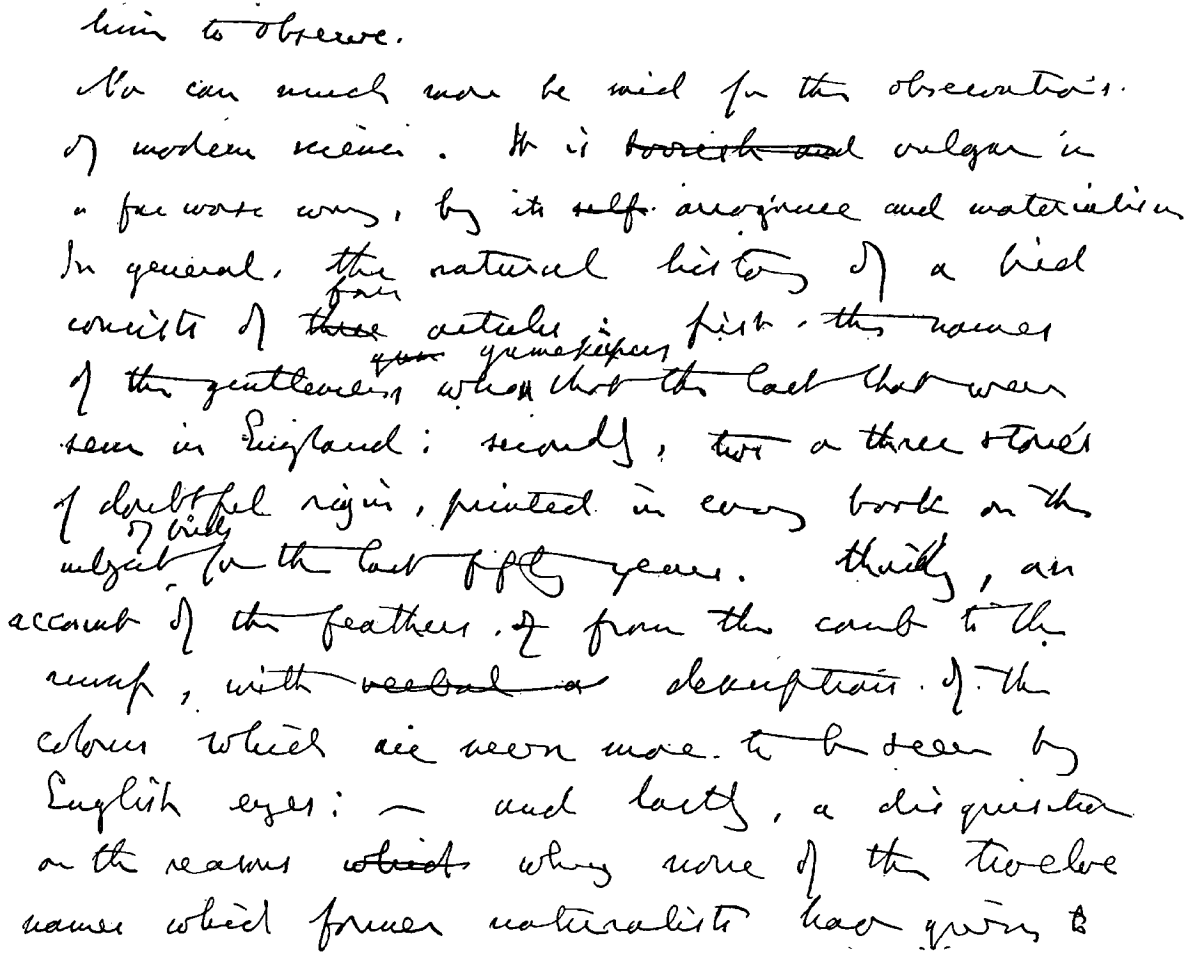

A Page of the MS. of "Love's Meinie" (§§ 3, 4)

pp. 19, 20

of the thirteen birds one by one, and read you their names off the back :—

The first,	is an Aquila.
The second,	a Haliætus.
The third,	a Milvus.
The fourth,	a Pandion.
The fifth,	an Astur.
The sixth,	a Falco.
The seventh,	a Pernis.
The eighth,	a Circus.
The ninth,	a Buteo.
The tenth,	an Archibuteo.
The eleventh,	an Accipiter.
The twelfth,	an Erythropus.
And the thirteenth,	a Tinnunculus.

There's a nice little lesson to entertain a parish schoolboy with, beginning his natural history of birds!

6. There are not so many varieties of robin as of hawk, but the scientific classifiers are not to be beaten. If they cannot find a number of similar birds to give different names to, they will give two names to the same one. Here are two pictures of your own redbreast, out of the two best modern works on ornithology. In one, it is called "Motacilla rubecula"; in the other, "Rubecula familiaris."[1]

7. It is indeed one of the most serious, as one of the most absurd, weaknesses, of modern naturalists to imagine that *any* presently invented nomenclature can stand, even were it adopted by the consent of nations, instead of the conceit of individuals. It will take fifty years' digestion before the recently ascertained elements of natural science can permit the arrangement of species in any permanently (even over a limited period) nameable order; nor then, unless a great man is born to perceive and exhibit such

[1] [See the particulars given in § 141 (below, p. 134).]

order. In the meantime, the simplest and most descriptive nomenclature is the best. Every one of these birds, for instance, might be called falco in Latin, hawk in English, some word being added to distinguish the genus, which should describe its principal aspect or habit. Falco montium, Mountain Hawk; Falco silvarum, Wood Hawk; Falco procellarum, Sea Hawk; and the like. Then, one descriptive epithet would mark species. Falco montium, aureus, Golden Eagle; Falco silvarum, apivorus, Honey Buzzard; and so on; and the naturalists of Vienna, Paris, and London should confirm the names of known creatures, in conclave, once every half-century, and let them so stand for the next fifty years.

8. In the meantime, you yourselves, or, to speak more generally, the young rising scholars of England,—all of you who care for life as well as literature, and for spirit,—even the poor souls of birds,—as well as lettering of their classes in books,—you, with all care, should cherish the old Saxon-English and Norman-French names of birds, and ascertain them with the most affectionate research—never despising even the rudest or most provincial forms: all of them will, some day or other, give you clue to historical points of interest. Take, for example, the common English name of this low-flying falcon, the most tameable and affectionate of his tribe, and therefore, I suppose, fastest vanishing from field and wood, the buzzard. That name comes from the Latin "buteo," still retained by the ornithologists; but, in its original form, valueless, to you. But when you get it comfortably corrupted into Provençal "Busac," (whence gradually the French busard, and our buzzard), you get from it the delightful compound "busacador," "adorer of buzzards"—meaning, generally, a sporting person; and then you have Dante's Bertrand de Born,[1] the first troubadour of war, bearing witness to you how the love of mere hunting and falconry was already, in his day, degrading the

[1] [See *Inferno*, xxviii. *ad fin.*, and xxix. *ad init.*]

military classes, and, so far from being a necessary adjunct of the noble disposition of lover or soldier, was, even to contempt, showing itself separate from both.

"Le ric home, cassador,
M'enneion, e'l buzacador.
Parlan de volada, d'austor,
Ne jamais, d'armas, ni d'amor."[1]

"The rich man, the chaser,
Tires me to death; and the adorer of buzzards.
They talk of covey and hawk,
And never of arms, nor of love."

"Cassador," of course, afterwards becomes "chasseur," and "austor" "vautour." But after you have read this, and familiarized your ear with the old word, how differently Milton's phrase will ring to you,—"Those who thought no better of the Living God than of a buzzard idol,"[2]—and how literal it becomes, when we think of the actual difference between a member of Parliament in Milton's time, and the Busacador of to-day;—and all this freshness and value in the reading, observe, come of your keeping the word which great men have used for the bird, instead of letting the anatomists blunder out a new one from their Latin dictionaries.

9. There are not so many nameable varieties, I just now said, of robin as of falcon; but this is somewhat inaccurately stated. Those thirteen birds represented a very large proportion of the entire group of the birds of prey, which in my sevenfold classification[3] I recommended you to call universally, "hawks." The robin is only one of the far greater multitude of small birds which live almost indiscriminately on grain or insects, and which I

[1] [See *Poésies Complètes de Bertran de Born* (in the *Bibliothèque Meridionale*, Tome I., 1888, p. 105).]

[2] [*Eikonoclastes:* see p. 280 of vol. i. of his *Works* (1847 edition).]

[3] [See *Eagle's Nest*, § 188 (Vol. XXII. p. 249), the classification being "Hawks, parrots, pies, sparrows, pheasants, gulls, and herons."]

recommended you to call generally "sparrows";[1] but of the robin itself, there are two important European varieties —one red-breasted, and the other blue-breasted.

10. You probably, some of you, never heard of the blue-breast; very few, certainly, have seen one alive, and, if alive, certainly not wild in England.

Here is a picture of it, daintily done,* and you can see the pretty blue shield on its breast, perhaps, at this distance. Vain shield, if ever the fair little thing is wretched enough to set foot on English ground! I find the last that was seen was shot at Margate so long ago as 1842,—and there seems to be no official record of any visit before that, since Mr. Thomas Embledon shot one on Newcastle town moor in 1816.[2] But this rarity of visit to us is strange; other birds have no such clear objection to being shot, and really seem to come to England expressly for the purpose. And yet this blue-bird—(one can't say

* Mr. Gould's, in his *Birds of Great Britain*.[3]

[1] [The MS. draft has an additional passage on "the Robin as the chief English representative of the whole species of the *στρουθός*":—

"You have large eagles and small, large owls and small; but not large robins and small. 'Well, but,' you say, 'there are different species of owls and eagles, but not different species of robins.' Yes; that is just the point; how little Nature has varied on this theme of the robin, how much on owl and eagle; what a specialty of perfection she seems to consider herself as having reached in a robin. Observe also that in this invariable size it is the best representative, as I have just said, of the essential *στρουθός*,—the land bird, or sparrow species. The *στρουθός* is the Bird central or absolute, in this point of size as in all others. You call a humming-bird a small bird; a crow, or a pheasant, a large bird; the *στρουθός* is just of what we feel to be a natural bird's size. This natural size, it seems, is not merely that to which we are accustomed, but that which has convenient relation to a bird's general functions. They are not usually intended to carry men on their backs, therefore they are not usually as large as ostriches; neither to feed on lambs, therefore not usually as large as eagles, nor on honey, therefore not usually as small as bees. They are for the most part meant to feed on fruits or insects, and to penetrate easily among tree branches. Large enough to catch flies and conquer worms; small enough to be concealed among leaves, and at ease between the twigs of a hedge: that is the normal size of a land bird."]

[2] [The date should be 1826. See Gould, vol. ii. No. 49, and for fuller references Yarrell's *History of British Birds*, 4th ed., vol. i. pp. 321–322. The bird is called "Bluethroat" or "Ruticilla Suecica."]

[3] [Vol. ii., No. 49. The pages are not numbered; the reference here (as elsewhere in this volume) is to the number of the *plate* which the letterpress accompanies.]