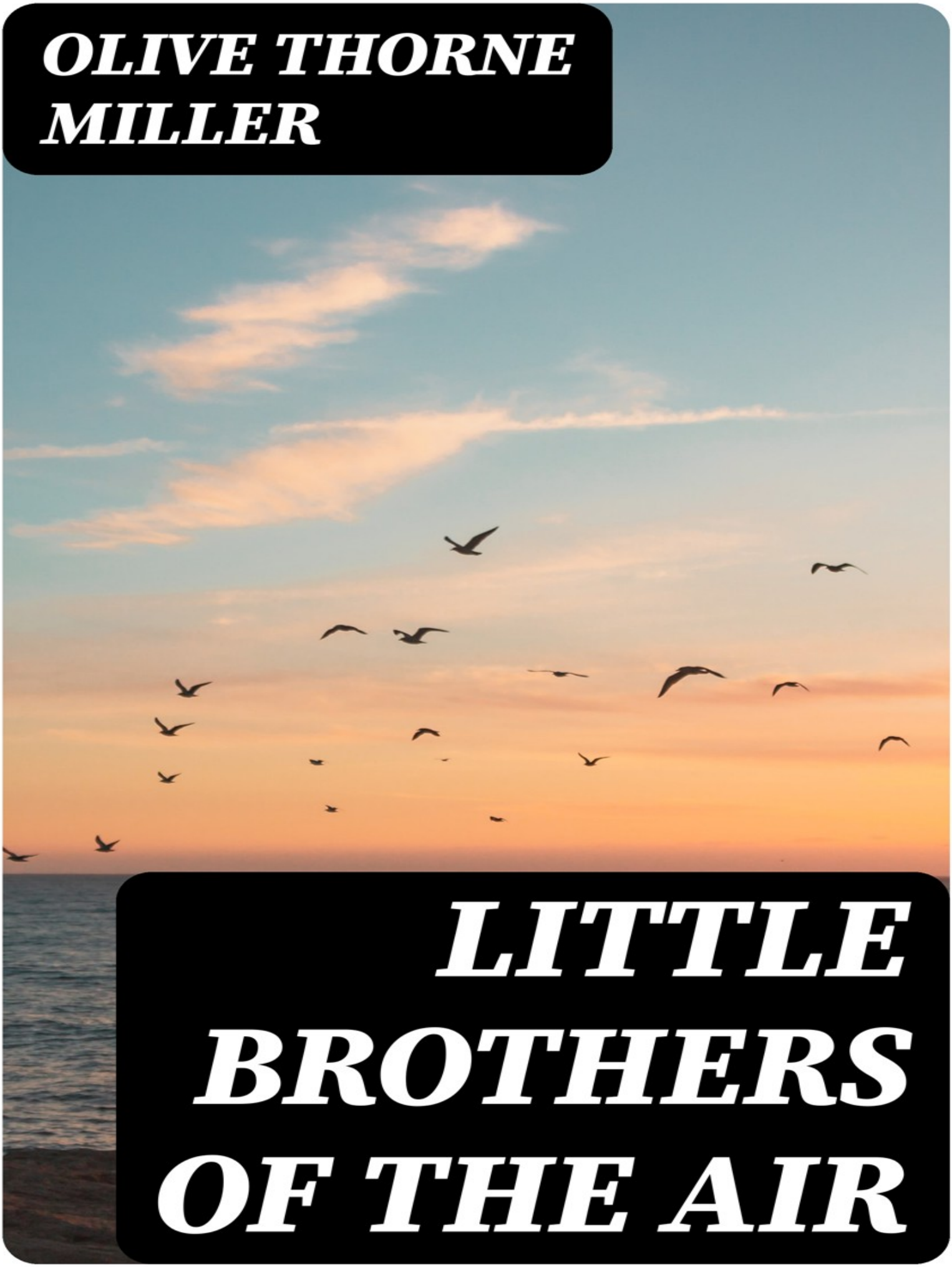
OLIVE THORNE MILLER
LITTLE BROTHERS OF THE AIR


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Olive Thorne Miller

Little Brothers of the Air

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INTRODUCTORY.

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SOME of the chapters of this little book were written in 1888, on the shore of the Great South Bay, Long Island; others in the northern part of New York State, known to its residents as the "Black River Country," a year or two later. Part of them have been published in The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's Bazaar, The Independent and other papers.

The nomenclature in the Table of Contents is that adopted by the American Ornithological Society.

OLIVE THORNE MILLER.

ON THE GREAT SOUTH BAY.

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Precious qualities of silence haunt
Round these vast margins ministrant.

'T is here, 't is here, thou canst unhand thy heart
And breathe it free, and breathe it free
By rangy marsh, in lone sea-liberty.

SIDNEY LANIER.

LITTLE BROTHERS OF THE AIR.

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I.

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THE KINGBIRD'S NEST.

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TO study a nest is to make an acquaintance. However familiar the bird, unless the student has watched its ways during the only domestic period of its life,—nesting time,—he has still something to learn. In fact, he has almost everything to learn, for into those few weeks is crowded a whole lifetime of emotions and experiences which fully bring out the individuality of the bird. Family life is a test of character, no less in the nest than in the house. Moreover, to a devotee of the science that some one has aptly called Ornithography, nothing is so attractive. What hopes it holds out! Who can guess what mysteries shall be disclosed, what interesting episodes of life shall be seen about that charmed spot?

To find a newly built nest is the first June work of the bird-student, and this year on the Great South Bay a particularly inviting one presented itself, on the top branch of a tall oak-tree near my "inn of rest." It was in plain sight from the veranda. The builder evidently cared nothing for concealment, and relied, with reason, upon its inaccessible position for safety. To be sure, as days went by and oak leaves grew, a fair screen for the little dwelling was not lacking; but summer breezes were kind, and often blew them aside, and, better still, from other points of view the nest was never hidden.

To whom, then, did the nest belong? I hoped to the kingbird, who at that moment sat demurely upon the picket fence below, apparently interested only in passing insects; and while I looked the question was answered by Madame Tyrannis herself, who came with the confidence of ownership, carrying a beakful of building material, and arranging it with great pains inside the structure. This was satisfactory, for I did not know the kingbird in domestic life.

For several days it seemed uncertain whether the kingbirds would ever really occupy the nest, so spasmodic was the work upon it. Now one of the pair came with a bit of something, placed it, tried its effect this way and that, and then disappeared; while for hours every day both might be seen about the place, hunting insects and taking their ease on the fence as if no thought of nesting ever stirred their wise little heads. The last addition to the domicile was curious: a soft white feather from the poultry yard, which was fastened up on the edge, and stood there floating in the

breeze; a white banner of peace flung out to the world from her castle walls.

Peace from a kingbird? Direful tales are told of this bird: "he is pugnacious," says one writer; "he fights everybody," adds another; "he is a coward," remarks a third. Science has dubbed him tyrant (*Tyrannis*), and his character is supposed to be settled. But may there not be two sides to the story? We shall see. One kingbird, at least, shall be studied sympathetically; we shall try to enter his life, to judge him fairly, and shall above all

> "bring not
> The fancies found in books,
> Leave author's eyes, and fetch our own."

Nearly two months that small dwelling on the oak was watched, day after day, early and late, in storm and in sunshine; now I know at least one family of kingbirds, and what I know I shall honestly tell, "nothing extenuating."

The house was built, the season was passing, yet housekeeping did not begin. The birds, indeed, appeared to have abandoned the tree, and days went by in which I could not see that either visited it. But the nest was not deserted, for all that; the curiosity and impertinence of the neighbors were simply amazing. (Perhaps the kingbird has some reason to be pugnacious!) No sooner was that tenement finished than, as promptly as if they had received cards to a house-warming, visitors began to come. First to show himself was an orchard oriole, who was in the habit of passing over the yard every day and stopping an hour or more in the neighborhood, while he scrambled over the

trees, varying his lunches with a rich and graceful song. Arrived this morning in the kingbird tree, he began his usual hunt over the top branch, when suddenly his eye fell upon the kingbird cradle. He paused, cast a wary glance about, then dropped to a lower perch, his singing ended, his manner guilty. Nearer and nearer he drew, looking cautiously about and moving in perfect silence. Still the owner did not come, and at last the stranger stood upon the edge. What joy! He looked that mansion over from foundation to banner fluttering in the wind; he examined closely its construction; with head turned over one side, he criticised its general effect, and apparently did not think much of it; he gratified to the full his curiosity, and after about one minute's study flew to the next tree, and resumed his singing.

The next arrival was a pewee, whose own nest was nearly built, in a wild-cherry tree not far off. The fence under the oak was his usual perch, and it was plain that he made his first call with "malice aforethought;" for, disdaining the smallest pretense of interest in it, he flew directly to the nest, hovered beneath it, and pulled out some part of the building material that pleased his fancy,—nothing less than pure thievery.

Among the occasional visitors to the yard were two American goldfinches, or thistle-birds, in bright yellow and black plumage, both males. They also went to the new homestead in the oak, inspected it, chatted over it in their sweet tones, and then passed on. It began to look as though the nest were in the market for any one to choose, and the string of company was not yet ended.

Soon after the goldfinches had passed by, there alighted a gay Baltimore oriole, who, not content with looking at the new castle in the air, must needs try it. He actually stepped into the nest and settled down as if sitting. Who knows but he was experimenting to see if this simple, wide-open cradle wouldn't do as well for oriole babies as for kingbirds? Certainly it was a curious performance. It made an impression on him too, for the next day he came again; and this time he picked at it, and seemed to be changing its interior arrangement, but he carried nothing away when he flew. Even after sitting began, this oriole paid two more visits to the nest which so interested him. On the first occasion, the owner was at home, and gave him instant notice that the place was no longer on view. He retired, but, being no coward, and not choosing to submit to dictation, he came again. This time, a fly-up together, a clinch in the air, with loud and offensive remarks, cured him of further desire to call.

More persistent than any yet mentioned was a robin. Heretofore, strange to say, the guests had all been males, but this caller was the mother of a young brood in the next yard. She came in her usual way, alighted on a low branch, ran out upon it, hopped to the next higher, and so proceeded till she reached the nest. The kingbird happened to be near it himself, and drove her away in an indifferent manner, as if this interloper were of small account. The robin went, of course, but returned, and, perching close to the object of interest, leaned over and looked at it as long as she chose, while the owner stood calmly by on a twig and did not interfere. I know he was not afraid of the robin, as

later events proved; and it really looked as if the pair deliberately delayed sitting to give the neighborhood a chance to satisfy its curiosity; as if they thus proclaimed to whom it might concern that there was to be a kingbird household, that they might view it at their leisure before it was occupied, but after that no guests were desired. Whatever the cause, the fact is, that once completed, the nest was almost entirely abandoned by the builders for several days, during which this neighborhood inspection went on. They even deserted their usual hunting-ground, and might generally be seen at the back of the house, awaiting their prey in the most unconcerned manner.

However, time was passing, and one day Madame Tyrannis herself began to call, but fitfully. Sometimes she stayed about the nest one minute, sometimes five minutes, but was restless; picking at the walls, twitching the leaves that hung too near, rearranging the lining, trying it this way and that, as if to see how it fitted her figure, and how she should like it when she was settled. First she tried sitting with face looking toward the bay; then she jerked herself around, without rising, and looked awhile toward the house. She had as much trouble to get matters adjusted to her mind as if she had a houseful of furniture to place, with carpets to lay, curtains to hang, and the thousand and one "things" with which we bigger housekeepers cumber ourselves and make life a burden. This spasmodic visitation went on for days, and finally it was plain that sitting had begun. Still the birds of the vicinity were interested callers, and I began to think that one kingbird would not even protect his nest, far less justify his reputation by tyrannizing

over the feathered world. But when his mate had seriously established herself, it was time for the head of the household to assume her defense, and he did.

As usual, the kingbird united the characters of brave defender and tender lover. To his spouse his manners were charming. When he came to relieve her of her care, to give her exercise or a chance for luncheon, he greeted her with a few low notes, and alighted on a small leafless twig that curved up about a foot above the nest, and made a perfect watch-tower. She slipped off her seat and disappeared for about six minutes. During her absence he stayed at his post, sometimes changing his perch to one or other of half a dozen leafless branchlets in that part of the tree, and there sitting, silent and watchful, ready to interview any stranger who appeared. Upon her return he again saluted her with a few words, adding to them a lifting of wings and spreading of his beautiful tail that most comically suggested the bowing and hat-lifting of bigger gentlemen. In all their life together, even when the demands of three infants kept them busy from morning till night, he never forgot this little civility to his helpmate. If she alighted beside him on the fence, he rose a few inches above his perch, and flew around in a small circle while greeting her; and sometimes, on her return to the nest, he described a larger circle, talking (as I must call it) all the time. Occasionally, when she approached, he flew out to meet and come back with her, as if to escort her. Could this bird, to his mate so thoughtful and polite, be to the rest of the world the bully he is pictured? Did he, who for ten months of the year shows less curiosity about others, and attends more perfectly to his

own business than any bird I have noticed, suddenly, at this crisis in his life, become aggressive, and during these two months of love and paternity and hard work, make war upon a peaceful neighborhood?

I watched closely. There was not an hour of the day, often from four A.M. to eight P.M., that I had not the kingbird and his nest directly in sight, and hardly a movement of his life escaped me. There he stood, on the fence under his tree, on a dead bush at the edge of the bay, or on the lowest limb of a small pear-tree in the yard. Sometimes he dashed into the air for his prey; sometimes he dropped to the ground to secure it; but oftenest, especially when baby throats grew clamorous, he hovered over the rank grass on the low land of the shore, wings beating, tail wide spread, diving now and then for an instant to snatch a morsel; and every thirty minutes, as punctually as if he carried a watch in his trim white vest, he took a direct line for the home where his mate sat waiting.

A few days after the little dame took possession of the nest, the kingbird had succeeded, without much trouble, in making most of his fellow-creatures understand that he laid claim to the upper branches of the oak, and was prepared to defend them against all comers, and they simply gave the tree a wide berth in passing.

Apparently deceived by his former indifference, however, the robin above mentioned presumed to call somewhat later. This time she was received in a manner that plainly showed she was no longer welcome. She retired, but she expressed her mind freely for some time, sitting on the fence below. With true robin persistence she did not give it

up, and she selected for her next call the dusk of evening, just before going to bed.

This time both kingbirds flung themselves after her, and she left, "laughing" as she went. The kingbirds did not follow beyond their own borders, and the robin soon returned to the nearest tree, where she kept up the taunting "he! he! he!" a long time, seemingly with deliberate intention to insult or enrage her pursuers, but without success; for unless she came to their tree, the kingbirds paid her not the slightest attention.

The last time the robin tried to be on friendly terms with her neighbor, I noticed her standing near him on the picket fence under his tree. There were not more than three pickets between them, and she was expostulating earnestly, with flirting tail and jerking wings, and with loud "tut! tut's," and "he! he's!" she managed to be very eloquent. Had he driven her from his nest? and was she complaining? I could only guess. The kingbird did not reply to her, but when she flew he followed, and she did not cease telling him what she thought of him as she flew, till out of sight.

Strangest of all was the fact that, during the whole of this scene, her mate stood on the fence within a dozen feet, and looked on! Did he think her capable of managing her own affairs? Did he prefer to be on good terms with his peppery neighbor? or was it because with her it would be a war of words, while if he entered the arena it must be a fight? as we sometimes see, when a man goes home fighting drunk, every man of the neighborhood keeps out of sight, while all the women go out and help his wife to get him home. The most troublesome meddler was, as might be expected, an

English sparrow. From the time when the first stick was laid till the babies were grown and had left the tree, that bird never ceased to intrude and annoy. He visited the nest when empty; he managed to have frequent peeps at the young; and notwithstanding he was driven off every time, he still hung around, with prying ways so exasperating that he well deserved a thrashing, and I wonder he did not get it. He was driven away repeatedly, and he was "picked off" from below, and pounced upon from above, but he never failed to return.

Another visitor of whom the kingbird seemed suspicious was a purple crow blackbird, who every day passed over. This bird and the common crow were the only ones he drove away without waiting for them to alight; and if half that is told of them be true, he had reason to do so.

With none of these intruders had the kingbird any quarrel when away from his nest. The blackbird, to whom he showed the most violence, hunted peacefully beside him on the grass all day; the robin alighted near him on the fence, as usual; the orioles scrambled over the neighboring trees, singing, and eating, as was their custom; even the English sparrow carried on his vulgar squabbles on his own branch of the oak all day; but to none of them did the kingbird pay the slightest attention. He simply and solely defended his own household.

In the beginning the little dame took sitting very easy, fidgeting about in the nest, standing up to dress her feathers, stretching her neck to see what went on in the yard below, and stepping out upon a neighboring twig to rest herself. After a few days she settled more seriously to work, and became very quiet and patient. Her mate never

brought food to her, nor did he once take her place in the nest; not even during a furious northeast gale that turned June into November, and lasted thirty-six hours, most of the time with heavy rain, when the top branch bent and tossed, and threatened every moment a catastrophe. In the house, fires were built and books and work brought out; but the bird-student, wrapped in heavy shawls, kept close watch from an open window, and noted well the bad-weather manners of Tyrannis. Madame sat very close, head to the northeast, and tail, narrowed to the width of one feather, pressed against a twig that grew up behind the nest. All through the storm, I think the head of the family remained in a sheltered part of the tree, but he did not come to the usual twigs which were so exposed. I know he was near, for I heard him, and occasionally saw him standing with body horizontal instead of upright, as usual, the better to maintain his position against the wind. At about the ordinary intervals the sitter left her nest, without so much as a leaf to cover it, and was absent perhaps half as long as common, but not once did her mate assume her post.

How were this pair distinguished from each other, since there is no difference in their dress? First, by a fortunate peculiarity of marking; the male had one short tail feather, that, when he was resting, showed its white tip above the others, and made a perfectly distinct and (with a glass) plainly visible mark. Later, when I had become familiar with the very different manners of the pair, I did not need this mark to distinguish the male, though it remained *en evidence* all through the two months I had them under observation.

During the period of sitting, life went on with great regularity. The protector of the nest perched every night in a poplar-tree across the yard, and promptly at half past four o'clock every morning began his matins. Surprised and interested by an unfamiliar song, I rose one day at that unnatural hour to trace it home. It was in that enchanting time when men are still asleep in their nests, and even "My Lord Sun" has not arisen from his; when the air is sweet and fresh, and as free from the dust of man's coming and going as if his tumults did not exist. It was so still that the flit of a wing was almost startling. The water lapped softly against the shore; but who can

"Write in a hook the morning's prime,
Or match with words that tender sky"?

The song that had called me up was a sweet though simple strain, and it was repeated every morning while his mate was separated from him by her nest duties. I can find no mention of it in books, but I had many opportunities to study it, and thus it was. It began with a low kingbird "Kr-r-r" (or rolling sound impossible to express by letters), without which I should not have identified it at first, and it ended with a very sweet call of two notes, five tones apart, the lower first, after a manner suggestive of the phœbe—something like this: "Kr-r-r-r-r-ree-bé! Kr-r-r-r-r-ree-bé!" In the outset, and I think I heard the very first attempt, it resembled the initial efforts of cage-birds, when spring tunes their throats. The notes seemed hard to get out; they were weak, uncertain, fluttering, as if the singer were practicing something quite new. But as the days went by

they grew strong and assured, and at last were a joyous and loud morning greeting. I don't know why I should be so surprised to hear a kingbird sing; for I believe that one of the things we shall discover, when we begin to study birds alive instead of dead, is that every one has a song, at least in spring, when, in the words of an enthusiastic bird-lover, "the smallest become poets, often sublime songsters." I have already heard several sing that are set down as lacking in that mode of expression.

To return to my kingbird, struggling with his early song. After practicing perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes, he left his perch, flew across the yard, and circled around the top bough, with his usual good-morning to his partner, who at once slipped off and went for her breakfast, while he stayed to watch the nest.

This magic dawn could not last. It grew lighter; the sun was bestirring himself. I heard oars on the bay; and now that the sounds of men began, the robin mounted the fence and sang his waking song. The rogue!—he had been "laughing" and shouting for an hour. "Awake! awake!" he seemed to say; and on our dreamy beds we hear him, and think it the first sound of the new day. Then, too, came the jubilee of the English sparrow, welcoming the appearance of mankind, whose waste and improvidence supply so easily his larder. Why should he spend his time hunting insects? The kitchen will open, the dining-room follows, and crumbs are sure to result. He will wait, and meanwhile do his best to waken his purveyor.

I found this to be the almost invariable programme of kingbird life at this period: after matins, the singer flew to

the nest tree, and his spouse went to her breakfast; in a few seconds he dropped to the edge of the nest, looked long and earnestly at the contents, then flew to one of his usual perching-places near by, and remained in silence till he saw the little mother coming. During the day he relieved her at the intervals mentioned, and at night, when she had settled to rest, he stayed at his post on the fence till almost too dark to be seen, and then took his way, with a good-night greeting, to his sleeping-place on the poplar.

Thus matters went through June till the 29th, when, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, there was an unusual stir about the kingbird castle. I saw that something had happened, and this must open a new chapter. But before beginning the chronicle of the kingbird babies, I should like to give my testimony about *one* member of the family. As a courteous and tender spouse, as a devoted father and a brave defender of his household, I know no one who outranks him. In attending to his own business and never meddling with others, he is unexcelled. In regard to his fighting, he has driven many away from his tree, as do all birds, but he never sought a quarrel; and the only cases of anything like a personal encounter were with the two birds who insisted on annoying him. He is chivalrous to young birds not his own, as will appear in the story of his family. He is, indeed, usually silent, perhaps even solemn, but he may well be so; he has an important duty to perform in the world, and one that should bring him thanks and protection instead of scorn and a bad name. It is to reduce the number of man's worst enemies, the vast army of insects. What we owe to the fly-catchers, indeed, we can never guess,

although, if we go on destroying them, we may have our eyes opened most thoroughly. Even if the most serious charge against the kingbird is true, that he eats bees, it were better that every bee on the face of the earth should perish than that his efficient work among other insects should be stopped.

II.

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A CHRONICLE OF THREE LITTLE KINGS.

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THERE was

"Riot of roses and babel of birds,
All the world in a whirl of delight,"

when the three baby kingbirds opened their eyes to the June sunlight. Three weeks I had watched, if I had not assisted at, the rocking of their cradle, followed day by day the patient brooding, and carefully noted the manners and customs of the owners thereof. At last my long vigil was rewarded. It was near the end of a lovely June day, when June days were nearly over, that there appeared a gentle excitement in the kingbird family. The faithful sitter arose, with a peculiar cry that brought her mate at once to her side, and both looked eagerly together into the nest that held their hopes. Once or twice the little dame leaned over