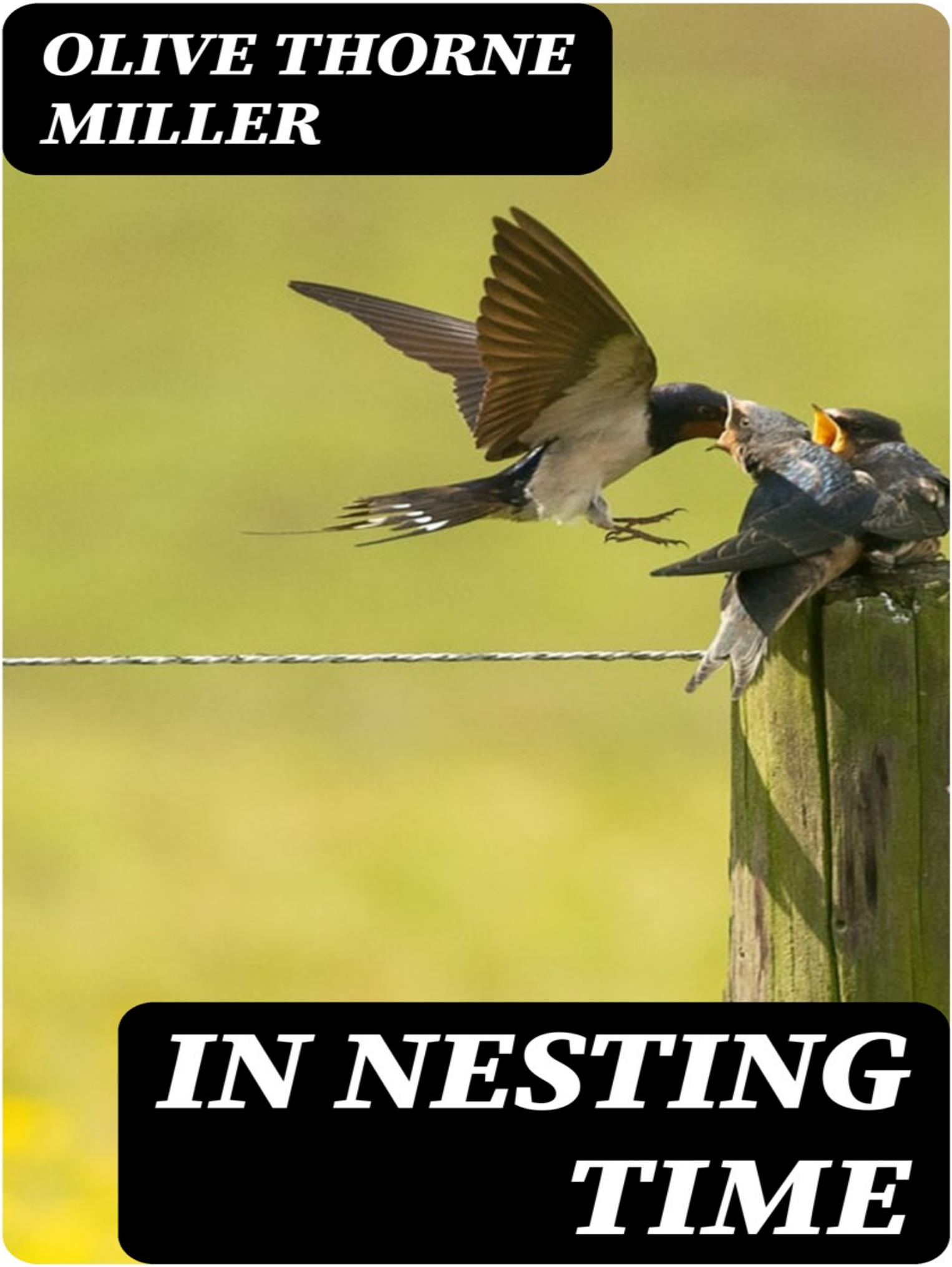
OLIVE THORNE MILLER



IN NESTING TIME

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BABY BIRDS.

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And oft an unintruding guest,
I watched her secret toils from day to day;
How true she warped the moss to form the nest,
And modeled it within with wood and clay.
And by and by, like heath-bells gilt with dew,
There lay her shining eggs as bright as flowers,
Ink-spotted over, shells of green and blue:
And there I witnessed in the summer hours
A brood of Nature's minstrels chirp and fly,
Glad as the sunshine and the laughing sky.

JOHN CLARE.

I.

BABY BIRDS.

"Ears have they, but they hear not," may be said of all the world. Tragedies and comedies go on continually before us which we neither see nor hear; cries of distress and prattle of infants, songs of love and screams of war, alike fall upon deaf ears, while we calmly discuss the last book or the news

from Borriboo-lah-Gha, as completely oblivious as if all this stirring life did not exist.

To be sure these things take place in the "upper stories," as Thoreau says, but they are none the less audible, and one is tempted to believe that bird voices are on a scale to which the untrained ear is not attuned. Once learn to hear, and nature is full of life and interest. The home affairs of our little neighbors whose modest cottage swings on a branch of the elm beside the door are more attractive than those of our fellow creatures in the house across the way partly because they are so open in their lives that our attentions do not seem intrusive, but more because their ways are not so familiar. We can guess how men and women pass their time, but we cannot guess why the cat-bird always sings from the middle of one particular shrub, nor where he has hidden his dusky spouse and nest full of babies; and after we know him we are eager to discover.

Upon reaching the charming home of a friend in Massachusetts last June, almost the first thing I saw was a pair of purple crow blackbirds in trouble. First arose a medley of queer husky tones, clamorous baby cries, and excited oriole voices, with violent agitation of the leaves of a tall elm, ending with the sudden exit of a blackbird, closely followed by a pair of Baltimore orioles. The pursued flew leisurely across the lawn, plainly in no haste, and not at all with the air of the thief and nest robber he is popularly supposed to be. Clearly the elm belonged by bird custom to the orioles, for their pretty swinging hammock could be seen partly hidden by leaves, about halfway up the tree,

and what business other than that of marauder had the sombre-hued enemy upon it?

Now the blackbird has no secrets in his life; the whole world is welcome to know his affairs, and in fact he proclaims them loudly himself. It was easy to see that he had anxiety enough of his own just then, without thinking of disturbing his neighbors, for he was engaged in the task of introducing his young family to the world, and every bird watcher knows that is attended with almost as many difficulties as is the same operation in what we call "society."

If the youngster escape the dangers peculiar to the nest, the devouring jaws of squirrel or owl, the hands of the egg thief, being shaken out by the wind, smothered by an intrusive cow-bunting, or orphaned by the gun of a "collector;" if, neither stolen, eaten, thrown out, nor starved, he arrives at the age that his wings begin to stir and force him out of the leafy green tent of his birth, a new set of dangers meet him at the door. He may entangle himself in a hair of the nest-lining, and hang himself at the very threshold of life—a not uncommon occurrence; or he may safely reach the nearest twig and from there fall and break his neck—not a rare accident; he may be attacked by a bird who questions his right to be on the tree; he may fly, and, not reaching his goal, come to the ground, an easy prey to any prowler.

In this blackbird family one of the little ones had taken his first ambitious flight to the oriole's tree, where he must and should be fed and comforted, in spite of the hostile

reception of its gayly dressed proprietor. The father took upon himself this duty, and many times during the day the above-mentioned scene was reënacted, loud blackbird calls, husky baby notes, the musical war-cry of the oriole, and a chase.

A second infant had wisely confined his wandering to his own tree, one of a group of tall pines that towered above the roofs of the village. This one could be easily watched as he stood on one branch for an hour at a time, sometimes in the nest attitude, head sunk in shoulders and beak pointed toward the sky, again looking eagerly around on his new world, turning his head from side to side, changing position to see the other way, and showing himself wide awake although the yellowish baby-down was still on his head, and his tail was not an inch long. Now and then the mother was heard calling in the distance, and as she approached he became all excitement, fluttering his wings, and answering in the husky tones of the family. A moment later, after a quick glance around, but without alighting and reconnoitring the whole neighborhood, as the robin does, she came down beside the eager youngling, administered to the wide open mouth what looked like two or three savage pecks, but doubtless were nothing worse than mouthfuls of food, and instantly flew again, while the refreshed infant stretched his wings and legs, changed his place a little, and settled into comfortable quiet after his lunch.

The urchin in the enemy's tree was not the most unfortunate of the nestlings. One already lay dead on the ground under the nest where it had fallen, and another

came down during the day, though happily without injury. This one was not very bright, or perhaps his baby wits were dazed by his sudden descent. He made no objection to staying in my hand as long as I liked to look at him, and when I placed him on a low branch, as a hint that it was safer there, he declined to accept my advice, but flew off and came to the ground again. He was a scraggy looking, rusty black little fellow, the most unattractive young bird I ever saw. Shortly after this he clambered up on a pile of brush about a foot high, without so much as a leaf to screen him, and there he stayed all day, motionless, being fed at long intervals; and there I left him at night, never expecting to see him again. But in the morning he appeared on a low shrub on the lawn, and about nine o'clock he took courage to launch himself on wing. He flew very low across the street, and dropped into the tall grass at the foot of a lilac bush. Why the parents considered that less safe than the open lawn I could not see, but they evidently did, for one of them perched upon the lilac, and filled the air with anxious "chucks," announcing to all whom it might concern—after the fashion of some birds—that here was a stray infant to be had for the picking up. Perhaps, however, the hue-and-cry kept off the quiet-loving cat; at any rate nothing happened to him, I think, for in a day or two the three young birds became so expert on wing that the whole family left us, and I hope found a place where they were more welcome than in that colony of house and orchard birds.

Not so quiet in their ways are the babies of another blackbird family—the redwings; restless and uneasy, the clumsy little creatures climb all about the bushes and trees,

and keep both parents busy, not only in filling their gaping mouths, but in finding them when the food is brought. They are always seeking a new place, and from the moment of leaving the nest show in a marked way the unrest, the impatience of the redwing family.

Quite as erratic is a much smaller bird, the yellow throated warbler, whose baby ways I have seen at the South. One of these bantlings no bigger than the end of a thumb will easily keep its parent frantically busy rushing about after food, and hunting up the capricious wanderer on its return.

The wood thrush, on the contrary, is patience itself. A youngster of this lovely family sits a half hour at a time motionless and silent on a branch, head drawn down upon his shoulders, apparently in the deepest meditation. When he sees food coming he is gently agitated, rises upon his weak legs, softly flutters his wings and opens his mouth, but never—never cries. Should one put a hand down to take him, as seemingly could be done easily, he will slip out from under it, drop to the ground, and disappear, in perfect silence.

The cry-baby of the bird world is the Baltimore oriole. As soon as this fluffy young person appears outside of his nursery, sometimes even before, he begins to utter a strange almost constant "chrr-r-r." He is not particularly active of movement, but he cannot keep silent. One little oriole mother whom I watched in Massachusetts had no help in raising her brood, her mate spending his time on the upper branches of the tree. He could not be blamed,

however; he was, so far as I could see, perfectly willing to aid in the support of the family, but Madam actually would not allow him even to visit the homestead. When the young were out he assumed his share of the labor. The first yellow-haired bairn mounted the edge of the nest one morning, and after a little stretching and pluming, tried to fly. But alas he was held! Two or three times he renewed the attempt, his struggles always ending in failure, and I feared I should see a tragedy. Half an hour later the mother returned, and whether she pushed him down, or merely advised him to go back and try again, I cannot say. The fact is that he did disappear in the nest, where he remained for two or three hours, for it is probably safe to assume that the urchin who came up later was the same. This time, without delay upon the brink, he climbed upon a twig, hopped about a little, and before long flew several feet, alighting on a small branch of the same tree. Hardly had he established himself safely and resumed his ordinary call, when down upon him from above came a robin, who, strange to say, had a nest in one of the upper branches of the same tall maple. This robin had always recognized the right of the oriole parents to their share of the tree, but the young one was a stranger, and he fell upon him accordingly. He knocked him off his perch; the unfortunate little fellow fell a few feet, then gathered himself, fluttered and caught at the outside of a clump of leaves on the end of a twig, where after frantic struggling he managed to secure a hold. Perhaps the robin saw his mistake, for he paid no more attention to the new-comer, who did not stay long on the tree after this second disaster.

The next morning came up out of the nest quite an unnatural oriole baby—he did not cry. Silently, he stepped out upon a twig, and looked about in the new world around him. He carefully dressed his feathers, and often rose to his full height and stretched his legs, as if it were legs and not wings he needed in his new life. The third scion of the household had also a marked character of his own. Having planted himself on the threshold, and found it a convenient place to intercept all food on its way to the younger ones still unseen, he remained. Every time the mother came with a mouthful, he fluttered and coaxed, and usually got it. It was too good a situation to leave and he seemed to have settled for life; but his wings overpowered his inertia or greed, about four o'clock in the afternoon.

So long had the third young oriole occupied his position, that the fourth made his appearance almost immediately, as though he had been waiting. There does appear to be some regulation of this sort among the orioles, for in all that I have noticed, no two ever came out together (excepting once, when both went back almost instantly, and one returned alone). This late comer had not the whole long sunny day to loiter away, and he flew in an hour. The fifth and last came up early the next morning evidently in haste to join the scattered family, for he bade farewell to the native tree in a short time. No more orioles appeared upon the maple from this day, but for two weeks I saw the little party about; the father, whom I had missed after the flight of the first infant, working like a drudge, with two or three hungry urchins wherever he went, excepting when he sought food in the new-cut grass on the ground. He gave us

no more songs, but his sweet, low call sounded all day on the place.

Another family of little folk came upon the maple after the orioles were gone, a nuthatch tribe. There were three or four of them exactly like the mother excepting a shorter tail, and they followed her like a flock of sheep, over and under branches, around the trunk, up or down or any way, never pausing more than an instant, not even when she plumped a morsel into a waiting mouth. She led her little procession by her querulous-sounding "quank," while they replied with a low "chir-up" in the same tone. It was a very funny sight. They could fly nicely, but never seemed to think of looking for food, and it was plain that the busy little mother had no time to teach them. It was interesting to see her deal with a moth which she found napping on a fence. She ran at once to a crack or some convenient hole in the rough rail, thrust it in and hammered it down. When it was quiet she snipped off the wings, dragged it out, and beat it on the fence till it was fit for food, the family meanwhile gathered around her, clinging closely to the fence, and gently fluttering. These nuthatches were remarkably silent, but some that I once saw living near the top of two or three tall pines were quite noisy, and I spent much time trying to see what they were forever complaining about. There always seemed to be some catastrophe impending up in that sky parlor, but it never appeared to reach a climax.

Charming to watch is the bluebird nestling; cheery and gentle like the parents, he seems to escape the period of helplessness that many birds suffer from, perhaps because

he is patient enough to stay in the nest till his wings are ready to use. The mocking-bird baby has a far different time. Victim of a devouring ambition that will not let him rest till either legs or wings will bear him, he scrambles out upon his native tree, stretches, plumes a little in a jerky, hurried way, and then boldly launches out in the air—alas!—to come flop to the ground, where he is an easy prey to boys and cats, both of whom are particularly fond of young mocking-birds. These parents are wiser than the crow blackbirds, for not a sound betrays the accident in the family, unless, indeed, the little one is disturbed, when they make noise enough. They keep out of sight, no doubt closely watching the straggler until he gets away from people, for although he has proved that he cannot fly, the young mocker is by no means discouraged; he trusts to his legs, and usually at once starts off on a run "anywhere, anywhere, out (in) the world." When far enough away for them to feel safe in doing so, the parents come down and feed and comfort the wanderer, and it is a day or two before his wings are of much use to him.

The most imperious young bird I know is the robin. He is perfectly sure he has a right to attention, and he intends to have it. If he is neglected too long and gets hungry, he calls loudly and impatiently, jerking himself up with a ludicrous air of stamping his feet. Even when he does condescend to go to the lawn with mamma, it is not to seek his food—far from it! It is to follow her around, and call every moment or two for something to eat. The idea that his individual exertions have anything to do with the food supply seems never to occur to him. He expects the fat morsels to fall into

his mouth as they always have, and why should they not? He will soon be taught, for even baby-birds have to be educated.

We have assumed in our easy-going way that birds "toil not" because they "do not spin," because they have not surrounded themselves with a thousand artificial wants, as we have. But the truth is that nobody can work harder than a pair of robins, for example, with four or five hungry mouths to fill, and every mouthful to be hunted up as it is wanted. No one would guess what an ever-yawning cavern a baby robin's mouth is, till he has tried to bring up a nestling himself. I once kept two small boys busy several days at high wages, digging worms for one young bird, and then I believe he starved to death.

The training of our winged neighbors is most interesting, but so cautiously carried on that we rarely see it, though we may often hear the robin, oriole, whip-poor-will, and many others receive instruction in singing. I have once or twice surprised young birds at their lessons, as for instance, a pewee family learning to hover over the daisies, a beautiful operation of their parents which I never tired of watching. I was behind a blind when they came, a little flock of five or six. They were very playful, and kept near together, flying low over the grass, alighting in a row on the edge of a pail, coming up on the clothes-line, banging awkwardly against the house, and in every way showing ignorance and youth. I studied one for a long time as he balanced himself on the clothes-line and looked off at the antics of his brothers trying to learn the hovering. One of the parents flew out

over the tall flowers, poising himself gracefully, his body held perfectly erect, legs half drawn up, turning his head this way and that, hanging thus in the air several seconds in one spot, then suddenly darting off to another like a humming-bird. The little ones in a row close together on a low branch of a shrub, looked on, and in a moment two or three sallied out and tried the same movement. They could fly well enough, but when they tried to pause on wing the failure was disastrous. Some tumbled out of sight into the daisies, others recovered themselves with violent efforts and returned hastily to the perch, complaining loudly. Then the parents brought food, and this went on for some time, while all the time the air was full of gentle twitters and calls, much baby-talk, and a little parental instruction no doubt.

A delightful field of work awaits the young naturalist of to-day. Our predecessors have devoted their energies to classifying and arranging. They have dissected and weighed and measured every part of the little bodies; they know to a fraction the length of wings and tails; they have pulled to pieces the nests, "clutched" the eggs, and blown and mounted and labeled and set up in cases the whole external of the little creatures. All that can be learned by violence, all the characteristics evolved by fear and distress are duly set down in the books. You shall find a catalogue of the robin's possessions in the shape of feathers and bones, pictures of his internal anatomy, illustrations of his work in nest building, and specimens in all stages, but in the whole world of these books you shall not find the robin. The soul of the robin has escaped them, it is not to be taken by force.

I do not find fault; it needed to be done, but happily—let us hope—it is done, and a more enticing field is now open, namely: to make personal acquaintance with the birds, find out how they live, their manners and customs, and their individual characters. This is one of the most charming studies in the world, but much more is required than a gun and a little or much scientific knowledge. There is infinite patience, perseverance, untiring devotion, and more—a quick eye and ear, and a sympathetic heart. If you do not love the birds you cannot understand them.

This is the pleasant path opening now, and in some ways it is particularly suited to woman with her great patience and quiet manners. Once interested in the lives in the "upper stories," you will find them most absorbing; novels will pall upon you, fancy work seem frivolous, society duties a bore, and talk—loud enough to interfere with listening—an impertinence.

BIRD-STUDY IN A SOUTHERN STATE.

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He loved the ever deepening brown
Of summer twilights on the enchanted hills;
Where he might listen to the starts and thrills
Of birds that sang and rustled in the trees,
Or watch the footsteps of the wandering breeze,
And the bird's shadows as they fluttered by,
Or slowly wheeled across the unclouded sky.

RICHARD WATSON GILDER.

II.

BIRD-STUDY IN A SOUTHERN STATE.

The most interesting experience in several years of bird-study was a trip to a Southern State for the purpose of making acquaintance with the mocking-bird.

Adventures began before the lights of New York sank below the horizon; adventures more strange than agreeable, for the journey was by steamer. Hardly had we passed out of the bay when there began a gentle roll which speedily sent passengers to bed. When we passed Long Branch the

motion was a steady rock from side to side, that made one feel like a baby in a cradle, and before bedtime it was a violent swing that flung one about like a toy, and tossed the furniture around like doll-house belongings.

Holding on to the side of the berth with both hands, I passed the night listening to the labored strokes of the engine and the crashing of the loosened freight in the hold, and entertained by the eccentric conduct of the loose articles in my state-room, a trunk, chair, life-preserver, plate, saucer, and teaspoon, which with one accord, and in spite of all I could do by most ingenious wedging, joined in a peculiar dance between the outer wall and the inner partition of my room. At one moment they rested quietly in their several ways, against the wall; the steamer lurched, and all started madly across the floor, the heavy things first, and the lighter bringing up the rear, each banging violently against the partition, with thump, rattle, or jingle according to its nature, then in a moment dashing back so furiously that I feared to see the thin planks yield and my trunk go out to sea by itself. Not that I cared for my trunk—my life was the subject that interested me at the time. Outside, too, the doors and blinds rattled, the tiller-chain chattered and wailed and sobbed like a woman in distress, and above all other sounds rose the dismal fog horn, for a pall of mist had settled over us.

Day differed from night only in being light, for the sole prospect from the guards was one moment the fog above, where the sky should be, the next the depths of the sea yawning as if to receive the ship into its bosom. In this

manner, during two days and three nights, we rolled on to our destination, and for days after my feet touched blessed Mother Earth I reeled and staggered like a drunken man.

After the storm, the calm. There followed upon this rough voyage weeks of quiet, delightful bird-study, whose long sunny-days were passed in the fragrant depths of pine groves, under arching forest of sweet-gum trees, or on the shore of the salt marsh; but wherever, or however, always following and spying out the ways of the feathered world.

The bird of the South—the mocking-bird, was the first object of study. By day he was watched and noted, during the long twilight he was listened to, and at midnight sleep was often banished by his wonderful and enchanting voice. Gray and inconspicuous in coloring, we all know him in the cage; but how different in freedom! how wild and bewitching his song! how wise and knowing his ways! how well worth weeks of study is this one bird!

Here were dozens of other birds also. What keen delight to one fresh from the town, to look over the marsh where

> "Leagues and leagues of marsh grass, waist high, broad in the blade,
> Green and all of a height, and unflecked with a light or a shade,
> Stretch leisurely off in a pleasant plain
> To the terminal blue of the main;"

to watch the great snowy heron sweeping over with broad white wing, tripping gracefully about on the edges of the channels, and toward night betaking itself to a line of trees

in the distance, that looked as if full of snowy blossoms that moved and changed about and at last settled for the night; to see the bald eagle catch a big fish and call his mate to help him eat it; to watch the lesser tern hover with yellow bill pointed downward and sharp eye fixed on the water, and at length stiffen his wings and dive head first into it, bringing out his prey, and filling the air with cries in a complaining, squealing tone that always reminds one of a young pig; to gaze fascinated at the bewitching flight of the ring-plover, sweeping low over the water in a small flock, now almost invisible as the sombre-colored backs turn toward you, now suddenly flashing bright as silver when the breasts come into sight, moving in perfect unison as if impelled by one will. More, many more birds of the marsh attract and draw one, but inland is the mocking-bird, and after a walk along the shore, always my feet turned to the groves and the fields where the matchless bird lives his life.

To see, as well as hear a wild mocking-bird sing, is worth a journey, even over the rolling deep. I passed hours in a pleasant grove beyond the gardens and fields, watching and listening to one bird whose concert hall it was. The grove was the audience room where one might be in the shade and not too conspicuous in watching him. His chosen place was in the sunshine, for this bird is a sun-worshiper. I always found him singing when I reached the spot. Perhaps on the top spike of a young pine-tree, balanced on one, or sometimes on two adjoining top twigs—which of course stand straight up—stood the singer, madly shouting his most peculiar medley. He looked at me as I passed near his perch, but did not pause in his song. After I had taken my