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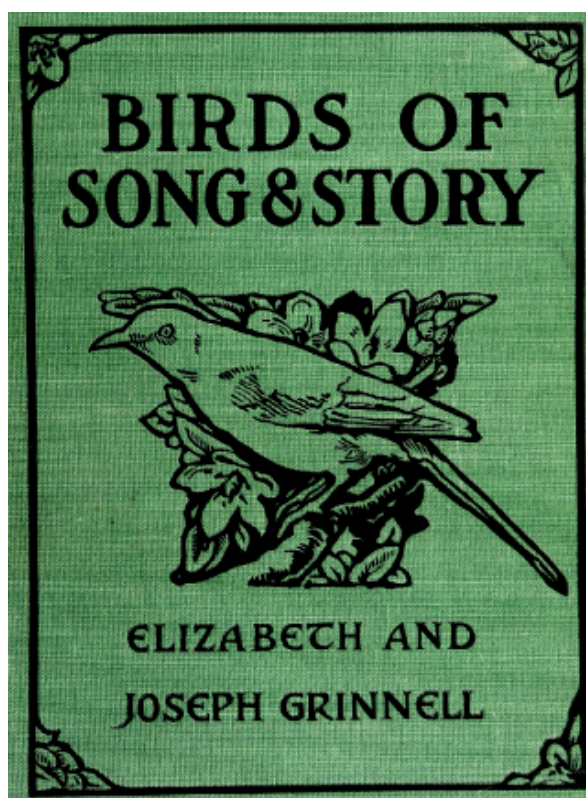
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BIRDS OF SONG AND STORY

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FOX SPARROW.

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BIRDS OF SONG AND STORY

BY

ELIZABETH AND JOSEPH GRINNELL

AUTHORS OF "OUR FEATHERED FRIENDS"

"And now, wouldst thou, O man, delight the ear
With earth's delicious sounds, or charm the eye
With beautiful creations, then pass forth
And find them midst those many-colored birds
That fill the glowing woods. The richest hues
Lie in their splendid plumage, and their tones
Are sweeter than the music of the lute."



CHICAGO

A. W. MUMFORD, PUBLISHER

1901



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THE BIRDS

They are swaying in the marshes,
They are swinging in the glen,
Where the cat-tails air their brushes
In the zephyrs of the fen;
In the swamp's deserted tangle,
Where the reed-grass whets its scythes;
In the dismal, creepy quagmire.
Where the snake-gourd twists and writhes.

They are singing in arroyos,
Where the cactus mails its breast.
Where the Spanish bayonet glistens
On the steep bank's rocky crest;
In the canon, where the cascade
Sets its pearls in maiden-hair,
Where the hay and holly beckon
Valley sun and mountain air.

They are nesting in the elbow
Of the scrub-oak's knotty arm,
In the gray mesh of the sage-brush,
In the wheat-fields of the farm;
In the banks along the sea beach,
In the vine above my door.
In the outstretched, clumsy fingers
Of the mottled sycamore.

While the church-bell rings its discourse
 They are sitting on the spires;
 Song and anthem, psalm and carol
 Quaver as from mystic lyres.
 Everywhere they flirt and flutter.
 Mate and nest in shrub and tree.
 Charmed, I wander yon and hither,
 While their beauties ravish me,
 Till my musings sing like thrushes,
 And my heart is like a nest,
 Softly lined with tender fancies
 Plucked from Nature's mother-breast.

ELIZABETH GRINNELL.

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[9]

SINGERS AND THEIR SONGS

And hark! The nightingale begins its song,—
 "Most musical, most melancholy bird."
 A melancholy bird? Oh, idle thought.
 In nature there is nothing melancholy.
 'Tis the merry nightingale
 That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
 With fast, thick warble his delicious notes.

COLERIDGE.

Some barbarous peoples possess a rude taste for the beautiful plumage of birds, decorating their bodies in feathers of softest and brightest tints. But we have record of few, if any, savage tribes the world over which delight in bird melody. True, the savage may seek his food by sound, or even song, but to feast the ear on music for music's sake—ah, this is reserved for culture.

An ear cultivated to melody is one of the soul's luxuries. Attuned to sweet and varied sound, it may become the guide to bird secrets never imparted to the eye.

Sitting in the close shrubbery of a home garden, or crouching moveless in a forest, one may catch whispers of bird language never imparted to human ears when the listener is moving about or talking with a comrade.

If one has accidentally or by patience discovered the evening resort of shy birds, let him precede the birds by half an hour. Sitting low among rocks or fallen trees, having the forethought to wear plainly colored clothes, and as moveless as the neighboring objects, one may be treated to such a feast of sounds as will both surprise and entertain him. The birds will come close, and even hop over one's coat sleeves and shoes, though so much as a full-fledged wink may dissipate the charm.

[10]

Just before bedtime there are whisperings, and salutes, and low-voiced conversations, and love notes, and "O's" and "Ah's" at sight of a belated insect, and lullaby ditties, and if one be possessed of a good deal of imagination, "evening prayers."

Birds that fly from their night-time perches in the thick shrubbery in the morning dusk with a whirr, and a scream, or emphatic call-note, in evening time just whisper or sing in half-articulate tones.

To be out in their haunts late in the day and very early in the dawn is to learn things about birds one never forgets. And if one chance to remain late at night, one may often hear some feathered person mumble, or talk, or scold, or complain, or sing a short melody, in his sleep. Some students of bird-lore suggest that all-night singers, like the mockers, and some thrushes, do "talk in their sleep," instead of from intent and choice. If one will watch a tame canary in its cage

one may hear a very low, sweet warble from the bird while its head is tucked under its feathers. This act wakens the little creature, and it may be seen to finish its note while it looks about in the lamp-light in a half-bewildered way.

Take our domestic fowls! Go noiselessly out to the chicken roost and stand stock-still for a while. Now and then some hen or cock will speak a few words in its own language, in a rambling, dozing way. Then the suggestion passes on, and perhaps half a dozen individuals engage in nocturnal conversation. One, more "nervous" from yesterday's overwork perhaps, actually has a nightmare, and cackles in fright. All this has no connection with the usual time for the head of the family to give his warning crow that midnight or daytime is close at hand and there is scarcely time for another wink of sleep.

[11]

Once in the secret of bird notes, even a blind person may locate the immediate vicinity of a nest. And he may identify species by the call-notes and songs. We have a blind girl neighbor who declares she would rather have her hearing than her sight, she has learned so well to hear what her sight might deprive her of.

When once the ear has learned its better lessons, glimpses, so to speak, of bird life flutter to it as naturally as leaves flutter to the sward in autumn. It is the continual chatter, chatter, that deprives many of us of the best enjoyments of life. We talk when we should listen. Nature speaks low more often than she shouts. A taciturn child or person finds out things that are worth the habit of keeping still to know.

These remarks are in the interest of singing birds. A bird is sometimes interrupted, and comes to a sudden stop. A footstep, a word, a laugh, and the very next note is swallowed by the singer. By studying our songsters one may come to know for one's self how individuals differ even among the same species.

There is the sad-voiced phœbe! Even she forgets her customary dismal cry at certain times when flies are winging their midday dance on invisible floors that never were waxed. It is when she takes a "flat stand" on the roof-corner and "bewails her lot" that her notes are utterly disconsolate. Take a couple of phœbes on a cloudy day, just after "one's folks have gone away from home on a long visit," and nothing lends an aid to sorrow like their melancholy notes. Really we do believe phœbe thinks he is singing. But he has mistaken his calling. Some of the goldfinches have a plaintive note, especially while nesting, which appeals to the gloomy side of the listener, if he chance to have such a side. Were Coleridge listening to either of these, the phœbe or the goldfinch, he would doubtless say, in answer to the charge of sadness:

[12]

"A melancholy bird? Oh, idle thought!
In nature there is nothing melancholy."

And he would have us believe the birds are "merry" when they sing.

And so they shall be merry. Even the mourning dove shall make us glad. She does not intend to mourn; the appearance of sadness being only the cadence of her natural voice. She has not learned the art of modulation; though the bluebird and the robin and all the thrushes call her attention to the matter every year.

If one will closely watch a singer, unbeknown to him, when he is in the very act, one may note the varying expression of the body, from the tip of his beak to the tip of his tail. Sometimes he will stand still with closely fitting plumage and whole attitude on tiptoe. Sometimes he will crouch, and lift the plumage, and gyrate gracefully, or flutter, or soar off at random on quick wings.

Sometimes he sings flat on the breast like a song-sparrow, or again high up in the sky like the lark. However he sings, heaven bless the singer! "The earth would be a cheerless place were there no more of these."

But legend tells the story of singing birds in its own way—the story of a time long, long eons ago, when not a single bird made glad the heart of anything or anybody.

[13]

True, there were some large sea birds and great walking land birds, too deformed for any one to recognize as birds in these days, but there was no such thing as a singing bird.

One day there came a great spring freshet, the greatest freshet ever dreamed of, and all the land animals sought shelter in the trees and high mountains. But the water came up to the peaks and over the treetops, and sorrow was in all the world. Suddenly a giraffe, stretching its long neck

in all directions, espied a big boat roofed over like a house. The giraffe made signs to the elephant, and the elephant gave the signal, as elephants to this day do give signals that are heard for many a mile, so they say! Then there came a scurrying for the big boat. A few of all the animals got on board, by hook or crook, and the rain was coming down in sheets. All at once along came the lizards, crawling up the sides of the boat and hunting for cracks and knot-holes to crawl into, just as lizards are in the habit of doing on the sly to this day. But not a crack or knot-hole could they find in the boat's side; for the loose places, wide enough for a lizard to flatten himself into, had all been filled up with gum, or something.

Then the lizards began to hiss, exactly the way they hiss to this day when they are frightened; and the big animals inside the boat poked out their noses to see what was to pay.

"Oh, they are nothing but lizards!" exclaimed the giraffe to the elephant, who had naturally taken possession of more than his share of the only foothold in existence. "Let them drown in the freshet."

But a big, awkward land bird, with teeth, and a tail like a church steeple, took pity on the lizards and gnawed a hole in the wall of the boat. [14]

Of course in trooped the lizards. Once in, they disposed themselves in nooks and corners, and right under the flapping ears of the elephant and between the pointed ears of the giraffe. And they began to whisper.

It was a very low, hissing whisper, as if they had never gotten farther than the s's in the alphabet, but the big animals understood.

Plenty of room was made for the lizards, and they were allowed to make a square meal now and then on the flies that had come in at the boat's door, uninvited, plenty of them.

After a few days the spring freshet came to an end, and the giraffe opened the door of the boat-house and looked out. He made signs to the elephant, and the elephant gave the signal, and out walked all the animals on "dry ground," which, to tell the truth, was rather muddy.

When all the other creatures were out of the boat it came the lizard's turn. But the elephant and the giraffe bethought them of something, and turned back to the boat "You promised us! You promised us!" they cried, to the wriggling lizards that hadn't a single thing about them to make anybody desire their company in land or sea.

"So we did promise," they answered, hissing their words.

Then the lizards all turned facing each other in rows, and stuck out their long tongues just as lizards do to this day, and breathed on one another, and made a sizzling noise. Suddenly, from each side of their long tails appeared pin-feathers, which grew very fast, till the scales were all disappeared. And then little baby feathers appeared on their backs, and breasts, and fore legs, or arms, which overlapped each other like scales, and were beautiful and soft and many-tinted. Beaks grew in place of the wide mouths; only the hind legs were left as they were. But these, too, began to change! They grew long, and slim, and hard, but the nails remained as they were before, only stronger. Then the lizards were reptiles no longer, but beautiful birds. And with one accord they began to sing, each singing a different song from his neighbor, and making the clear air ring with melody. [15]

And the giraffe made signs to the elephant, and the elephant signaled all the other animals to return. And so they returned. And they could hardly believe their eyes when the elephant told them these were the crawling lizards that had come into the boat-house the last thing. But he assured them they were the "very same." And then he told them how the lizards had promised him and the big giraffe that if they would be permitted to stay in the boat with the rest until the spring freshet was over, they would be "angels" ever afterward, and spend all their time, when they were not eating and sleeping, in making glad melody for all the animal world.

While the giraffe was speaking the birds lifted their wings, which an hour before were bare arms, and soared out and up into the blue sky, singing as they went.

And this was the origin of the singing birds. To explain how, to this day, there are plenty of lizards of all sizes and colors, the legend hints a sequel to the story. Not all of the lizards were able or even willing to go into the boat-house, being naturally shy, and the holes the big bird pecked in the walls were all too soon sealed up.

Almost drowned, the remaining lizards crept up on the backs of the great water dragons, the leviathan, and behemoth, which nobody knows anything about in our days, and so were saved.

[16]

Anyhow, we have them, on warm days sunning themselves on fence-rails and bare rocks, or scurrying under the stumps and stones. But they are always on good terms with the birds, for we have seen them basking in the sun together, and they eat the selfsame insects.

The lizards are no doubt discussing with the birds the approach of another spring freshet, when they, too, will bethink them of the boat-house, and so come by feathers and songs.

Harmless they are, as the birds, whom they resemble in many ways. We have taught some of them to drink milk and honey from a teaspoon, and to peck at insects in our fingers, to come at our call, and to lie in our hands. To some they are beautiful creatures; to others they are "nothing but lizards." Boys throw stones at them, and girls wish there were no lizards, they "are so ugly."

Oh, the pity of it! If these would but turn the creatures tenderly over, they would see beautiful colors on the under side, that sparkle and glisten like the breast of a brightly tinted bird. We are acquainted with one lizard as long as a mocking-bird, with a breast as silver-gray. And we love to think of the time (of course it is imagination, though they do say there is possibly some truth in it) when another spring freshet, or something, will turn the little reptile into the bird he resembles.

CHAPTER I

[17]

OUR COMRADE THE ROBIN

Robin, Sir Robin, gay-vested knight,
Now you have come to us, summer's in sight;
You never dream of the wonders you bring—
Visions that follow the flash of your wing.
How all the beautiful by and by
Around you and after you seems to fly;
Sing on, or eat on, as pleases your mind.
Well have you earned every morsel you find.
"Aye! ha! ha! ha!" whistles Robin. My dear,
Let us all take our own choice of good cheer.

LUCY LARCOM.

On account of its generous distribution, and the affection for the bird in the heart of Young America and England alike, the robin shall be given first place among the singing birds. He is the "Little Wanderer"—as the name signifies—the "Robin-son Crusoe" of almost every clime and race.

True, he may be a warbler instead of a thrush in the Old World; but what does that signify? To whatever class or family he may belong by right of birth and legend, the bird of the red breast is the bird of the human breast.

It is impossible to study the early history of birds in any language and not stumble upon legend and superstition. And the more we read of these the more we come to delight in them. There may not be a bit of truth in the matter, but there is fascination. It is like delving among the dust and cobwebs of an old attic. The more dust and cobwebs, the more fun in coming upon things one never went in quest of.

Of course superstition has its objections; but when the robin is the point at issue, we may waive objections and go on our merry ways satisfied that the oldest and clearest head in the family will concur.

[18]

Legends concerning our comrade the robin are full of tender thought of him. They have kept his memory green through the rain and shine of centuries, even going so far as to embalm him after death, as will be seen.

It is well-nigh impossible to give the earliest date in which the robin is mentioned as a "sacred bird." Certain it is that he ranks with characters of "ye olden time," for myth and superstition enshrined him. The literature of many tongues has preserved him. Poetry and sculpture have

embodied him and given him place among the gods and winged beings that inhabit the "neighbor world." Did he not scorch his original gray breast by taking his daily drop of water to lost souls? Did he not stain it by pressing his faithful heart against the crown of thorns? Or, did he not burn it in the Far North when he fanned back into flame the dying embers which the polar bear thought to have trampled out in his wrath that white men invaded his shores? Was he not always the "pious bird?"—though it must be confessed that his beak alone seemed to be possessed of religious tendencies. Was he not the original church sexton who covered the dead, with impartial beak, from eye of sun and man, piling high and dry the woodland leaves about them? The wandering minstrel, the orphan child, or the knight of kingly robe, each shared his sweet charity.



ROBIN.

The English ballad of the "Babes in the Wood" immortalized his memory in poetical sentiment: [19]

"Their little corpse the robin-redbreast found,
And strewed with pious bills the leaves around."

Earlier than the pathetic career of these Babes, homage was paid to the robins,

"Who with leaves and flowers do cover
The friendless bodies of unburied men."

This superstition of the robin's art in caring for the dead runs through many of the old poets, Drayton, Grahame, Hood, Herrick, and others. Strict justice in the matter would have divided the praise of him with the charitable night winds, for it was they more than he who "covered friendless bodies." The sylvan shades of the Old World being then more comprehensive than now, unburied men, from any cause, found their last resting-place in the lap of the forest, sleeping wherever they fell, since no laws of "decent burial" governed the wilds. The night winds, true to their instincts then as now, swirled the fallen leaves about any object in their way, in the fashion of a burial shroud. As a matter of course, credit was given to the robin, whose voracious appetite always led him to plunder litter of any sort in search of food. Up bright and early, as is still his habit (since at this hour he is able to waylay the belated night insect), the robin was spied bestirring the forest leaves, and unbeknown to himself was sainted for all time.

And his duties were not confined to those of sexton alone, for, according to good witnesses, he became both sculptor and clergyman—

"For robin-redbreasts when I die
Make both my monument and elegy,"

—stripping, as they were supposed to do, the foliage from the trees on which to write their elegies, and so leaving the uncovered trunks as monumental shafts. [20]

According to tradition, it was the robin who originated the first conception of decorating the graves of martyrs.

"The robin-redbreast oft at evening hours
Shall kindly lend his aid,
With hoary moss and gathered flowers
To deck the grave where thou art laid."

And again from one of the old poets, who was naturally anxious that his own last rites should be proper as well as pathetic:

"And while the wood nymphs my old corpse inter,
Sing thou my dirge, sweet-warbling chorister;
My epitaph in foliage next write this:
'Here, here, the tomb of Robert Herrick is.'"

And so it came to pass, by the patronage of the poets, that in the early centuries this little bird came to be protected by an affectionate, unwritten law. To molest a redbreast was to bring the swift vengeance of lightning on the house. The ancient boy knew better, if he cherished his personal safety, than to steal a young bird for the purpose of captivity, for

"A robin in a cage
Sets all heaven in a rage."

The "sobbing, sobbing of pretty, pretty robin" would surely call down upon the head of the luckless thief the dire displeasure of the deities; as runs the rhyme, meant in all reverence (as it should also be quoted);

"The robin and the wren
Are God Almighty's cock and hen.
Him that harries their nest
Never shall his soul have rest."

Terrible punishments were thus meted out to the ancient urchin whose instincts would lead him to rob bird's nests. [21]

In Pilgrim's Progress, Christiana is said to have been greatly astonished at seeing a robin with a spider in its beak. Said she, "What a disparagement it is to such a little, pretty bird as the robin-redbreast is, he being also a bird above many, that loveth to maintain a kind of sociableness with man; I had thought they had lived on crumbs of bread—I like him worse than I did-."

And the wordy-wise Interpreter, to clinch a moral lesson in the mind of the religious woman, explained how the robins "when they are by themselves, catch and gobble up spiders; they can change their diet (like the ungodly hypocrite), drink iniquity, and swallow down sin like water." And so, obedient to her spiritual adviser, Christiana liked the robin "worse than she did." Poor soul; she should have observed for herself that for a robin to gobble up a spider is no "iniquity." Did she think that crumbs grew on bushes, ready made for early breakfast, or that the under side of woodland leaves was buttered to order?

Spiders the robin must have, else how could he obtain the strings for his harp? Wherever the spider spins her thread, there is her devotee, the robin. He may not be seen to pluck and stretch the threads, but the source of them he loves, and he says his best grace above this dainty of his board. Our pet robin was known to stand patiently by the crack of a door, asking that it be opened wider, as, in his opinion, a spider was hiding behind it. He heard her stockinged tread, as he hears also the slippered feet of the grub in the garden sod—provided the grubs have feet, which it is known they can do tolerably well without.

Sure it is the world over, be he thrush or warbler, the robin is partial to bread and butter; to bread thrice buttered if he can get it. Fat of any sort he craves. The more practical than sentimental believe that he uses it in the preparation of the "colors done in oil" with which he tints [22]

his breast. For lack of oil, therefore, where it is not provided by his friends, or discovered by himself, his breast is underdone in color, paling even to dusky hue; so that, would you have a redbreast of deepest dye, be liberal with his buttered bread.

And his yellow mouth! Ah, it is the color of spring butter when the dandelions are astir, oozing out, as it were, when he is very young, as if for suggestion to those who love him.

The historical wedding of Cock Robin to Jenny Wren was the result of anxiety on the part of mutual friends who would unite their favorite birds. The "courtship," the "merry marriage," the "picnic dinner," and the rest of the tragedy are well described. Alas, for the death and burial of the robin-groom, who did not live to enjoy the bliss of wedded life as prearranged by his solicitous friends. But the affair went merry as a marriage-bell for a while, and was good until fortunes changed.

All the birds of the air combined to make the event a happy one, and they dined and they supped in elegant style.

"For each took a bumper
And drank to the pair;
Cock Robin the bridegroom,
And Jenny Wren the fair."

Just as the dinner things were being removed, and the bird guests were singing "fit to be heard a mile around," in stalked the Cuckoo, who it is presumed had not been invited to the wedding, and was angry at being slighted. He rudely began pulling the bride all about by her pretty clothes, which aroused the temper of the groom, naturally enough, as who could wonder? His best man, the Sparrow, went out and armed himself, his weapons being the bow and arrow, and took his usual steady aim to hit the intruder, but, like many another excited marksman, he missed his aim, and, oh, the pity of it! shot Cock Robin himself. (It was an easy way for the poet to dispose of the affair, as he knew very well a robin and a wren couldn't mate, in truth.)

[23]

Nor did the Sparrow deny his unintentional blunder when it came to the trial. There were witnesses in plenty; and Robin was given a splendid burial—Robin who had himself officiated at many a ceremony of the same sad sort.

It is a pathetic tale, as any one may see who reads it, and served the purpose of stimulating sympathy for the birds. We have forgiven the sparrow for his blunder, as will be seen later on; for in consequence of it, the birds were called up in line and made to *do something*, thus distinguishing themselves as no idlers.

The mating of Robin with Jenny Wren proved a failure, of course, so we have our dear "two birds," the robins, as near alike as two peas, when the male is not singing and the female is not cuddling her nest. A trifle brighter of tint is the male (in North America), but the two combine, like any staid farmer and his wife, in getting a living out of the soil. Hand in hand, as it were, they wander about the country anywhere under the flag, at home wherever it rains; but returning to the same locality, with true homing instinct, as often as the spring-time suggests the proper season for family affairs; completing these same affairs in time to look after their winter outfit of clothes. This last more on account of their annual shabby condition than by reason of the rigors of cold, for they change climate as often as health and happiness (including, of course, food) require.

[24]

True, some penalties attach to this sudden and frequent change, but the robins accept whatever comes to them with a protest of song, returning good for evil, even when charged with stealing more fruit than the law allows. It is impossible to compare the good they do with any possible harm, since the insect harvest-time is always, and the robin's farming implements never grow rusty.

Always in the wake of the robins is the sharp-shinned hawk and many another winged enemy, for their migrations are followed by faithful foes who secrete themselves in the shadows. We deprived one of these desperadoes of his dinner before he had so much as tasted it, also of his pleasure in obtaining another, for we brought him down in the very act, and rescued his victim only by prying apart the reluctantly dying claws.

But whatever may be said of hawks and such other hungry beings who lay no claim to a vegetable diet, their so-called cruelty should be overlooked, since it is impossible to draw the lines without affecting the robin himself. For see with what excusable greed he snatches at winged beings which happen to light for a rest in their flight, or draws the protesting earth-worm

from its sunless corridors. It is a law of nature, and grace must provide absolution. So must also the bird-lover, supposing in his charitable heart that worms and flies delight in being made over into new and better loved individuals.

Would the bird-lover actually convert this redbreast from the error of his victual ways, he may do so by substituting cooked or raw food from his own table. The robin is an apt student of civilization, and adopts the ways of its reformers with relish. As to the statement that robins require a diet of worms to insure life and growth, we can say that we have raised a whole family on bread and milk alone with perfect success. True, we allowed them a bit of watermelon in melon season, but they used it more as a newfangled bath than as a food, actually rolling in it, and pasting their feathers together with the sticky juice. The farmer's orchard is the robin's own patch of ground, and he revels in its varied bounties. A pair of them know at a glance the very crotch in the apple-tree which grew three prongs on purpose for their nest. The extreme center, scooped to a thimble's capacity, suggests the initial post-hole for a proper foundation. The said post may be placed directly across it, but that does not change the idea. Above is the parting of the boughs, across whose inverted arches sticks alternate, and so on up. And atop of straws and leaves and sticks is the "loving cup" of clay, with its soft lining of vegetable fiber and grasses. What care the robins that little cover roofs them and their young? Are they not water birds by nature, and wind birds as well? (Our pet sat for hours at a time in hot weather emersed to his ears in the bath, and even sang low notes while he soaked.) Birds of spring freshets and June winds, they dote on the weather, and bring off their young ones as successfully as their neighbors. What if a nest be blown down now and then? The school-boy, in passing, puts it back in its place and sees that every birdling goes with it; while the old birds above him, shedding water like a goose, thank him for his pains.

[25]

The orchardist who plants a mulberry-tree in his apple rows, though he himself scorns the insipid sweetness of the fruit, ranks with any philanthropist in that he foresees the needs of a little soul which loves the society of man more than anything else in the world.

[26]

By the planting of the mulberry-tree he plants a thought in the breast of his little son. "I don't like mulberries, father. What makes you set out a mulberry-tree in an apple orchard?"

"For the robins, my son. Haven't you heard that luck follows the robins?"

"What is luck, father?"

"Luck, my son, is any good thing which people make for themselves and the folks they think about."

And the little boy sits down on a buttercup cushion and meditates on luck, while he watches the robins knocking at the doors of the soft-bodied larvæ, engaged in making luck for other folks. And the boy's own luck takes the right turn all on account of his father setting out a mulberry-tree.

Whole school-rooms full of children are known to be after the same sort of luck when they plant a tree on Arbor Day; a cherry-tree or mulberry-tree, or even an apple, in due time is sure to bring forth just the crotch to delight the heart of mother robin in June. Not that the robins do not select other places than apple-trees to nest in. An unusual place is quite as likely to charm them. Let a person interest himself a little in the robin's affairs and he will see startling results by the summer solstice. An old hat in the crotch of a tree, an inverted sunshade, or even a discarded scarecrow, terrible to behold, left over from last year and hidden in the foliage, one and all suggest possibilities to the robins.

Mud that is fresh and sweet is essential to a robin's nest. Stale, bad-smelling, sour mud isn't fit for use. Sweet, clay-like stuff is what they want. A pack of twigs made up loosely, soft grass and fiber, all delight the nest-builders, who are as sure to select a location near by, as they are sure to stay all summer near the farmer on account of the nearness of food.

[27]

Anywhere from four to thirty feet one may find the nests with little trouble, they are so bulky, all but the delicate inside of them, which is soft as down; nest-lining being next thing to nest-peopling—the toes of the little new people finding their first means of clinging to life by what is next to them. A well-woven lining gives young robins a delicious sense of safety, as they hold on tight—the instinct to hold on tight being about the first in any young thing, be it bird or human baby, except, perhaps, the instinct of holding its mouth open.

Some people who do not watch closely suppose the young robin who holds its mouth open the longest and widest gets the most food. We are often mistaken in things. Mother robin understands the care of the young, though she never read a book about it in all her life. Think of her infant, of

exactly eleven days, leaving the nest and getting about on its own legs, as indeed it does, more to the astonishment of its own little self than anybody else. And before the baby knows it, he is singing with all the rest,

"Cheer up;
Cheerily, cheerily,
Cheer up."

The very same song we heard him sing within the Arctic circle, far up to the snow line of the Jade Mountains, alternating his song with the eating of juniper berries.

But one might go on forever with the robin as he hops and skips and flies from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from Alaska to Mexico and other parts; but one would never get to the end of loving him. [28]

When poor robin at last meets with disaster and cannot pick himself up again, in short, is "gone to that world where birds are blest," the leaves shall remember to cover him, while we imagine, with the poet who thought it not time and talent wasted to write an epitaph to the redbreast,

"Small notes wake from underground
Where now his tiny bones are laid.
No prowling cat with whiskered face
Approaches this sequestered place;
No school-boy with his willow bow
Shall aim at thee a treacherous blow."

But the funeral of even a robin is a sad event; so we will bring him back in the spring, for

"There's a call upon the housetop, an answer from the plain,
There's a warble in the sunshine, a twitter in the rain."

CHAPTER II

[29]

THE MOCKING-BIRD

Wit, sophist, songster, Yorick of thy tribe,
Thou sportive satirist of nature's school;
To thee the palm of scoffing we ascribe,
Arch-mocker, and Mad Abbot of Misrule.
For such thou art by day; but all night long
Thou pour'st soft, sweet, pensive, solemn strain,
As if thou didst in this thy moonlight song
Like to the melancholy Jaques complain,
Musing on falsehood, folly, vice, and wrong.
And sighing for thy motley coat again.

WILDE.

In his native town, or district, the mocker stands at the head of the class as a song-bird. He is not distinguished for his gorgeous plumage, like a parrot, nor yet for the mischief he does, like the crow. His virtue is all in his throat. And yet he can scarcely be honored as an original genius. Were he original he would be no mocker. But he has an original way with him for all that, when he takes a notion to mimic any person. Were he a man as gifted, we should have no trouble in seeing ourselves "as ithers see us"; or better, in hearing ourselves "as ithers hear us." He is the preacher, the choir leader, the choir itself, the organ. He gives out the hymns, chants the "Amen," and pronounces the benediction in the garden church. Few verses have been inscribed to the mocking-bird, for the reason, it is supposed, that sentiment intended for any known singer fits the mocker, though it must be conceded that he is humorist more than poet. It is impossible to listen to his varied songs and keep from laughing, especially if the mood be on one. Where the weather is very mild he sings all winter, and nearly all the year. His fall molt takes but a few weeks, and then "Richard is himself again." [30]

His humor does not desert him even at the trying season of molting his coat, for he is seen to stand on a bough and preen himself of his old tatters, catching a falling feather in his beak, and turning it about in a ludicrous way, as if laughing to himself at this annual joke of his. Dropping the remnant of his summer plumage, he cants his wise little head and gives a shrill cry of applause as it floats away.

Whatever may be said of his musical powers, the mocker exceeds his fellows in the art of listening. We have known him to sit the better part of an afternoon, concealed in thick foliage, listening with all his might to the various songs about him, with full intention of repeating them at midnight. And repeat them he does, not forgetting the postman's whistle, nor the young turkeys just learning to run (in the wet grass) to an untimely grave.

He has an agreeable way of improving upon the original of any song he imitates, so that he is supposed to give free music lessons to all the other birds. His own notes, belonging solely to himself, are beautiful and varied, and he sandwiches them in between the rest in a way to suit the best.

We imagine that he forgets, from year to year, and must have his memory stirred occasionally. This is particularly so in his imitation of the notes of young birds. We never hear them early in spring or very late in autumn after he has completed his silent molt. In late summer, however, when the baby birds have grown into juveniles, then "old man mocker" takes up his business of mimicking the voices of the late nursery.



AMERICAN MOCKING BIRD.

Until we knew his methods we would start at peculiar sounds in the garden and cry to one another, "There's a late brood of young ones!" and run to locate the tardy family. [31]

From his perch on the chimney the mocker laughs at us, while he squeals, like his own little son of a month old, or coaxes, like a whole nestful of baby linnets.

No matter who is the victim of his mimicry, he loves the corner of a chimney better than any other perch, and carols out into the sky and down into the "black abyss" as if chimneys were made on purpose for mocking-birds.

A neighbor of ours has a graphophone which is used on the lawn for the entertainment of summer guests. Think you that big brass trumpet-throat emits its uncanny sounds for human ears

alone? Behind it, or above it, or in front of it, listening and taking notes, is the mocker. Suddenly, next day or next week, we hear, perhaps at midnight, a concert up in the trees—song-sparrows, and linnets, and blackbirds, and young chickens, and shrikes, and pewees, and a host of other musicians, clear and unmistakable. Then as suddenly the whole is repeated through a graphophone, and we listen and laugh, for well we know that the only source of it all is our dear mocker. How he gets the graphophone ring we do not know any more than we know how he comes by all his powers of reproduction. Of practice he has a plenty, and his industry in this respect may be the key to his success.

The male differs so slightly from his mate that the two are indistinguishable save at song-time. They pair in early spring, and are faithfully united in all their duties. They nest mostly in bushes or low branches from four to twenty feet from the ground. The nests are large and often in plain sight. Like the robin and other thrushes, the mocker's first thought is for the foundation. This is made of large sticks and grasses, interlaced and crossed loosely. Upon these the nest proper is placed, of soft materials lined with horsehair or grasses.

[32]

With the mockers, as with other birds, there is not a fixed rule as to nesting materials. Outside of a few fundamental principles as to foundations, etc., they select the material at hand. Where cotton is to be obtained they use it, and strings in place of grass. Leaves in the foundation are bulky and little trouble to gather.

We have found a pair of mockers very sly and silent just at nesting-time. Or the female will be at the nest work, while her mate is singing at a distance as if to distract us from the scene of action. However, in our grounds, where we have taught all birds extreme confidence, the good work progresses in plain sight. One writer has declared that a pair of mockers will desert a nest if you so much as look at it. This is true only where they are very wild and unaccustomed to human friends.

When once the young are hatched the fun begins. During the day the male ceases to sing, and devotes himself to giving exact information as to where the nest may be found. Of course this information is unintentional. He flies at us if we step out in sight, screaming with all his might. The nearer we approach the nest the louder and nearer he cries, until he actually has an attack of hysterics and turns somersaults in the air or quivers in the foliage. If it be possible to reach you from behind, he dives at your shoulder and nips at your hair. Always from behind, never facing you. His quiet mate flits through the boughs as if she understands her husband's exaggerated solicitude, and half smiles to see his performances.

[33]

In a day or two the young birds are able to speak for themselves, and from this on until the next brood of their parents is hatched, the youngsters keep up a coaxing squeal. Getting out of the nest in about two weeks, they fly awkwardly about, easy prey to cats and other thieves. From a nest of four or five eggs a pair of mockers do well if they raise two or even one. Night birds find them easy to steal, for they sleep on the ground or under a bush at first, being several days in learning to fly; and a much longer time in learning to eat by themselves. This year three sets of young mockers were raised on raspberries. They were brought to the patch as soon as they left the nest, where they remained on the ground along the drooping canes. The old birds kept with them, putting in all their time at teaching the awkward things the art of helping themselves. The parent bird would hop up a foot or two, seize a tip end of a twig on which was the usual group of berries, and bring it down to the ground, holding it there and bidding the young ones "take a bite." Not a bite would they take, squealing with mouth wide open and waiting for the old bird to pick the berry and place it in the capacious throat, the yellow margins of the base of the beak shining in the sun like melted butter. And butter these birds like, as well as the robins, for they come to the garden table and eat it with the bread and doughnuts and pie like hungry tramps.

Unlike the ashy white of the parent breast, the juveniles have a dotted vest very pretty to look at, which disappears at the first molt.

The natural food of the mocking-bird is fruit and meat. They catch an insect on the wing with almost the cunning of a flycatcher, and listen on the ground like a robin, for the muffled tread of a bug under a log or in the sward. They are not the tyrants they are sometimes accredited with being. The mocker does not fight a pitched battle with other birds as often as opportunity offers. Like many another voluble being, his bark is worse than his bite. Not his weapon, but his word, is law. So fraternal are the mockers, as we see them, that the close coming of them near the house in spring insures us the company of many other birds.

[34]

It is hard to outwit the mockers. They love fruit of any sort as well as they love insects. They dote on scarecrows, those "guardian angels" of domestic birds, and have been seen to kiss their

cheeks or pick out their eyes.

We caused one of these terrors to stand in the Christmas persimmon-tree in the garden, thinking that, for fright of him, the mockers would stand aloof. It rained, and the first bird that came along snuggled under his chin with the hat-brim for an umbrella. That was a linnet. Along came a mocker and took refuge under the other ear of the angel. We tied paper bags around the fruit, but the mockers bit holes in the bags and took the persimmons. We pinned a sheet over the whole treetop, but peep-holes were sufficient. In went the mockers like mice and held carousals under cover.

Tamed when young, and given the freedom of the whole house, a mocking-bird feels fairly at home and is good company, especially if there be an invalid in the family. The bigger the house the more fun, for the limits of the cage in which birds are usually confined form the greatest objection to keeping them in captivity. Few cages admit of sufficient room for the stretch of wing in flight, or even for a respectable hop. [35]

We know of no bird save a parrot which chooses to be caressed. Birds are not guinea-pigs, to be scratched into good terms. It spoils the plumage and disagrees with the temper. A mocker on the ground never trails his coat-skirt. He lifts his tail gracefully, as if he knows that contact with the grass will disarrange his feathers.

In "Evangeline," Longfellow immortalized the mocking-bird thus:

"Then from a neighboring thicket, the mocking-bird, wildest of singers,
Swinging aloft on a willow spray that hung o'er the waters,
Shook from his little throat such floods of delirious music
That the whole air and the woods and the waves seemed silent to listen.
Plaintive at first were the tones, and sad; then soaring to madness,
Till having gathered them all, he flung them abroad in derision,
As when, after a storm, a gust of wind through the treetops
Shakes down a rattling of rain in a crystal shower on the branches."

CHAPTER III

[36]

THE CAT-BIRD

Why, so I will, you noisy bird,
This very day I'll advertise you;
Perhaps some busy ones may prize you.

He is not always the cat-bird, O no! He is one of our sweetest singers before day has fairly opened her eyes. Before it is light enough to be sure that what one sees be a bird or a shadow, the cat-bird is in the bushes.

Singing as he flits, this early riser and early eater passes from bush to bush on the fringed edge of morning, conscious of happiness and hunger. With a quaint talent for mimicry he tries to reproduce the notes of other birds, with partial success; giving only short snatches, however, as if afraid to trust himself.

In the hush of evening when the cricket's chirp has a drowsy tone, the cat-bird makes his melody, each individual with cadences of his own. Now like a thrush and now like a nightingale, he sings, though he is not to be compared with the mocking-bird in powers of mimicry. Yet his own personal notes are as sweet as the mocker's.

But, like most persons, he has "another side," on which account he came by his name. And his mate is Mrs. Cat-bird as well, for she, too, imitates the feline foe of all birds, more especially at nesting-time.

There is a legend to fit the case, as usual. This bird was once a great gray cat, and got its living by devouring the young of such birds as nest in low bushes.



CAT BIRD.

All the birds met in convention to pray the gods they might be rid of this particular cat.

[37]

As no created thing may be absolutely deprived of life, but only transformed into some other being, this cat was changed into a bird, henceforth doomed to mew and scream like a kitten in trouble.

Its note long since ceased to have much effect upon the birds, who seldom mistake its cry for that of their real enemy in fur and claws.

Not so its human friends, for it takes a fine ear indeed to distinguish the bird from a cat when neither is in sight.

Now this bird, doomed, as the superstition runs, to prowl and lurk about in dark places near the ground, seldom flies high, nor does it often nest in trees. This does not prevent the singer from exercising his musical talents, however, more, than it does the meadow-lark or the song-sparrow.

It is in midsummer that the cat-bird is best known as the bird that "mews." Then both birds, if one approaches the nest, fly at the intruder, wings drooping, tail spread, beak open, whole attitude one of scolding anger.

In this mood the bird fears nothing, even making up to a stranger, and pecking at him. If it would pass with the waning summer and the maturing of the young birds, this bad temper of the cat-bird would be more tolerable; but once acquired, the habit clings to it, and it may be that not till next winter will it get over the fit.

The favorite site of the cat-bird for nesting, as we have observed it, is the middle of a patch of blackberry bushes, so dense and untrimmed it would be impossible for any one save a bird to reach it. Even the parent birds must creep on "all twos" or dodge along beneath the briers. We have known it to build in a thick vine over the door.

[38]

The cat-bird and brown thrasher were always together in our Tennessee garden; each fearless, nesting near the door, eating the same food, but differing in personal habits. The cat-bird's nest was in the blackberries, the thrasher's in the honeysuckle. We often borrowed the young thrashers for exhibition to our friends in the parlor. After the first time or two the parents did not care, but watched quietly from the vine for the return of their darlings.

The cat-bird neighbor, always prying about, took note of our custom and played "spy" in the honeysuckle. At the first opening of the door out peeped a black beak, from which proceeded the familiar cat-cry we had learned to not heed. Paying no attention to this self-appointed guardian of the little thrashers, we took them into the parlor, where they would remain for half an hour.

All this time the cat-bird kept up its mewling and screaming at the door, outside, nor did it cease until the birds were placed back in the nest.

The custom of the cat-birds everywhere to play the detective, and sound the note of warning in behalf of all the other birds, is well known. Is there danger anywhere, they rush to the rescue with imploring cry, setting up a great agony of sound and posture, very ludicrous if not pathetic.

And the poor cat-bird is always at swords' points with the farmer. Scarecrows a plenty deck the orchards and ornament the gardens. More do these historical and sometimes artistic beings serve to ease the farmer's conscience than to intimidate the birds; for it is well known that cat-birds thrive best under the grotesque shadows of the scarecrow. And the more horrible of face and figure are these individuals created, the more are they sought after by the very birds they are intended to scare out of their wits.

[39]

It will probably take another generation of fruit-men to wake up to the fact that these and other birds habitually mistake the scarecrow for a guide-board to "ways and means," or a sign for "home cooking."

Would the farmer stop when he has finished the very worst scarecrow he can conjure up out of last year's trousers and coat and hat and straw from the bedding mow, the birds would have fair play. But the shot-gun, alas! picks off the poor little mew bird almost as fast as he himself picked off the berries an hour before, and so the farmer is accused of having "no heart."

But the farmer's boy of the bare feet and brown legs loves the funny bird. He will sit for an hour near its brier-bound nest, chuckling at its screams and gestures, and wondering "why it isn't a cat for good and all."

Hast thou named all the birds without a gun?
—O, be my friend and teach me to be thine.

EMERSON.

CHAPTER IV

[40]

THE HERMIT-THRUSH

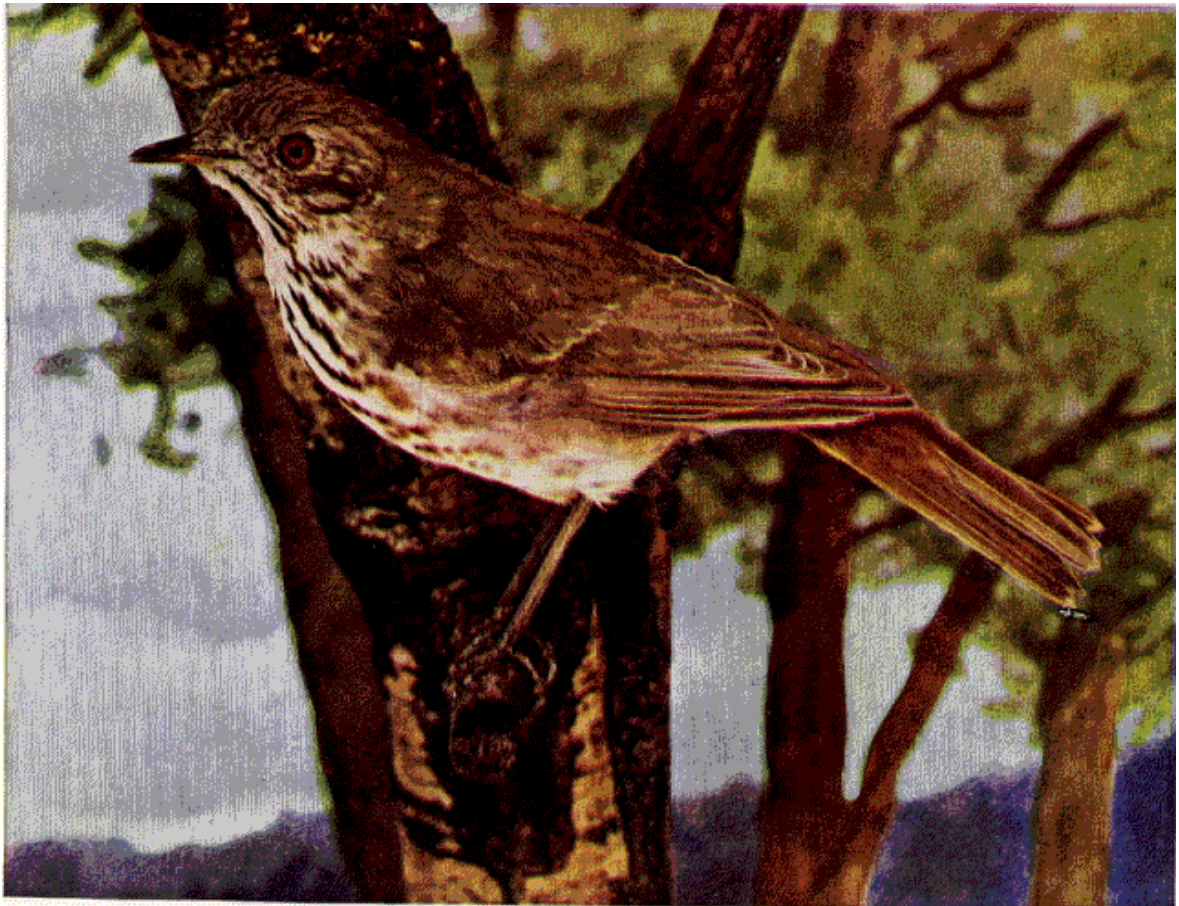
Thrush, thrush, have mercy on thy little bill;
I play to please myself, albeit ill;
And yet—though how it comes to pass I cannot tell—
My singing pleases all the world as well.

MONTGOMERY.

Hermit that it is, this little thrush is known and loved in nearly all of North America. True, there are several of its relatives about in fields and woods, which are taken for the hermit by those who have not compared the different birds; the plain, deep olive-brown above, with dotted creamy vest, being a popular dress with the thrushes.

The hermit answers to several names, suiting the location in which it is found. In low parts of the South it is known as the swamp-robin. You meet it in the damp, shady places where it is always twilight, in the fascinating grounds of the snails and water-beetles.

It likes such clammy, silent neighbors, with their retiring habits and proper manners, for the reason that it is able to turn them to some account at meal-time, which, as is the case with most birds, is all the time, or any time. (It is said to resemble in habits and notes the English song-thrush, which is known to spend most of its time at certain periods of the year hunting snails, which it has learned to dress for eating by slapping them against a stone. It will choose a stone of the proper shape, to which it carries its snails as often as it has good luck in the hunt, leaving little heaps of shell by the stone to mark its picnic-ground.)



HERMIT THRUSH.

Family affairs bring little labor to a pair of hermits, for they have not far to go in search of nesting materials. They take what is close at hand, little dry twigs, lichens, and last year's leaves crumbled and moist, which soon lose their dampness and adhere together in a thick mass.

[41]

But few have found it, this nest of the hermit, hidden under the bushes where it is always shadowed, and where the fledglings may help themselves to rambling insects without so much as stepping out of the door. They are supposed to take advantage of this nearness to food by remaining about the nest later than most birds; or if they run, returning on foot of course, having tardy use of their wings, but learning to stretch their legs instead. And well may they learn to "stretch their legs," as they will come to their fortunes by "footing it" mostly, when they are not migrating on the wing.

Like the thrashers, the hermit must scratch for a living when berries are not ripe. By listening one may hear the bird at its work, and by slipping quietly in the dusk of the early morning to the lowlands, or the thick woods, and standing stock-still for a while, even see it. But nearly always it is under cover on the edge of thickets, where the leaf-mold is unstirred and richest. And always by its own self is the hermit, as if it loves nature better than the company of its fellows, listening now and then for underground or overhead sounds, and dwelling on the beauty of the leaf skeletons it overturns like a botanist.

Lace-work and dainty insertion in delicate threads does Madam Hermit find in her resorts—fabric so marvelous and fascinating she could admire it forever; cast-off finery of such insects as outgrow their clothes, grasshopper nymphs, and whole baskets full of locusts' eggs hidden in half-decayed logs, and making a nourishing breakfast, "rare done" and delicious. She delights in the haunts of the praying-mantis at egg-laying season, surprising the wonderful insect in her devotions, who scarcely has time to turn her head on her foe before she disappears from sight.

[42]

It is well for her thus to disappear suddenly, for she is spared witnessing the fate of her newly laid eggs just above her on the twig, their silken wrapper being no obstruction in the way of Madam Hermit finishing her meal on them.

These habits of the hermit-thrush mark the dwarf-hermit in southern California. We see it in the orange-groves after irrigation or during a wet winter. Plenty of mulching in the orchards invites the dwarf (where it is a hermit like its relative), and we find it scratching away in the litter,

overturning frail little toadstool huts and umbrellas, and exchanging greetings with its neighbor, the varied thrush, under the next tree.

Here in the cañons, where the brooks turn right side up for one brief season in the long, dry year, we see the little olive-brown bird with its speckled breast. Its sight and hearing are keen, so that it detects the whereabouts of the stone-flies, lingering among the moist rocks until they come out for a drink or a bath, when—that is the last of them.

The dwarf brown beauty, which, of course, must have victuals by hook or crook, never breaking a single law in either case, loves the watery haunts of the dragon-flies.

It passes by the pupa-skin drying on its leaf-stalk just as it was outgrown, with perchance a glance at the reflection in the water; but the cunning bird neglects not to take in the pupa itself, making its own breakfast on undeveloped mosquitoes in the water's edge.

[43]

All winter long about our home lives the dwarf hermit, eating crumbs at the garden table and looking for belated raspberries on the ever-green canes. Early, before the sun is up, the bird runs along under our windows, where the myrtle covers the tracks of night insects, and rings its tinkling notes. These resemble the familiar bell-notes that belong to the wood-thrush, cousin of the hermit and the dwarf hermit.

Not so numerous as its relatives, the wood-thrush is seen only in Eastern North America. It nests in trees or bushes, packing wet, decaying leaves and wood fiber into a paste, which dries and resembles the mud nest of the robin. It, too, gets its food in the litter of leaves and wet places, choosing fens and cranberry bogs in the pastures. All the thrushes delight in berries, and any berry-patch, wild or cultivated, is the bird's own patch of ground.

The sadder the day the sweeter the song of the wood-thrush. Nature-lovers who stroll into the thickest of the woods of a cloudy day on purpose to make the acquaintance of the thrush will find

"The heart unlocks its springs
Wheresoe'er he singeth."

The notes of all the thrushes are singularly sweet, and may be recognized by their low, tinkling, bell-like tones.

At the funeral of Cock Robin, who did not survive his wedding-day in the legend, it was the thrush who sang a psalm, and he was well qualified, "as he sat in a bush," if such a thing were possible, no doubt bringing tears to his feathered audience.

The "throstle with his note so true" in the garden of Bottom, the fairy in "Midsummer Night's Dream," was the thrush of Shakespeare's own country. No fairy's garden is complete without this sweet singer described so truly by Emily Tolman.

[44]

"In the deep, solemn wood, at dawn I hear
A voice serene and pure, now far, now near,
Singing sweetly, singing slowly.
Holy; oh, holy, holy;
Again at evening hush, now near, now far—
Oh, tell me, art thou voice of bird or star?
Sounding sweetly, sounding slowly.
Holy; oh, holy, holy."

CHAPTER V

[45]

THE GROSBEAKS

Have you ever heard of the sing-away bird,
That sings where the run-away river
Runs down with its rills from the bald-headed hills
That stand in the sunshine and shiver?
Oh, sing, sing away, sing away!
How the pines and the birches are stirred

By the trill of the sing-away bird!

And beneath the glad sun, every glad-hearted one
 Sets the world to the tune of its gladness;
 The swift rivers sing it, the wild breezes wing it.
 Till earth loses thought of her sadness.
 Oh, sing, sing away, sing away!
 Oh, sing, happy soul, to joy's giver—
 Sing on, by Time's run-away river!

LUCY LARCOM.

You would recognize it anywhere by its beak. And you may call this feature of the face a beak, or a nose, or a hand, or a pair of lips. In either case it is thick, heavy, prominent, the common characteristic of the grosbeaks. Individuals may differ in plumage, but always there is the thick, conical bill.

"Oh, oh, what a big nose you've got!" and "Oh, oh, what a red nose it is!" we exclaimed, when we first met the cardinal face to face in a thicket. In a moment we had forgotten the shape and tint of the beak in the song that poured out of it. It was like forgetting the look of the big rocks between which gushes the waterfall in a mountain gorge.

Not that the mouth of the grosbeak was built to accommodate its song, but, that being formed [46] for other purposes, it nevertheless is a splendid flute.

Whichever he may be, the cardinal or the black headed, or the blue or the rose breasted, the grosbeak is a splendid singer.

On account of its gorgeous coloring, the cardinal is oftenest caged. But to those who love the wild birds best in their native freedom, the cardinal grosbeak imprisoned lacks the charm of manner which marks it in the tangle of wild grape-vines and blackberry thickets. Seldom still in the wild, unless it be singing, the red beauty flits and dodges between twigs, and dips into brush and careens through the thickest undergrowth of things that combine to hide it, now here, now there, and everywhere. One would think its bright coat a certain and quick token of its whereabouts, but so active is the lively fellow that it eludes even the sharpest eye, a stranger mistaking its gleam for a rift of sunlight through the treetops.

Legend tells us that the beak of this bird was once ashen gray and the face white. Once on a time, a whole flock of them were discovered in the currant rows of a mountaineer, who called on the gods of the woods to punish them, since he himself was unable to overtake the thieves. The gods, willing to appease the old man, yet loving the grosbeaks better, dyed their beaks crimson from that moment, and set black masks on their faces. Thus was a favor done to the cardinals, for ever after the juice of berries left no stain on their red lips, while the black masks set off their features to the best advantage, interrupting the tint of the beak and the head. He is no ecclesiastic, though he wear the red cap of the cardinal, which he lifts at pleasure, for he gets his living by foraging the woods and gardens for berries at berry-time.



ROSE BREASTED GROSBEAK.

The cardinal's companion is modest of tint, ashy brown with only traces of red below, deepening on wings, head, and tail. Bird of the bush is she, and she places her loosely made nest in the thicket, where she can easily obtain bark fiber and dry, soft leaves and grass. In it she sees that three or four chocolate-dotted eggs, like decorated marbles, are placed. And she repeats the family history two or three times a season, where the season is long. At first the lips of the baby birds are dark; but they soon blush into the family red. In plumage they resemble the mother for a time, but before cold weather the males put on a coat of red with the black mask.

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In the respect of molting the cardinals differ from their young cousins, the rose-breasted, the latter requiring two or three years to complete the tints of adult life.

But born in the thickets are the rose-breasts, just like the cardinals, the nest being composed of the selfsame fibers and woodland grasses. Strange craft of Mother Nature is this, to bring the rose-breast and the cardinal from eggs of the very same size and markings. But so she does; so that a stranger coming upon either nest in the absence of the mother bird might mistake it for that of the other. You can't be certain until you see the old birds.

The rose-breasted grosbeaks are found east of the Rocky Mountains and north into Canada. It migrates south early, and returns to its summer habitat rather late in spring. The lips of the rose-breast are white, not red, while the feet are grayish blue, differing from the brown feet of the cardinal.

How did it come by its breast? Why, legend has it that the breast was white at the start. One day he forgot himself, not knowing it was night, he was so happy singing the funeral hymn of a robin-redbreast that had died of a chill in molting time, as birds do die when the process is belated. And the grosbeak sang on, until a night-owl spied him and thought to make a supper of a bird so plump. But the owl mistook his aim and flew away with only a beakful of the breast feathers, he not taking into account the nearness of the molt. The grosbeak escaped, but lacking a vest.

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The robins gathered pink wild-rose leaves and laid them on the heart of the singer, not forgetting to line the wings, and so from that day to this the psalm singer is known as the rose-breasted grosbeak.

The head and neck of the male and most of the upper parts are black, the tail white and black combined, wings black variegated with white, and the middle breast and under wing-coverts the rich rose that deepens into a carmine. The beak is white.

The mother bird is streaked with blackish and olive brown above, below white tinged with dusky, under wing-coverts the tint of saffron. Her beak is brown.

These beautiful birds may be seen in the haunts of autumn berries, early spring buds that are yet incased in winter wrappings, and orchards in the remote tops of whose trees have been left stray apples. By the time these are frost-bitten they are "ready cooked" for the belated rose-breasts, whose strong beaks seem made on purpose to bite into frozen apples. But frozen apples have a charm of taste for any one who takes the trouble of climbing to the outer limbs for a tempting recluse. Better were more of them left in the late harvest for boys and girls and the rose-breasted grosbeaks.

An invisible thread fastened to a solitary apple on a high twig, and connected inside of the attic window of a cottage, suggests winter fun of a harmless sort. The grosbeaks fish for the apple, which all of a sudden is given a jerk from a watchful urchin inside the window; and the bird realizes the historical "slip 'twixt the cup and the lip." The string being, to start with, almost invisible, is from necessity very weak as well, and breaks at about the third jerk. The fun for the participants inside the window at the other end of the string is over for a time, and before it is readjusted the apple has several bites in it. And besides, there are other apples.

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On the Pacific coast we have the black-headed grosbeak, cousin of the others and equally gifted in song.

The sides of the head, back, wings, and tail of this male are black, though the back and wings are dotted with white and cinnamon-brown. The neck and under parts are rich orange-brown, changing to bright, pure yellow on the belly and under wing-coverts. The bill and feet are dark grayish blue. The female and her young differ in the under parts, being a rich sulphur-yellow. Upper parts are olive shaded, varied with whitish or brownish stripes. The habits of the black-headed grosbeak are like those of the others described.

From our custom of making the grounds as attractive to all wild birds as possible, never relenting our vigilance in regard to the feline race, we have had splendid opportunities of studying this bird. They have nested with us for three years, beginning in wary fashion and ending in perfect confidence.

The first of the season we saw only the male, and he kept high in the blue-gum trees, fifty or sixty feet or more above ground, singing as soon as everybody was out of sight, but disappearing if a door opened. We thought him a belated robin, so do the songs of the two birds impress a stranger. For weeks we could catch not so much as a glimpse of the singer, though we hid in the shrubbery. Shrubby was no barrier to the sight of the keen little eye and ear above. Then we took to the attic, and from a little roof corner-pane beheld the musician.

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But his song was short and ended unfinished, so suspicious was the bird. Gradually he came to understand that no shot-gun disturbed the garden stillness, even though he sat on an outer bough, and no cat lurked in the roses. He also appeared to notice that nobody played ball on the greensward, nor threw stones at stray chickens. Altogether circumstances seemed favorable to Sir Grosbeak, and he brought Madam along down from the mountain cañons.

By midsummer of the second season the two were seen at sunrise as low as the tallest of the orange-trees, but they flew higher or disappeared if the door were opened. It was the year that we first planted the row of Logan berries, a new cross between the blackberry and raspberry. It was between the orange and lemon trees, in a quiet corner of the orchard, and the grosbeaks espied them, reddening a month before they ripened. By getting up at dawn we made sure that nesting operations had begun within twenty feet of the Logan berries. But which way? It was not until the eggs were laid that we found the site on a low limb of a fig-tree adjoining the berry row. The nest was made solely of dry dark-leaf spines, and so transparently laid that we could distinguish the three eggs from below. There was no lining, plenty of ventilation in this and other of these grosbeaks' nests observed in the foothills being the rule. Perhaps the climate induces the birds to this sanitary measure. Certain it is that this nest could be no harbor for those insect foes that too often make life miserable for the birdlings.

The summer passed, and we gave up the row of berries to the grosbeaks. There were but few anyway, and we wanted the birds. And there was other fruit they were welcome to.

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This season the grosbeaks have brought off three broods within fifty feet of the house. The male sings in the low bushes and trees, and does not think of punctuating his notes with stops and pauses, even though we stand within a few feet of him. In fact, the birds are now as tame as robins. Young striped fledglings grope about in the clover, or flutter in the bushes as fearless as sparrows. If we pick them up they will support themselves by a grip on the hand and swing by their strong great beaks, screaming at the top of their shrill voices to "let go!" when it is themselves that are holding on with might and main. If they scream long enough, and their beaks do not weaken in their clutch, the mocker comes to the rescue and scolds us, while we explain the situation, extending our hands with the grosbeak clinging to the palm.

So far as we have known, all the nests in our grounds have been built in the crotch of a fig-tree. The fig has sparse foliage and affords little shelter. But then there are figs that ripen most of the summer—and figs are good for baby grosbeaks. Once we discovered a nest by accident. The bees at swarming-time settled in the top of a fig-tree, a place not at all suitable, in our opinion. We were busily engaged in tossing dust into the tree to frighten the bees out, when a grosbeak appeared, scolding so hard in her familiar, motherly tone that we knew we were "sanding" her nest as well as the bees. And we found it all right! She went on with her work after we had attended to the bees.

On account of the fondness of the birds for fruit and buds, the grosbeaks might easily become resident in any home grounds. Low shrubbery they love when once they have become familiar; unlike the thrushes, not caring particularly for damp places. Dry, baked-in-the-sun nooks, crisp undergrowth, and especially untrimmed berry rows fascinate them. During mating-season the male sings all the time when he is not eating, singing as he flies from perch to perch, and like others of the family, has been accused of night serenades. We are unable to know certainly if it is our grosbeak or the mocker that wakes us at midnight. It is probably the mocker, who has stolen notes from all the birds.

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CHAPTER VI

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THE ORIOLES

A rosy flush creeps up the sky,
The birds begin their symphony.
I hear the clear, triumphant voice
Of the robin, bidding the world rejoice.
The vireos catch the theme of the song.
And the Baltimore oriole bears it along,
While from sparrow, and thrush, and wood-pewee,
And deep in the pine-trees the chickadee.
There's an undercurrent of harmony.

HARRIET E. PAINE.

It's a merry song, that of the oriole. It belongs to the family, and once heard will be always recognized. Sometimes it is a happy laugh; sometimes a chatter, especially at nesting-time, when a pair of birds are selecting a place for the hammock. Always, wherever heard, the song of an oriole suggests sunshine and a letting-go of winter and sad times.

The name itself is characteristic of the bird, for it signifies yellow glory. And a yellow glory the oriole surely is, whether it be found in Europe or America, and whether it be called hang-bird, or yellow robin, or golden robin, or fiery hang-bird. The term "hang-bird" suggests the fate of a convict, but the oriole is no convict. His transgressions against any law are few and far between. The name simply denotes the conditions of its start in life. The "hanging" of an oriole occurs before it is out of the shell, at the very beginning of its career. The skill of the orioles in the art of weaving nests is unsurpassed by any other bird. Always it is nest-*weaving*; not nest-building. Not a stick or piece of bark do they use, nor a bit of mud or paste.

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The beak of the orioles differs so widely from that of the grosbeaks that one has but to compare them to be interested. One might almost imagine the bill of a grosbeak to be a drinking-cup, or a basket with an adjustable lid or cover shutting slightly over; while that of the orioles is sharp and pointed, sometimes deflected, longer than the head of the bird, parting, it is true, but the

upper and lower mandibles meeting so exactly together at the tip that they form a veritable needle or thorn. And a needle it is, on the point of which hangs a tale—the tale that has given to this lovely being the nom de plume of "hang-bird."

True, the orchard oriole fastens its nest in the forks, giving it a more fixed condition than is the case with the strictly pensive nests, but it, too, is woven with artistic designs, the threads interlacing in beautiful patterns. No more could a grosbeak weave an oriole's nest, with its big, clumsy, thick bill, than could an oriole crack pine cones to pieces with its needle beak. Each to its own tools when it comes to individual tricks. And there are the feet of the birds, fitted only for perching, not for walking! The nearest we ever came to catching an oriole on the ground was when we compelled a July grasshopper to sit in a bird-cage under a tree. The oriole went in at the door and the grasshopper went out of the door. We tried it again, and each time the bird and the hopper went out together, the oriole assisting its friend, for whom it has a special fondness. The fondness is not returned on the part of the hopper.

We were sorry for the grasshopper, and wishing to continue our experiments, secured the dry skin of an insect, which we tied to the perch of the cage. The oriole entered warily, took a bite, discovered the trick, and never came back.



BALTIMORE ORIOLE.

Perhaps the Baltimore oriole is best known, not being confined to the city whose name it bears. It came by its name very much as many other birds came by their names and will continue to come by them. About 1628 Lord Baltimore, on an important visit to America, heard a chatter in the top of a maple, and looking up beheld the colors of his own livery, black and yellow. The

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colors were animated and flitted from place to place, at last seeming to laugh at the Englishman who had come so far from home to find his coat of arms out of reach. Baltimore recognized the bird as an aristocrat, and bestowed upon it his own name on the spot. And a lord the oriole is to this day, black and orange in color, varying in tint with age and season of the year. New clothes, whether on birds or people, fade with wear and sunshine, and lose the luster of newness.

Everybody knows the oriole: you can't make a mistake. That is, you know the male; you may not be so certain of the female and young, for these are always duller of color, more olive, and without the bright black of the male. Moreover, the young male orioles dress very much like their sisters until they are a year or two old, when they dress like a lord.

A neighbor of ours was sure she had discovered a new species hanging their nest under the awning of a window. Both birds were dull yellow, exactly similar in size and color. There was no mistaking the oriole's nest, however; and when we went to see we found the male to be an immature only, mating, as is their custom, the second year, before his best clothes arrived.

The Baltimore oriole attaches its nest or hammock to twigs pretty well up out of reach, and weaves the same of grasses and string, or horsehairs, or all combined. Some of the strings and hairs are very long, and are passed back and forth in open-work fabric, crazy-quilt fashion, and really very beautiful. The cradles swing with every passing breeze, suggesting the origin of the Indian lullaby song, "Rock-a-Bye Baby, in the Treetop." The eggs are four or five in number, bluish white, with many and various markings in brown. These are laid on a soft bed of wool or other suitable material. No wind can blow the young from the nest, though sorry accidents do sometimes happen to them. We have found them caught by the toes in the meshes of the nest, helplessly suspended on the outside, thus earning the name of "hang-bird" in a particular case. Not so very different from the Baltimore is the Bullock oriole, which was also named for an English gentleman who discovered the gay fellow up in a tree, laughing at him. There is less black on the head and neck of the Bullock than on the Baltimore, but the two relatives are alike in habits and manners.

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The hooded oriole differs from both the others in the fact that he wears a hood or cowl of yellow, falling over the face like a mask. Perhaps the bill is more slender and decurved than in the Bullock.

The orchard oriole differs from the others in lacking the bright orange or yellow with the black of his dress. His bright chestnut breast, however, with the pointed bill and familiar manners, distinguish him as a member of the family. The nest is more compact than that of the others, woven sometimes of green grasses, which mature into sweet-smelling hay, retaining the green tint, which helps to hide its exact location in the foliage where it is placed.

To know one member of the oriole family is to know them all in a sense, and to know them is to love them.

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Here in southern California we are best acquainted with the Arizona hooded, which comes to us from Mexico as early as March or April and remains until autumn. We have also the Bullock, and have watched both at nesting-time. None of the orioles is gregarious. They come in single file, never in flocks, and go the same way, often a solitary bachelor or maid lingering behind. When they come in spring it is always the male first, two or three days ahead of his mate. And only one male appears first on the grounds, who makes known his presence exultantly, as if declaring, "I've come, see me!" The oranges are ripe about this time, and the coat of the gay bird is quite in keeping with the prevailing color. One associates any of the orioles, save the orchard, with oranges and buttercups and dandelions and summer goldenrod.

These birds love the habitation of man, and where encouraged and tempted by fruits, remain about our homes by choice, returning each year to the old homestead. We have had orioles return to our home four consecutive seasons, weaving the new nests on to last year's, like a lean-to, sewing the two together with threads. Three pairs of these double-apartment nests are swinging from a single gum-tree twenty-five feet above the driveway.

Often a pair of orioles will suspend their hammocks under the cloth awnings of windows, if provision is made for them. A strong string or little rope, put in and out of the cloth, close up under the corner, will tempt them. We have not known an oriole to pierce firm, untransparent texture of any sort, with her needle beak. On this account we tempt her with the rope.

If corn leaves were high enough, the orioles would doubtless take them for nesting-places in their season. Not so very different from corn is our banana leaf, only a good deal broader and higher. It closes in the middle of the day like a corn leaf, opening again at night or with the sunset.

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When the orioles first come to us in the spring they examine all the banana leaves. They soon make up their minds that these are either too young and tender or too old and tattered for a nesting site, and resort to the trees. Any tree will answer, but a favorite is the blue-gum, whose extreme height offers inducements. Though why the birds should take height into consideration we do not know, for later, when the leaves have matured, they select a low banana stock with its broad leaf, so low the hand can reach it. It may be they learn confidence as the season advances.

We have seen no nests with us made of other material than the light yellow fiber which the birds strip from the edge of the palm-leaves, the identical leaf of which the big broad fans are made. When the leaf is green it drips small threads from the edges of its midribs, which you see in the fan as thick grooves. These threads the orioles may be seen pulling out or off any hour in the day if the nest be located in a tree. If they have found a suitable banana leaf they work only in the morning and evening, as the leaf folds up like a book in the daytime, and the sharp apex under which the nest cuddles is difficult to reach.

An oriole works only from below, pushing the thread up, and pulling it down the width of two or three veins away from the first stitch, making a good hold. She first leaves a dozen or twenty threads swinging, after doubling her stitches to make them fast. Then she ties and twists the ends of the threads together at suitable length and width for the inner lining of the hammock; thus fashioning the inner space first and adding to the outside. When the whole is completed, she lines it with soft materials, using but one kind of material in the same lining. The banana-leaf hammock has two openings, back and front, through either of which the birds enter or emerge. As the nest progresses in size the leaf is spread apart, until on completion the thick midrib passes directly over the nest and fixes the shape of the whole like a roof or a tent. It is cool and always swinging, and on the whole is an ideal nursery.

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The adaptation of the oriole's feet for clinging and perching is a good thought of nature, else the bird could never weave from below as she does. She sticks her sharp toes through the mesh of the leaf, clinging to a rib while she works.

This custom of beginning on the inside of the nest marks the building instincts of all the hang-birds, for should they reverse the order they would make a mere tangle without inside proportions. It would be impossible to weave from without. As the nest progresses the outer threads are coarser and less closely woven, brought together at certain points of attachment to the twig or the leaf rib, and making a nest the winds might play with, but not steal away.

The oriole's nest is the poetry of bird architecture, be it swung in an apple-tree or an elm or a maple, or under a leaf. Her slender beak is her needle, her shuttle her hands, her one means of livelihood. We may call her fabric a tangle if we will; to the eye of Mother Nature it is a texture surpassing human ingenuity, the art for making which has descended by instinct to all her family. It is as beautiful as seaweed, as intricate as the network of a foxglove leaf, and suggests the indefinite strands of a lace-work spider's cocoon. All homage to the oriole!

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What a piece of good fortune it is that they
Come faithfully back to us every May;
No matter how far in the winter they roam,
They are sure to return to their summer home.

What money could buy such a suit as this?
What music can match that voice of his?
And who such a quaint little house could build,
To be with a beautiful family filled?

O happy winds that shall rock them soft,
In their swinging cradle hung high aloft;
O happy leaves that the nest shall screen.
And happy sunbeams that steal between.

CELIA THAXTER.

CHAPTER VII

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THE BIOGRAPHY OF A CANARY-BIRD

Sing away, aye, sing away.
Merry little bird,
Always gayest of the gay.
Though a woodland roundelay
You ne'er sung nor heard;
Though your life from youth to age
Passes in a narrow cage.

Near the window wild birds fly.
Trees are waving round;
Fair things everywhere you spy
Through the glass pane's mystery.
Your small life's small bound;
Nothing hinders your desire
But a little gilded wire.

MRS. CRAIK.

He didn't look very much like a bird, being mostly a big little stomach, as bare of feathers as a beechnut just out of the burr, with here and there on the head and back a tuft of down. His eyelids bulged prominently, but did not open, sight being unnecessary in consideration of the needs of his large stomach. Said needs were partially satisfied every few minutes with the nursing-bottle.

And a very primitive nursing-bottle it was, being no other than the beak of the parent bird thrust far down the little throat, as is the family custom of the rest of the finches.

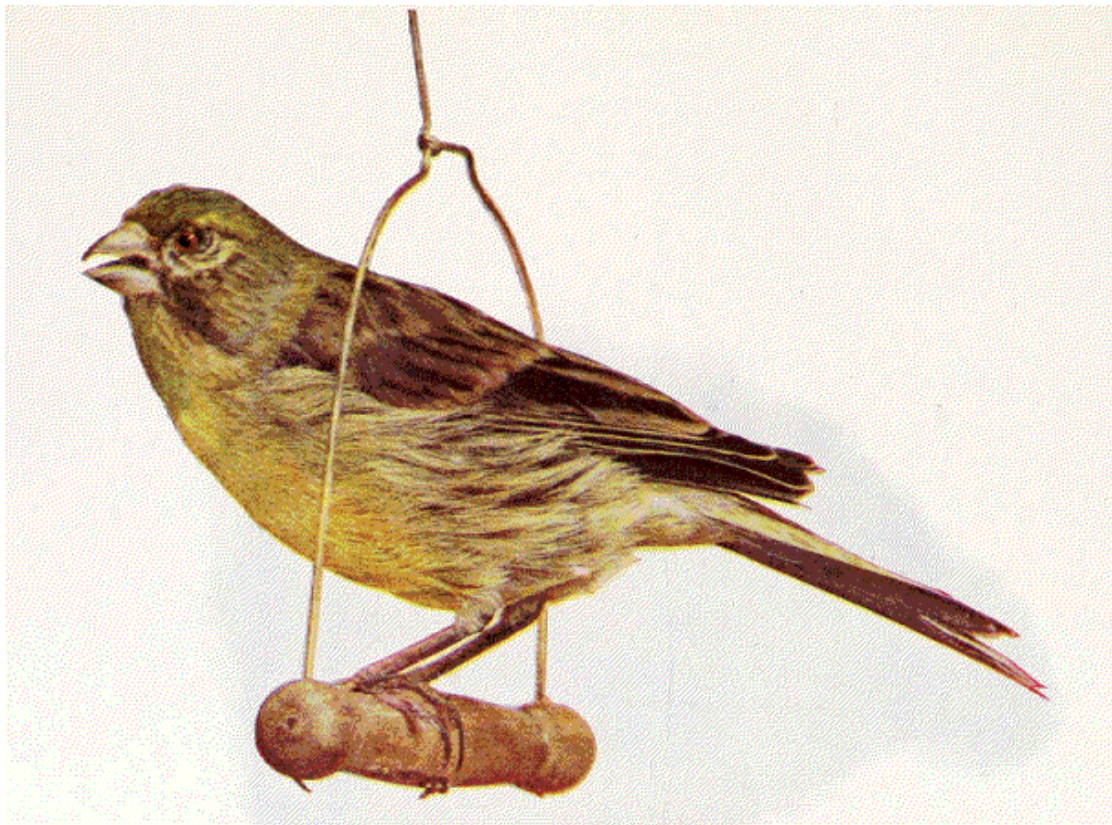
From somewhere in the breast of the mother a supply was always forthcoming, and found its way down the tiny throat of the baby and into the depths of its pudgy being. This food, which was moist and smooth, was very nourishing indeed, and sweet as well, for it tasted good, and left such a relish in the mouth that said mouth always opened of itself when the mother bird came near. But no more than its own share of the victuals did Dicky get, though he did his very best to have it all. There were other babies in the same cradle to be looked after and fed. And they all five were as much alike as five peas, excepting that Dicky was the smallest of all and was kept pushed well down in the bottom of the nest. This did not prevent his mother from noticing his open mouth when it came his turn to be fed.

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Canary mothers have sharp eyes; so have canary fathers, as will be seen.

Now, when this particular pair of birds began to look about the cage for a good place to fix upon for family affairs, some kind hand from outside fastened a little round basket in one corner, exactly of the right sort to stimulate nesting business. It was an old-fashioned basket, with open-work sides and bottom, airy and clean. Now, had this basket been a box instead, we should have had no tragedy to record; or had the mesh been closely woven, no fatal mistake (though well meant) would have darkened the sky of this domestic affair. But alas! the truth must be told, since the biography we are writing admits of no reservations.

It all came about by the interference of the father bird, whose presence in the nursery should have been forbidden at the start. The mother was more than once alarmed by his activity and misapplied zeal about the nest, and she had scolded him away with emphatic tones.



CANARY.

Not having anything of importance to do save to eat all day and sleep all night, he was on the alert for employment. One dreadful morning, when the mother was attending to breakfast, this father canary espied some, tatters sticking out of the bottom meshes of the nest basket, bits of string ends and threads, carelessly and innocently overlooked.

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"Ah," thought he, "here is something that ought to be attended to at once."

And he went to work! He thrust his sharp beak up between the round meshes of the basket bottom and pulled at every thread he could lay hold of, struggling beneath, fairly losing his foothold in his eagerness to pull them out. Having succeeded in dragging most of the material from beneath the birdlings, he caught sight of a few more straight pink strings lying across the meshes, and began tugging at them. The mother, feeding the babies from the edge of the nest above, noticed the little ones each in its turn crouching farther and farther into the bottom of the cradle, faintly opening their mouths as if to cry, but being too young and weak to utter a sound. It was a mystery, but the deepest mystery of it all was the fact that little Dicky, the dwarf of the family, came to the top as the rest worked down, and was getting more than his share of the breakfast.

About this time the mistress of the canary-cage came to see after her pets, and beheld a sight which made her scream as hard as if she had seen a mouse. There, beneath the nest, was the father bird tugging at protruding feet and legs of baby birds with all his might, growing more and more excited as he saw his supposed strings resisting his attempts to pull them through.

When the affair was looked into, there was but one bird left alive of the five little infants no more than five days old, and they were released from their predicament to have a decent burial in the garden at the foot of a motherly-looking cabbage head that stood straight up in disgust of the cruel affair, "as if she would ever have such a thing happen to her little cabbages!" True, she had no little cabbages of her own, but that made no difference.

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Now that we have tucked away these four little canary-birds, who never saw the light of day, and therefore never could realize what they missed by not holding on harder to what little they had by way of feet and legs, we will drop the painful subject and attend to Dicky.

Of course the father bird was excluded from the nursery, as he should have been weeks before, and there was only one mouth to feed. And that mouth was never empty unless the owner of it was sleeping. In fact, the babe was stuffed; though, strange to say, his stomach grew no bigger, but less and less, as the rest of his body filled out.

At the end of a couple of weeks he had a pretty fair shirt on his back, of delicate down, softer than any shirt of wool that ever warmed a human baby's body. And the mother stood on the edge of the basket and admired it. She didn't make it, of course, but she was in some way responsible for it, and no doubt felt proud of the bit of fancy work. She noticed, also, that the eyes of the little one did not bulge so much as they did, and a tiny slit appeared at the center, widening slowly, until one happy hour they opened fairly out, and "the baby had eyes." But they were tired eyes to start with, like the eyes of most young things, and they wearied with just a glimpse of the light. So the lids closed, and it was several days before Dicky actually took in the situation as he ought.

There being no other baby to crowd, he kept to the nest longer than birds commonly do, and when at last he got on his feet he was pretty well fledged. [65]

Now, when he had obtained his first youthful suit of clothes, his mother looked surprised, as did also his father, it is to be supposed, he in his solitary cage hanging close to the other. Both parent birds were pure-bred Teneriffe canaries, the male as green as emerald and the female more dusky and lighter. By a strange freak of nature, which happens sometimes by breeding these birds in captivity, the young fellow was bright yellow, of the tint of a ripe lemon, beak white, and eye black, while his feet and ankles retained their original baby pinkness. Oh, he was a pretty bird! But it was foreordained in his case, as in similar cases, that he should not be so sweet a singer as though his color had been like that of his parents. He was not conscious of this fact, however, and it mattered not to him that he was yellow instead of green. Nor did he care in the least that the price of him was marked down to a dollar and a half when it should have been double. Away he went in a new cage, after his new mistress had paid the sum named into the hand of his former owner. He peeked out of the bars as he was carried along swinging at every step; that is, he peeped out as well as he could, considering that a cloth was covered over the cage. The wind blew the cloth aside now and then and Dicky saw wonderful sights—sights that were familiar and "so soul-appealing." Not that he, in his own short life, had ever seen such sights, but that somehow in his little being were vague memories or conceptions of what his ancestors had seen. It is hard to explain it, but everything cannot be explained. When we come to one of these things we call it "instinct," with a wise shake of our heads, just as we were told to say "Jerusalem" when we came to a word we couldn't pronounce when we were very young and read in the Second Reader. [66]

Well, Dicky had a good home of his own, and lived for a purpose, although he never developed into a trained singer. In the heart of him he longed for a mate, and often expressed his desires in low, musical notes. But no mate came to him, and he would sit for hours pondering on his bachelor's lot, and singing more notes.

Now, wild birds are constantly having something "happen" to them. They fly against a wire or get a wing hurt, or the young fall out of the nest and can't find their mother. Dicky's mistress was always on the lookout for such accidents, and she brought such birds into the house and nursed them and brought them back to health when possible. It occurred to her to offer a "calling" or "vocation" to Dicky. So she made a small private hospital of his cage, into which she placed the victims of accident or sickness as she found them. Dicky was surprised, never having seen a bird save his parents, and his lady-love in his dreams, and at first he stood on tiptoe and was frightened.

But he learned to be kind after a while, and to show his visitors where the food and water were kept, and to snuggle up to them on the perch when it came bedtime. Many and many a poor invalid did he aid in restoring to freedom and flight, until he became pretty well acquainted with the birds that nest in our grounds.

Year after year the good work went on, and Dicky developed more musical talent, until he sang sweetly, imitating the finches and linnets outside. In the fall of the year, when the wild birds were thinking of their annual migrations, Dicky himself grew restless and quit his songs. Then his mistress opened his door and told him he might "go." Not far away, of course, but all about in the room, that seemed to this caged bird as big as any world could be. In his quest for new nooks he came by accident upon the mirror above the fireplace. Standing on the edge of a little vase before the glass, just in front of the beveled edge of it, he espied two yellow birds, one in the glass itself and another in the beveled edge, as a strict law of science had determined should be the case. [67]

In a second the whole bearing of the bird was changed. His feathers lay close, his legs stood long and slim, and his eyes bulged, as they never had bulged since the lids parted when he was two weeks old. Then he found voice. He sang as never a green bird sang sweeter. He turned his head and the two birds in the glass turned their heads. He preened his wing and the two birds preened each a wing. His little throat swelled out in melody, the tip of his beak pointing straight to the ceiling of the big room as if it were indeed the blue sky, and the two birds sang with uplifted

beaks and swelling throats. They were of his own kind, his own race, his own ancestral comrades. And they were not green! The low mesas of the Canary Islands never resounded to such melody.

But melody was not food, at least so thought Dicky's mistress, as she tempted the bird in vain to eat. Not a crumb would he touch until placed back in his cage, where he straightway forgot his recent discoveries. As usual, he took his bread and cooky to the water-dish and set it to soak for dinner, and scattered his seeds about the cage floor in his eagerness to dispose of the non-essentials, the hemp only being, in his opinion, suitable for his needs. Of course he was obliged to pick up his crumbs after he had thus assorted the varieties.

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Every day when the door was open he flew straight to the mirror. If we moved the vase to the middle, away from the beveled edge, he found the place by himself and stood on tiptoe exactly where the reflection accorded him the companionship of two birds, and he would resume his melody. It was real to him, this comradeship, and it lasted until actual and personally responsible companions were provided for him.

Now, let not the reader conjure up a picture of many birds in a cage with Dicky as governor or presiding elder. It was midsummer, when the sands are hot and inviting to the retiring and modest family known by name as "lizards." The particular branch of this family to which we refer, and to which Dicky was referred, is known to scientists, who would be precise of expression, as *Gerrhonotus*. But the familiar name of "lizard" is sufficient for the creatures we placed in a large wire cage on the upper balcony and designed for Dicky's summer companions.

Now, it should not seem strange to any one that we chose the lizard people to associate with this yellow-as-gold canary. Were they not one and the same long ages ago? And this is no legend, but fact. Have they not both to this day scales on their legs and a good long backbone? To be sure, the birds now have feathers on most of their bodies, so they may be able to fly; but a long while ago the bird had only scales, and not a single feather. And are not baby lizards hatched from eggs laid by the mother lizard? Ah, it is a long story, this, dating back too far to count. But long stories are quite the accepted fashion in natural science, and from reading them we resolved to make some observations of our own. There is more to be gained sometimes in making observations on one's own account than by adopting those of others.

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We captured half a dozen lizards and gave them the names of Lizbeth, Liza, Liz, and Lize. That is, four of them, being of the same order, received these names; there were two little ones besides, with peacock-blue trimmings, which have nothing to do with this story. The four named were about eight inches in length, speckled above and silver beneath. Their other beauties and characteristics will not be discussed except as it becomes necessary in treating of Dicky's further development.

From the day when these five creatures became fellow-captives they were friends. The lizards took to sleeping in the canary's food-box, so that in getting at his meals he was obliged to peck between them, and sometimes to step over them and crowd them with his head after hidden seeds. As the afternoon sunshine slanted across the cage the five took their dry bath all in a heap, bird on top with wings outspread, lizards in a tangle, each and all thankful that there was such a thing as a sun bath or family descent. Later, as the sun was going down and the lizards became drowsy, as lizards will, Dicky sang them a low lullaby, now on the perch above them, now on the rim of the feed-box. At times another comrade joined them, especially at this choral hour.

One of those red and white striped snakes seen in ferns and brakes along watercourses made a home in the cage with the bird and the lizards. This snake had an ear for music; at the first notes he emerged from his lair slowly and cautiously, lifted his graceful head toward the singer, and glided in his direction. If the bird were on the perch the snake would crawl up the end posts, taking hold with his scales, which, of course, were his feet, and lie at length on the perch at Dicky's feet, watching out of its beautiful eyes. At other times it would merely glide toward the bird, lift its head erect some five or six inches, and remain motionless until the song was finished. A big, warty hop-toad, also an inmate of this asylum, was a friend of Dicky's, as indeed was every creature, even to the big grasshopper. This toad and the bird were often seen in the bath together, the toad simply squatting, as is the custom of toads, the bird splashing and spattering the water over everything, including, of course, the toad. The toad blinked and squatted flatter to the bottom of the bath, hopping out when the bird was done, and the two sunning themselves after nature's own way of using a bath-towel.

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It would be too long a story were one to tell of the songs Dicky sang to the drone of the drones bumming away against the wire, sorry perhaps that they were to become dinner to lizards before summer was half over. But we must bring the biography to an end, hoping that these few

reminiscences will tend to interest people in the "Dickies" that are about them in wire cages, too often neglected and never half comprehended.

But we should by all means give an account of the last we ever saw of this particular Dicky.

During his stay on the balcony he had become acquainted with the finches and linnets and mocking-birds of the yard, holding quiet talks with them in the twilight, and growing more thoughtful at times, even to the extent of watching for opportunities to escape. One evening, just as we lifted the door to set in a fresh pan of water, out darted Dicky. Straight to a tree near by he flew, and called himself over and over again. We cried to him, "Dicky, O Dicky, come back." [71]

Ah, but here was a taste of freedom—the freedom which his ancestral relatives had enjoyed on the low slopes of Teneriffe before ever a foreign ship had carried them away captive. And Dicky had never read a word about his ancestors and their freedom! Therefore, what did he know about it? Scientists call it "instinct." It is a word too hard for us, and we will say "Jerusalem" and let it pass. Away across the street flew Dicky, the bird of prison birth, the bird of only two comrades of his kind and color, and these but shadows in a mirror.

The lizards heard us call, and peeped lazily over the edge of the hammock seed-box, blinking sleepily, and then cuddled down again without sense of their loss.

Running after the bird did not bring him back, as everybody knows to his sorrow who has once tried it. A glint of gold in the pine-tree, a radiance as of lemon streamers in and out of the cypress hedge, and we saw Dicky no more.

My bird has flown away,
Far out of sight has flown, I know not where.
Look in your lawn, I pray,
Ye maidens kind and fair,
And see if my beloved bird be there.

Find him, but do not dwell
With eyes too fond on the fair form you see,
Nor love his song too well;
Send him at once to me,
Or leave him to the air and liberty.

From the Spanish.

Some day a budding ornithologist, more eager than wise, with note-book and pencil, will possibly record a "new species" among the foothill trees—a species that resembles both yellow warbler and goldfinch. And the young man will look very knowing, all alone out in the woods; and he will send his specimen to the National Museum for identification. And the museum people will shake their wiser heads and inform the "ornithologist" that, in their opinion, there is more of the ordinary tame canary "let loose" in the individual than goldfinch or warbler. [72]

Let it pass.

A bird for thee in silken bonds I hold,
Whose yellow plumage shines like polished gold;
From distant isles the lovely stranger came,
And bears the far-away Canary's name.

LYTTLETON.

CHAPTER VIII

SPARROWS AND SPARROWS

What is it, then, to be a queen, if it is not like the silver linden-tree to cast
a protecting shadow over the world's sweetest song-birds?

CARMEN SYLVA.

Grudge not the wheat
Which hunger forces birds to eat;
Your blinded eyes, worst foes to you,
Can't see the good which sparrows do.
Did not poor birds with watching rounds
Pick up the insects from your grounds?
Did they not tend your rising grain,
You then might sow to reap in vain?

JOHN CLARE.

No bird, unless it be the crow, is so nicknamed as the sparrow. None is so evil spoken of, none so loved. Accepted enemy of the farmer, it is the farmer's dearest friend.

It is a good, large family, that of the sparrows, ninety or more varieties occurring in the United States. Always, of whatever tint or markings, it is recognized by its stout, stalky shape, short legs, and strong feet; but more surely by its bulging, cone-like bill, pointed toward the end. This beak is the bird's best characteristic, just as a certain nose is the leading feature of some human families. And there is character in a sparrow's nose. It is used for original research and investigation, on account of which the sparrow, of all the birds, deserves the degree of doctor of philosophy conferred upon him; omitting, of course, one single member of the family, the English sparrow. And why the English sparrow should come in for any notice among the song-birds we cannot tell, unless it be the fact that it really does haunt them, and they have to put up with it almost everywhere they go. Surely it needs no picture to introduce this little vagrant, save in a few regions sacred as yet from its presence. Even this little foreign rogue has lovable traits, were it not for the prejudice against him. What persistence he has in the face of persecution and death! What philosophy in the production of large families to compensate for loss! What domestic habits! What accommodation to circumstances! What cheerful acceptance of his lot! Surely the English sparrow presents an example worthy of imitation.

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To those whose preferences are for cooked little birds, what suggestions are stirred by the hosts of these sparrows invitingly arrayed on roof and porch and fences. They make as good pot-pie as the bobolink or robin, and it would seem less sacrilege to so appropriate them. The rich and poor alike might indulge in the delicacy. Especially might the weak little starvelings in the cities, whose dipper of fresh, new milk is long in coming, or never to come at all, find in sparrow broth a nourishing substitute. Who knows but for this very purpose the birds are sent to the large cities. We read of a story of "quails" in a certain Old Book, and more than half believe the wonderful tale. Why not make a modern story of sparrows sent "on purpose," and cultivate a taste for the little sinner? And its eggs! Why, a sparrow hen will lay on, indefinitely, like a real biddy. Only be sure to respect the "nest-egg," so the old bird may have one always by her "to measure by."



ENGLISH SPARROW.

Think of the "little mothers" of the big cities, raising baby weaklings on sparrow broth and poached sparrow's eggs. It is a pity to waste such fat, little scraps of meat as are thrown about. Besides, making good use of the birds, if they must be killed, is good for the soul of boys. It would teach them thrift and a good purpose. Our best ornithologists declare the English sparrow "a nuisance without a redeeming quality." Pity they hadn't thought about the pie.

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But there are sparrows and sparrows. Some of the family are our sweetest singers. Take the song-sparrow, the bird of the silver tongue. It is known throughout the Eastern United States and Canada; and on the Pacific coast and elsewhere it is still the song-sparrow, though it varies slightly in color in different regions. In many states it remains all winter, singing when the snow is falling, and keeping comradeship with the chickadee.

Everybody knows the little fellow by his voice if not by his coat. Nothing fine about the coat or gown save its modest tints. But, as with many another bird of gray or brown plumage, its song is the sweetest. Hearty, limpid, cheerful in the saddest weather, always ending in the melody of an upward inflection, as if he invited answer.

The song-sparrow is the only one we have noticed to gargle the song in its throat, swallowing a few drops with each mouthful; or it may be that he stops to take a breath between notes. We have seen him sing, sprawled flat on a log in a hot day, with wings outspread, and taking a sun bath. The song is always very brief, as if he would not tire his listeners, though he gives them an encore with hearty grace. Individual birds differ in song, no two singing their dozen notes exactly alike.

While his mate is patiently waiting to get the best results from her four or five party-colored eggs, the song-sparrow sings constantly, never far from the nest in the bush or the low tree, or even on the ground, where cats are debarred from the vicinity. One never can depend on the exact color of the eggs, for they vary in tint from greenish white to browns and lavender, speckled or clouded, "just as it happens."

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And the feathers of the birds have all these colors mingled and dotted and striped, and dashed off, as you may see for yourself, by looking out of the window or taking a still stroll down along the creek.

The song-sparrow has a pert little way of sticking its tail straight up like a wren when it runs—and it is always running about. In our grounds they follow us like kittens, keeping up their happy chirp as if glad they ever lived and were blessed with feet and a beak.

The nest of the song-sparrow is compact and snug, with little loose material about the base of it. We have had a long hunt many a time to find it. If we are in the vicinity of it the two birds follow us, chirping, never going straight to the nest, but wandering as we wander, picking up food in the way, and appearing to hold a chatty conversation. It is not evident that they are trying to conceal the fact that they have a nest and that we are near it; for if we sit down and wait, the mother goes straight to it without a sign of fear. But we must wait a long while sometimes, until dinner is over, for these birds seem to remain away from the nest longer at a time than most birds do. They feed their young on larvæ, pecked out of the loose earth, and tiny seeds from under the bushes, or soft buds that have fallen. They pick up a whole beakful, never being satisfied with the amount collected. So it drips from the corners of their mouths in an odd fashion, and some of it escapes, especially if it have feet of its own.

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We have not seen a nest of any other than a dark color. Horsehairs make almost half of it, and the outside is of grass closely woven around. The young birds are not "scared out of their wits," as are some birdlings, if a stranger appears, but will snuggle down and look one in the face. Once off and out they are always hungry, following the parent birds with a merry chirp, with the usual upward inflection. They come early to our garden table, where crumbs of cake and other things tempt them to eat too much. After they are filled they hop a few feet away, and sit ruffled all up, and blinking with satisfaction.

Once we played a pretty trick on the sparrows. Knowing their preference for sweets, we placed a saucer of black New Orleans molasses on the table, with a few crumbs sprinkled on the top. Of course the birds took the crumbs, and of course, again, they took a taste of the molasses. It wasn't a day before they dipped their beaks into the molasses that had now no sprinkling of crumbs, and seemed surprised at its lack of shape. It tasted good, and yet they couldn't pick it up like crumbs. Then they took to leaving the tip of the bill in the edge of it and swallowing like any person of sense. When they were done they flew away with the molasses dripping from their faces and beaks in a laughable style, returning almost immediately with more birds.

The fact is, a sparrow is a boy when it comes to eating. Were it not for its good appetite, it couldn't put up with "just anything." Sparrows love the towns and cities because they find crumbs there. Our friend the baker knows them, and many a meal do they find ready spread at his back door. So does Bridget the cook, and even Lung Wo, if their hearts happen to have a soft place for the birds. As for the boy around the corner, who walks about on crutches, he knows all about the sparrows' preferences. In fact, sparrows seem to have a special liking for boys on crutches. One little fellow we knew used to lay his crutch down flat on the ground and place food up and down on it when the sparrows were hungry in the morning. And the crutch came to be the "family board," around which the birds gathered, be the crutch laid flat or tilted aslant on the doorstep. In this way Johnny of the crippled foot came to have a good understanding with the birds, and many a quiet hour was spent in their company. Johnny may turn out to be a great ornithologist some day, all on account of his crutch. What will it matter that he may never shoulder a gun and wander off to the woods to shoot "specimens"? His knowledge of bird ways will serve a better purpose than a possible gun. It was Johnny who first told us to notice how a sparrow straddles his little stick legs far apart when he walks, spreading his toes in a comical way.

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Eastern and Western song-sparrows differ, and so do individual birds everywhere—not only in their songs, but in the distribution of specks and stripes on their clothes. What we have said about our song-sparrows may not wholly apply to the family elsewhere. These differences lead bird-lovers to study each of the birds about his own door and forests without placing too much credit upon what others say.

There is much of the year when sparrows live almost solely on seeds, and this is the time when they join hands with the farmer, so to speak, and help him with the thistles and other weeds, by work at the seed tufts and pods. Sparrows love to run in and out of holes and cracks and between cornstalks and dry woodpiles. It was this habit of peeping into everything, on the part of the birds, that led the olden poet to write:

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"I love the sparrows' ways to watch
Upon the cotter's sheds.
So here and there pull out the thatch
That they may hide their heads."

It was a pretty idea and a charitable one, that of the poet's. In a country where roofs are shingled with thatch, or dry sticks and leaves overlapping, the sparrows are familiar residents; and where somebody remembers to "pull out the thatch" or make a loose little corner on purpose, they sleep all night. We have ourselves made many a pile of brush on purpose for the sparrows.

The white-crowned sparrows winter with us, going far up the Alaskan coast to nest in the spring, as do also the tree-sparrow, the golden-crowned, savanna, and some others, including the beautiful fox-sparrow. These birds arrive in the Far North as soon as the rivers are open, and to the gold-seekers, who get to their dreary work with pick and spade, are like friends from home. Many a homesick miner stops a moment to listen to their clear, ringing songs, almost always in the rising inflection, as if a question were asked. And for answer, the man who sometimes would "give all the gold he ever saw" for one glimpse of home, draws his sleeve across his eyes.

Some of the sparrows which nest in Alaska use pure white ptarmigan feathers for nest-lining; while their cousins in the east, on the opposite side, breeding in Labrador, use eider-down. In these far northern latitudes these birds scratch in the moss and dead leaves of summer-time, often coming to ice at the depth of three or four inches. The summers are so short that insect life is very scarce, excepting the mosquitoes. But there are berries! And an occasional hunter's or gold-seeker's cabin always furnishes meals at short notice. Men may pass the birds at home in civilization with scarcely a thought; but when away and alone, the presence of a bird they have known in other climes brings them to their senses. It is then they recognize the fact that birds are their comrades and friends, to be cherished and fed, not always hunted and eaten.

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On account of the distribution of sparrows the world over, many legends have been written of them. The very earliest we have read is the one that assures us the sparrow was seen by Mother Eve in the Garden of Eden, on the day she ate of the forbidden fruit. In fact, the "tree" was full of sparrows warning the woman not to eat, though the birds themselves were making for the fruit with might and main.

In the story of Joseph it is recorded that the "chief baker" had a dream. In his dream he bore three baskets on his head. In the uppermost basket were all kinds of "bake-meats for the king." While the baker was walking to the palace with the baskets on his head the sparrows came and ate all the meat there was in the upper basket.

In the narrative the name of the birds is not given, but the fact that they "ate up the meat," going in at the little wickerwork spaces, leads us to believe they were sparrows. It was only a dream; but people dream their waking thoughts and habits. It is supposed that this chief baker was fond of birds, and it was customary for him to feed them on the king's victuals.

Well, the king is no poorer off now that the birds had their fill. And we wish peace to the soul of the baker for his kindness.

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In the ballad of the "Babes in the Wood" it was the sparrow who made the fatal mistake which took off Cock Robin before the wedding feast was over. Poor sparrow! He has never been known to carry a bow and arrow under his coat from that day to this. Thinking of that old ballad, we have often watched the robins and the sparrows together, and are never able to make out that the robin holds any grudge against his ancient friend and guest who made the blunder.

In nearly all the markets of the Old World sparrows have been sold as food, bringing the very smallest price imaginable. In Palestine two of them were sold for the least piece of money in use, though what anybody wants of two sparrows, unless to make a baby's meal, we do not know.

The tree-sparrow of England is common in the Holy Land, and it was probably this bird to which the New Testament alludes.

Of our American sparrows, the fox-sparrow is probably the most beautiful in markings. By its name one might imagine it had something to do with foxes, and so it has, but in color only, being a rich foxy brown in its darker tints. This bird is seen all winter in Washington on the Capitol grounds, scratching in the leaves for food and singing its loyal melody. The fox-sparrow has been sometimes detained in captivity, but as a rule grows too fat for a good singer. It seems to be the same with them as with our domestic fowls—if too fat they give poor returns. The hen and the sparrow and most people must scratch for a living, would they make a success in life. But who would want to cage a sparrow unless it be an invalid who can never go out of the room? Even here, if the invalid have a window-sill it were better; for the window-sill is sparrow's own delight, if it be furnished with crumbs. Or, if one would see some fun, let the crumbs be in a good round loaf tightly fastened. This, let the sparrow understand, is for him alone, and he will burrow to the heart of it. Caged birds make sorry companions.

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The farmer sometimes wishes he had all the sparrows he ever saw in a cage. Well, farmer, were it not for the sparrows, there would be more abandoned farms than you can imagine. Therefore, let them live and have their freedom. And let the farmer's daughter make bread on purpose for them. They will make no complaints about her first attempts, nor call it sour or heavy. Let the children play at camp-fire and throw their biscuits to the birds. It will give them happy hearts, each of them, the birds and the children. The sparrows will respond with a single word of thanks, but it will be hearty.

"One syllable, clear and soft
 As a raindrop's silvery patter,
 Or a tinkling fairy bell heard aloft.
 In the midst of the merry chatter
 Of robin, and linnet, and wren, and jay,
 One syllable oft repeated:
 He has but a single word to say,
 And of that he will not be cheated."

CHAPTER IX

[83]

THE STORY OF THE SUMMER YELLOWBIRD

The little bird sits at his door in the sun,
 Atilt like a blossom among the leaves,
 And lets his illumined being o'errun
 With the deluge of summer it receives.
 His mate feels the eggs beneath her wings,
 And the heart in her dumb breast flutters and sings—
 He sings to the wide world, and she to her nest;
 In the nice ear of Nature, which song is the best?

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

Here is a legend of the summer yellowbird. Let who will believe or disbelieve. They will think of it as often as they see the yellow beauty.

Once on a time, when Mother Nature was very lavish of her gold, she forgot to be thrifty and took to spreading it everywhere. She thought she had enough to make the whole world yellow, this being her favorite color; but she soon collected her wits, and reasoned that if everything were yellow there would be nothing left for contrast. So she quit spreading it on, and took to tossing it about in great glee, not caring where it went, so it was in dashes and dots and streaks and lumps, here and there.

She threw whole handfuls on the flowers, and butterflies, and little worms, and toadstools, and grass roots, and up in the sky at sunset, and against mountain peaks. The mountains laughed at this sudden whim of Mother Nature, opening their mouths wide, and got whole apronfuls tossed right down their throats.

After the ocean bottoms had been peppered with the gold, the flowers came along for their share; the buttercups and dandelions, and goldenrod and sunflowers and jonquils, and hosts of

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others.

Last came the orioles and finches and bobolinks, and many others, each in turn getting a spray or a dash or a grain of the yellow, and went away singing about it.

But certain very plain little birds arrived later, when the gold was almost gone, and asked Nature to give them "just a little." Now she had but a handful left. Seeing that there wasn't enough to go around if each had a little, the lady birds said, "Give all you have left to our mates. We do not care for gold. We will follow them about like shadows and look well to the nesting."

Then Nature smiled on the unselfish lady birds, and tossed all she had left of the yellow stuff straight at the singers who stood before her, each behind the other in a straight row, thinking she would give it to them in bits. But Nature threw it at them with all her might, laughing.

Of course the bird in front got the biggest splash, and then it scattered down the line, until the last few had only a dust or two. But they all began to warble, every one, each so happy that he had a little gold.

When Nature saw that the bird in the front had more than his share, she looked very keenly in his face and said: "My son, you must go everywhere, all over the cities and towns and country and forests, wherever human hearts are sad and eyes are dim with tears. And you must warble all about summer and good times when the clouds are dark, and you must be fond of houses where people dwell, and fields and playgrounds and sheep, and keep company with sorrow, and make the earth glad you had so much gold about you. And you can stay out in the rain, and make believe the sun shines when it doesn't, just to make people happier. Shoo! little summer yellowbird, that is your name."

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And the bird has been true to his happy mission ever since, going about here and there and everywhere in our country, taking his gold with him, and making buttercups and dandelions grow on fir-trees and goldenrod quiver in the glens before even the spring crocuses are out. In the green of the trees he looks like a single nugget, and when he runs up and down a branch it seems as if somebody had spilled liquid gold above, and it was running zigzag in and out of the bark. When he flies in the blue sky he seems like a visible laugh, for nobody can see the dash he makes and not smile. Many a breaking heart has been made less sad by the sight of him, and though he is not much of a singer, as singing goes, the few notes he has are cheery. Better to speak a few glad words than be an orator and scold.

And the yellow summer bird couldn't scold if he tried. The more he warbles gladness, the more the habit grows. In those nooks where the yellow warbler does his dress act, or molts, the children catch the feathers as they fall from his night perch, or lie in the ferns and toss them about for fun, to see them glint in the sunshine. Little girls gather them for doll hats, and make startling fashions for winter head-dresses.

All right, little girls; take the feathers as they are tossed to you by the merry warbler, without a single twinge of conscience. They are yours because they are given you. You didn't steal them nor hire a big boy to bring them to you. Should the yellow warbler molt a pair of wings by mistake, and you found them lying in a bush some bright autumn morning, you might have them for your doll's hat. You might even put them on your own little head.

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But to rob a bird of its gold, to tear out a wing or a feather to flaunt on your own pitiless head or the cracked china head of your doll—that would be a different thing.

There is a story afloat which we are tempted to tell, though it isn't a very happy one, and is not believed by everybody. It especially concerns girls and some women.

It has been a well-known fact for centuries that birds do hold conventions for the supposed purpose of talking over matters that concern themselves.

Not long ago, some time in the century that has just passed, there was a general convention of American birds held in the backwoods of the north. There were representatives from all the bird families that wear bright feathers. The purpose of the assembly was for discussion of different points in fashion, more particularly of the head-dress of women.

Now, at this point in the story, everybody knows exactly the drift of the "moral" which is as sure to come at the end as the yellowbird is sure to come with the daffodils. So it's of no use to go on with the story, since the moral is what story-tellers usually aim at from start to finish. Listen to the summer yellowbird all next season, and when he gives the word, let everybody, big and little, who loves to wear bird feathers and wings, make a scramble for the backwoods, and you may

hear the upshot of the convention for yourself. In the mean time, should crows and magpies and eagles and vultures, and other birds of strong beak and furious temper, steal down on homes and peck off the scalps of girls and women as they lie in their happy beds, let no one be alarmed. Possibly there has been a bird convention, and the big birds of sharp claw and strong beak are but doing as they are directed—and it is "the fashion" for them to do it, so they are quite excusable.



SUMMER YELLOW BIRD.

But if we go on with legends and imagined bird conventions, we shall never get to the bird itself. [87]

The bird itself is the summer yellowbird, the dear, delightful yellow warbler, whose very picture you see before you; the restless, much-traveled bird, the bird who may not look exactly like himself when his coat is worn and tumbled, but who comes by a new, fresh one when it is most sorely needed. More dull of color is his mate, who is just behind himself, somewhere in the tree out of range of the camera. The two are never far apart in family times; where one flies there goes the other, happy as clams—if clams ever are very happy, which we doubt—nesting as they do deep down in the wet sand, and never seeing a flower or a ripe peach or a raspberry all their lives. However, it is supposed the clam knows something akin to happiness, for he is always where he wants to be, save when he falls into the pot, and here is where we will leave him.

Well, the yellow warbler is at home all over North America, migrating from place to place, sometimes in twos and threes, sometimes in flocks; at times journeying straight on, and again stopping in every treetop for refreshments sure to be ready. Sometimes the birds travel by night, coming in on the morning train like any travelers, hungry for breakfast, and the first we know of

their arrival is a quaint little plea for something to eat. Not a highly melodious note that, but curious and pleasing.

We always know summer is coming straight away when we see the warbler, just as we know winter is here by the first snowflake. And as soon as they arrive nesting begins. For that very purpose they come, of course. As to the nests, they are very beautiful. The one in the picture must have been built deep in the woods, where grasses and dried leaf tatters were plenty.

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But there is no set pattern to go by, when nests are made. That is, there is no particular building material allowed, as with the swallows and some others. The yellow warbler loves best to use things that mat together readily, so the nest cup will be compact and thick, like a piece of felt cloth—so different from the nest of the grosbeak, transparent and open, like basketwork.

To get this cloth-like substance, the birds visit the sweet-fern stalks of the pasture sides, pulling off the woolly furze bit by bit, until a beakful is gathered. Then they make a trip to the brooks, especially in early spring, where they wake up the catkins on the pussy-willows and get loads of the soft fur. Oh, the secrets the pussy-willows know, about bird and bat and butterfly cocoon, and other winged people that frolic in their shadows! They could tell you exactly how many beakfuls of pussy fur it takes to weave a crib blanket for a yellow warbler's nest. Whole nests are made of it sometimes; for the warbler loves to gather one particular kind of material for a nest if she comes across enough of it in one spot. That is why they build so rapidly, always getting it done in a hurry. They love big loads of anything, and the male shows his mate where she can find it with the least trouble. In places where sheep pasture, rubbing against trees and catching their sides into thorns and sticks at every turn, the yellowbird gathers the wool. She likes this particularly, as it is light and clings to itself, and she can carry large quantities at one trip.

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The happy boy or girl who has a pasture near by home is rich. There is nothing like a pasture to study nature in, especially birds. A wood lot with trees of all sizes in it, a cranberry bog, a huckleberry patch, a maple grove, a sweet-fern corner, with snake vines running at random among young brakes—ah! this is the spot of all the world for nature-lovers and birds. One can part the bushes and find a warbler's nest most anywhere. One can peer up into the treetops and find another. In the treetops the nest is fastened securely, be it where the winds have a habit of blowing through their fingers when it isn't necessary. But birds and winds are fair play-fellows and seldom interfere with one another.

Here, in southern California, we have little wind, if any, in the days of the summer yellowbird. So nests are often set in a crotch without a bit of fastening.

Two years ago a pair came to the house grounds, the first we had seen so near. We wondered what they would nest with first, knowing their disposition to take the material close at hand. We knew they strip the down from the backs of the sycamores in the mountain cañons, and gather bits of wool fiber from tree trunks, or ravel lint from late weed stems in the arroyos. So we anticipated and shook loose cotton-batting in a bush. No sooner did father yellowbird spy the fluffy, white stuff than he brought madam, and she was delighted. This cotton could be pulled by beakfuls, and an afternoon or two would make the entire nest.

And they used it, not getting another thing save some gray hairs from a lady's head, which in combing had escaped, and were saved on purpose for the birds.

The nest was placed in the crotch of a pepper-tree, just out of reach of tiptoe inquirers. Just one pinch of cotton above another until the cup was deep and true to the shaping of the mother's breast, she turning round and round after the manner of nest-builders. Through the layers ran separate hairs which held the cotton in shape.

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It was a beautiful thing, that nest, even after it had served its purpose, and we took it down when the birds had flown. That was a mistake of ours. It was before we had come to know it is better to leave old nests undisturbed. Many birds love to return the coming season and repair last year's structures.

When the following summer came, and the yellowbirds returned from their winter in Mexico, they went straight to the same old tree. They crept up and down the trunk, peering into all the crotches, and criticising every place where a nest might have been. Perhaps a single speck of the cotton had remained and served for "a pointer"; anyway, the birds located the exact spot and went to work without more ado.

Exactly as though they remembered, they went also to the supply counter where we had placed more cotton in advance of their coming, and with it they built exactly the same white nest

in the very crotch of last year's happy history.

It was a pretty sight to see the mother take the cotton. It looked sparkingly white against her breast and dripping from her beak. And all the time she was arranging it in the nest to suit her experienced mind, her mate sang, warbling his sympathy, darting through the leaves, and running up and down the branches. This running up and down the boughs, so like their cousins, the creepers, makes this bird look graceful of form and motion, as indeed he is, anywhere and at anything he does. On this account he is often called the gem-bird, his brilliant grace suggesting some precious and coveted stone. [91]

These warblers of ours did not feign lameness, if we came near the nest, as some of the family are said to do. From daily companionship they came to know and trust us. Had the nest been a little lower we should have succeeded in taming them completely, as we have many of the wild birds at nesting-time.

We have left the nest where it is this fall, hoping the birds will return and claim it another year. It being of cotton, however, and having no threads to bind it in the crotch, we think the winter storms will wreck it.

It has been claimed by good authority that the cow-bird loves to deposit her eggs in the yellow warbler's nest. But this is of little avail to the cow-bird's trick, for Madam Warbler sees the point and the egg at a glance. She often builds above the intruder, imprisoning the alien egg, and so leaves it to its fate. A single bird is said to have built above the cow-bird's egg three times in succession, as the intruder persisted, until there were four floors to the nest, on the last of which the mother succeeded in laying her own eggs. If she becomes discouraged by the persistency of her guilty neighbor, she will leave the spot sometimes and search for another in which to carry on her own affairs in peace.

Of the seventy-five or more species of this warbler family said to occur in the United States, all resemble each other in points enough to mark them as warblers. All are insect-eaters. Some are called worm-eaters, others bug-eaters. They despise a vegetable diet. On account of their sharp appetite for grubs and larvæ, the warblers are the friends of all who live by the growth of green things and the ripening of fruits and grains. With few exceptions all the birds are small and very beautiful. Theirs is the second largest family among our birds, ranking next to the sparrows. [92]

Some of the warblers live near streams, playing boat on floating driftwood, hunting for insects in the decaying timbers, running up and down half-submerged logs atilt on the shore, after spiders and water-beetles.

If they are missed we may be sure they will return in their own good time, bringing their warble with them. They may only stay long enough for breakfast or dinner, taking advantage of their stop-over tickets, like any travelers of note. Perhaps the strong, courageous, singing males of the party of travelers come in advance of the females and young, as if to see that the country is ready and at peace. Nothing can be said of them more beautiful and fitting than this quotation from Elliott Coues:

"With tireless industry do the warblers defend the human race. They visit the orchard when the apple and pear, the peach, plum, and cherry, are in bloom, seeming to revel among the sweet-scented blossoms, but never faltering in their good work. They peer into crevices of the bark, and explore the very heart of the buds, to detect, drag forth, and destroy those tiny creatures which prey upon the hopes of the fruit-grower, and which, if undisturbed, would bring all his care to naught. Some warblers flit incessantly in the tops of the tallest trees, others hug close to the scored trunks and gnarled boughs of the forest kings; some peep from the thickets and shrubbery that deck the watercourses, playing at hide-and-seek; others, more humble still, descend to the ground, where they glide with pretty mincing steps and affected turning of the head this way and that, their delicate flesh-tinted feet just stirring the layer of withered leaves with which a past season carpeted the sod. We may see warblers everywhere in their season and find them a continual surprise." [93]

"Sweet and true are the notes of his song:
Sweet, and yet always full and strong;
True, and yet they are never sad.
Serene with that peace that maketh glad;
Life! Life! Life!
Oh, what a blessing is life!
Life is glad."

CHAPTER X

THE BLUEBIRD

He flits through the orchard, he visits each tree.
The red-flowering peach, and the apple's sweet blossoms;
He snaps up destroyers wherever they be.
And seizes the caitiffs that lurk in their bosoms.
He drags the vile worm from the corn it devours,
The worms from their webs where they riot and welter;
His song and his services freely are ours.
And all that he asks is, in summer a shelter.

WILSON.

Yesterday the snow melted from the top of the great rocks in the woods; the evergreens shading the rocks lost their white load that had been bearing down the branches for a month; the fences straggled their lean legs wide apart, as if it were summer, only the tips of their toes resting on the surface snow; the north roof of the barn fringed itself with icicles that tumbled down by noon, sticking up at the base of the barn in the drifts head foremost; the top dressing of white powder that for weeks had adorned the woodpiles sifted down through the sticks in a wet scramble for the bottom. All around the farm the buntings had picked the snow off, making the fields look as if brown mats were spread all over the floor. But yesterday the south wind puckered up its lips and blew all over everything in sight, and the brown mats disappeared, or rather, grew into one big one. The cows in the barn-yard look longingly over the fence toward the pasture, and the fowls take a longer walk than they have dared for months, away out in the garden, where lopping brown vines and nude bush stalks bear witness to what they have suffered.



BLUE BIRD.

The sun shines across the dooryard as it hasn't shone for so long, making a thin coat of mud just at the edge of the chips and around the doorsteps. But what matters? The children run in and out, tracking up the clean floors, taking their scolding with good cheer. Isn't spring here? and don't they hear the bluebird's note in the orchard?

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Run! run! and put up some more little boxes on the shed and the fence-posts. Clean out the last year's nests in the hollow trees. Tell the old cat to "keep mum" and "lie low," or she will be put in a bag and dropped to the bottom of the very first hole in the ice. Cats are all right in the dead of winter, when Old Boreas is frantic in his annual mad fit. She can sit on the rug and purr to her heart's content; but when the bluebirds come, if she bethinks herself of the fact, and sharpens her claws against the trunk of a cherry-tree, she would better look out. When the old cat sharpens her claws she means business, especially if she turns her head in the direction of the orchard. From the orchard comes a soft, agreeable, oft-repeated note, there is a quivering of wings outspread, and "he" is here. There may be only one or two or six singers. They have left the lady bluebirds in a safe place until they are sure of the weather. If the outlook be bad to-morrow, the birds will retire out of sight and wait for another warm spell. But spring is really here, and the good work of the sun goes on. In a day or two the lady birds appear modestly, of paler hue than the males, quiet, but quick and glad of motion.

It is the time of sweethearts. A blue beauty, whose latest coat is none the worse for winter wear, alights near the mate of his choice, sitting on a twig. He goes very near her and whispers in her ear. She listens. He caresses a drooping feather, torn in her wing as she dodged the brush in the journey. She thinks it very kind of him to do so.

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Suddenly an early fly appears, traveling zigzag, slowly, somewhere, probably on some family business of its own. Bluebird spies it and makes for it. Not on his own account! Oh, no! He snatches it leisurely and presents it to his love, still sitting on the tree. She thanks him, and wipes her beak on a smaller twig.

So little by little, and by very winning ways, does this gentle blue courtier pay his suit of Miss Bluebird. A chance acquaintance of bluebird sidles up to the same branch on which the two have been sitting. Bluebird courtier likes him not; he will have no rival, and so he drives the intruder away as far as the next tree, returning to his sweet and singing a low warble about something we do not understand. Probably he is giving her to understand that he will "do the right thing" by her all the time, never scolding (as indeed he never does), and looking to the family supplies, and in all things that pertain to faithful affection will prove himself worthy of her. She consents, taking his word for it, and they set about the business of the season.

Now they must hurry or the wrens will come and drive them out of house and home. One of the bluebirds remains in the nesting-place, or very near it; for if the house be empty of inmates, the wrens make quick work of pulling out such straws and nesting material as have been gathered.

If the people of the farm or other home be on the watch they can lend a hand at this time. Offered inducements by way of many boxes or nesting-places, with handfuls of fine litter, will attract the wrens, and the bluebirds will be untroubled. It may be that a cold snap will come up in a driving hurry after the nesting is well under way. In this event the birds will disappear, probably to the deep, warm woods, or the shelter of hollow trees, until the storm be past, when they will come again and take up the work where they left off.

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This sudden going and coming on account of the weather has always been a mystery to those who study the bluebirds. Some imagine they have a castle somewhere in the thickest of the woods, where they hide, making meals on insects that love old, damp trees. Caves and rock chambers have been explored in search of the winter bluebirds, but not a bird was found in either place. They keep their own secrets, whether they fly far off to a warmer spot, or whether they hide in cell or castle.

If the work is not anticipated by human friends, and the nesting-places cleaned out in advance of the birds, they will tidy up the boxes themselves, both birds working at it. What do they want of last year's litter with its invisible little mites and things that wait for a genial warmth to hatch out? House-cleaning is a necessity with the bluebirds. When the nest is done it is neat and compact, composed of sticks and straws with a softer lining. The birds accept what is ready to hand, making no long search for material. Being neighbor to man and our habitations, it uses stable litter.

The three to six pale blue eggs contrast but slightly with the mother's breast. The little ones grow in a hurry, for well it is known that more broods must be attended to before summer is over. Sometimes the nest is placed at the bottom of a box or passageway, and the young birds have difficulty in making their way to freedom. The old birds in such a case are said to pile sticks up to the door, and the little ones walk up and out as if on a ladder!

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The mother soon takes to preparing for another brood, and the father assumes all the care of the young just out, leading them a short distance from the mother, and teaching them to hunt insects and berries. The little ones are not blue, as any one may see, but brown with speckled breasts. These speckled breasts of young birds are fashionable costumes for many other than bluebirds. They remind one of infantile bibs, to be discarded as soon as the young things eat and behave like their elders.

When the persimmons are ripe in the late fall whole families of bluebirds collect in the trees for the fruit. They love apples as well, but apples are hard unless in early spring after the frost has thawed out of them. So the birds take the persimmons first. It is at this time, when they are flitting from tree to tree, that any person who will take the trouble of hiding underneath and keeping still will catch glimpses of the yellow soles of the bluebird's feet. The legs are dark above the soles. There is a legend about this that is pleasing to know and half-way believed by lovers of legends.

And one need not be ashamed of one's fondness for legends. Legends are as old as the hills, and folk-lore has preserved them. Now that the printer has become the guardian of such things, we expect a legend with every bird and beast, and a life history of either is hardly complete without.

Nearly all the birds of North America are entitled to a legend through the nature-loving Indians, the first inhabitants of our country. They have left little data, but enough has been gleaned from their folk-lore to put us on the trail of many a delightful story. Some of our legends may be of recent date, but all have a fascination of their own. The ancients loved myth and weird, fanciful tales. We are descendants of the ancients, and we love the same things.

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Once upon a dreary time a flood of water covered all the earth. The land birds were all huddled together in a little boat, twittering to each other of a "bright to-morrow," as they do to this day. As the storm grew harder the birds grew cold, not having any clothes up to that date. This was the first rain that ever came, and caught many things, of course, unprepared. The birds had been of naked skin, like the lizards, but their beaks had grown, else how could they have been twittering to one another of a bright to-morrow? On this very morrow of song, the boat being far above the mountain-tops, a single ray of sunshine appeared at a crack in the cabin-house. The bluebird always, from the very first, being on the lookout for stray bits of sunshine, sprang to the spot, which was just big enough for his two feet. When the sun went back behind the clouds it was found that the stray bit of it which the bluebird had hopped upon remained on the soles of his feet. That is the way the bluebird came by his yellow soles.

And he came by his blue coat in this wise: When the storm had spent itself the bluebird was the first to go out of the boat, straight toward heaven, singing as he went. When he got to the blue sky he stopped not, but pushed his way straight through, rubbing the tint of the sky right into his uncolored feathers, that had grown in a flash when he left the boat. His mate followed straight through the hole her lord had made, but of course she did not get so much blue as he, the hole being rubbed quite dry of its paint. Ever since the first flight of the bluebird somewhere the sun has shone through the rift he made in the sky and he carries hope of spring in his wake.

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The bluebirds are good neighbors, never quarreling nor troubling other birds. In the late fall his note changes to a plaintive one, as if he were mourning for the dear, delightful days of summer-time and nursery joys. It is now that he, with his large family, may be seen on weed stalks in the open country, looking for belated insects and searching for beetles and spiders among the stones.

In darting for winged insects the bluebird does not take a sudden flight, but sways leisurely, as if he would not frighten his treasure by quick movements.

Besides this particular bluebird, so well known all over North America, there are two other members of the family, differing only slightly in coloring and similar in habits. These are the Western and the Arctic bluebirds.

The bluebirds are the morning-glories of our country. They are companions of the violet of spring and the asters in autumn. They belong to the blue sky and the country home and the city suburbs. When the English sparrow is weary of being made into pot-pie and baby-broth, it will go on its way to the North Pole or the Southern Ocean, and our darling in blue will have no enemy in all the land.

When all the gay scenes of the summer are o'er,
And autumn slow enters, so silent and fallow,

And millions of warblers that charmed us before
Have fled in the train of the sun-seeking swallow,
The bluebird, forsaken, yet true to his home,
Still lingers and looks for a milder to-morrow;
Till forced by the horrors of winter to roam,
He sings his adieu in a lone note of sorrow.

WILSON.

CHAPTER XI

[101]

THE TANAGER PEOPLE

"Magic bird, but rarely seen,
Phoenix in our forest green,
Plumed with fire, and quick as flame—
Phoenix, else thou hast no name."

It is a large tribe, of numerous species in America, but the scarlet tanager alone may well be termed the Red Man of the forest. Native of the New World, shy, a gypsy in his way, harmless to agriculture, a hunter by nature, fascinating to all eyes that light on him.

It is as if Nature had a surplus of red and black the day she painted him, and was determined to dip her brush in nothing else. This contrast of color has made him one of our most familiar birds. But, as with many another of striking hue, the scarlet tanager has an indifferent song. Among our flowers like the scarlet geraniums and hibiscus, we do not look for the fragrance that distinguishes the pale violet or wild rose. It is as if the bright tint of bird or blossom is sufficient of itself, and nature would not bestow all virtues upon one individual.

Still the musical qualities of this tanager are not to be despised. His few notes may be almost monotonous, but they are pensive, even tender when addressed to his dear companion, for whom his little breast holds warm affection. She, too, at nesting-time, utters the same pensive note, and the two may be noticed in the treetops, whispering to one another in low tones.

It is not for his song, therefore, that we seek the bird, but hearing the song, we would see the singer. And who can blame us? We love the deeper tints of sunset and sunrise, the red and yellow of autumn leaves, the red glow of the prairie fire, the tint of the Baldwin apple and the sops o' wine. A tree of dull green apples in the orchard, though of finer flavor, will be neglected, more especially by the "wandering boy," for its crimson-cheeked neighbor of indifferent relish. The red apples of the naked winter bough, left on purpose for Jack Frost and the birds to bite, are said to allure the latter before the paler fruit of the next tree is disturbed.

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Therefore, when a nature-lover wanders into the woods in dreamy mood and the scarlet tanager flits above him amid the green of the foliage, the thrush and the sparrow are forgotten.

The tanager is discreet by nature, for it is as if he knows that by glimpses only is he best appreciated. Were he less retiring, as bold in habit as in color, sitting on the roofs and fence-posts, swinging the nest pendant from boughs, like the oriole, he would be less fascinating. But the tanager is seldom more than half seen; he is detected for an instant, like a flash, and disappears.

It is with the eye as with the hand. We would hold in the grasp of our fingers what we covet to touch or own. And the eye would retain in its deep fortress, if only for a moment, the tint it feasts on. More especially is this the case if the thing we would hold or see is transitory by nature.



SUMMER TANAGER.

So when we sit down on a half-decayed log bedecked with toadstools, and hear the note of a scarlet tanager overhead, we listen and are moveless. It is repeated, and if we are unacquainted with the bird we may think him to the right of us. Actually he is on the left, being endowed with the gift of ventriloquism. By this gift or attainment the beautiful creature eludes his human foes. For foes the tanager surely has, the more's the pity! Not content to adore the bird as part and parcel of generous nature, there are those who would pay their homage to the wings only, set among feathers and plaited straw. Such lose the fine art of tenderness. The face that would pale at sight of a brown mouse shines with pride beneath a remnant of red plumage literally dyed with the life-blood of their original owner. [103]

"Angelina has a hat
 With wings on every side;
 Slaughter o' the innocents
 Those pretty wings supplied.
 Sign of barbarity,
 Sign of vulgarity—
 That winged hat."

Well, let Angelina's hat pass for what it is worth to her. It is no more than the redbirds have had to submit to all their life history. There isn't a savage tribe but has made use of bright feathers for dress, either in skins or quills. The dark-skinned native is "dressed for church" if he wear a

single feather tuft in his scalp-lock, or a frail shoulder-cape of crimson breasts, stripped from the bird in the bush.

It may be the tanager has a sort of dull instinct to hide himself on this account in the deep foliage, deeming it the better part of valor to keep out of harm's way when a nature-lover sits on the toadstool-bedecked log to watch for him.

His mate, of dull greenish yellow, has less enemies in the disguise of admirers, and her little heart has no call to flutter when the so-called nature-lover haunts the woods. She goes on with her nest-building on the arm of a maple or even lonely apple-tree, making haste, for well she knows the season is short in which to raise their single brood. By the middle of August they must be off, [104] have the wings of the young grown sufficient strength; and yet the old birds only arrived from their warmer clime in the South when May was half over, or later.

Like the grosbeak's, the tanager's nest is loosely built of twigs and stalks, transparent from below, as if ventilation were more necessary than softness. The dull blue eggs, spotted with brown or purple, may be distinctly seen from beneath when the sun is shining overhead. But why worry the mother bird by long gazing? She is in great distress. Were the ear of the nature-lover properly tuned he would understand her to be saying, "They're mine, they're mine. I beg, I beg. Don't touch, don't take."

But in due time the young are juveniles, not nurslings, and they leave the nest, too soon the worse for wear on account of its careless build. At first the thin dress of the young is greenish yellow, like the mother, and they may pass unnoticed amid the late summer foliage. The male juveniles, during their first year, somewhere change to brighter hues in spots and dashes of red and black, as if their clothes had been patched with left-overs from their fathers' wardrobes. The fathers themselves, before they fly to the warm South, drop their scarlet feathers, like tatters, amid the ferns and blue-berries, and girls pick them up for the adorning of doll hats. No merrier sight, and none more innocent of character, than this of little girls searching for what is left of the beautiful summer visitor, picking up, as it were, the shreds of his memory. These scarlet feathers, together with those of the summer yellowbird, placed in layers or helter-skelter in a case of gauze, make a fairy pillow for winter times, pretty to look at. They come with thistle-down and [105] milkweed tassels, and sumach droppings and maple leaves, and the first oozing of spruce gum in the woods. Yes, and beechnuts and belated goldenrod, and the first frosts that nip the cheek of the cranberry in the bog.

And the huckleberry patch is littered with the tiny plumes, for tanagers love the huckleberries that leave no stain on their greenish yellow lips. These huckleberries are their chief food in late berry-time, coming, as they do, when the juveniles need a change in their meat diet before the long flight ahead of them. Up to this date they made good, square meals from fat beetles and other insects big enough to "pay for catching." That bumblebees and wasps are endowed with sharp points in their character does not forbid the use of them for tanager food; though it is presumed that the stings are either squeezed out, or the insect killed, before it is fed to the nestlings, as we have noticed in the case of the phœbes.

In these late summer days the singer punctuates his song often and long, for he must recuperate for his autumn journey. More than this, he must protect his young ones. He therefore loses the shyness of spring, and follows the juveniles about, feeding them and teaching them to shift for themselves, and protecting them with word and sign. His whole care is for his family, and hard is a cruel world indeed whose human inhabitants can molest him. His scarlet cloth is forgotten. He will follow his young even into captivity, and there feed them through bar or window. But not a fascinating prisoner is the tanager; one grows accustomed to his bright coat, and as it is seen against the pane in winter-time, contrasting with the whiteness of the snow, seems to reproach the hand that imprisoned it. When one stops to think of it, scarcely a bird in captivity, [106] unless it be the canary to the manner born, gives the satisfaction and amusement anticipated. It is the going and coming of the wild birds that make more than half the fun. The sudden surprise of spring; the reluctant departure of autumn, with the hope of intermediate days—there is charm in all this keeping of Nature's order.

Well, good by, sweet scarlet tanager. Sing us back your farewell note of "Wait, wait." We shall see you again when the early cherries are ripe, if not sooner. The beetles and bumbles and the grasshoppers will be watching out for you, and the terrible hornet shall double his armor-plate to suit the strength of your strong beak. It will be of no avail for the big black beetle to hide beneath the iron kettle he carries on his back, and the bum of the big, yellow bumblebee will serve only as its call-note, while the broad sword of the hornet will have no time to unsheath itself at sight of you. Good by, tanager.

CHAPTER XII

THE MEADOW-LARK

Hark! the lark!

SHAKESPEARE.

Think, every morning when the sun peeps through
The dim, leaf-latticed window of the grove.
How jubilant the happy birds renew
Their old, melodious madrigals of love.
And when you think of this, remember too
'Tis always morning somewhere, and above
The awakening continents from shore to shore,
Somewhere the birds are singing evermore.

LONGFELLOW.

Never did any lark "lean its breast against a thorn" and sing. That was the poet's sorry fancy. Larks are not in the habit of leaning their breasts against anything when they sing. They stand tiptoe on a stout grass stem or a fence-post or the highest bough, or sing as they fly, or warble a simple ditty while running on the ground.

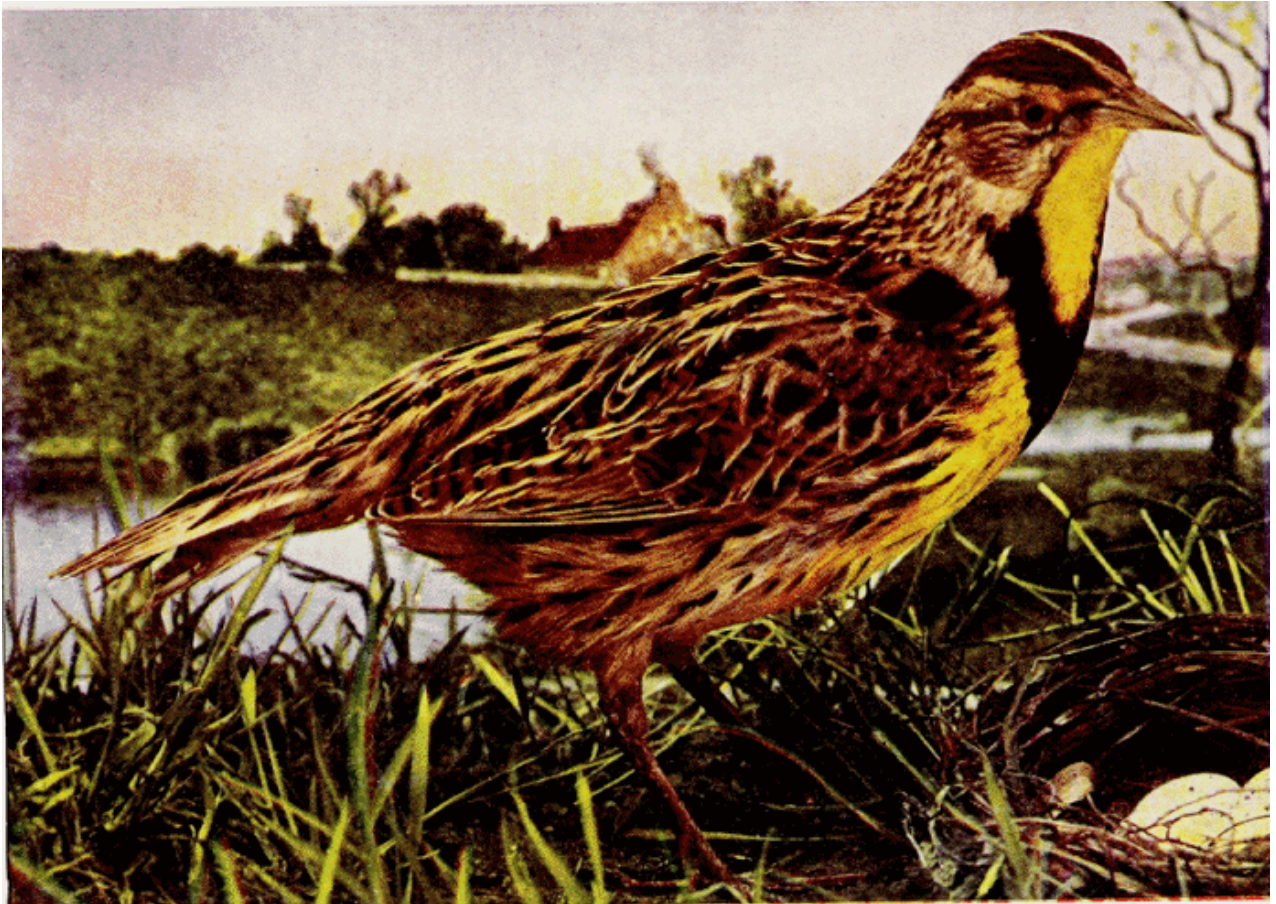
It is on account of this habit of his, always having his song at his tongue's end, that the poets have made the lark the subject of many a moral romance. "His feet are on the earth, while his song is in the sky." "High or low, in joy and pain, warm or cold, wet or dry, sing like the lark." And he is given the credit of "waking up the morning," and also of "tucking in the night," and of "blowing the noon whistle," and all sorts of intermediate duties. He doesn't deserve it all more than other birds, however. But it is the poet who sings as often as the mood takes him. If it be the lark that inspires him at this particular moment, the lark is his theme. Or if it be the raven or the wren or any other winged subject, it is one and the same to the poet.

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But country people are all poets. In their hearts they have enshrined the meadow-lark, because he is very near them and gives them little cause to despise him. He has no tooth for fruit or grain, unless he happen to stumble on it unawares. He seems never to seek it, like the sparrows. Resident in many places, even when the snow is up to his knees; in the open field, in the margin of woods, where it is cool and grassy; in damp meadows where the insect people have their summer home; and if food be scarce, even in the barn-yard litter, may the meadow-lark be seen.

Yes, seen and heard! Very often he is heard and not seen. And no one need see him to know him. His song is his passport to everybody's heart. "There's the meadow-lark!" exclaims a white-haired man, bent with much listening and many sorrows, leaning on memory and his strong cane for support. And his eye brightens, as no youthful eye can shine, at sound of the familiar melody. "Yes," he says, "that is the meadow-lark. He's somewhere down in the open. I knew him when I was a boy."

And the old man, who is a boy again, walks weakly off to the nearest field, bent on flushing the comrade of his childhood. He sits feebly down on a log and rests. It is the same log he climbed when he was a boy. It was not horizontal as long ago as that, but perpendicular, and was green-topped and full of orioles' nests. It lies prone on the ground now, long ago cut straight in two at the base. And it has laid there so long it has grown black and mildewed. On account of this mildew, and the toadstools that have ruffled and fluted and bedecked its softened bark, the insect people have made their home in it.



MEADOW LARK.

The old man sitting there, waiting for the meadow-lark to appear, thinks not of the insect people, but of the lark. With the tip of his strong cane he breaks off a piece of the serried bark, and a spider scurries down the side of the log and into the grass. He chips off another piece, and a bevy of sow-bugs make haste to tumble over and "play dead," curling their legs under their sides, but recovering their senses and scurrying off after the spider. The cane continues to chip off the bark, and down tumble all sorts of wood people, some of them hiding like a flash in the first moist earth they come to; others never stopping until they are well under the log, where experience has taught them they will be safe out of harm's way. And they declare to themselves, and to each other, that they will never budge from under that log until it is midnight "and that wicked meadow-lark is fast asleep." [109]

Of course it is no other than the meadow-lark the insect people are running away from! They never saw the old man, nor the tip of his cane that was doing all the mischief. They know their feathered foe of old. What care they for his song? He is always on their trail. So when the old man sat down heavily on the log, and the point of his cane jarred the loose bark, out tumbled the tenants, expecting each of them to be presented with a bill. But the bill of their dreaded enemy is a rod or two away.

He has had his breakfast already. It was composed of all sorts of winged and creeping folk, including many an insect infant bundled all up in its swaddling-clothes and not half conscious of its fate.

It was for this very purpose that he was up so early. Of course the poets did not take his breakfast into account when they wrote verses about his "rising with the sun" and singing with "the first beam of day." Nothing in the world brought him out of bed save his ever-present appetite. And the farmers have cause to bless their stars that the meadow-lark has an appetite of his own. Also, that he and his spouse make their nest in the grass, and that the baby larks get about on the ground long before they are able to fly fence-high. [110]

But we are leaving the old man sitting too long on that damp log. He may catch a cold. Of one thing we are certain, he will catch sight of "that rogue lark" if he waits half an hour. He used to wait just that way when he was a boy, though to keep still half as long in any other place for any other purpose would have been a physical impossibility. His specs are on the end of his nose now, for the old man has good far sight, and he squints knowingly at a bunch of meadow-grass three rods away. Who says the eye of the aged grows dim? The eye of this particular old man never

shone brighter even when he climbed that identical elm and came near losing his balance, reaching after the orchard oriole's nest that swung, empty, just at tantalizing distance. What did the boy want of that nest? He just wanted to get it, that was all.

And what does the old man want of the meadow-lark caroling at the base of bunch-grass somewhere ahead of him? Why, he just wants his nest, that is all! Suddenly up pops the bird, right out of the waving mound he was "sure to be in," and he flies low to the nearest stone heap, looking the old man right in the eyes as if he had as easy a conscience as ever reposed in the breast of man or bird. And no other conscience has the meadow-lark, to be sure. It is the same conscience that has descended to him through his ancient family down through countless generations. [111]

But the old man isn't after the conscience of the dear bird. He is after what may develop at the base of that grassy mound. Over toward it he goes, feeling with his cane, poking the buttercups and smartweed and yarrow aside. "Ha," he laughs, "I've got it, Mary!"

"Mary" isn't anywhere in sight; but the old man's habit of telling "Mary" everything stands by him like any good friend. He has been telling her everything all his life, and why shouldn't he tell her about this lark's nest, the very latest discovery of his?

No deceiving this old boy! All these meadow-grasses, bent low and forming a rather awkward archway over a possible corridor, hold secrets. Out darts the mother lark with many a sign of maternal anxiety. And the singer discontinues his morning carol.

The old man kneels very stiffly down in the meadow (he thinks he is dropping down with a jerk, in boy fashion) and parts the grasses. He peers in and sees something. He laughs, parting his gums wide, exhibiting to a black and yellow bumblebee a solitary tooth, like the last remaining picket on the garden gate he swung on when he was a boy. Then he rises stiffly, and goes as fast as his legs can carry him, exactly as he has always done for seventy-five years, more or less, straight to "tell Mary."

Just as he reaches the doorstep and places his strong cane against the corner, preparatory to lifting his right foot, he turns to take a look at the spot he has just left, empty-handed, in the meadow. He shades his eye from the nine-o'clock sun, and sees a crouching form no bigger than was his own at the age of ten. He tries to shout, but that one tooth standing in the door of his lips like a faithful sentinel, or something back of and behind it in the years that are gone, prevents his voice from reaching farther than the stone wall at the garden's edge. "Mary," inside, darning hand-knit stockings, hears the voice that is dear to her, lo! these many years; and she does the shouting. Somehow her voice is the stronger of the two. "Get out of that meadow, boy! No stealing lark's eggs in here." [112]

The "boy" slinks back down to the road fence, and bethinks him of another meadow "out of sight of folks," where no end of larks are singing.

When the nesting-season is over—and maybe there were a couple of broods—the larks will club together on a picnic excursion and wander off and on, nobody knows just where. Perchance they will turn up in the next town or the next county or the next state. As they wander, they will sing plaintively, stopping for meals where meals are served. Or they will chatter all together, recognized wherever their happy lot is cast, loved by the loving, perhaps eaten by the sensual.

It will be remembered that the lark was a wedding guest of no ordinary office at the marriage of Cock Robin and Jenny Wren. At the very last feature of the beautiful ceremony the ballad runs this wise:

"Then on her finger fair Cock Robin put the ring,
While the lark aloud did sing:
'Happy be the bridegroom,
And happy be the bride;
And may not man nor bird nor beast
This happy pair divide.'"

After the cruel blunder was done, which was the fault of neither bird nor beast nor man (by intention), and the question as to who should act the part of clerk at the last sad burial rites was raised, it was the lark who volunteered, though it is to be supposed that his heart was breaking. [113]

"Who will be the clerk?
'I,' said the lark,

'If it's not in the dark,
And I will be the clerk.'

Now, why the lark should object to doing this very solemn service for his dead friend the robin, if it should happen to be "dark," we cannot tell. Perchance he really couldn't act the part of a clerk at night on account of his family having been forbidden, centuries and centuries ago, to lean any more against the moon in the first quarter. It used to be a habit of theirs to sing that way, and that is how they came by the crescent on their breast. The gods made up their minds that if all the larks in the world took to leaning their breasts against the moon all at one time it would result in toppling the old moon over. The meadow-lark being the last of the family of larks to obey the command, flew away with the shadow of the crescent under his throat. Anybody can see it for himself in plain sight. So, as intimated, the lark at the funeral, remembering that he couldn't have a moon to lean against, refused to do the part asked of him, if the ceremony occurred after dark. Though, come to think of it, this legend about the crescent must be of very recent date, for the lark of the ballad could have been no other than the English skylark, which has no crescent. But the moon has a crescent, and so has our meadow-lark, and so, if there be a grain of truth in the ballad and the legend, our dear singer must have been spirited across the sea for that special occasion. [114]

Our interest in this old ballad of Cock Robin would have died before it began had we not been informed of the whole affair with such precision as to details.

For the benefit of those who doubt the event having ever occurred "within the memory of man" and birds, we will refer our readers to the inscription on a certain very old tomb-stone in Aldermay Churchyard, England. If they do not find a single reference to Cock Robin and the lark which acted the part of clerk at the funeral, it will be because they have left their specs at home. Is it not a well-known fact that tombstones tell no falsehoods?

Thinking all these things very calmly over, it occurs to us that, after all, any other of the singing birds we have mentioned in this book might be as well fitted to act the part allotted to the lark as that bird himself. The plain, everyday facts are, it was a poet who reported the affair, and he was at his wit's end to find a word to rhyme with "clerk," and a clerk he must have at a funeral of that date. Now the English tongue, wherever it is spoken, is a curious language. It seems ready made to suit any figure, stout or slim, big or little. The poet knew that any person of good sense, accustomed to rhyming, would read the word "clerk" to sound like "dark." Hence the immortal rhyme,

"I," said the lark,
'If it be not in the dark,
And I will be clerk.'

CHAPTER XIII

[115]

SKYLARK (HORNED LARK)

"Under the greenwood-tree,
Who loves to lie with me,
And tune his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat;
Come hither, come hither, come hither;
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather."

In Shakespeare's play, "As You Like It," scene v., Amiens, a close student of nature, is made to sing this song.

It probably caused his companion, Jaques, to remember the skylark of his own boyhood, for he besought Amiens to "sing it again." But Amiens argued with his friend that it would make him "melancholy." However, he sang again, and it is supposed that the two lived over the days of their boyhood, when they lay on the grass under the greenwood-tree, just on the edge of a corn-field, and listened to the skylark tuning his merry note in his own sweet throat.

Dear to the heart of English boys and other people is the skylark, on account of which, and for the reason that Britishers of any age may like to meet an old friend should they chance to take up this book in their travels, we are giving a chapter to this bird. In the play, Jaques and Amiens sing later together all about their favorite lark (it is presumed):

"Who loves to live i' the sun,
Seeking the food he eats
And pleased with what he gets."

Surely the skylark loves to live i' the sun, for he is always in the open, summer and winter, as if he would be sure to not miss a single sunbeam. As is the case with most of our birds who dwell or nest near our homes, the skylark does not seek man for his own sweet sake, but for the sake of what the farm holds; though no marauder is this lark, for it eats ground insects nearly the whole year—crickets, and beetles, and grubs, and worms, and little folk who see no further than their noses. To be sure, in late fall, after the farmer's buck-wheat and other grains are ripened and mostly harvested, the larks visit the fields in flocks to gather up the crumbs and grow fat on the change from a meat to a vegetable diet.

[116]

This growing fat, by reason of his generous diet in late fall, just before the snows come, serves the same purpose as does the fattening of bear just before winter. The snow covers lark's "meat victuals" all up, and the birds must fall back at times on their stores laid by under their skin for this very season. Though they do not hibernate, they still have use for their fat. So has the gunner, and the people with snares ready to set for the unwary and hungry birds.

A recent writer, commenting on this autumn sport of the Englishman, excuses their seemingly wanton destruction by observing that "were they not thus taken, large numbers would doubtless meet natural death in their autumn flights." To quote Shakespeare again, "Oftentimes, excusing of a fault doth make the fault the worse."

There seems to be a sort of inconsistency in the fact that, from earliest times, the human family have been guilty of eating what most they love—or what most they do declare they love. The flavor of the flesh of a bobolink or skylark is hardly out of the mouth before the tongue takes to praising the favorite bird with a psalm or hymn; in due time the poet and singer bethinks him of his annual feast of flesh, and his spiritual appreciation grows thin.



HORNED LARK.

We are thankful, in spite of all this, that the poets and singers sing on. They have immortalized the skylark of Europe as no other known bird is immortalized. [117]

Superstition claims the bird as peculiarly its own. Do not its prophets divine things mysterious and darkly subtle by the skyward flight of the bird? And its song! Any priest of the craft may read in its varying notes all sorts of fortunes to people and clans.

And the eggs of the skylark! Were they not speckled and streaked by passing night winds in the shape of fairies with garden gourds filled with the ink juice of the deadly night-shade berries? Were the skylark's eggs white they would be "moon-struck," and the hatchlings would sing the song of the night-owl. In spite of the speckled eggs and the usual grassy cover of the nest, these are too often the successful object of the prowling boy. Though it must be confessed that in this, as in the case of the robbery of other birds, it is not always the original finder of the nest who is guilty of theft. Shakespeare was aware of this fact, for in "Much Ado About Nothing" he makes Benedick speak of "the flat transgression of a school-boy, who, being overjoyed with finding a bird's nest, shows it his companion, and *he* steals it."

The mistake was in "showing it his companion." Though, should the companion happen to be a girl, he need have no fear. The nest will be undisturbed next time he visits the spot.

For eight months of the English year does the skylark sing, prodding the lazy, comforting the sorrowful, accusing the guilty, making more merry the glad. On account of its ever-circling upward flight, the bird is believed to hold converse with heaven. In captivity it is supposed to be "longing for the sky" when it flings itself against the roof of its cage. To protect it against harm in this last, soft cloth is sometimes used for the cover to its home. [118]

In winter, when the skylarks cover the sandy plains of Great Britain, they have but a single cry, having laid by their songs with which to "wake the spring"; or it may be with them as in the case of our bobolinks—after a diet of ripe grains they are "too full for utterance." But when spring is actually astir, then are the larks abroad in the sky. Francis Rabelais, as long ago as the fourteenth century, loved the English spring for the sake of the skylark, and the thoughts the bird inspired in him. Having no appetite, apparently, for the bird when he is fattened for eating, the poet longed for larks in the act of singing, as if, could he hold one of them in his hand when it was articulating, he might come by its written song, as the telegrapher reads the scroll as it unwinds. But he wouldn't be content with one bird, oh, no!—if ever the "skies should fall" he made up his mind to "catch larks" by the basketfuls. But the heavens never were known to fall in lark-singing time, and the poet is long since under the sod with the skylarks nesting above him.

To be like a singing bird has been the longing of human hearts in all ages; as if we realize that there is medicine in song as in nothing else—medicine to the singer. And so there is. No higher compliment could be paid by a poet to the memory of his friend than the following, dated in the seventeenth century. There is a happy lesson of work, and good nature, and lightness of heart in a trying occupation too good to lose.

"There was a jolly miller once,
Lived on the River Dee;
He work'd and sung from morn to night,
No lark more blithe than he."

[119]

Several attempts to introduce the English skylark into America have been made, with no satisfactory results. It is hoped to some day have them feel at home on the Pacific coast, where the varying moist and dry climates of north and south would give them the pleasures of their natural migrations. But although we may never have the skylark with us, we have its relative in our horned or shore larks. In its habits it resembles its lark kindred in the Old World, singing on the wing, nesting on the ground, feeding on the same food, walking rapidly, reserving flight as the last resort when pursued.

The horned lark is so named on account of a little tuft of feathers on each side of the forehead, which it raises or lowers at pleasure. It nests in the North very early, even before the snow is all melted, and brings off two or more broods in a season. In the autumn it exchanges its beautiful song for a good appetite, and fattens itself on grains and berries in anticipation of possible winter hunger. It may be seen all over North America at some season of the year, in fall and winter in flocks.

In California we have the Mexican horned larks, which cover the mesas and rise reluctantly in large numbers when surprised. They love to follow the open country roads, running out of the

track while we pass, but returning as soon as we have gone our way. On rainy days—which, by the way, are the best of bird days—we have taken our umbrellas and strolled out to the flat lands on purpose to see these larks in their greatest numbers. They will fly, with a whirr of sound, and alight almost at our feet, to repeat the act for a mile if we choose. [120]

In midsummer they are seen in the vicinity of their nesting-places, standing in rows under fences or plants with mouths wide open, seeming to choose hot sand to flying straight across the short desert to mountain retreats. The horned larks, wherever seen, suggest contentment, and pleasure in life as they find it.

CHAPTER XIV

[121]

BOBOLINK

"June! dear June! Now God be praised for June."

'Nuff said; June's bridesman, poet o' the year,
Gladness on wings, the bobolink is here;
Half hid in tiptop apple-blooms he sings,
He climbs against the breeze with quiverin' wings.
Or, givin' way to 't in a mock despair.
Runs down, a brook o' laughter, through the air.

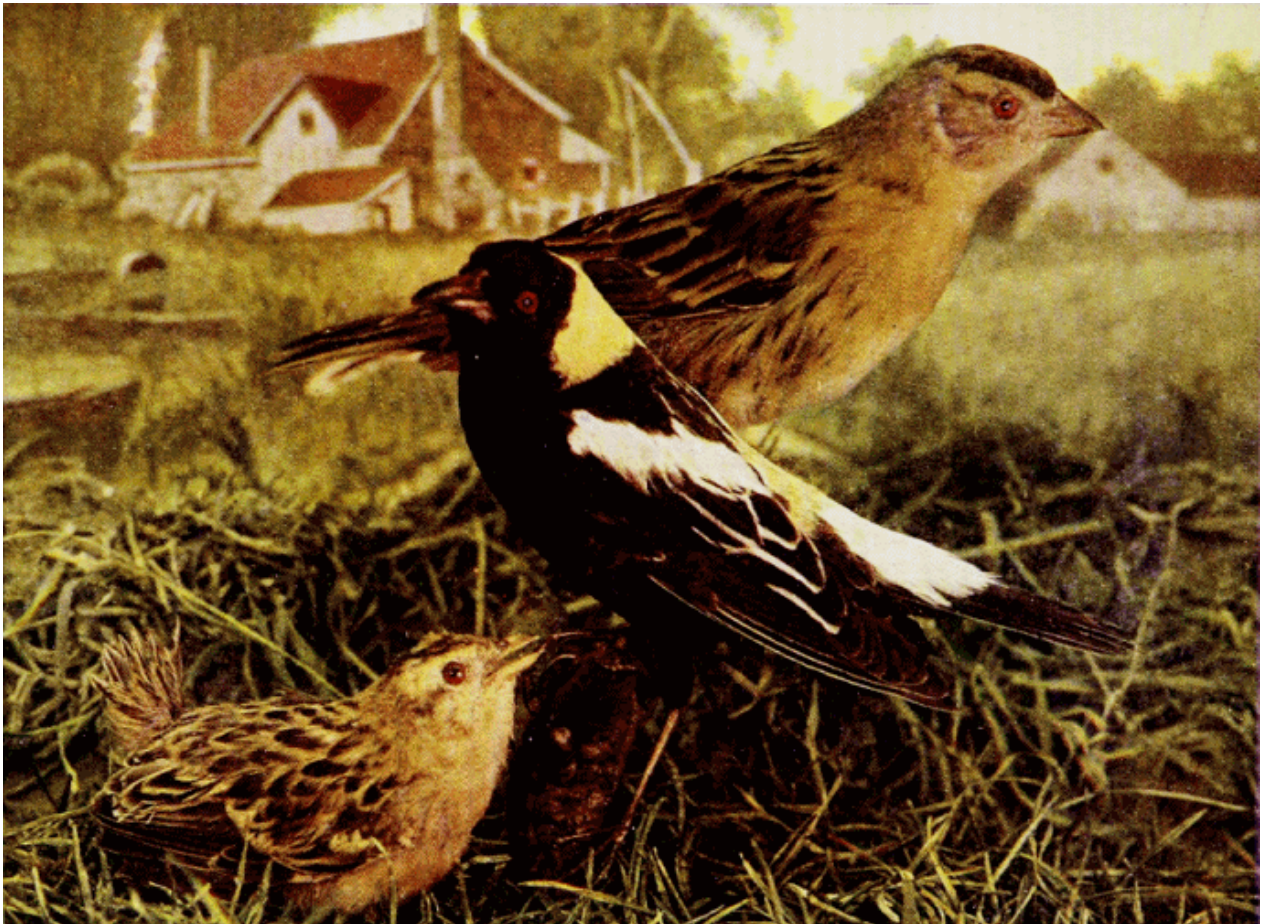
LOWELL.

He was just a bird to start with, half blackbird and the other half sparrow, with some of the meadow-lark's ways of getting along. As to the naming of him, everybody settled that matter at random, until one day he grew tired of being called nicknames and named himself.

Think of having "skunk-blackbird" called after a fellow when he deserved the title no more than half a dozen of his feathered friends! He could never imagine what gave him the disagreeable epithet, unless it be his own individual hatred for the animal whose name clung to him like mud.

To be sure, the coat of the bird was striped, something like that of the detestable beastie; but so were the coats of many other birds, and he could never tell why he should be called a blackbird, either.

True, he loved the marshes for personal reasons; but who has seen a blackbird twist its toes around a reed stalk and sing like mad?



BOBOLINK.

So, as we said, he named himself, constituting himself a town crier on behalf of his own [122] concerns. "Bobolink! bobolink!" As often as the blackbird attempted to talk of himself, bobolink chimed in and drowned every other note. And he kept it up for two or three months, until everybody understood that he had given himself a proper name. And each year he returns to remind the skunk and blackbird that he is no other than himself, and to assure people that he is deserving of an original name, whatever else may be said of him.

But the skunk never has quite forgiven the bobolink his resentment of the name, for the ugly little creature haunts the bird in marsh and meadow, watching for the young bobolinks to get big enough for eating, exactly as the bobolink waits for the dandelion seeds to get ripe for his dinner. But dandelion seeds and little baby bobolinks are two different sorts of victuals; and father bobolink, swaying on his weed stem, wishes skunks were not so big, so he could turn on the whole family and devour them as he does the bumblebees in the next stone heap.

It is of no use wishing, for the old feud between the hated animal and the coveted bird is still on. And skunk knows very well how to get the best of the bobolink. Bobolinks see better by daytime, and besides they are tired out with singing all day long, and they sleep like Christians all night. It is then, when the moon is little, and the flowers have closed their eyes, and the grass stems are growing silently in the dew, and the cicada is absorbed in the courting of his sweetheart—ah! it is then that skunk walks abroad, sniffing. Tail straight out behind, gently swaying as he goes, nose well pointed toward the nearest grass tufts, thoughts intent on supper, and alas! baby bobolinks quietly sleeping. Skunk may take in the mother as well, while she broods, she, no [123] doubt, having a violent attack of nightmare, could she but live to tell her mate about it.

Yes, indeed! poor bobolink has his trials, and he is entitled to all the sweet melody of his family to help him rise above them. When he is tired of New England polecats and takes a run down South, it is but to meet his other enemy, the opossum. And he might as well be given the name of opossum-bird—for, like the skunk, the opossum loves the still, dark night—and fat old bobolinks.

Should the bobolink and his juvenile family take to a tree for a roosting-place, provided his supper has not made his body heavier than his wings are strong, opossum will climb after him.

So poor bobolink is pursued on every hand. Bird of the ground is he, everywhere; he is born on the ground and dies on the ground, usually, for the ground is his dinner-table. His human friends (or foes) take him pitilessly at his meals when he is too full for utterance or quick flight. And these human friends (or foes) dine upon him until they in turn are too full for utterance.

Oh, the bobolink has a hard time! But still he named himself out of the glee of his heart, and he sings a fourth part of the year as only a bobolink can sing.

You can make almost anything you please of the song. Children sit on the fence-rails and mimic him, and "guess" what he says, and cry, "Spink, spank, spink," "meadow wink, meadow wink," "just think, just think," "don't you wink, don't you wink," "want a drink, want a drink?" Coming back to his real name, "bobolink, bobolink," as if, after all, that were the nearest right.

Right under the swinging bare feet of the children, in a dark, cool nest, Mother Skunk is fast asleep, making up for last night's carousals among the bobolink nests. [124]

June would be no June without the bobolinks, where they are expected, and so ever so many things get ready for them. For what other purpose than for the bobolinks do the ground-beetles air themselves, and the crickets get out their violins, and the gray spiders spin yarn on their doorsteps? Of course it is all for purposes of their own, since nobody knows that beetles and crickets and spiders particularly love to be gobbled up by a bobolink. But it is one and the same to the bobolink family, who must have food of some sort. And they couldn't at this season of the year, and under the peculiar conditions of family life, get along reasonably well without meat of some sort. Later on, when the dandelions bethink themselves to turn into round white moons that fly away in the breeze, and the wild oats lift their shoulder-capes, the bobolinks can turn vegetarians.

Shy, suspecting little birds, sharp of eye, fresh from a winter tour in the West Indies, they come exactly when they are expected. They never disappoint people. The very earliest to arrive may sing their "Don't you wink, don't you wink," on April 1st. But bobolink makes no April fool of himself or anybody else, unless it be Master Skunk in his hollow tree, who rubs his eyes at the first word from Robert o' Lincoln. But the male birds have come in advance of their women folk, and roost high and dry out of reach of four-footed marauders. It is as if the mother bobolinks would be quite sure the spring storms are over before they put themselves in the way of housework.

Until their mates arrive, the male birds go on a lark, sailing low over meadows, singing as they sail, each outdoing his friend, sitting now on a fence-post, and now on the budding branch of a maple or elm, calling their own names, and adding whole sentences or stanzas in praise of the Middle West country, and of New England in particular. [125]

Then comes the fun of courtship, when the modest lady bobolinks appear on the ground. With the praise of them on their lips, the males come near and ask each for the hand of his lady-love. Should a rival seek an accepted sweetheart, the rightful mate drives him from the field, literally speaking, and the by no means dejected lover goes to another meadow for a bride. And that is all right, for aren't all lady bobolinks alike? No, indeed, they are not! or so think their devoted mates, for never was closer tie than binds the two to one another. The male never leaves the neighborhood of his family, but sings to his mate as she attends fondly to those affairs which gladden the heart of nature among bird or beast or insect. And she has not far to go for nesting materials. She may even shorten matters by shoving together a bunch of dry leaves and grass that served for the nest of a field-mouse last fall. And she eats as she works, for at every pull at blade or leaf an insect runs out of its hiding-place, right into her mouth, as it were. And if the farmer happen to be plowing, she will run along at the back of him, on the margin of the last furrow, for grub or larva, slipping back into the grass of the hay-field before ever he turns for the next furrow.

If the bobolinks flew north in the light of the moon they may expect good luck; and sometime in June, where before there were a pair of birds, there are now half a dozen or one more than that. The eggs are five or six, but, as with most birds, "there's no telling," and if the parents succeed in raising three or four children out of their single brood for the summer, they do well. [126]

There's no better June fun than hunting for bobolinks' nests. When it comes to disturbing them, that is another question. The farmer may not like to have his meadow-grass trodden down before it is piled on the hay-wagon, but it can't be helped. And while the search is going on, there are so many other things coming to pass at the same time, quite unlooked for, that one sometimes laughs and sometimes cries. There are the bumblebees, for instance! The boys hadn't taken *them* into account, and a fellow's shins begin to warn him of danger that is mostly past. And there are

the nettles hiding in their own nooks on purpose to sting. And the little patches of smartweed which one has to cross in going from the east end of the meadow to the west end harbors crawling and hopping people that one doesn't see in time to avoid; and though they don't bite at all, they *do* look and feel—well, most any boy knows how they feel if he cannot tell it. O, yes, it is fun hunting bobolinks' nests, if one respects the rights of one's neighbors in feathers. With note-book and pencil a boy can put down the date of hatch, and growth of quill and beak and strength, and a thousand things it is good to know about birds. Only, as a rule, a single boy never goes on a bobolink hunt. And it's of no use for a whole bevy of boys to load themselves with lead-pencils. They never have been known to put down a single item of observation under these circumstances. To make a business of studying bobolinks or other birds, a person must be all alone. And there isn't the temptation to pilfer when one is all alone. One catches sight of the father bobolink swinging and swaying on a stout but yielding weed stalk, singing for all he is worth, and one cannot steal, not *that* time. [127]

But a nest would seldom be found if the foolish birds would keep a close mouth about the matter. It does seem as if they would learn after a while, but they don't. As soon as a stranger with two legs or four comes within sight of the spot, the birds set up what they intend for a warning cry, but which is in reality an "information call." Under its spell one can walk straight to the nest, which even yet, on account of its color and surroundings, may be taken for an innocent bunch of grass, provided one has as good eyes as the skunk has nose.

But nesting-time passes, with all its pleasures and trials and dangers and happy-go-lucky affairs. Late summer sees the young bobolinks out of the nest and away to the weed stalks with their parents. The young males set up an independent though weakly melodious warble on their own account, though they have not yet forgotten their baby ways, and still coax the parents for a good bite of bug or beetle. It is about the only very young bird we are acquainted with that is as precocious in regard to song. It is by this only that it is recognized as a male in this first season, being clothed like the mother and sisters. And, strange to say, about this time the father bobolink begins to don another dress. His black and white are inconspicuous, as if faded with the summer sun, and he ceases to sing as formerly. The fact is, he has no time to sing now, with the young birds to help along, as it is getting almost "time to move." And this strange bird actually seems to forget which are his own children, for the whole neighborhood gathers together, males, females, and young, helter-skelter, each intent on gastronomic affairs and the growing of feathers. As the days wear away, and the sere and yellow leaf of sumac and beech and maple warn all good folk that winter is getting ready to travel back home, the bobolinks preen up. Slyly, like the Arab, they steal away; not suddenly as they came in the spring, but slowly and deliberately. The wings of the young must have time to expand, and season and endure fatigue. Besides, bird families are not able to carry lunch-baskets on an autumn outing. So the bobolinks pass slowly toward the South, feeding as they go, never exercising enough to lose weight, but actually fattening on the journey. [128]

Now, taking all things into account, the bobolinks are the most sensible of people. Persons who ought to know better by experience and observation hurry on a journey, take no time to enjoy the scenery and the people that live along the route. At the journey's end they are depleted, tired, worn to skin and bone, and out of sorts with travel. Not so the bobolinks! They have no bones at the journey's end. They have fattened themselves into butter. They have put on flesh as the bare spring trees put on leaves, and the butternut takes in oil. All the way they eat and drink, and make as merry as they can with so much fat on them.

The yesterday's bird of mad music is to-day the bird of mad appetite. True, they may call out "chink" in passing, but "chink" means "chock-full," and people who delight in bobolink table-fare recognize the true meaning of the note.

Bobolink has forgotten to call his own name, so he answers to any nickname the epicurean lovers of him please to call him by—"rice-bird," "reed-bird," "butter-bird," anything or everything that is appropriate. And "possum" sits up on a stump and laughs. [129]

Never mind, 'possum, it's your turn all the time. If bobolink could imitate you in the art of making-believe dead, he would fare better—until folks found him out. People have little use for a dead bobolink, unless shot-gun or snare be in at the death. But bobolinks never seem to learn of 'possums or anybody else. They follow in the wake of their ancestor bobolinks, over the selfsame route to the South; dining in the selfsame rice-fields; swinging on the selfsame reed stalks, exactly as the reed stalks come up each year in the place of last season's petiole.

It's a sad, pathetic tale. But wait! Spring is coming in the steps of last year's spring-time; over the selfsame route, to the selfsame end and fortunes. With the spring will return the bobolinks, as

many as have survived disaster. Before you know it he will be calling himself in the meadows, exactly as he called last spring. The seasons and the birds are but echoes of themselves.

Robert o' Lincoln, with his latest striped coat, will sway on the stems and wait for his sweetheart. He will flirt with neither sparrow nor thrush until she arrives. He is true, is the bobolink! So is the polecat, growing lean under his winter stump, and licking his lips at the sound of the farmer calling to his children, "The skunk-blackbird has come!"

"When you can pipe in that merry old strain,
Robert o' Lincoln, come back again."

CHAPTER XV

[130]

AT NESTING-TIME

"I pray you hear my song of a nest.
For it is not long."

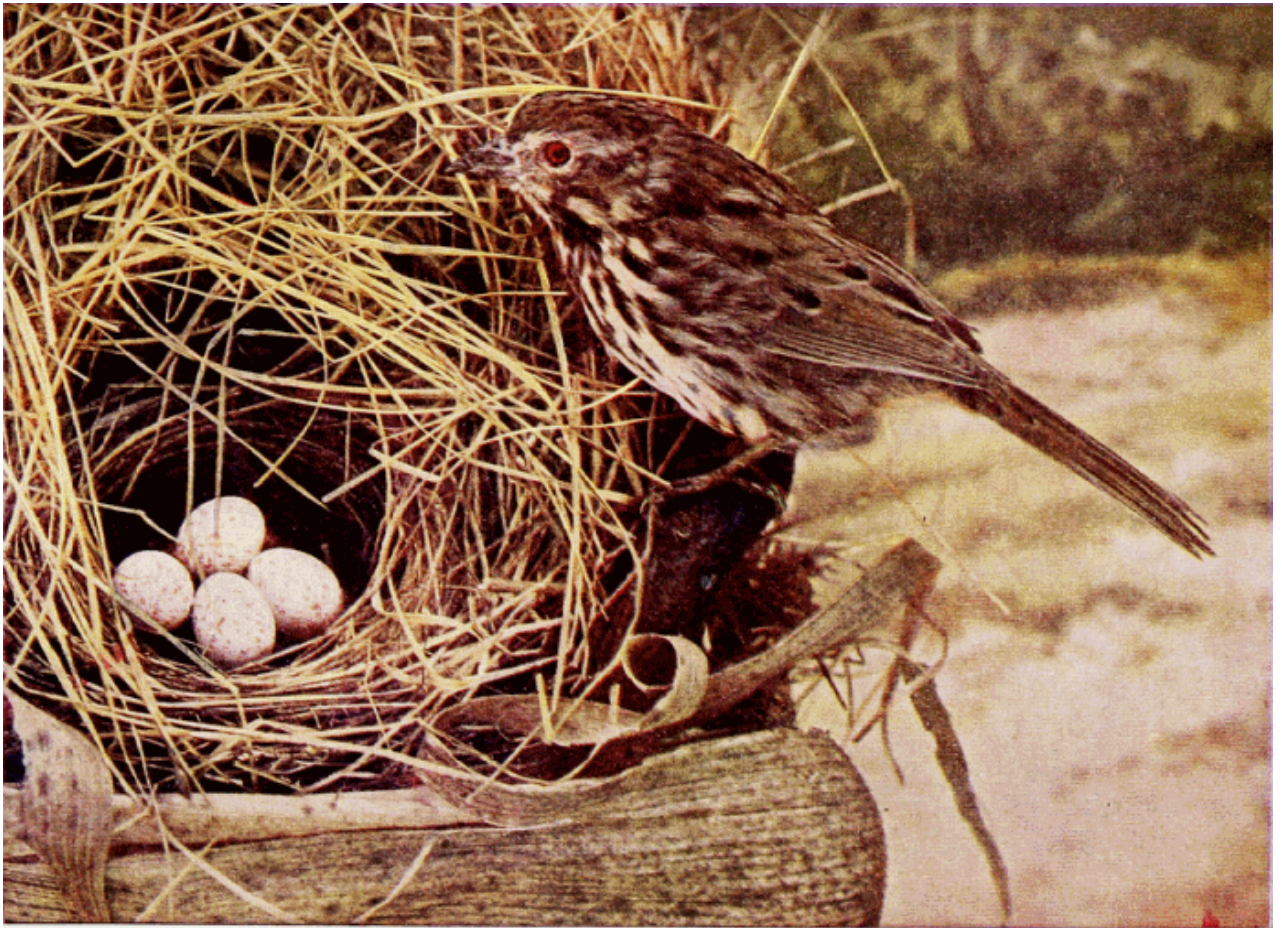
In the preceding chapters we have said little about the female or mother birds. In referring to a single individual we have used the pronoun he, as if "he" and no other were worthy of affectionate notice.

As apology, we refer our readers to the title of our book, "Birds of Song and Story."

As it is mostly the male who sings, and also the male who wears the more beautiful plumage, we have given him the first or greater space. It is the male who figures in myth or legend, since it is he who speaks or is known for conspicuous markings.

But always, at the right season, is the wife bird or the mother bird loyal and true, sweet and modest of color and habit. It is she who "lives for a purpose"—if purpose ever moves the heart of a bird. It is she who sacrifices her own individual preferences and joys for the sake of others. It is she, mostly, who makes the family fortunes. It is she, save in a few instances, who builds the nest, and warms the eggs when once she has placed them where they ought to be.

As it is the vocation or pleasure of her mate to sing, it is hers to listen. And surely her family cares would be dreary enough were it not for the song she hears. It is always for her that her lord makes music, as if he knows her "mother term" is long and monotonous. Many a time his eye is on her, when the keenest human spy fails to "see where that nest is." No hiding the exact spot from old father bird. Didn't he help select it? Wasn't he there at the start? Of course he was!



SONG SPARROW.

In early spring, before actual nesting-time, a male bird is seen coaxing his mate to think of the conveniences of some certain spot. He flies to a corner or a crotch and turns and twists and makes signs, and grows excited, as if urging his mate to commence at that very moment and at that very spot. Wife bird, coming to his side, considers and accepts his suggestions, or laughs at them, as the case may be. Should she accept the site of his choice, it is not then, not just at that moment. It is as if she fears the noise and bustle of her companion may have attracted attention. She returns in some quiet hour, and all by herself begins her summer work. [131]

We have seen a boisterous oriole lead his lady to a banana leaf and do his best to coax her into immediate acceptance of the location. It is not until the following day that we notice the first swinging threads. And it is the same with many other birds which nest near the house. Perhaps the linnet, or house-finch, is the most persistent in choosing a nest site. He is sometimes seen at the business late in the fall and early winter, turning about in corners and nest-boxes, chattering to his mate, and "making himself so silly." His mate, of more sense, looks on and lets him talk, seeming to smile at his foolishness. Doesn't he know, at his age, that she will be on hand at the proper time?

As a rule, it is the mother bird who does all the nest-work. We have seen her closely followed by the male, in the case of the linnet and many of the other finches; the song-sparrow and chippie and towhee and mocker and oriole each keeps at the side of his dear companion and follows her on the wing, singing, while her mouth is full of grass or other stuff. When she alights at the threshold of her nursery he alights too, on a near twig, to follow her back to the material in a moment or two. By hiding in the shrubbery one can see so much of interest at nesting-time. But first of all, would bird-lovers induce parent birds to choose the home grounds, preparation must be made some time in advance. [132]

Trees must be planted and allowed to grow naturally, not in clipped or distorted forms. Birds love natural growth. They recognize wild things and nooks when these are planned and made to grow in private grounds. Now and then a tree root upturned; a pile of boughs; a heap of cuttings and prunings the gardener would have condemned to the fire; a bit of space overlooked by the lawn-mower, moist and grass-tangled; woodpiles and logs left where they are until moss and toadstools have covered them, and bugs have housed in them—a thousand things people, in their love of order and neatness, dispose of at sight—would prove untold attraction to the birds. Too many homes in city and country are not frequented by these visitors, who really prefer our

grounds to the woods when once they learn their welcome. When induced for a single season to build in cultivated places, a pair of birds will return, often bringing several other pairs with them.

It seems as if certain birds are popular among their people, and "set the pace," as it were, in the matter of nesting habits. The places they frequent are sought after by the rest; and not only by their own kind or species, but by birds of different character.

It is with birds as with humankind—many different sorts make up a popular neighborhood. [133] Bird families do not choose to wander away to some remote part of the country and make a settlement. Indeed, as we have studied them, birds delight in fraternal good-fellowship.

Within an area of two hundred feet square in our grounds we have counted thirty-three varieties in this single season. Of these, fifteen have nested—the linnet, two varieties of goldfinch, chipping-sparrow, song-sparrow, humming-bird, towhee, mocker, pewee, phoebe, oriole, thrush, black-headed grosbeak, yellow warbler, and bush-tit. Some of these have nested twice or three times in our long season. These birds are not seen to quarrel nor to disagree as to the locations chosen. Each respects the other's rights, even to keeping guard over one another's children. Be a single family or even one little bird in trouble, each and all of these birds mentioned come to the rescue. At such times the varying notes are a sound both interesting and amusing. Food and water are always before these birds in shady places or in the sunshine. Materials for nest-building are spread before them the whole six months of the nesting-season, from horsehair and strings to mud, paper, rags, bark, feathers, cotton, dry grasses, lint, and a general assortment of lichens. The linnets, goldfinches, hummers, orioles, yellow warblers, and bush-tits lose their wits over the fluffy white cotton. Our song-sparrows and phoebes are not seen to use other than material of dark color, like brown rootlets and mud for phoebes, and old grass blades and dark horsehair for the sparrows. Mention has been made as to most of the others.

The linnets are the easier suited. A black last year's sparrow's nest put in the box under the eaves in place of a new white cotton one is accepted, with no questions asked. We have [134] substituted nest for nest many times, and find there is no choice. Also, we have substituted young birds of the same species, and each and all are adopted. Sometimes we find an orphan birdling, which is sure to be cared for provided it be placed in the nest of any kind, motherly bird. Of course, in thus trading or causing to be adopted young birds, we are careful not to give a seed-eater to a meat-eater, and vice versa.

An insect fare would hardly agree with nurslings accustomed to regurgitated food, like the finches and hummers. Once we rescued a tiny young hummer from a "wicked boy," who had come to the treasure by theft. The little thing was nearly dead with cold and hunger. But we knew exactly where to find a dear, motherly old soul in the person of a humming-bird, who had just completed her nest. We placed the orphan in the frail cradle, so weak it could scarcely open its beak. The old bird came at once, cuddled and coddled the baby as only a humming-bird can do, with her small, soft breast. In ten minutes the wee one was having its supper, and it was raised by the foster-parent.

There seems to be something in the breast of mother birds at the nesting-season akin to human instinct. All these interesting studies go on with us at our door. No cats are allowed within certain bounds. And any home may be the same if the dwellers will take the trouble. An ideal corner in a school-yard would be one in which birds were taught confidence and dependence. Birds are subject to cultivation and encouragement.

If one is just making a start toward this, quick movement in the shrubbery should not be indulged in. Loud, sudden noises and throwing balls or other things, at the commencing of the [135] nest season, frighten the birds. One must learn to stand stock-still and listen and look. Birds notice movement more than sound. Sidewise motions disturb, where straight, go-ahead methods are not noticed.

By gradually accustoming birds to one's presence, and then to one's voice, and then to the near approach, one may succeed in taming wild birds at nesting-time. We have had the finches and linnets and towhees and bush-tits and humming-birds perfectly trustful, even to some of the males, whose presence at the nests is not absolutely essential. We have had the parent birds feed the young from our hands, we standing at the nest. As to nesting itself, the fun to be had of a spring morning is beyond description. After learning this familiarity the birds will go on without noticing us. The towhee straggles across the grass, tugging a long rag much too heavy to fly with. The mocker pulls straws from the torn end of a garden cushion. The bush-tit gathers bits of lichen from the bough on which our hands rest. The phoebe scarcely waits for us to step aside that she may bite the shreds from the jute door-mat, to mix with her mud. The sparrow, scratching away

under the tree for a bug and a bit of leaf at one and the same time, treads on our toes in her fearlessness. The hummer fans our faces with her wings, should we happen to be near the "cotton-counter."

When the young birds are just big enough to tumble out of the nest, then nursery-times fairly begin. The ground is alive with them. Of many sizes and features, more especially as to beak, they peep and scream and coax. By sundown those not old enough to hop or flutter to a safe place are the source of great anxiety. We are obliged to go out and help "put the babies to bed." And these twilight times, more than the whole day, are the "cat-times." Pussy understands the turmoil. She skulks and prowls, and scarcely dares to breathe in her silent hopes. It is then that we dare breathe, and many other things. This incessant war on the feline tribe must be kept up would any one have birds around his home.

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There is one thing at nesting-time that puzzles us. Why do mother birds pass carelessly by so much good material? They pick up this grass or string or feather, to drop it for another. And then, why do they pass by this or that fly or other insect and pick up another?

They probably have their reasons, the same as they choose between equally good nest locations. It is on this account that we are particular to have a variety of everything in their way.

It is at nesting-time that we take especial care of the garden table. We furnish everything we imagine acceptable. As soon as the young of finches or sparrows are out of the nest they are brought to the table by their parents. All the birds have a sweet tooth. They like cookies and pie and sugar and (as will be remembered in the case of the sparrows) good molasses. It was when the tourist robins were here that we thought about the molasses. The robins wouldn't take it *clear*, as the sparrows did, so we mixed it with meal. They came and looked at it and tasted, and liked it very well. Thinking to score a point for the temperance people, we mixed some old bourbon with the pudding. A tipsy robin would be a funny sight! But not a morsel of the meal would they ever touch. We kept up the game several days, it resulting at last in all the robins leaving the grounds in disgust. Then we tried it on the sparrows, but to no purpose. Every bird grew suspicious, and we had to give it up. This proved to us that birds cultivate the sense of smell.

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Birds in general are like the donkey before whose nose is suspended a wisp of hay tied to the end of a pole, "to make him go." Of course in the case of the donkey the pole goes in advance of the nose, and it's a long while before the wisp and the appetite have a passing acquaintance. With the birds at our home the "wisp" is always out, so they are in no hurry to migrate. They do not leave us for so much as a short visit to their folks in Mexico until the molt is well under way. Some summer visitants even molt completely with us, and it is a sorry season. By the time a young bird is able to hustle for himself he wouldn't know his own mother. She has shed the feathers around the beak, leaving her nose or mouth so grotesque one has to laugh. Seeming to understand the joke is at their expense; some of our birds at this time keep well hidden, and come only to the edges of the shrubbery for food, or if overtaken in the open, they run as fast as their legs can carry them. A song-sparrow without a bit of tail is hopping now under the window, chirping her happy note, but hiding if we look at her.

A hummer, which yesterday took honey from the flowers we held in our lips, sits on a tiny twig, the picture of despair because her neck feathers are so thin. A mocker who has drank all summer from the dish with the bees, peeps at her shadow and preens imaginary quills. Half of them are on the ground by the table.

A phœbe sits alone on the housetop, wailing, thinking no doubt she is singing, and looking the picture of distress, with one tail-feather, and not enough of her ordinary neckerchief around her neck to cover the bare skin of it. And the nests, where are they? Just where they were. But they are faded and old and deserted. Never does a young bird go back to the nest after it has once left it, though some people believe they use it for a bed until long into the autumn. We have not seen them do so. They scorn the old thing! Isn't it as full of mites as it can hold? Of course it is, especially if it be a linnet's nest. When the third brood came out in the same nest we found it so infested with mites, almost invisible, that we could not touch it. And the poor little birdlings had to bide their time in getting away. It is supposed to be on account of these parasites that some birds compose their nests of strong-smelling weeds. However, we have not known any of the nests near us to be disturbed by these parasites save those in which several broods are reared. We have a seven-story flat, on each successive floor of which a linnet and a phœbe have nested. Phœbe's nest is mud, linnet's is straw and hair. Each builds atop of the others. It may grow to be a sky-scraper yet. Many of the mother birds sing at nesting-time. The house-finch, or linnet, keeps a continual twitter while incubating. So also the goldfinches. These notes are low and very musical and happy. The phœbe speaks her mournful note under the eaves while on the nest. By close

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listening, when other things are noiseless, one may detect the almost inaudible note of some of the hummers. The ear of a nature-lover grows keen by practice. There are low, nearly inarticulate whisperings among the birds in summer days never heard by those who have not learned the art of listening. The nest of the summer yellowbird may be within six feet of a person on the hunt for it, who, though of keen eye, may never find it, for lack of as keen an ear to hear the low note of the mother bird behind the foliage.

By close observation one may come to disprove many things said against the birds. For instance, a neighbor told us to be careful how we encouraged the orioles and phœbes to nest in our grounds if we didn't want them to eat up all our honey-bees. As usual with us in such cases, we accepted the warning "with a pinch of salt," and took to making observations on our own account. [139]

Locating ourselves behind an open window near the beehives, we watched. A vine trellis with top bar uncovered offered safe footing to phœbe; on she came with five young phœbes hatched on the fourth-floor flat under the eaves. The young birds were whining for food. As plain as any words can be, they cried, "Bees, bees, please!" And bees they were to have for dinner! The mother led them to the trellis bar, where they squatted in a row, peeping their longings. Bees were flying thicker than hail. The mother canted her head from side to side, the black eye of the upward cant searching the homeward-bound insects. "Why don't you help yourself?" we wondered. In a few minutes the bum, bum, of the drones was heard. Then mother phœbe darted, and darted, and darted; each time she snapped a big, sting-less, bumming drone, which she killed by banging its head against the bar. Then it was taken by a little phœbe, or more often by two phœbes, who tugged at the creature until it came in two parts, or was cunningly appropriated as a whole by one of them. This meal-time went on until all were, for the time being, appeased, and the family flew off. By the middle of next day they returned and went through the same performances, very amusing to the witnesses inside the window. Now, not a single worker-bee was touched! And the mother phœbe knew the exact hour for the flying of drones. These lazy, shiftless, bumming fellows never leave the hives until the day is far advanced and the sun has warmed things up. So, not breakfast, but dinner, was made of the drones. [140]

As for the orioles, we were willing to give them a chance to speak for themselves. They appeared about April 10th, as usual. And straight for the bee corner of the garden they went. "I told you so!" said the neighbor. We watched. There were rose-bushes and vines in that part of the grounds, and to these the orioles hastened as fast as their wings could take them. The beehives sit under a row of moss-roses so thickly covered with spines that one cannot take hold of them without gloves. But this pair of orioles ran up and down and in and out without fear. These and many other rose-bushes did they examine minutely, pecking away as fast as they could move their beaks. Right at the entrance to the hives they went, on straggling briers, but not a bee did they touch. We were as close to them as we wished to be. Suddenly we scared them away before they should have devoured every secret, and there was retreat for our neighbor! The orioles had been eating the little green plant-lice that infest rose-bushes early in the spring.

Later they took to watching the bees, and we resumed our watch of the orioles. It was midsummer, and the young birds were all about, crying for bread, or rather for "bees," though their pronunciation was not so distinct as that of the young phœbes. The parent orioles took their stand right on the doorstep of the hives, and waited with head slightly turned, alert, ready for "a bite." Not a worker did they touch, but when a drone came bumming along he was nabbed as quick as a wink. All drone-time (which lasts about two months with us) did the orioles patronize the beehives. Unmolested did the tireless workers come, pollen-loaded, and run in at the entrance. [141]

When the summer yellowbirds have three or four hungry mouths to feed, just watch at the open window behind the snowball-bush and "see what you see." Little green caterpillars make nourishing food for baby yellowbirds. The parents might be running up and down amid the green and white of the bush, just for effect of color, but they are not. Those little, soft, green biscuits are the objects of their ramble.

It has been an open question as to whether old birds carry water to the young. In the case of tame canaries they have been seen to regurgitate a whole cropful of the liquid into waiting "parched throats." So we may conclude that young birds require water.

In the case of a very young humming-bird who was deprived of its mother, we raised it for a while, at least, on milk sweetened with honey, feeding it with an eye-dropper such as surgeons use. The milk was a good substitute for such animal food as the young of hummers are accustomed to. When young humming-birds come out of the nest, and for many weeks, they are either very fearless or their sight is not good. Surely it is not the latter, unless it be atoned for by

greater sense of smell; for they come to flowers we hold up to them, and even light on our hands and faces, following us in the shrubbery.

As a rule, young birds are suspicious and wary. They know by instinct how and where to hide. After sundown is the time to see interesting events connected with supper and bedtime. By close and quiet watching one may see for one's self where and how young birds sleep. Some retire to the same bough or bush each night. A family of bush-tits slept in a row on an orange twig every night for two weeks, in plain sight of us, and as near as six feet from our hands. The parents had been blessed with unusual success in this particular brood, bringing off six. These all slept in a row, "heads and tails," whispering the softest of notes until quite dark. [142]

We have never been able to account for all the egg-shells that disappear in nesting-times. Now and then cracked bits are found in fields and woods, but only bits. One might get some information from the ants that are always prowling about for detached morsels of animal life. The birds themselves may eat or hide them, lest they tell tales. We have found shells far away from any nests, as if they had been carried on purpose. Sometimes they lie in the nest bottom in powder.

It is worth while to take a peep into every nest, just to get "pointers"—but never to get birdlings! And one's peeps should not be too frequent. It disturbs family order and confidence. Besides, if one takes to peeping when the birds are nearly fledged they often become frightened, and leave the nest too immature to warrant freedom and safety. Young birds are seen to sit or cling to the edge of the nest long before they are able to fly. At night they snuggle down into the warmth—and warmth as much as food is essential to young birds. But nesting-time has an end, like all good times.

When the late peaches turn their rosiest cheek to the autumn sun, and the husk of the beechnut opens its pale lips, then are the nests that were so lately the center of attraction tenantless and neglected. Old birds, in passing, take no notice of them, and the hungry juveniles pay no visible heed. What care they for cradles, now that the universal cry is "Bread and butter, please"? [143]

Baby zephyrs nap on the worn-out linings, and the rain runs its slim fingers through the fading meshes. Even the domestic feline, who was wont to peep into the heart of every one of them, no longer is discovered inquiring into the nesting habits of birds. Forsaken are the nests. Naked are the boughs. We will leave them for the winter winds to question—and the winter winds will ravel more bark for next year's nests, and they will make the meadow-grasses molt their softest wrappers for linings. And it is the winter winds that will swirl the dead leaves into lint, and pull the weed stalks into fiber.

Therefore, long live the winter winds!

CHAPTER XVI

[144]

THE ROMANCE OF ORNITHOLOGY

The birds must know. Who wisely sings
 Will sing as they.
 The common air has generous wings:
 Songs make their way.
 What bird is that? The song is good,
 And eager eyes
 Go peering through the dusky wood
 In glad surprise:
 The birds must know.

HELEN HUNT JACKSON.

As everybody knows, ornithology means a discourse about birds—and people have discoursed about birds ever since spoken or written language gave us the means of exchanging thoughts.

In the Biblical history of the creation, birds occurred in the fifth epoch of time, when the evolution of grass and herbs and trees and seeds and fruits had made for them a paradise. With the

grass and trees and seeds and fruits had evolved a variable diet for the feathered folk, and by instinct they have continued to follow after their food, migrating on merry tours the wide world over. Lovers of them from earliest dates have discoursed of their ways and means, of their habits, their favorite resorts, their uses relative to cultivation of lands, their faults in connection with civilization. Students of nature have divided the birds into "classes" and "species," as the human race itself is divided. As "order is heaven's first law," ornithologists have taught us to distinguish it in the study of birds; and so we have the "groups," always with reference to individual habits and anatomical peculiarities. [145]

In the Old World, ornithology as a science dates perhaps from Aristotle, 384 years before Christ. True, he was a teacher of A, B, C's on the subject, but he set students to "thinking." But there were students before Aristotle; if not students of science, they were students of religion. It is to religion in many forms that we owe the romance of ornithology. We may call this phase of the subject "superstition." The word itself is almost gruesome to the unlettered imagination. It suggests uncanny things, ghosts and goblins, and other creatures that are supposed to wander around in the dark, because they were never seen at midday or any other time. To the educated person actual faith in ghosts and goblins has given place to a mildly fanciful imagination which indulges in the flavor of superstition, as one takes light desserts after a full meal. And so we have the romance of superstition for the intelligent.

Stopping to consider that the word itself means a "standing still" to "stare" at something, an attitude of reverence, so to speak, we see how religion in ornithology preceded the romance of it. Certain of the birds waited on the deities, or had access to their presence, in consequence of which they were set apart and protected. Sometimes they were prophets of the gods, foretelling future events with accuracy. Their flights were noted by religious devotees, who, unconsciously to themselves probably, and certainly unsuspected, by their followers, were sure to be "out" at migration times. At such times, should the birds choose a natural course past a city and be seen only after they had left it behind them, the prophet knew, in the depths of his religious being, that the gods had doomed that city. It was only when the study of birds as an actual science developed the fact that these denizens of the air depended more upon climate and necessary diet than upon the will of gruesome gods that the religion of ornithology gave place to romance. And romance is the after-dinner course of real ornithology—romance lends a fanciful touch to figures and data, and apologizes to the average student for intermissions that seem dedicated to frolic. [146]

In the universe of romance, North America has its full share. Preceding the romance was, and still is (among the native tribes), the religion of superstition. The deities foretell certain death of persons among the Eskimos by the passing of a bluejay or the croak of a raven.

Our own poet, Edgar Allan Poe, was not an Eskimo, but he indulged in the well-known superstitions about the bird when he permitted the raven to perch above his door. Many of the Arctic tribes are known to protect the ominous bird to this day. The Indians of Alaska revere and even fear it, like a black spirit from the land of demons.

Song and story among American aborigines are replete with bird superstition. So prominent was it that early historians made mention of it to preserve it, and students of languages are putting it into books, so that romance and legend may not pass away with our native Indians.

The government itself is preserving the history of American superstition among its precious archives. Reports of the Ethnological Bureau are entertaining reading for vacation times. True, they are "heavy volumes" in some cases, but there are supplements. Were these reports placed in more school and other libraries, the inclination to read more objectionable and not half so entertaining literature would go quickly out, like a fire-proof match, without burning the fingers. [147]

To those who find a fascination in prehistoric legends the study of bird representation on the ancient pottery of some of our western Indians, and in the mounds of the Mississippi Valley, is offered in some of these government reports. They are a very mine of suggestion and information. Imagination, subtle guide to many a self-entertaining mind, runs fast and faster on before while one reads, and one wonders how it came to pass one never knew about government reports before.

The Ethnological Bureau is the poet's corner of our government—the romance of our dull facts and figures. Without its unsleeping eye forever scanning the sky of unwritten literature for gems, how would some of us know about the history of the human race as preserved by the Iroquois Indians? And that birds had a wing, if not a hand, in the peopling of America at least?

Of course America was "all the world" to these Indians, and naturally enough their priests and poets combined to give some adequate genesis for the people.

It is said that a story, once started on its rounds in civilized society, gathers facts and things as it goes, until at last—and not before very long—its own original parent "wouldn't recognize it." Not so the legends that have come to us through savage tongues. Simple to start with, they maintain their original type without a trace of addition. What students gather for us of folk-lore is as correct as though the first text had been copyrighted by its author. Note this simplicity in all barbaric legends, the discourse coming straight to the facts and leaving off when it is done.

This one legend referred to of the origin of the human race makes so good a preface to the closing rhyme of our text, that we are tempted to give it for that special purpose. According to this story of the Iroquois Indians, it is to birds that woman owes her history. Unconsciously to these natives of America, they identified woman with birds and birds' wings for all time. Unconsciously, perhaps, to herself, woman has also identified her sex with birds and bird wings, though in a different relation to that of the Iroquois. The legend will need no further introduction to the girl or woman of America who may become interested in "Birds of Song and Story." [148]

There was once a time when all the earth was hidden under great waters. No island or continent gave foothold. No tree, torn from its moorings, afforded rest to tired foot or wing; for finny and winged people were all the inhabitants in being. Birds soared unceasingly in the air, and fish disported their beautiful armor-plate in the water. In the consciousness of bird and fish there was need of higher intelligences than themselves. They watched and waited for some hint, some glimpse, of other and superior beings. One day the birds, congregating in the sky, discoursing on this very matter, beheld a lovely woman dropping out of the far blue. Hurriedly they talked of possible means of saving her from drowning, for they had a subtle sense that this falling object, with arms outstretched like wings, was the being they hoped for. One of their number, a prophet, suggested the means. As the lovely being dropped toward the great sea the birds came together and lapped wings over wings in a thick feathered island. Upon the soft deck of this throbbing life-boat the beautiful being descended and lay panting. Slowly and lovingly her soft hand caressed the wings of her benefactors. She lifted the variously tinted plumage of the breasts on which she reclined, and kissed the down of them. [149]

That was long, long ago! We will conclude our text with the ending of the poem preceding the first chapter in our book, repeating four lines of the same, and dedicating this same "ending" to the Birds.

While the church-bell rings its discourse
They are sitting on the spires;
Psalm and anthem, song and carol,
Quaver as from mystic lyres.

Wing and throat are in a tremor,
While they pay their Sunday dues,
And escorted by the ushers.
They are sitting in the pews.

Oh, the travesty of worship!
Perched above each reverent face.
Sit these feathered sacrifices.
Closely pinioned to their place.

Chant a dirge for woman's pity,
Choir, before the text is read!
Sing a requiem for compassion,
Woman's tenderness is dead.

On her head are funeral emblems;
She has made herself a bier
For the martyred birds who, shroudless,
Coffinless, are waiting here.

Eyes dilate and forms distorted.
Praying as in dumb distress,
Poising, crouching, reeling, swooning.

Supplicating wretchedness.

Twisted into shapes so ghastly,
Frightful, grim, disconsolate;
Writhing in a moveless torture.
Passion inarticulate.

[150]

Call it "love of what is lovely,"
"Choice of best in nature's grace,"
Back of all the giddy tangle
Lurks the tradesman's wily face,

E.G.

Index

[=151=]

[Transcriber Note: Although two unique copies of this volume are stored at The Internet Archive and both of them list an Index at Page 151, neither one of them has an Index and both end at Page 150.]

Transcriber Note

In order to prevent images from splitting paragraphs, text was reformatted. Minor typos may have been corrected.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BIRDS OF SONG AND STORY ***

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