

## BIRDS AT YULE-TIDE.

## I.

## SUNLIGHT.

At the northern end of the wren orchard there is an angle in the stone wall where the autumn winds pile dry leaves. The wall at this point is five feet high and very thick, and no breeze finds a way through it. Above and behind the wall a dozen or more ancient white pines rise high into the air, cutting off all view of the northern sky; but southward the orchard falls away in grassy terraces, and through the vistas between the old gray trunks and tangled branches far glimpses of Cambridge and the Charles River meadows greet the eye. Christmas, 1892, had come and gone, but New Year's Day was still in the future. There were snow banks in the shadows, and back of the wall, under the pines, the north wind bustled about on winter errands. Weary with a long walk, I had sunk deep into the dry leaves on the sunny side of the wall, and had found them warm and comforting. The sun's rays had brought heat, and the brown leaves had taken it and kept it safely in their dry depths.

At first, as I lay there, the world seemed lifeless, so utterly silent was it. No insect's wing gleamed in the sunlight, no squirrel ran on the wall, no bird spoke in the treetops. There are wonderfully still moments in midsummer, when the breeze dies away, the sun's rays glow like fire in the lake, and the birds sit motionless and drowsy in the thickets. In those moments, however, the watchful eye can always see the dragonfly darting back and forth over the water, the inch-worm reaching out its aimless and inquiring arm from the tip of a grass stalk, or the ant marching back and forth with endless patience

under the stubble forests. Still and seemingly dead as was this winter morning, I had faith that if I listened attentively enough some voice would come to me out of the silence; and sure enough, as soon as my presence was forgotten, two or three golden-crested kinglets began lisping to each other in the nearest cedars. Soon they came into view, hovering, fluttering, clinging, among the evergreen branches; sometimes head downwards, often sideways, always busy clearing the foliage of its insect dwellers.

While I was watching these tiny workers, now and then catching a glimpse of their bright yellow crown-patches, I saw a much larger bird alight in a leafless ash-tree about fifty feet from me, near the orchard wall. The next moment the harsh cry of a jay came through the still air, and as I brought my glass to bear on the visitor I expected to recognize the gay plumage of the crow's festive cousin. The bird in focus was no jay: that was clear at first glance. It was shorter than a blue jay by two inches or more; it was not blue, and its head was not crested. Presently another bird of the same species joined the first comer, and the two sat quietly in the bare tree, doing nothing. Far away a flicker called, and then in the pines the clear *phæ-bē* of the titmouse came like a whiff of perfume. One of the strange birds dropped suddenly to the foot of the tree, and began moving over a broad snow bank which lay in the shadow cast by the wall and a bunch of privet and barberry. The snow was sprinkled with the winged seeds of the ash, and the bird picked these up one by one, neatly freed each seed from its membrane, and swallowed it.

While the bird remained in shadow she looked gray; but whenever the sun-

light struck her, rich olive tones glowed upon her head, back, and rump, while traces of the same coloring showed upon her breast. Beautiful water-markings rippled from her neck downward over her back. Her wings were dark ashy gray marked by two white wing bars and white edgings to the stiff feathers, and under each eye a white line was noticeable. Her feet showed black against the snow, in which they moved regardless of cold or dampness. The bird in the tree was not favorably placed for me to see his colors, so, rising softly from my leaf-bed, I moved silently towards him until he came against a dark background. Slowly raising my glass, I leveled it upon him, and brought out to my admiring eyes the exquisite tints of his plumage. Where his mate had glowed with olive, he blushed with rosy carmine. Head, nape, rump, throat, and breast alike were suffused with warm, lustrous color. Here and there, white, gray, and ash struggled for a share in his dress, but the carmine outshone them. There could be no doubt as to the birds' identity,—they were a pair of pine grosbeaks.

My approach to a point not more than twenty feet from the feeding bird did not disturb her. She watched me closely, but continued to gather the ash seeds. At times she even ran towards me a foot or two. Suddenly a dark shadow crossed the snow drift, and both birds started apprehensively, as though to fly away; but they quickly regained their composure as a ragged-winged crow sailed close above the treetops and disappeared behind the hill. A nearer approach to the birds showed me how massive were their bills: the upper strongly arched mandible forming a sharp hook far overhanging the blunter under one. Their tails, too, were noticeable, being plainly and quite deeply forked.

Advancing step by step, I came at last so near these confiding birds that, had they been domestic fowls, they would

have avoided me. The one on the ground flew into the ash-tree, and both moved a little higher among the branches as I walked directly beneath them. Of nervous fear they gave no sign, although both uttered short musical notes in a querulous tone. This trustfulness is characteristic of many of the migrants from the far north which suddenly, and for causes not yet fully understood, sweep over fields and forests in midwinter. Many a time I have stood beneath a slender white birch in whose branches dozens of pine siskins were resting, or red-poll linnets feeding. I have leaned over the upper rail of a fence and looked down upon red crossbills eating salt and grain from a cattle trough on the ground on the other side of the fence, while they watched me with their bright eyes, yet did not fly. Chickadees and Hudson Bay titmice have chided me while they perched upon twigs, only a foot or two from my head; and nuthatches, kinglets, purple finches, goldfinches, and snow buntings have in a less noticeable way shown far less fear of me than any summer migrant or resident bird would display.

## II.

### MOONLIGHT.

Sunset in late December comes long before tea time, so I lingered in the wren orchard while the orange light came and went in the west, and until the big yellow moon swung free from the eastern elms, and began her voyage across the chilly sky. I had been worrying the crows at their roost in a grove of pitch pines on the very crest of the Arlington ridge. Just as they skulked into the grove on one side, I glided in from the other. Silently they floated through the twilight, and gained a thickly branching pine. In its upper foliage they crowded together and prepared for sleep. Then they heard my footsteps on the twigs

and snow crust below, and suddenly a great stirring, and rubbing of wings and twigs told of their flight. At first they said nothing, but when they had reached the upper air they circled over the grove cawing spitefully. A small flock of pine grosbeaks dropped into the grove, and after the brightest of the golden light had faded from behind far Wachusett I heard a small troop of kinglets come in for their night's lodging. The crows came back to their favorite tree, and when I disturbed them a second time nine of them flew away full of wrath.

Leaving the pines to darkness and its birds, I came back to the wren orchard. As I ran through a savin-dotted pasture, a lonely junco flew from beneath a juniper bush, and lighted upon the ground. I stopped and watched him. For a while he kept very still, but at last he showed his white tail feathers in flight, and vanished among the cedars. Under the cedars I found a dead bird, lying on its back upon the snow. It was a grosbeak, with almost every feather, except those on the breast, intact; yet, strange to say, its body had been eaten, — probably by mice, for no creature less tiny could have removed the flesh so completely without injuring the plumage. I fear the trustfulness of this gentle migrant caused its death. Mice can eat birds, but they cannot shoot them first.

The apple-trees in the wren orchard seemed even more grotesquely gnarled as they lifted their distorted limbs against the moonlit sky than they had in the pale winter sunshine. They are very old trees for fruit trees, and many a dark cavern in their trunks and larger limbs offers shelter to owls, squirrels, and mice. Leaning against one of their broad trunks, I imitated the attenuated squeak made by a mouse. Again and again I drew breath through my tightly closed and puckered lips, feeling sure that if Scops and his appetite were in company anywhere within an owl's ear-

shot of my squeaking, I should hear from the little mouser.

Once, twice, perhaps three times, there fell upon my ear what seemed like the distant wailing of a child or the faint whinnying of a horse. All at once it came over me that the sound was not distant, and I held my breath and listened intently. It came again, — faint, tremulous, sad. My ears declined to say whether it came fifty feet or a quarter of a mile. I stole softly towards the point from which it proceeded, but before I had gone a rod I heard the same or a similar sound on my left. This time it was more distinct, and I knew it to be the quavering whinny of a screech owl. Stooping to the ground, I scanned the apple-trees with the white sky for a background. In the third tree from me I saw a dark lump on a branch. I crept towards it, and at the first sound I made, the bunch resolved itself into a broad-winged little owl, which flew across to the next tree. Rising, I walked straight towards it, until I stood close beneath the bird, who watched me without moving.

Although I could see only his silhouette, I knew well what his expression was like, having had several of his family as pets. His feathery ear-tufts were depressed, and his head was set down closely upon his shoulders. Could I have seen his face, I should have met an impish glare in his small yellow eyes, and a look about his mouth suggestive of sharp bites. The screech owl fears the barred owl as much as a robin does; so when I hooted like his big cousin, and spun my hat into the air over him, he flew down almost to the ground, made a sharp angle, and rose into a tree at a little distance. After I had followed him from tree to tree for several minutes, he finally succeeded in dodging me, and I left the orchard to the quiet of the winter's night.

In the morning, when I rolled into the pile of leaves by the sunny side of the wall, the day seemed bereft of incident and color; but as I ran down the

frozen hillside, hurrying more to regain warmth than to gain time, the day appeared, in retrospect, to be well filled with incident and life. Not only had there been crows, jays, flickers, chickadees, kinglets, and a junco busy about their respective tasks of food-finding, but the charming pine grosbeaks had gathered the ash seeds from the snow, a few feet from where, as soon as moonlight replaced sunshine, Scops set himself to gather his nightly harvest of mice. Vegetation, as a rule, is dormant in winter ;

most of the insect world selects winter for its period of repose and transformation ; snow, ice, and lack of food drive certain birds into migration, and cause reptiles and a few species of mammals to hibernate. Beyond these limits Nature keeps on her way untroubled ; and even within these limits there is less stagnation than most men suppose. If man were not himself so much in dread of the snow, he would not credit the lower animals with undue fear of wintry elements.

*Frank Bolles.*

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### THE BLAZING HEART.

WHO are ye, spirits, that stand  
 In the outer gloom,  
 Each with a blazing heart in hand,  
 Which lighteth the dark beyond the tomb ?

“ Oh, we be souls that loved  
 Too well, too well !  
 Yet, for that love, though sore reproved,  
 (Oh, sore reproved ! ) have we 'scaped hell.

“ 'Scaped hell, but gained not heaven.  
 Woe, woe and alas !  
 Only, to us this grace is given,  
 To light the dark where the dead must pass.

“ Behind us the shadows throng,  
 And the mists are gray ;  
 But our blazing hearts light the soul along  
 From grave to yon gate that hides the day.”

Who may this lady be  
 At my right hand ?  
 “ This is the heart which for Antony  
 Changed from soft flesh to a burning brand.”

“ This for Æneas glowed,  
 Is glowing still.”  
 “ This kindled for Phaon ; the flame it showed  
 No waters of ocean could quench or kill.”