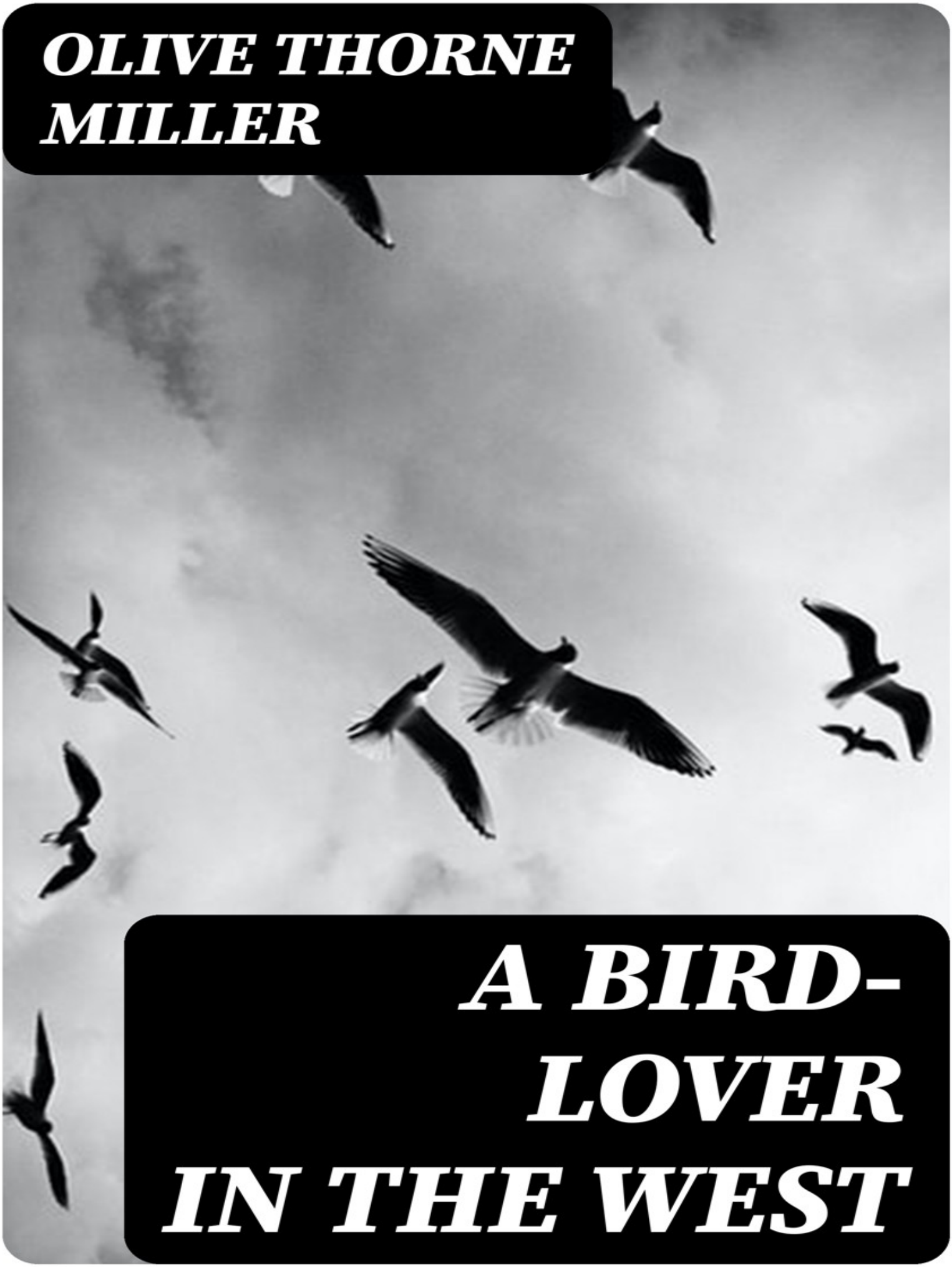
OLIVE THORNE MILLER
A BIRD-LOVER IN THE WEST

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INTRODUCTORY.

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The studies in this volume were all made, as the title indicates, in the West; part of them in Colorado (1891), in Utah (1893), and the remainder (1892) in what I have called "The Middle Country," being Southern Ohio, and West only relatively to New England and New York, where most of my studies have been made.

Several chapters have appeared in the "Atlantic Monthly" and other magazines, and in the "Independent" and "Harper's Bazar," while others are now for the first time published.

OLIVE THORNE MILLER.

IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS.

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Trust me, 't is something to be cast
Face to face with one's self at last,
To be taken out of the fuss and strife,
The endless clatter of plate and knife,
The bore of books, and the bores of the street,
From the singular mess we agree to call Life.

And to be set down on one's own two feet
So nigh to the great warm heart of God,
You almost seem to feel it beat
Down from the sunshine and up from the sod;
To be compelled, as it were, to notice
All the beautiful changes and chances
Through which the landscape flits and glances,
And to see how the face of common day
Is written all over with tender histories.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

A BIRD-LOVER IN THE WEST.

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I.

CAMPING IN COLORADO.

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This chronicle of happy summer days with the birds and the flowers, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, begins in the month of May, in the year eighteen hundred and ninety-two.

As my train rolled quietly out of Jersey City late at night, I uttered a sigh of gratitude that I was really off; that at last I could rest. Up to the final moment I had been hurried and worried, but the instant I was alone, with my "section" to myself, I "took myself in hand," as is my custom.

At the risk of seeming to stray very far from my subject, I want at this point to say something about rest, the greatly desired state that all busy workers are seeking, with such varying success.

A really re-creative recreation I sought for years, and

"I've found some wisdom in my quest
That's richly worth retailing,"

and that cannot be too often repeated, or too urgently insisted upon. What is imperatively needed, the sole and simple secret of rest, is this: To go to our blessed mother Nature, and to go with the whole being, mind and heart as well as body. To deposit one's physical frame in the most secret and sacred "garden of delights," and at the same time allow the mind to be filled, and the thoughts to be occupied, with the concerns of the world we live in year after year, is utterly useless; for it is not the external, but the internal man that needs recreation; it is not the body, but the spirit that demands refreshment and relief from the wearing cares of our high-pressure lives. "It is of no use," says a thoughtful writer, "to carry my body to the woods, unless I get there myself."

Let us consult the poets, our inspired teachers, on this subject. Says Lowell,—

"In June 't is good to lie beneath a tree
While the blithe season comforts every sense,
Steeps all the brain in rest, and heals the heart,
Brimming it o'er with sweetness unawares,
Fragrant and silent as that rosy snow
Wherewith the pitying apple-tree fills up
And tenderly lines some last-year's robin's nest."

And our wise Emerson, in his strong and wholesome, if sometimes rugged way,—

"Quit thy friends as the dead in doom,
And build to them a final tomb.

Behind thee leave thy merchandise,
Thy churches and thy charities.

Enough for thee the primal mind
That flows in streams—that breathes in wind."

Even the gentle Wordsworth, too; read his exquisite sonnet, beginning,—

"The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

All recognize that it is a mental and spiritual change that is needed.

With the earnest desire of suggesting to tired souls a practicable way of resting, I will even give a bit of personal history; I will tell the way in which I have learned to find recreation in nature.

When I turn my back upon my home, I make a serious and determined effort to leave behind me all cares and worries. As my train, on that beautiful May evening, passed beyond the brick and stone walls, and sped into the open country, and I found myself alone with night, I shook off, as well as I was able, all my affairs, all my interests, all my responsibilities, leaving them in that busy city behind me,

where a few burdens more or less would not matter to anybody. With my trunks checked, and my face turned toward the far-off Rocky Mountains, I left the whole work-a-day world behind me, departing—so far as possible—a liberated soul, with no duties excepting to rejoice and to recruit. This is not an easy thing to do; it is like tearing apart one's very life; but it can be done by earnest endeavor, it has been done, and it is a charm more potent than magic to bring restoration and recreation to the brain and nerve-weary worker.

To insure any measure of success I always go alone; one familiar face would make the effort of no avail; and I seek a place where I am a stranger, so that my ordinary life cannot be recalled to me. When I reach my temporary home I forget, or at least ignore, my notions as to what I shall eat or drink, or how I shall sleep. I take the goods the gods provide, and adjust myself to them. Even these little things help one out of his old ways of thought and life. To still further banish home concerns, I mark upon my calendar one week before the day I shall start for home, and sternly resolve that not until I reach that day will I give one thought to my return, but will live as though I meant to stay always. I take no work of any sort, and I banish books, excepting a few poets and studies of nature.

Such is the aim of my honest and earnest striving; that I do not quite reach my goal is merely to say I am human. Letters from home and friends will drag me back to old interests, and times will come, in sleepless nights and unguarded moments, when the whole world of old burdens and cares sweep in and overwhelm me. But I rouse my will,

and resolutely, with all my power, push them back, refuse to entertain them for a moment.

The result, even under these limitations, is eminently satisfactory. Holding myself in this attitude of mind, I secure a change almost as complete as if I stepped out of my body and left it resting, while I refreshed myself at the fountain of life. A few weeks in the country make me a new being; all my thoughts are turned into fresh channels; the old ruts are smoothed over, if not obliterated; nerves on the strain all the year have a chance to recreate themselves; old worries often weaken and fade away.

The morning after I left home that balmy evening in May dawned upon me somewhere in western New York, and that beautiful day was passed in speeding through the country, and steadily getting farther and farther from work and care.

And so I went on, day after day, night after night, till I entered Kansas, which was new to me. By that time I had succeeded in banishing to the farthest corner of my memory, behind closed and locked doors, all the anxieties, all the perplexities and problems, all the concerns, in fact, of my home life. I was like a newly created soul, fresh and eager to see and enjoy everything. I refused the morning papers; I wished to forget the world of strife and crime, and to get so into harmony with the trees and flowers, the brooks and the breezes, that I would realize myself

"Kith and kin to every wild-born thing that thrills and blows."

In one word, I wished as nearly as possible to walk abroad out of my hindering body of clay.

I looked out of the windows to see what the Cyclone State had to give me. It offered flowers and singing birds, broad fields of growing grain, and acres of rich black soil newly turned up to the sun. Everything was fresh and perfect, as if just from the hands of its maker; it seemed the paradise of the farmer.

From the fertile fields and miles of flowers the train passed to bare, blossomless earth; from rich soil to rocks; from Kansas to Colorado. That part of the State which appeared in the morning looked like a vast body of hardly dry mud, with nothing worth mentioning growing upon it. Each little gutter had worn for itself a deep channel with precipitous sides, and here and there a great section had sunken, as though there was no solid foundation. Soon, however, the land showed inclination to draw itself up into hills, tiny ones with sharp peaks, as though preparing for mountains. Before long they retreated to a distance and grew bigger, and at last, far off, appeared the mountains, overtopping all one great white peak, the

"Giver of gold, king of eternal hills."

A welcome awaited me in the summer home of a friend at Colorado Springs, in the presence of the great Cheyenne Range, with the snow-cap of Pike's Peak ever before me. Four delightful days I gave to friendship, and then I sought and found a perfect nook for rest and study, in a cottonwood grove on the banks of the Minnelowan (or Shining Water). This is a mad Colorado stream which is formed by the junction of the North and South Cheyenne Cañon brooks, and comes tumbling down from the Cheyenne, rushing and roaring as if it had the business of the world on its

shoulders, and must do it man-fashion, with confusion and noise enough to drown all other sounds.

Imagine a pretty, one-story cottage, set down in a grove of cottonwood-trees, with a gnarly oak and a tall pine here and there, to give it character, and surrounded as a hen by her chickens, by tents, six or eight in every conceivable position, and at every possible angle except a right angle. Add to this picture the sweet voices of birds, and the music of water rushing and hurrying over the stones; let your glance take in on one side the grand outlines of Cheyenne Mountain,

"Made doubly sacred by the poet's pen
And poet's grave,"

and on the other the rest of the range, overlooked by Pike's Peak, fourteen thousand feet higher than the streets of New York. Do this, and you will come as near to realizing Camp Harding as one can who is hundreds of miles away and has never seen a Colorado camp.

Do not think, however, that such camps are common, even in that land of outdoors, where tents are open for business in the streets of the towns, and where every householder sets up his own canvas in his yard, for the invalids to sleep in, from June to November. The little settlement of tents was an evolution, the gradual growth of the tent idea in the mind of one comfort-loving woman. She went there seven or eight years before, bought a grove under the shadow of Cheyenne, put up a tent, and passed her first summer thus. The next year, and several years thereafter, she gradually improved her transient abode in many ways that her womanly taste suggested,—as a

wooden floor, a high base-board, partitions of muslin or cretonne, door and windows of wire gauze. The original dwelling thus step by step grew to a framed and rough-plastered house, with doors and windows *en règle*.

Grouped picturesquely around the house, however, were some of the most unique abiding-places in Colorado. On the outside they were permanent tents with wooden foundations; on the inside they were models of comfort, with regular beds and furniture, rugs on the floor, gauzy window curtains, drapery wardrobes, and even tiny stoves for cool mornings and evenings. They combined the comforts of a house with the open air and delightful freshness of a tent, where one might hear every bird twitter, and see the dancing leaf shadows in the moonlight. Over the front platform the canvas cover extended to form an awning, and a wire-gauze door, in addition to one of wood, made them airy or snug as the weather demanded.

The restfulness craved by the weary worker was there to be had for both soul and body, if one chose to take it. One might swing in a hammock all day, and be happy watching "the clouds that cruise the sultry sky"—a sky so blue one never tires of it; or beside the brook he might "lie upon its banks, and dream himself away to some enchanted ground." Or he might study the ever-changing aspect of the mountains,—their dreamy, veiled appearance, with the morning sun full upon them; their deep violet blueness in the evening, with the sun behind them, and the mystery of the moonlight, which "sets them far off in a world of their own," as tender and unreal as mountains in a dream.

He *might* do all these things, but he is far more likely to become excited, and finally bewitched by guide-books, and photographs, and talk all about him of this or that cañon, this or that pass, the Garden of the Gods, Manitou, the Seven Sisters' Falls, the grave of "H. H.;" and unless a fool or a philosopher, before he knows it to be in the full swing of sight-seeing, and becoming learned in the ways of burros, the "Ship of the Rockies," so indispensable, and so common that even the babies take to them.

This traveler will climb peaks, and drive over nerve-shaking roads, a steep wall on one side and a frightful precipice on the other; he will toil up hundreds of steps, and go quaking down into mines; he will look, and admire, and tremble, till sentiment is worn to threads, purse depleted, and body and mind alike a wreck. For this sort of a traveler there is no rest in Colorado; there always remains another mountain to thrill him, another cañon to rhapsodize over; to one who is greedy of "sights," the tameness of Harlem, or the mud flats of Canarsie, will afford more rest.

For myself I can always bear to be near sights without seeing them. I believed what I heard—never were such grand mountains! never such soul-stirring views! never such hairbreadth roads! I believed—and stayed in my cottonwood grove content. I knew how it all looked; did I not peer down into one cañon, holding my breath the while? and, with slightly differing arrangement of rocks and pine-trees and brooks, are not all cañons the same? Did I not gaze with awe at the "trail to the grave of H. H.," and watch, without envy, the sight-seeing tourist struggle with its difficulties? Could I not supply myself with photographs, and guide-books, and

poems, and "H. H.'s" glowing words, and picture the whole scene? I could, I did, and to me Colorado was a delightful place of rest, with mountain air that it was a luxury to breathe (after the machinery adjusted itself to the altitude), with glorious sunshine every morning, with unequaled nights of coolness, and a new flower or two for every day of the month.

If to "see Colorado" one must ascend every peak, toil through every cañon, cast the eyes on every waterfall, shudder over each precipice, wonder at each eccentric rock, drink from every spring, then I have not seen America's Wonderland. But if to steep my spirit in the beauty of its mountains so that they shall henceforth be a part of me; to inhale its enchanting air till my body itself seemed to have wings; if to paint in my memory its gorgeous procession of flowers, its broad mesa crowned with the royal blossoms of the yucca, its cosy cottonwood groves, its brooks rushing between banks of tangled greenery; if this is to "see Colorado," then no one has ever seen it more thoroughly.

The "symphony in yellow and red," which "H. H." calls this wonderland, grows upon the sojourner in some mysterious way, till by the time he has seen the waxing and waning of one moon he is an enthusiast. It is charming alike to the sight-seer whose jaded faculties pine for new and thrilling emotions, to the weary in brain and body who longs only for peace and rest, and to the invalid whose every breath is a pain at home. To the lover of flowers it is an exhaustless panorama of beauty and fragrance, well worth crossing the continent to enjoy; to the mountain lover it offers endless attractions.

Nothing is more fascinating to the stranger in Colorado than the formation of its cañons, not only the grand ones running up into the heart of the mountains, but the lesser ones cutting into the high table-land, or mesa, at the foot of the hills. The above mentioned cottonwood grove, for example, with its dozen of dwellings and a natural park of a good many acres above it, with tall pines that bear the marks of age, is so curiously hidden that one may come almost upon it without seeing it. It is reached from Colorado Springs by an electric road which runs along the mesa south of the town. As the car nears the end of the line, one begins to look around for the grove. Not a tree is in sight; right and left as far as can be seen stretches the treeless plain to the foot of the eternal hills; not even the top of a tall pine thrusts itself above the dead level. Before you is Cheyenne —grim, glorious, but impenetrable. The conductor stops. "This is your place," he says. You see no place; you think he must be mistaken.

"But where is Camp Harding?" you ask. He points to an obscure path—"trail" he calls it—which seems to throw itself over an edge. You approach that point, and there, to your wonder and your surprise, at your feet nestles the loveliest of smiling cañon-like valleys, filled with trees, aspen, oak, and pine, with here and there a tent or red roof gleaming through the green, and a noisy brook hurrying on its way downhill. By a steep scramble you reach the lower level, birds singing, flowers tempting on every side, and the picturesque, narrow trail leading you on, around the ledge of rock, over the rustic bridge, till you reach the back entrance

of the camp. Before it, up the narrow valley, winds a road, the carriage-way to the Cheyenne cañons.

II.

IN THE COTTONWOODS.

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A cottonwood grove is the nearest approach to our Eastern rural districts to be found in Colorado, and a cotton storm, looking exactly like a snowstorm, is a common sight in these groves. The white, fluffy material grows in long bunches, loosely attached to stems, and the fibre is very short. At the lightest breeze that stirs the branches, tiny bits of it take to flight, and one tree will shed cotton for weeks. It clings to one's garments; it gets into the houses, and sticks to the carpets, often showing a trail of white footprints where a person has come in; it clogs the wire-gauze screens till they keep out the air as well as the flies; it fills the noses and the eyes of men and beasts. But its most curious effect is on the plants and flowers, to which it adheres, being a little gummy. Some flowers look as if they were encased in ice, and others seem wrapped in the gauziest of veils,

which, flimsy as it looks, cannot be completely cleared from the leaves.

It covers the ground like snow, and strangely enough it looks in June, but it does not, like snow, melt, even under the warm summer sunshine. It must be swept from garden and walks, and carted away. A heavy rain clears the air and subdues it for a time, but the sun soon dries the bunches still on the trees, and the cotton storm is again in full blast. This annoyance lasts through June and a part of July, fully six weeks, and then the stems themselves drop to, the ground, still holding enough cotton to keep up the storm for days. After this, the first rainfall ends the trouble for that season.

In the midst of the cottonwoods, in beautiful Camp Harding, I spent the June that followed the journey described in the last chapter,—

"Dreaming sweet, idle dreams of having strayed
To Arcady with all its golden lore."

The birds, of course, were my first concern. Ask of almost any resident not an ornithologist if there are birds in Colorado, and he will shake his head.

"Not many, I think," he will probably say. "Camp birds and magpies. Oh yes, and larks. I think that's about all."

This opinion, oft repeated, did not settle the matter in my mind, for I long ago discovered that none are so ignorant of the birds and flowers of a neighborhood as most of the people who live among them. I sought out my post, and I looked for myself.

There are birds in the State, plenty of them, but they are not on exhibition like the mountains and their wonders. No

driver knows the way to their haunts, and no guide-book points them out. Even a bird student may travel a day's journey, and not encounter so many as one shall see in a small orchard in New England. He may rise with the dawn, and hear nothing like the glorious morning chorus that stirs one in the Atlantic States. He may search the trees and shrubberies for long June days, and not find so many nests as will cluster about one cottage at home.

Yet the birds are here, but they are shy, and they possess the true Colorado spirit,—they are mountain-worshipers. As the time approaches when each bird leaves society and retires for a season to the bosom of its own family, many of the feathered residents of the State bethink them of their inaccessible cañons. The saucy jay abandons the settlements where he has been so familiar as to dispute with the dogs for their food, and sets up his homestead in a tall pine-tree on a slope which to look at is to grow dizzy; the magpie, boldest of birds, steals away to some secure retreat; the meadow-lark makes her nest in the monotonous mesa, where it is as well hidden as a bobolink's nest in a New England meadow.

The difficulties in the way of studying Colorado birds are several, aside from their excessive suspicion of every human being. In the first place, observations must be made before ten o'clock, for at that hour every day a lively breeze, which often amounts to a gale, springs up, and sets the cottonwood and aspen leaves in a flutter that hides the movements of any bird. Then, all through the most interesting month of June the cottonwood-trees are shedding their cotton, and to a person on the watch for

slight stirrings among the leaves the falling cotton is a constant distraction. The butterflies, too, wandering about in their aimless way, are all the time deceiving the bird student, and drawing attention from the bird he is watching.

On the other hand, one of the maddening pests of bird study at the East is here almost unknown,—the mosquito. Until the third week in June I saw but one. That one was in the habit of lying in wait for me when I went to a piece of low, swampy ground overgrown with bushes. Think of the opportunity this combination offers to the Eastern mosquito, and consider my emotions when I found but a solitary individual, and even that one disposed to coquette with me.

I had hidden myself, and was keeping motionless, in order to see the very shy owners of a nest I had found, when the lonely mosquito came as far as the rim of my shade hat, and hovered there, evidently meditating an attack—a mosquito hesitating! I could not stir a hand, or even shake my leafy twig; but it did not require such violent measures; a light puff of breath this side or that was enough to discourage the gentle creature, and in all the hours I sat there it never once came any nearer. The race increased, however, and became rather troublesome on the veranda after tea; but in the grove they were never annoying; I rarely saw half a dozen. When I remember the tortures endured in the dear old woods of the East, in spite of "lollicopop" and pennyroyal, and other horrors with which I have tried to repel them, I could almost decide to live and die in Colorado.

The morning bird chorus in the cottonwood grove where I spent my June was a great shock to me. If my tent had been

pitched near the broad plains in which the meadow-lark delights, I might have wakened to the glorious song of this bird of the West. It is not a chorus, indeed, for one rarely hears more than a single performer, but it is a solo that fully makes up for want of numbers, and amply satisfies the lover of bird music, so strong, so sweet, so moving are his notes.

But on my first morning in the grove, what was my dismay—I may almost say despair—to find that the Western wood-pewee led the matins! Now, this bird has a peculiar voice. It is loud, pervasive, and in quality of tone not unlike our Eastern phœbe, lacking entirely the sweet plaintiveness of our wood-pewee. A pewee chorus is a droll and dismal affair. The poor things do their best, no doubt, and they cannot prevent the pessimistic effect it has upon us. It is rhythmic, but not in the least musical, and it has a weird power over the listener. This morning hymn does not say, as does the robin's, that life is cheerful, that another glorious day is dawning. It says, "Rest is over; another day of toil is here; come to work." It is monotonous as a frog chorus, but there is a merry thrill in the notes of the amphibian which are entirely wanting in the song. If it were not for the light-hearted tremolo of the chewink thrown in now and then, and the loud, cheery ditty of the summer yellow-bird, who begins soon after the pewee, one would be almost superstitious about so unnatural a greeting to the new day. The evening call of the bird is different. He will sit far up on a dead twig of an old pine-tree, and utter a series of four notes, something like "do, mi, mi, do," repeating them without pausing till it is too dark to see him, all the time getting lower, sadder, more deliberate, till one feels like

running out and committing suicide or annihilating the bird of ill-omen.

I felt myself a stranger indeed when I reached this pleasant spot, and found that even the birds were unfamiliar. No robin or bluebird greeted me on my arrival; no cheerful song-sparrow tuned his little pipe for my benefit; no phœbe shouted the beloved name from the peak of the barn. Everything was strange. One accustomed to the birds of our Eastern States can hardly conceive of the country without robins in plenty; but in this unnatural corner of Uncle Sam's dominion I found but one pair.

The most common song from morning till night was that of the summer yellow-bird, or yellow warbler. It was not the delicate little strain we are accustomed to hear from this bird, but a loud, clear carol, equal in volume to the notes of our robin. These three birds, with the addition of a vireo or two, were our main dependence for daily music, though we were favored occasionally by others. Now the Arkansas goldfinch uttered his sweet notes from the thick foliage of the cottonwood-trees; then the charming aria of the catbird came softly from the tangle of rose and other bushes; the black-headed grosbeak now and then saluted us from the top of a pine-tree; and rarely, too rarely, alas! a passing meadow-lark filled all the grove with his wonderful song.

And there was the wren! He interested me from the first; for a wren is a bird of individuality always, and his voice reminded me, in a feeble way, of the witching notes of the winter wren, the

"Brown wren from out whose swelling throat
Unstinted joys of music float."