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WHEN THE SKYLARK SANG IN PORTLAND

by

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Nearly half a century ago, Ladd's Addition out beyond Hawthorne Avenue on the east side was the home of one of the world's great song birds. Sparsely settled at the time, the fields were open and grassy. During the sunny spring mornings, bird lovers were bent on wandering about listening to the skylark whose music had inspired some of the greatest poets in the world. This field of the bird lovers and the skylark has long past, but it is a story remembered by many of the older residents.

One morning in April, I stood watching at the edge of this half wild park. A skylark rose and started winging slowly up, beginning to sing as he went. He circled evenly in a big spiral, his song keeping pace and varying from a clear musical whistling to a series of liquid trills, then quick ecstatic notes as if something stirred him ^{from} within and quickened his quivering wings to ascend higher and higher into the sunshine and the clouds. My eyes followed the lifted head and limpid tones up into the blue until they were lost. I stood waiting. A speck appeared in the sky and the bird began coming down, unwinding its spiral and still dropping its lilting music as if floated gracefully earthward. When some hundred feet above me, the song softened, stopped, and the bird dropped to the grass with the velocity of an arrow. I almost felt as if earth and sky around me had become a big stage and I had been listening to a great artist who had lifted me with him as he soared and sang. From earth to sky and back again, the joyous notes keeping time with the wings, made a perfect performance.

I pondered on the courage and optimism of this little wanderer of the old world who by no desire of his own had landed on the far Pacific Coast. I wondered if ~~he~~ perhaps he had been piercing the skies and supplicating his gods to let his wings carry him home again. I almost wished he was back there, but not by the long dreary route of cramped box with many companions in the steerage of a vessel, then crowded into a stuffy noisy baggage car and whizzed across a big country-- to end with his box upset, no food and no water, barely alive. And out of that black punishment had come this silvery offering to my ears.

A few days later I sought out the skylark again. I saw the mother drop into the grass near the center of the field and edging closer, a shadow flared out and flew away. She had slipped from her nest. It was built much like that of a meadowlark, and there were three spotted eggs in it. It gave me a thrill. Perhaps the skylarks would live here and like it.

About a week later I found three naked nestlings. On my next visit as I neared the place, I saw a dog nosing about in the grass, his tail wagging back and forth. I had a premonition of disaster and hurried over to the spot. The nest had been dug out and the young birds killed. I had a foreboding that the skylarks might have an up-hill time getting started in this country.

There are so many enemies like roving cats and dogs for birds that nest on the ground that it would seem almost impossible for a few newcomers to get a start and thrive. Even though sixty pairs had been introduced and scattered around the regions of Portland, Gresham, and Salem at one time, those that survived would be too few to start a race.

At home, *Alauda arvensis*, lover of the cultivated fields, is a common dweller throughout much of Europe and Asia. It is found in open spaces, commons, downs, and mountain slopes, but more especially in cultivated areas, having greatly increased in numbers and range with the wide spread of agricultural movement. In fact, it is reported that it is probably the most abundant bird in western Europe.

From early spring until mid-summer they are spread here and there throughout vast areas engaged in rearing their young, of which there are usually several broods. By September they commence to congregate in flocks, often of enormous numbers, and to range about the country in search of food. In the more northern portions of their habitat, they appear to be entirely migratory, departing for the South on the advent of severe weather. But in England and the Continent they are not wholly so, for while the majority are absent in the coldest weather, evidently northern birds may be found in various localities. During these fall migrations the birds often come, as on the east coasts of Scotland and England, in a continuous stream for several days at a time until the numbers are simply incalculable. At such times they are snared and netted by thousands, and even hundreds of thousands, for food. Great quantities are shipped to Paris and London open markets, and other large cities. It is a massacre of the innocents that would seem to threaten the species with extinction. Their food consists principally of seeds of grain and wild plants, and such swarms of gleaners might eventually clean the fields down to starvation.

The skylark endures confinement readily and is a favorite

cage bird. It sings freely and delightfully for a good part of the year. When reared from a nestling, it becomes gentle and affectionate and has the mocker's power of imitating the songs of other birds. If taken when adult it often pines and dies.

A good many years ago, Mr. C. F. Pfluger had the dream of importing and establishing a number of European bird species into the State of Oregon. Perhaps mesmerized by his zeal and enthusiasm were many names among pioneer families associated with him who also wanted to hear the songs of the birds of their childhood. From 1888 on for twenty-five years, the records show the tireless energy and eagerness of Mr. Pfluger and his friends who contributed loyally to this cause.

In 1907, nineteen years after this group of enthusiasts had started their venture, the Portland Song Bird Club was formed, with B. Fallows as President, Ralph Hoyt as Treasurer, and C. F. Pfluger as Secretary.

Early experiments with importing nightingales and mockers had not proved successful, but the skylark fared better at first. In fact, the main ambition of the Club became to stock the State of Oregon with skylarks. On November 19, 1907, sixty pairs of skylarks and a few scattering pairs of thrushes, chaffinches and goldfinches were ordered from an eastern importing firm. The bill for this order was \$264.70, and it was only one of many.

The Portland Song Bird Club nearly succeeded in establishing the skylark in the regions around Portland, Gresham, and Salem, and at one time the birds were reported as numerous in the Umpqua Valley, and in Marion and Washington Counties. It is known that they existed in these regions for some twenty to twenty-five

years. Finally their voices faded away and there have been no records for a good many years.

This is the typical history of importations of the skylark in other regions of the country, in New Jersey and Delaware on the eastern coast, in Cincinnati, in Santa Cruz, California, and around Victoria, B. C. It is said that there is not a skylark in the country today.

There are at least two groups of thought on introducing and transplanting foreign birds. One of these, the conservative, represented by such eminent students as Joseph Grinnell, believes in preserving at all costs our native birds and calls attention to the many attempts at importation of foreigners that have ended in nothing more than disease and disaster. John Phillips, also a conservative, states that the other flexible group "would bring in anything from a button quail to an ostrich without any regard to the general suitability of the species." He also states that there are very few species that can or will get a foothold in this country. Two obnoxious exceptions are the European starling and the English sparrow, the former of which has not yet reached the Pacific Coast, the latter of which has about "taken the whole works."

But to the skylark--

"Like a cloud of fire,

The deep blue thou wingest,

And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest."

we say, "Would that you had staid."