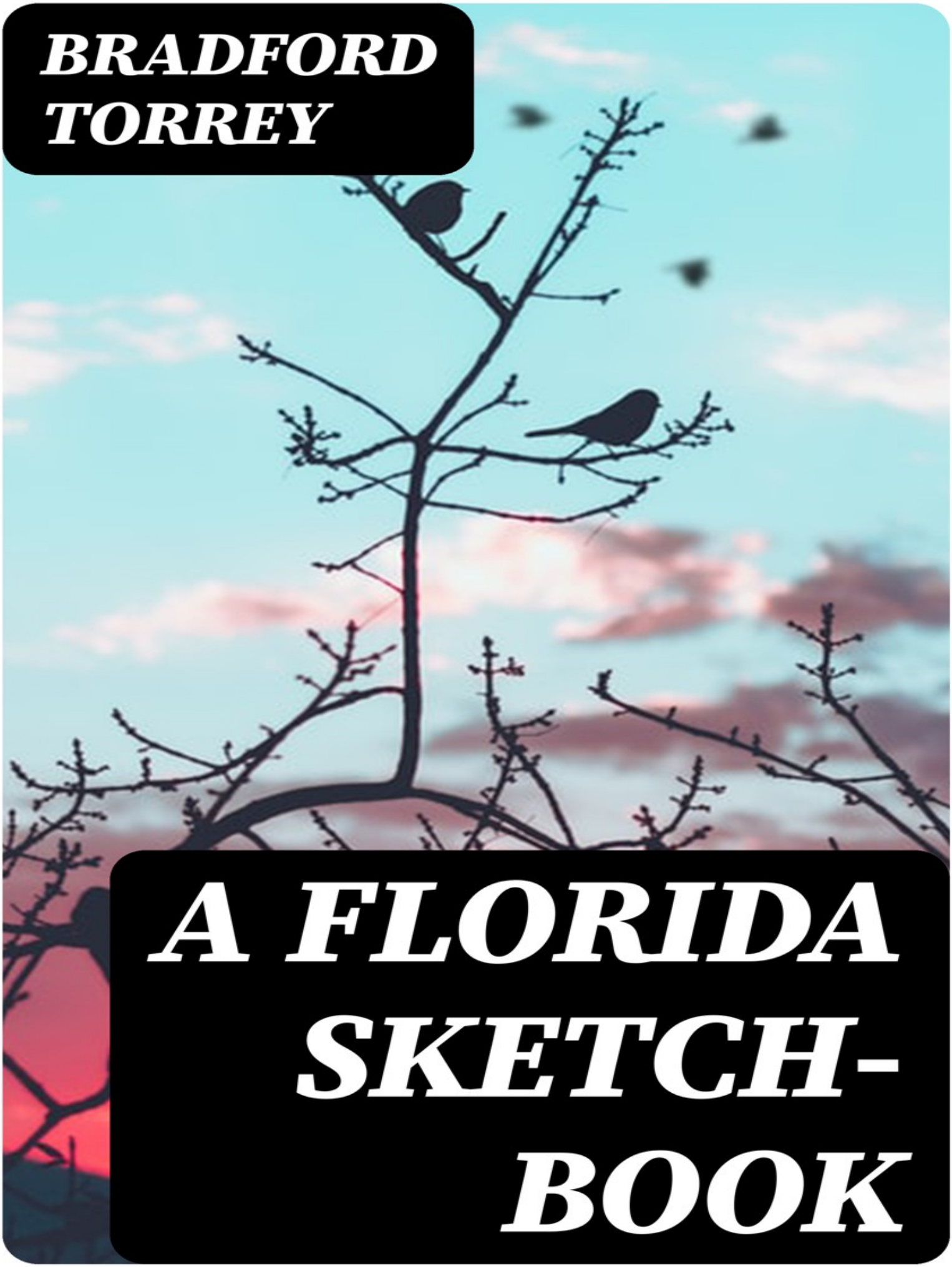
BRADFORD TORREY



A FLORIDA SKETCH-BOOK

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IN THE FLAT-WOODS.

In approaching Jacksonville by rail, the traveler rides hour after hour through seemingly endless pine barrens, otherwise known as low pine-woods and flat-woods, till he wearies of the sight. It would be hard, he thinks, to imagine a region more unwholesome looking and uninteresting, more poverty-stricken and God-forsaken, in its entire aspect. Surely, men who would risk life in behalf of such a country deserved to win their cause.

Monotonous as the flat-woods were, however, and malarious as they looked—arid wastes and stretches of stagnant water flying past the car window in perpetual alternation—I was impatient to get into them. They were a world the like of which I had never seen; and wherever I went in eastern Florida, I made it one of my earliest concerns to seek them out.

My first impression was one of disappointment, or perhaps I should rather say, of bewilderment. In fact, I returned from my first visit to the flat-woods under the delusion that I had not been into them at all. This was at St. Augustine, whither I had gone after a night only in Jacksonville. I looked about the quaint little city, of course, and went to the South Beach, on St. Anastasia Island; then I wished to see the pine lands. They were to be found, I was told, on the other side of the San Sebastian. The sun was hot (or so it seemed to a man fresh from the rigors of a New England winter), and the sand was deep; but I sauntered through New Augustine, and pushed on up the road toward Moultrie (I believe it was), till the last houses were passed

and I came to the edge of the pine-woods. Here, presently, the roads began to fork in a very confusing manner. The first man I met—a kindly cracker—cautioned me against getting lost; but I had no thought of taking the slightest risk of that kind. I was not going to *explore* the woods, but only to enter them, sit down, look about me, and listen. The difficulty was to get into them. As I advanced, they receded. It was still only the beginning of a wood; the trees far apart and comparatively small, the ground covered thickly with saw-palmetto, interspersed here and there with patches of brown grass or sedge.

In many places the roads were under water, and as I seemed to be making little progress, I pretty soon sat down in a pleasantly shaded spot. Wagons came along at intervals, all going toward the city, most of them with loads of wood; ridiculously small loads, such as a Yankee boy would put upon a wheelbarrow. “A fine day,” said I to the driver of such a cart. “Yes, sir,” he answered, “it’s a *pretty* day.” He spoke with an emphasis which seemed to imply that he accepted my remark as well meant, but hardly adequate to the occasion. Perhaps, if the day had been a few shades brighter, he would have called it “handsome,” or even “good looking.” Expressions of this kind, however, are matters of local or individual taste, and as such are not to be disputed about. Thus, a man stopped me in Tallahassee to inquire what time it was. I told him, and he said, "Ah, a little sooner than I thought." And why not “sooner” as well as "earlier"? But when, on the same road, two white girls in an ox-cart hailed me with the question, “What time 'tis?” I thought the interrogative idiom a little queer; almost as queer, shall we say, as “How do you do?” may have sounded to the first man who heard it—if the reader is able to imagine such a person.

Meanwhile, let the morning be “fine” or “pretty,” it was all one to the birds. The woods were vocal with the cackling of robins, the warble of bluebirds, and the trills of pine warblers. Flickers were shouting—or laughing, if one pleased to hear it so—with true flickerish prolixity, and a single downy woodpecker called sharply again and again. A mocking-bird near me (there is *always* a mocking-bird near you, in Florida) added his voice for a time, but soon relapsed into silence. The fact was characteristic; for, wherever I went, I found it true that the mocker grew less musical as the place grew wilder. By instinct he is a public performer, he demands an audience; and it is only in cities, like St. Augustine and Tallahassee, that he is heard at his freest and best. A loggerhead shrike—now close at my elbow, now farther away—was practicing his extensive vocabulary with perseverance, if not with enthusiasm. Like his relative the “great northern,” though perhaps in a less degree, the loggerhead is commonly at an extreme, either loquacious or dumb; as if he could not let his moderation be known unto any man. Sometimes I fancied him possessed with an insane ambition to match the mocking-bird in song as well as in personal appearance. If so, it is not surprising that he should be subject to fits of discouragement and silence. Aiming at the sun, though a good and virtuous exercise, as we have all heard, is apt to prove dispiriting to sensible marksmen. Crows (fish crows, in all probability, but at the time I did not know it) uttered strange, hoarse, flat-sounding caws. Every bird of them must have been born without a palate, it seemed to me. White-eyed chewinks were at home in the dense palmetto scrub, whence they announced themselves unmistakably by sharp whistles. Now and then one of them mounted a leaf, and allowed me to see his pale yellow iris. Except for this mark, recognizable almost as far as the bird could be distinguished at all, he looked exactly like our common New England towhee. Somewhere behind me was a king-fisher’s rattle, and from a savanna in the

same direction came the songs of meadow larks; familiar, but with something unfamiliar about them at the same time, unless my ears deceived me.

More interesting than any of the birds yet named, because more strictly characteristic of the place, as well as more strictly new to me, were the brown-headed nuthatches. I was on the watch for them: they were one of the three novelties which I knew were to be found in the pine lands, and nowhere else—the other two being the red-cockaded woodpecker and the pine-wood sparrow; and being thus on the lookout, I did not expect to be taken by surprise, if such a paradox (it is nothing worse) may be allowed to pass. But when I heard them twittering in the distance, as I did almost immediately, I had no suspicion of what they were. The voice had nothing of that nasal quality, that Yankee twang, as some people would call it, which I had always associated with the nuthatch family. On the contrary, it was decidedly finchlike—so much so that some of the notes, taken by themselves, would have been ascribed without hesitation to the goldfinch or the pine finch, had I heard them in New England; and even as things were, I was more than once deceived for the moment. As for the birds themselves, they were evidently a cheerful and thrifty race, much more numerous than the red-cockaded woodpeckers, and much less easily overlooked than the pine-wood sparrows. I seldom entered the flat-woods anywhere without finding them. They seek their food largely about the leafy ends of the pine branches, resembling the Canadian nuthatches in this respect, so that it is only on rare occasions that one sees them creeping about the trunks or larger limbs. Unlike their two Northern relatives, they are eminently social, often traveling in small flocks, even in the breeding season, and keeping up an almost incessant chorus of shrill twitters as they flit hither and thither through the woods. The first one to come near me was full of

inquisitiveness; he flew back and forth past my head, exactly as chickadees do in a similar mood, and once seemed almost ready to alight on my hat. “Let us have a look at this stranger,” he appeared to be saying. Possibly his nest was not far off, but I made no search for it. Afterwards I found two nests, one in a low stump, and one in the trunk of a pine, fifteen or twenty feet from the ground. Both of them contained young ones (March 31 and April 2), as I knew by the continual goings-in-and-out of the fathers and mothers. In dress the brown-head is dingy, with little or nothing of the neat and attractive appearance of our New England nuthatches.

In this pine-wood on the road to Moultrie I found no sign of the new woodpecker or the new sparrow. Nor was I greatly disappointed. The place itself was a sufficient novelty—the place and the summer weather. The pines murmured overhead, and the palmettos rustled all about. Now a butterfly fluttered past me, and now a dragonfly. More than one little flock of tree swallows went over the wood, and once a pair of phœbes amused me by an uncommonly pretty lover’s quarrel. Truly it was a pleasant hour. In the midst of it there came along a man in a cart, with a load of wood. We exchanged the time of day, and I remarked upon the smallness of his load. Yes, he said; but it was a pretty heavy load to drag seven or eight miles over such roads. Possibly he understood me as implying that he seemed to be in rather small business, although I had no such purpose, for he went on to say: “In 1861, when this beautiful war broke out between our countries, my father owned niggers. We didn’t have to do *this*. But I don’t complain. If I hadn’t got a bullet in me, I should do pretty well.”

“Then you were in the war?” I said.

“Oh, yes, yes, sir! I was in the Confederate service. Yes, sir, I’m a Southerner to the backbone. My grandfather was a ----” (I missed the patronymic), “and commanded St. Augustine.”

The name had a foreign sound, and the man’s complexion was swarthy, and in all simplicity I asked if he was a Minorcan. I might as well have touched a lighted match to powder. His eyes flashed, and he came round the tail of the cart, gesticulating with his stick.

“Minorcan!” he broke out. “Spain and the island of Minorca are two places, ain’t they?”

I admitted meekly that they were.

“You are English, ain’t you?” he went on. “You are English—Yankee born—ain’t you?”

I owned it.

“Well, I’m Spanish. That ain’t Minorcan. My grandfather was a——, and commanded St. Augustine. He couldn’t have done that if he had been Minorcan.”

By this time he was quieting down a bit. His father remembered the Indian war. The son had heard him tell about it.

“Those were dangerous times,” he remarked. “You couldn’t have been standing out here in the woods then.”

“There is no danger here now, is there?” said I.

“No, no, not now.” But as he drove along he turned to say that *he* wasn’t afraid of *any* thing; he wasn’t that kind of a man. Then, with a final turn, he added, what I could not dispute, “A man’s life is always in danger.”

After he was gone, I regretted that I had offered no apology for my unintentionally offensive question; but I was so taken by surprise, and so much interested in the man as a specimen, that I quite forgot my manners till it was too late. One thing I learned: that it is not prudent, in these days, to judge a Southern man’s blood, in either sense of the word, by his dress or occupation. This man had brought seven or eight miles a load of wood that might possibly be worth seventy-five cents (I questioned the owner of what looked like just such a load afterward, and found his asking price half a dollar), and for clothing had on a pair of trousers and a blue cotton shirt, the latter full of holes, through which the skin was visible; yet his father was a—— and had “owned niggers.”

A still more picturesque figure in this procession of wood-carters was a boy of perhaps ten or eleven. He rode his horse, and was barefooted and barelegged; but he had a cigarette in his mouth, and to each brown heel was fastened an enormous spur. Who was it that infected the world with the foolish and disastrous notion that work and play are two different things? And was it Emerson, or some other wise man, who said that a boy was the true philosopher?

When it came time to think of returning to St. Augustine for dinner, I appreciated my cracker’s friendly warning against losing my way; for though I had hardly so much as entered the woods, and had taken, as I thought, good heed to my steps, I was almost at once in a quandary as to my road. There was no occasion for worry—with the sun out, and my general course perfectly plain; but here was a fork in the road, and whether to bear to the left or to the right was a simple matter of guess-work. I made the best guess I could, and guessed wrong, as was apparent after a while, when I found the road under deep water for several rods. I objected to wading, and there was no ready way of going

round, since the oak and palmetto scrub crowded close up to the roadside, and just here was all but impenetrable. What was still more conclusive, the road was the wrong one, as the inundation proved, and, for aught I could tell, might carry me far out of my course. I turned back, therefore, under the midday sun, and by good luck a second attempt brought me out of the woods very near where I had entered them. I visited this particular piece of country but once afterward, having in the mean time discovered a better place of the same sort along the railroad, in the direction of Palatka. There, on a Sunday morning, I heard my first pine-wood sparrow. Time and tune could hardly have been in truer accord. The hour was of the quietest, the strain was of the simplest, and the bird sang as if he were dreaming. For a long time I let him go on without attempting to make certain who he was. He seemed to be rather far off: if I waited his pleasure, he would perhaps move toward me; if I disturbed him, he would probably become silent. So I sat on the end of a sleeper and listened. It was not great music. It made me think of the swamp sparrow; and the swamp sparrow is far from being a great singer. A single prolonged, drawling note (in that respect unlike the swamp sparrow, of course), followed by a succession of softer and sweeter ones —that was all, when I came to analyze it; but that is no fair description of what I heard. The quality of the song is not there; and it was the quality, the feeling, the soul of it, if I may say what I mean, that made it, in the true sense of a much-abused word, charming.

There could be little doubt that the bird was a pine-wood sparrow; but such things are not to be taken for granted. Once or twice, indeed, the thought of some unfamiliar warbler had crossed my mind. At last, therefore, as the singer still kept out of sight, I leaped the ditch and pushed into the scrub. Happily I had not far to go; he had been much nearer than I thought. A small bird flew up before me,

and dropped almost immediately into a clump of palmetto. I edged toward the spot and waited. Then the song began again, this time directly in front of me, but still faraway-sounding and dreamy. I find that last word in my hasty note penciled at the time, and can think of no other that expresses the effect half so well. I looked and looked, and all at once there sat the bird on a palmetto leaf. Once again he sang, putting up his head. Then he dropped out of sight, and I heard nothing more. I had seen only his head and neck—enough to show him a sparrow, and almost of necessity the pine-wood sparrow. No other strange member of the finch family was to be looked for in such a place.

On further acquaintance, let me say at once, *Pucæa æstivalis* proved to be a more versatile singer than the performances of my first bird would have led me to suppose. He varies his tune freely, but always within a pretty narrow compass; as is true, also, of the field sparrow, with whom, as I soon came to feel, he has not a little in common. It is in musical form only that he suggests the swamp sparrow. In tone and spirit, in the qualities of sweetness and expressiveness, he is nearly akin to *Spizella pusilla*. One does for the Southern pine barren what the other does for the Northern berry pasture. And this is high praise; for though in New England we have many singers more brilliant than the field sparrow, we have none that are sweeter, and few that in the long run give more pleasure to sensitive hearers.

I found the pine-wood sparrow afterward in New Smyrna, Port Orange, Sanford, and Tallahassee. So far as I could tell, it was always the same bird; but I shot no specimens, and speak with no authority.[1] Living always in the pine lands, and haunting the dense undergrowth, it is heard a hundred times where it is seen once—a point greatly in favor of its effectiveness as a musician. Mr. Brewster speaks of it as

singing always from an elevated perch, while the birds that I saw in the act of song, a very limited number, were invariably perched low. One that I watched in New Smyrna (one of a small chorus, the others being invisible) sang for a quarter of an hour from a stake or stump which rose perhaps a foot above the dwarf palmetto. It was the same song that I had heard in St. Augustine; only the birds here were in a livelier mood, and sang *out* instead of *sotto voce*. The long introductory note sounded sometimes as if it were indrawn, and often, if not always, had a considerable burr in it. Once in a while the strain was caught up at the end and sung over again, after the manner of the field sparrow—one of that bird's prettiest tricks. At other times the song was delivered with full voice, and then repeated almost under the singer's breath. This was done beautifully in the Port Orange flat-woods, the bird being almost at my feet. I had seen him a moment before, and saw him again half a minute later, but at that instant he was out of sight in the scrub, and seemingly on the ground. This feature of the song, one of its chief merits and its most striking peculiarity, is well described by Mr. Brewster. "Now," he says, "it has a full, bell-like ring that seems to fill the air around; next it is soft and low and inexpressibly tender; now it is clear again, but so modulated that the sound seems to come from a great distance."[2]

[1] Two races of the pine-wood sparrow are recognized by ornithologists, *Pucæa æstivalis* and *P. æstivalis bachmanii*, and both of them have been found in Florida; but, if I understand the matter right, *Pucæa æstivalis* is the common and typical Florida bird.

[2] *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club*, vol. vii. p. 98.

Not many other birds, I think (I cannot recall any), habitually vary their song in this manner. Other birds sing almost inaudibly at times, especially in the autumnal season. Even the brown thrasher, whose ordinary

performance is so full-voiced, not to say boisterous, will sometimes soliloquize, or seem to soliloquize, in the faintest of undertones. The formless autumnal warble of the song sparrow is familiar to every one. And in this connection I remember, and am not likely ever to forget, a winter wren who favored me with what I thought the most bewitching bit of vocalism to which I had ever listened. He was in the bushes close at my side, in the Franconia Notch, and delivered his whole song, with all its customary length, intricacy, and speed, in a tone—a whisper, I may almost say—that ran along the very edge of silence. The unexpected proximity of a stranger may have had something to do with his conduct, as it often appears to have with the thrasher's; but, however that may be, the cases are not parallel with that of the pine-wood sparrow, inasmuch as the latter bird not merely sings under his breath on special occasions, whether on account of the nearness of a listener or for any other reason, but in his ordinary singing uses louder and softer tones interchangeably, almost exactly as human singers and players do; as if, in the practice of his art, he had learned to appreciate, consciously or unconsciously (and practice naturally goes before theory), the expressive value of what I believe is called musical dynamics.

I spent many half-days in the pine lands (how gladly now would I spend another!), but never got far into them. ("Into their depths," my pen was on the point of making me say; but that would have been a false note. The flat-woods have no "depths.") Whether I followed the railway—in many respects pretty satisfactory method—or some roundabout, aimless carriage road, a mile or two was generally enough. The country offers no temptation to pedestrian feats, nor does the imagination find its account in going farther and farther. For the reader is not to think of the flat-woods as in the least resembling a Northern forest, which at every turn opens before the visitor and beckons him forward. Beyond

and behind, and on either side, the pine-woods are ever the same. It is this monotony, by the bye, this utter absence of landmarks, that makes it so unsafe for the stranger to wander far from the beaten track. The sand is deep, the sun is hot; one place is as good as another. What use, then, to tire yourself? And so, unless the traveler is going somewhere, as I seldom was, he is continually stopping by the way. Now a shady spot entices him to put down his umbrella—for there is a shady spot, here and there, even in a Florida pine-wood; or blossoms are to be plucked; or a butterfly, some gorgeous and nameless creature, brightens the wood as it passes; or a bird is singing; or an eagle is soaring far overhead, and must be watched out of sight; or a buzzard, with upturned wings, floats suspiciously near the wanderer, as if with sinister intent (buzzard shadows are a regular feature of the flat-wood landscape, just as cloud shadows are in a mountainous country); or a snake lies stretched out in the sun—a “whip snake,” perhaps, that frightens the unwary stroller by the amazing swiftness with which it runs away from him; or some strange invisible insect is making uncanny noises in the underbrush. One of my recollections of the railway woods at St. Augustine is of a cricket, or locust, or something else—I never saw it—that amused me often with a formless rattling or drumming sound. I could think of nothing but a boy’s first lesson upon the bones, the rhythm of the beats was so comically mistimed and bungled.

One fine morning—it was the 18th of February—I had gone down the railroad a little farther than usual, attracted by the encouraging appearance of a swampy patch of rather large deciduous trees. Some of them, I remember, were red maples, already full of handsome, high-colored fruit. As I drew near, I heard indistinctly from among them what might have been the song of a black-throated green warbler, a bird that would have made a valued addition to my Florida