

THE MOCKING-BIRD (*Mimus polyglottus*).

BY ELIZABETH OAKES SMITH.

THERE is an instinct, an intuition, a prophecy in the name by which an individual is to be distinguished among his fellows. I knew a gentleman who was christened John, despite the intentions of his parents to endow him with the euphonious name of Bezeleel. The father whispered the cognomen solemnly at the font, which the priest mistaking, cried out, "I'll not allow it—Beelzebub, indeed!" and forthwith pronounced his name John. There was that about him in after life that forbade any one calling him Johnnie; he was John always; calm, reticent, dignified; whereas Bezeleel might have rendered him something less than a gentleman.

But I am to speak of the mocking-bird. A name that might fit the character of a canary, a born slave, content under bondage by the laws of heredity, would be misplaced if given the mocking-bird, an advanced creature, who may submit to bondage, but under protest, and with a game-some philosophy that makes the best of it, too royal to be crushed by adverse fate; and so I called my mocking-bird Puck, as designating his love of mischief, his jauntiness and fun. He made me think of wild-woodsprites; of the Puck-weed-jies of the Indians; of the Puck of Shakespeare (and, by the way, no doubt the great poet caught this name from the lips of Walter Raleigh, on his return from Virginia, where he had learned it from the aborigines). I always fancied my bird was hearing and seeing what was lost to me, and was peering about to find that

"Little Western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with Love's wound,
And maidens call it Love-in-idleness,"

and ready to play the mischief with some wild prank.

My room was large and airy, made bright with roses and geraniums of luxuriant growth and abundant flowering, under which was a perch for Puck, from whence he gleamed forth at his own sweet will, or plumed himself daintily, always with a coquettish, if not impudent, pose of the head. These birds are very abundant in the neighborhood of Hollywood, North Carolina, and they not

only attract but challenge the attention of the observer by their studied attitudes, and their pretty habit of spreading and lifting their wings, and stepping as if ready for a dance; hence, I took great delight in studying their habits and indications of character.

The mocking-bird does not migrate in this vicinity, as the weather becomes less bright with sunshine during the winter season. He comes out in numbers with the gleam of genial hours, fluttering among the red berries of the yopan and holly, blithe and saucy, courageous and enterprising. Being "to the manor born," he careers amid other birds with an air of indifference, if not of contempt, turning into irony their best efforts of melody. He will perch himself upon a covert branch, and seem listening to the vocal attempts of his neighbors, and then suddenly he will pour forth a medley of them all, mixing the sweet notes of the thrush with the scream of the bluejay and hoot of the owl, the snarl of the catbird, and the thrill of the wren, so glibly rendered that before you can discriminate the intent of song he has started off into another and another travesty, baffling your power to separate the one from the other, and you are bewildered, as if some laughing witch were turning all the grace and prettiness of the wild woods into mockery.

I am sure this hilarious impudence has the effect of silencing the other birds for the time being, unless it be at the period of courtship, when all are too intently busy in their own affairs to heed the jeers of their neighbors; and this has suggested a doubt to my own mind as to the inner life of the mocking-bird.

Is he a straightforward, earnest creature, a consecrated lover, a devoted family bird, like other winged denizens of the grove; or, is he a careless worldling, stealing sweets with a reckless disregard of all woodland proprieties? Is he an affluent child of genius, holding his unapproachable powers with an easy assurance, mindless of recognition, content to be rivalless and critical, and despising mediocre pretentiousness?

I fancy I hear him saying to his choice companion on the bough, in a tender undertone,

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"Just mark, lady mine, how all these unevolved creatures are carried away by their own poor music; every song of theirs I can give in an improved style and make no ado about it either;" and forthwith he gives a madrigal so mellow, so touching, so all his own, that we would think the nightingale and lark had poured all their melodies into one.

The secret of the matter is, the mocking-bird is embarrassed by his riches; all his affluent endowments telling, as it were, against him in the same way is in us humans, who are better accepted by our kind when endowed with one special faculty than when holding at command a dozen or more; the rounded-out fullness of a life creating only envy and distrust.

In his courtship, the mocking-bird is an audacious Viking, taking to himself royally, and not over-encumbered with sentiment. Tender he is, but with a sense of his own worthiness and unapproachable completeness that will abide no nonsense or the semblance of rebuff. In the family relation, I observe, both sexes have an exclusive air, as if they held themselves aloof from ordinary birds, and were an unusually united household, with large, imperial habits.

They have upon occasion wonderful pluck, and when anything has roused this dormant intensity, they are anything but suave and nice-mannered. One day I observed a large turkey buzzard prowling about a tree in which a pair of mocking-birds had snugly ensconced themselves, and were at the very crisis of incubation, when the soft woolly little heads were about to disclose themselves to the expectant parents. I do not think the buzzard had any ill designs other than perhaps a vulgar curiosity; but he is an ungainly, unsightly creature, with his plucked neck looking like a woman without the civilizing presence of a collar.

Birds have a language perfectly understood by their kind, and they appeal to the sensibilities of each other with as much assurance of a sympathetic response as animals of a larger growth and reason more pronounced in character. No sooner did our birds behold the intrusion of the obscene vagrant than they gave out a note of distress, a short, sharp cry, and instantly there was a gathering. All the friendly neighbors surged to the spot, and took in the situation at a glance.

It was curious to behold with what dexterity and combination of force they pounced upon the

aggressor. One would drop down upon his head, another upon his back. It was a sight to see them drop like a plummet down, and rise with a scream to repeat the operation. The buzzard for a time held his perch with a stolid, mulish resolve not to be ejected by creatures whom he evidently held in contempt for their smallness of size as well as intense excitability, like all dull characters, who lack fineness of insight. At length, however, he stuck out his long neck, leaned forward, and flopped his ragged wings, and launched himself woodward.

I know not the process of thought that actuated his tormentors; but they gathered in front of him and compelled him to make his escape seaward. Never was a miserable creature who had incurred the hatred of his townspeople drummed forth with kettle, fife, and deafening yells, more hardly beset than this ill-conditioned denizen of the woods. He made the best of his way over the water, followed by the enraged mocking-birds, till their instinct warned them it was safer to return. They did so, quite in a body, and really, I do believe, they were laughing over their triumph like so many imps. The face of the bird is not favorable to a display of merriment, but the wild flights and antics they exhibited round the little household in the tree was as expressive of fun as those of a child, when he staggers and doubles himself up at the recollection of some audacious piece of funniness.

Ordinarily the mocking-bird seems little interested in the movements of other winged dwellers of the vicinity. Birds of bright plumage and cheery song are little noticed by him, while he has a decided antipathy to those of heavy make or sombre hues. I never saw them meddle with the fish-hawks or eagles; but as we have seen, they will not endure the buzzard, and the crow was also distasteful to them. An unlucky owl, having lost his way and blinded by the sun, lodged himself not far from the house; it was pitiful to see how mercilessly they beset and screamed after him until he made his way to a thicket. I observed the attacking party in this instance took the matter more quietly than in the other, as if they understood the unfortunate state of the owl, and were content to be rid of him without fuss.

The garments of the mocking-bird, though plain brown and white, are exceedingly well-fitting and genteel, and his general carriage is that of an aris-

toerat, contemning show, at once easy and graceful. He likes to assemble a few choice spirits about him as Shakspeare might have done, and hold rehearsals of the finer touches of song. It is a pretty sight, half a dozen upon a branch, lifting and falling their wings, learning to keep time, and most likely willing to show the white globe on the under side of their wings. I am sure they are planning a concert that shall worry all the birds about, who will hear their best plagiarized, with no hope of redress.

I have thought it is like our poets, who do not scruple to seize upon the beautiful thought of another, and cast it into artistic shape. Mr. Emerson commends this, saying it is like building a more beautiful temple, as men do, from the stones of one less perfect or gone to decay.

The mocking-bird is a contemner of all that is commonplace, homely or neutral in any shape. He is fond of color, and it is most likely that the gorgeous hues of the cardinal bird and blue-bird, jay, etc. may have at first so won upon his admiration, that he bethought himself to imitate their peculiar notes. At first it might have been emulation, perhaps sheer envy; but this wonderful bird, so affluently developed, partaking the nature of genius, observant and critical, was impelled by his superior intelligence to leave the commonplace groove incident to other birds, and launched out into oceans of adventure like a winged Columbus.

As the robin, bobolink ("Robert of Lincoln" as Bryant elegantly calls him), and other migratory birds make their way to the vicinity from the north and east, a change is perceptible in the mocking-bird. He acquires a certain aloofness, "a looker on here in Vienna" air, as if he might be studying the language and manners of a new people, and these conversant with far countries. I have had some fear that the gay mocking-bird is too versatile, too capricious to embody any deep attachment to human beings, as less gifted creatures often do; but an incident occurring in our neighborhood quite relieved me of the misgiving, and convinced me that here, as elsewhere, the distinguishing attribute of genius is the patience of endeavor, coupled with fervor of affection.

Miss Laura Pelitier had been for five years the happy owner of one of these fine birds, which flew about the premises at his own sweet will, coming home at nightfall and entering his cage as a matter of course. He was royally independent and most

tenderly devoted. In the course of time his young mistress fell into the rosy bondage of a young, happy love, and removed to a new home, taking her favorite with her, who still escaped all bondage, and was seemingly as happy as in the old homestead. In the course of time, something over a year, the wife returned thither, leaving the mocking-bird, with many injunctions, to the care of her husband during her absence. She had thought it best to cage him up, lest some mishap might befall him.

Despite all forecast, the bird contrived to escape from his cage, and did not return as had been his wont, and the young husband went to bring his wife home again to confront her with the story of her loss. "Some natural tears she shed," but hardly had she wiped them, before in at the window, breezy with delight, came the mocking-bird, and lighted upon her head.

Now the question arises, how did he find his way back? Did he remember it? Did he follow the husband when he was out of the cage, lest, as was supposed, he was seeking his way to his beloved friend? Why did he not follow the old habit of returning to the cage at night, as another bird would have done?

There must have been complicated questionings and nice reasonings in that poor little brain to bring about such a result. The lady knew her bird by a slight injury it had at one time received, which left a mark upon the neck. Here were affection, reason, observation and memory all combined in one pretty head and heart-piece.

I learned by companionship with my Puck, that he had a keen zest for fun, and a most persistent curiosity. My work-basket was a perpetual resource to him. He would pull things about and scatter them over the floor, taking them in his bill one at a time. He would roll the spools and hop after them as eagerly as a kitten might do. He would seize upon the thread and fly all over the room, round the plants, across the windows, holding fast upon it, and tangling himself and me in its meshes.

I learned that not only a bright color but a metallic ring pleased him; a gold thimble, after prolonged effort, would be seized in his bill, and up he would fly to the ceiling and drop it down upon the whitely-polished, hard pine floor. This he would repeat again and again, and then tired out, would scramble about my head and pull the hairs.

He would draw the pins out of the cushion, dive at the fringe of the curtain, and for a good half hour work at the end of a gay ribbon, backing and pulling comically. A corner of my paper would attract him; and he would dig at it and hop into the air, and utter little screams as if out of all patience.

None of these movements were automatically performed, but with zest, design and enjoyment. I could hardly realize that Puck was only a bird, so companionable, so vivacious, so comical did I find him—a touch of the impish to be sure, for I had to guard my eyes lest he should make a dive at them, as he often did.

He was nice in his person, bathing several times in the day, and slopping unmercifully. Fond as he was of me, he never lighted upon me while his feathers were wet; but confined himself to his perch till they were dry and carefully smoothed out. Children rush upon us with their faces daubed with sweets and caress us all the same; why should a bird abstain because of wet feathers?

Puck was carnivorous, but enjoyed a change to delicate bits, and his method of feeding was at once refined and tasteful. Indeed he converted eating into one of the fine arts. Unlike less perfect creatures, he never gobbled his food. No sooner did a worm, a fly or a moth cross his vision than he pounced upon it, not to devour, but to toss into the air, to inspect, to admire, as a cat plays with a mouse. He would retreat from it, hop forward, lift his wings, tipping his head one side, drop them again; eye the bug or butterfly with a travesty manner; up in the air, down again, and with a toss it was gone.

Birds are far more intellectual than we apprehend. We are apt to think they do nothing but raise their young and sing, having nothing else to do for the time being. The period of courtship, marriage and paternity is undoubtedly very exacting, and fills up much of their busy lives; but they have a vast and beautiful experience outside of all this.

Their nests are miracles of ingenuity, "procreant cradles" over which are lavished not only the tenderest emotions, but a forecast, a skill that fill me with awe. It is as if an arcana of divine love and protectiveness were revealed to me, and I could see how the inner life of every creature is moulded to beauty. I seem to see that procreation is not all; that the bird has a sweet life based

upon pure intellectual proclivities, and that he studies what is about him; he delights in color as well as song, and his notes are the expression of a supreme content, a rest as it were from searching into the soul of things as the poet does.

His faculties require space and play. He returns visits—he tells the gossip of the neighborhood; he plays pranks; peeps into cosy nooks, sees who comes and goes, looks after birdlings that are left orphans, and marries or is single, as best he likes; not always a matter of choice, for there are bachelors as well as Benedicts in woodland life. We do not half understand the mysteries or possibilities of the life of a bird, and yet these are but a moiety in the wonderful creations upon every side of us.

The mocking-bird is an early riser. Perhaps he has a consciousness of ill-desert in his imitative tendencies; that in this bending to irony, to mixing his heavenly art with worldly satire, he stoops from his high transcendental mission of the beautiful, and becomes a common bird. To me it was an affecting melody, the notes of this weird songster, poured forth while other denizens of the wood still nodded on the branch.

There is always a peculiar softness in the early dawn of Southern latitudes—a faint stir of leaves, a low insect murmur, a cloudless setting of the stars, or the silent moon along the sky, as if Nature were loth to disturb the fullness of repose. Into this heaven of rest come a few preluding notes, a breathing of a divine spirit of harmony, scarcely disturbing the hush that reigns supreme. Anon, another and another, unlike any sentient creature in all the earth. A gush of melody, a low plaint, a rapturous swell—the inner life of a being compounded of harmony. A wild, melodious halleluiah, poured out in measureless joy and entrancing sweetness. The tears gush to your eyes, you rise up and instinctively feel an exaltation, responsive to this song; transcending all songs in its indescribable, overpowering, soul-touching sweetness.

It is a song native to the mocking-bird when he sings his own song, and not another's. You must be up betimes if you would hear it, for it soon wakens other songsters, lavish in their everyday utterances, and the mocking-bird descends from his empyrean, and you will hear only his sensitive utterances of inferior music—the poet magnetized by the immediate.