

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

\*.\* Correspondents are requested to be as brief as possible. The writer's name is in all cases required as proof of good faith.

## The English sparrow.

THIS bird seems to be on trial for its life before the American people. The charges against it are so indefinitely and loosely stated, that a cautious judge would be obliged to rule out a very large part of them. The bird is charged with many misdemeanors — such as tyrannizing over our native birds, and driving them from our home grounds, gardens, etc., to our great loss and damage; to leaving the insects which they were imported to destroy largely unmolested; to robbing our grain-fields and storage-houses; to befouling our roofs, rain-gutters, pipes, and walls of buildings, to the entire destruction of our rain-water supplies, etc. Words of praise are few and far between. The fact is, it has got a bad name, and with the usual result, — every one is ready to cast a stone at it, whether he knows any thing against or for it.

Whether the object of its importation — the destruction of worms and insects in the city parks — was a success or failure, I know not. My impression from the general reports is, that it is largely, if not entirely, a failure.

The sparrow is an active, hardy, and persevering bird; it has already possession of the New England, the middle, and the western states to the Rocky Mountains, and perhaps of the southern. From 1870 to 1872 I saw them in possession of the towns of the Missouri River valley, from Kansas City, north to Omaha. Probably the lower valley to St. Louis was occupied before this, as St. Louis had been previously occupied. Whether they had progressed then north from Omaha, I do not know.

Mr. Ralph S. Tarr, in *Science* (vi. 416), says, "In the southern and western states, beyond the Mississippi River, the bird has not been observed." This is a mistake so far as the western states are concerned, and may be for the southern. I saw them also in 1873 in Lincoln, Nebraska, 55 miles west of the Missouri River, and in Denver, Col., in 1883.

They seem to follow the great thoroughfares of transportation, probably attracted by the scattered grains upon the roads. In 1876 I saw them on the Chicago and north-western railroad, in Iowa, moving westward; and in 1883 moving northward above St. Joseph, on the Kansas City, St. Joseph, and Council Bluffs railroad.

The bird seems to have a marked preference for cities and large towns, probably from the greater abundance of its favorite food, the grains scattered in the offal of the great thoroughfares and about grain warehouses. Exceedingly social and gregarious, it selects the eave trough-pipes, cornices, and angles of the higher and larger buildings of these thoroughfares, for its retreats, nests, etc. It seems to care but little for trees or shrubbery, the common resort of our native birds: hence they seldom come in collision. From 1869 to 1882, my residence at Plattsmouth, Nebraska, and grounds, were embowered with trees and shrubbery, and the grounds were the resort of large numbers of our native birds. The sparrows were thick upon the streets, but I never saw one inside of the grounds, or interfering with the native birds. Since 1882, at Kansas City, under like surroundings, the same results obtain.

As an insectivorous bird, I know nothing of them, but presume that when grain fails they may resort to insects. Have you not in the east, where the birds

must now be much more numerous, and their habits more fully developed, many witnesses who can tell us what they know rather than what they do not know? The public would then be prepared to sit in judgment on the accused. Will not such witnesses give your readers this evidence through the columns of *Science*?

But now suppose this evidence adverse to the bird, and judgment of extermination follows. How is this sentence to be carried into execution? Shall it be by shooting? A survey of the field and a little consideration make this appeal a large undertaking; not unlike the extermination of the swarms of locusts which invade us — or even the flies and mosquitoes — by shooting. The idea is absurd. How will poison operate in the case? But a few moments' consideration will show the vast dimensions of this undertaking: first, the invention and preparation of a poison in such form as to induce the bird to prefer and take it in place of its own natural and accustomed food, if this can be done; then the millions of miles of area over which this preparation must be distributed to insure success, for by this time the bird must be assumed to be spread over the entire country, east and west, south and north, embracing Canada as well as the entire Pacific coast, involving the action of different governments.

Again, suppose this feat accomplished. What will be the effect of such a mass of poison on the entire life of the country, human as well as animal? And may we not stop here, and leave poison as among the absurd ideas?

The condemned sparrow seems to be entire master of the position; and can we not imagine it, in the slang phrase of the day, asking us, 'Well, what are you going to do about it?' A. L. CHILD, M.D.

Kansas City, Nov. 17.

## Stepniak's 'Russia under the czars.'

In *Science*, No. 142, you reviewed Stepniak's 'Russia under the czars.' I wonder that the author's real name is not known to you. It is Krawtschinsky, the murderer of Mesentzof (1878). A person of that sort has, I think, no right to complain that his friends are kept in confinement, and prevented from committing new crimes. A lie is certainly a very little offence in comparison to what he did and advocates; and lies are freely resorted to by that author on the old plan, '*Calomniez, il en restora toujours quelque chose.*' Now, besides, such a kind of lie pays well in England as sensational, as well as answering to the hatred of a considerable number of the higher and middle classes in England. How freely lies must be indulged in is shown by the statement you reprint, that the fortress of Peter and Paul is known as the place from which Krapotkine escaped. Now, this is a lie. Krapotkine was able to escape only because, on account of his real or supposed illness, he was transferred to a hospital.

As to cruelties perpetrated in the fortress, nobody who is not blinded by party spirit believes in them here, and this on account of the fact that until recently (1880) the prisoners could freely exchange letters with their friends by the aid of bribed guards; so much so, that Nitchayef conducted from his prison a great deal of the nihilist plots. Any cruelty inflicted on prisoners would be known in that way, but there is none except solitary confinement.

A. WOIEKOF.

St. Petersburg, Nov. 7.