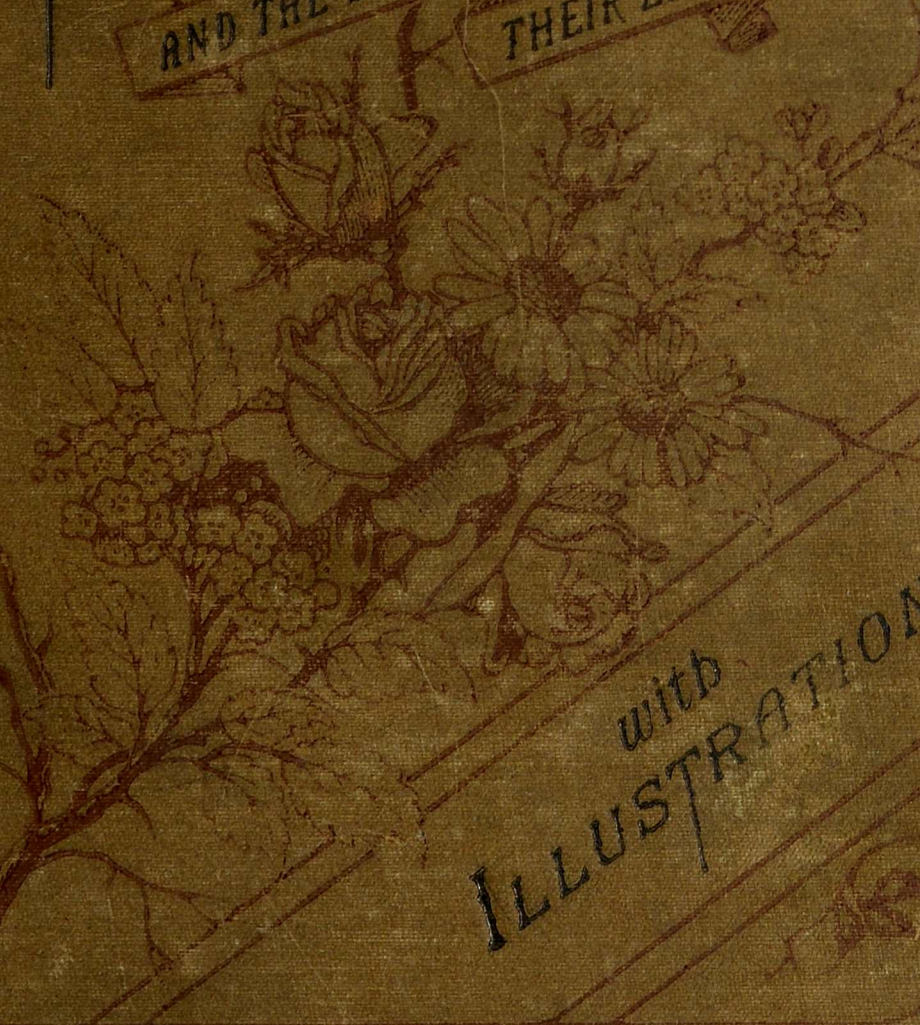


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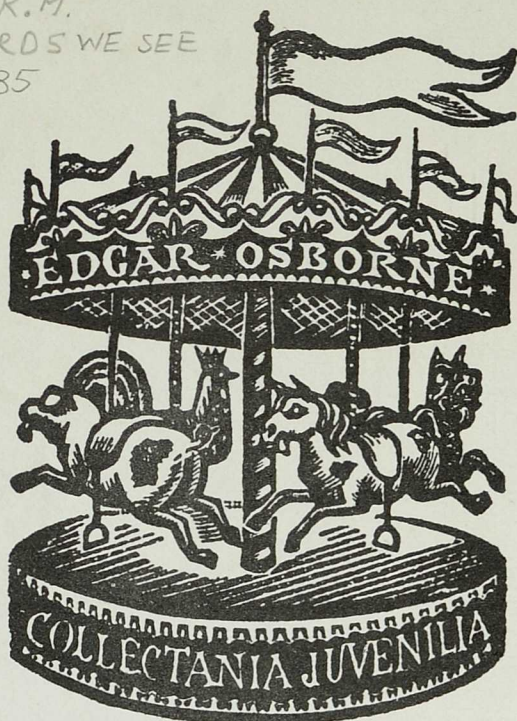
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THEIR LIVES



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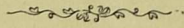
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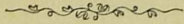
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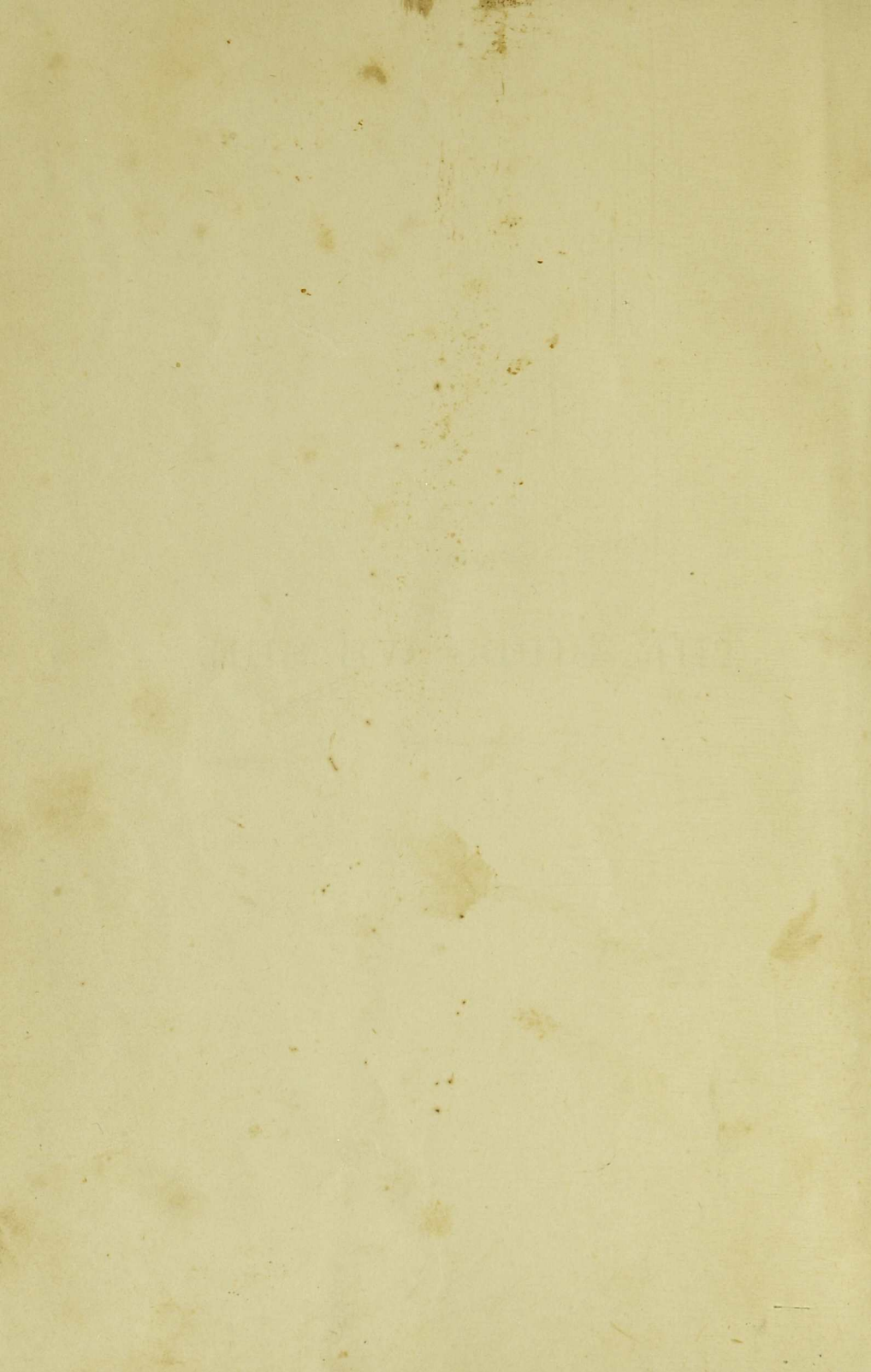
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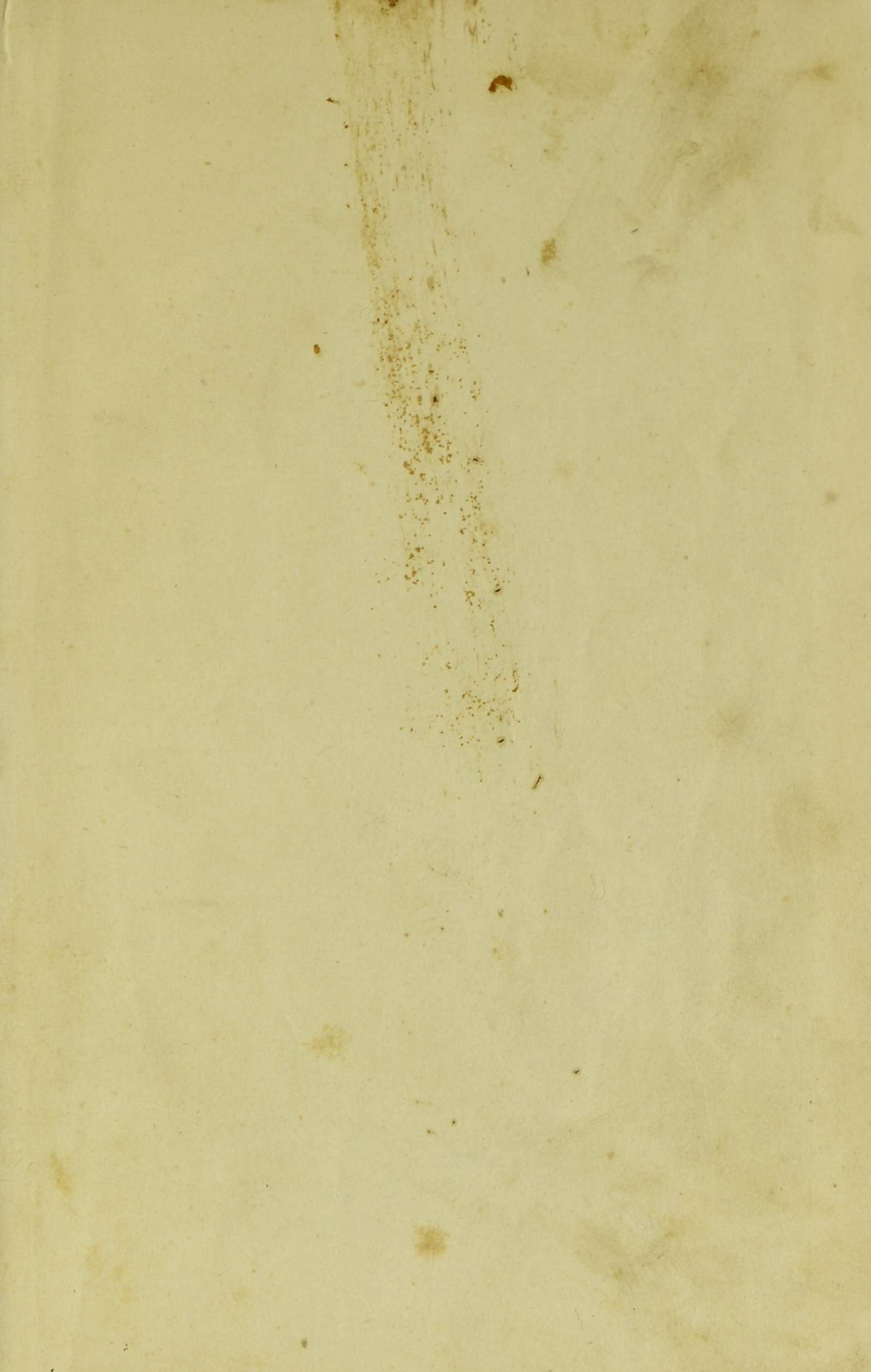
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THE BIRDS WE SEE.









A ROBIN FAMILY.

THE BIRDS WE SEE :

AND

The Story of their Lives.

BY

M. K. M.,

AUTHOR OF "LEAVES FROM NATURE'S BOOK,"

ETC. ETC.

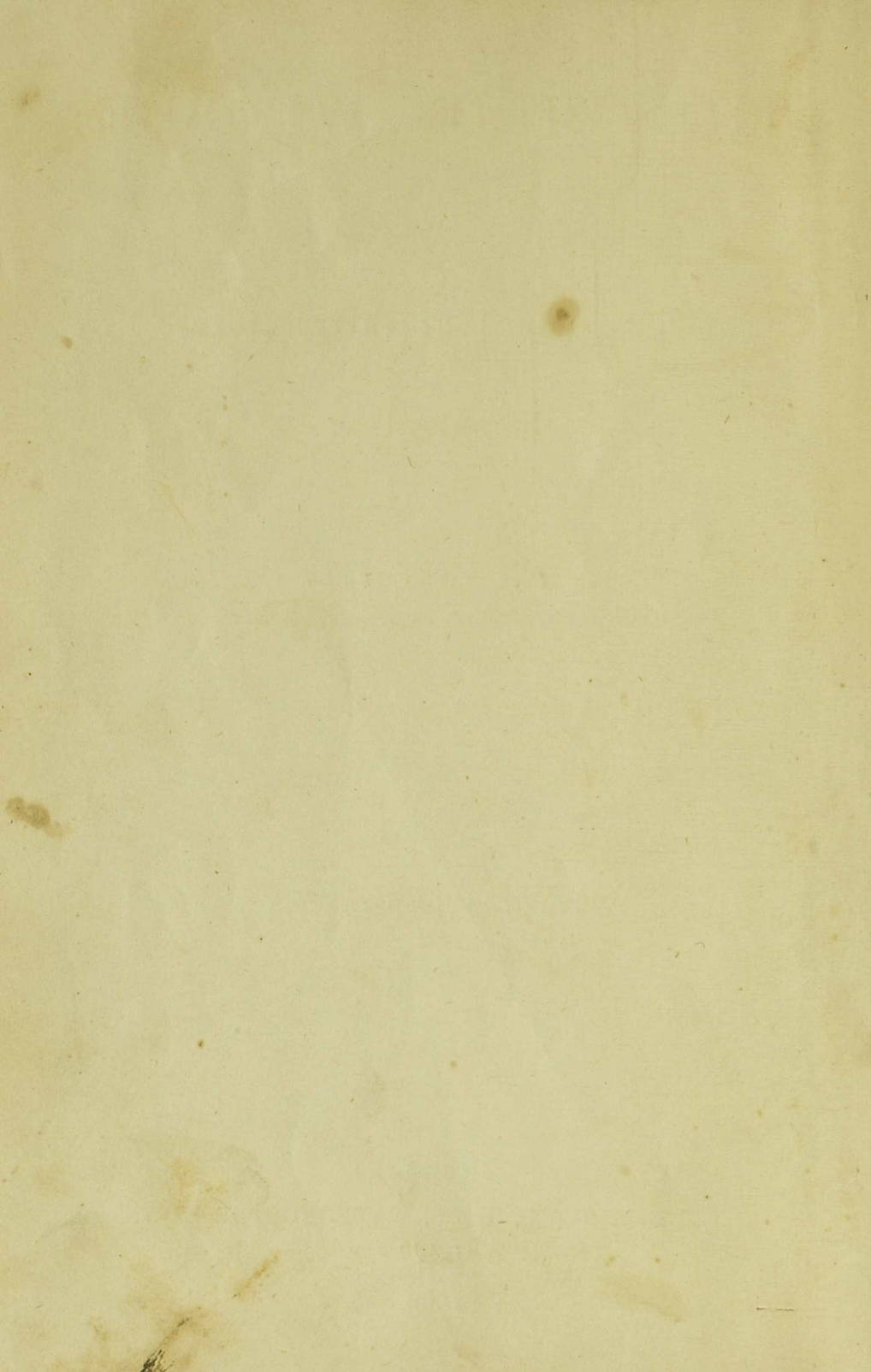
WITH TEN ILLUSTRATIONS.

London :

T. NELSON AND SONS, PATERNOSTER ROW.

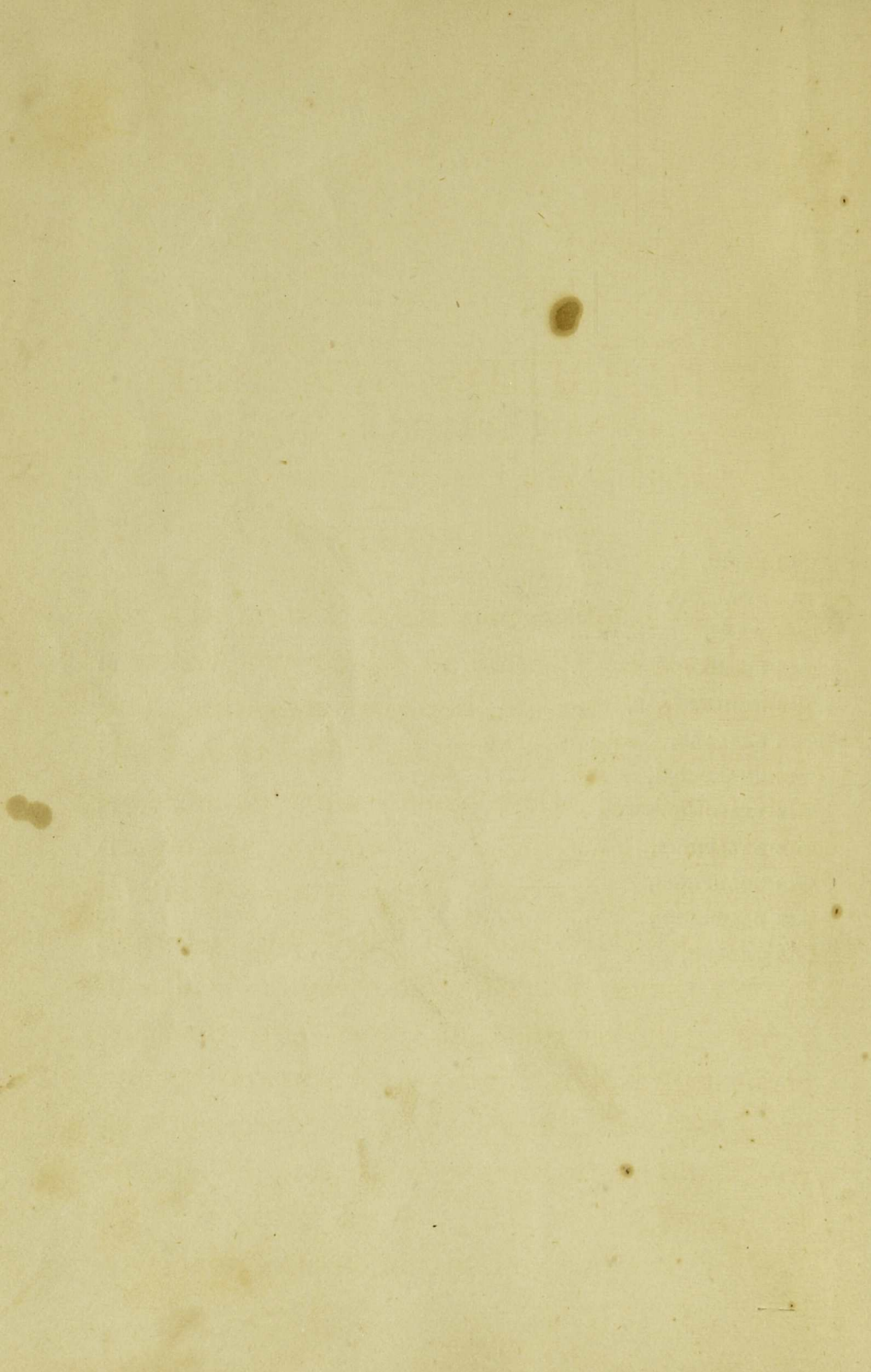
EDINBURGH ; AND NEW YORK.

1885.



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THE BIRDS WE SEE.

THE ROBIN.

I HAVE often played, as I dare say you have, at a game in which you throw a handkerchief at another person, calling out, “Earth,” “Air,” or “Water!” and then, while you count ten, that person must name some creature of the earth, or the air, or the water, as the case may be. If he cannot think of one in the given time, he must pay a forfeit. Now I have noticed, that when I call out “Air!” the answer that comes more than any other is “Robin!” So, as his name springs up so naturally, it is a very good reason why we should begin first to talk about the Robin Redbreast.

Now I want you to understand that God

has given to every bird a character of its own, almost as much as he has to you and me; only with this difference, that with them *all* of the same kind, or species, as it is called, have the same character, whereas you and I are each one individually different;—we are just ourselves and nobody else. I wish to help you to try and find out the character of the various birds we see, not by what I say, but by watching their ways and habits for yourselves. Very pleasant work you will find it, if you really give your minds to it, even now; and I can tell you, from experience, it will not wear itself out like many other pleasures, but will keep fresh and bright all your lives long.

The robin's nature is to be very sociable; while other birds are shy and timid, he seems created on purpose to please mankind by his confidence in them and his near approach to them. No wonder the little bird should be a favourite, so pretty and sprightly, so bold and familiar as he is. Everybody knows him, everybody loves him. This may partly be owing to the kind act he is said to have per-

formed to the Babes in the Wood. But it is not only in England he is a favourite; all over Europe the robin is to be found, and everywhere is he treated with the same affection as with us, almost every European language having a pet name of its own for him, so that the robin bears a kind of charmed life. I never saw a robin in a cage; did you? The most thoughtless boy would never kill one intentionally, and the hardest-hearted gardener never dreams of accusing him of spoiling his crops. True, he may take a few strawberries now and then, but nobody would grudge him that. Indeed, he is on excellent terms with the gardener. Have you not seen him many a time hopping about on the newly-dug soil, now on the path, now on the top of the tool-house, now, bolder still, on the handle of the spade which the gardener has stuck into the ground a minute while he talks to you? He is watching for worms, and so the gardener knows he can trust him not to do any harm. "Ah! but what does he do in the winter?" you say. Well, I am afraid times *are* very hard for him then; but he picks up

a bit here, and a bit there, and looks just as sleek as if he lived well, and as contented as if he knew where his next meal was to come from. It is one of the robin's good points that he is never dull nor out of spirits, let things be ever so bad.

The robin sings more or less all the year round, only we do not notice his song so much in summer, when so many other birds are singing too. By-and-by they get silent, and some fly away to other lands; but the robin does not care to go. He never leaves us far; and if in summer he wanders into the woods, and we do not see so much of him, he returns to us as soon as autumn comes, and then he sings his sweet plaintive song in our gardens and shrubberies, among the falling leaves and fading flowers. And when the flowers are all gone, he sings on just the same; as if he would tell us that though things are not so bright as they have been, it is all right, and they will come back again some day. Will you not help him with a few crumbs next time the snow is on the ground?

At last spring returns: he has lived through

the hard days, and it *is* all right again. You go out to dig in your garden, and the first worm wriggles itself up to see how the world goes on: down comes robin, and pounces upon it. *Your* intention was to get your garden ready for your seeds, but what you really had to do was to provide a famished bird with his dinner. Ah! that was a useful worm, though you may think the world would never miss him: he spent his life loosening the soil about the roots of your plants, without which they would never have grown; and though it *does* seem rather sad to be eaten up at last, yet he did his work well, and was useful even in his death; and what could any of us wish for more?

Like other birds, it is the male who does most of the singing; and it is the male also who wears the beautiful colour on his breast—that of the female is only a pale speckled brown.

The robin builds his nest not on high trees—that would look like a want of confidence in man—but somewhere near the ground, in a great variety of situations; sometimes in a

bank or in a hole in the wall, very often in the ivy. I have found it in a rubbish heap, in rock-work, and in a greenhouse. Once I saw one in the outer hall of a country-house, the door of which was generally left open, and as visitors passed in and out, the keen black eyes of the little bird were fixed upon them ; but she never moved from her post, and there she reared her young ones in safety. I must tell you of one robin who took a long journey rather than leave her nestlings. A waggon had once been packed with hampers to send to a distance, but from some reason or other it had to wait many weeks in a shed before it started. The bottom of the waggon was filled with straw, and a pair of robins thought this would be a snug place for their infant family. They made their nest ; the eggs were laid, and the young hatched, when, lo ! one morning horses were put in, the whip smacked, and the waggon began to move. The mother bird kept her place on her helpless little ones. A home upon wheels was what she had never calculated upon, but she was not going to be frightened away from her duty now ; she

would only hurry into the hedge for food for them, and then return to her post. It was fifty miles to go. When they arrived, the waggoner, who was a kind man, took great care that his guests should not be hurt in the unpacking; and then he carried them safely back in the empty waggon to the place they started from.

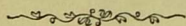
The robin lays five eggs, of a pale mottled brown. The nest is made of dead leaves, and has rather an untidy look; but it is soft and warm inside. It is a pretty sight to see the parents feeding their young when they first get abroad into the great world. The parents are tenderly attached to each other, and instead of pairing afresh every year, as most birds do, they are believed to remain united for life. The robin is never to be found in flocks; it does not care for company. It has its dear mate and its friend man, and it wants no more.

I have said the robin is always in good spirits, but I must make one exception, which you will not wonder at, and that is, when either you or the cat comes near its young

ones. The nest being so near the ground, cats often do get at the nestlings; and then the poor parent birds, helpless as they are, after flitting about in an agony of distress, will sit upon a bough and utter such a wail of grief that it would almost make you cry to hear it.

I don't like to tell tales, but I am obliged to confess the robin's temper is none of the best; it is very touchy, and easily offended, so that they will fight stoutly over a worm or a caterpillar. Even over the same meal of crumbs, when there were plenty for all, I have seen one fly at another without any reason, as it seemed to me; but I suppose, like other quarrelsome people, he *thought* he had. I am quite sorry to think that even a robin has faults; but we will say no more about them, but rather remember all his good qualities as we say good-bye to him.

THE SWALLOW.



THE winter was long and dreary ; but it is all over now. Indeed you have almost forgotten it as you sally forth on this sweet April morning to gather primroses from the bank and see if the cowslips are out in the fields. Everything is full of life and joy ; and just as you stoop over the green springing meadow-grass to look for those golden honey-cups, something black skims along in front of you, and is away in an instant. “ Ah, there’s the first Swallow ! ” you say. And the old man coming along the footpath at the same moment looks after it just as eagerly as you do, though *he* has seen it come and go for seventy years, and you only a few summers. Yes ! and when you get to be seventy, you will find, I hope, you have still a welcome to the returning swallow.

It has been spending the winter in the sunny lands of the South—in Spain and Africa, and on the shores of the Mediterranean; and now it has come back to its old home to rear its young and live its life anew. Why it should feel constrained to depart, and how it finds its way over land and sea back to the very spot which it left last year, are questions which we cannot answer; and the uncertainty and the mystery give a kind of romantic interest to all birds of passage, as they are called, but especially to the swallows. As they live entirely upon insects, and as the insect tribes either die or remain torpid in the winter, *something* warns them that they must leave the place which can no longer supply them with food. Then when the warmth of spring hatches the insect eggs, and brings out myriads of tiny creatures into the sunshine, the same *something* teaches them to return again whence they came. We call it *instinct*; but that is only another name for the guiding hand of that great Creator who, as the Bible tells us, bids the swallow observe the time of her coming (Jer. viii. 7).

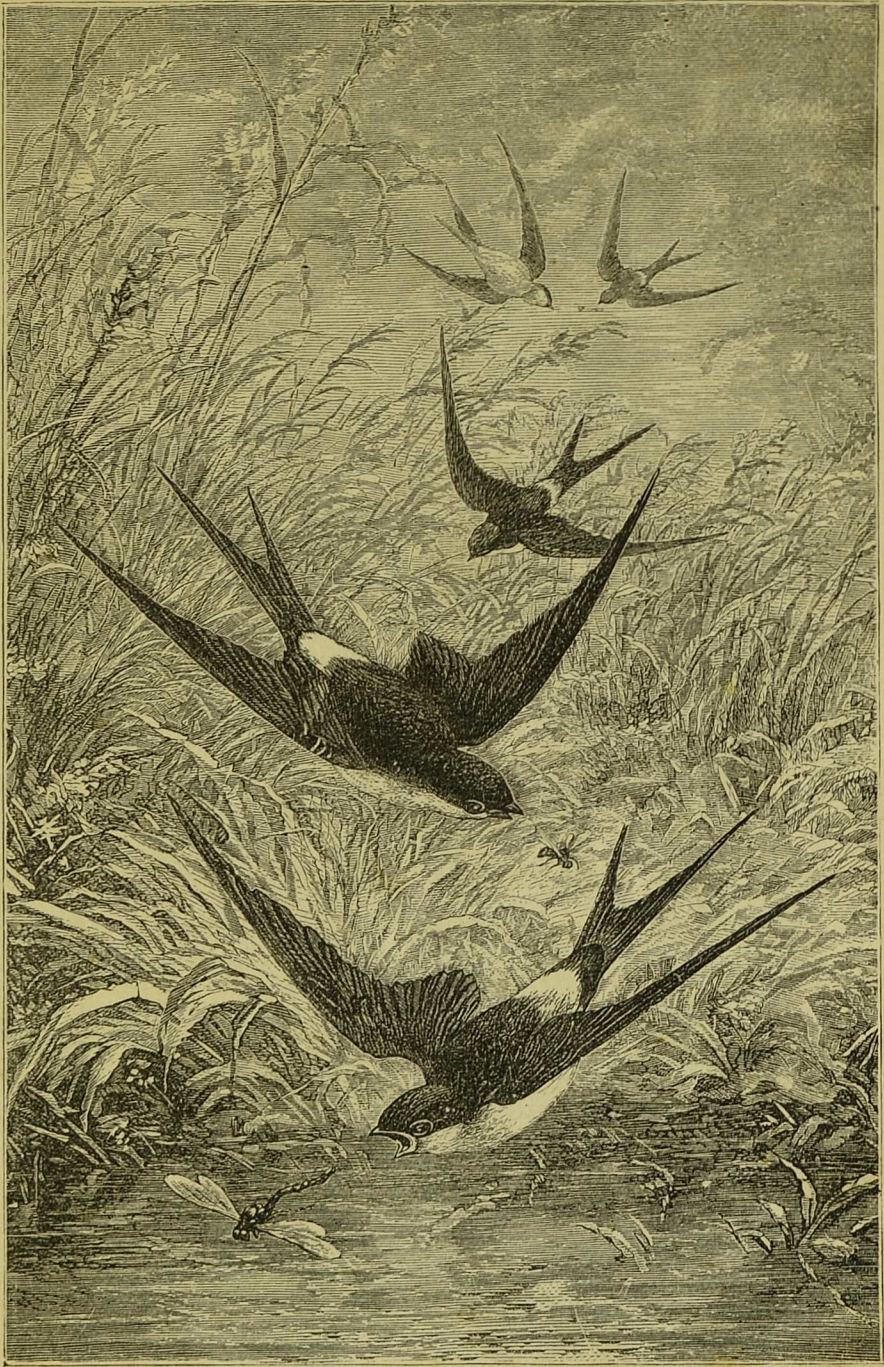
There are four different species of swallows which visit us—the Swift, the Chimney Swallow, the House Martin, and the Sand Martin. They are all much alike as we see them on the wing, except that the first two are of swifter flight. The martins are smaller, and have more white about their under parts, so that on a summer evening the rays of the setting sun are thrown back from their snowy breasts like a flash of light.

The house martin makes its nest against the sides of houses, as you must often have seen. It is formed of mud taken from the ruts in the lanes and the edges of ponds. The eggs are of a beautiful clear white. He is a cunning as well as a clever little workman; so he only builds a small bit of his house-wall every day, and that early in the morning, that the heat of the sun may dry it well before he goes on. Last summer I watched a pair of martins at their work, and it took them five days from the time that they stuck the first dab of mud against the house till the outside was finished. After that they had to put to rights the inside, and make it snug and comfortable, which took

several days more. They almost always avoid a south aspect, as they know the heat of the mid-day sun would crack their mud-built house. Next year the same pair will come back again, and, if it is possible, will put the old nest in repair instead of making a new one.

The swallows return to us about the second week in April; the martins arrive a few days later: and they always keep the same order. They go away all together; but when they come back we only see them as stragglers—first one and then another, and at last in numbers.

Those who have watched them closely think they seem weak of flight and less vigorous when they first appear. They could hardly be tired with the journey. What is a thousand miles to those light and graceful wings, which can fly sixty miles an hour with scarcely more fatigue than the engine of an express train? Probably when they first return insects are not plentiful enough to give them their full supply of food; at any rate, it is two or three weeks before they think of beginning house-keeping. When they *do* begin, there is no



SWALLOWS.

more play, but real and earnest business. You must not think they are only amusing themselves as they dart over your heads, and you fancy what an easy life they must have of it, and how fresh the air must feel to them, and how pleasant to have nothing to do but play like that. No! life is work to them, as it is, or ought to be, to every other living creature. Their feet are so formed that they can only with difficulty rise from the ground, so that they rarely settle. But there is no need: the air is their home, and their eating, drinking, washing, and nearly all the occupations of their lives, are done upon the wing.

The swallow builds her nest in chimneys, five or six feet down! The nest is made of clay or mud, like the martin's, and lined with grass and feathers, where she lays five or six eggs thickly spotted with pink.

When the young are hatched, there is indeed no play-work then; for they are very hungry, and from early dawn till dark the old birds are on the wing to supply their wants.

It is pleasant to wake up in the early

summer mornings and hear the low, pleasing twitter of the swallow-brood in the chimney, as they wonder to each other in their narrow nursery what the great world is like. Other nestlings can peep out and see something of it; but the young swallows know nothing till at last some happy morning their father and mother contrive to get them up into the air and place them in a row upon the house-top. You may often see them there about the end of June, and the parents feeding them. By degrees they learn to fly, but are still fed. At a given signal the young one flies to meet the old one, uttering a little complacent squeak, which I suppose means "Thank you." They meet for a moment and part again; but in that moment he has eaten his dinner—consisting of several courses, too, for the parent supplies him with a whole mouthful of collected insects at once. At last they are able to shift for themselves: and now the old birds will be able to take breath after their labours, and enjoy themselves a little. No such thing. They begin at once to think about a second family; for they rear two broods every season,

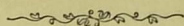
and the summer is not long enough for them to rest between. But you know, if our work is our happiness, we do not care to take much time for play. So the old nest is used again, and the same course gone through.

By the time the second batch are on the wing, it is high time to think about their journey. The nights grow long and chilly, and the chestnut-leaves are turned quite yellow, and insects are not nearly so plentiful as they were a month ago. The swallows know they must depart. For a while we see them in large companies perched upon the house-tops, or wheeling round as in a state of great excitement, as in chattering swallow language they discuss their plans and settle their route. At last it is all adjusted. We get up some fresh October morning; and they are gone. The dew lies thick upon the grass, as it did yesterday, and the gossamer is covering the hedges with its fairy net-work, but the summer birds have left us; we shall see them no more till spring.

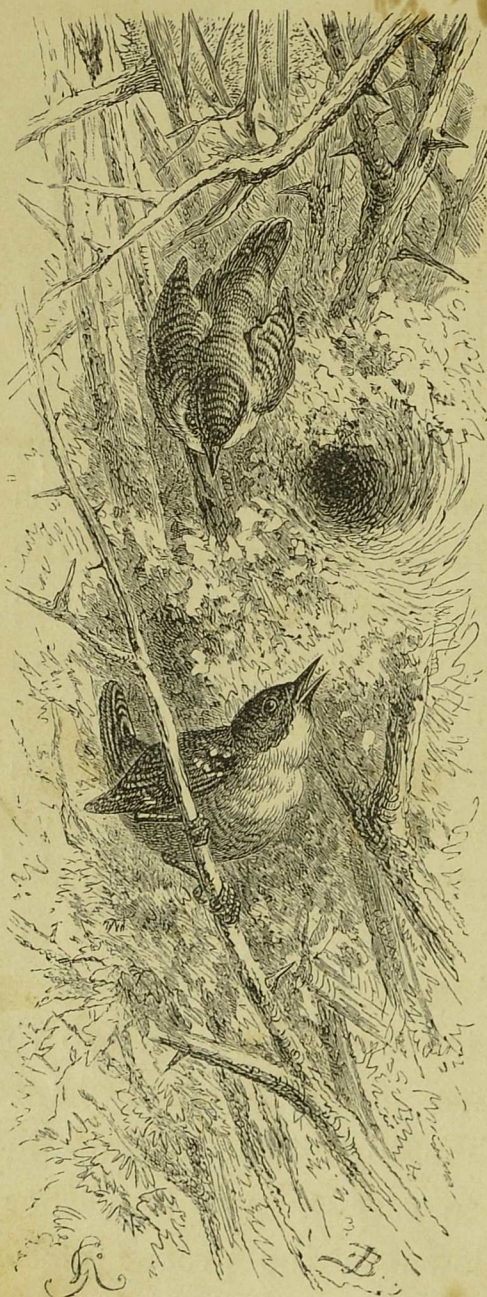
Others lead you now, and you have only to follow where they go before you. But when

in after years you find you have to walk alone, and you know not the path in which you ought to tread, remember that the God who guides the swallow over land and sea will most assuredly guide *you* (Prov. iii. 6).

THE WREN.



THE pretty little Wren—or Jenny Wren, as we sometimes familiarly call her—is almost as great a favourite with us as the robin. We do not see nearly so much of her; but her small size and her pert little ways make us all feel kindly towards her. The tiny creature is only four inches long. She hops out of the hedge just before us, and perches on a bough of hazel over it; and you must make the best use of your eyes if you want to look at her, for she is off again in a moment—but not before she has taken *you* in from top to toe with those sharp bright eyes of hers. Perhaps you had time to notice the way in which she chooses to carry her tail. Other birds carry theirs down in the proper place and in orthodox fashion; but jenny wren



WRENS.

thinks fit to stick hers up, as if she wanted to be like the turkey - cock when he is in a passion. It is rather becoming to her than otherwise, however: at any rate, it is like herself, and we never wish our old friends to change their manners.

When the wren flits about from branch to branch it gives a faint, weak chirp, which seems fitly to belong to so small a body; but when it sets itself to sing, it is in a voice so loud and strong you would

never guess where it came from. It is a clear and pleasant song; the more welcome because, like the robin's, we often hear it in the winter when the snow lies thick upon the ground.

The wren will build its nest in strange places. Once one was found in the sleeve of an old coat hanging up against the wall! A hay-rick is a very frequent place, as is also a cow-shed. The nest is peculiar: it is round like a ball, with a hole at the side; and the bird in making it begins at the top, instead of, like others, at the bottom. If it is in a bush or fir-tree, it is made underneath the bough, so that it is fixed by the upper part instead of the lower. The materials are dried leaves mostly, but also fern or grass, or whatever comes readily in the way. Jenny wren is so touchy, and so little mindful of her trouble, that if you only presume to put your finger on the nest, she will forsake it and build afresh! You may not have seen her, but she has either watched you, or has found out in some way of her own that you have touched her property. Inside it is lined with feathers, and eight or ten pretty little white eggs with pink spots

will soon be found there. Both parents are most active in feeding their young; and it is a marvel how these little birds, who have no great power of wing, should be able to feed so large a family.

The wren never leaves us, but lives as best it can through the winter on chance morsels: I dare say these always turn up just at the right moment. They appear to feel the cold a good deal, for they are sometimes found in the farmyard huddled together as if for the warmth.

A little boy once went out on a cold winter night to look for sparrows under the thatch of his father's cottage. His hand came against something soft and warm, and he took it into the room, rather puzzled to think what strange creature he had got hold of. When he came to the light he found it was four little wrens that had rolled themselves up to try to keep out the weather; their heads under their wings, and their feet tucked in in the middle, so that they only looked like a ball of feathers—as soft as a cowslip ball, and alive too! Presently, with the friendly warmth of the

room, they began to wake up, and were doubtless much astonished to see where they were, and puzzled to know how they got there.

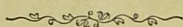
There is another well-known little bird which bears the name of wren ; and though it is no real relation to jenny, it is such a little gem of beauty I want you to look out for it in your walks. It is called the Golden-crested Wren, or Gold Crest. It is not common in the summer time ; but when your winter walk lies through or alongside a plantation of fir-trees, use your eyes well, and you will be almost sure to see it. It haunts these trees more than any other, as it lives upon the insects it picks out of the cones. You may know it at once by the bright yellow patch upon its head, which gives it its name. It is a mere scrap of a bird, the smallest we have in England, being only three inches and a half long : and the egg is the funniest little thing—no bigger than a pea, and not a large pea either ; its colour pale mottled brown. But the little bird's powers are quite complete, though they are packed into such a very small compass. It is not too small to be useful : do

you think *anything* is? Never was work better finished than the nest of the golden-crested wren; never a family better tended than the tiny little ones of this tiny little being.

Its Latin name is *Regulus*, which means a little king; and this is the fable of how it came by such a name:—Once upon a time the birds agreed that they should like one to be king over all the rest. But how should they decide who was worthy of the honour? They settled at last that the one who could soar the highest should be their king. So the swallow started forth, and with its rapid wing it wheeled round and round in endless circles, but it could not soar into the sky; and the lark rose higher and higher, but it could not breathe in that thin, cold upper air. But the eagle—*that* was his natural home. He mounted up as if he never meant to come back to earth. There was no question about it: do what they would, it was plain the eagle must be king, and none beside. Just as they were about, then, to salute the eagle king of birds, the little golden-crested wren popped up

his head and put in *his* claim. Where had he come from? Why, he was so small he had perched himself on the eagle's tail, and nobody had seen him; and so light, the great bird had never felt his weight: so he had soared all the time with the eagle, and been just as high as he had. The other birds shook their heads gravely; but they could say nothing against such a cunning little fellow. And thus it came to pass that the smallest bird and the largest were each honoured with the title of king. And the little gold crest deserves it, too; for, with his golden crown upon his head, he tells us that in this world there is room for the small as well as the great; nay, that God's power is even more shown in the perfectness of the small than in the majesty of the large.

THE CUCKOO.



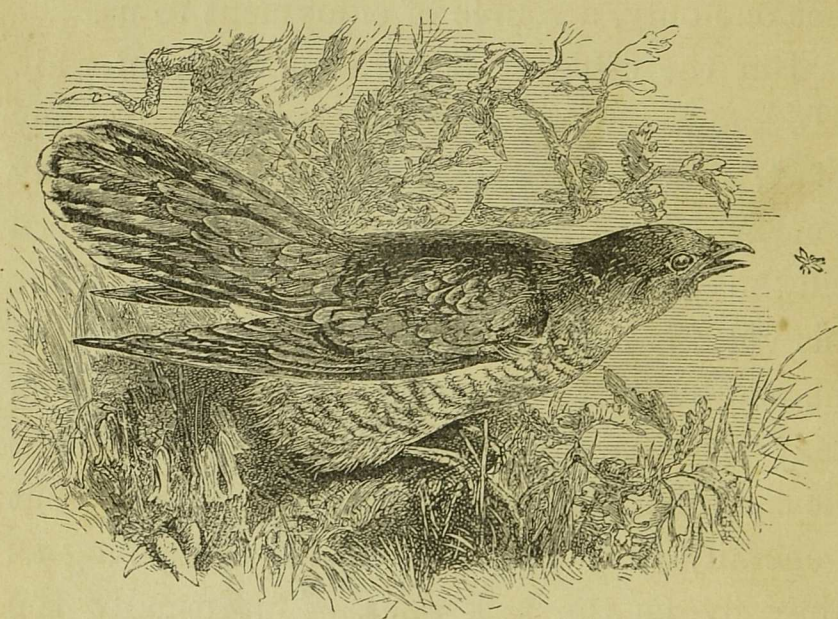
IF we are glad to see the swallow, still more, I suppose, we all welcome the Cuckoo. Perhaps I am wrong in classing it among the birds we *see*; for most people might pass their whole lives and never see one, unless it were a stuffed specimen in the British Museum. It very seldom shows itself; it is its song which is so pleasant and familiar, not its bodily presence. But we take in pleasure by our ears as well as by our eyes. Wise people, who like to go to the bottom of things, sometimes debate as to which of the two gives us *most* pleasure, and, as there is a great deal to be said on both sides, they generally leave off where they began. So we sit down upon this sloping bank, blue rather than green with its wild

hyacinth carpet, and shut our eyes that we may weigh the matter ; and, as we listen to the lark singing overhead, and the hum of the bees, and the wood-pigeon cooing, and, sweeter still, the voice of the cuckoo, we think how good God has been to make every sense, and not one only, a source of enjoyment to us.

But the cuckoo's is hardly a song, after all. He knows only two notes, *f* and *d*, in the key of *d* ; and he says them over and over all day long, and day after day, from the middle of April till the end of June. The latter part of the time his voice is not so musical, and it sounds as if he had oversung himself. Now and then you may hear two cuckoos singing in different keys, which makes an unpleasant discord ; but generally they sing in unison. They sing as they fly, as the lark does. But usually the sound seems to come from the depths of the wood ; then it almost dies away with the dreamy sweetness of an echo, and again it bursts out loud and clear close to you.

It is an ash-coloured bird you would see if ever it *did* show itself, about as large as a jack-daw ; and its under parts are white, with

bars of black all across. It comes in the middle of April, and, if it is warm weather, begins its song at once. Everybody hails it; it is associated in our minds with all our thoughts of spring, and lengthening days, and opening flowers. When we are young, it



THE CUCKOO.

seems to rejoice with us; and when we grow old, it brings with it happy memories, and wakes up our youth again. Yes, young and old, rich and poor, poets and ordinary men, all love the voice of the cuckoo. Through the month of May we hear it incessantly; but

gradually it grows less and less frequent, till we miss it altogether; and in July it leaves us, long before the approach of autumn could warn it to seek a warmer home.

But, though we love the voice of the cuckoo, there is not much to admire in its character and habits. Every other bird builds its own nest with infinite pains, and rears its own family with loving care and tenderness. But the cuckoo neither builds a nest nor provides for its offspring; it just lays its eggs in other birds' nests, without leave or license, and takes no more trouble about them—a careless and unnatural mother. But, instead of scolding the cuckoo, we will just look a little into this remarkable page of the book of Nature.

The egg is very small for so large a bird, being scarcely bigger than a common sparrow's (which it is somewhat like in form and colour), so that it lies naturally in the nest of a small bird, just as if it were one of its own. A hedge-sparrow's is usually chosen, but it is always an insect-eating bird; for the young cuckoo *must* have insects, and nothing else, for its food. If it be hatched first, it takes upon

itself at once to throw the other eggs out of the nest; if it find the young hedge-sparrows already in possession, it is just the same—the baby monster must and will have it all to himself, and, whether eggs or young, he manages to get them on to his back, climbs up the side of the nest, throws them over, and they are seen no more. His back has got a curious hollow in it—different to other nestlings, as if on purpose for this evil deed—which, after ten days, fills up and takes the usual form. Long before that, he has got rid of his companions, and reigns supreme in the tiny nest which he is fast outgrowing.

The poor hedge-sparrow has hard work to satisfy the amazing appetite of her foster-child, already twice as big as herself. For three weeks it is tended in the nest, and then, when it gets abroad, the hedge-sparrows feed it with untiring industry for five weeks more before it can take care of itself. In olden times it was believed that its first act of self-provision was to devour its foster-parent! but we have no evidence to prove it quite so bad as this.

And now I want you to notice how per-

fectly one thing fits into another, and how admirably God has adapted the means to the end in this strange history. If the egg were larger, it would not go into a small bird's nest; if a larger nest were chosen, the young cuckoo would not have strength to throw out the eggs and the young; if it did not do that, there would be no room in the nest, and the hedge-sparrow would be utterly unable to provide for the wants of both.

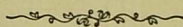
Why the cuckoo should have been created with these peculiar habits, I cannot tell you. Perhaps the Creator would have us see that he is not tied down to one way of doing things, but can accomplish his purposes just as well by different means. We may feel sure *there is* a reason for everything in creation; and by patient watching we may very often find out something about it. There is one good thing about the study of natural history, that anybody can enter into it, and anybody enjoy it. It does not want talents, nor cleverness, but just the common, ordinary gifts that everybody has or *might* have—attention, patience, and observation; and with

these there is always the hope of finding out something fresh, and adding to the general stock of knowledge. So, perhaps, by degrees we shall see clearer into the cuckoo's history.

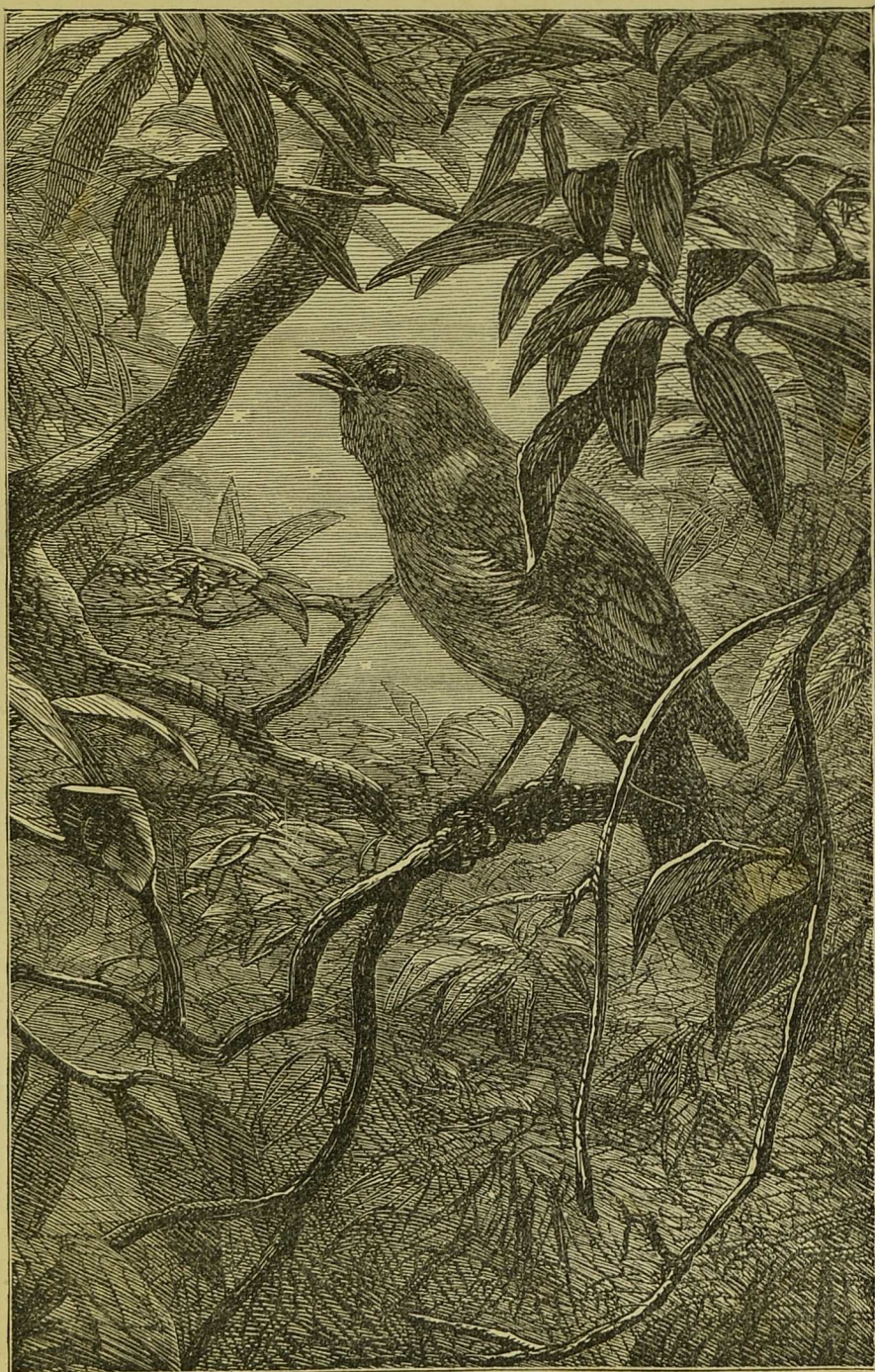
Did you ever hear of a cuckoo singing in mid-winter? I will tell you of one that did. A great many years ago, the servants of a country gentleman had stowed away a quantity of timber for winter use in a corner of one of their master's fields. Winter came, and Christmas came with its merry-makings, and the oven was wanted to bake some of the good things. So the wood was sent for from the field, and a large armful put into the stove to heat the oven. All at once, from out of the middle of the stove, came the familiar sound of "Cuckoo! cuckoo!" The astonished servants turned pale with fright—for those were superstitious days—and they thought the wood was bewitched. At last, one bolder than the rest put his arm in, but only drew out a bundle of feathers, while came a second time, "Cuckoo! cuckoo!" He tried again, and this time brought out a poor half-starved cuckoo.

Most likely it had not been strong enough to follow the others to a warmer climate, and so had crept for shelter into the pile of timber. There it must have fallen into a torpid state till the heat of the oven revived it. It died soon after, and never lived to cry "Cuckoo! cuckoo!" in any other place than the Christmas fire.

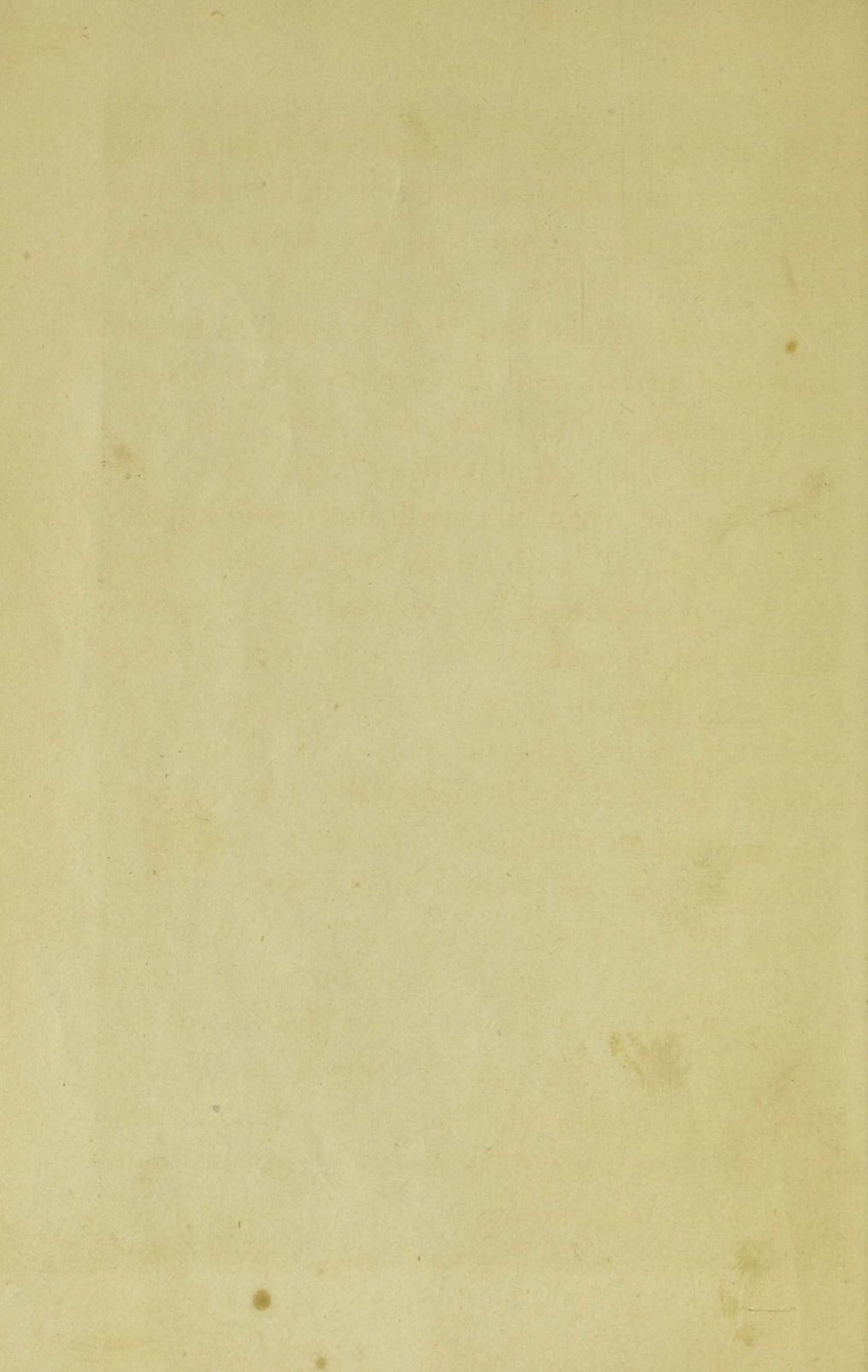
THE NIGHTINGALE.



THE Nightingale, like the cuckoo, is known to most of you by the hearing rather than the seeing. It is a shy and timid bird, desiring not the society of man, and hiding itself from his sight in the thicket and the shade. I was once, however, spending the spring in a quiet country spot, and a pair of nightingales built their nest in the middle of a flowering currant-bush close to the house. The male bird sat upon the dead branch of an apple-tree very near it, and sang night and day; and they were both so tame, they would pick up the crumbs strewed for them on the gravel-walk underneath the window. But usually it is a rare sight to see the little singer whose voice so charms us; which, happily, though he *does* avoid us, is so powerful it can



THE NIGHTINGALE.



be heard half-a-mile off: and so, though we may be in our garden, and the nightingale in the wood, we do not lose the treat of his singing.

The most likely time to see them is when they first arrive, and the leaves are not forward enough to hide them from view. I have seen them then often, and so might you. If at the end of April you stroll down some quiet lane, bordered with copse-wood and low thicket, the ground covered with the many-shaded purple cuckoo-flower, and a young oak-tree standing up here and there quite bare and dry, there you may have a chance of seeing, as well as hearing, the nightingale. There he is on that leafless bough; your light footstep does not make much noise, or he would be frightened in a minute. Not much to look at, with his unadorned brown coat and pale ash-coloured breast; but his shape is elegant: and see how his throat swells and quivers with that thrilling song, which seems as if his heart were so full of joy he could not pour it out fast enough!

Poets have said a great many things about

the nightingale, some true and some false ; and among the false things, they have fancied he leans his breast against a thorn all the while he sings, because his song is so sad ! Another has called it a melancholy bird ; but he was a disappointed man, or he would never have said that. Another, much wiser, has given his opinion that “in nature there is nothing melancholy ;” and you, with your happy hearts, will rather feel that the nightingale, in his song, just says out the gladness and joy you would like to express, but cannot. It is one of the strange things about nature, that it gives us back ourselves, as it were : if we are sad, it seems to sympathize ; and when we are happy, it seems to tell out our joy. But in itself God has made all creation to praise him, and it is a happy life he means his creatures to live, and not a sad one.

The nightingale's song is more varied than any other English bird's. It is made up of sixteen different parts, and it is all in as perfect harmony as if it read the notes out of a music-book as you might do, and it never sings them wrong or out of tune ! Perhaps

you do not know that birds' throats are formed with as nice a suitability for singing as yours or Jenny Lind's. A complicated arrangement is necessary to produce such sounds, and birds have it. They are made on purpose, so that there is hardly a bird that is entirely mute; and nearly all can be taught the notes of others besides their own. No animal has this capability—their throats are fashioned differently; and no dog or cat was ever known to speak any other language than its own. But birds have a natural susceptibility, as we call it, for singing. It is part of the work they have to do. It is their means of communication with each other, though *we* do not understand it. Oh, if some kind fairy would only give us the power, how pleasant it would be!

We know this much, that there is some soothing power in it on others of the same race; for the time when they sing most is when their mates are sitting in their nests. The nightingale pours out his sweetest strain for her—not too near, lest he should betray his secret, but on a bough not far off; and

thus he beguiles the tedious hours. *He* means it for his mate ; but God means it also for us, so that, as we listen, we may well say, with a good man of old, “ Lord, what music must thou have provided for thy saints in heaven, since thou givest bad men such music upon earth.”

It is a mistake to suppose that nightingales sing only in the night. From the end of April to the beginning of June, if the season is fine, they sing all day too ; but then they only form part of the general chorus. Twilight comes, and other heads are folded under their wings ; the nightingale alone, as if the day were not long enough to tell out his tale, prolongs his song of praise into the night.

The nest is made in a thick bush or shrub, entirely concealed from sight. It is formed of dead leaves and moss, not particularly well put together ; but then music, and not architecture, is the nightingale’s profession. The five eggs are of a plain, dull brown, but the shade of colour varies in almost every nest. After the young are hatched, the song gradually loses its sweetness, and soon ceases alto-

gether. The female has only a harsh call, hardly to be termed a song. Like the cuckoo, it does not wait for the falling leaves, but some time in July leaves us for southern climes.

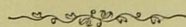
It is rather capricious in its tastes, for it never visits the north of England, and is seldom seen in Devonshire, Cornwall, or Wales. It is scattered all over Europe; but it is a creature of the Old World, and is never found in America.

We read of a Roman emperor, one of whose favourite dishes was a stew made of nightingales' tongues; and you will not be surprised, after this, to hear he was a weak and cruel man. A famous man in his day had once a dish made of the tongues of singing-birds, including those of nightingales, which cost more than £6000! It is a comfort to think this was such a long time ago; we must hope people know better now.

It is very difficult to keep nightingales in confinement; they almost always pine away and die. I hope you will never wish to make the experiment. Leave them to the shade

and the woodland, where God has placed them, and where "they ask no witness of their song, nor thirst for human praise." Humble and retiring, not knowing they sing better than others, seeking for neither notice nor admiration, let us take pattern from them. Let us bear in mind that beautiful motto of the great and good Fénelon, which is just what a nightingale would choose if he wanted one—" *Love to be unknown.*"

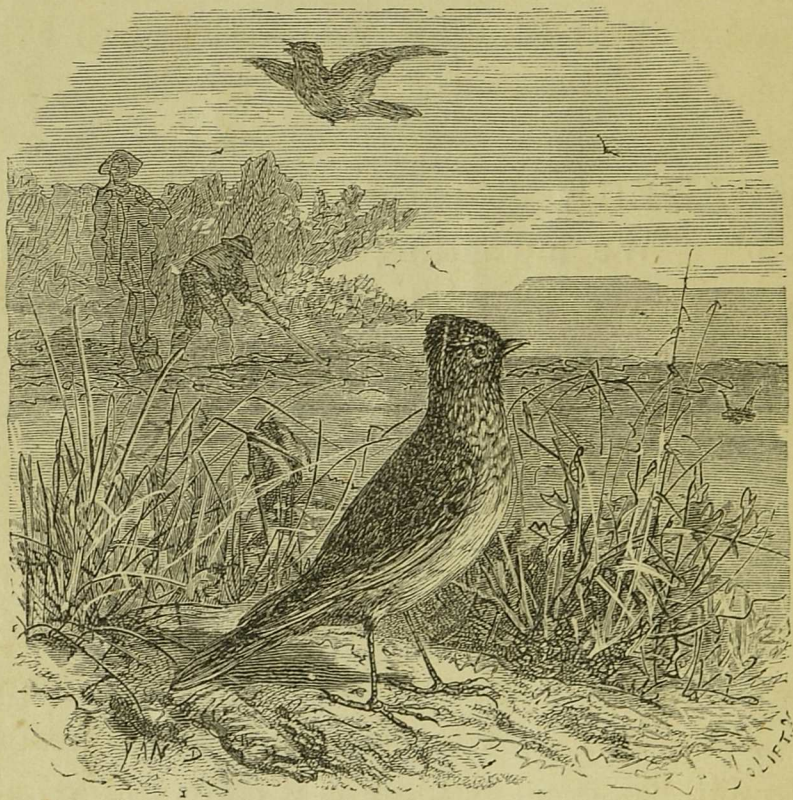
THE SKYLARK.



WHERE does the song come from? We are sitting on the green, open down; there are no trees near us to shelter any birds, not a living creature is to be seen anywhere; yet a song we do hear certainly—a happy, joyful song, the air seems quite full of it. Where *can* the singer be?

Look up, little one, look up; it is the skylark's song, and there is the Skylark itself, so high in the air we can only see it as a dark speck against the white clouds over our heads. Now it has gone as high as it cares to go, and it is coming down again, down, down, singing all the while, till it drops like a stone a little way from us, and we get a good look at our friend at last. A brown, sober-feathered bird, a spotted breast, with just a tinge of yellow

upon it, and a little crest upon its head—that is all. It has no particular beauty. God meant the lark for singing; and sing it does, with all its might.



THE SKYLARK.

Most birds sing their song through, and then stop a minute, as if to take breath; but the skylark all the time it is in the air never pauses, and never seems to tire. Most birds

sing upon a bough, but the skylark sings in the air—it never perches on a tree ; it would not be comfortable if it did. Its claws are straight, so that it could not clasp the spray ; they are made on purpose for running swiftly through the thick grass or clover where it lives and makes its nest. It has a relation, the woodlark, which lives partly on trees and partly on the ground ; but the skylark itself is never seen upon a tree. If it is not singing in the air, it is down in some lowly spot upon the ground. That is where it always springs from, as if to teach you and me that the humblest place is, after all, the nearest to heaven.

The skylark sings nearly all the year round. As soon as the first daisy opens its yellow eye, in February, or even January, the lark thinks it is full time for it to begin *its* work too. By-and-by the primrose peeps out from its crisp crinkled leaves, and then it sings more cheerily still. Then comes the honey-suckle, the wild rose of summer, the corn-fields turn yellow, the apples grow red, the leaves fade and presently fall ; but all the while the sky-

lark sings on, and its song blends with every season : it seems to say out for us what we feel in our hearts, and to thank God for us for the summer flowers and the autumn fruits.

The skylark is an early riser ; it makes a point of springing up to greet the morning sun. It sings at intervals all the day long ; and as the sun sinks in the west it sinks down too, into its grassy home, to begin the day again just the same to-morrow.

For a nest, it simply lines a hole in the ground with dry stalks and bits of grass ; and there it lays five or six dark mottled brown eggs. It chooses its situation in the meadow or clover-field, or even on the open down. Yet the nest is not so often found as you would suppose ; and even if once found, it is difficult to hit upon the same spot again.

Larks are plentiful everywhere, and in winter they fly about together in large flocks. Their summer food is mostly earth-worms, but in winter they are driven to vegetable diet. We call the wild plants *weeds*, and the garden ones *flowers*, but each alike bears its little seeds after its own kind, and each of these

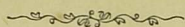
little seeds has its own work to do. We gather the pods of our sweet-peas and our lupines, and store them carefully away till we plant them the following summer. And the wild flower-seeds—does nobody gather *them*? Yes; God lays them in *his* storehouse, and not one is wasted. Some fall to the ground, ready to take root and grow up in the spring-time, but the greater part are for the spreading of the little birds' table. The larks especially feed on these seeds in the winter, and all the cold weather through they come and eat, and are satisfied.

Everybody loves the skylark's song; and sometimes, when people have gone away to other lands, they have taken a skylark with them to remind them of their English home. There was once a poor old widow woman who, finding it hard work to get her living at home, thought she would like to go to the gold-diggings in Australia. So she crossed the sea to that far-off country. The only treasures she possessed she took with her: one was her Bible—for she was a good old woman, and loved her Bible—the other was a pet skylark,

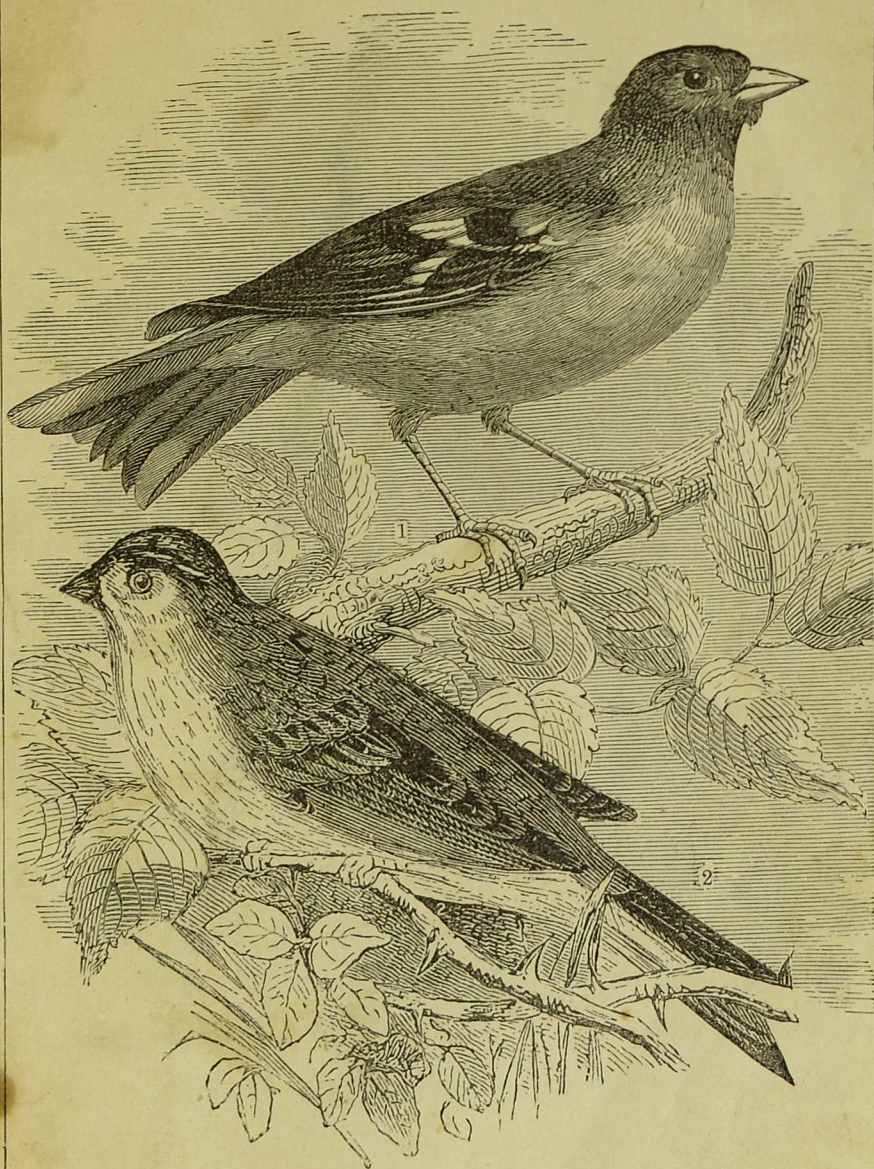
which had been used to live in a small wicker cage outside her cottage window. When she got to Australia, she hired a little hut, and got her living by washing the gold-diggers' clothes and cooking their dinners. All the time the little lark sang his happy English song beside her door. She listened, and it cheered her at her work. Some of the gold-diggers listened too: it was years since they had heard that familiar song, and many offered to buy the lark, if the widow would only sell him. She shook her head. "No, no, I'll never do that; but you may come o' Sundays and hear him sing—mayhap it'll do you good." Alas! they had no church there; nothing to make Sundays different from other days. But, Sunday after Sunday, they *did* come; and the lark's song told them of the green valleys of England; it brought back memories of their childhood—of the prayers learned at their mothers' knees—of the thoughts they once had about God and about heaven; alas! how sadly forgotten now! The rough men's hearts were softened; I think, nay, I am quite sure, they were better men for it. The skylark

preached a little sermon to them ; *he* did not know it, *he* did not mean it, but God meant it, and God sent it ; and I think, as the poor woman said, “ it did them good.”

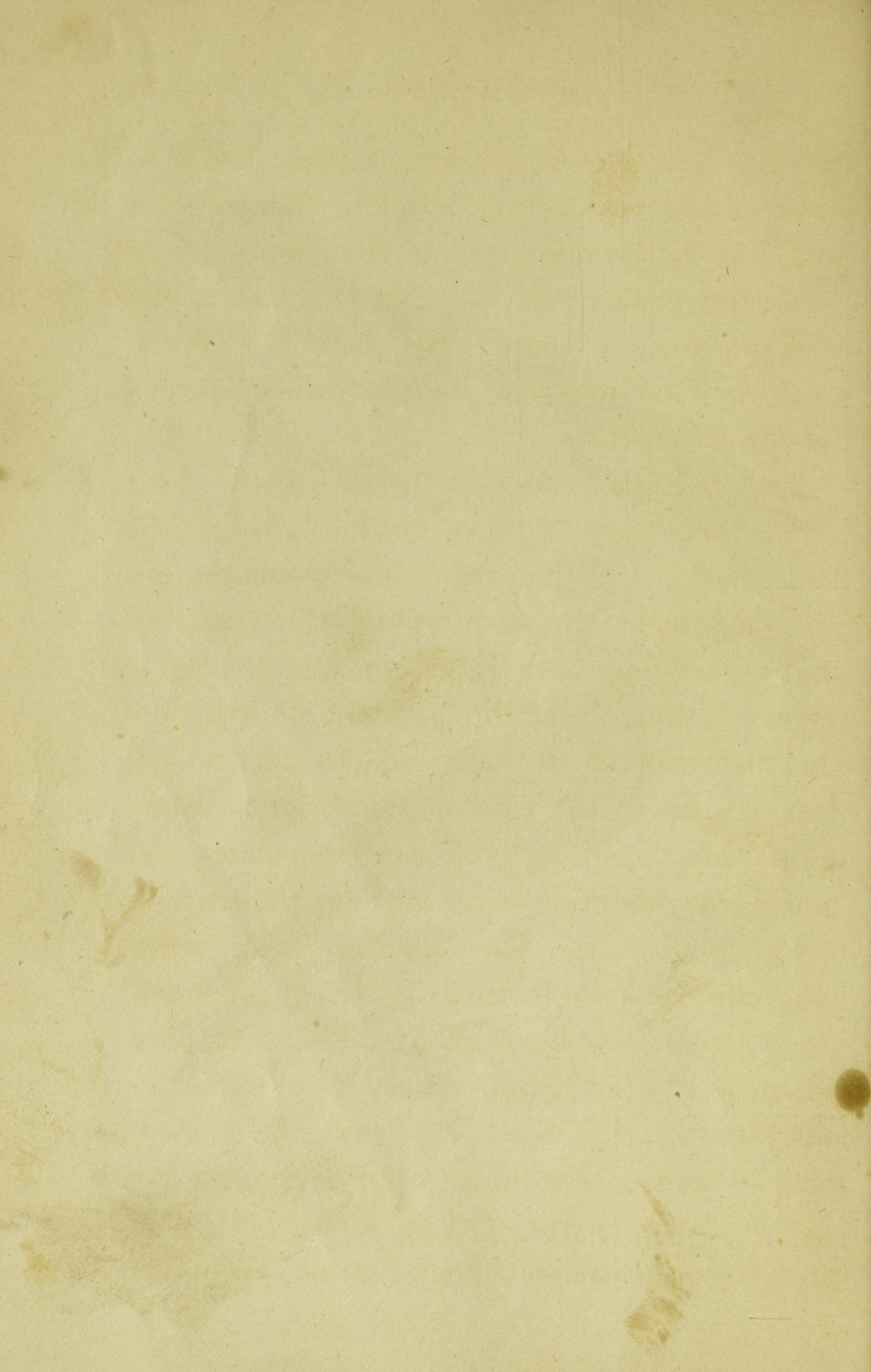
THE CHAFFINCH.



I THINK you are sure to know the Chaffinch, such a frequent and familiar little bird as he is, and so handsome withal. With the blue on his head like a cap, and the streaks of white on his chestnut wings, and the soft bright red on his breast, you are quite as sure to admire him. This is the plumage of the male bird; the female has no red, and her dress is altogether more sober. The hen birds of all kinds are plainer in their attire; always neat and elegant (for nature is never slovenly), but quiet and Quaker-like, just as if nature meant to give a sly hint on the matter of dress to others besides birds. Yet I must tell you the reason people who have studied the subject give us for this, as it is very interesting:



1. THE CHAFFINCH. 2. THE YELLOWHAMMER.



the hen bird, which sits for so many hours so close on her nest, either hatching her eggs or guarding her young ones, is thus more likely to escape prying eyes than if she had a gay coat on, like her mate. See how kindly and tenderly God provides for the safety even of his lower creatures.

The chaffinch stops with us all the year round, and may be seen during any of the four seasons. When you fling your crumbs out on a cold winter morning, the first bird that comes may be a robin, and the second a sparrow; but the third, and the fourth, and the fifth will most likely be chaffinches. If you sit upon the lawn on a bright, balmy April day, thinking you can almost see the grass grow and the daisies lift up their heads, a chaffinch will be sure to drop down before long, after a stray feather or a bit of moss, and away again, too busy about its nest to stay. Then, in the hot summer, as you lie under the oak-tree, in the wood, a sound like "Pink, pink!" makes you raise your eyes, and you see a gleam of red flitting from branch to branch; it is the chaffinch again. While in

autumn you may see a great many of them together, as at that time the males separate from the females, and fly about together in old bachelor parties; so that one of the Latin names of the chaffinch is *Cælebs*, which means bachelor.

The chaffinch has a pleasant song, loud and clear, though it wants sweetness, and is rather hurried, as if it wanted to get to the end; but it begins it again directly, and will sit on a twig, close to your window, and pour out the same notes for an hour together; then it will fly to another place, and repeat its more common note of "Pink, pink!" while it hunts for caterpillars or steals your cherries.

But the special gift of the chaffinch is not *singing*, but *building*. Except the goldfinch and the long-tailed tom-tit, it has hardly a rival among British birds in the skill with which it makes its nest. The goldfinch's is smaller, and therefore more fairy-like, but the chaffinch's is quite as beautiful in its construction. It builds often in rather an exposed situation—in the forked branch of a

pear tree or a plum tree, amongst the laurels of the shrubbery, in the holly-tree on the lawn—but the nest is so artfully made of the same colour as the branch or the leaves around it, you may pass it every day and never see it. At last the poor bird betrays its own secret by springing out before you, and then you search about till you find a more beautiful little home than ever fairy dwelt in or enchanter's wand created. The outside is sometimes made of moss or wool and little bits of stick or dried grass, woven together till it is firm and close as a piece of cloth, and so round and smooth that not a morsel of moss is out of its place, nor a single hair sticking up when it ought to lie down. Inside it is lined with horse-hair or feathers, and five or six pale eggs, blotched with brown, are laid in the midst of them. I have a nest before me now like this, which I have kept from the days of my childhood. I did not take it—I should blush to think I had ever been guilty of such a deed of cruelty; but it was given me by a boy companion, and prized for its beauty.

At other times, when the nest is built against a bare branch, it is so covered over with lichens as hardly to be distinguished from the bough it rests on, and the lichens are stuck on with bits of spiders' webs. I have one like this too. The boy who was clipping the shrubbery of my early home cut it off by mistake, and brought it in to "little miss," bough and all, with its five eggs lying soft and warm in their bed of feathers. It was the first bird's nest I remember seeing, and the love I now bear both to birds and their nests dates from that moment. I loved them then, but I love them better still now, for I can trace a Father's hand in every hair of those exquisite little dwellings. Perhaps the time may come when it will comfort you, too, to remember that the God who has given the birds skill for *their* work will also give you strength and wisdom for *yours*.

The male chaffinch makes a most attentive husband, and will take his mate's place upon the nest for a certain time every day, while she takes her needed exercise and refreshment. Both together, they work hard at their nest,

and then at the task of feeding their young. They begin their building about the middle of April, and in a fortnight or three weeks the house is ready for their future family. I have read of a gentleman who watched a pair of chaffinches make their nest under his window in three days. But that must have been under some extraordinary pressure of circumstances; it is not usually done so speedily as that; it takes a fortnight or three weeks with most birds before the nest is ready without and within. But I suppose it is with birds as with boys and girls; some do their work lazily; others heartily, and so get through it in half the time. I have, however, noticed that all birds are more alert and lively at the building and rearing time than at any other. In the autumn they seem to hop about listlessly, as if they missed the excitements of housekeeping and the care of a family. No doubt they find how much happier it is to have plenty to do; and if you watch them in the spring, I am sure you will say they enjoy *their* work, as I trust *you* do.

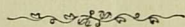
I hope you will never find it in your heart

to take a bird's nest. Is it not sad to think that, after all their trouble and their pleasure in this little piece of property, a monster should come and take it away from them? If our hands, clever as we think them, could never *make* it, is not to *steal* it a most unworthy use to put them to? Sometimes we may find one which, for some reason or other, the bird has forsaken, and then, of course, it is lawful spoil; but never meddle with it otherwise. Some will forsake as soon as they find it is discovered; others will bear a good deal of looking at, and will trust you not to do them any harm. And it is well to remember, you may take one egg, or even two, out of a nest without its being missed: it will only make one or two mouths less to feed when the little ones are hatched. So that you might get a collection in this way without the uncomfortable feeling that you had injured one of God's creatures for your own pleasure.

I have wandered from the chaffinch, but you must forgive me; and next time you see him on the lawn (so spruce and trim as he is, no wonder his nest should be neatly turned out

of hand, I feel certain he is particular about *everything*), and then fly into the laurustinus, where he has established his household, and you follow him and find it, please remember what I have been saying, and prove yourself not a *thief*, but a friend.

THE YELLOWHAMMER.



THE robin makes the most of his red breast as he flits in and out of the winter holly or the summer lilac bushes. But there is a little bird with a *yellow* breast as much deserving of our notice, and almost as common. True, it is not so trustful, and is seldom seen about our houses; but there is hardly a hedge-row or bit of wayside furze where you may not see the Yellowhammer perched on the topmost twig, jerking itself about for a minute or two, and then flying off to settle again a little way in advance of you. It has a trick of going before you all down the lane in this fashion.

The yellowhammer is rather larger than most of our small birds, being seven inches in length. Its bright yellow breast is softened in colour by being spotted with black, and its

upper parts are mostly brown. It makes its nest among the lower branches of bushes, almost on the ground, hidden from sight by the long rank grass, so that it is not so easy to find as you might think. The bird belongs to the family of buntings, and is often called the yellow bunting. Indeed, it has such a long string of common names, it is a sign it is a familiar and well-known bird.

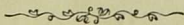
The eggs, like those of all the rest of the buntings, are easily known by the purple fantastic-looking scrawls which some fairy's hand appears to have traced on them.

Early in the spring the yellowhammer begins to say all he has to say. A song we can hardly call it; it is just three notes, which sound something like *chit-chat-chirr*, with the last syllable so long drawn out, it seems to end in a wail of grief. When other birds are singing we may not notice it; but if we do, it sounds like a few minor notes in some happy and joyous strain. When *they* grow silent, however, we cannot help hearing it, nor can we mistake it. Beside the ripening corn, the harvest-field, the orchard with its golden fruit,

—over and over again the same mournful tones—it always sounds to us like a sigh for the departing summer—for the cold dreary winter so soon to follow it.

But what need for melancholy, bird with the yellow breast? The winter has its work to do as well as the summer; and never winter either to you or to us will be without some gleams of God's sunshine, and some kind provision from God's hand.

THE BULLFINCH.



WE have said that every bird has its own character ; and the more you notice the more you will find this true. Especially is this the case with the Bullfinch ; he is so bold and independent-looking ; so handsome, too, with the red on his breast, and the black on his head, and the dark gray on his back, all so clearly and brightly marked. In point of shape, he will not compare with his cousin the chaffinch ; his head is thick, and the general make of his body strong built rather than elegant. But in other respects the bullfinch has a great resemblance to the other birds of the finch tribe.

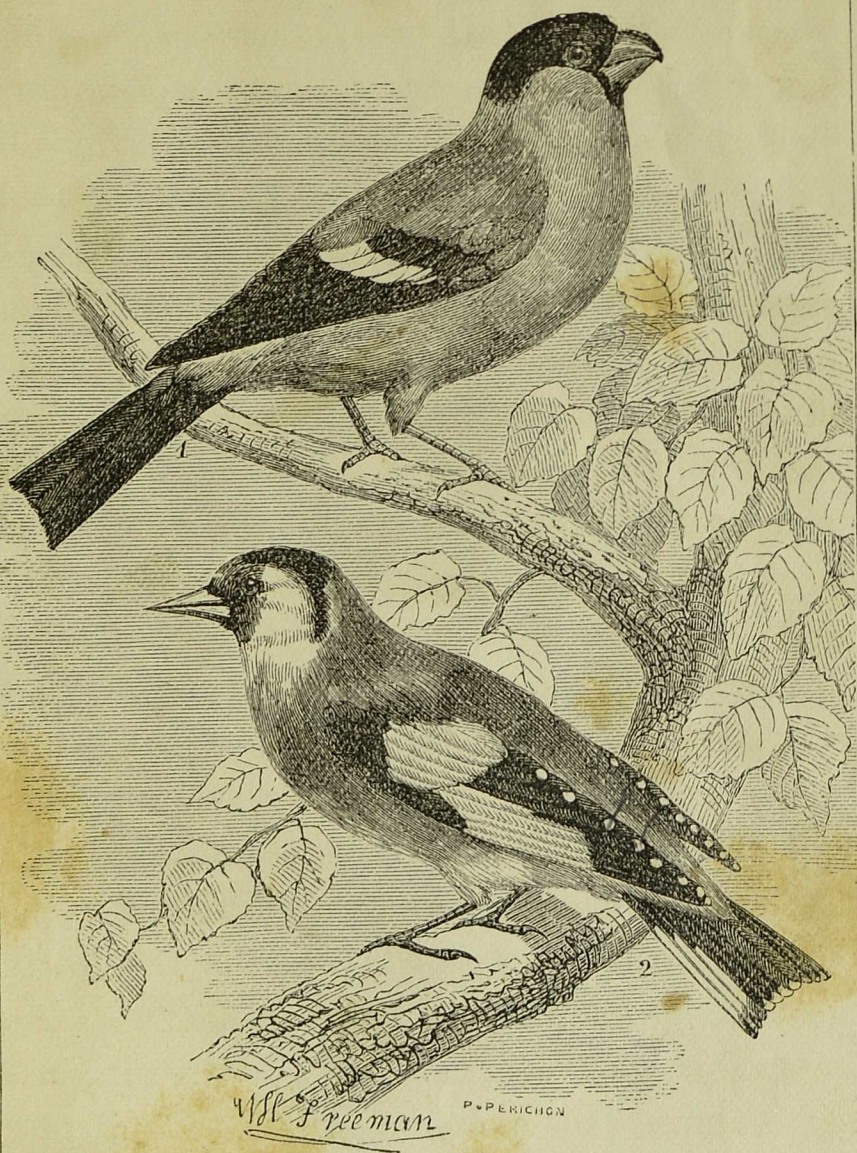
The bullfinch is fond of retirement, and so, though not at all uncommon, he is not often seen. On some cold winter day you may

chance to see a pair in the apple-tree pecking away at the buds—their favourite occupation. They want to get at the insects which have packed themselves snugly away inside the buds to sleep till the spring-time. When the frost is very severe, and even their sharp, strong beaks can make no impression on the frozen buds, they will condescend to join the other claimants for your crumbs. Then again in summer, when the cherries are ripe, you will catch a glimpse of the bright red breasts once more; but, in general, they hide themselves in the shrubberies and thickets, and never seek our notice.

Their nest is not particularly well finished, and is generally placed in the thickest part of the thickest bushes. The eggs are five or six in number, and are bluish-gray, spotted faintly with purple.

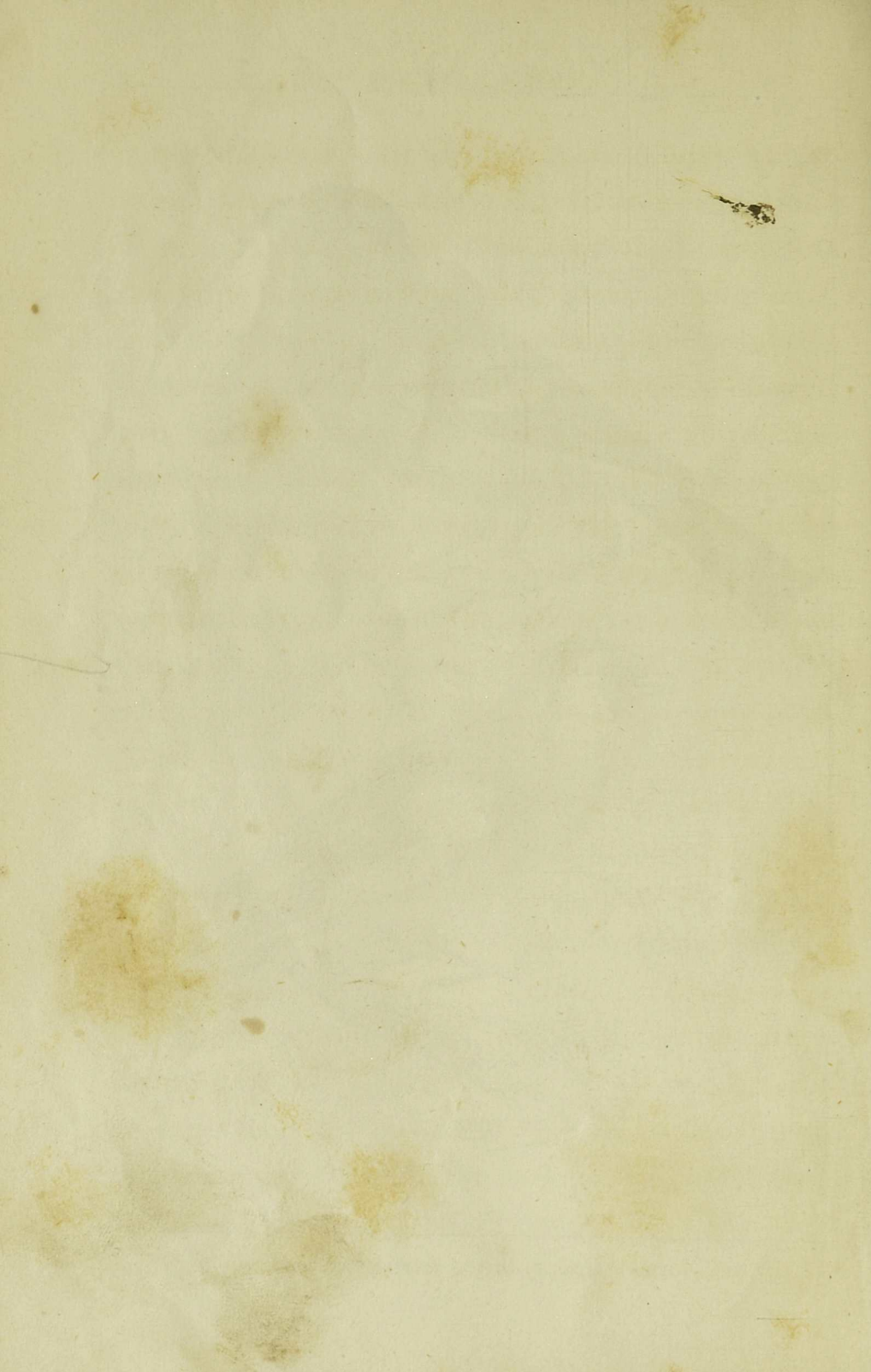
The natural note of the bullfinch is only a simple pipe or whistle; but he is very clever at imitating the notes of others, so that he is much sought after. He is a very apt scholar, and very docile and affectionate.

The best birds are brought from Germany,



1. THE BULLFINCH.

2. THE GOLDFINCH.



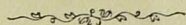
where much time and trouble are spent upon their education. They are taken very early from the nest, and they soon get very tame. When they are about two months old their master takes them in hand in earnest. He begins to whistle or play to them on a bird-organ one single tune, taking care that they never hear any other, or they would mix them up together. By degrees they begin to whistle it too. Sometimes a very clever bird will learn two or three tunes, but in general one is as much as they can manage correctly. It sounds very strange to hear these little creatures warbling "God Save the Queen," or "Home, sweet Home."

A gentleman had once taken great pains with a favourite bullfinch, and taught it to sing "God Save the Queen" very perfectly. He was then called away, and did not return home for some time. The first tidings he heard then were, that the poor bullfinch was very ill, and not likely to live. It had lost its song and all its powers. The gentleman went to the bird at once. It struggled up to its feet when it heard his voice, and by a great effort

perched on his hand as it used to do. It began to sing the familiar air, but it was too much for its failing strength, and in the act of doing it, it fell down dead !

Poor bully ! it had faithfully repaid its master's care. Is it not sad to think that people should so often ill-treat and ill-use the creatures around them, when a little kindness would draw forth love like this ? Love begets love, whether it be among birds or men. Try it, and you will find it so.

THE GOLDFINCH.



THE Goldfinch does not hop about our doors like the robin or the chaffinch. You will not see one every day, unless, indeed, you see it in that saddest of places for a free soaring bird, shut up in a narrow wire cage hanging outside some cottage door. If you would rather see him in his liberty and his glory, come with me, and I will show you where to look for him.

Go out some bright September morning, pass through the corn-fields whence the harvest has just been gathered in, out on to the green down beyond. A fine plot of thistles lies just on the edge of the slope. The feathery down, which is the seed, is just ripe. Some of it is floating on the breeze, away, away, till it sinks down somewhere, where

God pleases, to spring up by-and-by into a next year's thistle; and some is still hanging on the plant, ready for whatever may come next. And, lo! on these stems are perched some half-dozen little birds—beautiful little birds, with red and yellow and black on their soft, smooth feathers—pecking away at the downy heads with extreme satisfaction. And as the stems bend and sway with their gentle weight, and the gold on their fluttering wings gleams bright in the sunshine, you agree with me that it is a pleasant sight indeed to see a party of goldfinches at their thistle-down dinner.

The goldfinch has much beauty of form and colour, as you will see in the picture — a shapely, elegant little bird; yet, fragile as it seems, it stays with us all the winter, and braves the storm from which many more hardy-looking creatures shrink. It also sings delightfully, beginning early in the year, and early in the day too. Through the later summer months, when other notes are mostly silent, it is very pleasant to wake up early in the dawning light and hear its clear, sweet

song from the bushes just outside our window. It is, besides, very affectionate to man, very clever at learning all the little tricks which you may take the trouble to teach it, and so sprightly and apparently happy in confinement, that it is a general favourite, and more frequently kept as a cage-bird than any other of our English species. Poor little goldfinch ! it pays dearly for having so many gifts.

Another of its accomplishments is the art of building. Its nest is a most finished piece of workmanship, woven and felted of moss and lichens, like the chaffinch's, but smaller, more compact, and, if possible, still more perfect. It builds mostly in our gardens and shrubberies, laying five or six eggs of bluish-white, spotted with brown at the large end. After the young are reared, they flock together in little parties about the commons and open places where their food most abounds. In choosing a spot for its nest, it always fixes on some slender topmost twig which will sway up and down with the wind ; so that the young goldfinches get well rocked, cradle-like, in their soft, warm nursery, just as if it were

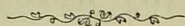
to prepare them for the bending and dancing of the thistle-plants on which they perch in their after life.

To crown the good qualities of the goldfinch, it is very useful to the farmer, living on the seeds which are most injurious to him, and yet never touching his grain or his crops ; for its special food is the seed of the race of plants called by botanists *composite*. That is a hard word, but they mean by it the thistle, dandelion, groundsel, and many other familiar wayside weeds. You have often puffed away their downy heads, or watched the wind scattering them hither and thither ; and they would soon cover the farmer's fields and choke the good seed he has sown there, if the birds did not keep them under. This is the special work of the goldfinch. It has this peculiarity, that it never picks its food from the ground. No ! it likes best to have it quite fresh ; so it always clings to the plant itself, and there feasts away at its leisure.

And as we stand and watch it, *we* know what the goldfinch does not—that an Almighty Hand has provided and arranged for all with

unerring love and forethought; creating the thistle-down for the goldfinch, and the goldfinch for the thistle-down, making one thing fit into another in a never-ending chain; so that the more we study Nature, the oftener we find ourselves obliged to exclaim, "O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches" (Ps. civ. 14).

THE BLACKBIRD.



THE Blackbird and the thrush are relations, and so much alike in their ways and habits that the story of one's life is very like the story of the other's. Poets call them the merle and the mavis; and we speak of the two birds together more familiarly than we do of any others. Both like our fruit when they can get it, as well as slugs and snails; both sing to us at early dawn and in the gathering twilight; both build their nests early, so that they have time to rear two broods every season. They use the same materials too, dried roots and coarse moss; but the thrush lines its nest with mud, plastered quite smooth, while the blackbird prefers hair or a few leaves. The eggs of the latter are green mottled with brown, totally unlike those of the thrush.



THE MERLE AND THE MAVIS.



Their forms may be somewhat similar, but the deep ebony black of our present friend, and his golden bill, are peculiarly his own. Mrs. Blackbird, of course, must take her husband's name, but she is not black at all, but brown all over, and without the yellow bill.

The voices, too, of the blackbird and the thrush are as unlike as can be. Of the thrush we shall speak presently; that of the blackbird is, to our thinking, sweeter and richer far. It is not so loud nor so varied; but it is so deep, so mellow, so full of melody, the very soul of music is in it, and it seems to blend with all the beautiful in this beautiful world of ours. Somebody has put it into musical notes; but no instrument of man's making could ever reproduce the blackbird's song as *he* sings it.

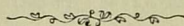
Nearly every bird has a call or cry peculiar to itself besides its song. Some have so many different ones it is very confusing. We wonder what strange voice it is that we hear, and after all we find out it only comes from some old familiar friend. The blackbird's cry when he is alarmed or startled is loud and sounding, and once heard is easily recognized again.

The blackbird has sometimes a trick of taking strange things to mix up with his nest besides the usual orthodox materials. A servant had been washing some Honiton lace cuffs, and had left them out upon the lawn all night to dry. In the morning, however, they had vanished. "They can't have gone without hands," said her master rather testily. Much inquiry was made, as they were valued, but nothing could be heard of them, and they were given up for lost. But one day some time after, where do you think they were found? Woven into a blackbird's nest in a garden some distance off! I suppose he thought they would make light and tasty hangings for his nursery walls. And so they *did* go without hands after all, and the gentleman had to learn the useful lesson that it never does to be too sure.

The blackbird's sober attire makes him look grave and sedate: he is fond of play nevertheless. You may often see them in the garden chasing each other about backwards and forwards, and amusing themselves at some game of their own, which *you* may not understand, but no doubt *they* do.

Not long since, there was a great man amongst us who began life as a poor man in a small miner's cottage. When he was only three years old, his father lifted him up to peep into a blackbird's nest, and from that time he loved all the birds, but blackbirds most of all. When he was a young man, he had one especial favourite which he had tamed. Did he keep it in a cage? Oh no; it used to roost every night at his bed's head all through the winter. In the spring it would fly away to the wood, build its nest, rear its young, and then return again to its post and its friend. And when he was a poor man no longer, but lived in a princely house of his own, he still remembered and cherished his early favourites. This was George Stephenson, to whom we owe our railways. I think it is an honour to the blackbird to have been loved by such a man as he was.

THE THRUSH.



YEAR after year you may hear the Thrush's voice from the same spot, and the same tree, and the same bough. *We* like our own places by the fireside, and the thrush seems to have something of the same feeling. Some bright March morning you hear the first notes ; you look round, and there, on the bare leafless bough of the tall elm-tree at the end of the garden you see it perched, neatly dressed in brown, its speckled throat swelling as it pours out its heart in song. The song wants sweetness, but it is so varied and so cheery we all love it.

From that same place, early in the morning and long after sunset, the same thrush will sing on all through the spring, now and then in the summer, again in the autumn, and just



THE THRUSH.
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for a treat once or twice in the winter. Perhaps you may even notice that the song improves: it is the case with birds as it is with you, that practice makes perfect. A young thrush does not come into full song till it is about three years old, and each season its notes get mellower till the end of that time. Then, I suppose, it is considered grown up and its education finished.

You must often have watched the thrush upon the lawn: what quick little runs, or rather hops, he takes; then he tugs up a worm; then another run, and another worm. Slugs and snails, however, it likes best; and for this reason it is a very early riser, telling us by its song, before it is fully light, what a good breakfast it has made off those delicious morsels on the damp dewy grass. Its way of breaking the snail shells is by banging them with its beak against a stone. But if this does not succeed, it has another device in store: it carries them in its beak up into the air, and then lets them fall upon the stone, when of course they are smashed, and it can regale itself at its leisure. But the thrush

likes a change of diet sometimes; and when the fruit is ripe, it is one of the first to claim its share.

The nest is made in March, and perched in a fir or laurel or other evergreen tree. In out-of-the-way fir plantations you may find one in almost every tree; and as they are generally within reach of the ground, you may gladden your sight over and over again with the five blue eggs, spotted black at the large end, and so bright and so pretty. If you like, you may take *one* out of every nest; and you would get as many as would fill your pockets, and yet have done no harm, for the mother bird would never miss nor mourn a single egg. But, oh! do be content, and take no more.

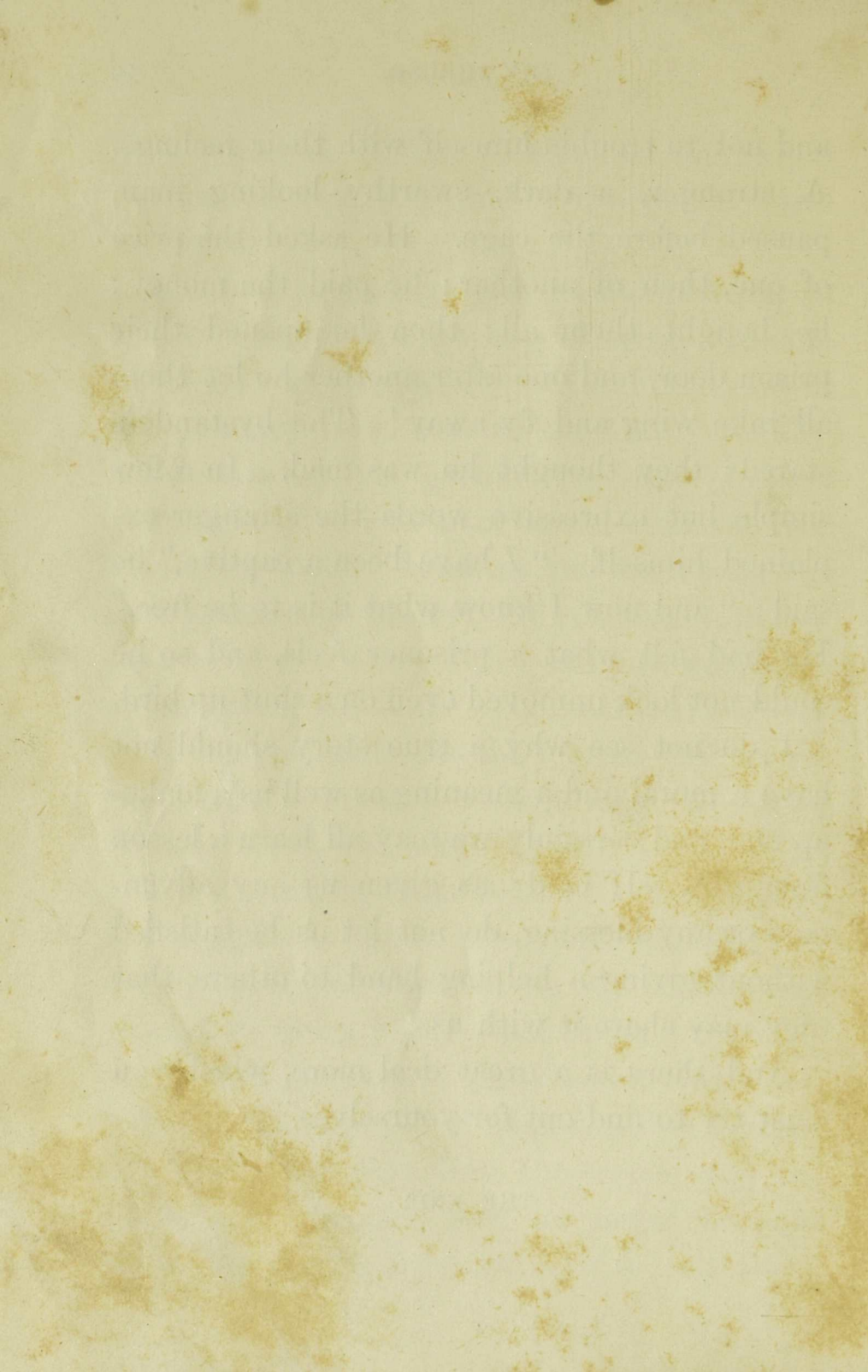
The thrush is often kept in a wicker cage as a song-bird. How often I have pitied one there, and hoped that the life of a captive bird was not so weary as it seemed to me it must be!

Once on London Bridge stood a bird-seller, with a large cage full of imprisoned songsters. They had been torn from the woods, and the fields, and freedom; but he never thought about *that*. His business was to sell them,

and not to trouble himself with their feelings. A stranger, a dark, swarthy-looking man, paused before the cage. He asked the price of one, then of another; he paid the money: he bought them all; then he opened their prison door, and one after another he let them all take wing and fly away! The bystanders stared; they thought he was mad. In a few simple but expressive words the stranger explained himself. "*I have been a captive,*" he said; "*and now I know what it is to be free.*" He had felt what a prisoner feels, and so he could not look unmoved even on a shut-up bird.

I do not see why a true story should not have a moral and a meaning as well as a make-up one, and certainly we may all learn a lesson from this. If God has given us any advantage or any blessing, do not let us be satisfied without giving a helping hand to others, that they may share it with us.

And there is a great deal more, which you must try to find out for yourselves.



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