"These birds (passenger pigeons) seem now to have joined the extinct starlings of the Ile de la Réunion."—Gene Stratton Porter, Homing with the Birds.

"The transporting of the Fregilupus to England caused me no little anxiety, seeing that it was infinitely more valuable than a Great Auk, and I was glad when I handed it into Dr Günther's custody, as I had not quitted my hold of the case for some days and nights."—Dr Bowdler Sharpe, History of the Natural History Collections of the British Museum.

It is a commonplace of natural history that island species are frequently unique in form and too often tend to become extinct. Thus the tricoloured pigeon hollandais, the crested blue parrot and the flame-feathered aphanapteryx were all remarkable birds, occurred only in the Mascarene Islands and have all vanished from the face of the earth.

There was also found in the island of Réunion a curious starling, which, from its elongated beak and crested head, was at first supposed to be a species of hoopoe, and was even figured as the "Black and White Hoopoe" in Buffon's Natural History—this being doubly inaccurate, since, as pointed out by M. Levaillant, this brown and white bird had not an atom of black in its entire plumage. The "hoopoe" fairly swarmed, even down to the seashore, while inland it frequented the marshes in great flocks, feeding greedily on the berries of the coffee-tree and on those of the pseudo-buxus. It became very fat in June and July, and may itself have been used for food, for it had none of the usual starling alertness, being so stupid that it could easily be knocked down with a stick. Its abundance procured for it a popular name, the bird being styled the "martin," a term also
THE RÉUNION STARLING

Exterminated 1837
applied to the mynahs which, having been introduced from India, had multiplied exceedingly on the island.

The extinction of the Réunion starling is an ornithological mystery. Like the ill-fated Labrador duck, it seemed to have no particular enemies; its environment must have been eminently suitable for it, or it could not have swarmed as it did, while to the advantage of numbers it added a voracious appetite, backed by a specialised beak and large, powerful feet armed with capable claws. It is thus probable that some outside influence caused its extermination; perhaps the introduced mynahs competed too successfully for nesting sites, or the sticks of the creoles became too busy. Be this as it may, it now only survives in the cabinets of a few—a very few—museums; its nestlings and eggs are unknown.

In Levaillant's day (1800) collectors had little difficulty in obtaining specimens. Levaillant states that he himself had seen seven in skin, besides one in his own cabinet. Yet when Jules Verreaux, the celebrated taxidermist, visited Réunion in the thirties the bird had become so rare that Verreaux supposed that the last of them fell to his own gun, and the skeleton which he presented to Professor Newton long remained the only example in England. Somewhere about this time M. Legras, a resident of Réunion and an enthusiastic ornithologist, in spite of his local knowledge and repeated excursions after birds, noted that he had scarcely seen ten of the once swarming "hoopoes" in all his wanderings. The bird had, at any rate, been completely exterminated, not only throughout the coast regions, but even in the adjacent mountains, and though it was thought that it might survive in the forests near Saint Joseph, it was so nearly finished that the local museum could not boast of a single specimen. In 1834, however, an example was presented to the Port Louis collection by a member of the Mauritius Natural History Society, while in 1835 M. Sauzier brought four living birds to Dr Desjardins. The fact that it was possible at this late day to obtain so many live specimens together suggests that the four birds were fledglings and all taken from the same nest, that the dying species still
struggled to breed, and that the normal clutch of eggs at a sitting was four or five. In the sunset of their race these captives still maintained family traditions, for they ate readily anything that was offered; perhaps they were less stupid than the average, for two of them managed to escape. It may have been one of these fugitives that was shot by M. Autard and exhibited at a meeting of the Mauritius Natural History Society on 5th January 1837—the last of its race.

In view of this obituary it is pleasant to record that our own Natural History Museum at South Kensington possesses a good example of the Réunion starling. This individual was received from Mr Nivoy in 1833 by the old Comte de Riocour, who had a very famous and choice collection of birds at his chateau at Vitry. On his death the specimens passed into the museum of the second Comte, who kept his birds in a large room, protected from the dust by glass cases and from the light by green blinds. The third Comte sold the lot to that sound naturalist, the late Adolphe Boucard, who offered them to the British Museum. One hundred and forty-eight specimens, including the starling, were purchased by the trustees, and some of us well remember this historic individual, for long an ornament of the bird gallery in its own glass-fronted case and now transferred to the study collection. Thanks to the care lavished on it by successive owners, the bird seems likely to add at least a century to the ninety years of post-mortem life which it has already achieved.

The museum of the Jardin des Plantes at Paris has had several Réunion starlings. Two of these were not mere skins, but actual birds preserved in spirit, and were partially dissected by MM. Milne-Edwards and Oustalet, who investigated the digestive tract and portion of the respiratory organs. Two stuffed individuals are still displayed in the main bird gallery, with a number of mynahs and grackles: one is fully adult, and is probably the "beautiful new specimen" so carefully measured by Dr Hartlaub many years ago, while the other is sub-adult and may be one of the two cited by Levaillant as preserved in "Notre Muséum de Paris."
The younger bird is not quite perfect, a portion of the crest being missing.

By the kindness of MM. Milne-Edwards and Oustalet the writer was enabled to photograph both individuals. The adult bird has been carefully mounted, and bears a well-developed crest of white-shafted feathers; the general body colour is ashy brown, the wings and tail being blackish brown and the flanks isabelline. The beak is bright orange-yellow, and the legs, feet and claws citron-yellow, the last being strongly curved. The younger specimen, like all sub-adult individuals, as far as is known, has more brown and less grey in its plumage than obtains in mature birds. The eye in this species was said to be brownish blue, and it is quite likely that such was the case, as similar tints occur to-day in the young of other starlings, and the iris of the Ré-union bird may have been described from an immature specimen. The tongue was frayed towards the tip into brush-like filaments suitable for taking honey and small insects, and was forked before and behind. The late Professor Louis Brasil demonstrated a sexual dimorphism in this species, the beaks of the males being larger and the crest on the head more developed than in the females. This character is well shown in the four examples which Dr Chaulmet presented about 1832 to the Troyes Museum.

The curtain has long rung down upon the Réunion starling, yet by a happy chance it was momentarily lifted in 1844, though the species was already in its grave. In that year Professor Savi, of Pisa, received from a Corsican priest named Lombardi several preserved specimens and with great generosity presented nine of these priceless treasures to various Italian and other museums, retaining only one for Pisa. The full census is: Paris, 4 (2 mounted, 2 in spirit); Troyes, 4; London, 1; Cambridge, 1 (skeleton); Caen, 1; Florence, 1; Turin, 1; Pisa, 1; Leyden, 1; Stockholm, 1; Belgium, 1; Lusanne, 1; Geneva, 1; Livourne, 1; Port Louis, 2. The writer is indebted to Professor Menegaux for permission to reproduce, from *The Revue Française d'Ornithologie*, the fine plate of the specimen at Caen accompanying this article. Professor Brasil,
speaking of this individual, notes that the crest is actually longer than appears in the photograph, the plumes, owing to their fineness, not lending themselves well to the camera: their true proportions may, however, be deduced from the dark line in the centre of the crest, caused by two shafts seen together.

And thus is written the story of the Réunion starling—isolated, aberrant, without kith or kin among living birds, its swarming nation exterminated like the passenger pigeons to which it has been compared. Too late the naturalist recalls the suggestion of Levaillant: “The bird being very common in the isles of France, one may hope that some travellers will one day give us its history.”