

**FOWLER
WILLIAM
WARDE**

TALES OF THE BIRDS

William Fowler
Tales of the birds

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24727593

Tales of the birds:

Содержание

A WINTER'S TALE	4
OUT OF TUNE	26
A JUBILEE SPARROW	41
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

W. Warde Fowler

Tales of the birds

A WINTER'S TALE

There is a certain quiet bit of land, just where two midland counties meet, that is in winter a favourite resort of the fieldfares. There they find all they need – the hedges are usually bright with hips, and with the darker crimson berries of the hawthorn; the fields are all pasture-meadows, and the grass is tufty and full of insects; a little stream winds snake-like through the fields, hidden by an overarching growth of briar and bramble. No well-worn path crosses these meadows, and you may count on being undisturbed if you sit for a few minutes, to enjoy the winter sunshine and watch the shy birds, on the bole of one of the scattered elms that shelter the cows in summer. The fieldfares are in clover here: they get food, drink, sunshine when there is any, and above all the solitude they so deeply love. In other parts of the district you may see them, or you may not, for they move about and show their handsome forms and slaty backs, now here, now there; but in this favoured haunt some are always to be seen, and set up their loud call-note from elm or hedgetop as soon as your intruding form is seen moving in their direction.

One autumn there had been but a poor crop of berries; and by

the time the fieldfares arrived in middle England the blackbirds and missel-thrushes had already rifled the hedges of much of their fruit. But up to the middle of January enough remained to feed the usual number of visitors, and when once January is past, they may hope for open weather and a plentiful supply of grubs and worms to help them out. During the third week in that wintry month, the sun shone bright and warm, though the fields were covered with hoar frost at night; no thought of trouble entered the hearts of the birds; in the middle of the day you might even have heard them uttering a faint kind of song from the hedge-top over the brook, as the genial sun warmed them and bade them think of the spring that was surely coming.

But the frost went on, day by day; and now the blue sky was covered with dull cloud, driven before a bitter north-east wind, so that the sun could no longer melt the hard-bound meadows with his midday glow. The fieldfares found themselves quite alone. The redwings had gone to the neighbourhood of the towns and villages, and so too had the robins and wrens, who had lived in the hedges all the winter through till now. The rooks and starlings were in the ploughed fields, and searching even there almost in vain for food. A chance crow or magpie was all the company they had for several days together; and crows and magpies are not always agreeable neighbours.

At last the berries were all gone, and the ground so hard-frozen that no bill could break it and no bird hope to find grub or worm there. Some of the elder birds went a long distance one day to

forage; they returned very tired with news of a single hedge on which there was still some store of berries, but they had left one of their number behind them. The old birds looked very grave; they called a meeting, and then the eldest, with drooping tail and lack-lustre eye, told them that they must stay no longer where they were, and no longer keep all together. They must break up into small parties and find their food as best they could for themselves; if they did not go far, and the frost broke up, they might all find their way back again in a few days; all might yet be well. "But I must tell you," said he, turning to the younger birds, "that if the frost goes on, or if snow falls, we shall all be in peril of our lives. And see, a light, dry snow is falling already! You that are young and strong must leave us at once and go southward. Do not delay a moment; fly while you can. We, who are already tired out, will seek the berry hedge we found, and try and recruit ourselves before we move further. We left our poor old friend under that hedge this morning, with his head under his wing, and we do not know whether we shall find him again alive. But we will all hope for the best, and try to struggle through a bad time. Good-bye, young ones, good-bye! Be sure you break up into companies of three or four, or you will never find enough to keep you from starving. Keep a good heart, and go straight southwards towards the mid-day sun, and when the frost goes, come again northwards, and hope to find us here." Then he flew away, slowly and feebly, and most of the other old birds followed him.

The young ones, who still had plenty of life and hope in them, and hardly knew what it was to be in peril of their lives, soon broke up into different divisions, and started different ways, but all in a southward direction. Each company had its leader, and there was much rivalry as to which should belong to the company which was led by a handsome and lively bird named Cocktail, to whom they all looked up. But Cocktail would not have more than three with him; and Cocktail was wont to have his own way. He chose his great friend Feltie¹ and two others, Jack and Jill; and off they went with a loud and hearty good-bye; the other three quite confident in Cocktail's prudence, skill, and courage. He was nearly two years old; he had had a nest and family last summer in a Norwegian pine-forest; he had attacked a magpie that was threatening his young, and beaten it away in disgrace; he had led a large party across the Northern Sea last autumn to England, and had found them all a breakfast within an hour of landing. Whatever he did was sure to be right, and wherever he went there was sure to be food. He was well aware of all his virtues, and liked, in a cheerful and pleasant way, to be made much of; and he had taken young Feltie under his protection from their first acquaintance, because Feltie had very soon made it plain that in his honest eyes there was no such bird as Cocktail to be found in the whole world. Jill was chosen because she was a young hen-bird of a mild and yielding disposition, yet of pleasant manners and ladylike ways; and to say the truth, during these

¹ Local name for fieldfare.

sunny days of late, Cocktail had cast an approving eye upon her, and had half made up his mind to select her as his partner for the coming spring and summer – provided of course that no one with superior charms should meet his eye in the meantime. As for her own choice in the matter, that never entered into his calculations. Lastly, Jack was the brother of Jill, and very fond of her – which is not usually the case with brothers and sisters among the fieldfares; and on this account he was allowed to join the party. “We must have one more,” Cocktail had said before they started, “and it really doesn’t much matter who it is provided he will follow me and do what I tell him. No swaggerers here, please; I want some one who’s nobody in particular!”

“Oh, if you wouldn’t mind, Cocktail,” said Jill humbly, “I don’t think Jack is any one in particular, mayn’t he come?”

“Let him come forward,” said Cocktail magnificently; “let me see him. Here, you Jack, are you any one in particular?” Jack declared that he was no one but himself, and therefore could not be any one *in particular*, like Cocktail; and on the strength of this he was admitted to the little company.

Cocktail now found the fondest desire of his heart realized; so far his genius had always been hampered by older birds, who in spite of their inferior talents would always contrive to direct the movements of a troop by combining together: but now he was in sole and happy command of three admiring subjects, who would not worry him with advice, and would obey his orders implicitly. He took them first to the top of a tall elm, whence they could see

over the fast whitening fields to a range of hills not far away to the southward; he told them that he should cross those hills and rest for the night on the other side in shelter which he would find for them. Meanwhile they were to fly at a little distance apart, in order to keep a good look-out for berries; but they must always keep their eyes on him, and when they heard his signal "Chak-chak," they were to join him again at once.

"The first who fails to come at that signal," said Cocktail, "or who is guilty of any negligence or disobedience, WILL BE AT ONCE LEFT BEHIND!"

With these words he started off, and the others followed him as they had been told, at a little distance to right and left. Very little in the way of food was found that day, and Jack and Jill were getting tired and hungry, when after rising to the hills, and passing for some miles over high, desolate country, where there was hardly a hedge to be seen, and the white carpet was only broken by low gray stone walls which could not help a hungry fieldfare, they descended towards evening into the shelter of a little well-wooded valley,² where were the pleasant grounds of a gentleman's house. Cocktail made straight for this house, but stopped short on a tall tree outside the garden, and began to look round him.

It was about four o'clock, and fast getting dark. He could see the lamp lighted in a room in the house, and a bright fire burning; a lady sat by the fire at work; then a maid came in with tea, and

² The valley of the Colne in the Cotswold Hills.

the blinds were drawn down, the shutters closed, and all was gray and cold again. But Cocktail's keen eye had seen something by the bright firelight which made him jerk his tail and sit more upright on his bough – berries, scarlet berries, arranged all about an old oak chimney-piece!

“Shame!” said he indignantly; “but there must be more of them in the garden.” And bidding the others follow, he flew down into the well-planted grounds. They here found themselves nearer to human habitations than they had ever been in their lives before; but hunger made them bold. “To right and left,” said Cocktail, “and look for holly-bushes.” His own search was a failure; he found several bushes, but not a berry was left. He felt very angry when he thought of the rich store of berries inside that cosy room, where no starving birds could get at them. There was the well-fed lady enjoying her tea by the fire, and looking with admiration at the berries (*looking* indeed, thought Cocktail, and not eating them!), and here were four poor birds starving outside in the cold for want of them.

But now a “chak” was heard from another part of the garden. Making his way there, he found that Jack was the lucky discoverer of a bush that still boasted a fair store of berries; up came the others too, and now they had a good feast on the berries as long as the light lasted: then, at Cocktail's order, they dropped down to roost in a thick shrubbery some distance from the house, where the evergreens had as yet kept the snow from lying very deep upon the ground. In a few minutes their four heads were

under their tired wings, and they were fast asleep.

Next day they were awake early, but their breakfast on the remaining berries was rudely interrupted by the gardener, who came to sweep the snow from the walks; and after lingering in a tree for a few minutes, Cocktail gave an angry “chak,” and led the way again southwards. To have his breakfast broken into in this way was more than he was used to, and for several days he had had no morning bath. And more than that, he was tired and stiff with the night’s hard frost; so his temper was not so good as usual, and he flew high and quick, hardly looking at the hedges as he passed over them. Many a time the others would fain have stopped to pick a stray berry, or try for grains on a stubble-field where they could see partridges cowering below them; but on went Cocktail without heeding, and on they had to go too.

About midday they came to the foot of another long range of hills, which they had seen in the distance for some time. The north-east wind was blowing hard, and had driven them some way to the westwards; and they had turned still farther west to avoid a large town,³ where engines were puffing, and trains rushing continually in and out. Under these hills they found a large park, with thorn-bushes planted here and there, on which a few berries were still showing red through the white rime that clung to them; and here Cocktail at last halted, and allowed his famished followers a little rest. But he was more severe and imperious than on the day before, and strictly forbade them to

³ Swindon.

go out of his sight.

“We shall go on again before long,” he said; “we must get further south yet, so be ready to start at any moment.”

“Don’t you think,” said Jack, “that we might stay here a day or two at least? The park is large, and there are a few berries on a good many of the trees.”

“Did I ask your advice?” said Cocktail angrily.

“No, you didn’t, but – ”

“Then hold your tongue, Mr. Nobody-in-particular. I did not bring you here to tell me what I ought to do. Leave this bush directly. Do as I tell you at once – it’s all you’re fit for.” So Jack retired in disgrace, and in great wrath, and Jill went with him. Poor little Jill! She was getting very faint, and had hardly had strength left to get as far as she had come; but being a brave little soul she kept it to herself and struggled on. But when she was alone with Jack she told him how bad she felt.

“Jack,” she said, “I can fly no further to-day. Why does he want to go on?”

“Because he knows more about it than we do, I suppose,” said Jack. “And we have promised to follow, you know. You must have a good dinner and come on somehow.”

“But I can’t eat,” said Jill: “I’m so tired, I can hardly move, and the berries are so hard and dry, I can’t get them down my throat.”

“That’s serious,” returned Jack; “you must certainly have rest. I’ll go and tell Cocktail, and he’ll be sure to stay a day or two.”

So Jack flew back to Cocktail’s bush, but was instantly

ordered off again. Feltie however flew after him to ask what he wanted, and on hearing the state of things, undertook to be his ambassador to Cocktail. But that imperious captain would not listen.

“Rubbish,” he said. “Do you suppose I didn’t know that we should have this kind of thing going on? What’s the good of a leader if he is not to whip up lazy birds?” And he instantly gave the signal for starting, and flew off towards the hills. Feltie followed him by instinct, and turning to look back, saw Jack and Jill starting too, the latter flying slowly and feebly. Feltie’s heart sank within him; he couldn’t help thinking that it was cruel of Cocktail, and that there was no real reason why they should not stay. He looked at the line of hills; they were one long range of pure white, not even broken by the dark line of a wall or a hedge. As the ground rose below them the cold wind blew still colder. How much more comfortable it had been in the park! He would make a last effort to save Jill’s strength, and perhaps her life. If they could only halt on that large clump of trees at the top of the great curving hill they were now flying up, all might be well; Cocktail might be persuaded to turn back again.

He put on his utmost speed, and overtook his leader.

“Cocktail,” he said, “dear captain, will you perch for a moment on these trees to let the others come up?”

Cocktail was really fond of Feltie, whereas he only patronized Jill and tolerated Jack. He also felt that he had been harsh, and was willing to be gracious once more. He agreed to halt, and

when they reached the trees he turned round to the wind and gave his loudest "Chak-chak." But there were no birds in sight.

They waited a moment, Feltie's heart fluttering; Cocktail sitting strongly on his bough, with head erect. Then he called again, and then again. After that there was a long silence. Feltie dared not break it; Cocktail was too proud to do so. Not a living creature was in sight; not a labourer returning to his fireside; not a rook, not a rabbit. There were tracks of four-footed creatures on the snow below the clump of trees, but all was deadly still, except the branches as they swayed in the bitter wind.

Suddenly the shriek of an engine coming from the distant town broke in on the silence, and gave Feltie a kind of courage.

"Let us go back," he said, "and find them. Jill can't go on, I feel sure, and Jack has stayed with her. Let us go back and pass the night in the park."

"Feltie," said Cocktail, "I never guessed you were such a coward. *You* want to stay behind too, do you? Go back and join Jack and Jill; the berries won't last so long as the frost, and you will be less able then to fly further south. There you'll stay, and there perhaps you'll die; and I shall never see you again. Why can't you trust in me? I expected to be obeyed, and you are all rebelling and deserting me!"

Feltie made up his mind in a moment. Jack and Jill must take care of themselves; he and Cocktail must hold together. A shade of pity crossed his mind for Cocktail's disappointment. "He was meant to lead," he thought, "and we are not giving him a fair

chance. Whatever happens I will stick to him, and perhaps he will need my help yet.”

“I am ready,” he said; “I will not leave you.”

“That’s a good fellow,” said Cocktail. “Now fly your best; the sun must be sinking soon, for though it is all cloudy, I can see a faint pink light on the hills we left behind us this morning. Remember how easily we got across them, and what a good supper we found on the other side. We shall soon be across these hills too, and then we will find another garden and more holly-trees.” And off he flew.

Cocktail was quite himself again, but he had reckoned without his host: how was he, poor bird, to know what the Marlborough Downs were like in winter? How was he to guess that instead of reaching some deep warm valley at sunset, they might fly on till after dark, and indeed perhaps all through the night, without a chance of escaping from that terrible wind? Long, undulating plains, all shrouded in white; rounded hills, whose dim whiteness melted into leaden gray as it met the snow-laden clouds; here and there a shelterless dip, down which the wind swept almost more wildly than on the open plain: between these they had to choose, if choose they would: and as one was no better than the other, they went straight on.

At last they reached a rather deeper and wider hollow, at the bottom of which a large road ran.⁴ A high bank sheltered this road to the north, and at the top of the bank was a hedge. It was

⁴ The London and Bristol road in the Kennet Valley west of Marlborough.

now dark, blowing and snowing furiously.

“This is our only chance, Feltie,” said Cocktail: “but see there where the road turns a little; there we can get a better shelter.”

And here, just where an old ruined turnpike cottage stood between the road and the bank, with long brown grass growing behind it, they settled down for the night – a night which few who live on those downs will ever forget. Feltie himself used afterwards to say that they must have died, but for one solitary piece of good fortune. The two birds had crouched down in the long grass at the foot of the bank close to each other, and put their heads under their wings, but sleep would not come; they were too hungry and too wretched. Some time after dark a rustling was heard in the frozen grass; some four-footed creature was coming.

“Fox!” whispered Cocktail; “but I can’t fly, and if I could, where should we go? It’s all up, I fear, but crouch closer in the grass and see.”

It was not a fox; it was a hare. Puss came softly in behind the ruined cottage, and crouched down quietly close to the birds. They kept perfectly still. When she was fast asleep Cocktail whispered to Feltie to move up to her, and did so himself, getting as near her warm breath as possible. Feltie followed his example. And thus they passed the night, tolerably warm and comfortable, and even sleeping. Puss never offered to stir, and was still fast asleep when they left her in the morning.

The next day, no breakfast. Not a morsel of food was to be found anywhere. The fields were deep in snow. Once they tried a

rickyard, but the farmer's son came out with his gun, and they had to take to flight again, frightened out of their lives. Their wings were getting feeble, and they often had to alight on the ground and rest; and after resting, every fresh starting was more difficult than the last. Cocktail said little, and seemed to be getting deaf and sleepy; Feltie had to take the lead and keep the lookout. They passed at midday over some lower-lying country,⁵ and then, almost without knowing it, they once more found themselves upon a high, bleak table-land of never-ending down.⁶ As night fell they sank quite exhausted on the sheltered side of a high hill, whose flanks were clothed thickly with gorse, hoping that some friendly hare might again favour them with her company.

In the middle of the night Cocktail suddenly spoke: "Feltie," he said, "we ought to have stayed in that park. If I had known what was coming I would have stayed, but one can't know everything. You may have to go on without me to-morrow; if I can't fly, you must go on. I'm your leader, and this is my last order. Go on till you get food, and when the frost goes, come back this way if you care to. If you don't find me, tell Jack and Jill that they were right, and I was wrong. Good-night once more, old Feltie; mind and do as I tell you."

Cocktail said these last words with something of his old cheerful tone of authority; then he put his head under his wing again. Feltie said nothing, but nestled closer to him. When

⁵ Pewsey Vale.

⁶ Salisbury Plain.

morning broke, and Feltie ruffled his feathers and looked about him as usual, Cocktail did not do the same. His head was still under his wing, but not a feather stirred; Cocktail was dead, and frozen hard. Feltie shuddered and flew away, hardly knowing where he went.

It did not indeed much matter which way he went. Death was all around. The only living creature abroad was a wandering carrion crow, whose melancholy croak seemed to tell that he too was starving. The broad white pall lay silently over the whole plain; the sky was still overcast, and the wind blew from the north-east with hardly less cruel violence than on the day before. It was more the wind than his own wings that carried Feltie along. Those wings were stiff and painful, and would do their work no longer. And he, too, like poor Cocktail, was getting drowsy with hunger and fatigue; life was going slowly out of him. He did not feel much pain; he simply kept getting every minute more tired, more sleepy, and, strange to say, more comfortable.

After a time he came to the edge of a steep hill, at the foot of which was a straggling village. It looked desolate enough, for the thatched roofs were covered with snow, and tall elms above them swayed in the howling wind. Beyond the village were some flat meadows, full of ditches, and divided by a stream not yet quite frozen over; on the other side of the meadows the downs rose steeply again. Feltie had not enough life left in him to feel that there was any hope for him in this valley; he was simply drifting like a dead leaf or a snowflake, and it little mattered

where he stopped. Somewhere the leaf would settle and decay, somewhere the snowflake would drop and melt: somewhere too the poor starving bird must rest from his last flight, and sink into a never-ending sleep. The wind took him over the brow of the hill, and with a series of little flights, ever growing shorter and feebler, he made his way down the white slope, and settled, almost stupefied, under the leeward side of a large barn, which stood close to a farmhouse on the outskirts of the village. There he sat crouching, his head sunk into his neck, his tail and wings drooping, his eyes half closed – a very different bird from the Feltie who had started on his journey three days before, quite unconscious of trouble and pain.

What was this? Human voices, laughter, coming round the corner of the barn! Feltie had never been so near a human being before. He tried to fly, but it was impossible; no strength was left. His heart beat, and he crouched closer to the ground. Then two small ploughboys, shouting and snowballing each other, burst round the barn; the foremost, seeing Feltie, at once ran up and seized him, thus offering a splendid aim to his pursuer, who sent a snowball at him which took deadly effect on him. But the first boy popped Feltie into his pocket, and ran off, crying out as he ran:

“I’se got a bird: thee sha’n’t have none of un!”

Down the village street he ran, making for his father’s cottage, but had got no farther than the vicarage gate, which was half way down the street, when another well-compacted snowball,

delivered from behind the gate, knocked his hat off into the road, and filled one ear with snow which at once began to trickle gently down his neck. He looked up with a red face, and saw the vicar's son, a boy of fourteen, swinging on the gate and laughing with all his might.

“Oh, that was a beauty!” he said: “Oh, that was a tickler for you, Bill!”

“Thou beest a beast,” was Bill's reply. He didn't mean a pun, but perhaps there was a pleasant emphasis in the doubled syllable. “Thou beest a beast, thou beest.”

“What's that?” said the swinger on the gate suddenly jumping down. “What am I? I'll teach you – ” But Bill did not stop to hear what he was to be taught. He took to his heels again and ran like a deer. But the vicar's son was more than a match for awkward Bill at running, and in less than a hundred yards he collared him and had him down in a twinkling on the snow in the deserted street.

“I'll teach you to call me names, you young cad.” And he began his lesson by scientifically “bagging” Bill's wind.

“Doan't thee pummel I, doan't thee now,” said panting Bill. “I'll gi' thee a bird I'se got in my pocket, if thee woan't pummel I no more.”

“Where's the bird? Get up and show it me directly, you young lubber,” said his conqueror, keeping a fast hold of his prisoner's collar, the better to secure the execution of the bargain. Bill sulkily obeyed, and produced Feltie from his pocket. But the jolting and banging produced by Bill's headlong flight in

his heavy hob-nailed boots had been too much for Feltie; he still breathed, but his eyes were shut and he was in fact quite unconscious of what was going on. The vicar's boy let go Bill's collar, and taking Feltie in both hands, began to walk back to the vicarage gate.

In two minutes he and Feltie were in the snug warm drawing-room of the vicarage, where his mother and three sisters were sitting by the fire at work.

"My *dear* George," said the mother from her armchair as the boy came in, "how can you go out a day like this without a greatcoat? And what in the world have you got there?"

"Don't be frightened, mother," said George, as he sat down on the hearthrug to thaw; "it's only a fieldfare."

"What is a fieldfare, George?" asked his youngest sister.

"First of all, Miss Minnie," answered George, "a fieldfare is a bird; secondly, it's a kind of thrush; thirdly, it only comes here in winter; fourthly, it eats berries; and fifthly, if you don't go and get some brandy quickly, this one will die, for it's all skin and bone, and hasn't had the ghost of a berry inside it this last week, *I* should say."

"Brandy, George! Who ever heard of a bird drinking brandy!"

"Now do you ladies want to save this bird's life, or do you not?" said Master George impatiently. "Because if you do, Minnie will go and shut up the cat and dog, and Edith go and get some drops of brandy, and Katie will get me a quill pen to pour the brandy down his throat with, and mother –"

“And mother will take care of the bird until George has changed his jacket, for he’s dripping on to the hearthrug like old Father Christmas,” said the mother, and quietly took Feltie out of his hand into her lap, where she began to stroke him gently. “Now, George, make haste, or he’ll die before you’re down again.”

They all ran off on their several commissions, and when George came down again, still putting on his jacket in his hurry, they were all assembled round the mother, who had Feltie on a napkin in her lap, and was cutting a quill pen into a proper shape for giving him the first and last medicine he ever had in his life. George held the bird’s beak open, while she deftly contrived to slip a single drop of brandy in half a teaspoonful of water down his throat; in five minutes she gave him another dose, and then another; and now Feltie’s eyes opened wide, and his feathers began to quiver slightly all over him.

“Now, mother, put your two hands over him, and keep him quite warm for a bit. He’ll do, I expect,” said George.

It was a bold experiment to give a bird brandy-and-water, but on this occasion it answered its purpose. In another hour or two Feltie was able to eat a few shreds of meat, which were given him at the suggestion of the vicar, who had now come in, and was taking much interest in his recovery. Then he wanted to go to sleep, but the bright light of the room made him feel very uncomfortable, and the loud human voices sounded harsh and strange in his ears. There was much discussion as to where

he should be put for the night; but the vicar decided that he should sleep in the conservatory, which was warmed with hot water. So they carried him there in procession, and left him in a warm corner on a heap of the gardener's matting, with plenty of scraps of meat and crumbs, and a saucer of water if he should be thirsty in the night. So Feltie fell fast asleep, and dreamt of poor Cocktail all alone and frozen under the gorse on Salisbury plain; and George too fell fast asleep in his snug bed, and dreamt that a whole flock of fieldfares were come to the vicarage, asking for brandy-and-water to be given them with a quill pen.

Next morning George was down betimes, half dressed, and in a state of great excitement, to see how his fieldfare was getting on. But Feltie was awake still earlier, and had already taken his breakfast when George opened the conservatory door. He felt quite strong again, and with his strength had returned all his dread of human beings. So no sooner was the boy inside the door, than he began to flutter among the plants, and then flew up to the glass roof and tried to struggle through it. Then he came down again, and smelling the fresh air coming through the door, was attracted in that direction, and in another minute was free. Off went George after him – over the garden wall, where he dropped a slipper, for he had not had time to put on his boots; across the road, through the hedge, which tore his trousers and scratched his face; over the orchard, and up into the stubble-field beyond, where a shepherd who was tending the new-born lambs that had been dropped in spite of the snowstorm, was much astonished to

see the vicar's son tearing along without a hat, without his boots, and with his usually neat collar flying behind him secured by only a single button. But still Feltie went on, and George, seeing that he was able to shift for himself, gave up the pursuit, and consoled himself by a talk with the shepherd about the young lambs and their mothers, before he went home to dress and tell his tale.

Meanwhile Feltie had perched on a hedge some distance away, and began to look about him. "What was this he felt? Surely it was not so cold, and the wind was blowing gently from the south-west. Was not the snow melting?" (Master George's right foot had found that out as soon as he got over the garden-wall.) "Was not it beginning to rain?"

"Chak-chak! Chak-chak!" cried Feltie, suddenly finding his voice: "the storm is over, the fields will be soft again, the worms will come to the surface, and perhaps the sun will shine again soon! Chak-chak!"

His voice was answered feebly from a distance. Then over a hedge came half-a-dozen fieldfares, flying weakly, as he had done the day before. He joined them, and they gave him welcome, and told him how they too had gone southwards, a brave band of fifteen, of whom only six were now alive; how they had gone on and on till they had reached a stormy sea which they were too weak to cross; and how they had turned back again in despair, and were now returning northwards.

Feltie told them his story too; and then the seven set out on their journey; and in the afternoon the sun shone warmly out of

the rainy clouds, the lark rose in the air and sang, the robins sat on moist twigs and cheered them with a strain as they passed; the streams rose, full of melting snow, and rushed over their banks into the meadows, moistening them and making them soft and pleasant to the searching bills of hungry birds: the air was soft, wet, and delicious, and in the fields they heard the bleating of the young lambs, and the calls of neighbouring parties of fieldfares and redwings.

At last when they neared the familiar spot which Feltie had left but a few days before, he bade farewell to his fellow-travellers and turned with a beating heart in the direction of the well-known elm-trees, standing in the flat meadows where the stream wound here and there under its brambly archway.

His loud "chak-chak" was answered: there were some old friends there still. There was Jill: and there too was Jack: they had saved their lives, then, by staying in the friendly park among the thorn-trees. But that terrible storm had done its work upon the little company: more than half were still missing, and Feltie himself was almost the last straggler to arrive. Many an adventure had to be narrated, and many a story of struggle for life and death; but there was none so thrilling as the winter's tale that Feltie had to tell, and no loss so sadly to be bewailed as the death of the brilliant Cocktail in the gorse on the dreary frozen down.

OUT OF TUNE

“Spirits are not finely touched
But to fine issues.”

In a certain manufacturing town, of no great size, there lived a musician. For the most part he gained his living by playing at concerts and giving lessons; but he was young, ardent, and clever, and he had always nursed a hope that he might one day be a great composer. He felt a soul of music within him, that wanted to come out and express itself. But, though he had had a complete training in composition, and had written much music and published a little, no one took any notice of what he composed; it was too good to sell well (so he used to say, and perhaps it was true), and he had never had a chance of having any of his larger works performed in public. And he began to get rather irritable and impatient, so that his wife was sometimes at her wits' end to know how to cheer him up and set him to work once more with a good heart.

Great was the poor man's delight when one day a letter arrived from the town clerk, to tell him that on the approaching visit of the Prince of Wales to open the new Town Hall, a grand concert was to be given, in which works by natives of the town were to be performed; and that he was invited to write a short cantata for

voices and orchestra. A liberal sum was to be paid him, and he was to train his own choir, to have the best artists from London to help him, and to conduct his composition himself. The news put him in such a state of high spirits that now the prudent wife was obliged to pour a little cold water on his ambition, and tell him that he must not expect too much success all at once. But she made him comfortable in their little parlour, and kept the neighbours from breaking in upon his work; and for some time the cantata went on at a flowing pace, until nearly half of it was done.

After a while however the musician's brain began to rebel against being kept in all day hard at work, and to refuse to keep quiet and rest in soothing sleep at night. It said as plainly as possible – "If you will go on driving me in harness all day long, I shall be obliged to fidget at night, and what is more, it is quite impossible for me to do such good work in the day as I used to. So take your choice: either you must give me repose sometimes, or I must cease to be able to find you beautiful melodies, and to show you how to treat them to the best advantage." But the musician did not know that his brain was complaining in this way, though his wife heard it quite well; and he went on driving it harder than ever, whipping it up and spurring it on, though it had hardly any strength left to pull the cantata along with it. And all this time he was shutting himself away from his friends, who used formerly to come often and refresh him with a friendly chat in the evenings; he refused to go with his wife and visit the very

poor people whom they had been in the habit of comforting out of their slender store; he lost his temper several times with his pupils, and one day boxed a boy's ears for playing a wrong note twice over, so that the father threatened to summon him before the magistrates and have him fined for assault; and his wife began at last to fear that his stroke of good luck had done him more harm than good.

One morning he got up after a restless night, in which his poor brain had been complaining as usual without being taken any notice of, and settled himself down in the parlour after breakfast with the cantata, feeling worried and tired both in his body and mind. With great labour and trouble he finished the last chorus of his first part, and uttered a sigh of relief. The next thing to be done was to write the first piece of the second part, which was to be an air for a single voice, and was to be sung at the concert by one of the best singers in the country. All the rest of the cantata had been thought out carefully before he began to write; but this song, for which beautiful words were chosen from an old poet, had never worked itself out in his brain so as to satisfy him. And now the poor brain was called upon for inspiration, just at a time when it was hardly fit even to do clerk's work.

He tried to spur it up with a pipe of tobacco, but not a bit would it budge. Then he took a dose of *sal volatile*; but the effect of it only lasted a few minutes, and then he felt even more stupid than before. Then he opened the window and looked out into their little back-garden, just as a gleam of sunshine shot down through

a murky sky. This made him feel a little better, and he returned to his desk, and sat for a few moments looking at the words which he was to set to music, feeling almost as if he were now going to make a little way. But the sunshine had also made the canary in the window feel a little warm-hearted, and it burst out into such a career of song, that the room seemed to be echoing all over with its strains. And all his own music fled at once out of the distracted composer's head.

“You little noisy fiend!” he cried angrily, “putting in your miserable little twopenny pipe, when a poor human artist is struggling to sing. Don't you know, you little wretch, that art is long and time is fleeting?”

He jumped up, took down the cage with an ungentle hand, and carried it into another room, where he drew a heavy shawl over it and shut the door. The canary's song was stifled, but the musician's song was not a bit the better for it. And after a while there came another annoyance. The house was small and not very solidly built, and though the room where he was at work did not look out on the street, any street-calls, bands, hurdy-gurdys, or such like noise-making enemies, could be heard there quite distinctly. This time it was a street-boy whistling a tune; it was not a bad tune, and it was whistled with a good heart; indeed the boy put so much energy into his performance, that he must have been in very high spirits. And why did he stop there so long? Generally they passed by, and the tails of their tunes disappeared in the distance, or they turned down the next street. But this one

was clearly stopping there on purpose to annoy the composer.

He went softly into the front room, keeping out of sight from the window. He was seized with a desire to wreak vengeance on this tormentor, but he was not quite clear how to do it, and must survey his ground first. Stepping behind the window-curtain, he peeped out between the curtain and the window-frame, and saw a small boy, whistling hard, with a long string in his hand, which descended into the area below. The musician stood on tiptoe, and looked down into the area; it was a sort of relief to him to see what this urchin was about. At the end of the string he perceived a dead mouse, which was being made to jump up and down and counterfeit life, as well as was possible under the circumstances, for the benefit of a young cat of the household, who was lying in wait for it, springing on it, and each time finding it drawn away from her just as she thought her claws were fast fixed in it. This boy was in fact an original genius, who had invented this way of amusing himself; he called it cat-fishing, and it was excellent sport.

The musician suddenly flung up the window, and faced the boy, who seemed by no means disconcerted; he only left off whistling and looked hard at the musician.

“What are you doing with the cat?” said the latter, with all the dignity he could put on. “What business have you to meddle with my cat, and make that infernal din in front of my house?”

The boy began slowly to haul up the string, looking all the while steadily at the composer.

“I say, gov’nor,” he said, with a mock show of friendly interest, “do you know as you’ve got a blob of ink at the end o’ your nose?”

The composer was taken aback. He certainly did not know it, but nothing was more likely, considering how he had been pulling his moustache and scratching his head with fingers which, as he glanced at them, showed some traces of ink. He put his hand involuntarily to his nose, and half turned to the glass over the chimney-piece. There was not a stain there: the nose was innocent of ink. Instantly he returned to the window, but the boy was gone; all that was left of him was a distant sound of “There’s nae luck about the house” far down the street. The composer went gloomily back to his study, without a particle of music in his brain; the canary and the whistler had driven it all away. He sat down mechanically at his desk, but he might as well have sat down at the kitchen-table and tried to make it play like a piano.

He got up once more, and looked out of the window. The sun was again shining, and the little garden, fenced in between brick walls which caught the sunshine, and enlivened with a few annuals (for it was early summer), did not look altogether uninviting. At the end of it was a little arbour which he had built himself, and a rose tree that he had planted against it was already beginning to blossom. The composer thought he would go and quiet himself down in this little arbour, and try and get his thoughts fixed upon the air he was to write. Out he went, and seated there, began to feel more at ease. After a while he began to think once more of the old poet’s lines; and feeling as

if music were coming into his brain again, went and fetched his manuscript and his pen and ink, to be ready in case he should have musical thoughts to write down.

Suddenly there broke in upon his peace the loud, shrill song of a wren. It was close to him, just outside the arbour; and when a wren sings close to you, it pierces your ears like the shrillest whistle ever blown by schoolboy. It was all unconscious of the presence of the composer so close to its nest, which it had built in the branches of the rose-tree that climbed up outside; and it hopped down for a moment on the gravel just in front of the arbour to pick up some fragment of food. The composer's nerves were quite unstrung by its sudden outburst of self-asserting song; it was an insult to music, to the poet, and to himself. No sooner did the tiny bird appear, as complacent and hearty as all wrens are, than he seized the ink-bottle, and like Luther at Wittemberg, flung it wildly at the little fiend that thus dared to disturb his peace. Of course he missed his aim; of course he broke the ink-bottle and spilt the ink; and alas! when he returned from picking up the bits, a splash from the bottle had fallen in a grand slanting puddle over the neat manuscript of the last page of the chorus which concluded his second part. And as he stood beholding it in dismay, lo! the voice of that irrepressible little wren, as shrill and pert as ever, only a little further off!

If the musician had not quarrelled with his brain, and if the struggle between them had not put his nerves all out of tune – if he had been then the gentle and sweet-tempered artist he

generally was – he would have laughed at the idea of such a little pigmy flouting him in this ridiculous way. As it was, he growled under his breath that everything was against him, crushed his hat on his head, took the manuscript into the house and locked it up in a drawer, wrote a hurried note to his wife, who had gone put, to say he had gone for a long walk and would not be back till late, and sallied out of the house where no peace was any longer possible for him.

He walked fast, and was soon out of the town and among the lanes. They were decked with the full bloom of the wild roses, and the meadows were golden with buttercups; but these the composer did not even see. Birds sang everywhere, but he did not hear them. He was just conscious that the sun was shining on him, but his eyes were fixed on the ground, and his mind was so full of his own troubles that there was no room in it for anything nicer to enter there. He was thinking that his song would never be written, for he could not bear to write anything that should be unworthy of those words, or second-rate as music; and it seemed as if his brain would never again yield him any music that he could be satisfied with. “I shall be behindhand,” he thought to himself. “I shall have to write and say I can’t carry out my undertaking; my one chance will be lost, and all my hopes with it. I shall lose my reputation and my pupils, and then there will be nothing left but beggary and a blighted life!” And he worked himself up into such a dreadful state that when he was crossing a river by a bridge, it did actually occur to him whether it would not be as well to jump

over the parapet and put an end to his troubles once for all. His mind was so full of himself that for a moment he forgot even his wife and child, and all his friends and well-wishers.

He stood by the parapet for some minutes looking over. The swallows and sand-martins were gliding up and down, backwards and forwards through the bridge, catching their food and talking to themselves. A big trout rose to secure a mayfly from the deep pool below, and sent a circle of wavelets spreading far and wide. A kingfisher flashed under the bridge, all blue and green, and shot away noiselessly up the stream; and then a red cow or two came down to drink, and after drinking stood in the water up to their knees, and looked sublimely cool and comfortable. And the river itself flowed on with a gentle rippling talk in the sunshine, hushing as it entered the deep pool, and passing under the bridge slowly and almost silently – “like an *andante* passing into an *adagio*,” said the musician to himself; and he walked on with eyes no longer fixed on the ground, for even this little glimpse of beauty from the bridge had been medicine to the brain, and it wanted more – it wanted to see and to hear more things that were beautiful and healing.

He went on, still gloomy, but his gloom was no longer an angry and sullen one. Through his eyes and ears came sensations that gradually gladdened his heart, and relieved the oppression on his brain: he began to notice the bloom on the hedges and in the fields; and the singing of the larks high in air, though he hardly attended to it, made part of the joyousness of nature

which was beginning to steal into his weary being. Presently he came to a little hamlet, hardly more than a cottage or two, but with a little church standing at right angles to the road. The churchyard looked inviting, for rose-bushes were blooming among the graves, and it was shut out from the road by a high wall, so that he would be unobserved there. He walked in and sat down on a tombstone to rest.

He had not been there long, and was beginning to feel calmed and quieted, when there broke out on him from the ivied wall the very same shrill wren's song that had so wounded his feelings in the morning. It sent a momentary pang through him. There started up before his eyes the broken ink-bottle, the smeared page, the bitter vexation and worry, and the song not even yet begun. But the battle of body and brain was no longer being waged, and as the tiny brown bird sang again and again, and always the same strain, he began to wonder how such cheerful music could ever have so maddened him. It brought to his mind a brilliant bit of *Scarlatti*, in which a certain lively passage comes up and up again, always the same, like a clear, strong spring of water bubbling up with unflagging energy, and with a never-failing supply of joyousness. And the wren and *Scarlatti* getting the better of him, he passed out of the churchyard, and actually began to feel that he was hungry.

Just across the road was a thatched cottage, standing in a little garden gay with early summer flowers; beehives stood on each side of the entrance, and a vine hung on the walls. It looked

inviting, and the musician stepped over the little stile, and tapped at the door, which was open. A woman of middle age came forward.

“Can you tell me,” said he, “whether there is an inn anywhere near where I could get some bread and cheese?”

She answered that there was no inn nearer than the next village, two miles away. “But you look tired and pale, sir. Come in and have a morsel before you go on; and a cup of tea will be like to do you good. Sit you down in the porch and rest a bit, and I’ll bring you something in a moment.”

The musician thanked her, and sat down in the porch by the beehives. It was delicious there! – bees, flowers, sunshine; on the ground the shadows of the vine-leaves that were clustering unkempt above his head; in the distance golden meadows and elm-trees, and the faint blue smoke of the town he had left behind him. Outside the porch hung a cage, in which was a skylark, the favourite cage-bird of the poor; it had been interrupted in its song by the stranger’s arrival, but now began again, and sang with as good a heart and as lusty a voice as its free brethren in the blue of heaven.

“What a stream of song!” thought the musician. “He sings like good old Haydn! We can’t do that now. We don’t pour out our hearts in melody, and do just what we like with our tunes.”

The lark ceased for a moment, and the ticking of the big clock within the cottage suddenly called up in his mind the *andante* of the *Clock Symphony*, and the two bassoons ticking away in thirds

with that peculiar comical solemnity of theirs; and he leant back in the porch and laughed inside himself till the lark began to sing again. Then he went on mentally to the last *allegro vivace*, and caught up by its extraordinary force and vivacity, his brain was dancing away in a flood of delicious music, when the woman came out to him with a cup of tea and bread and butter.

“How that bird does sing!” he said to her. “It has done me worlds of good already!”

“Ah,” she answered, “he has been a good friend to us too. It was my boy that gave him to me – him as is away at sea. He sings pretty nigh all the year round, and sometimes he do make a lot of noise; but we never gets tired of him, he minds us so of our lad. Ah, ’tis a bad job when your only boy will go for to be a sailor. I never crosses the road to church of a stormy morning and sees the ripples on the puddles, but I thinks of the stormy ocean and my poor son!”

The musician asked more about the sailor; and he was shown his likeness, and various relics of him that the fond mother had cherished up. And when he rose to go he shook hands with the woman warmly, and told her that he would one day bring his wife and ask for another cup of tea. Then he started off once more, refreshed as much by the milk of human kindness as by the tea and bread and butter.

He soon began to feel sleepy, and looked for a quiet spot where he could lie down in the shade. Crossing two or three fields he came to a little dingle, where a stream flowed by a woodside; on

the other side was a meadow studded with elms and beeches, and under the shade of one of these, close to the brook, and facing the wood, he lay down, and was soon fast asleep.

He was woke up by a musical note so piercing, yet so exquisitely sweet, a *crescendo* note of such wonderful power and volume, that he started up on his elbow and looked all round him. It was not repeated; but in a minute or two there came from the wood opposite him a liquid trill; then an inward murmur; then a loud jug-jug-jug; and then the nightingale began to sing in earnest, and carried the musician with him into a kind of paradise. He did not think now of the great composers; this was not Beethoven or Mozart; this was something new, and altogether rich and strange. Every time the bird ceased he was in suspense as to what would come next; and what came next was as surprising as what went before. At last the nightingale ceased, and dropped into the thick underwood; but the musician lay there still, and mused and dozed.

At length he started up and looked at his watch; it was past seven o'clock. He hurried off homewards in the cool air, refreshed and quieted, thinking of nothing but the things around him, and now and then of the cottage, the lark, the brookside, and the nightingale. But presently there came into his recollection the old poet's lines, and he repeated them over to himself, for they seemed in harmony with his mood, and with the coolness, and the sunset. Then as a star comes out in the twilight, there came upon his mind a strain worthy to be married to immortal verse;

like the star, it grew in brightness every moment, until he could see it clear and full. In a moment paper and pencil were in his hand, and the thought was fixed beyond all fear of forgetting. By the time he reached home, the whole strain was worked out in his mind, and he wrote the first draft of it that same evening, as he sat contented in his parlour, with his wife sewing by his side.

After this nothing went wrong with the cantata. It was finished, it was a great success, and the music to the old poet's words was enthusiastically encored. The audience called loudly for the composer, and the Prince of Wales sent for him, and congratulated him warmly. And the day after the concert he took his wife out into the country, and they had tea at the cottage; the lark sang to them, the flowers were alive with murmuring bees, and the musician's mind was free from all care and anxiety.

As they sat there, he told his wife the whole story of that eventful day, not even keeping from her the thought that had passed through his mind on the bridge. When he had finished, she laid her hand on his, and said, in her comfortable womanly way —

“You were out of tune, dear, that's what it was. And you can't make beautiful music, if you're out of tune: everything you see and hear jars on you. You must tell me next time you feel yourself getting out of tune, and we'll come out here and set you all right again.”

They went comfortably back to the town, after a day of complete happiness. As they neared their own door, they saw

the street-boy leaning again over their railings, and cat-fishing as usual in the area. He was whistling with all his might; but this time it was “Weel may the keel row.” They took it as a good omen; and the astonished urchin found himself pounced on from behind, carried into the house by main force, and treated with cake, and all manner of good things, while the musician sat down to the piano and played him all the beautiful tunes he could remember. He did not come to fish in their area any more after this; but a few days later he was heard whistling “Vedrai carino” with an abstracted air, as he leant over a neighbour’s railings, amusing himself with his favourite pastime.

A JUBILEE SPARROW

On the evening of the 21st of June, 1887, a cock sparrow sat on the roof of St. James's Palace, in London, gazing down now into St. James's Street, now into Pall Mall, where the preparations were almost finished for the Jubilee which was to take place next day. Flags were being fixed at all the windows, and Chinese lanterns hung out for the illuminations; seats were being everywhere contrived for the spectators, and all was bustle and activity. Every one seemed in good humour; it was plain that all were bent on showing the good Queen who had reigned fifty years without a blot on her fair fame, that their hearts went out to her in sympathy and goodwill. Yet any one skilled in the ways of birds, who could have seen the sparrow as he sat there, would have judged from the set of his feathers that *his* mind was very far from being at ease.

"There's no time to lose," he muttered to himself; "she'll have to sit all day and all night, or we sha'n't do it after all." He flew down to a snug corner behind a tall brick chimney looking to the south, where his wife was sitting on a nest with four eggs in it.

"My dear," he said; "you mustn't leave the nest to-day; you know my hopes and wishes; you will disappoint me dreadfully if you can't manage to hatch out an egg to-morrow. It really is our duty, as we live in a palace, to have a nestling hatched on the Jubilee day. Why, my people have lived here ever since the

Queen came to the throne, and one of my ancestors was born on the very day of her accession! we must keep up the tradition, and, my dear, it all depends on you. Remember, I picked you out of a whole crowd down in St James's Park, and I made no inquiries about your connections; you may have come from a Pimlico slum for all I know. But I saw you had good qualities and I asked no questions. Now do try and do yourself justice. Sit close, and don't on any account leave the eggs, and I will bring you all sorts of good things from the Prince of Wales' own kitchen."

The hen sparrow fluttered her wings a little and meekly assured her husband that she would do her best. "It's hard work," she added; "my poor breast is getting quite bare, and I'm so hungry. But I'll sit till August to please you, you beautiful and noble bird."

"That's right," said the cock sparrow, much pleased; and indeed he was a fine bird, with his black throat and blue head, and mottled brown back. He flew straight down to the back door of Marlborough House, where the Prince of Wales lives (he patronized no human beings but royalty and the aristocracy), and finding the usual supply of crumbs and scraps put out by the royal kitchen-maid, he made a good meal first himself, and then set to work to carry his wife her supper.

The day was very hot and very long, and the warmth greatly helped the weary hen in performing her duties. She stuck to her post all the time she was having her supper, and she knew that her eggs would soon be hatched; but neither she nor her husband had

quite reckoned for the warmth of the day. Just when the cock was going to roost, well satisfied with his wife, and certain that his fondest hopes would be realized to-morrow, crack, crack! peep, peep! out came a tiny sparrow from the egg in the warmest corner of the nest, full three hours before the Jubilee day was to begin!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.