

The Life Story of a Kingfisher.

BY S. L. BENSUSAN.

"IT is like your impertinence," said the kingfisher, stamping one of his curious feet, that had the outer and middle toe joined in fashion peculiar to kingfishers—"it is like your impertinence to ask if I might chance to be a dragon-fly. Me, a kingfisher, compared with a mere dragon-fly!"

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," said the skylark, who lived in a meadow just beyond the trout-stream's bank; "I meant no offence, but I know nothing more beautiful than a dragon-fly; at least, I did not until I met you."

Admiration, or an uncontrollable thrill of envy, had stilled the brown bird's song; he gazed open-mouthed at the kingfisher, who stood upon a twig that overhung the river. Strong light-shafts pierced through the branches of the lime and alder trees above, and lighted the crown of feathers on the kingfisher's head, a dark blue crown with cross-bars of lightest hue. The feathers on his back looked like a robe of cobalt fire, and this strong colouring was thrown into relief by the yellow-white throat and the yellow-red under parts. The colours hardly responded to anything the painter's palette knows; they were a strong though subtle harmony of the kind that Nature alone can produce.

Pleased with the skylark's flattery, the

kingfisher stretched his wings and uttered his thin, piping cry.

"I'm a fine bird indeed," he said, modestly, "and as big as you."

This was hardly true. From one wing tip to the other he was ten inches long and his height did not exceed seven. The sober-plumaged lark made no reply, and the kingfisher continued.

"See me catch fish," he said; "that alone is a liberal education, and will make you proud to have my acquaintance."

He stood splendidly poised, like the matador who is about to make his first stroke in the *plaza de toros*, and in that moment there was nothing ridiculous in the overgrown head, the sword-like bill, the insignificant legs and stumpy tail of the brilliant little bird, for the sunlight on the feathers made them glow like a splendid emerald, and the colour dominated every other aspect. Below him in the laughing water tiny minnows and baby trout making their way up-stream caught the reflection of the light.

"What can this be?" asked one little fish, leaving the friendly shelter of a stone and moving boldly into the open water. The glittering head above him stooped for a brief instant, there was a sudden plunge, a splash, and the ripples made sudden circles. Then the flash of light curved and wheeled and was



"THE GLITTERING HEAD ABOVE HIM STOOPED FOR A BRIEF INSTANT, THERE WAS A SUDDEN PLUNGE, A SPLASH."

back upon the branch in the old position. The small fish was dead, the kingfisher had closed his sharp beak upon him just behind the neck. For a brief instant the fish hung limp and motionless between the bird's jaws, and then with a sudden movement his captor swallowed him head foremost.

"Neat, eh?" he asked the astonished skylark.

"I should starve," confessed the other bird, "if I had to get my food in that way."

"Nothing to speak of, my dear sir," replied the kingfisher, who liked an audience. "See some more?"

This time a cunning young trout was the first-comer below the branch, and the kingfisher's eyes shone as brightly as his feathers in anticipation of the tasty morsel; but the stroke, though skilled and sudden, did not avail; the wily fish had some idea that the brilliant stranger was not sitting above the water for the benefit of his health, and the kingfisher got nothing more than a wetting. Somewhat disconcerted, he shifted his position from the willow tree's branch to a flat stone in the stream, still within view of the skylark, and was at once successful, the prey being a very young salmon smolt some three or four inches long. Small though the fish was, he was not easy to handle, and the lark was surprised to see how promptly the bird disposed of the difficulty. He

"Don't you wonder how it is done?" asked the kingfisher. He was panting, for the last load was not a light one, and he had met with moderate luck before the skylark had mistaken him for a dragon-fly and so started the conversation recorded here.

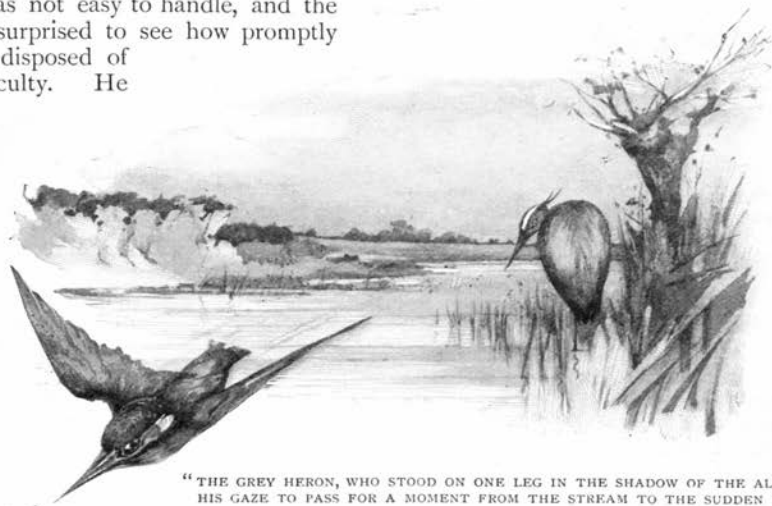
"I'm very surprised to think that you can digest the bones," remarked the lark.

"I can't," confessed the kingfisher; "and when I get back to my hole I eject them as though I were an owl."

"To your hole!" repeated the astonished skylark. "Do you live in a hole? I thought that only rats lived in holes. I couldn't live anywhere except in the open."

"I dare say not," sneered the kingfisher. "The open air is not likely to hurt your plumage, if you don't mind my saying so; nor would it be likely to expose you to the attacks of birds of prey. But I could not endure the fields; I should never sleep. And now I will wish you good-day, for I've had as much fish as I want, and it is time to go home and think."

He sprang from the stone and darted upstream, moving with quick wing-beats that were hard to follow. Small fish flinging themselves into the air in pursuit of flies saw



"THE GREY HERON, WHO STOOD ON ONE LEG IN THE SHADOW OF THE ALDERS, ALLOWED HIS GAZE TO PASS FOR A MOMENT FROM THE STREAM TO THE SUDDEN APPARITION."

could not shift his grip lest the fish should escape, for he had not been able to strike in the vital part at the back of the head. So, turning half round, he battered the head of his unfortunate captive on the stone with such unerring aim that after the second swift blow the writhing body was at rest. Then the baby salmon was sent to look after the last fish caught,

the colour flash across them and tumbled back into the water without troubling their prey; young frogs that had been tadpoles only a few weeks before stared open-mouthed; and even the grey heron, who stood on one leg in the shadow of the alders, allowed his gaze to pass for a moment from the stream to the sudden apparition that seemed to be carved out of sunlight.

By no means unconscious of these tributes, though he ignored them, the kingfisher pursued his way over the stream until he came to a part where the branches of the trees on either side met overhead and the growth along the bank was more than commonly luxurious. Low down, under the shelving bank, he paused at an opening not unlike the hole made by a water-rat, and entered it so swiftly that it was hard to follow the movement that hid him from sight.

At the entrance there was little more room than was required to admit him, but the hole widened rapidly and led upwards for about a yard, where it ended with the kingfisher's nest.

This was a collection of half-digested fish-bones, to which the bird at once added certain portions of the fish he had just been eating. These bones could not boast a very savoury odour, nor would the general condition of the tunnel leading from bank to nest have fulfilled all the requirements of a sanitary inspector. But birdland has no inspectors. The rule of life there is that if you transgress Nature's laws you die without any interference from your fellow-birds, and if you do not transgress the laws you are liable to be equally unfortunate. This knowledge makes birds careless, content to enjoy life, but quite unwilling to take any but the most obvious precautions. The kingfisher, quite unaware that his surroundings were by no means hygienic, fluffed out his feathers, settled his head well between his shoulders, and slept happily among the decayed and ill-smelling bones until daybreak next morning, when he set to work to depopulate the stream without so much as a headache.

"You are always to be found in this part," remarked the skylark one day, as he lighted at the meadow's edge.

"It belongs to me," replied the kingfisher. "I have about five hundred yards of stream to myself, and none of my family may fish in it. Naturally, I can't keep the grey heron away, he is too big to be persuaded, but I can look after small birds."

"Are you here all the year round?"

"Why, certainly," replied the kingfisher. "If this were a big river, instead of the tiny tributary that it is, I should be compelled to leave it in the winter time. There is no living to be had from a very broad stream in cold weather, but this place is suited for all the year round."

"How do you manage about your young ones then?" asked the lark. "When you've

raised a family, they must live too, I suppose. Where do you put them?"

"They must look after themselves to a very large extent," replied the kingfisher; "my younglings and their mother left me a fortnight since, and I suppose that most of them will migrate in the autumn."

"Where do they go?" asked the lark.

"Somewhere on the Continent, to the South of Europe, I imagine," replied the other bird, rather vaguely. "I only know that the migrating birds collect on the sea-shore in the autumn, and have to live on small crabs and shell-fish and shrimps while they wait for the favouring wind that shall carry them oversea. They never come back. We kingfishers make no pretensions to affection. By the time we have raised six or eight hungry ones to the point of being able to take care of themselves, our parental fondness has worn thin. And, mark you, I don't think that the youngsters are much attached to us; they are glad enough to go away from parents and nest so soon as they are strong enough to do their own fishing."

"Don't you feel lonely?" said the lark.

"I take a mate in the spring, if that is what you mean," replied the other bird, "but a little domestic joy goes a long way. My wife and I separate at midsummer, or soon after. Yet we are loving enough and devoted to each other at the proper time. This year we met very early in April and, working side by side, we tunnelled out the hole that guarded the nest. We set the delicate bonework on the sandy bottom, and without any other addition, save a few of our own feathers, the home was complete. It was not one of the easy jobs that can be undertaken twice or thrice a year. My bill, strong though it is, was so sore with the tunnelling work that it hurt me to strike a big fish, and my mate was in the same plight. For some time I was quite content with sticklebacks and leeches, and they are not delicacies.

"Now," he continued, "the trouble is over. I shall return to the same nest year after year, as long as there is plenty of food, in fact, and though I may do some more travelling it will be in more leisured fashion. Some of the nests built by my family are more than six feet from the bank's entrance; the diameter of the tunnel spreads steadily from three to nine inches. And you may notice that the tunnel always moves upwards, so that the nest may be well drained. Comparisons are odious, of course, but when I remember how you thought that only rats lived in holes, I am compelled to ask whether

you think your nest, an affair built in a hurry of grass and leaves and lined with hair, can compare for a moment with the one that shelters my family, my wife, and myself?"

The lark took no offence, being a friendly bird and deeply moved by the charm of his companion's colouring. He quite forgot that, while he had a song that gladdened earth and heaven, the kingfisher, for all his beautiful feathers, could say no more than "peep" or "peep-pip." It was a shrill call that nobody wanted to hear, and, after all, the lark's nest was really a cleverly-contrived affair, perfectly suited to its place.

Autumn and winter passed slowly, but uneventfully. The heron left the neighbourhood, the lark was heard no longer, for he had joined the flock; but the grouse packs came down from the high moor to feed on the "stooks," and the roe-deer and black-gate filled the low-lying plantations. Gunners had gone south and the land was left to the elements, for most of the farm hands found their work in the byre.

The little stream grew swollen and muddy; there were days when food seemed to have disappeared, and even the water-insects and butterflies that suffice a hungry kingfisher in summer times of stress were wanting. Happily there were no long frosts, and there were no other kingfishers in the neighbourhood to claim a share of the scanty fish supply. Still, it was an anxious time, and the bird looked eagerly for the spring as he flitted silently from pool to pool, his brilliant covering dulled by the clouds that obscured the sun.

He passed all the winter nights in the hole on the bank, fearful at times lest the swollen water that rushed so tumultuously past should rise to the level of his home. He heard the hiss of the rain and the clatter of branches and wood-drift that came down the stream, and he heard the awesome cry of the green plover, the melancholy call of the bittern, and the scream of the whaup. But in his snug home there was a sense of security, even though all his worldly wealth consisted of fish-bones, or at best some large fish that had been caught and dragged with infinite pains into a secure corner, to stand between the captor and hunger in the days of winter's extreme wrath.

But all things have an end, March will not stay away for ever, and with his approach to prepare the world for spring the heavy rains and winds must realize that their rule is over. So the time came when the waters subsided until all danger of inundation had passed,

when the early sun looked down in friendliest fashion through the dishevelled branches of the trees, and once again the kingfisher was proud of his plumage. He took longer flights, pausing upon stones that had just been uncovered after long weeks of submersion. At this season he could not sit in comfort on a bough and wait for his prey to pass beneath him; he had to scan the waters carefully and, choosing his moment, make a bold plunge, happy enough if in return for the wetting he secured a fish. In the latter part of March he went on long excursions, passing the limits of his hunting-ground, and uttered his shrill, piping cry with a determination that might have been best understood when, one afternoon, it met with a faint response.

A lady bird—should one call her a queenfisher?—had heard his call and was responding to it. She was rather smaller than he, her colouring was less brilliant, and under the lower mandible there was a red patch that the male bird lacked. The winter had not treated her well; she was thin and in poor condition, and gave a ready hearing to the male bird's story. He told her of his splendid mansion in the bank, his wealth of fish-bones, the length of stream that belonged to him, the admiration of all living things on either side of the water. To her this corner of the country was very new and pleasant. She was conscious, too, of a great desire to have a home and bring little ones of her own to see the pageants of May and June. The solitary habit that had seemed so fitting to the winter months had gone from her now, and side by side the two birds flew up-stream, revelling in the warm sunshine and the soft song of subsiding waters.

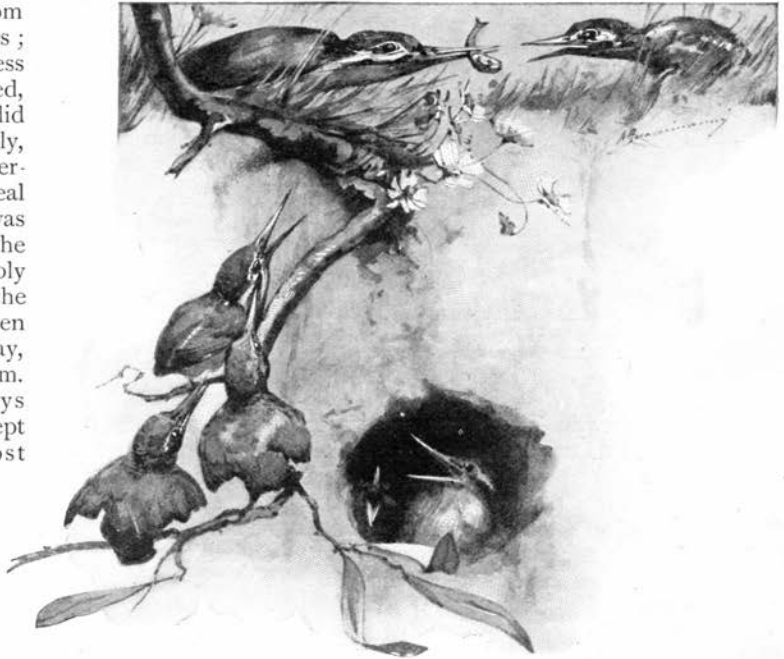
Labouring together, they carried the tunnel farther into the bank, always preserving the sharp slope; they cleaned and cleared the passage and moulded the fish-bones so delicately upon the sandy ground that only a kingfisher could have sat on the nest without destroying its symmetry, and no other bird could have turned eggs as they must be turned in hatching time. By now April was waning, and the new-comer placed six eggs in the nest. They were nearly round, their colour was pearly white, and they were so thin that the yellow yolk gave them a most delicious tinge of colour. This could not be seen in the darkness of the nest, and perhaps the birds themselves did not know it; but had one of the eggs been held to the light when it was but a few days old, the shell would have shown a quality akin to opalescence.

No trouble came to the tunnel in the bank. On the surrounding farm-lands there was too much work waiting for young and old to admit of bird-nesting; no stoat or rat ventured into the darkness to seek the nest at the far end, and in the waters, now quite shallow and warm, the young fish were plentiful. The kingfisher and his mate shared all labours equally, took their turn on the nest and their turn on the bank, and very early in May the six babies rewarded their trouble. For the first week the newcomers were free from any sign of feathers; nothing more helpless could be imagined, but they had splendid appetites. Happily, the weather was perfect; there were real halcyon days, as was only right, for the kingfisher is probably the halcyon of the ancients, and when he nested, they say, all the seas were calm. For fourteen days Father Neptune kept all but the most favoured wind chained securely in the caverns below the ocean floor, and so the halcyon, though it nested on the bosom of the ocean, could bring all its eggs

to life. Perhaps Nature remembered the old legend; certainly the early May days were windless and full of sun, the stream's song was more musical than it had been before, and baby fish without number revelled in their brief hour of glorious life. I should be afraid to guess how many were snatched suddenly from the waters to be swallowed, half digested, and then ejected, that the baby kingfishers might be fed

Father and mother bird alike possessed this curious gift of digesting the fish sufficiently to enable their young to eat it without danger. When it was like a curd and quite free from bones and scale and indigestible matter they could give it to their babies safely. Pigeons can do a similar thing, and on this account the country folk are heard to

speak of pigeons' milk. Constant care and attention brought the little ones along at a fine pace, and before they were a fortnight old they could slide down the tunnel to the entrance of their home. Once there, the light frightened them for a time, but they became accustomed to it, and soon learned to climb on to the low branch of a willow that overhung the bank near their nest. Safely seated there, in the days before they had learned to fly, or even gathered round



"THEY WOULD CLAMOUR FOR FOOD ALL THE DAY."

the entrance to the nest, they would clamour for food all the day. Now matter how hard the parents might work, they continued to squall until the evening came, and then they would stumble up the steep tunnel, digging their feet into the sand and protesting loudly that they were still hungry. I can't help thinking that this greediness had something to do with the gradual slackening of the parental interest. Sustained work, unaccompanied by thanks or recognition of any description, is apt to tire the most willing worker.

Before Midsummer Day came round the youngsters could fly, and spectators, had there been any, might have seen the rare sight of kingfishers playing together. These birds live a life so solitary that the games may be seen only when there is a nestful of



"THERE WAS SOMETHING OF THE GRACE OF SWALLOW FLIGHT ABOUT THE MOVEMENT OF THESE YOUNG BIRDS."

newly-fledged young. There was something of the grace of swallow flight about the movement of these young birds, whose plumage had assumed full colouring everywhere save on the breast, which had a dark brown tinge in place of the lighter hue of the adults.

They soon became expert fishers, but greediness was fatal to two out of the six. One swallowed a young eel without stopping to kill it, and died in a few minutes; another tried to devour a young trout before any of his brothers or sisters could seek to secure a share, and in his haste was choked.

"Pip-peep," remarked the kingfisher, "it is time our family broke up."

"Yes," said his mate. "I think I will go back to

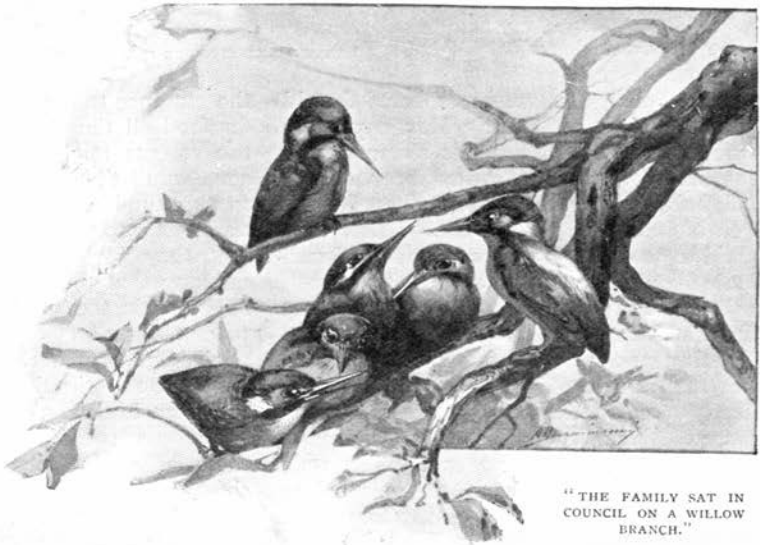
the wood near the bend of the stream before any of the season's birds seek to take my old fishing-ground."

"Quite right, my dear," agreed the kingfisher. "We have been very happy, but I will not stand in your way, and I will give the youngsters their marching order too."

Next day the family sat in council on a willow branch for the last time.

"You have had good advice and a careful upbringing," said the kingfisher to his four children, "and now you must go and find your own place in the world. Go up-river, and if there is an unoccupied stretch of stream take it. If the worst happens and you can't find a hole in the bank, look for one in the woods, as many of your family have done before you, and if you can find no free water for yourselves you must poach until the summer is over, and then go eastward to the coast and emigrate. You will find dozens of others doing the same. You must go, because this water will only feed all of us until the summer's end. Then it is hard for one to get a really good living."

Yet another week, and the kingfisher was alone again and slept o' nights in the nest, with never so much as a regret to keep him company. With all parental affection gone, he scoured his stretch of stream prepared to do battle with his own children should they be lurking in its neighbourhood; but they



"THE FAMILY SAT IN COUNCIL ON A WILLOW BRANCH."

were far away or very careful, and he saw nothing of them. He noted the procession of song-birds from the high hills, and heard the songs that the wind sings when summer is on the wane; he saw the cornfields change from green to gold, and fished merrily enough through a succession of "soft" days. Never had the stream been more bountifully supplied. The corn was cut, and he heard the guns when the shooting men came to the low land from the moors, where the grouse were beginning to pack and avoid the butts. Then he noted with some surprise that the heron left its accustomed haunts earlier than usual, and that the meadow held several strange birds who chattered fearfully in a weird, unfamiliar tongue about the approaching season.

On a sudden the winter settled upon the land, briefly preluded by wind and rainstorms that churned the swollen waters of the stream and made fishing difficult. Some instinct warned the kingfisher to gather a store while there was yet time, and he did his

One morning he ventured out in search of breakfast, to find that the wind had fallen and the land lay wrapped in snow. The glare troubled his eyes and made his aim unsteady; perhaps too short rations were weakening him; he had found it hard to face the wind, and knowing nothing of a hard winter was delighted with the change. That night the temperature fell far below freezing-point, and when the kingfisher flew hungrily from his home at daybreak the surface of the water was covered with ice. At first he thought his eyes had deceived him; never before had he known his beloved stream to surrender to winter in this manner. Hurriedly and anxiously he darted from point to point, only to find that the seal of the ice was everywhere firmly set.

Tired, hungry, and bewildered he lighted upon a twig, and saw beneath him in a tiny space of clear water a little company of small fish. They were moving slowly, as though numbed with cold. With a wild cry he dashed himself against them, but the ice was strong and thick; he lay half stunned and



"THE COLD NUMBED HIM SLOWLY."

best, working with tireless energy and letting no chance go by. At first he congratulated himself upon being quite alone; then, while the weather grew worse and the wind howled with rage as it passed the mouth of his hole in the darkness, he grew afraid, and would have given half his scanty food supply for some companionship.

badly hurt, making no attempt to rise. The cold numbed him slowly and the surrounding whiteness seemed to take the colour from his feathers. A watery sun glanced down for a moment as though to afford him one last look at the abundant store of living food below. Then a cloud barred the light and the snow fell heavily.