

II.

A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

My first sight of the little stranger was one morning when returning from a long stroll in search of a nest of the red-headed woodpecker. It was not through the woods I had been, as might be expected. I did not search the dead limbs or lifeless trees; on the contrary, I followed the dusty road and examined the utility poles, for the woodpecker of these latter days has departed from the ways of his fathers, deserted the cool and fragrant woods, and taken up his abode in degenerate places, a fitting change of residence to follow his change of habit from digging his prey out of the tree-trunks to catching it on the wing.

On this morning I found holes and birds enough, but no hole that seemed to belong to any particular bird; and as I walked along home by the railroad, I came upon my little stranger. He was seated comfortably on a wire, so comfortably that he did not care to disturb himself for any stray mortal who might chance to pass.

I stopped to look, and hurriedly note his points, fearing every moment that he would take wing; but not a feather stirred. A king on his throne could not be more absolutely indifferent to a passer-by than this little beauty. He was self-possessed as a thrush, and serene as a dove, but he was not conveniently placed for study, being above my head in strong sunlight, against a glaring sky. I could see only that his under parts were beautiful fluffy white dusted with blue-gray, and that he had black on the wings. He was

somewhat smaller than a robin, and held his tail with the grace of a catbird.

On several subsequent days I passed that way frequently, sometimes seeing the bird alone, again with a comrade, but always noting the same reserved manners, and always so placed that I could not see his markings. It was not until a week or so later that I had a more satisfactory view.



Babies in Gray - The Shrike

I was taking my usual afternoon walk, about five o'clock, when, as I approached a little pond beside the road, up started the unknown from a brush heap on the edge. He flew across the road to a tree near the track, and I was about to follow him when my eye fell upon another on the fence beyond, and on walking slowly toward him I discovered a second, and then a third. Three of the beauties on a fence a little way apart — a family! I stood and gazed.

The backs and heads of the birds, as I could then plainly see, were a little darker shade of the delicate blue-gray, with the same soft, fluffy look I had noticed on the breast. The wings were black and somewhat elaborately marked with white. The beak, that tell-tale feature which reveals the secret of a bird's life, was not long, but thick, and black as jet, and the dark eye was set in a heavy, black band across the side of the head. The combination of black and gray was very effective, and closer acquaintance did not modify my first opinion of the little stranger; he was a beautiful bird, graceful in every movement, and innocent and sweet in life I was sure, and am still, in spite of —

But let me tell my story: While I was noting these things, I heard the cries of a bird-baby behind me. The voice was strange to me, and of a curiously human quality. I turned hastily, and there on the pole was the baby in gray, receiving his supper from one of his parents, and crying over it, as do many feathered little folk — one more of the mysterious family.

There were thus five in sight at once, and at least three of them were infants lately out of the nest, hardly taught to feed themselves; yet the most sedate head of the household was no more dignified and grown-up in manner than was the youngest of them, for when he had cried over his repast and descended to the fence I could not tell him from Mamma herself.

I soon discovered that this was no junketing party; all were on business bent. They might look at me and they did, although I was not near enough to disturb them; but every one kept at least one eye on the ground, where were growing beans about three inches high, and I'm sure no small creature could stir in that part of the world that one of those sharp eyes did not light upon it. They were ten or so feet apart, so that each had his own share of territory to overlook, and every few moments one flew to the ground, seized something, and returned at once to his place, ready for another. It was a wire fence, and they always selected the wires instead of the posts to perch upon. Sitting and never standing, their attitude expressed a charming serenity.

While I stood watching, two of the youngsters happened to pounce upon the same object — a worm it looked like — and there was for a moment a spirited tug of war. Each held on to his end, and resisted with cries the attempts of his brother to deprive him of it. Doubtless the prey, whatever it was, suffered in this affair, for in a moment they separated amicably, and each returned to his station on the fence. These three were babies; their actions betrayed them; for a little later, when one of the elders flew from the field to a

low peach tree, instantly there arose the baby-cry "ya-a-a-a!" and those three sedate looking personages on the wire arose as one bird, and flew to the tree, alighting almost on the mother, so eager were they to be fed. In a moment she flew to the fence, where all three followed her. When she escaped from their importunities she came much nearer to me, doubtless to see if I needed watching, and I had a closer look than I had succeeded in getting before, and satisfied myself on a point or two of marking.

Up to this time my searching into the name and identity of my little strangers in gray had been in vain. But a direful suspicion was growing within me. That heavy black line from the eye! The strongly marked wings! I turned with dread to a family I had not considered — the shrikes. There were the markings, too true! But that delicate blue-gray was not "slate color." Still, people see colors differently, and in every other way the description was perfect. They must be — my beautiful, graceful strangers must be butcher-birds!

Dreadful discovery! I must know all about them; whether they deserve the name and reputation. I flew to my books.

"The character of the butcher-bird," says Wilson, "is entitled to no common degree of respect. His courage and intrepidity are beyond every other bird of his size, and in affection for his young he is surpassed by no other. He attacks the largest hawk or eagle in their defense with a resolution truly astonishing, so that all of them respect him;" and, further, "He is valued in Carolina and Georgia for the destruction of mice. He sits on the fence and

watches the stacks of rice, and darts upon them, also destroying grasshoppers and crickets."

So said Wilson, but subsequent writers have said terrible things about him: that he catches small birds and impales them on thorns; that he delights in killing more than he can eat. Could these things be true? Where, then, was the larder of this family? Such a curious and wonderful place I must see. I resolved to devote myself to discovering the secrets of this innocent looking family in gray.

The nest where they had first seen the light was in a low spruce-tree beside a constantly used gate, not more than eight feet from the ground, and across the road was a tree they much frequented. Next to that, and overshadowed by it, was a thorny tree, "honey locust" it is called. Ominous proximity! I resolved to investigate. Perhaps I should find the birds' place of storage. I crossed the track and went to the tree. What a structure it was! A mere framework for thorns, and a finer array of them it would be hard to find, from the tiny affair an inch in length, suitable to hold a small grasshopper, to foot-long spikes, big enough to impale a crow. Not only was every branch and every twig bristling with them, but so charged was the whole tree with the "feeling" of thorns, that it actually sent out great clumps of them from the bare trunk, where there was not a shadow of excuse for being. They grew in a confused mass, so that at first I thought there had been a hole which some person had stopped by crowding it full of needles, at all angles, and of all sizes up to the largest. On one side alone of the trunk, not more than five feet high, were eight of these

eruptions of thorns. Could the most bloodthirsty shrike desire a more commodious larder?

I looked carefully, dreading to see evidence of their use in the traditional way. Outside there, on the wire, sat one of the birds, very much at home; it was the height of the season, and the country was swarming with young birds. Now, if ever, they should lay up for the future, and prove their right to the name, or kill to amuse themselves, if that were their object. But the closest scrutiny failed to reveal one thorn that was, as far as I could see, ever had been, used for any purpose whatever. There was not another spiny tree in the vicinity, and I came away relieved.

One more viewing I had with my little gray friends. Coming leisurely along on my way home from the glen one afternoon, I saw two of them sitting on the wire of a fence beside the road. I had never been so near them, and stopped instantly to have a close look, and perhaps settle the question whether the black band on the side of the head ended at the beak, or crossed over the forehead and met its fellow. I found, at this short range, that the light part of the plumage was covered with fine but wavy bars, which gave it an exquisite look, and proved the bird to be the great northern, rather than the loggerhead shrike.

Very gradually I drew nearer, till I was not more than six feet from them, and could see them clearly, while they remained perfectly self-possessed for ten or fifteen minutes that I stood there. So near was I that I could see the white eyelids, and the tiny feet, which seemed hardly strong

enough to hold them on their perch, and explained their preference for wires to rest on.

One of the little fellows had his back to me, showing the beautiful white markings on his wings as they lie closed and folded together. Near the end of them were white lines making on the black feathers a figure resembling what is known in needlework as a "crow's-foot," perhaps an inch in width, and, a little above this, two dainty waved bars met like a pair of eye-brows. The marking was elegant.

While I looked, the bird nearest me suddenly lost what little interest he had in my doings, turned his eyes downward, and in a moment dropped upon a big grasshopper, which he carried in his beak to a wire near the ground to dispose of. Evidently, he was not quite ready to eat, for he deliberately lifted one foot, took the grasshopper in his claw, and instantly ejected upon the ground a dark-colored bolus, I should judge half an inch in diameter, and more than twice as long. Then he returned to his grasshopper and made short work of it.

This seemed only to sharpen his appetite, for in a moment he dragged out from the grass something which startled me. Was it feathers or fur or a bit of old rag?

I could soon tell, for he was not in the least ashamed or secretive about it. He pulled it to where a fallen wire lay very near the ground, threw it partly over the wire, plainly as a hold to pull against, and then jerked off a mouthful, which he ate. Again and again did he fling it over the wire,

for it soon slipped off, and it was perfectly plain that the object was to give him purchase to pull against. Then I could see small legs on the fragment, and a tail like a mouse's. While I stood watching this feast in progress, a call came from across the road. It was not loud, and it was of a quality hard to express, not exactly harsh, nor yet musical. It was instantly answered by the two on the fence, and the one I was watching dropped his fresh meat and joined his parent. Then I examined the remains of his meat, and found that it had reddish brown fur, a tail not so long but resembling that of a mouse. It was on the borders of a recently cut field of wheat, and it was doubtless some species of ground mouse, a common field mouse, I have reason to believe.

And that was the last I saw of the pretty gray birds that year.