

THE LONE SWALLOWS

by
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**“The beautiful swallows, be tender to them, for
they symbol all that is best in nature and all that is
best in our hearts.”**

Richard Jefferies.

COMPILER'S NOTE

MOST of the papers in this volume are published for the first time. A few have appeared in *The Daily Express*, *The London Evening News*, *The Field*, *The Saturday Review*, *The Outlook*, *The English Review*, and *The Wide World Magazine*. I am indebted to the Editors of these publications for permission to reprint them; and I am personally grateful to Sir Theodore Cook, of *The Field*, and to Mr. Austin Harrison of *The English Review* for their encouragement and kindness in criticising and printing my earliest essays.

"Winter's Eve," the first attempt to describe the common sights and sounds of the English countryside, I include for reasons of sentiment. Nature writing, I have been told by some authorities on art, is regarded as a trivial thing—"nature," according to those people, is but a frail base for art-creation. Those authorities, I discovered, did not know the difference between a linnet and a celandine. And they did not want to be told. But I imagine that, as children, they would have been delighted to see a linnet's woven nest, and to be told that the celandine is the first of the wild flowers to fashion after a dreary winter a gold cup in the February meadows and woods. My own belief is that association with birds and flowers in childhood—when the brain is plastic and the mind is eager—tends to widen human sympathy in an adult life. The hope of civilisation (since we cannot remake the world's history) is in the fraternity of nations, or so it seems to myself, whose adolescence was spent at the war; the hope of amity and goodwill of the nation is in

the individual—in the human heart, which yearns for the good and the beautiful; and the individual is a child first, eager to learn, but unwilling to be taught. Therefore it would appear that the hope of civilisation is really in the child. Sometimes heredity may be too great a handicap, but a sweet environment is a gradual solvent of inherited vice; at least it will prevent hardness, whence springs un-understanding, and hate. It was on a Sunday in May, 1920, in a tramcar at Catford, a south-eastern suburb of London, that the seed of this thought was sown by the sight of children returning to the slums after a day in the country. How eager they were: and how their parents were happy! Immediately afterwards, in a visionary fervour, or, may be because I was very young, I wrote "London Children and Wild Flowers," which Austin Harrison published, with Walter de la Mare as god-parent.

H. W.

*SKIRR COTTAGE,
11th November, 1921.*

THE LONE SWALLOWS

ALONG the trackless and uncharted airlines from the southern sun they came, a lone pair of swallows, arriving with weakly and uncertain flight from over the wastes of the sea. They rested on a gorse bush, their blue backs beautiful against the store of golden blossom guarded by the jade spikes. The last day of March had just blown with the wind into eternity. Symbols of summer and of loveliness, they came with young April, while yet the celandines were unbleached, while the wild white strawberry and ragged-robin were opening with the dog violet. On the headland the flowers struggle for both life and livelihood, the sward is cropped close by generations of sheep, and the sea-wind is damp and cold. Perhaps the swallows hoped to nest, as their ancestors had done centuries since, in the cave under the precipice at the headland's snout, or that love for its protection after the wearying journey was new-born in their hearts. One cannot say; but the pair remained there.

Days of yellow sunshine and skies blue as their wings greeted them. Over the wave crests and the foamed troughs they sped, singing and twittering as they flew. Kestrel hawks with earth-red pinions hung over the slopes of the cliffs, searching with keen eyes for mouse or finch, but the swallows heeded not. Wheatears passed all day among the rabbit burrows and the curled cast feathers of the gulls, chiffchaffs iterated their little joy in singsong melody, shags squatted on the rocks below, preening metal-green plumage and ejecting plentiful fish-

bones. The wanderer on the sheep-track, passing every day, joyed in the effortless thrust of those dark wings, the chestnut stain on the throat, the delicate fork of the tail. Winter was ended, and the blackthorn blossoming—there would be no more snow or ice after the white flowers, fragile as vapour thrall'd by frost, had come upon their ebon wilderness of spines. The heart could now look forward, not backwards to other fled springtimes. The first swallows had come from distant lands, and three weeks before the winged hosts were due! One of the greatest of nature-writers wrote, "The beautiful swallows, be tender to them." In fancy Richard Jefferies, too, was wandering on the headland, and watching the early vagrants, breathing the fragrance of the wild thyme that came like an old memory with the wind. Always dearly loved are the singing birds of passage, returning with such feeble wings to the land that means love and life to them, and love and life and beauty to us. Each one is dear; all the swallows returned are a sign and a token of loveliness being made manifest before our eyes.

The early April days passed, like the clouds in the sky, softly and in sunlight, merging into the nights when Venus lighted the western seas, and belted Orion plunged into the ocean. In the sheltered places the arums grew, some with hastate leaves purple-spotted, and showing the crimson *spadix* like the tip of a club. Brighter grew the gorselands, till from the far sands they looked like swarming bees gold-dusty from the pollen of the sun. The stonechat with white-ringed neck and dark cap fluttered into the azure, jerked his song in mid-air, then dived in rapture to his mate perched upon a withered bramble. In a

tuft the titlark was building her nest, while the yellowhammer trilled upon a rusted plough-share in the oatfield.

Sometimes the swallows flew to a village a mile inland, and twittered about an ancient barn with grass-grown thatch, haunted by white owls, and hiding in dimness a cider press that had not creaked in turning for half a century. Once they were seen wheeling above the mill pond, and by the mossy waterwheel, hovering along its cool gushings and arch of sun-stealing drops thrown fanwise from the mouldered rim. Everywhere the villagers hailed them with delight, and spoke in the inn at nights of their early adventuring. Such a thing had been unknown for many years; the oldest granfer had heard tell of it, but had never actually seen it before. The old man took a poet's delight in the news, and peered with rheumy and faded blue eyes, hoping to see them when tapping along the lane to his "tater-patch." It became a regular thing for the wanderer upon the headland to report their presence when he returned from the high solitude and the drone of the tide, and the yelping cries of gulls floating white in the sunshine above a sea of woad-blue.

Gulls selected nesting sites, and the sea-thrift raised pink buddings from its matted clumps. The ravens rolled in the wind uprushing from the rocks, and took sticks in black beaks to the ledge where they had nested throughout the years. The male bird watched upon a spar while his mate with throaty chucklings built anew the old mass of rubbish where her eggs would be laid. Sometimes he fed her with carrion filched from a pearly gull by the flashing and sunpointed foam, and she gabbled with pleasure. Ever and anon the fleeing specks of the

swallows passed near, winding in and out, floating and diving, “garrulous as in Cæsar’s time.” Like kittens in distress the buzzards wailed, spreading vast brown canvas that enabled them to sail high among those silver and phantom galleons, the clouds. Steamers passing to the Severn basin left smoke trails on the horizon; the life of the sea and land, wild and civilised, went on; but no other swallows arrived. Light of heart the wanderer watched, and waited. Any day, new-born and blessed by Aurora, would see the arrival, any day now—two dark arrowheads fell with mighty swoop from heaven, arrowheads that did not miss their mark. There was a frail flutter of feathers in the sunshine, a red drop on the ancient sword, a scuttle of terrified rabbits, a faint scream trembling and dying in the blue. Then only the murmur of the sea far below and the humming of the single telegraph wire near the pathway. The peregrine falcons had taken the lone and beloved swallows.

LADY DAY IN DEVON

THE rooks are now busy in the elms of the churchyard, and drifting thwartwise the wind with sticks for their nests. Sometimes a young male bird comes with food for his mate as she pleaches the twigs with claw and beak; she flutters her wings like a fledgeling, gapes widely, and squawks with satisfaction. Daws come to the trees, perching head to the south-west breeze, ejaculating sharply. Periodical visitants are the starlings, their songs of mimicry swelling with sudden rush and wheezing. One bird has learnt the chattering cry of a kestrel, the mating call, and deceives the rooks into thinking that one of the brown mouse-hawks is near. That rooks are thieves among themselves is well known, stealing sticks from their neighbours. To-day I watched one taking material that a young and enthusiastic sister brought with difficulty every five minutes or so from the distant beech clump. The thief was an artist, she was subtle, and cunning. A quick hop took her to the young bird's pile, she seized a stick, and drifted upwards into the wind, swung round in a half circle and brought it to her own nest in the same tree with a soft *caa-caa*, as though implying relief at reaching home again. Her mate, judging by his white face, is an ancient bird; he is wise; he does no work; he fetches no food for his toiling wife; but perches near the nest, approving her method of labour, and guarding its results. He is the nearest approach to a bird "fence" that it would be possible to find.

A lane of red mud leads through the beech-clump. Life here is hard, but the celandines show their spoke-rays to the sun and wind-washed heaven, braving the half-gales that come across the Atlantic and twirl the fallen numbers of autumn's leaves among their yellow flowers. A tawny owl lives in a pollard hornbeam in this clump; he comes regularly at dusk to my cottage and hoots with mournful insistence to the barn owls that roost under the thatch. Rabbits' bones and fur, finches' feathers, and the fragile skulls of mice hang in the crevices of the tree, hundreds of them, some fresh and white, others hidden under the brown dust of decay that trickles from the old tree's dead heart. Tap his home, and he flaps out, pursued by any small birds searching for spiders or grubs in the spinney. The trees are dwarfed, bent by the salt winds; a few larches grew here, but never more the sap will rise and burst in emerald foam on their wispy branches. Constant buffeting with the winds of the ocean has killed them. A magpie is prospecting the mazed brittleness of one of them for a nesting site; she appears nearly every morning.

Beyond the clump is a combe, or valley, where every year a pair of carrion crows nest. They fly away as soon as they see me, four hundred yards below—they are crafty, and leave nothing to chance. In the stone hedges the celandines, flowers much bigger than those around London, shine like spilled meteor fragments against their leaves. Primroses grow with them, and the white blossom of the wild strawberry, and in places the stitchwort is in bloom. A flock of linnets sings in a hawthorn, a silver twittering of song coming as the wind rests; with a rustling of wings the flock leaves for the bloom of the gorse which everywhere is scenting the air. The apple trees in

the orchard close below are beginning to bud, already goldfinches haunt their lichened branches, now fighting with gold-barred wings aflutter, now pausing to pipe sweet whispers of coming vernal glory, when the blossoms shall spill in showers of loveliness. Afar are the Burrows, and over their sogged wastes the green plovers wheel and fall, uttering wild calls to the wind, while their mates stand below, diving with broad pinions to earth as though they would die for love. High above a buzzard is sailing. To the right a great horse draws a plough against the skyline, and a dozen gulls follow in its wake; behind them trip and whistle four dishwashers, or wagtails. They say in the village that three pairs of ravens are nesting on the headland this year; I have seen but one. In this district a raven has only once been known to kill or "eye-pick" lambs, but that was many years ago, and then their breeding ledge was robbed in revenge. The raven has come near to extermination, like the peregrine falcon; but here both of these mighty fliers rarely molest the belongings of man; the one feeds on offal and dead rabbits that the stoats have left, and the other takes stock-doves, oystercatchers, wild duck, snipe, and ring-plover. In the early spring they stoop at gulls and diving birds just for exuberance of spirit. Certainly every tide leaves its dead among the seaweed and the beach-wrack: gulls and auks with their backs torn and ripped by the swift blue-hawks.

THE INCOMING OF SUMMER

WHERE by the stream the towers of the wild hyacinth bore their clustered bells, sought by that gold-vestured hunchback the wild bee, the willow wren sang his little melody, pausing awhile to watch the running water. The early purple orchids grew with the bluebells, their spurs upraised, their green leaves mottled with purple. Already the blackthorn had put forth its blossoms, a sign of frostless nights and warm days; already the blackbird had planted its nest in the alder bush. Now the year would advance till the grain was bronzed and the red arms of the reaper-and-binder whirled among its baked stems. Following the green and silver windings of the water the blue swallows hovered and fell, but the cuckoo's voice had not yet called from the pheasant coverts. Any dawn would be welcomed by his mellow note, for over the sea and the land the winged hosts were passing, urged by the love they bore the thicket or the hedgerow that had weaned them, and for which in parched lands they had pined. From the time of the early sweet violet the migrants had been returning, and their journeyings would continue till the time of the first poppy.

The willow birds perched on the wands of the sallows, and the swallows twittered as they glided. Two singing notes, oft repeated, came from an ash tree where an olivine chiffchaff was piping his simple music. Throughout the gusty winds of March dust-laden and with only the celandines to tell of hope, he had been piping by the brook, a wanderer whose notes would be heard till the blackberries of October. The allotted

span of the celandines was over, their rayed spokes of yellow were bleached—the wheatears were flitting upon the swarded downlands. The flowers had gathered to themselves all the light that the sun of early spring had flung between swift clouds, the seeds were formed, their hopes fulfilled. In their place came wild strawberries and herb robert, the dog-violet and the speedwell.

The meadow grasses were not yet tall enough to sigh at the wind's soft passing, but a red admiral had been joying in the sunlight for many days. Down by the streamlet the moor-hen had woven her rushy nest, bending an arch of withered sedges over her labour to hide the speckled eggs. In the mud of the pebbled shallows her webbed feet left a track as she sought for beetles. Small spoors, the imprint of little claws, showed where a vole had made quick passage across a mud-bank. In the turf bank its retreats were tunnelled, leading to a domed hollow lined with grasses—here her young would shortly nestle. From the stream and the shallow the rushes were rising, green spearpoints scarce sturdy enough to conceal the nest of the wild duck. Now they were thin and over-sharpened, as though exhausted by the effort of straining upwards to the light to which the sacrificial flowers would be offered in June; then they would be “thick and sappy,” annealed; in winter the cattle would tread their dried stems upon the beaten floors of the shippen.

Over pebbles, wine-stained, gray, rusted and brown, the stream tumbled, around mossy boulders and under branches, swaying dreamily the drowned poa grasses. Brook-trout lurked for the gnats that sometimes brushed the surface with

trailing legs. Where the wind was stayed by arch of hazel and willow the midges danced their nuptials, in ghostèd assembly rising and falling. The time of the mayflies was not yet, their brief pageant would be heralded by the myriad trumpets of summer's insects; summer was still shyly virginal. No sunbeam had yet touched the buttercup, unblazoned was the shield of the meadow by *gules* of poppy, *azure* of cornflower, or *argent* of feverfew. Fragile were the greeneries of the hedge above the brooklet, sweet the primroses under the stubbed roots of the ash trees. Loveliest is the year when "sumer is icumen in," when the willow wren, slim as he perches on an amber wand, sings all the love in his heart.

Something is moving in the nettles which the bullocks have not trampled. Their hooves have impressed cloven hollows at the marge, but the nettles are unspoiled. A tangled song comes from the middle of the patch, incoherent and unceasing. The pointed leaves quiver as the motion continues. Presently a little bird with a fawn breast jerks into the air, flutters a moment, and then disappears. It is a whitethroat, and till now his presence in the countryside was unknown. Ecstasy, uncontrolled and rising from his heart like the spring in the hillside, has all his being enthralled. The trembling of the nettles and the husky voice continue, and a brown bird passes over the nettled sanctuary. It is a wren carrying a leaf to the house that after two days' labour is nearly built. Swiftly he pushes the oak leaf into place, then mounts a dry bramble jutting above the pleached ash and hazel branches, and from his pine-spindle of a beak pours a ringing melody. The fervour of the crackey's song is so intense that in comparison with his size and minute cocked tail it appears an impossibility—he is a

Swinburnian singer. His vernal feelings are so strong that in the interval of vocal exclamation he fashions many spare nests, most of them loosely and carelessly made. The shanty in the dead ivy around the oak is constructed of withered leaves that harmonise with its surroundings; he has another in a hayrick near, formed of dried grasses; a third in a green bush composed wholly of moss fetched from a bank in the sunken lane.

The whitethroat and his mate have jerked away, the willow bird slipped upstream, the cock-wren with cocked tail is stuttering an alarm. Down by the water's edge a reddish animal nibbles a shoot held in its paws. Perceiving that it has no hostile bearing, the wren is silent. At the slightest movement the vole will dive with a musical and hollow plop into the water and swim to concealment. Quietly it finishes the sappy stalk, then creeps under a thick stem of cow-parsley, the florets of which are budding. Finches pass over, calling to each other, and a silver chirruping announces a wagtail. He alights on a smooth gray boulder, slender in outline and poised on fragile legs, flaunting a breast of daffodil. The hen-bird follows, and they perch together. Their long tails move as though to maintain an earthly balance, so faery-frail are they. She leaves him, flitting in wavy flight to another boulder. He follows, but she is restless. Downstream they pass, stopping for a moment on a jutting fragment of rock in the stone hedge, peering into a cavity. Throughout the summer the gray wagtails will haunt the brook, for within the cave foundations of their nest are already laid, fibres sought inside the pollard willows.

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