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Dickey Downy The Autobiography of a Bird

Virginia Sharpe Patterson

Imprint

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To
my dear children
Laura, Virgie, and Robert George
this little Volume is
Affectionately Inscribed

INTRODUCTION

This beautiful volume has been written for a good purpose. I had the pleasure of reading the proof-sheets of the book while in the Yellowstone National Park, where no gun may be lawfully fired at any of God's creatures. All animals there are becoming tame, and the great bears come out of the woods to feed on the garbage of the hotels and camps, fearless of the tourists, who look on with pleasure and wonder at such a scene.

"The child is father of the man," and this volume is addressed to the heart and imagination of every child reader. If children are taught to love and protect the birds they will remember the lesson when they grow old. When children learn to prefer to take a "snapshot" at a bird with a camera, rather than with a gun, they will protect these feathered friends for their beauty, even if they do not regard them for their usefulness.

Nature has supplied a system of balances if left to itself. Some forms of insect life are so prolific that but for the voracity and industry of the birds the world would become almost uninhabitable.

Bird life appeals to the eye for its beauty, to the ear for its music, and to the interest of man for its utility. Shooting-clubs have foreseen the extermination that awaits many of the finest of the game birds, and are taking much pains to enforce the laws enacted for game protection. A selfish interest thus is called into activity, and one class of birds is receiving protection through the aid of its own enemies.

But the birds of beautiful plumage are now threatened with extinction by the desire of womankind for personal decoration. Against this destruction Audubon societies are organizing a crusade, and Mrs. Patterson's principal purpose in this book is to direct attention to the wholesale slaughter of the birds of plumage and song.

The Princess of Wales was requested to write in an album her various peculiarities. Among the inquiries was: "What is your greatest weakness?" She answered: "Millinery."

When Napoleon was banished to Elba it is stated that the fallen monarch was followed by Josephine's old millinery bills. How

many of these bills were for the plumage of slaughtered birds the historian does not say. But the passion for the beautiful is very strong in the tender hearts of women, and an earnest appeal to the natural gentleness of the sex must be made to enlist them in the defense of the birds.

Mrs. Patterson enters upon this task with enthusiasm, and many a bird will live to flutter through the trees or glisten in the sunshine and gladden the earth with its beauty that but for this little book would have perched for a brief season upon the headgear of some lovely woman.

Let the good work go on until the mummy of a dead bird will be recognized by all persons as an unfitting decoration for the head of womankind.

JOHN F. LACEY.

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Last night Alicia wore a Tuscan Sonnet
And many humming birds were fastened on it.
Caught in a net of delicate creamy crêpe
The dainty captives lay there dead together;
No dart of slender bill, no fragile shape
Fluttering, no stir of radiant feather;
Alicia looked so calm, I wondered whether
She cared if birds were killed to trim her bonnet.
Her hand fell lightly on my hand;
And I fancied that a stain of death
Like that which doomed the Lady of Macbeth
Was on her hand.

— Elizabeth Cavazza

CHAPTER I

THE ORCHARD

Bobolink, that in the meadow
Or beneath the orchard's shadow
Keepst up a constant rattle,
Joyous as my children's prattle,
Welcome to the North again.

—*Thos. Hill.*

My native home was in a pleasant meadow not far from a deep wood, at some distance from the highway. From this it was separated by plowed fields and a winding country lane, carpeted with grass and fringed with daisies.

While it was yet dawn, long before the glint of the sun found its way through the foliage, the air was musical with the twittering of our feathered colony.

It is true our noisy neighbors, the blue-jays, sometimes disturbed my mother by their hoarse chattering when she was weary of wing and wanted a quiet hour to meditate, but they disturbed us younger ones very little. My mother did not think they were ever still a minute. Constantly hopping back and forth, first on one bough, then on another, flirting down between times to pick up a cricket or a bug, they were indeed, a most fidgetty set. Their restlessness extended even to their handsome top-knots, which they jerked up and down like a questioning eyebrow. They were beautiful to look at had they only possessed a little of the dignity and composure of our family. But as I said, we little ones did not trouble ourselves about them.

The air was so pleasant, our nest so cozy, and our parents provided us such a plentiful diet of nice worms and bugs, that like other thoughtless babies who have nothing to do but eat, sleep, and grow, we had no interest in things outside and did not dream there was

such a thing as vexation or sorrow or crime in this beautiful world. When our parents were off gathering our food, we seldom felt lonely, for we nestled snugly and kept each other company by telling what we would do when we should be strong enough to fly.

At this stage of our existence we were as ungainly a lot of children as could well be imagined. To look at our long, scrawny necks and big heads so disproportioned to the size of our bodies, which were scantily covered with a fuzzy down that scarcely concealed our nakedness, who would have thought that in time we would develop into such handsome birds as the bobolink family is universally considered to be?

Our mother, who was both very proud and very fond of us, was untiring in her watchful care. No human mother bending over the nursery bed soothing her little one to rest, showed more devotion than did she, as she hovered near the tiny cradle of coarse grass and leaves woven by her own cunning skill—alert and sleepless when danger was near and enfolding us with her warm, soft wings. Thus tenderly cared for we passed the early sunny days of life.

After we could fly we often visited a fragrant orchard that sent its odors across the grain fields. From its green shade we made short excursions to the rich, black soil in search of some choice tid-bit of a worm turned up by the plow expressly for our dessert. We were indeed glad to be of use to the farmer by devouring these pests so destructive to his crops, but did not limit our labors to these places; we also made it our business to pick off the bugs and slugs that infested the fruit trees, and often extended our efforts to the tender young grape leaves in the arbor and the rose bushes and shrubs in the flower garden.

On a warm morning after a rain was our favorite time for work, and it was pleasant to hear the tap-tap-tapping of our neighbor the woodpecker, as he located with his busy little bill the bugs in the tree limb. It was like the hammer of an industrious blacksmith breaking on the still air. His jaunty red cap and broad white shoulder cape made of him a very pretty object as he worked away blithely and cheerily at his useful task. While the rest of us did not make so much noise at our work, we were equally diligent in pick-

ing off the larvae and borers that ruined the trees, and on a full crop we enjoyed the consciousness of having aided mankind.

On several occasions I had seen our enemy, the cat, slinking stealthily on his padded feet from the direction of the great brick house which stood on the edge of the orchard. Crouched in a furrow he would gaze upward at us so steadily and for so long a time without so much as a wink or a blink of his green eyes, that it seemed he must injure its muscles. Aside from the many frights he gave us it is sad to relate that he succeeded before many days in getting away with one of our number. One morning he crept softly up to a young robin which had flown down in the grass, but had not sufficient power to rise quickly, and before the unsuspecting little creature realized its danger, the cat arched his back, gave a spring, and seized it. A moment later he softly trotted out of the orchard with the poor bird in his mouth and doubtless made a dainty dinner in the barn off our unfortunate comrade. This incident cast a deep gloom over us, and our songs for many days held a mournful note.

But while cats were unwelcome visitors from the great brick house, we sometimes had others whom we were always glad to see. The two young ladies of the family, together with their mother and little niece, occasionally came out for a saunter under the trees, and it was very delightful to listen to their merry chat. So affectionate toward each other, so gentle and withal so bright and lively, they seemed to bring a streak of sunshine with them whenever they came. Miss Dorothy, who was tall and stately, seldom sat on the grassy tufts which rose like little footstools at the base of each tree, but rambled about while talking. This was perhaps because she disliked to rumple her beautifully starched skirts. But Miss Katie—impetuous, dimple-cheeked Katie, would fling herself down anywhere regardless of edged ruffles or floating sash ribbons.

"For it is clean dirt," she laughingly said, when Miss Dorothy playfully scolded her for it. "This kind of dirt is healthful, and it isn't going to hurt me if a few dusty twigs or a bit of dried grass or weeds should cling to my gown. You must remember, Sister Dorothy, there are different kinds of dirt. I haven't any respect for grease spots or for clothes soiled from wearing them too long. I don't like

that kind of dirt, but to get close to dear old mother earth, and have a scent of her fresh soil once in a while is what I enjoy. It is delightful. I like nature too well to stand on ceremony with her."

"You like butterflies too, don't you, aunty?" asked little Marian.

"To be sure I do, dear. I love all the pretty things that fly."

"And the birdies too?" asked the child.

"Yes, indeed; I love the birds the best of all."

"And the old cat was awful naughty when he caught the baby robin the other day and ate it up. Wasn't he, aunty?"

"Yes. Tom is a cruel, bad, bad cat," responded Miss Katie, as she squeezed Marian's little pink hand between her own palms. "That naughty puss gets plenty to eat in the house and there are lots of nice fat mice in the barn, and yet he slips slyly out to the orchard and takes the life of a poor, innocent little bird."

"And it made the mamma-bird cry because her little one was dead," added Miss Dorothy, who had drawn near.

Little Marian heaved a deep sigh and her rosy lips trembled suspiciously. "Poor mamma-bird! It can never have its baby bird any more," she said, with a sob of sympathy. "Don't you feel sorry for it, Aunt Dorothy?"

"Yes, dear. I feel very sorry for it."

"And I expect the poor mamma-bird cries and cries and weeps and grieves when she comes home to supper and finds out her little children are gone forever and ever." And with her bright eyes dimmed with tears of pity, Marian, clasping a hand of each of the young ladies, walked slowly to the house still bewailing the fate of the robin.

My heart warmed toward these sweet young girls for their tender sympathy. I almost wished I were a carrier pigeon, that I might devote myself hereafter to their service by bearing loving messages from them to their friends.

But, alas! I was to have a rude awakening from this pleasant thought. As we flew that evening to our roosting-place, I observed

to my mother that if there were no cats in the world what a delightful time we birds might have.

"You have a greater enemy than the cat," she responded sadly. "It is true the cat is cruel and tries to kill us, but it knows no better."

"If not the cat, what enemy is it?" I asked in surprise. "I thought the cat was the most bloodthirsty foe the birds had."

My mother dipped her wings more slowly and poised her body gracefully a moment. Then she said impressively, "Our greatest enemy is man. No," suddenly correcting herself, "not man, but women, women and children."

"Women and dear little children our enemies?" said I, in astonishment. "The pretty ladies who speak so sweet and kind! The pretty ladies who gather roses in the garden! Would they deprive us of life?"

My mother nodded.

"Yes," she answered, "the pretty ladies, the wicked ladies."

CHAPTER II

DICKEY DOWNY'S MEDITATION

It hath the excuse of youth.

— *Shakespeare.*

That night I pondered long upon what my mother had told me. Ever since I left my shell I had been taught to respect my elders, and that it was a mark of ill manners and bad breeding for children to question the superior knowledge of those much older than themselves. Notwithstanding this, in my secret heart I could not help thinking that my mother was mistaken in her estimate of women when she called them wicked. She had surely misjudged them. However, I took good care not to mention these doubts to her.

I had heard from my grandmother, who had traveled a great deal from the tropics to the North and back again, that women were the leaders in the churches and were foremost in all Christian and philanthropic work; that they provided beautiful homes for orphan children, where they took care of them and nursed them when they were sick. She told me about the hospitals where diseased and aged people were kindly cared for by them. She said they were active in the societies for the prevention of cruelty to children and to animals. They fed armies of tramps out of sheer pity; even the debauched drunkard was the object of their tenderest care and their earnest prayers. They held out a friendly hand to the prisoners in the jails and sent them flowers and Bibles; they pitied and cheered the out-cast with kind words. They offered themselves as missionaries for foreign lands to convert the heathen and bring them to Christ. They soothed the sick and made easy the last days of the dying.

On the battlefield, when blood was flowing and cannon smoking, my grandmother had seen the Red Cross women like angels of mercy binding up the gaping wounds and gently closing the glazed eyes of the expiring soldier. In woman's ear was poured his last message to his loved ones far away, and when death was near it