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Title: My pets

Real happenings in my aviary

Author: Marshall Saunders

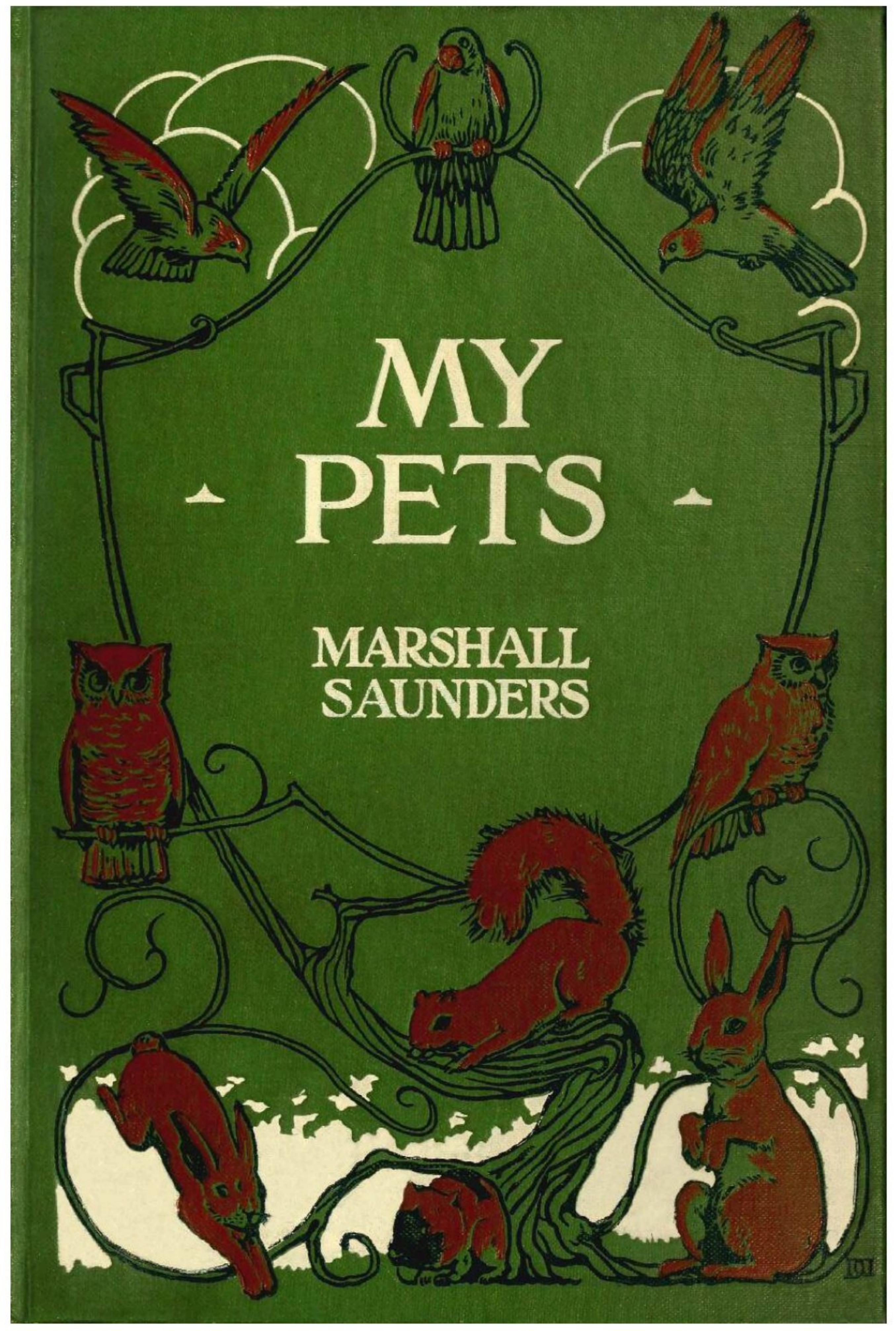
Release date: June 9, 2024 [eBook #73801]

Language: English

Original publication: Philadelphia: The Griffith & Rowland Press, 1908

Credits: Charlene Taylor, Joeri de Ruiter and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net> (This file was produced from images generously made available by The Internet Archive/American Libraries.)

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MY PETS

MARSHALL
SAUNDERS

MY PETS



European Goldfinch
[Page 104](#)

MY PETS

Real Happenings in My Aviary

By

Marshall Saunders

Author of "Beautiful Joe"

Illustrated from Photographs

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain.
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

Philadelphia

The Griffith & Rowland Press

Boston

Chicago

Atlanta

New York

St. Louis

Dallas

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AMERICAN BAPTIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

Published August, 1908

From the Society's own Press

DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to those of my boy and girl friends who are never satisfied with a story unless it is entirely true. While the most of my stories are partly true, I have never before written one that is entirely and wholly true in every particular. The story of my aviary and the pets in it is taken from my diaries, and many of the birds are still living and moving and having their being, and are always glad to see any girls and boys who call on them, if they do not come in too great numbers at one time.

Marshall Saunders.

Boston, January, 1908.

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CHAPTER I THE STORY OF TWO OWLS

The birds that really started me in the serious, and yet amusing task of keeping an aviary, were two little Californian screech owls.

The year was 1899, and I was studying boy life in the charming Belmont School, twenty-five miles from San Francisco. The grounds of the school lie on the lower slope of hills that enclose an open valley fronting the bay of San Francisco. A walk of twelve miles took us to the shores of the Pacific. Close to the school were beautiful cañons that the boys and older persons were never tired of exploring. The lads of the school were allowed to keep dogs, horses, pigeons, poultry—indeed, any pets they chose to have. One day, when I was up in the poultry yard, where there were some choice bantams and game-fowl, I saw a boy trotting about with a box in his hand.

"What have you there?" I asked.

"Four little owls," he replied. "I got them the other day when I was out walking, and I had their mother too, but she has flown away."

"What are you going to do with them?" I said.

"I don't know," he replied thoughtfully. "I don't want to bother with them. I suppose it would be best to kill them."

I looked in the box. Those four solemn-eyed, motherless balls of down appealed to me. In southern California I had been very much taken with the little owls that sat on hillocks, and turned their heads round and round to look after any one riding or driving by, until it really seemed as if they would twist them off.

I felt that I must adopt these little Northerners, so I said to the boy, "I will take them."

He joyfully resigned his charges, for he did not like the idea of destroying them, and I thoughtfully pursued my way to my room; what did owls eat?

I asked everybody I met, and the universal recommendation was, "Give them raw meat. That is the best substitute for the birds, mice, and insects that their parents catch for

them."

I went to the Japanese cook, and with a friendly grin he seized a huge knife and swung himself down the hill to the meat-room. (13)

On receiving a piece of beef, I minced it fine, and dropped small morsels into the open beaks of my new pets. They were hungry, and after eating, nestled down together and went to sleep.

The days are mild, but the nights are chilly about the bay of San Francisco. So after their latest supper, I put a rubber bag of hot water under their nest and covered them up for the night.

In the morning I hurried to their basket, and uncovered the nest I had made for them. They were as warm as toast, and four wide-open beaks pleaded eloquently for food. I cut up more meat, and for days fed them when hungry, and carried them out of doors in the sunshine, where they were objects of interest to every one about the place, especially to the dogs that would fain have devoured them.

One Sierra collie dog, Teddy Roosevelt by name, in whose upbringing I was assisting, used to tremble as he stared at them, partly from jealousy, partly because he recognized lawful prey in them.

One day some one suggested gopher—that is, ground-squirrel meat—as a change of diet. The gophers do an immense amount of damage in California on lawns and in flower-gardens, where they burrow to get at the tender roots.

I went to a house near by, where a gentleman was trying to get rid of the gophers that were devastating his lawn. He put up a warning hand when he saw me coming. A line of hose lay beside him, with which he had been trying to flood a gopher out of his hole. Presently the poor little fellow came struggling up. The gentleman despatched him with a satisfied, "He is the last one. Now the grass will grow." (14)

He presented me with the dead body, and animated by a feeling of duty to my owl family, I carried it home, cut off a piece, and offered it to the owls. They would not eat it. They preferred mutton, beef, or veal. On these they flourished.

Soon I had another meat-eating bird given to me. While walking in a beautiful cañon, where live-oaks and ferns, green from spring rains, abounded, one of the teachers who had strayed from the rest of the party, came back to us with a young sparrowhawk that he had found. No parents seemed to be near. If left on the ground it would perish. In the light of subsequent experience, I would have put it high up on a branch and left it, trusting to the parents to find it. At that time I did not understand how faithful and constant birds are in following their young, so I took it in spite of its dismal squawks, and carried it back to the school.

My owls, by this time, had grown famously, and like children, they began to exercise their tiny limbs. It was very amusing to see them trying to climb from the center of their box to the top. They would stretch out diminutive claws, mount over each other, fall back, try again, and finally succeeded in sitting all in a row on the top, looking with solemn, questioning eyes on the great world around them. I put Hawkie with them, and they adopted him as a brother, and usually kept him in the middle. It was a pretty sight to see the row of five, with the mottled, brown bird tucked snugly between his owl friends. (15)

When the summer vacation came, and the boys dispersed, I went with some friends to live in a cottage across the bay of San Francisco, just under the slope of Mount Tamalpais. At the back of the cottage was a veranda shaded by a climbing rose. In the rose branches I put Hawkie and my two owls, named Solomon and Betsy.

Very regretfully I had been obliged to part from two of the little owls, for the boy who had given them to me was so pleased with the progress they had made, that he asked for the return of a part of his gift. I was sorry afterward that he had not let me keep them, for a cat soon made away with them. As the summer went by, I wondered that I did not lose my three pets. They sat all day long in the rose branches. Daytime, of course, is sleepy time for owls, but even when dusk came on they made no attempt to fly away, and the hawk only made one or two half-hearted efforts to fly across the garden out into the road.

Toward autumn the owls were fully developed, and other little screech owls had found them out, and at dusk would come about the cottage, saying softly, "Too, who, who, who, who!" (16)

Solomon and Betsy never seemed interested enough to respond, and every evening I took them in the house where Hawkie went to sleep, and Betsy and Solomon became

lively, and in the gentlest and sweetest of tones hooted for their meat.

They were tiny creatures, their bodies being not much larger than a New England robin's, but their eyes seemed immense. They had a peculiar habit of staring at their food, then twisting their heads round and round before they pounced on it. It was very amusing to see the owls "focus," and it became a way of entertaining our friends.

They often had a tug of war over their meat, when I gave it to them without cutting it up. Sollie would seize one end of a piece of beefsteak, and Betsy would grasp the other, and then they would brace their little claws and pull until the taste of the raw flesh being too tantalizing, one would let go to swallow a morsel, and at once lose the whole thing.

When the autumn had come we, with other summer residents, left Mill Valley where, I must not forget to say, numbers of beautiful birds abounded. Some of the public-spirited citizens had imported foreign birds in the hope of acclimating them. I was often awakened by a gay note and a flash of red at the window, as some foreigner wished me good-morning. The birds were protected, and the fine forests were also protected. When we went for picnics, mounted guards would warn us that we must light no fires under the magnificent old trees. (17)

The owl's next place of residence was Berkeley, where my younger sister went to take classes in the State University. We had rented a small cottage there, and to this day we laugh over our experiences in moving to our new home. We had the two owls, Hawkie, the dog Teddy, and a chipmunk that my married sister had brought me from Lake Tahoe, that most beautiful of Californian summer resorts. How were we to take charge of all these creatures? For we had to cross the bay of San Francisco, then recross it to Berkeley. We finally got a large cage for Hawkie and the owls, and put in a compartment, giving them the upper part, and the chipmunk the lower. The dog we put on a chain.

Taking the train from Mill Valley to Sausalito, we boarded the steamer for San Francisco, changed to another, and went across the bay to Oakland, thence by train to Berkeley. When we arrived there it was late in the afternoon, and my sister and I, the dog, the owls, Hawkie, and the chipmunk, were all tired out. Indeed, the dog, who was very petted and spoiled, and who did not enjoy traveling, had dark rings around his eyes, and was in a peevish, mischievous condition. To my sister's disgust, for she being the younger was the victim, he started to run away. She had to run after him, and came back exhausted.

To add to our troubles, we could not get into our cottage that night. Fortunately, our landlady took boarders, and offered us a room in her house. We gladly accepted this offer, and putting the subdued Teddy in a tool-shed, took the birds in the house. (18)

My sister says she never was more tired in her life than she was that night. We were sleeping blissfully, when we were awakened by a well-known sound. The naughty little owls, glad of the peace and quietness of the night after the turmoil of the day, were hooting persistently and melodiously.

"The landlady and the boarders," gasped my sister; "they will hear and wake up. Can't you stop the little wretches?"

I sprang out of bed, and addressed a solemn remonstrance to Solomon and Betsy. They were exceedingly glad to see me, and distending their little throats, continued to hoot, their clear, sweet young voices carrying only too well on the still Californian night air.

Then the chipmunk woke up and began to slide up and down an inclined piece of wood in his part of the cage. We were in despair. We could not sleep, until I had the happy thought of giving the owls a bath. I seized Betsy, held her in a basin of water, and wet her feathers considerably. Then I served Solomon in the same way, and for the rest of the night the tiny little things occupied themselves in smoothing their wet plumage. The chipmunk quieted down, and we had peace.

When we got into the cottage I had a carpenter build a small aviary at the back of it, with a box for rainy weather. The nights were not too cold for my hardy birds. Indeed, they were not too cold for many semi-tropical ones. I found a bird fancier not far from me, who had built a good-sized, open-air aviary, where he kept canaries and foreign finches all the year round, with only a partly open, glass shelter for the birds to use when it rained. (19)

My sparrowhawk did not seem unhappy in my aviary, but he never had the contented, comfortable expression that the owls had. His apathy was pathetic, and the expression of his beautiful, cruel eyes was an unsatisfied one. In time, I should have allowed him to go, but suddenly he fell ill. I think I overfed him, for I got him into the habit of taking a late

supper, always leaning out the window and handing him a piece of meat on the end of a stick before I went to bed.

I brought him into the warm kitchen, where he moped about for a few days. Just before he died he came hopping toward the parlor, where I sat entertaining a friend. I often took him in there on the broad windowsill and talked to him as I sat sewing.

He stood in the doorway, gave me a peculiar look, as if to say, "I would come in if you were alone," hopped back to the kitchen, and in a short time was no more.

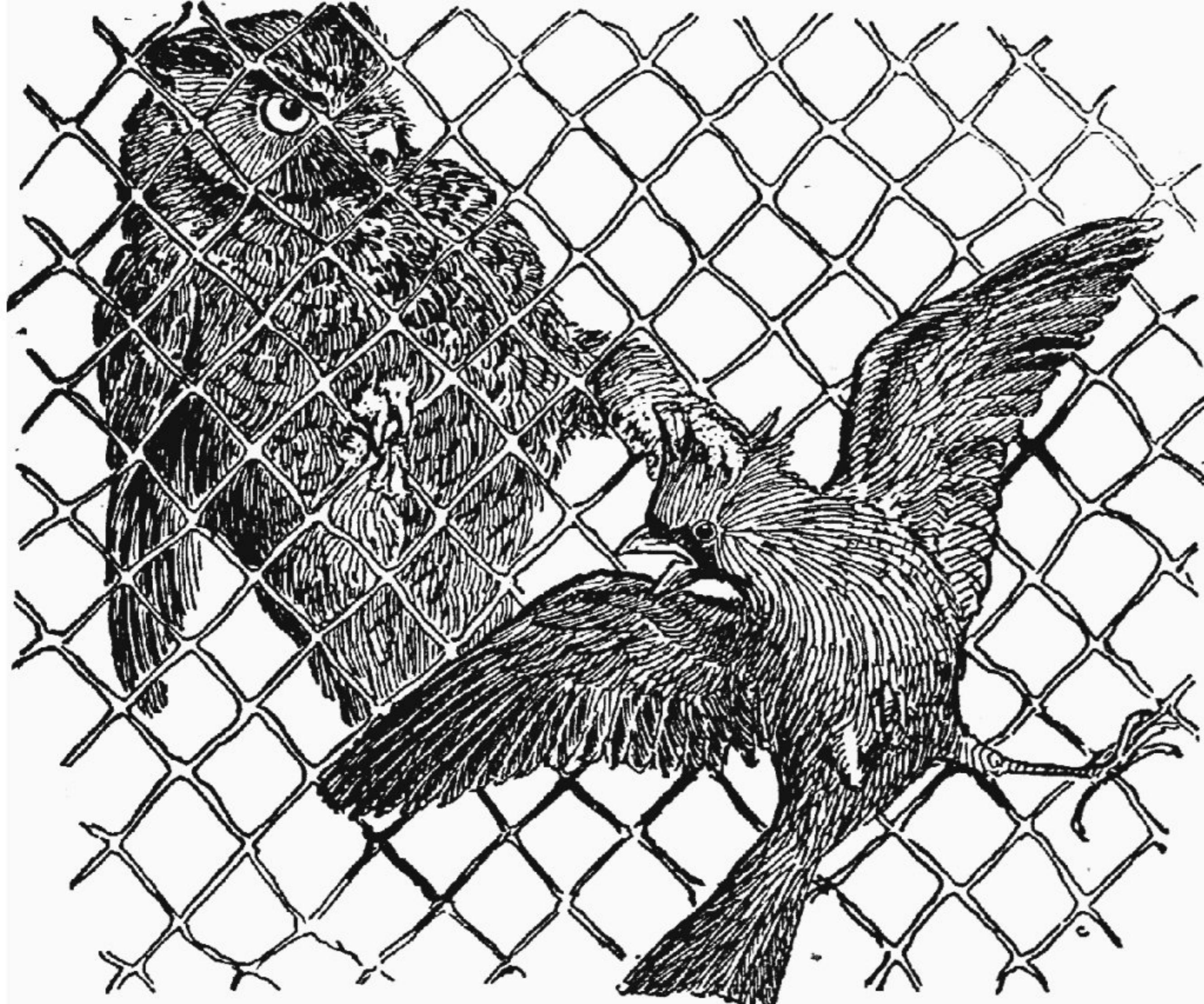
My sister and I mourned sincerely for our pretty bird, and I had the uncomfortable feeling that I might have done better if I had left him in his own habitat—but then he might have starved to death if his parents had not found him. Would death by starvation have been any more painful than his death with me? Possibly some larger creature might have killed him swiftly and mercifully—it was a puzzling case, and I resolved to give up worrying about it. I had done what I considered was best, and I tried to console myself for his death in petting the dear little owls that had become so tame that they called to my sister and me whenever they saw us, and loved to have us take them in our hands and caress them. (20)

About them I had no misgivings. They would certainly have died if I had not adopted them, and there was no question about their happiness. They were satisfied with a state of captivity. They had so far lost one of their owl habits, for they kept awake nearly all day, and slept nearly all night—and they could see quite well in the most brilliant Californian sunlight, and that is pretty brilliant. A cat or a dog many yards distant would cause them to raise excitedly the queer little ear tufts that play so prominent a part in the facial expression of some owls, and they would crack their beaks together and hiss angrily if the enemy came too near.

Cats and dogs frightened them, and a broom merely excited them. When strangers wanted to see the elevation of these tufts, a broom, swiftly passed over the floor, would cause Solomon and Betsy to become very wide awake, with feather tufts straight up in the air. I never saw them abjectly and horribly frightened but once. A lady had brought her handsome parrot into the room where the owls were. The poor little mites put up their ear tufts, swayed to and fro on their perch, and instead of packing their feathers and becoming thin and elongated in appearance, as they did for cats and dogs, they puffed themselves out, snapped their beaks, and uttered the loudest hissing noise I had ever heard from them. (21)

From their extremity of fear I concluded that their instinct told them this danger was so imminent that they must make themselves as formidable as possible.

The parrot was of course quickly removed, and I took care that they should never again see another one.



CHAPTER II

THE OWLS START ON THEIR TRAVELS

Betsy and Solomon lived happily through that winter and spring, and before summer came we had made up our minds to return to the East. What should we do with the owls? They would be a great deal of trouble to some one. They required an immense amount of petting, and a frequent supply of perfectly fresh meat. No matter how busy we were, one of us had to go to the butcher every other day.

We began to inquire among our friends who would like a nice, affectionate pair of owls? There seemed no great eagerness on the part of any one to take the pets we so much valued. Plans for their future worried me so much that at last I said to my sister, "We will take them East with us."

We trembled a little in view of our past moving experiences, but we were devoted to the little creatures and, when the time came, we cheerfully boarded the overland train at Oakland.

We had with us Betsy and Solomon in their large cage, and in a little cage a pair of strawberry finches, so called because their breasts are dotted like a strawberry. A friend had requested us to bring them East for her. We had also a dog—not Teddy, that had only been lent to us; but our own Irish setter Nita, one of the most lovable and interesting animals that I have ever owned.

The chipmunk was no longer with us. He had not seemed happy in the aviary—indeed, he lay down in it and threw me a cunning look, as if to say, "I will die if you don't let me out of this." So I gave him the freedom of the house. That pleased him, and for a few days he

was very diligent in assisting us with our housekeeping by picking all the crumbs off the floors and eating them. Then he disappeared, and I hope was happy ever after among the superb oak trees of the university grounds close to us.

When we started for the East, the pets, of course, had to go into the baggage car, and I must say here for the benefit of those persons who wish to travel with animals and birds, that there is good accommodation for them on overland trains. Sometimes we bought tickets for them, sometimes they had to go in an express car, sometimes we tipped the baggagemasters, but the sums spent were not exorbitant, and we found everywhere provision made for pets. You cannot take them in your rooms in hotels, but there is a place for them somewhere, and they will be brought to you whenever you wish to see them, or to give them exercise. We were on several different railway lines, and visited eight different cities, and the dog and birds, upon arriving in eastern Canada, seemed none the worse for their trip.

However, I would not by any means encourage the transportation of animals. Indeed, my feelings on the subject, since I understand the horrors animals and birds endure while being whirled from one place to another, are rather too strong for utterance. I would only say that in a case like mine, where separation between an owner and pets would mean unhappiness, it is better for both to endure a few days or weeks of travel. Then the case of animals and birds traveling with some one who sees and encourages them every day is different from the case of unfortunate creatures sent off alone.

(25)

Our Nita was taken out of the car at every station where it was possible to exercise her, and one of us would run into restaurants along the route to obtain fresh meat for the owls. Their cage was closely covered, but whenever they heard us coming they hooted, and as no one seemed to guess what they were, they created a great deal of interest. My sister and I were amused one evening in Salt Lake City to see a man bending over the cage with an air of perplexity.

"They must be pollies," he said at last, and yet his face showed that he did not think those were parrot noises issuing from within.

I remember one evening on arriving in Albany, New York, causing slight consternation in the hotel by a demand for raw meat. We hastened to explain that we did not want it for ourselves, and finally obtained what we wished.

As soon as we arrived home in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the owls were put downstairs in a nice, dry basement. They soon found their way upstairs, where the whole family was prepared to welcome them on account of their pretty ways and their love for caresses.

Strange to say, they took a liking to my father, who did not notice them particularly, and a mischievous dislike to my mother, who was disposed to pet them. They used to fly on her head whenever they saw her. Their little claws were sharp and unpleasant to her scalp. We could not imagine why they selected her head unless it was that her gray hair attracted them. However, we had a French Acadian maid called Lizzie, whose hair was jet black, and they disliked her even more than they did my mother.

(26)

Lizzie, to get to her storeroom, had to cross the furnace-room where the owls usually were, and she soon began to complain bitterly of them.

"Dey watch me," she said indignantly, "dey fly on my head, dey scratch me, an' pull out my hairpins, an' make my head sore."

"Why don't you push them off, Lizzie?" I asked, "they are only tiny things."

"Dey won't go—dey hold on an' beat me," she replied, and soon the poor girl had to arm herself with a switch when she went near them.

Lizzie was a descendant of the veritable Acadians mentioned in Longfellow's "Evangeline," of whom there are several thousand in Nova Scotia. My mother was attached to her, and at last she said, "I will not have Lizzie worried. Bring the owls up in my bathroom."

There they seemed perfectly happy, sitting watching the sparrows from the window and teasing my long-suffering mother, who was obliged to give up using gas in this bathroom, for very often the owls put it out by flying at it.

(27)

One never heard them coming. I did not before this realize how noiseless the flight of an owl is. One did not dream they were near till there was a breath of air fanning one's cheek. After we gave up the gas, for fear they would burn themselves, we decided to use a candle. It was absolutely necessary to have an unshaded light, for they would perch on any globe shading a flame, and would burn their feet.

The candle was more fun for them than the gas, for it had a smaller flame, and was more easily extinguished, and usually on entering the room, away would go the light, and we would hear in the corner a laughing voice, saying "Too, who, who, who, who!"

The best joke of all for the owls was to put out the candle when one was taking a bath, and I must say I heard considerable grumbling from the family on the subject. It seemed impossible to shade the light from them, and to find one's self in the dark in the midst of a good splash, to have to emerge from the tub, dripping and cross, and search for matches, was certainly not calculated to add to one's affection for Solomon and Betsy. However, they were members of the family, and as George Eliot says, "The members of your family are like the nose on your face—you have got to put up with it, seeing you can't get rid of it."

Alas! the time soon came when we had to lament the death of one of our troublesome but beloved pets.

Betsy one day partook heartily of a raw fish head, and in spite of remedies applied, sickened rapidly and sank into a dying condition. (28)

I was surprised to find what a hold the little thing had taken on my affection. When her soft, gray body became cold, I held her in my hand close to the fire and, with tears in my eyes, wished for a miracle to restore her to health.

She lay quietly until just before she died. Then she opened her eyes and I called to the other members of the family to come and see their strange expression. They became luminous and beautiful, and dilated in a peculiar way. We hear of the eyes of dying persons lighting up wonderfully, and this strange illumination of little Betsy's eyes reminded me of such cases.

Even after death she lay with those wide-open eyes, and feeling that I had lost a friend, I put down her little dead body. It was impossible for me to conceal my emotion, and my mother, who had quite forgotten Betsy's hostility to her, generously took the little feathered creature to a taxidermist.

I may say that Betsy was the first and last bird I shall ever have stuffed. I dare say the man did the work as well as it could be done, but I gazed in dismay at my Betsy when she came home. That stiff little creature sitting on a stick, with glazed eyes and motionless body, could not be the pretty little bird whose every motion was grace. Ever since the day of Betsy's death, I can feel no admiration for a dead bird. Indeed, I turn sometimes with a shudder from the agonized postures, the horrible eyes of birds in my sister women's hats—and yet I used to wear them myself. My present conviction shows what education will do. If you like and study live birds, you won't want to wear dead ones. (29)

After Betsy's death Solomon seemed so lonely that I resolved to buy him a companion. I chose a robin, and bought him for two dollars from a woman who kept a small shop. A naturalist friend warned me that I would have trouble, but I said remonstratingly, "My owl is not like other owls. He has been brought up like a baby. He does not know that his ancestors killed little birds."

Alas! When my robin had got beautifully tame, when he would hop about after me, and put his pretty head on one side while I dug in the earth for worms for him, when he was apparently on the best of terms with Sollie, I came home one day to a dreadful discovery. Sollie was flying about with the robin's body firmly clutched in one claw. He had killed and partly eaten him. I caught him, took the robin away from him, and upbraided him severely.

"Too, who, who, who who," he said—apologetically, it seemed to me, "instinct was too strong for me. I got tired of playing with him, and thought I would see what he tasted like."

I could not say too much to him. What about the innocent lambs and calves, of which Sollie's owners had partaken?

I had a fine large place in the basement for keeping pets, with an earth floor, and a number of windows, and I did not propose to have Sollie murder all the birds I might acquire. So, one end of this room was wired off for him. He had a window in this cage overlooking the garden, and it was large enough for me to go in and walk about, while talking to him. He seemed happy enough there, and while gazing into the garden or watching the rabbits, guineapigs, and other pets in the large part of the room, often indulged in long, contented spells of cooing—not hooting. (30)

In 1902 I was obliged to leave him for a six months' trip to Europe. He was much petted by my sister, and I think spent most of his time upstairs with the family. When I returned home I brought, among other birds, a handsome Brazil cardinal. I stood admiring him as he

stepped out of his traveling cage and flew around the aviary. Unfortunately, instead of choosing a perch, he flattened himself against the wire netting in Sollie's corner.

I was looking right at him and the owl, and I never saw anything but lightning equal the celerity of Sollie's flight, as he precipitated himself against the netting and caught at my cardinal's showy red crest. The cardinal screamed like a baby, and I ran to release him, marveling that the owl could so insinuate his little claws through the fine mesh of the wire. However, he could do it, and he gripped the struggling cardinal by the long, hair-like topknot, until I uncurled the wicked little claws. A bunch of red feathers fell to the ground, and the dismayed cardinal flew into a corner. (31)

"Sollie," I said, going into his cage and taking him in my hand, "how could you be so cruel to that new bird?"

"Oh, coo, coo, coo, coo," he replied in a delightfully soft little voice, and gently resting his naughty little beak against my face. "You had better come upstairs," I said, "I am afraid to leave you down here with that poor cardinal. You will be catching him again."

He cooed once more. This just suited him, and he spent the rest of his life in regions above. I knew that he would probably not live as long in captivity as he would have done if his lot had been cast in the California foothills. His life was too unnatural. In their native state, owls eat their prey whole, and after a time disgorge pellets of bones, feathers, hairs, and scales, the remnants of food that cannot be digested.

My owls, on account of their upbringing, wanted their food cleaned for them. Betsy, one day, after much persuasion, swallowed a mouse to oblige me, but she was such a dismal picture as she sat for a long time with the tail hanging out of her beak that I never offered her another.

I tried to keep Solomon in condition by giving him, or forcing him to take, foreign substances, but my plan only worked for a time.

I always dreaded the inevitable, and one winter day in 1903 I looked sharply at him, as he called to me when I entered the house after being away for a few hours. "That bird is ill!" I said. (32)

No other member of the family saw any change in him, but when one keeps birds and becomes familiar with the appearance of each one, they all have different facial and bodily expressions, and one becomes extremely susceptible to the slightest change. As I examined Sollie, my heart sank within me, and I began to inquire what he had been eating. He had partaken freely of boiled egg, meat, and charcoal. I gave him a dose of olive oil, and I must say that the best bird or beast to take medicine is an owl. Neither he nor Betsy ever objected in the least to opening their beaks and taking any sort of a dose I was minded to give them.

The oil did him no good, and I saw that he was doomed. I kept him beside me during the night, and at four o'clock in the morning he died. Just at the last he opened his eyes, and there was the same strange, luminous, beautiful appearance of the eye-ball that there had been when Betsy died. I have seen many birds die, but have never, except in the case of the owls, noticed this opening of the eyes, with the curious illumination.

We missed the little fellow immensely, for he often insinuated his pretty little cooing note in the midst of our family conversation. He knew each one of us, and would call out when we came near him, but a stranger he always received in silence, and with raised ear tufts. (33)

We tried not to mourn foolishly for our pet. The reproach is often and justly brought against animal-lovers that they are over-sensitive—that they love not wisely, but too well. We suffer, and the lower creation suffers with us. We lie down and die, and so must they. The rational and really happy way is to struggle against this passion of tenderness for all suffering, created things, to endeavor to be wise and practical, and while doing everything in our power to alleviate all suffering and unhappiness, yet not to be weakened by it.

Little Solomon had a happy life, and an almost painless death. There was only one thing lacking. We would like to look forward to seeing him again. Perhaps we shall—who knows?



CHAPTER III

A REIGN OF ROBINS

Bob the First, at the head of my long list of robins, having been killed by my pet owl, I very soon bought another. This one was not so gentle nor so handsome as Bob the First, his wings and his tail having their ends sawed off by contact with the wires of too small a cage.

Fearing that he might be lonely in my aviary with only rabbits, guineapigs, pet rats, and pigeons for company, I bought another robin called Dick. The new bird was long, straight, sharp-eyed, and much smarter in his movements than Bob the Second who, of course, considering the condition of his wings and tail, could not fly, and was obliged to hop over the ground.

(35)

It was very amusing to see the two robins stare at each other. Both had probably been trapped young, for at that time the law against the keeping of wild birds in captivity was not enforced, and boys and men were perniciously active in their depredations among our beautiful wild beauties.

Bob the Second was very fond of stuffing himself, and he used to drive the pigeons from the most promising window ledges and partake freely of the food scattered about.

Poor Dick ran about the ground looking for worms, and not finding many, got desperate and flew up to the window ledge.

Bob lowered his head and flew at him with open bill. Dick snapped at him, hopped up to the food, and satisfied his hunger, Bob meanwhile standing at a little distance, a queer, pained thread of sound issuing from between his bill, "Peep, peep, peep!"

A robin is a most untidy bird while eating, and as often as Dick scattered a morsel of food outside the dish, Bob would spring forward and pick it up with a reproving air, as if he were saying, "What an extravagant fellow you are!"

Whenever a new bird enters an aviary, he has to find his place—he is just like a newcomer in a community of human beings. Bob, being alone, was in the lead when Dick

came. Dick, having the stronger bird mind, promptly dethroned him. They were very amusing birds. Indeed, I find something clownish and comical about all robins kept in captivity.

The wild bird seems to be more businesslike. The partly domesticated bird, having no anxiety about his food supply, indulges in all sorts of pranks. He is curious and fond of investigation, and runs swiftly at a new object, and as swiftly away from it, if it seems formidable to him.

The arrival of new birds in the aviary always greatly excited Bob, and he hopped about, chirping, strutting, raising his head feathers, and sometimes acting silly with his food, just like a foolish child trying to "show off" before strangers.

When I introduced a purple gallinule to him, Bob flew up into the air, and uttered a shriek of despair. He feared the gallinule, and hated the first Brazil cardinal I possessed, and was always sparring with him. One day I put a second cardinal into the aviary. Bob thought it was his old enemy, and ran full tilt at him. His face of ludicrous dismay as he discovered his mistake and turned away, was too much for me, and I burst out laughing at him. I don't think he minded being made fun of. He flirted his tail and hopped away.

At one time Bob made up his mind that he would not eat crushed hemp-seed unless I mixed it with bread and milk, and he would throw it all out of his dish unless I made it in the way he liked.

My robins have always been good-natured, and I never saw one of them hurt the smallest or feeblest bird, though they will sometimes pretend that they are going to do so. (37)

When Bob took a sun-bath, any member of the family who happened to be near him would always be convulsed with laughter. He would stretch his legs far apart, stick out his ragged plumage, elevate his head feathers till he looked as if he had a bonnet on, and then half shut his eyes with the most ludicrous expression of robin bliss.

All birds look more or less absurd when taking sun-baths. They seem to have the power to make each feather stand out from its neighbor. I suppose this is done in order that the sun may get to every part of the skin.

His most amusing performance, however, took place when his first moulting time after he came was over. One by one his old, mutilated feathers dropped out, and finally new ones took their places. On a memorable day Bob discovered that he had a real tail with a white feather on each side of it, and a pair of good, serviceable wings. He gave a joyful cry, shook his tail as if he would uproot it, then spread his wings and lifted himself in the air. Hopping time was over. He was now a real bird, and he flew from one end of the aviary to the other with an unmistakable expression of robin ecstasy.

Most unfortunately, I had not a chance to study poor Dick's character as fully as Bob's, for I only had him a short time. Both he and Bob, instead of mounting to perches at night, would go to sleep on the windowsills, where I was afraid my pet rats would disturb them, as they ran about in their search for food. Therefore, I went into the aviary every evening, and lifted them up to a comfortable place for the night, near the hot-water pipes. I would not put robins in a warm place now. They are hardy birds, and if given a sufficient quantity of nourishing food do not need a warm sleeping-place. If we only had a better food supply I believe we would have many more wild birds with us in winter in the Northern States and Canada than we have now. (38)

Late one evening I went into the aviary to put my robins to bed. I could only find Bob—Dick was nowhere to be seen. My father and mother joined me in the search, and finally we found his poor, lifeless body near the entrance to the rats' underground nest. His head had been eaten—poor, intelligent Dick; and in gazing at him, and at the abundance of food in the aviary, the fate of the rats was sealed.

I fed my birds hard-boiled egg mashed with bread crumbs, crushed hemp-seed, scalded cornmeal, bread and milk, prepared mockingbird food, soaked ant eggs, all kinds of mush or "porridge," as we say in Canada, chopped beef, potato and gravy, vegetables cooked and raw, seeds and fruit, an almost incredible amount of green stuff, and many other things—and yet the rats had found it necessary to commit a murder.

Well, they must leave the aviary, and they did, and for a time Bob reigned alone. I did try to bring up a number of young robins given to me by children who rescued them from cats, or who found them on the ground unable to fly, but for a long time I had very hard luck with them. (39)

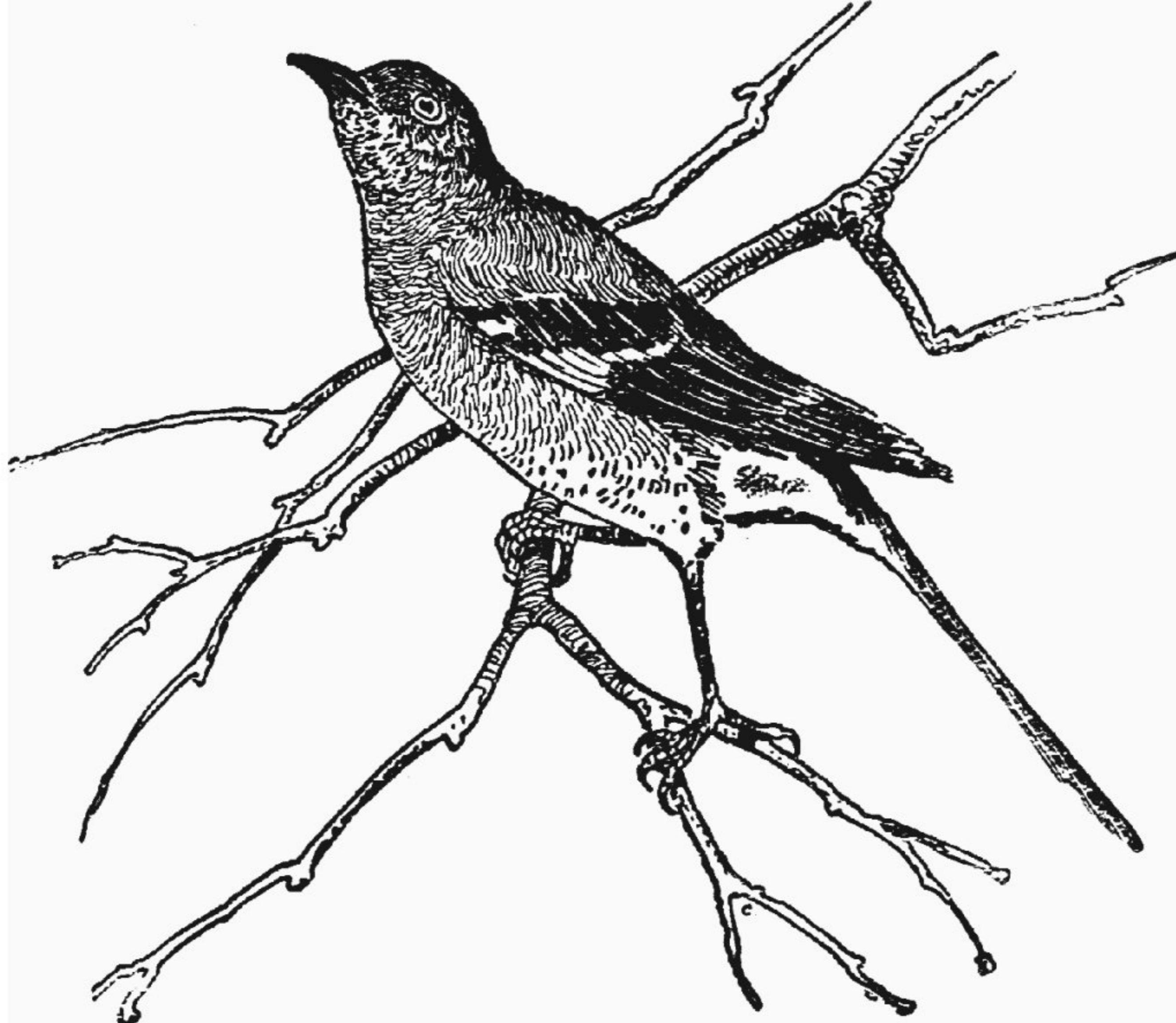
Either the birds were diseased or I did not feed them properly. I have a fancy that I half starved them. Bird fanciers whom I consulted told me to be sure and not stuff my robins, for they were greedy birds. As long as I took their advice my young robins died. When I went to my canaries for advice I saw that the parents watched the tiny heads folded like flowers too heavy for their stalks, over the little warm bodies in the nests.

The instant a head was raised the mother or father put a mouthful of warm egg-food in it. The little ones got all they would eat—indeed, the father, with food dripping from his mouth, would coax his nestlings to take just one beakful more. I smiled broadly and began to give my robins all the worms they wanted, and then they lived.

The bringing up of young birds is intensely interesting. I found that one reason why early summer is the favorite time for nest-making is because one has the short nights then. Parents can feed their young quite late in the evening and be up by early daylight to fill the little crops again. Robins are birds that like to sit up late, and are always the last to go to bed in the aviary.

I solved the difficulty of rising at daylight to feed any young birds I was bringing up by giving them a stuffing at eleven o'clock at night. Then I did not have to rise till nearly eight. (40)

This, of course, was for healthy birds. If I had a sick guineapig, rabbit, or bird, I never hesitated to get up many times during the night, for I have a theory that men and women who cannot or will not undertake the moral responsibility of bringing up children, should at least assist in the rearing of some created thing, if it is only a bird. Otherwise they become egotistical and absorbed in self.



CHAPTER IV

A NAUGHTY MOCKINGBIRD

Among the young robins I had given me was one that was found sitting helplessly under some trees.

"I think I will try my solitary Bob with this one," I said, and I took it to the aviary and put it on the ground.

The baby robin that had been reserved and sulky with me, wildly flapped his tiny wings when he saw Bob, and ran after him screaming for food.

Bob stopped short, wheeled round, searching for worms, and diligently stuffed the little fellow, who followed him as closely as his shadow.

I was delighted with the success of my experiment, but received a shock a little later on going into the basement to find the wet, bedraggled body of my poor baby robin in the pigeon's big bathtub. He must have fluttered in while following Bob, his foster parent, about, and the puzzled Bob did not know how to get him out. (42)

As I picked up the body and held him in my hand, a workman who was busy about some repairs in the basement, said solemnly, "It's drowned!" There was no doubt about it. I had lost my little bird, and now there was nothing but the burial.

Another little robin soon took its place. This one I promptly gave to Bob, and met with a surprise. The young one fluttered its little wings, ran after Bob with appealing cries to which a deaf ear was turned. Why would he not feed it?

"You selfish bird," I said, and I fed the robin myself.

Bob said nothing, but looked wise, and in a short time my baby robin was in a dying condition, crying and fluttering his little wings to the last, as if he saw the loving mother bird approaching with her bill full of food.

Had Bob refused to feed it because it was diseased? I fancied he had, for I usually find that birds know a good deal more about each other than I know about them.