OP: SCENES FROM THE BIRDS OF ARISTOPHANES

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Op: Scenes from the Birds of Aristophanes by Aristophanes

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ARISTOPHANES

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SCENES

BIRDS OF ARISTOPHANES

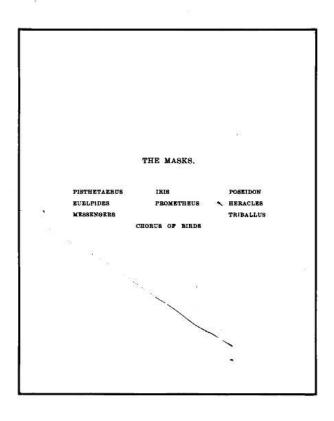
THE TRANSLATION

BY

ISAAC FLAGG

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THE ARGUMENT.

Two Athenians, PISTRETARRUS (Chickwin) and EUELPIDES (Hopegood), tired of the humdrum life in their native city, choose to migrate and cast in their lot with the birds. By the eloquence of Chickwin the birds have been pereuaded to build a city in the sir, declare themselves independent of both gods and men, and assert their ancient prerogative of the sovereignty of the universe. While the two men are occupied in the inner sanctuary, whither they have withdrawn to be fledged, the bird-chorus, in the "Parabasia," present their manifesto to the public.

PARABASIS.

(Translated by ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE.)

Come on then ye dwellers by nature in darkness, and like to the leaves' generations,

That are little of might, that are moulded of mire, unenduring and shadow-like nations,

Poor plumeless ephemerals, comfortless mortals, as visions of shadows fast fleeing,

Lift up your mind unto us that are deathless, and dateless the date of our being:

4

Us, children of heaven, ageless for aye, us, all of whose thoughts are eternal;

That ye may from henceforth, having heard of us all things aright as to matters supernal,

Of the being of birds, and beginning of gods, and of streams, and the dark beyond reaching,

Truthfully knowing aright, in my name bid Prodicus pack with his preaching.

It was Chaos and Night at the first, and the blackness of darkness,

and Hell's broad border, Earth was not, nor air, neither heaven; when in depths of the womb

of the dark without order
First thing first-born of the black-plumed night was a wind-egg
hatched in her bosom,

Whence timely with seasons revolving again sweet Love burst out as

a blossom, Gold wings gleaming forth of his back, like whirlwinds gustily turning.

He, after his wedlock with Chaos, whose wings are of darkness, in Hell broad-burning, For his nestlings begat him the race of us first, and upraised us to

light new-lighted,
And before this was not the race of the gods, until all things by Love

were united:
And of kind united with kind in communion of nature the sky and

And of kind united with kind in communion of nature the say and the sea are Brought forth, and the earth and the race of the gods everlasting and

blest. So that we are Far away the most ancient of all things blest. And that we are of Love's generation

There are manifest manifold signs. We have wings, and with us have the Loves habitation;

And manifold fair young folk that foreswore love once, ere the bloom of them ended,

Have the men that pursued and desired them subdued, by the help of us only befriended, With such baits as a quail, a flamingo, a goose, or a cock's comb

staring and splendid. All best good things that befall men come from us birds, as is plain to all reason:

For first we proclaim and make known to them spring, and the winter and autumn in season: Bid sow, when the crane starts clanging for Afric, in shrill-voiced

emigrant number, And calls to the pilot to hang up his rudder again for the season, and slumber;

And then weave cloak for Orestes the thief, lest he strip men of theirs if it freezes. And again thereafter the kite reappearing announces a change in the

breezes. And that here is the season for shearing your sheep of their spring wool. Then does the swallow

Give you notice to sell your greatcoat, and provide something light for the heat that's to follow. Thus are we as Ammon or Delphi unto you, Dodona, nay, Phœbus Apollo.

For, as first ye come all to get auguries of birds, even such is in all things your carriage,

Be the matter a matter of trade or of earning your bread, or of any one's marriage.

And all things we lay to the charge of a bird that belongs to discerning prediction: Winged fame is a bird, as you reckon; you sneeze, and the sign 's as

a bird for conviction: All tokens are 'birds' with you-sounds too, and lackeys, and donkeys. Then must it not follow

That we ARE to you all as the manifest godhead that speaks in prophetic Apollo?

In the following scenes and songs, from the latter part of the comedy of the Birds, Aristophanes, while holding constantly to the fanciful dramatic illusion of a winged community and a city in the sir, has introduced, after his usual manner, a great many witty allusions of a local and personal character, besides reminiscences and travestics of the famous literature of his time. Such passages cannot, of course, impress the modern reader as forcibly as they must have impressed the contemporaries of the poet in the Dionysiac theatre at Athens; still less can their effect be adequately conveyed by means of a translation into a modern tongue.

IRIS, personification of the rainbow, messenger of the gods of Heaven, is a familiar figure to readers of the Iliad of Homer. We can well understand the surprise and indignation manifested by the goddess, when in Scene IV. she is intercepted on her flight down to Earth, informed that she is guilty of trespass, and called upon to show her passport.

PROMETHEUS, a god of the fallen dynasty of the Titans, sentenced by Zeus, for stealing fire and bestowing it as a gift upon mortals, to be chained to a cliff of Mt. Caucasus and preyed upon eternally by a ravenous vulture, is known to readers of Aeschylus as a type of lofty courage, sublime endurance, and a proudly defiant spirit. As he appears in Scene V. Prometheus has clearly deteriorated in respect to some of the nobler qualities of the soul, while his hatred for the gods of the Zeus administration, and his love for men — and birds, remain undiminished.

Possidon, god of the sea, and Heracles, the mighty here and demi-god, introduced in Scene VI. as ambassadors of Zeus to the birds, are typical, in the comic representation, the former of the elegant Athenian aristocracy, the latter of a class that would include the professional athlete and the sporting man.—Triballus, the third member of the divine commission, supposed to represent a hitherto unknown race of foreign gods, is a pure invention of Aristophanes; the name being taken from the Triballoi, a semi-barbarous people inhabiting lands near the Danube, the district of the modern Servia and Bulgaria.