

THE DEER MENACE.

Timely Warnings Unheeded.

Attention to the menace of plant-eating animals in our native forests has frequently been drawn in the past by various authorities, such as Dr. L. Cockayne, but it was not until the Forest and Bird Protection Society took the matter in hand and broadcasted the gravity of the question throughout the land, that corrective measures were begun.

The following paper by the Rev. P. Walsh, which was read before the Auckland Institute, in August, 1892, is an instance of many such unheeded warnings:

With the exception of that of the domestic animals, most of the attempts at acclimatisation that have been made in this country have been unfortunate. The small birds are a severe tax on the farmer; the rabbits threaten to break up the estates of the large landholders, who are said to have celebrated their introduction with a champagne lunch; while the stoats and weasels, from which so much was expected, have not only failed to accomplish the object desired, but are already, in the destruction of native birds, and in their depredations in the fowl-yard, proving themselves an intolerable nuisance.

Still, though the mistake is now generally admitted, the attempt in these cases was somewhat justified by the hope, delusive though it soon proved to be, of some tangible benefit that would more than compensate for any attendant evil. This justification, however, can hardly be allowed in the case of deer, unless their introduction be accompanied by certain restrictions that have not hitherto been observed. For, although there may be few forms of enjoyment to equal that which would be found in stalking the grand game amongst our forest-clad mountains, still those in a position to enjoy the sport would necessarily form but a fraction of our population, while even the keenest sportsman would hardly be content to purchase his own gratification by the destruction of that forest which is the glory of his country and the birthright of the community at large.

To those who are unacquainted with the New Zealand bush it may seem strange to associate the idea of destruction with a few head of these innocent-looking creatures. They are perhaps familiar with the idea of an Old Country deer-park, where the animals wander harmlessly among the sylvan glades with no other effect than that of giving life and beauty to the

landscape; and they would be surprised to learn that the presence of the deer would prove more injurious to a rata or a kauri than to an elm or an oak. And, indeed, if they made the comparison at all, their conclusion would probably be in favour of the giant growth and the massive density of our own forest. The two conditions, however, are entirely different, and the comparison is not so easily disposed of. The European forest or deer-park, it must be recollected, has grown up *subject to the presence of ruminants of various kinds*—that is to say, the several species of trees and shrubs composing it have overcome (perhaps with artificial assistance) any struggle they may have had when young and weak, and the whole is now able to take care of itself. Again, the understuff in a great part consists of seedlings from the older trees, of which, though many may have been cropped or broken, a sufficient number have survived to replace the older growth. And, besides this, the floor of the forest is generally covered with a quantity of grasses, fern, and brambles, which spring up every year, and which amply supply the wants of the animals.

But in the New Zealand bush the case is quite opposite to all this. The forest has grown up through the course of ages undisturbed by any four-footed enemy whatever. In its virgin state there is no grass, properly speaking, at all, while the undergrowth of ferns, shrubs, and seedling plants, once destroyed, can never be restored. And, moreover, the constituent portions are so dependent on each other for nourishment and protection that, once the balance has been disturbed, the entire growth rapidly suffers.

It may seem incredible that the towering kauri or the giant rata, whose twisted limbs, loaded with a fairy garden of epiphytes and climbing plants, have weathered a thousand