

A bird-loved suburb of London.

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Birds

A Bird-loved Suburb of London

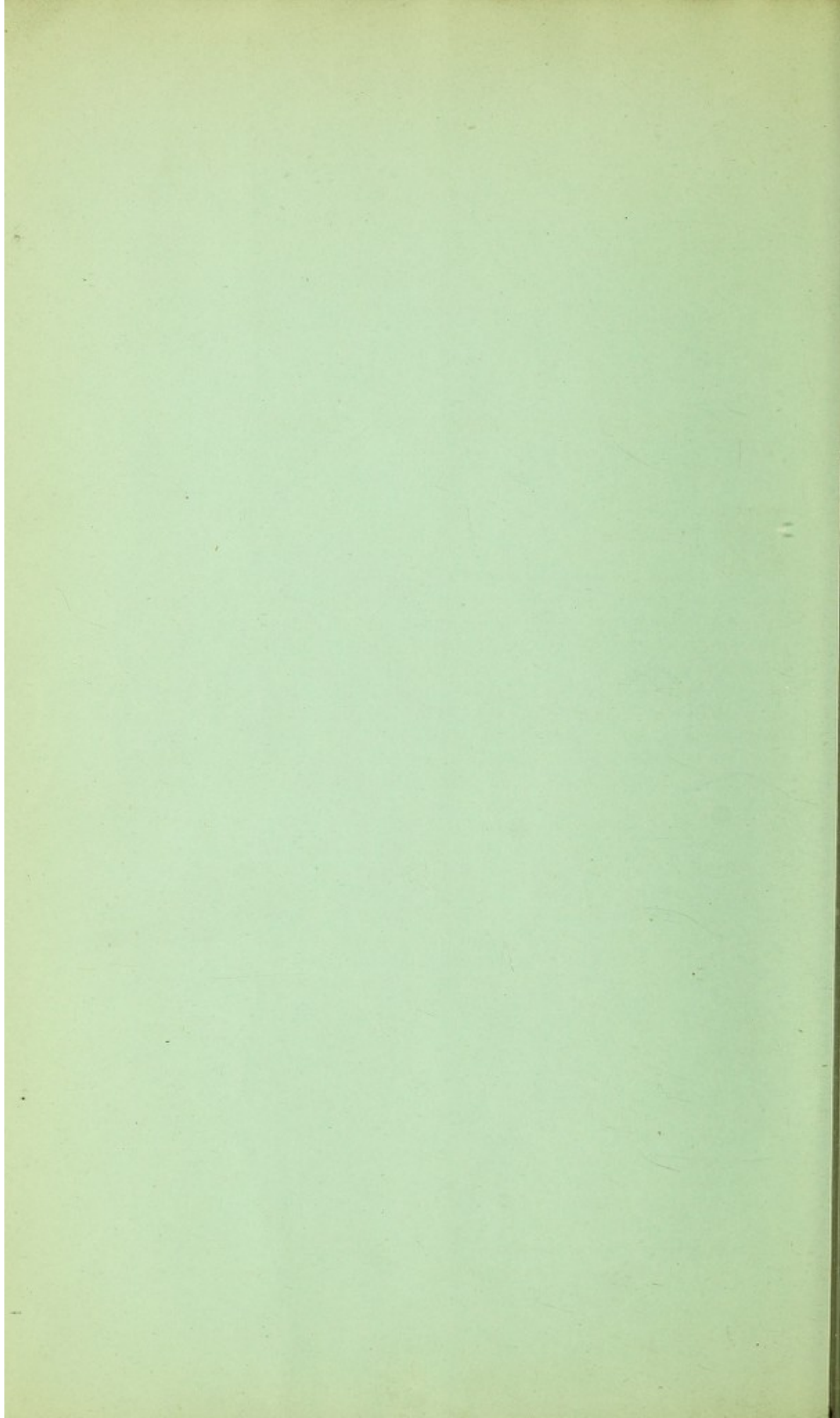
by

W. J. B. Miller


Nature Notes

1894.





A BIRD-LOVED SUBURB OF LONDON.

O those who love the sights and sounds of rural life, no suburb of London is so pleasant to live in as Richmond. The park affords a perennial charm; the less known and less visited surroundings of the park furnish scenes whereof the interest is well-nigh inexhaustible; and the Terrace garden that we owe to the laudable enterprise of the town presents lovely slopes, terraced walks and flowers, and charming river-peeps, with varied aspects of plant-life and bird-life, the like of which it would be difficult to find on any other spot whatever, so near London. This garden, which was for a long time a ducal pleasure, preserves relics of its former splendour in statues that still show traces of original excellence of design; in cosy bowers for pairs, each of which seems, as it were, formed of the half of a canoe, cut in two, and set upright on the plane of bisection; in grand old magnolias, putting out in autumn large flowers that are loved and haunted by honey-seeking bees; and in fine foreign trees and shrubs, such as the prettily foliaged *Salisburia Adiantifolia*, which bears the name, not of a modern statesman, as some have supposed, but of a botanist who flourished when the tree was imported from Japan. Then, too, pleasant Petersham, with all its poetic memories, forms an integral part of Richmond on the south, and on the north as a similar part of the borough, we have all the glory, and the wealth, and the beauty of Kew Gardens. There we may find the floral treasures of the whole of the world preserved, and displayed in choicest form, and placed before us in complete scientific nomenclature, to afford us never-ending objects for study or for enjoyment. There we may admire the glorious flower of the *Victoria lily* from the Amazon, or study such trees as the gigantic *Sequoia* from California; with every variety of shrub, or tree, or flower that any region of the earth can produce. Best of all is, however, to me, that herbaceous ground, which forms a little walled-in garden of itself, where we may see, and admire, the floral beauties of our own land, all exhibited in the best way to enable us to recognise and study them. This

little garden may well convince us that our own country is truly a land of flowers. The loved flowers that adorn our meadows and hedgerows are here set forth in all their glory. The thistles and mulleins that we see on the Devonian Headland; the fragrant violet that nestles modestly in the neighbouring combs; the daisy that is, alike, the child's delight and "the poet's darling," the very groundsel that we gather for our canaries; all these and a thousand such familiar pets, here greet us, sometimes with surprise, among the whole array of their kindred, whether of lowly, or it may be, of highly distinguished relations.

Mistakes are often made, no doubt, in Richmond, in regard to the cutting down of ancient oaks or cedars, or the clearing away of bird-loved thickets; and it is not always easy anyhow to find out to whom these depredations are due; but kindly nature, in so fertile a region, soon repairs the damage or supplies the loss; thus the regrettable act of vandalism is before long, swept entirely out of sight and out of mind.

There are around Richmond many things that delight the lover of nature, poetic and historical associations, river-scenes, plant-life, and much else. With its increasing purity, the river goes on affording, more and more, the delights of *tidal* flow and ebb. In quiet times, when not a single angler is near, the fish may be seen leaping joyously out of the water, increasing, it would seem, in size, as the times of purification pass on. Two or three times, in foregoing days of foulness, I have seen, with much amazement, a huge porpoise swimming upward, with the tide, towards Teddington Lock, the highest point it could reach; and when, by-and-by, with ebbing tide, it came down again, every boat in Richmond seemed to be out, with gun or rifle, to shoot at the huge fish, almost as much in vain, it would appear, as if the firing had been aimed at an iron-clad. In descending the polluted stream, the last of these piscine visitors became so weakened that it had, at length, to succumb to the poisoning effects of the stream wherein it swam.

Henceforth we may, perhaps, hope that an ascending porpoise may be able to go down, as it came up, uninjured; while in its wake we may, perhaps, expect to have other piscine visitors—why not, perhaps, salmon?—hitherto precluded by the foulness and insufficiency of the stream. The river is beautiful above the first *tidal* lock at Kingston; but our own new *half-tidal* lock enables us at Richmond to study the added charms that arise from the flow and ebb of the tide—delights to observe which we should miss above Teddington.

While all this is very pleasant, and well deserving of attention, there is, perhaps, nothing to surpass that in which the district is very rich, bird-life. This we may watch and study with delight everywhere around, at any hour of the day, and at all times of the year. In regard to our district, where, to the nature-lover, all seasons are delightful in their varied aspects, the chief question that arises is which season he likes the best. To

one the warmth, and glow, and radiance of summer would seem the best, with June-roses and flowers fully displayed, and all the wealth of the "crown of the year." To another, dearest is the

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness! close bosom friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless with fruit the vines that round the
thatch-eaves run."

This is autumn, gorgeous with colours of closing foliage, and the manifold beauties of fruit-gathering and harvest. But to me the season dearest of all is the spring. Then, every avenue to Richmond is a mass of floral blossom, the admiration of every visitor. Then we look for the return from the palm-groves of Africa of the migrant birds; then we listen for the voice of the cuckoo, the turr-turr of the turtle, the song of the nightingale; then we watch for the skimming flight of the swallow; and then, too, with the great bird-loving poet we say that

"Once more the heavenly power makes all things new;
And domes the red-plowed hills with loving blue;
The blackbirds have their wills, the thrushes, too;
Opens a door in heaven, from skies of glass,
A Jacob's ladder falls, on greening grass;
And o'er the mountain walls young angels pass."

Though Richmond is ever pleasant, it is to me pleasantest in spring; and then, especially, it is most delightful in the awakening of the bird-life that always forms a world of delight. In this region, rightly viewed, one may be ready to admit that

"Even winter bleak has charms for me, when winds howl through the naked tree;
When frosts on hill-top, bush and lea, are hoary grey,
And blinding mists wild, furious flee, darkening the day."

Then it is that some aspects of bird-life may be observed with the deepest interest. Then it is that the birds that brave with us the cold, and the fogs, and the storms, will become to a bird-lover strangely familiar. Then the hard-pressed thrushes, or rooks, or starlings will gladly welcome the smallest bit of food that you may accord to them, will come with joy to the well-remembered feeding-place, and will, by-and-by, almost take therefrom the food out of your hand. Then the little wren or hedge-warbler, who retains his song all through the winter, will gladden your heart by seeming to thank you for the grateful food by singing you his modest little song. And then, too,

"The redbreast, sacred to the household gods,
Wisely regardful of the gathering sky,
In joyless fields and thorny thickets leaves
His shivering mates, and pays to trusted man
His annual visit. Half afraid, he first
Against the window beats, then brisk, alights
On the warm hearth, then hopping o'er the floor,
Eyes all the smiling family askance,
And pecks, and starts, and wonders where he is,
Till, more familiar grown, the table crumbs
Attract his slender feet."

As we walk round in autumn, we may note how the trees and shrubs that embellish spring-tide now present beauties of berries and fruits that furnish, in winter, food for the birds. The hawthorn that forms the glory of May is now laden with haws; the briar-rose with hips, which always go first; the ivy with its black berries, which ripen last of all, and then furnish luscious fruits, sought like grapes by all the thrush tribe; and the rowan or mountain-ash, with red berries, which are eaten by the birds in winter long before the haws. The quality of these fruits varies, even more than the size. Among the trees near Ham Gate there is a hawthorn which, I observe, is always cleared first. But of all trees none furnishes birds with so much food as that pride of Richmond Park, the oak. In summer, the blackcap and other small birds pick from oaks the caterpillars with which they mainly feed their young. There is no tree on which all the thrush tribe love so much to sing. And in autumn many birds are eager to feed on the acorns; rooks pick them off the trees, doves and pigeons fill their crops full of them, and the pheasants come greedily out for them from every covert.

In the early spring, it is interesting to see how the birds that spend all the winter with us—unless, like thrushes, they belong to those kinds that never use the same nest twice—look up their old nests, clear out the accumulations of winter, repair the dilapidations, if the nest admits of repair or, if the storms have used the nest badly, forthwith set to work to build a new one. All this is clearly visible before the leaves come out, and much familiar colloquy accompanies the settlement of this spring-cleaning of the birds. At that time we may look up from the street and see forty or fifty rooks' nests standing out upon the leafless elms on the top of the hill, and mark the eagerness of the parent birds in preparing a home for their young. Last winter (1893-4) the storms had blown clean away most of the old nests; and in building the new nests it might be marked that certain birds seemed to have a recognised right to certain convenient sites. From mounds on the western edge of the park, two or three rookeries may be looked down upon, at such times, in a more minute way.

In autumn, the rooks often gather in large flocks, and go through complicated evolutions above or among the trees. Mingled with them often are some jackdaws, distinguishable by smaller size, three times quicker beat of wing, and sharper jack or croak. The flock will caw and jack, and wheel and soar to a lofty height, and sweep together round and round, and dive headlong, all in turn, and seem to throw themselves against some favourite tree, now in apparent pairs, and now in an entire mass. The movements of the combined rooks and jackdaws, sometimes mixed with ambitious starlings, are full of interest. The starlings are always noteworthy in their habits. Distinguishable from the blackbirds by their mode of walking—one foot before the other alternately, instead of hopping with both

feet at once—they gather in flocks towards autumn, and may then be seen on the grass-plots, closely probing every spot for grubs with their spear-like beaks. As spring returns, they separate in pairs and look up their old nests, and then clear them out with much familiar colloquy and prattle, and singing by the male of his soft little song. For years, a pair has built in a favourite haunt by our own house, and as the male gets his heightened colour, the pair seem to be talking to each other as they look in and greet me when I am dressing; while often when I come home, the brighter male sings to me from a ledge, in the last rays of the dying day. The starling has the art to learn the notes of other birds; thus, when the ground is, perhaps, covered with snow, I am startled to catch, from tree or housetop, an imitation of the clear note of the swallow.

Looking after their old nests in spring, like the rooks, are those other life-paired birds, the stately herons. Few people seem to know that there is in Richmond Park a fine heronry. The nests are among evergreen trees in a secluded enclosure; and the herons, at breeding time, sit in stately fashion, on or beside their nests; thus, unless the birds spread their large wings for flight, it is often difficult to see them. An occasional cry from an unobserved heron sometimes startles a visitor ignorant of what the sound comes from. The motions of the herons in the air are full of stateliness and grace. Sometimes we see them mounting in large spirals to a great height; but more often they may be observed moving slowly home across the Thames, with neck drawn back and legs stretched at full length behind, to act as a sort of rudder. An ardent ornithologist records how that he once got inside the enclosure where the heronry stands, saw some young birds on the ground running towards the lake; and he describes the tumult of agitation that took place overhead as he disturbed the herons from their nests, and witnessed the large-winged birds flying about in anxious alarm, among the tree-tops. A feat of trespass like this, though detailed in a London weekly journal, is, I presume, rarely attempted. But one can easily imagine what the sport of hawking must have been in old times, with a heron for the quarry. The flight of the heron, though slow, is graceful, easy, and powerful; and to be impaled in a downward swoop on the heron's terrible beak, carried round like a bayonet, might prove disastrous to the most powerful peregrine or gyr-falcon. Some years ago the herons left their usual nesting-place for a few years, and built on a large *oak*, a little way off, inside the edge of the Isabella Plantation; and there, before the leaves came out, the nests could be seen with great ease. But the birds have now all got back to the old heronry.

Next in interest to the herons come the swans. Standing on the eminence by White Lodge, we may sometimes see half-a-dozen swans sailing in line aloft towards the Pen Ponds or Lakes, with necks outstretched to full length and a peculiar

utterance constantly going on as they wing their way through the air. At other times, we may see them swimming about one of the lakes, and in June and July it is pleasant to watch a pair carefully tending and guarding their cygnets near the islet on the upper lake, while a moorhen swims outside with three pretty little chicks. In July of this year (1894), two old swans were quietly swimming about with *seven* cygnets, forming quite a large family-party, as if they were one brood. Seeing that in general, two or three cygnets are all that a brood contains, it would seem that two or more broods must, in this family, have been here somehow united. Some large fish, presumably pike, were then at times sporting like porpoises in both lakes.

The swans on the Thames will, at quiet times, take food out of one's hand, or even be tempted to come out of the water at high tides, and waddle up the garden; the motions there of the stately bird forming a sad degeneration from its perfect grace in the water. Sometimes you may see a sober-dressed cygnet riding on its mother's back; and often a swan will fly along the river, almost close to the water, for several miles. On the upper Pen Lake I once witnessed a great concourse and apparent conflict of swans, out of which there rose, at last, after much flapping of wings along the water for some thirty yards, two large swans which mounted by wide gyrations to a great height, and by-and-by made off at such altitude, in the direction of Windsor.

In walking about the park, or its surroundings, we are often reminded of the proximity of the great metropolis: the tower of the Crystal Palace—now well nigh a part of London—stands out clear in the sunshine, and, in certain states of the atmosphere, the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral seems to be almost close at hand. On turning round to the other side of the wood, however, or merely looking the other way, we have nothing but flowers, and trees and birds; the crow of the pheasant is heard close by, the hens walk out near your feet, and the cooings of turtle-dove and cushat sound sweetly from elms overhead.

In Richmond Park, the deer add largely to the interest, at all times of the year. Now we may see them in their varied beauty, lying quietly in large herds, among the fern; now, in their younger forms, skimming like hares, and hardly any larger, over the grass; in October often fighting, like skilled fencers, and forming a pretty sight to watch; and, in frost and snow, coming, after a little coaxing, to take food out of your hand. These are the pretty and graceful fallow deer; but even more interesting are those representatives of our ancient foresters, once the lords of English woodlands, the red deer, which form a race by themselves. These are the deer that we see in their native haunts on Exmoor: these are they that call to mind the famous hunt that opened the *Lady of the Lake*, when

“The stag at eve had drunk his fill, where danced the moon on Monan's rill;
And deep his midnight lair had made, in lone Glenartney's hazel shade.”

The red deer may be sometimes seen taking a mud-bath, such as I saw them enjoying, not long since, rolling in the mud, as well as their antlers would allow them, in the short brook that flows into the northern pond by Whiteash Lodge.

The deer certainly add much to the beauty and interest of Richmond Park. And whenever we look around in this pleasant district, it is truly delightful to feel that you can everywhere call up a world of memories, in history and poetry, that live, and well deserve to live, for ever. All around you there lie associations of princes or famous men, now in state and splendour, now in retirement, and now even in exile. This house preserves the memory of an eminent statesman, and in it was born a famous queen. That other house belonged to one of the members, and was the occasional resort, of a famous club; there it was that the great dictator coined, impromptu, such a word as "labefactation" or "anfractuosity"; and there he libelled Scotch learning by likening it to a besieged town, where everybody got a mouthful but nobody a bellyful! And in this third house was hatched the cabal that English schoolboys never forget. Here we look on the spot where dwelt the unsurpassable chief of the older school of English poetry; and there lived the pioneer of the new and now prevailing school of nobler poetry, the very *genius loci*, the Bard of Richmond, an easy-going, much-loved man, whom the chief of the outgoing school, though himself one of the sorest of the *irritabile genus vatum*, so much loved that he even wrote, in his successor's style, for one of his poems, a lovely simile, about a "myrtle in the hollow breast of Apennine," which no student of poetry can ever forget. This is the bard who calls upon us to observe that

" Here you may trace the matchless vale of Thames ;
 Enchanting Vale ! beyond whate'er the Muse
 Has of Achaia or Hesperia sung ;
 Fair winding up to where the muses haunt
 In Twickenham's bower ; to Royal Hampton's pile ;
 To Clarendon's terraced height, and Esher's groves ;
 To lofty Harrow now, and now to where
 Majestic Windsor lifts his princely brow."

It is a classic region; as a classic land we should cherish all its associations, and as such we should cultivate an interest in every bit of the many charms that Nature has endowed it with.

The nightingales, on their arrival, are most likely to be first heard at the western edge of the enclosure that contains Sidmouth Wood. This plantation, which was enclosed seventy years ago, and is nearly a mile round, takes its name from Henry Addington, who was created Viscount Sidmouth on ceasing to be Premier, and eight years later (in 1813) was made Deputy Ranger of Richmond Park, where he lived at White Lodge, till his death in 1844, when he was buried in Mortlake churchyard. This is the man whose rivalry with a more famous statesman was preserved by the mathematical couplet

in ratios, long in vogue among the populace, "Pitt is to Addington as London to Paddington." At that time Paddington was a village quite outside London. In this wood, nightingales are often so plentiful that it might well be called nightingale grove. There I have often heard nightingales singing very beautifully in the daytime, sometimes in emulative contest. One showery morning, when warm rain was falling, I stood for a while sheltered from a sharp shower, under a tree; whereupon, almost close to my ear there burst forth a glorious song from a nightingale. By-and-by there broke out a fainter song from a more distant bird; and the two went on singing in seeming rivalry, gradually drawing nearer and nearer to each other, till, at last, one of the two nightingales flew out close to my head. In the prettily named Nightingale Lane, which leads down the hill to Buccleuch House, I have never heard the song of the nightingale, but it is often to be heard by day in the thickets—lately threatened by the Philistines with destruction—a little nearer to Petersham. Therefrom it may often be heard, sounding, like all nightingales' songs, better when not listened to too close at hand, pealing gloriously right across the Petersham meadows. The nightingale's song, heard in such a situation, has recently lifted into poetry, as well it might, a distinguished Selbornian in Richmond, who has addressed to the nightingale a pretty but irregular poem of sonnet length.

In the lower estuary of the river, I have seen much of the Thames life of nightingales, and become quite familiar with their habits. There they come over in large numbers at their earliest arrival; there I have found their nests, and seen their pretty eggs, of uniform and continuous olive tinged colour. Much like the robin, in perching and feeding, is the nightingale; much like the robinets are the young nightingales, in the plain speckle of their first plumage. The place in Sidmouth Wood where the nightingale is most likely to be seen is the transverse glade, upon the grass of which glade it may be now and then seen to hop, robin-like, to pick up a small worm. There, perhaps, some may have seen the bird without knowing what it was.

People often fall into the mistakes of supposing that the nightingale sings in the night only, and that no other bird sings at night. Both suppositions are entirely wrong. Many who love song-birds seem unable to distinguish one bird's song from another's unless they can see the singer. Thus it happens that they hear at night, or perhaps in early morning, the glorious song of a thrush, a blackbird, or a blackcap, and say forthwith that they have heard the nightingale.

A skill in finding birds' nests is gained in boyhood alone, and when thus fully acquired it never afterwards leaves its possessor; so that, knowing the habits of birds, and their times and places of nesting, he readily catches sight of nests, wherever he wanders, as a matter of course, and just as easily as he discerns the flowers of the field. Thus have I seen nests by scores—in Kew

Gardens, in Richmond Park and its suburbs, and in the lovely Terrace Garden—and it is not difficult to guess, without even looking into the nest, whether it contains egg or fledgeling, and just as surely can one discern turtle, or cushat, or nightingale.

In watching birds, too, there is a habit that is acquired, first in boyish days, and goes on increasing, by which best to secure their confidence and get them to recognise that you nowise observe them with enmity. They seem to watch your eyes, and by degrees learn to look on you as a friend. Such have I everywhere got to find them: and such confidence I trust I may ever retain.

The bird whose form and voice we hail most readily after the fogs and storms of winter is perhaps that “thrice-welcome darling of the spring,” the cuckoo. Cuckoos come in large numbers to Richmond; and some of the earliest make their appearance close to the river, in the trees of Cambridge Park, just opposite my own garden. For many years I have been in the habit of looking out for the earliest arrival of our spring migrants, and noting the date at which I first heard the cuckoo. Many times I have heard its voice first, unexpectedly, across the river from Cambridge Park; at other times when I have been looking out for the bird’s arrival, I have heard and seen it first at the edge of Isabella Wood, where it seems to enter Richmond Park. To know where the migrant birds usually appear first, helps us much in finding them earliest. Last year I first heard it there on April 16; but this year, an earlier season, I saw two cuckoos together on April 8, on the same tree that I had first seen the bird upon last year. A cuckoo’s egg I have seen but once in Richmond, and that was one spring in our own garden. The cuckoos had been unusually numerous in Cambridge Park that spring, and had often flown across the river to the Surrey side. And that year it happened that a pair of robins, which had reared a brood the previous year in a box in our garden, had built their nest in one of the boxes, and had there laid two eggs. But on looking in one morning, I saw a similar egg, though a little bit larger, lying close beside the other two. Up to that time, I had only seen a cuckoo’s egg when laid beside the “eggs of heavenly blue” of the hedge-warbler, where it was clearly to be recognised. And the hole in the box was much too small for a cuckoo ever to get through. This, however, *was* a cuckoo’s egg, which must have been brought and placed there by the cuckoo’s beak. It would have been interesting to note the hatching of the young cuckoo, and watch its sad behaviour towards its nest-mates; but whether the robins had ever been deceived before or not I cannot say; anyhow, they forsook this nest, and went off and built a nest and reared their brood in another box. The excellent collection in the fine Natural History Museum at South Kensington enabled me to settle such a question as this by seeing there a cuckoo’s egg lying beside robin’s eggs in a robin’s own nest.

The enclosures in the Sidmouth, Isabella, and Spanker's Hill Woods must, in the season, contain a large number of birds' nests. There they remain fortunately undisturbed, and we only know of their existence through the occasional appearance of the young birds in the glades and open spaces. There I have seen the young nightingale, looking in its first plumage wonderfully like a robinet, and there too the young cuckoo tended by its little foster-parents, whose undisturbed attention it has secured by the reprehensible but clearly established practice of shouldering its mate-fellows out of the nest. This bit of bird-life may, in fact, be seen outside the enclosures. I have seen it on Wimbledon Common, and have called attention in Kew Gardens to the interesting sight of bird-life thus afforded.

All the varieties of what we generally call swallows are plentiful in Richmond; their motions, and the several dates of their arrival, down to the latest comers, the magnificent swifts, are noteworthy and full of interest. The sand-martins have their lively colonies here; the chimney-swallows and house-martins return to their old sites; the glorious swifts breed in their not easily discoverable holes: and all the kinds may be seen hawking for flies together over the ponds and the river, or heard singing on some quiet tree their sweet but little known song:—

“*Arguta lacus circumvolitavit hirundo.*”

After sunset, in the evening gloaming, it is pleasant to watch, from our verandah, the erratic movements of the bats, mingled with the lightning-like career of the swifts, who sometimes utter, close to our ears, their battle-like scream; till, as darkness gathers, the birds and bats seem to melt into the gloom and vanish from sight. On the evening of the August bank-holiday of this year there was a splendid sunset; the glories of the heavens were noteworthy and long-continued, and the swifts, swallows, and bats were at their very best, careering late around our verandah. In a few days, the swifts had entirely gone from Richmond, but in the last week of August, I saw a dozen of these birds joyously careering around St. Catherine's Point, the southernmost corner of the Isle of Wight, quite ready to fly off to join their comrades in the palm groves of Africa.

There are many birds, we have to bear in mind, which, though quite common, have never, somehow, obtained the general recognition that is readily accorded to the robin, the lark, the wren, or the cuckoo. They have formed the themes of no nursery tales; and have never been admitted into poetry or legend. Among these are the wryneck, the creepers, and the night-jar or goat-sucker. The chiff-chaff proclaims his name earlier and more persistently than the cuckoo, yet few seem to recognise, or even hear, its voice. But, save in regard to its soft yet sweet song, the swallow is known by every child even, and looked out for, and welcomed; and as with the Greek poet of twenty-four centuries ago, so now, everyone knows enough to say, with Anacreon, of this gentle bird, that

“When Nature wears her summer vest, he comes to weave his simple nest ;
And when the chilling winter lowers, again he seeks the genial bowers
Of Memphis or the shores of Nile, where sunny hours of verdure smile.”

Some of the summer migrants are best found outside Richmond Park. Priory Lane, which leads from Barnes Common to Roehampton Gate, is the place above all to see and hear the whitethroats and blackcaps; in the precincts of Wimbledon Common we should look for whinchats, stonechats, and such like birds; and the Philistines have not yet wholly deprived Sheen Common of those bird-loved copses which may, it is hoped, be in time partly restored by persistent efforts on the part of the Selborne Society. From Priory Lane we enter Richmond Park where it is crossed by the brook whose name carries us, in imagination, back to the time when the beavers used to form across it their wonderful dams; and their name is preserved by the brook, along with the well-known Yorkshire town of Beverley.

Of the falcon-tribe, the one most frequently seen in Richmond is the graceful kestrel or windhover, whose stationary hoverings in the air, so wonderfully sustained, are truly amazing. The kestrel may now and then be seen flying off with a shrew or field mouse in his talons; and once I saw the bird bearing off what looked like a mole or rat—I had not my field-glass at hand to distinguish—when it looked as an eagle might do when carrying off a lamb. Next to the kestrel comes the sparrow-hawk, a proud-looking bird, which we may sometimes see dashing into a startled flock of small birds, and carrying off one in his deadly gripe. Once I was startled by a sparrow-hawk almost rushing against my head in fierce pursuit of a thrush, when they dashed both together into a thick holly-bush close by, and there they were so closely entangled that I at once caught them, one in each hand. The thrush, a fine black cock with yellow bill, I let go, glad to escape from his deadly pursuer; the bold little hawk, a female, I held for awhile, with some difficulty, and at last let her fly gladly away. The kite—rare now, I believe, in any part of England—I have never seen in Richmond.

The dreadful bird-catchers, whom we too often see prowling about Richmond, with their cages, and nets, and limed twigs, and blinded decoy-birds, are as bad as the slaughtering tourists whom the railways pour in to destroy the sea-birds on Devonian headlands. Their lamentable destruction prompts a lover of Nature to wish, with one of our great naturalists, that the mighty city, now raised to county rank, would take possession of the fauna and flora all round its precincts, including our own favoured district, and vigorously prohibit the destruction of any part whatever of this life that lies within its borders.

The lover of birds may, if he but makes right use of the knowledge that comes fresh from Nature's hand, know where to look for and find, and cultivate the acquaintance of all the summer visitants. To watch the skimming of the swallows

over meadows, or streams, or ponds, is to him always full of interest; and the launchings forth, from tree or garden-twig, of the fly-catcher, is a never wearying delight. Then, as summer wanes, with what saddening feelings of deferred hopes does he bid good-bye to one after another of the migrants, as they wing their way for the winter to serener shores. The mighty wings of the swift soon take the bird in August to central Africa; the fly-catcher follows soon after; and so, one by one, he looks for the departure of his visitors and wishes them a pleasant winter and a safe return.

Stress of season, perhaps, curtails his rambles, and forbids him to take much note of the winter visitants—those migrant thrushes from Norway, the redwing (Linnæus's nightingale of Norway), and the field-fare, and other such birds. These birds are mainly *heard* as they come in and pass westwards in autumn, but not much *seen*. Other thrushes move to the west when the hard weather comes on, to the lands of the brooks and water-meadows; but they move singly. The migrant thrushes move in flocks, and can be easily traced towards that Devon, where winter shelters them in large numbers. I have several times picked up a dead redwing or field-fare, dropped on its westward route; and have heard, but scarcely seen, the migrant thrushes in early spring on their way back towards their summer home. Thus it is that the bird-lover catches glimpses of these migrants now and then, at less genial times than when he listens for cuckoo or nightingale. When winter comes he looks forward, and never in vain, to the returning familiarity of the resident and dependent birds, who come to his garden for their daily portions of gratefully-supplied food. In times of winter storms, or frost and snow, it would be well if we were all to inquire:—

“ Ilk happing bird, wee, helpless thing! that in the merry months of spring,
Delighted me to hear thee sing, what comes of thee?
Where wilt thou cower thy chattering wing, and close thy ee?”

Then it is amazing to see what troops of small birds you may have as pensioners on the well-remembered daily bounty. The supply of a little unfrozen water will, in very cold weather, bring many to drink; and the birds seem to learn from one another where to find what they so much delight in. Crumbs and scraps of bread will furnish grateful food to many small birds, and the winter starlings will come to join in the feast, with many pretty skirmishes, along with the robins, hedge-warblers and sparrows. Fragments of half-picked bones will attract the insect-eating birds that spend the winter with us; and the thrushes and blackbirds, unable to find snails or earth-worms, will therewith rejoice in so seasonable a supply. But the chief delight may, perhaps, be had with the tits. Hang up for them on tree or bush bits of suitable food, and you may have three or four different kinds of tits coming daily to the well-known spots; and there they will hang, usually head downwards, and be blown about, and twirled around, and chatter, and play, and furnish never-wearying pictures of enjoyment. A bit of cocoa-nut hung

up will tempt many, and a handful of cheap grain flung out now and then will form an agreeable addition and variety to the bones and bread crumbs. Gardens where such food is supplied in winter seem to be known and loved by the birds that are summer visitors, which, perhaps, somehow learn about them from the birds that are permanent residents. Much of nesting habits, and many a pretty specimen of nest-building, may be watched and studied, day by day, in such a garden. The sparrows, which build mostly about house-roofs, sometimes take up their abode in a tree; and it is interesting to observe how they vary the structure of the nest to suit the altered position. In its usual situation, the nest, though soft and comfortable inside, is a little slovenly in its outward form and appearance; the house-roof supplies, in such a place, an abundant shelter. But when the nest is built in a tree, the wary birds seem to know that more is required. They build then more compactly, and finish by supplying the nest with a nice roof or cover. This is done by the ordinary house-sparrow, whose well-known eggs I have several times seen in such a nest. There is, in some localities, a bird of a slightly different kind, called a *tree-sparrow* (*Passer Montanus*) which lays eggs without spots; but this is not familiar in Richmond, where the sparrows that build in trees are the ordinary house-sparrow, and I presume it is the same bird that builds in the Lombardy poplars by St. James's lake in London.

It is, perhaps, because sparrows are so common and so pert that they fail to obtain from us the appreciation which is justly their due. Their nice mode of adapting structure to situation, in nest-building, is but one out of several faculties that distinguish the very intelligent bird which seems to make itself the companion of man wherever he goes, all over the world, almost. No bird is more tender and attentive to its young ones. It is a pretty sight to note a family of young sparrows clustering round their mother, quite wary and able to take care of themselves, but fluttering their wings, and chirping, and flying with open mouth to receive the never denied maternal morsel. On warm summer days, we may watch the mothers teaching their offspring how to pick, in the best way, from the rose-trees, the aphides that they like, bending down the pliant twigs, and showing the young how they may do it for themselves. And in winter, we may observe how intelligently the sparrows watch the tits hanging to the food tied for them by long strings to rod, or bush, or apple-tree. Unable themselves to cling as easily as the tits can, they seem to study, and practise, like training athletes, till, after many failures, one, and then another, achieves an envied success; and thus by assiduous practice, some of them, in our own garden, are able to cling to the food in a gale, and be blown, like the tits, about and around, and hold on, and feed in peace and comfort. Sparrows are birds that afford, to an attentive observer, quite an interest in watching.

The nest-building of the birds furnishes an object of study that is full of wonder. By watching it day by day, and close at hand, in your own garden, it will seem quite amazing. Those neat nest-builders, the chaffinch, the goldfinch, and such like, are well-known and highly appreciated; but once I had the good fortune to be able to study thoroughly, and at ease, the wonderful skill as a nest-builder of the song-thrush, which, along with the blackbird (itself another thrush) and the skylark, floods English scenes with melody little inferior to the music of the nightingale. Of one of the loveliest songsters of English woods and hedgerows, it was pleasant to be able to note how highly it should rank as an architect in nest-building. As a singer the thrush ranks among the very foremost. On the song-thrush, Tennyson, a lover and a student of birds, wrote, in the latest years of his long life, a truly remarkable poem, of which three-fourths represent, in a wonderful nearness of structure, the words that denote the several snatches of the bird's bursts of melody, while the remaining fourth records the comment on each strain by the poet. Here is one of the stanzas:—

“Summer is coming, summer is coming : I know it, I know it, I know it ;
Light again, leaf again, life again, love again !’ Yes, my wild little poet.”

And thus the noteworthy poem goes on all through. As a nest-builder, the thrush placed at first a fundamental structure, with a hollow about the size of a tea-cup, largely of moss and such soft substances, wrought into a rounded form by intermingled straw, or small roots, or stems of grass, up to where there was put, at the brim, a thicker band hooped round, as it were, like the mouth of a basket. All this was carefully intertwisted and delicately fastened into proper positions here and there by a sort of concretionary matter supplied by the bird, so far as I could make out, in the form of saliva. This cup itself made a nice nest; but then, as I well knew, there was to come a lining; and the laying on of this was the finest part of the work. Within the cup the bird first laid on, and fastened to the frame by the same kind of glutinous matter, a layer of mingled mud and horse-dung, thicker at the bottom and thinning out towards the top, all rounded with amazing smoothness by the thrush's bill. For innermost coating, short slips of rotten wood were used, firmly glued on by the same cement and bruised flat, so as to thoroughly accord with the smoothness of the surface whereon it was laid. When thus finished, the lining was like pasteboard, hard, smooth, tough, and watertight, while thoroughly warm and comfortable, furnishing a structure admirably fitted to protect the eggs during the bleak winds of early spring.

In studies of birds' nests and their modes of building, there is much to awaken our interest; and it is certainly enough to win the admiration of any careful observer

“To view the structure of that little work,
A bird's nest: mark it well, within, without;
No tool had he that wrought, no knife to cut,
No nail to fix; his little beak was all,

And yet how neatly finished ! What nice hand,
With every implement and means to boot,
Could make me such another ?”

Of the songs of birds, various theories have been proposed to account for the main motives. Some attribute them wholly to emotions of love, and dwell upon them as the language of courtship and affection ; others to hilarity and joy ; and others, again, to rivalry or defiance ; but perhaps it would be best to note in the songs a mixture of all these emotions. In regard to this subject, a small matter occurred in our own garden. Of a pair of robins, which had long built every year in one of our nest-boxes, the female was, after a hard winter, observed to be ailing ; she could scarcely eat or move about, and when I took her into my hand she hardly cared to get away. The male bird had always been so attentive to his consort, that his love seemed to be of the kind sung of by Ovid :—

“ Hanc cupit, hanc optat, sola suspirat in illa ;
Signaque dat nutu, sollicitatque notis.”

And now he tried to tempt her with crumbs, a bit of meat, or a worm ; but, alas, she pined away and died. Then, for a week, the male went around singing rapturously, almost without pause, the whole day long. This seemed to be to find and coax a sweetheart, and when he had thus secured another wife, the pair soon built a nest in one of our boxes, and reared there a nice little brood. At ordinary times this robin used to sing his best when challenged by a rapturous little singer of our own, a goldfinch-canary mule, who liked to show how he could outsing the robin. They would answer each other and, in rivalry, strain their little throats to the utmost. This bird of mine was so tame that he would hop or fly about the garden, and go quietly into his cage again, and sing a soft little song, surpassingly sweet, as he was taken in to roost. By-and-by, however, through old age or weakness, this sweet songster died, and was buried at the bottom of the garden with a poetic epitaph.

A love for Nature may be cherished best of all, perhaps, without any thought of what, in cruel irony, is usually called sport ; and wholly free from the desire to take the life of bird, or fish, or insect, believing with the great American naturalist, Thoreau, that no humane being past the thoughtless age of boyhood, would ever wish to destroy any creature that holds its life by the same tenure wherewith he holds his own. Ruskin wisely urges everyone to cultivate perfect sympathy with every living thing around him ; and in one of the rules of his Society of St. George, he makes the members promise to neither kill nor hurt any living creature needlessly, nor destroy any beautiful thing, but to strive to save and comfort all gentle life, and guard and perfect all natural beauty upon the earth. This view has grown with me from boyhood, and still grows with increasing strength. The truest lovers of Nature are quite content to watch and observe, without the slightest wish to kill ; they thus secure the fullest confidence and harmony with all living creatures, and they are quite ready to endure the contempt that is poured out upon

them by the lovers of sport as fadmongers. A Burns can feel sympathy with a wounded hare, and awaken universal pity for a field-mouse whose "wee bit housie" has been laid in ruins by his ploughshare; and a Thoreau moves a mother's heart by truly asserting that in its extremity the hare cries like a child. We may well take to heart the lesson given by Wordsworth:—

"Never to blend our pleasure or our pride
With sorrow of the meanest thing that feels."

To a man who can take an interest in pursuits such as are here noted, they will form a perennial delight, ever varying, and never found to fail. In whatever situation he may be placed, whatever may be his vocation, these studies will always furnish companionship for his daily walks; and the very remembrance of them will in hours of solitude prove a truly delightful solace. Like the daffodils to the High Priest of Nature, they may be truly said to "flash upon that inward eye which is the bliss of solitude"; and he goes forth to the renewal of these pursuits, or the seeking for fresh ones, with a mind invigorated by the thought of what they have many a time already afforded him. Even London, in its dreariest days, is rendered more than tolerable by the recollection of what he has many a time seen and heard, and hopefully enjoyable by the thought of what may be expected in days to come. To one such lover of Nature it happened once, some fourteen years ago, that on a well remembered Tuesday, often cited as "Black Tuesday," when London had been unexpectedly buried, like a city of the dead, beneath the fall from an appalling snowstorm—which straitened the vast metropolis by cutting off for a while the daily supplies of milk, butter, vegetables, and fruit, and engulfed, all night, eminent travellers in trains passing in and out of Oxford—he had to walk at night four miles due westward, from office to home, along the great western highway, a walk more trying than he had found an Alpine pass. Even then, when floundering from snow-drifts in road, where vehicles abandoned were nearly buried, to the footpaths inside Hyde Park, in hopes of finding there drifts of less depth and difficulty, he could recall, as in the dim light he struggled on, the brighter times when he had heard such and such a songster, or caught sight of such and such a nest, and he was cheered and rendered hopeful by the remembrance. And when, at last, on reaching home, he had to shovel a path to the door, and have his boots almost cut from his feet, it was pleasant to be able to forget the difficulties of the walk in recollections such as had cheered and encouraged him in its course. Truly has it been said that

"Nature never did betray the heart that loved her: 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life to lead from joy to joy."

The man that has the tastes whereof I write, may abundantly gratify them wherever he may be placed, even in London; but he can especially cultivate such pursuits, and find in them never-ending delights, if he but set out in the right way, in a district so rich in everything that pertains to the sights and sounds of rural life, especially of bird-life, as the one that lies around Richmond.