DALLAS LORE SHARP

ROOF AND MEADOW

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Roof and Meadow

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BIRDS FROM A CITY ROOF

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I laid down my book and listened. It was only the choking gurgle of a broken rain-pipe outside: then it was the ripple and swish of a meadow stream. To make out the voices of redwings and marsh-wrens in the rasping notes of the city sparrows behind the shutter required much more imagination. But I did it. I wanted to hear, and the splash of the water helped me.

The sounds of wind and water are the same everywhere. Here at the heart of the city I can forget the tarry pebbles and painted tin whenever my rain-pipes are flooded. I can never be wholly shut away from the open country and the trees so long as the winds draw hard down the alley past my window.

But I have more than a window and a broken rain-pipe. Along with my five flights goes a piece of roof, flat, with a wooden floor, a fence, and a million acres of sky. I couldn't possibly use another acre of sky, except along the eastern horizon, where the top floors of some twelve-story buildings intercept the dawn.

With such a roof and such a sky, when I must, I can, with effort, get well out of the city. I have never fished nor

botanized here, but I have been a-birding many times.

Stone walls do not a prison make,

nor city streets a cage—if one have a roof.

A roof is not an ideal spot for bird study. I would hardly, out of preference, have chosen this with its soot and its battlement of gaseous chimney-pots, even though it is a university roof with the great gilded dome of a state house shining down upon it. One whose feet have always been in the soil does not take kindly to tar and tin. But anything open to the sky is open to some of the birds, for the paths of many of the migrants lie close along the clouds.

Other birds than the passing migrants, however, sometimes come within range of my look-out. The year around there are English sparrows and pigeons; and all through the summer scarcely an evening passes when a few chimney-swallows are not in sight.

With the infinite number and variety of chimneys hedging me in, I naturally expected to find the sky alive with swallows. Indeed, I thought that some of the twenty-six pots at the corners of my roof would be inhabited by the birds. Not so. While I can nearly always find a pair of swallows in the air, they are surprisingly scarce, and, so far as I know, they rarely build in the heart of the city. There are more canaries in my block than chimney-swallows in all my sky.

The swallows are not urban birds. The gas, the smoke, the shrieking ventilators, and the ceaseless sullen roar of the city are hardly to their liking. Perhaps the flies and gnats which they feed upon cannot live in the air above the roofs. The swallows want a sleepy old town with big thunderful

chimneys, where there are wide fields and a patch of quiet water.

Much more numerous than the swallows are the night-hawks. My roof, in fact, is the best place I have ever found to study their feeding habits. These that flit through my smoky dusk may not make city nests, though the finding of such nests would not surprise me. Of course a night-hawk's *nest*, here or anywhere else, would surprise me; for like her cousin, the whippoorwill, she never builds a nest, but stops in the grass, the gravel, the leaves, or on a bare rock, deposits her eggs without even scratching aside the sticks and stones that may share the bed, and in three days is brooding them—brooding the stones too.

It is likely that some of my hawks nest on the buildings in the neighborhood. Night-hawks' eggs have occasionally been found among the pebbles of city roofs. The high, flat house-tops are so quiet and remote, so far away from the noisy life in the narrow streets below, that the birds make their nests here as if in a world apart. The twelve-and fifteen-story buildings are as so many deserted mountain heads to them.

None of the birds build on my roof, however. But from early spring they haunt the region so constantly that their families, if they have families at all, must be somewhere in the vicinity. Should I see them like this about a field or thicket in the country it would certainly mean a nest.

The sparrows themselves do not seem more at home here than do these night-hawks. One evening, after a sultry July day, a wild wind-storm burst over the city. The sun was low, glaring through a narrow rift between the hill-crests and

the clouds that spread green and heavy across the sky. I could see the lower fringes of the clouds working and writhing in the wind, but not a sound or a breath was in the air about me. Around me over my roof flew the night-hawks. They were crying peevishly and skimming close to the chimneys, not rising, as usual, to any height.

Suddenly the storm broke. The rain fell as if something had given way overhead. The wind tore across the stubble of roofs and spires; and through the wind, the rain, and the rolling clouds shot a weird, yellow-green sunlight.

I had never seen a storm like it. Nor had the night-hawks. They seemed to be terrified, and left the sky immediately. One of them, alighting on the roof across the street, and creeping into the lee of a chimney, huddled there in sight of me until the wind was spent and a natural sunlight flooded the world of roofs and domes and spires.

Then they were all awing once more, hawking for supper. Along with the hawking they got in a great deal of play, doing their tumbling and cloud-coasting over the roofs just as they do above the fields.

Mounting by easy stages of half a dozen rapid strokes, catching flies by the way, and crying *peent-peent*, the acrobat climbs until I look a mere lump on the roof; then ceasing his whimpering *peent*, he turns on bowed wings and falls—shoots roofward with fearful speed. The chimneys! Quick!

Quick he is. Just short of the roofs the taut wings flash a reverse, there is a lightning swoop, a startling hollow wind-sound, and the rushing bird is beating skyward again,

hawking deliberately as before, and uttering again his peevish nasal cry.

This single note, the only call he has besides a few squeaks, is far from a song; farther still is the empty-barrel-bung-hole sound made by the air in the rushing wings as the bird swoops in his fall. The night-hawk, alias "bull-bat," does not sing. What a name bull-bat would be for a singing bird! But a "voice" was never intended for the creature. Voice, beak, legs, head—everything but wings and maw was sacrificed for a mouth. What a mouth! The bird can almost swallow himself. Such a cleft in the head could never mean a song; it could never be utilized for anything but a fly-trap.

We have use for fly-traps. We need some birds just to sit around, look pretty, and warble. We will pay them for it in cherries or in whatever they ask. But there is also a great need for birds that kill insects. And first among these are the night-hawks. They seem to have been designed for this sole purpose. Their end is to kill insects. They are more like machines than any other birds I know. The enormous mouth feeds an enormous stomach, and this, like a fire-box, makes the power that works the enormous wings. From a single maw have been taken eighteen hundred winged ants, to say nothing of the smaller fry that could not be identified and counted.

But if he never caught an ant, never one of the fifth-story mosquitos that live and bite till Christmas, how greatly still my sky would need him! His flight is song enough. His cry and eery thunder are the very voice of the summer twilight to me. And as I watch him coasting in the evening dusk, that

twilight often falls—over the roofs, as it used to fall for me over the fields and the quiet hollow woods.

There is always an English sparrow on my roof—which does not particularly commend the roof to bird-lovers, I know. I often wish the sparrow an entirely different bird, but I never wish him entirely away from the roof. When there is no other defense for him, I fall back upon his being a bird. Any kind of a bird in the city! Any but a parrot.

A pair of sparrows nest regularly in an eaves-trough, so close to the roof that I can overhear their family talk. Round, loquacious, familiar Cock Sparrow is a family man—so entirely a family man as to be nothing else at all. He is a success, too. It does me good to see him build. He tore the old nest all away in the early winter, so as to be ready. There came a warm springish day in February, and he began. A blizzard stopped him, but with the melting of the snow he went to work again, completing the nest by the middle of March.

He built for a big family, and he had it. Not "it" indeed, but *them*; for there were three batches of from six to ten youngsters each during the course of the season. He also did a father's share of work with the children. I think he hated hatching them. He would settle upon the roof above the nest, and chirp in a crabbed, imposed-upon tone until his wife came out. As she flew briskly away, he would look disconsolately around at the bright busy world, ruffle his feathers, scold to himself, and then crawl dutifully in upon the eggs.

I knew how he felt. It is not in a cock sparrow to enjoy hatching eggs. I respected him; for though he grumbled, as