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WILLIAM
WARDE**

MORE TALES OF THE
BIRDS

William Fowler
More Tales of the Birds

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W. Warde Fowler

More Tales of the Birds

THE LARK'S NEST

A STORY OF A BATTLE

I

It was close upon Midsummer Day, but it was not midsummer weather. A mist rose from moist fields, and hung over the whole countryside as if it were November; the June of 1815 was wet and chill, as June so often is. And as the mist hung over the land, so a certain sense of doubt and anxiety hung over the hearts of man and beast and bird. War was in the air as well as mist; and everything wanted warmth and peace to help it to carry out its appointed work; to cheer it with a feeling of the fragrance of life.

The moisture and the chilliness did not prevent the Skylark from taking a flight now and then into the air, and singing to his wife as she sat on the nest below; indeed, he rose sometimes so high that she could hardly hear his voice, and then the anxious feeling got the better of her. When he came down she would tell him of it, and remind him how dear to her that music was. "Come with me this once," he said at last in reply. "Come, and leave the eggs for a little while. Above the mist the sun is shining, and the real world is up there to-day. You can dry yourself up there in the warmth, and you can fancy how bad it is for all the creatures that have no wings to fly with. And there are such numbers of them about to-day – such long lines of men and horses! Come and feel the sun and see the sights."

He rose again into the air and began to sing; and she, getting wearily off the nest, followed him upwards. They passed through the mist and out into the glorious sunshine; and as they hung on the air with fluttering wings and tails bent downwards, singing and still gently rising, the sun at last conquered the fog to the right of them, and they saw the great high road covered with a long column of horsemen, whose arms and trappings flashed with the sudden light. They were moving southward at a trot as quick as cavalry can keep up when riding in a body together; and behind them at a short interval came cannon and waggons rumbling slowly along, the drivers' whips cracking constantly as if there were great need of hurry. Then came a column of infantry marching at a quickstep without music, all intent on business, none falling out of the ranks; they wore coats of bright scarlet, which set off young and sturdy frames. And then, just as an officer, with dripping plume and cloak hanging loosely about him, turned his horse into the wet fields and galloped heavily past the infantry in the road, the mist closed over them again, and the Larks could see nothing more.

But along the line of the road, to north as well as south, they could hear the rumbling of wheels and the heavy tramp of men marching, deadened as all these sounds were by the mud of the road and by the dense air. Nay, far away to the southward there were other sounds in the air – sounds deep and strange, as if a storm were beginning there.

"But there is no storm about," said the Skylark's wife; "I should have felt it long ago. What is it, dear? what can it be? Something is wrong; and I feel as if trouble were coming, with all these creatures about. Look there!" she said, as they descended again to the ground at a little distance, as usual, from the nest; "look there, and tell me if something is not going to happen!"

A little way off, dimly looming through the mist, was a large cart or waggon moving slowly along a field-track. Leading the horses was the farmer, and sitting in the cart was the farmer's wife, trouble written in her face; on her lap was a tiny child, another sat on the edge of the cart, and a third was astride on one of the big horses, holding on by his huge collar, and digging his young heels into the brawny shoulders below him. All of these the Skylarks knew well; they came from the farm down in the hollow, and they must be leaving their old home, for there was crockery, and a big clock, and a picture or two, and other household goods, all packed in roughly and hurriedly, as if the family had been suddenly turned out into the world. The farmer looked over his shoulder and said a cheering word to his wife, and the Skylark did the same by his.

"Don't get frightened," he said, "or you won't be able to sit close. And sitting close is the whole secret, dear, the whole secret of nesting. I'm sorry I took you up there, but I meant well. Promise me to sit close; if any creature comes along, don't you stir – it is the whole secret. They won't find you on the eggs, if you only sit close; and think how hard it is to get back again without being seen when once you're off the nest! There's nothing to alarm you in what we saw. See, here we are at the nest, and how far it is from the big road, and how snugly hidden! Promise me, then, to sit close, and in a day or two we shall begin to hatch."

She promised, and nestled once more on the eggs. It was true, as he had said, that the nest was some way from the road; it was in fact about halfway between two high roads, which separated as they emerged from a great forest to the northwards, and then ran at a wide angle down a gentle slope of corn-land and meadow. In the hollow near to the western road lay the farmhouse, whose owners had been seen departing by the Skylarks, standing in a little enclosure of yard and orchard; near the other road, but higher up the slope, was another homestead. On the edge of the slope, connecting the two main roads, ran a little cart-track, seldom used; just such a deeply-rutted track as you may see on the slope of a south-country down, cutting rather deeply into the ground in some places, so that a man walking up to it along the grass slope might take an easy jump from the edge into the ruts, and need a vigorous step or two to mount on the other side. Just under this edge of the grass-field, and close to the track, the Larks had placed their nest; for the grass of the field, cropped close by sheep, offered them little cover; and they did not mind the cart or waggon that once in two or three days rolled lazily by their home, driven by a drowsy countryman in a short blue frock.

Next day the weather was worse, though the fog had cleared away; and in the afternoon it began to rain. Long before sunset the Larks began to hear once more the rumbling of waggons and the trampling of horses; they seemed to be all coming back again, for the noise grew louder and louder. Each time the cock bird returned from a flight, or brought food to his wife, he looked, in spite of himself, a little graver. But she sat close, only starting once or twice from the nest when the distant crack of a gun was heard.

"Sit close, sit close," said her consort, "and remember that the way to get shot is to leave the nest. We are perfectly safe here, and I will be hiding in the bank at hand, if any danger should threaten."

As he spoke, men passed along the track; then more, and others on the grass on each side of it. Then that dread rumbling grew nearer, and a medley of sounds, the cracking of whips, the clanging of metal, the hoarse voices of tired men, began to grow around them on every side. Once or twice, as it began to grow dusk, men tried to kindle a fire in the drizzle, and by the fitful light groups of men could be seen, standing, crouching, eating, each with his musket in his hand, as if he might have to use it at any moment. Officers walked quickly round giving directions, and now and then half-a-dozen horsemen, one on a bay horse always a little in advance, might be seen moving about and surveying the scene. Then more men passed by, and ever more, along the slope; more horses, guns, and waggons moved along the track. A deep slow murmur seemed to rise in the air, half stifled by the pouring rain, and broken now and then by some loud oath near at hand, as a stalwart soldier slipped and fell on the sappy ground. Then, as lights began to flash out on the opposite rise to the southward, a noise of satisfaction seemed to run along the ground – not a cheer, nor yet a laugh, but something

inarticulate that did duty for both with wet and weary men. In time all became quiet, but for the occasional voice of a sentinel; and now and then a cloaked form would rise from the ground and try to make a smouldering fire burn up.

All this time the Skylark's wife had been sitting close; men and horses were all around, but the nest was safe, being just under the lip of the bank. Her husband had crept into a hole close by her, and was presently fast asleep, with his head under his wing. They had already got used to the din and the sounds, and they could not abandon the nest. There they slept, for the present in peace, though war was in the air, and seventy thousand men lay, trying to sleep, around them.

II

On that first day, when the sun had broken through the mist and shone upon the army hastening southwards, an English lad, in the ranks of an infantry regiment, had heard the singing of the Larks high above them. He was a common village lad, a "Bill" with no more poetry or heroism in him than any other English Bill; snapped up at Northstow Fair by a recruiting serjeant, who was caught by his sturdy limbs and healthy looks; put through the mill of army discipline, and turned out ready to go anywhere and do anything at command – not so much because it was his duty, as because it was the lot that life had brought him. He was hardly well past what we now call schoolboy years, and he went to fight the French as he used to go to the parson's school, without asking why he was to go. He might perhaps have told you, if you had asked him the question, that trudging along that miry road, heavily laden, and wet with the drippings of the forest they had just passed through, was not much livelier than trying to form pothooks under the parson's vigilant eye.

When they emerged from the forest into the open, and began to descend the gentle slope into the hollow by the farmhouse, the sun broke out, as we have seen, and Bill, like the rest, began to look about him and shake himself. Looking up at the bit of blue sky, he saw two tiny specks against it, and now for the first time the Lark's song caught his ear.

At any other moment it would have caught his ear only, and left his mind untouched. But it came with the sun, and opened some secret spring under that red coat, without the wearer knowing it. Bill's sturdy legs tramped on as before, but his thoughts had suddenly taken flight. There was nothing else to think of, and for a minute or two he was away in English midlands, making his way in heavy boots and gaiters to the fields at daybreak, with the dew glistening on the turnip-leaves, and the Larks singing overhead. In those early morning trudges, before work drove all else from his mind, he used to think of a certain Polly, the blooming daughter of the blacksmith; so he thought of Polly now. Her vision stayed awhile, and then gave way to his mother and the rest of them in that little thatched cottage shrinking away from the road by the horsepond; and then the Rectory came in sight just beyond, and the old parson's black gaiters and knotted stick. Bill, the parson's schoolboy, bringing home one day a lark's nest entire with four eggs, had come upon the parson by the gate, and shrunk from the look of that stick.

Bill had put the nest behind him, but it was too late; and he was straightway turned back the way he came, and told to replace the nest where he found it.

"And mind you do it gently, Bill," said the old parson, "or the Lord won't love you any more!"

To disobey the parson would have been for Bill a sheer impossibility, though easy enough for other lads. For him the old parson had been in the place of a father ever since he lost his own; and at home, in school, in church, or in the village, he often saw the old man many times a day. Not that he exactly loved him – or at least he was not aware of it; he had more than once tasted of the big stick, and oftener deserved it. But in Bill there was a feeling for constituted authority, which centred itself in those black gaiters and in that bent form with the grey hair; and it was strengthened by a dim sense of gratitude and respect; so he turned back without a word, and put back the nest with all the care he could.

When he came in sight once more, the parson was still at his gate, looking down the road for him from under the wide brim of his old hat.

“Have you done it, Bill?” he said, and without waiting for an answer, “will they thrive yet, do ye think?”

“I see the old ’uns about, sir,” says Bill “There’s a chance as they may take to ’un again, if the eggs be ’ant to ’ cold ’oweever.”

“Then the Lord’ll love you, Bill,” said the old man, quite simply, and turned away up his garden. And Bill went home too; he told no one the story, but the parson’s last words got a better hold of him than all the sermons he had ever heard him preach.

And so it came about that, years afterwards, as he trudged along that Belgian highroad, besides Polly and his mother and the cottage, he saw the Rectory and the old parson, standing at the gate – waiting for the postman, perhaps with news from the seat of war. “I never wrote to ’un,” thought Bill, “as I said I would, to let ’un see a bit of my scrawlen – ”

But a nudge of the elbow from the next man drove all these visions away.

“D’ye hear that, youngster?” said this neighbour, an old Peninsular veteran, once a serjeant, and now degraded to the ranks for drunkenness; “d’ye hear that noise in front? That’s a battle, that is, and we’ll be too late for it, unless Bony fights hard, drat him!”

The pace was quickened, and for several miles they went on in silence, the sound of battle gradually getting louder. At last it began to die away; and soon an aide-de-camp came galloping up and spoke to their colonel, who halted his men in a field by the roadside. Then tumbrils full of wounded men began to roll slowly along the road, at which Bill looked at first with rather a wistful gaze. At last night set in, and they bivouacked on the field as they were.

Early next morning troops began to file past them – infantry, artillery, and baggage; the cavalry, so Bill was told by his neighbour in the ranks, was in the rear keeping off the enemy. Bony was coming after them, sure enough, he said, and the Duke must draw back and get all his troops together, and get the Prussians too, before he could smash that old sinner.

At last their turn came to file into the road, and retrace their steps of yesterday. It was now raining, and already wet and cold, and Bill simply plodded on like a machine, till a slight descent, and the sight of the farmhouse, and of the dark forest looming in front of them, told him that he was again on the ground where the sun had shone and the Lark sung. And his trials for that day were nearly at end, for no sooner had they mounted the slope on the further side, than they were ordered to the right, and turning into the fields by the little cross-track, were halted between the two roads, and lay down as they were, tired out.

III

Dawn was beginning at three o’clock on Sunday the 18th of June, and the Lark was already astir. In the night an egg had been hatched, and great was the joy of both parents. All was quiet just around the nest; at a little distance a sentinel was pacing up and down, but no one else was moving. The wife, at a call from her mate, left the nest, and rose with him through the drizzling rain.

“Higher, higher,” cried the cock bird, “let us try for the blue sky again, and look for the sunrise as we sing!” And higher they went, and higher, but found no blue that day; and when the sun rose behind the clouds, it rose with an angry yellow light, that gave no cheer to man or beast. And what a sight it showed below them! All along the ridge for a mile and a half lay prostrate forms, huddled together for warmth; picketed horses stood asleep with drooping heads; cannon and waggons covered the ground towards the forest. And all that host lay silent, as if dead. And over there, on the opposite height, lay another vast and dark crowd of human beings. What would happen when they all woke up?

The Larks spent some time, as was their wont, bathing themselves in the fresher air above, and then descended slowly to find insects for the new-born little one. Slowly – for a weight lay on the

hearts of both; there was peril, they knew, though neither of them would own it. As they approached the earth, they saw a figure kneeling against the bank, and prying into the ground just where lay the home of all their fond desire. Each uttered at the same moment a piteous cry, and the figure, looking up, rose quickly from his knees and watched them. Then he went slowly away, and lay down among a group of cloaked human forms.

It was Bill, just released from sentinel duty. As he paced to and fro, he had seen the Larks rise, and, relieved by a comrade in a few minutes, he searched at once for the nest. Bill was not likely to miss it; he knew the ways of larks, and searched at a little distance right and left from the spot he had seen them leave. There was the nest – three brown eggs and a young one; it brought back once more the Rectory gate, and the old parson, and those few words of his. “I wish as I’d sent ’un a letter,” he said to himself, as he heard the Larks’ cry, and rose from his knees. That was all he said or thought; but Bill went quietly back to his wet resting-place, and slept with a clear conscience, and dreamed of pothooks and Polly.

When he woke nearly every one was astir: all looking draggled, cold, and dogged. Breakfast was a poor meal, but it freshened up Bill, and after it he found time to go and spy again at the nesting-place. The hen was sitting close, and he would not disturb her. The cock was singing above; presently he came down and crept through the grass towards her. But Bill saw no more then, for the bugles began to call, and all that great host fell gradually into battle array.

Bill’s regiment was stationed some little way behind the cart-track, and was held ready to form square at a moment’s notice. Hours passed, and then a hurried meal was served out; the battle was long in beginning. Every now and then Bill could hear the Lark’s song overhead, and he listened to it now, and thought of the nest as he listened. He could not see it, for a battery of artillery was planted between him and the track; but he kept on wondering what would happen to it, and it helped him to pass the weary hours of waiting.

At last, just at the time when the bells of the village church were beginning to ring at home – when village lads were gathering about the church door, and the old clerk was looking up the hymns, and getting the music out on the desks for the two fiddles and the bassoon – a flash and a puff of white smoke were seen on the opposite height, then another and another, and every man knew that the battle had begun.

And then the time began to go faster. Bill watched the artillerymen in front of him, and the smoke in the enemy’s lines, when he was not occupied with something else under his serjeant’s quick eye. Something was doing down there at the farmhouse; he could hear it, but could not see. Away on the left, too, he could see cavalry moving, and once saw the plumes of the Scots Greys on the enemy’s side of the valley, and then saw them galloping back again, followed by squadrons of French horse. Then an order was given to form square; cannon-balls began to whistle round, and as the square was formed, some men fell. Then a long pause. Suddenly the artillerymen came running back into the square, and Bill, in the front of the square, could see the further edge of the cart-track in front of him lined with splendid horsemen, who dropped into it and rose again on the other side, charging furiously at the square. Not a word was said, or a gun fired, till they were quite close; then the word was given, the front ranks of the square fired, and half the horsemen seemed to fall at once. Others rode round it, and met the same fate from the other sides. Then back went all the rest as best they could, with another volley after them, and Bill had seen his first fight.

Again and again this wave of cavalry came dashing against them, and each time it broke and drew back again. So the day wore on, and the battle raged all round. Ranks grew thinner and men grew tired of carrying the dead and dying out of their midst. Bill’s square was never broken, but the men were worn out, the colonel and most of the officers were killed or wounded, and still the battle went on.

At last, when the sun was getting low, the regiment was suddenly ordered forward. Glad to move their stiffened limbs at last, the men deployed as if on parade-ground, and dashed forward in line at

the double. Bill saw that he would cross the cart-track close by the Lark's nest; in all that din and fever of battle, he still thought of it, and wondered what its fate had been. Another minute and they were crossing the track, and as they leapt up the other side, he saw a bird fly out from under the feet of a soldier next but one to himself. The next moment he felt a sudden sharp blow, and fell insensible.

When he came to himself he could see the redcoats pouring down the slope in front of him; every one was going forward, and the enemy's cannonade had ceased. A wounded soldier close by him groaned and turned heavily on his side. Bill tried to pull himself together to walk, but his right leg was useless, and he could only crawl. He crawled to the edge of the bank and found himself close to the nest; he put his hand in and found two warm eggs and two nestlings. Then he slipped down the bank and fainted at the bottom.

A fortnight afterwards, the old parson came down to his garden-gate with a letter in his hand, and stepped across to the thatched cottage. Bill's mother met him at the door with a curtsy and a pale face.

"It's his own writing," said the parson, "so don't be frightened. Shall I read it you?" And he opened and read the letter; here is a faithful copy of it —

"Brussels Ospitle, June 22.

"Dear Mother, – We ave won a glorious Victry, and old Bony and all of em they run away at last. I see em a runnin just as I got nocked over my dear mother I did for some on em but don't know how many twas, them cavalry chaps mostly twas as I nocked over I be rather smartish badly hit dear mother the Doctor ave took off my rite Leg but I feels as if twur thur still it do hurt so tell passon I found a Lark's nestie as I didn't never take none of the eggs on twur a marvelous wunder as they warn't scruncht with them Frenchies a gallopin over the place and our fellows wen they sent em a runnin tell passon as the Lord do love me I partly thinks I carn't rite no more dear mother but I'm a comin ome soon as I'm better so no more now from y^r affexnit son

"Bill."

The letter was read a hundred times, and laid carefully away when all the village had seen it. But the lad never came home; he lies in the cemetery at Brussels. The Larks brought up their young, and sang even while the dead were being buried; then they left the terrible field of Waterloo, and never dared return to it.

THE SORROWS OF A HOUSE MARTIN

Little Miss Gwenny was sitting alone in the garden, taking her tea. Her comfortable little garden chair was placed under the projecting eaves on the shady side of the Parsonage; the unclipped jessamine that climbed up the wall was clustering round her, and a soft breeze was stirring its long shoots, and gently lifting the little girl's long hair with the same breath. She looked the picture of comfort and enjoyment.

On the table by her side were the tea-tray and a well-worn copy of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." She was not reading, however, though now and then she turned over the pages and looked at a picture. Except when she did so, she kept her eyes half closed, and leaning back in her chair gazed sleepily into the garden through her drooping eyelashes. The fact was that she was every minute expecting something wonderful to happen. What it would be she could not in the least guess; but that lovely September day it really seemed as if there might be fairyland in the garden at last. Twice before during that summer she had contrived to have the garden to herself, without fear of interruption from parents, brothers, servants, or visitors; but nothing wonderful had happened, and this would probably be her last chance before cold and wet set in.

But in spite of her tea and her book and her beloved solitude, Miss Gwenny was not at this moment in quite such a happy frame of mind as to deserve to have her garden turning into fairyland. Several things had happened to vex her; and when one is vexed it is too much to expect White Rabbits or Cheshire Cats or Mock Turtles or March Hares to wait upon one at pleasure and tell their tales. It was true indeed that her brothers were well out of the way at a cricket-match, and that her father and mother had just set out on a long drive, taking with them the manservant, who was always spoiling her plans by poking about in the garden with his tools. But this same man had spitefully (so she thought) locked up the tool-house before he went away, and it was just this very tool-house on which she had been setting her heart all the morning. There she could not possibly be seen either from the road or the windows, while she could herself see enough of the garden to catch sight of anything wonderful that might come; and there too she had some property of her own in a dark corner, consisting of a dormouse, the gift of her brothers, and sundry valuable odds and ends, with which she might amuse herself if nothing did come.

And this was not the only thing that troubled her. She had heard her mother say that she was going to ask Aunt Charlotte to look in and see after Gwenny: and Gwenny did not want, I grieve to say, to be seen after by Aunt Charlotte. That kind lady was sure to stay a long time in the garden fidgeting with the rose-trees, and collecting snails and caterpillars in an old tin pan. These creatures she always carefully killed, to the great delight of the boys, by pouring boiling water on them, and she had more than once sent Gwenny to the kitchen to fetch a kettle for this purpose. Gwenny secretly determined to rebel if such were her lot this afternoon; for how could there be fairyland in the garden if all the animals were killed? And every minute she was expecting to hear the latch of the gate lifted, and the quick decided step of her aunt coming up the garden path.

Several times as she sat there a quick shadow had passed over the white page of her book, but she did not notice it, nor did she heed a continuous quiet chatter that was going on over her head. At last, just as she happened to turn to the page on which is the picture of the Duchess carrying the pig-baby, the shadow hovered for a moment and darkened the leaf, so that she looked up with a little frown on her face.

"Everything teases me this afternoon!" she exclaimed. But the House Martin, whose shadow had disturbed her, had flown into his nest with food for his young ones. Gwenny watched for his coming out again, and listened to the chattering that was going on in the nest. She could just see his tail, and the bright white patch above it, as he clung to the door of his nest up there under the eaves. Presently he came out, and then she watched for his return; and soon, so constant was the hovering

and chattering, that Aunt Charlotte, and the gardener, and fairyland itself, were all forgotten, and she began, after her own odd fashion, to talk to the Martins in a dreamy way.

“What busy people you are!” she said, very softly, so as not to disturb them: “how tired you must get, fussing about like that all day long! Fancy if my mother had to run round the garden twenty times before giving me anything to eat! That would be more in Aunt Charlotte’s way, wouldn’t it? I won’t get the boiling water today, – or at least I’ll spill it. You look very happy, gossiping away all day, with a nest full of young to look after; anyhow it’s lucky for you that you can’t be caught, and have boiling water poured on you. She’d do it if she could, though. Yes, you are certainly very happy; you don’t come back to your nest and find it locked up like my tool-house. How you do skim about, like fish swimming in the air! And how nice and clean you are! – though I did see you grubbing in the mud the other day on the road. I say, I should like to be you instead of *me*, with all sorts of things to worry me.”

At this moment a Martin stopped to rest on a bare twig of the apple-tree which grew close to the house and almost touched it; and at once fell to ruffling up its feathers, and pecked at them with great energy.

“What are you doing that for?” asked Gwenny, watching in a lazy way, with her eyes half closed.

The Martin seemed to take no notice, but clinging to his twig with some difficulty against the rising breeze (for his feet were not much used to perching) he went on diligently searching his feathers with his bill.

“What are you doing that for?” asked Gwenny again, rousing herself. And recollecting her manners, she added, “If you will be kind enough to tell me, I should really like to know, because, you see, I’m interested in all the animals in our garden.”

“That’s easily answered,” said the Martin: “it’s only because these things I’m pecking at tease me so.”

“Tease you!” cried Gwenny. “Why, I was just thinking that you had nothing in the world to tease you. I’m sure you look as happy as the day is long. I have so many little things to worry me, you see!”

“Dear little Gwenny!” said the Martin, after a pause, “so you have your troubles too! Do you know, I’ve seen you here every summer since you were hardly big enough to toddle about the garden, and I should have thought you were the happiest little girl in the world.”

Gwenny shook her head sadly; and indeed at that moment she heard the latch of the gate lifted. But it was only the postman, and there was no sign yet of Aunt Charlotte. The Martin went on:

“And do you really think that a House Martin has not troubles? Why, dear me, to think only of these ticks! There are half a dozen in each feather, I really believe; and if you had to count my feathers, it would be your bedtime long before you got through half of them. I could sit here by the hour together hunting for them, if I hadn’t plenty of other work to do. You can’t think how they fidget one, tickling and creeping all day long! And the nest up there is swarming with them! Have you got ticks under your feathers, I wonder?”

“Don’t talk of such horrid things,” said Gwenny. “Of course I haven’t. Please don’t fly down: you might drop some about. I had no idea you were such nasty creatures!”

“Speak gently, please,” returned the Martin. “It’s not our fault. They will come, and there’s not a Martin in the world that hasn’t got them. You see we have our troubles; and you are a very lucky little girl. You have no ticks, and no journeys to make, and no droughts to go through, and no sparrows to bully you, and no men or cats to catch and kill you. Dear me,” he added with a sigh, “such a spring and summer as my wife and I have had! Troubles on troubles, worries on worries – and, depend upon it, we haven’t seen the end of it yet. But it’s no good talking about it. When one is worried the best thing is to be as busy as possible. So I had better say goodbye and get to work again.” And he fluttered off his perch.

“No, don’t go,” said Gwenny. “Tell me all about it; I’m sure it’ll do you good. I always go and tell some one when I get into trouble.”

So the Martin began, while Gwenny arranged herself comfortably as for a story, while the breeze blew the brown locks all about her face.

“The wonder is,” he said, “that I am here at all. Every year it seems more astonishing, for half the Martins that nested in the village in my first summer are dead and gone. And indeed our numbers are less than they used to be; we have to face so many troubles and perils. When we left Africa last spring – ”

“Why did you leave it?” asked Gwenny. “If you will make such terribly long journeys, (and I know you do, for father told us) why do you ever come back? Of course we’re very glad to see you here,” she added, with an air of politeness caught from her mother, “but it seems to me that you are very odd in your ways.”

The Martin paused for a moment. “I really don’t quite know,” he presently said; “I never thought about it: we always do come here, and our ancestors always came, so I suppose we shall go on doing it. Besides, this is really our home. We were born here, you see, and when the heat begins in South Africa there comes a strange feeling in our hearts, a terrible homesickness, and we *must* go.”

“Then when you are once at home, why do you leave it to go away again so far?” asked Gwenny.

“My dear,” said the Martin, “if you will listen, and not ask so many questions beginning with ‘why,’ you may possibly learn something about it. Let me begin again. When we left Africa this year we went our usual way by some big islands in a broad blue sea, where we can rest, you know, and stay a day or two to recruit ourselves, – and then we made another sea-passage, and came to land near a large and beautiful town, with great numbers of ships lying in its harbour. Of course we are not afraid of towns or men: we have always found men kind to us, and willing to let us build our nests on their houses. Long ago, you know, we used to build in rocks, and so we do now in some places; but when you began to build houses of stone we took to them very soon, for then there was plenty of room for all of us, and no one to persecute us either, as the hawks used to do in the rocky hills. But really I begin to fear we shall be obliged to give it up again one of these days.”

“Why?” said Gwenny. “Don’t think of such a thing, now we’re friends. Why should you?”

“If you want to know why,” continued the Martin, “you must wait a little till I get on with my story. When we reached that fine town with the ships, we rested, as we always do, on any convenient place we can find, – chimneys, towers, telegraph wires; and of course as we come in thousands and much about the same time, the people look out for us, and welcome us. So they used to, at least: but of late years something has possessed them, – I don’t know what, – and they have set themselves to catch and kill us. It may be only a few wicked persons: but this year nearly all those towers and wires were smeared with some dreadful sticky stuff, which held us fast when we settled on it, until rough men came along and seized us. Hundreds and thousands of us were caught in this way and cruelly killed, and will never see their old home again.”

“Horrible!” cried Gwenny. “I believe I know what that was for: I heard mother reading about it in the paper. They wanted to sell the birds to the Paris milliners to put on ladies’ bonnets. But how did you escape?”

“Only by a miracle,” said the bird. “And indeed I do wonder that I’m safe here; I alighted on a tall iron fence near the sea, and instantly I felt my claws fastened to the iron, – not a bit would they move. A few yards off were two or three of my friends just in the same plight; and after a time of useless struggling, I saw to my horror a man come along, with a boy carrying a big bag. As the fence was high, he carried a pair of steps, and when he came to the other birds, he put these down and mounted them. Then he seized my poor friends, gave their necks a twist, and dropped them into the bag, which the boy held open below. It was sickening: I could see one or two which he had not quite killed struggling about at the bottom of the bag. Poor things, poor things! And there was I just as much at the mercy of these ruffians, and my turn was to come next.”

“It’s too horrible,” said Gwenny: “I wonder you can bear to tell it.”

“Ah, my dear,” said the Martin, “we have to get hardened to these things. And it’s good for you to hear my story, as you thought our lives were all happiness. Well, the man came along to me with his steps, and I struggled, and he chuckled, and in another moment it would have been all over. But just as he was going to grip me, he noticed that his boy was not below with the bag, and turning round he saw him a little way off in the road practising standing on his head, while the bag was lying in the dust with its mouth open. He shouted angrily, scolded the boy, and bade him bring back the bag directly; and when he came, gave him a kick in the back that made him squeal. Then he turned round again, seized me with a rough dirty hand, and wrenched my claws loose. Oh, the dreadful misery of that moment! But it was only a moment. At the very instant when he got me loose, the steps were pulled from beneath him, and as he struggled to save himself he let go his hold of me. Away I went as fast as I could fly, only looking back for a moment to see the man on his face in the dust, and the boy running away with all his might. I owe my life to that urchin’s mischief. He served his master out well, and I hope he didn’t get beaten for it afterwards.

“Well, I flew off, as I said, and it was a long time before I rested again. I was afraid that sticky stuff would hold me fast again, and I dipped into the rivers and scraped myself in the dusty roads, till I felt I had pretty well got rid of it. And no other misadventure happened while we were in France; and then there came a pleasant morning with a gentle breeze, in which we crossed the sea to this dear home of yours and ours, where no one wants to catch and kill us; and then we felt as happy as you fancy we always are. It was mid-April, and your fields looked so fresh and green, we had not seen such a green for nearly a whole year. The sun shone into the grass and lit it up, and forced the celandines and marigolds to open their blossoms all along the valley as we made our way to our old home here. Every now and then a delicious shower would come sweeping down from the west, and the labouring men would get under a tree, and throw old sacks over their shoulders to keep them dry; and the gentlefolk out walking in the roads would put up their umbrellas and run for it. But we, – ah! how we did enjoy those showers after the long weary journey! We coursed about and chatted to each other, and greeted our friends the Sand Martins by the river bank, knowing that the sun would be out again in a few minutes, and would bring all sorts of juicy insects out of the moistened grass. And when the rain had passed, and the blue sky above was all the bluer for the dark cloud in the distance, where the rainbow was gathering its brightness, what delicious feasts we had! how we did career about, and chatter, and enjoy ourselves!”

“I daresay you did,” said Gwenny. “And I’m very glad you are happy some time: but I’m sure there’s something dreadful coming yet!”

“Only too soon there came something dreadful,” the Martin continued, – “dreadful to us at least. The very next day – the day we came here – the soft west wind dropped, and no more showers came. Quite early in the morning I felt a difference – a dryness about the skin, and a tickling at the roots of my feathers, which I knew was not caused by those little creepers I told you of. And when I rested on the telegraph wires to scratch myself with my bill, I got so cold that I had to leave off and take to flight again. And then I knew that the wind was in the *east*, and that I should get very little good by flying, though fly I must, for the insects would not rise. Those of yesterday were dead already, nipped with a single night’s frost, and there was no sun to bring new ones to life. But we managed to get on fairly that day, and hoped that the east wind would be gone the next morning.”

“Why, what a difference the east wind does make to some people!” put in Gwenny. “You’re just like Aunt Charlotte; whenever she’s sharper than usual, my mother says it’s the east wind, and so it is, I believe. It dries up the snails, so that they go under the bushes, and she can’t find them. That’s the only way I can tell an east wind: the snails go in, and Aunt Charlotte gets put out.”

“Then Aunt Charlotte must have been very cross last spring,” said the Martin; “and so were we, and very wretched too. It lasted quite three weeks, and how we contrived to get through it I hardly know. Some of us died – the weaker ones – when it turned to sleet and freezing; and when the Swifts came early in May they had a dreadful time of it, poor creatures, for they are very delicate

and helpless, in spite of their long wings. There were no flies to be had, except in one or two places, and there we used all to go, and especially to that long strip of stagnant water which the railway embankment shelters from the east. We used to fly up and down, up and down, over that dreary bit of water: but to collect a good beakful of flies used to take us so long that we had often to rest on the telegraph wires before it was done, and we got so cold and so tired that we could only fly slowly, and often felt as if we should have to give in altogether.”

“I saw you,” said Gwenny; “I watched you ever so long one day, and I was quite pleased because I could see the white patches over your tails so nicely; you flew so slowly, and sometimes you came along almost under my feet.”

“And I saw you,” returned the Martin, “one day, but one day only; for you caught your bad cold that very day while you were watching us; and the next time I saw you, when I peeped in at the window as I was looking for my old nest, you were in bed, and I could hear you sneezing and coughing even through the window panes. It was a bad time for all of us, my dear.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Gwenny. “I don’t much mind staying in bed, especially in an east wind, because then Aunt Charlotte stops at home, and can’t – ”

“Never mind Aunt Charlotte,” said the Martin. “She’ll be here directly, and you mustn’t say unkind things of her. I can feel with her, poor thing, if she lives on snails like the thrushes, and can’t catch them in an east wind.”

Gwenny was about to explain, but the Martin said “Hush!” and went on with his tale, for he was aware that it was getting rather long, and that Aunt Charlotte might be expected at any moment.

“At last the east wind went, and then for a while we had better luck. Rain fell, and the roads became muddy, and we set to work to rebuild our nest. For you must know that it was one of our bits of bad luck this year that our dear old nest had been quite destroyed when we returned, and instead of creeping into it to roost during that terrible east wind, as we like to do, we had to find some other hole or corner to shelter us. You see your home is our home too; and how would you like to have to sleep in the tool-house, or under the gooseberry bushes in the garden?”

“I should love to sleep in the tool-house,” said Gwenny, “at least, if I could have my bed in there. But I didn’t know you slept in your old nests, nor did father, I am sure, or he would have taken care of them when the workmen were here painting the window-frames and the timbers under the roof.”

“I thought that was how it was done,” said the Martin; “they like to make everything spick and span, and of course our nests look untidy. Well, it can’t be helped; but it was bad luck for us. We went to work all the same, gathering up the mud in our bills, and laid a fresh foundation, mixing it with a little grass or straw to keep it firm.”

“Like the Israelites when they had to make bricks!” cried Gwenny.

“Just so,” said the Martin, though he did not quite understand. “And all was going on nicely, and my wife up there was quite in a hurry to lay her eggs, and we were working like bees, when out came the sun, and shone day after day without a cloud to hide him, and all the moisture dried up in the roads, and our foundations cracked and crumbled, because we could get no fresh mud to finish the work with. We made long journeys to the pond in the next village and to the river bank, but it was soon all no good; the mud dried in our very mouths and would not stick, and before long there was nothing soft even on the edge of pond or river – nothing but hard-baked clay, split into great slits by the heat.”

“Why, we could have watered the road for you, if we had known,” said Gwenny.

“Yes, my dear, to be sure; but then you never do know, you see. We know a good deal about you, living as we do on your houses; we know when you get up (and very late it is) and when you go to bed, and a great deal more that you would never expect us to know; but you know very little about us, or I should not be telling you this long story. Of course you might know, if you thought it worth while; but very few of you take an interest in us, and I’m sure I don’t wonder.”

“Why don’t you wonder?” asked Gwenny.

“Because we are not good to eat,” said the Martin decisively. “Don’t argue,” he added, as he saw that she was going to speak: “think it over, and you’ll find it true. I must get on. Well, we waited patiently, though we were very sad, and at last came the rain, and we finished the nest. Ah! how delicious the rain is after a drought! You stay indoors, poor things, and grumble, and flatten your noses against the nursery windows. We think it delightful, and watch the thirsty plants drinking it in, and the grass growing greener every minute; it cools and refreshes us, and sweetens our tempers, and makes us chatter with delight as we catch the juicy insects low under the trees, and fills us with fresh hope and happiness. Yes, we had a few happy days then, though we little knew what was coming. An egg was laid, and my wife nestled on it, and I caught flies and fed her, – and soon another egg was laid, and then, – then came the worst of all.”

The Martin paused and seemed hardly able to go on, and Gwenny was silent out of respect for his feelings. At last he resumed.

“One afternoon, when the morning’s feeding was over, I flew off, so joyful did I feel, and coursed up and down over meadow and river in the sunshine, till the lengthening shadows warned me that my wife would be getting hungry again. I sped home at my quickest pace, and flew straight to the nest. If I had not been in such a hurry I might have noticed a long straw sticking out of it, and then I should have been prepared for what was coming; but I was taken by surprise, and I never shall forget that moment. I clung as usual to the nest, and put my head in before entering. It was a piteous sight I saw! My wife was not there; the eggs were gone; and half a dozen coarse white feathers from the poultry yard told me what had happened. Before I had time to realise it, I heard a loud fierce chatter behind me, felt a punch from a powerful bill in my back, which knocked me clean off the nest, and as I flew screaming away, I saw a great coarse dirty sparrow, with a long straw in his ugly beak, go into the nest just as if it were his own property. And indeed it now was his property, by right of wicked force and idle selfishness; for as long as I continued to hover round, he sat there looking out, his cruel eyes watching me in triumph. I knew it was no good for me to try and turn him out, for I should never have lived to tell you the story. Look at my bill! it’s not meant to fight with, nor are my claws either. We don’t wish to fight with any one; we do no one any harm. Why should we be bullied and persecuted by these fat vulgar creatures, who are too lazy to build nests for themselves? Up there at the farm-house they have turned every one of us out of house and home, and I daresay that next year we shall have to give up your snug house too. You could prevent it if you liked, but you take no notice, and you think us always happy!”

This was too much for poor Gwenny, and the tears began to fall. “No, no,” she implored, “you *shall* come here again, you *must* come here next year! I’ll tell father, and I know he’ll protect you. We’ll do all we can if you’ll only promise to come again and have a better summer next year – I’ll promise, if you’ll promise.”

“Dear child, I didn’t mean to make you cry,” said the Martin. “It’s all right now, so dry your eyes. We built another nest, and there it is over your head. But it’s very late in the season, and if the cold sets in early my little ones will have hard work to keep alive. In any case they will be late in their journey south, and may meet with many trials and hardships. But we must hope for the best, and if you’ll do your best to keep your promise, I’ll do my best to keep mine. Now we are friends, and must try not to forget each other. As I said, this is your home and mine too. Often and often have I thought of it when far away in other lands. This year I thought I should have hardly one pleasant recollection to carry with me to the south, but now I shall have you to think of, and your promise! And I will come back again in April, if all is well, and shall hope to see you again, and your father and mother, and Aunt Charlotte, and the sn – ”

“Gwenny, Gwenny!” said a well-known voice; “my dear child, fast asleep out of doors, and evening coming on! It’s getting cold, and you’ll have another chill, and drive us all to distraction. Run to the kitchen and make the kettle boil, and you can warm yourself there before the fire.”

“I’m not cold, Aunt Charlotte, and I’m not asleep,” said Gwenny, stretching herself and getting up. “And, please, no boiling water to-day! It’s fairyland in the garden to-day, and I really can’t have the creatures killed, I really can’t!”

“Can’t *what!*” cried Aunt Charlotte, lifting the pan in one hand and the garden scissors in the other, in sheer amazement. “Well, what are we coming to next, I wonder! Fairyland! Is the child bewitched?”

But at that moment the Martin, who had left his perch, flew so close to Aunt Charlotte’s ear that she turned round startled; and catching sight at that moment of the carriage coming down the lane, hastened to open the gate and welcome Gwenny’s father and mother.

Gwenny looked up at the Martin’s nest and nodded her thanks; and then she too ran to the gate, and seizing her father with both hands, danced him down the garden, and told him she had made a promise, which he must help her to keep. It was an hour before they came in again, looking as if they had greatly enjoyed themselves. Aunt Charlotte had gone home again, and the snails were left in peace. And as the Martin flew out of his nest, and saw Gwenny and her father watching him, he knew that the promise would be kept.

THE SANDPIPERS

Fresh and sweet from its many springs among the moors, where the Curlew and the Golden Plover were nesting, the river came swiftly down under the steep slopes of the hills; pausing here and there in a deep, dark pool under the trees, into which the angler would wade silently to throw his fly to the opposite bank, and then hurrying on for a while in a rapid flow of constant cheerful talk. Then making for the other side of its valley, it quieted down again in another deep pool of still water: and, as the valley opened out, it too spread itself out over a pebbly bed, welcoming here another stream that rushed down from the hills to the west.

Just here, where winter floods had left a wide space of stones and rubbish between the water and the fields, and before the river gathered itself together again for a swift rush into another pool, a pair of Sandpipers had made their scanty nest and brought up their young in safety for two years running. And here they were again, this last June, safely returned from all the perils of travel, and glorying in a nestful of four large and beautiful eggs of cream colour spotted with reddish-brown blotches. The nest was out of reach even of the highest flood, but within hearing of the river's pleasant chat: for without that in their ears the old birds could not have done their work, nor the young ones have learnt the art of living. It was placed among the bracken under an old thorn-bush, on the brink of a miniature little precipice some four feet high, the work of some great flood that had eaten out the shaly soil.

The Sandpipers felt no fear, for there was no village at hand, and hardly a boy to hunt for nests: the fishermen kept to the bank of the river or waded in it, and only glanced for a moment in admiration at the graceful figure of the male bird, as he stood bowing on a stone in mid-stream, gently moving body and tail up and down in rhythmical greeting to the water that swirled around him, and piping his musical message to the wife sitting on her eggs near at hand.

One day when he was thus occupied, before making a fresh search for food for her, an answering pipe from the nest called him to her side. He guessed what it was, for hatching time was close at hand. When he reached the nest, he found that inside the first egg that had been laid a tiny echo of his own clear pipe was to be heard. Whether you or I could have heard it I cannot say; but to the keen ears of the parents it was audible enough, and made their hearts glow with the most delightful visions of the future. And this hidden chick was wonderfully lively and talkative, more so than any chick of theirs had been before he came out into the world. It was quite unusual for a Sandpiper, and both the parents looked a little serious. Nor was their anxiety allayed when the egg-shell broke, and a little black eye peered out full of life and mischief.

Then out came a head and neck, and then a sticky morsel of a mottled brown body, which almost at once got its legs out of the shell, and began to struggle out of the nest. Was ever such a thing known before? The old birds knew not whether to laugh or cry, but they hustled him back into the nest in double quick time, and made him lie down till the sun and air should have dried him up a little. Hard work the mother had of it for the next day or two to keep that little adventurer under her wing while the other eggs were being hatched. When he was hungry he would lie quiet under her wing; but no sooner had his father come with food for him than he would utter his little pipe and struggle up for another peep into the wide world. Terrible stories his mother told him of infant Sandpipers who had come to untimely ends from disobeying their parents.

One, she told him, had made off by himself one day while his mother was attending to his brothers and sisters, and before he had gone many yards along the pleasant green sward, a long red creature with horrible teeth and a tuft to his tail, had come creeping, creeping, through the grass, and suddenly jumped upon him. His mother heard his cries, and flew piping loudly to the spot; but it was too late, and she had to watch the cruel stoat bite off his head and suck his blood. Another made off towards the water and was crushed under foot by an angler who was backing from the river to land a

fish, and never even knew what he had done. Another fell into a deep hole at nightfall and could not get out again, and was found starved and dead when morning came.

After each of these stories the little bird shuddered and crouched under his mother's wing again: but the mastering desire to see the world always came back upon him, and great was the relief of the parents when the other eggs were hatched and education could begin. Then the nest was soon abandoned, and the little creatures trotted about with their mother; for they are not like the ugly nestlings that lie helpless and featherless in their nests for days and days, as human babies lie in their cradles for months. Life, and manners, and strength, and beauty, come almost at once on the young Sandpipers, as on the young pheasants and partridges and chickens. And their education is very easy, for they seem to know a good deal already about the things of the world into which they have only just begun to peep.

So one lovely day in June the whole family set out for the bank of the river, the young ones eager to learn, and the old ones only too anxious to teach. For what they had to learn was not merely how to find their food – that they would soon enough discover for themselves – but what to do in case of danger; and as they tripped along, the mother in her delicate grey dress, white below with darker throat and breast, and the young ones in mottled grey and brown, so that you could hardly tell them among the pebbles and their shadows, she gave them their first lesson, while the father flew down the river and back again to exercise his wings and to look for food.

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