



THE LION'S MOUTH

STRANGE BIRD-FELLOWS

BY FREDERICK L. ALLEN

ONE winter day at the seashore I met a man who typified moral courage. He was a bird enthusiast, and he carried a large telescope with which to identify ducks gathered offshore. I marveled at that man. I wondered how he stood the ordeal of carrying that telescope through the city on his way to his trysting place with the ducks. Was he fortified by the thought that people would suppose him to be a yachtsman setting forth to add to the equipment of his yacht, or a lighthouse keeper returning to reinforce the guard?

If I had been in his place, I fear I should have left the telescope at home. For I, too, have a weakness for birds; but when I set out for my favorite hills and orchards my field glass is hidden deep in my pocket, and I try to wear the aspect of a man intent merely upon exercise. It is bad enough to hear the small boys jeer at my knickerbockers without giving them reason to guess that I am going to spend the morning flirting with sparrows. Not that everybody is not most generous toward me and the sparrows. My friends assure me that it is a fine thing to learn about birds. And yet, tactful as they are, I can see what is going on in the back of their minds. The proper age for such things, to their way of thinking, is somewhere between five and twelve. This feeling dogs me wherever I go. And so, if I am engaged in observing a thrush by the roadside and a farmer comes along, I put my glass furtively out of sight and give my best imitation of a man examining the condition of the telephone wires or inspecting the progress of

the crops. Only in the depths of the forest am I thoroughly at ease, and able to enjoy the birds as if I were at the proper age.

There are others who share my tastes. Most of them, however, hunt in packs for mutual moral support. They belong to "bird clubs." They take bird walks together, each member fortified by the sense that there are others as foolish as he. And they cover over their amiable delight in the game of keeping a bird list by pretending that they are engaged in a species of ornithological research. They fool even themselves into thinking that they are advancing the cause of science. Nonsense. I would as soon believe a man who explained his game of golf as a series of experiments upon the resiliency of gutta-percha as believe most of these bird people. There may be a few ornithologists among them, but not many. To most of them, I'll wager, it is a game and little more, if they only dared admit it.

The books written on the subject have the same way of reducing a taste for birds to a scientific and utilitarian basis. One of them points out, as an argument for bird study, that "Birds are nature's most potent checks upon the undue increase of noxious insects and harmful rodents." All true, doubtless, and bravely said. I yield to no man in the severity of my attitude toward harmful rodents. Yet the garbage man, for that matter, is another potent check, and still I shall never willingly devote my Saturday afternoons to his pursuit.

The same book also lays stress on the value to science of ornithological study, which appears to consist mostly of sitting very still in the middle of a thicket

for a very long time, watching a bird on a nest. "Take a sheltered seat in some favored locality," urges this handbook, "and become a part of the background. . . . Secrete yourself near some spot loved by birds, and it may be your privilege to learn the secrets of the forest."

My brief experience at this sort of thing has taught me principally the secrets of the noxious insects. The mosquito, for instance. He never for an instant took me for a part of the background. For every thing I learned about the feeding habits of young finches, I learned several things about the feeding habits of old mosquitoes. No, I find it bad enough to have to stand motionless in a swamp for as much as half a minute getting the focus on a restive redstart, while the noxious insects settle savagely, one by one, on the back of my neck, without dragging out the sport for hours. Let those whose necks are more leathery than mine, or whose ankles are less appetizing, advance the cause of science.

From what the books say, it appears that some ornithologists are so indefatigable as not to be content merely with becoming a part of the background. They use what is called an observation-blind. This consists of a large umbrella, with a long spike on the end of the handle, which can be driven into the ground, and with a cloth covering which hangs down all around, forming a sort of miniature tent. In this tent, on a campstool, sits the ornithologist. There are little windows in the side to let the mosquitoes in and out, and through one of these windows the ornithologist observes the wild life of the neighborhood. The idea seems to be to rig the thing up close to a sparrow's nest and climb inside. The sparrows soon forget that there's a man in it; or if they don't forget him they at least lose all respect for him. So business continues as usual in the sparrow community, while for hours and hours the ornithologist sits there and takes down the evidence.

The main thing that I am curious about is what happens when the neighbors stroll by and decide to inspect this strange tentlike object. Imagine walking up to the thing and finding the gentle eyes of an ornithologist gazing out at you through the window! Would you inform him kindly that the rain had stopped some days ago and that it would be quite safe to put up his umbrella and go home? Or would you tiptoe quietly away, wondering what sad experience had led the man thus to seek the solitude of his gloomy thoughts? An interesting device, the observation-blind, but not for me. I should be too sure that the neighbors were tapping their foreheads significantly as they passed by. And my interest in birds, after all, is not scientific. For me the game's the thing.

The game, of course, is to see how many kinds of birds you can identify each time you go out, and how many you can add to your list for the season. To play it well you should select a route across country which will take you through a pleasing variety of scenes. The only drawback is that not all the scenes are pleasing in themselves. The experts tell me, for instance, that the place of all places to look for sea birds is in the neighborhood of the city dump. I went there just once. You walk along a dingy street to the waste spaces beyond the last of the factories and gas houses, and there by the water's edge, where ash carts are depositing their contents and dreadful people are picking over the rubbish for junk, is the place to pull out your field glass and look for mergansers. The whole thing seems a sordid episode. You feel that your activities must seem slightly irregular even to the men who drive the ash carts; and whenever a limousine rolls by on the road you seem to hear its occupants asking one another if that figure standing among the orange peels doesn't look strangely familiar, and whether he is searching with that field glass for a discarded shoe or two with

which to replenish his wardrobe. My one experience convinced me that I preferred the birds whose search for noxious insects and harmful rodents is pursued under less favorable conditions.

Under any conditions, however, the game has its fine points which must be carefully watched. For instance, one of the best ways of attracting birds, according to the authorities, is to place the lips to the back of the hand and make a violent kissing sound. Apparently this has some resemblance to the cries of a wounded bird; and according to one of the bird books, one may enter an apparently deserted thicket, and after a few minutes of this sort of thing, "find oneself surrounded by an anxious or curious group of its feathered inhabitants." This is valuable information, but to be used with discretion. In Central Park, for instance, one is just as likely as not, after trying this little ornithological experiment, to find oneself surrounded by an anxious or curious group of gentlemen with blue coats and brass buttons. Better keep these tactics for the open country.

It is for the open country that I am bound when you see me setting forth on a warm spring morning, with my field glass in one pocket, a manual of birds in another, and my pipe in a third. That is all the equipment I need. There are no country-club dues to pay. The price of carfare to the end of the line is all that is required. Financially required, I mean. For there are two other requirements. One is the vigorous competitive instinct which I hope my daughter will attain between the ages of five and twelve, and never lose—the instinct which makes it possible for one to secure immense satisfaction out of expecting to get three new birds on one's list, and then actually getting five; and the other is a love of the upland cedar groves where the goldfinches flock in the treetops, the old roads overhung with willows full of warblers, and the birch clumps green with young leaves, where the field-sparrows sing.

YOUTH

BY BEN RAY REDMAN

SHE was a most expansive dowager,
 Freighted with spoils from foreign
 argosies;
 One would have guessed a score of
 treasuries
 Had been ransacked capriciously for her.

Her pudgy fingers with the slightest stir
 Betrayed a host of colored, flashing stars;
 Long ropes of pearls and diamonds in bars
 Armored her body, sheathed in lavender.

Pouting, she teased her escort with a glance
 Provocatively roguish, while she swayed
 Her massive shoulders, bare and unafraid,
 In tempo with the rhythm of the dance.

Meantime the jazz band whined: "Oh honey
 child,
 You've got to love me, for you drive me
 wild!"

DILEMMA FOR MORALISTS

BY C. A. BENNETT

THEN

SAY seventy-five or a hundred years
 ago.

He had been one of a group of boys aged about fifteen who had persecuted an unhappy stray dog by tying a tin can to its tail and pursuing it with stones and yells. His parents were grieved, but hardly surprised; that was the kind of boy he was. They could do nothing with him. In despair they sent him to a priest, to whom he made full confession. He said he could not tell why he had done it. The other boys proposed it and the impulse to join in had just come to him and he had acted on it. Besides, every proper boy looked upon a stray dog as fair game.

The priest talked to him about the evils of acting on impulse and the need for self-control. He said that all boys were by nature cruel. These unregenerate impulses were part of the Old Adam. The Old Adam must be driven