

ALL through the greater part of the year the woodlands of England echo with song. It may be the full harmony of the choir, or the more broken and scattered

strains of lonely minstrels; yet each of the early months has some happy quota of sound, life,

and rejoicing, especially for the ear that knows how to listen. Every bird that has a voice seems to be taking part in the concert, and to be doing his utmost and best to make the harmony as joyous and complete as the most ardent musician could desire. But the time of quiet will come, when, turn where we will down the long avenue of beeches, or into any one of the winding green roads that meet us at every hundred yards, or along by the edge of the copse of hazel and dainty birch, not a sound is to be heard. The silence at first seems strange and unnatural enough—that the entire orchestra, which not so long ago filled and flooded the whole woodland domain, should all at once be dumb—but a moment's thought reminds us of the simple fact that most of these wild and artless strains, the wandering cry of the cuckoo, the passionate, sad love-song of the nightingale, the mellow whistle of the thrush, or the liquid melody of the skylark, were after all but the utterance of one happy message to the earth—"the days of joy and gladness, of sunshine and love, are come; let us choose our mates, and build, and sing, rejoice, and be glad." Such is the wondrous instinct which God has planted in these feathered choristers; and so take they their living part in the great anthem ever ascending from hill and valley, woodland and mead, to the blue sky above.

The full sweet song of birds, with few exceptions, is to be heard in perfection only during the season of nesting and rearing the young. Hence the seemingly sudden, but really gradual, quiet that falls upon the woods. Now and then, indeed, a second

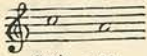
brood is reared, and then the happy bridegroom once more mounts guard over the nursery; and when not too busy in providing for the family wants, solaces his bride with a serenade of loud or tender music, just as the wind and weather, the sunshine or the rain, incline him. She knows his voice well, and can distinguish it among a host of rivals or imitators. Even the skylark, the woodlark, the titlark, though somewhat alike in many points of tone and trill, are to her ear quite distinct; and should any gay roving bachelor of another genus presume to come a-courting, or paying a morning call, not a word will she say to him. The blackcap and the nightingale may be close at hand on rival boughs, and vying with each other in eager and impassioned praises and entreaties; within a stone's throw may be a troop of finches, equally joyous and in full song; but each musician sings only to his own species, and rarely, if ever, but to the ear he loves to catch, and for which alone he sings. The peculiar call of the female cuckoo, which attracts so many contending suitors, and all the various caressing language of other birds, excites no influence generally, and to all but the individual species is an unknown dialect.

There is, in fact, but one note which seems to be of universal comprehension, and this is the warning cry of danger. The instant it is uttered, the whole flock of birds within hearing, though of many various species, repeat a separate signal of danger, and away they all hurry into the bushes or hedgerow for safety. Nature, in all her ordinances, has

a fixed design and foreknowledge, and each species has a separate voice assigned to it, so that each may continue distinct and unmixed, as at first created; and that the notes of birds are as language designed to convey a distinct meaning is clear from the utterly different sounds emitted at particular periods. As summer advances the spring voices become changed; the requirements of the early season have ceased; and the summer excitements, monitions, and informations, not needed in autumn, are no longer heard.

One strange fact, however, remains—and as yet without any certain or adequate explanation—that one sex only is gifted with the power of song: as many naturalists suppose, for the purpose of cheering his mate during the period of incubation; yet leaving us in doubt, in spite of the delightful melody of the songster, as to the exact meaning and object of his song. The singing of all birds seems to be an entirely spontaneous effusion, poured forth with little exertion, and without weariness or lassitude. In certain seasons and weather, the nightingale sings all day at intervals, and during most of the night; the power of song never becoming weaker, the notes never harsh or untunable, even after hours of practice.

The cuckoo alone would seem to suffer from constant use of his voice. All through April and May with unwearied activity he chants his one strain of two notes



Cuck - oo

lands I have counted upwards of 150 repetitions without a moment's cessation), but by the middle of June he has gradually got hoarser and hoarser, unmusical, and out of tune. Now and then his cry descends but a single tone, or more rarely down to an imperfect fourth; or even continues on one faint and quavering monotone; while just before the faultless song of Philomela ceases, it wanders away into



a croaking sound, like a hush or warning of danger to his mate and the half-fledged brood.

In round numbers, the chief song-birds of England amount to about twenty-five—among which the nightingale reigns chief and supreme. It is almost impossible to frame any accurate table of the comparative beauty and merit of these varied and happy songsters; but the attempt has been made by an earnest student of nature,* who devoted many years to this one express subject, and some of his notes are of curious interest. Taking "20" to express the point of perfection, at the head of the whole list stands the sweet bird of night: for mellowness of tone, compass, and execution, and an inborn plaintiveness of melody which is almost wholly his own. Pre-eminent, too, among the beauties of the strain is its infinite variety; as many as sixteen different beginnings and closes having been noted in the song of a single bird. Beginning, like many a famous master of eloquence, in a sound of infinite and tender softness, he gradually breaks out into deeper and fuller expression, reserving all his strength as if for some sudden touches of passion and delight, and then dying away into a fine and delicate thread of such exquisite and keen sweetness as to pierce the very heart. In the calm stillness of a summer evening this dainty note may be heard through half a mile of silent, listening woodland.

Next to the nightingale come the three happy

* Daines Barrington.

singers, the skylark, woodlark, and titlark, each having a special excellence of his own; the two latter singing both while on the wing and when at rest; their song being full of sweetness, variety, and swift changes; and the first surpassing even the nightingale in the rapid snatches of sprightly joy with which he rises up towards the blue æther,

"And ever rising, wins his liquid way."

Then follow the whole throng of finches, headed by the linnet, who stands fifth on the entire list, and carries off (in these days of competitive examination) 74 marks out of a possible 100 for compass, execution, sprightliness, plaintiveness, and mellow tone. Far lower down on the list come the better known and more popular melodists, the blackbird, the thrush, and the whitethroat, the reed-warblers, and the robin—who, by the way, during the silent autumnal days deserves a whole column to himself. To these, however, must be added the blackcap, who, for beauty, power, and flute-like brilliancy of song, excels all other of these happy minstrels but the nightingale himself.



For a time all these joyous sounds one by one die out, and we talk of the silence of the woods and fields. But, in truth, the great song of earth to heaven never ceases; wander where we will in these pleasant domains, if the ear be but rightly in tune, one may catch in ever falling or rising cadence soft and happy echoes of peace and joy rising as in a cloud towards the summer sky. The hum, the murmur, the whisper of the meadow grass or the waving corn, the all-pervading sound of multitudinous insect-life, the faint rustle of the wandering breeze among the far-off tree-tops, the still fainter music of the streamlet in the next hollow,

"That to the quiet woods all night Singeth a quiet tune:"

all these, together, float dreamily through the balmy air, and yet tell us that the songs of summer never die. Even the silence has a voice. Happy they who can so join in it here in this world of changing sun and shade, that they may know at last of the deeper mystery, and the yet grander song, of another and a greater life.

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ABOUT STERNHOLD AND HOPKINS'S PSALMS.



THE history of the metrical versions of the Psalter which have at one time or other been authorised for use in the churches, is one of the most interesting subjects to be found in the by-ways of literature. One version still remains in constant use by Presbyterian worshippers; the other two versions are numbered amongst the things that were. All three

have exercised an abiding influence on the sacred poetry of our country; and each has found an echo in the hearts of thousands of worshippers of various creeds and countries. The rugged lines of Sternhold and Hopkins, the more polished verses of Tate and Brady, the literal renderings of Francis Rous—all these have formed at various times the sole medium of praise to assemblies of Christians, most of whom would have looked upon the introduction of a hymn into the worship of the Church as not only inexpedient, but rankly heretical. An outline of the history of each of the three versions we have named is what is proposed in these articles. The records bearing on the subject are not generally accessible,

and when collected into a concise and chronological narrative we feel sure they will be appreciated by many readers.

The earliest of all the versions of the Psalms in the tongue of the people appears to have been that of the brothers Wedderburn, known as the "Dundee Psalms," from the residence of the authors. How many were translated we cannot certainly tell; neither is it known at what precise date they were issued to the public. The first mention of them is in connection with the martyrdom of George Wishart in 1546. Knox, in his "History of the Reformation," records the fact that Wishart on the night before he was apprehended at Ormiston, "after supper, held comfortable purpose of the death of Goddis chosen children, and merrily said, 'Methink that I desyre earnestlye to sleep; and thairwith he said, 'will ye sing a Psalme?' and so he appointed the 51st Psalme, which was put in Scotische meter, and begane thus:—

"Have mercy on me now, good Lord,
After Thy great mercy."

These lines are from the second verse of the Psalm in the Wedderburn collection, and it seems therefore