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A FEATHERED TOM SAWYER

by

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"What is that night bird that seems to move from place to place in the dark bushes, and has such a medley of strange sounds?" "I heard a bird chattering last night. As if in a dream he was trying to imitate other birds, or he thought he was leading a Christmas carol. What was he?" "A real roller of a bird has come into our district. He mews to the cat, whistles to the dog, and glugs like a bullfrog, and he never lets up until near morning. Is there any way to make him tired of listening to himself? An immediate answer would be appreciated." These and other questions have been asked us by Journal readers interested in bird life, from one phase or another.

My answer was, "You are listening to the bird that has no equal as a night singer, the largest and most unwarbler-like of all American warblers, a bird with a real sense of humor and unbounded enjoyment in his own vocal tricks, a Tom Sawyer comedian. This is the long-tailed chat. His eastern relative is the yellow-breasted chat.

We have many different song birds that one may hear from daylight till the sun sets, but it is unusual and a rare treat to hear a bird that ^{sings} for the very love of it most of the day and on to midnight or later. In southern California the unforgettable nights are filled with the song of the mockingbird who calls from the avacado and fig orchards, or even roams the pepper trees along the city streets. He has a bolder temperament than the chat and mimics his neighbors also, but he is of an entirely different bird family and never comes north. The catbird is a double for the chat, but not quite such a buffoon. One other bird that cannot resist expressing his lure of the soft spring night is the white-crowned sparrow of the dooryard. From a clump of bamboo at the back door he holds it as long as he can, then explodes with a clear piercing call that shatters the stillness. In this northern region, especially on moonlight nights, one may hear the chuckling tones and twisted phrases of the long-tailed chat.

I was looking out of the window down through the tall firs and on to the river where a late, red-gold moon had fallen into the water whose current was trying to dissolve the brilliant ball and carry it away. One minute it was round. The next its even curve was broken into ragged edges and glittering shafts of light that rippled away down stream. But it wasn't the moon nor the river that held me at the window at midnight. It was the voice of a bird that came up clear and ringing through the stately firs. The chat had come to our woods.

It was the spirit of the night, a resonant rollicking voice without a form, alone but not lonesome. "Cher! Cher! Cher!" clear and strong it came from the dark tangle along the river bank. A minute later three notes in a higher pitch startled me from an entirely different position, with no movement or sound of wings to tell of their going. How did he do it? How did he find his way through the dark trees and brush? He didn't. Again and again he appeared to change position, his voice trailing off like a far-away farewell. In reality, the smug little actor sat on his limb and touched another button in his fuse box which put a muffler on his clarion voice, and fooled one into thinking he had taken a flight up the valley. In rapid succession and changing pitch, now low and rich, now high and full, that voice was ventriloquial like an echo. Did he sing to a near-by mate on her nest to keep her reassured and contented? Or did he sing to the moon and the woods because he couldn't help it?

The moon began to wane, the tall firs to grow dim. There was no gold ball for the river to wash away. And all at once there was no bird singing. At three o'clock the moon went down. The trees were dead black, the river a dim ribbon of the earlier night. But life was awakening. There were sleepy cheepings from all the bird residents. They increased to a soft chorus, answers back and forth, small excitements at getting out of bed. Then from the deep limbs of a fir a small form landed out, and another and another here and there, sparrows, violet-green swallows, a vireo, a towhee and others of the community colony who had refused earlier to be inveigled from their beds by the romantic chat. Perhaps they had listened annoyed at his moon-struck mewings.

So far we had known our chat only as a voice in the night. In the morning we descended the hill that led to the brushy region along the river. Before we came near enough to scare him, I thought to distract him by whistling some of his own calls (as best I could). We sat down in a half brushy place and waited. Soon "Kook! Kook! Kook!" was the advance he made. I mimicked it. Curiosity led him nearer. "Kwook!" he said harshly with a twist in the note. "Do that one if you can." I tried it, and then again, as he seemed astonished. He came nearer and squinted and peered through the limbs. Then he slide out of sight but not far away and fairly started a barrage of all the things he knew, three soft low notes, three high pitched ones, a string of guttural scoldings, a rapid rippling series, and then he whistled to a dog so well that the canine would have been forgiven for being taken in. He was determined to out-do any challenge.

We saw a bird of sparrow size, upper parts grayish glossed with olive-green, a white eye ring; chin, throat and breast rich yellow with a clear line where it joined the pure white of the under parts; bill and feet blackish. We did not witness the chat's love song. Dawson calls it the "dropping song" and says, "It is one of the choicest of avian comedies, for it is acted as well as sung. The performer flings himself into mid-air, flutters upward for an instant with head upraised and legs dejectedly dangling, then slowly sinks on hovering wings, with tail swinging up and down like a mad pump-handle,-- Punch as Cupid, smitten with the mortal sickness. All this while the zany pours out a flood of tumultuous and heart-rending song. He manages to recover as he nears the brush, and his fiancée evidently approves this sort of buffoonery."

The same writer says "the full song of the chat is usually delivered from some elevation, a solitary tree rising above dense cover. The music almost defies analysis, for it is full of surprises, vocal somersaults, and whimsy turns. Its cadence is ragtime and its richest phrases are punctured by flippant jests and droll parentheses. Even in the tree-top the singer clings closely to the protecting greenery, whence he pitches headlong into the thicket at the slightest intimation of approach."

We had just about covered the twenty-four hours of the chat's day and night. From three in the morning for about three hours he was silent. Then he began again and filled out the forenoon with his practicing. In the middle of the day he subsided to his thicket for a siesta. Late afternoon found him at it again, and on into the night. How could he listen to his jumble of whistles, chucks and caws through all the hours of the nesting season? Perhaps it gets onto his mate's nerves as she builds a flimsy nest and raises but one brood a year. He is undoubtedly an eccentric, but that there is method in his madness no one who studies him closely can doubt.