

Tommy Smith's BIRDS



Edmund Selous

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“A bird of the heavens shall carry the voice, and that
which hath wings shall tell the matter.”

PREFACE

I SHOULD like to explain, since otherwise it might be quite misunderstood, that this work is as much a serious one on field ornithology as if, throughout its pages, the birds I have touched on said nothing, and I said hardly anything about them. Writing it primarily for children, I have been obliged to make the contents wholly ornithological, in order to give it, as hoped, the required interest in their eyes; and I have been obliged to write it for children owing, apparently, to such interest not being felt by a sufficient number of the grown-up population to induce any publisher to meet the expense of production.

Nor is apathy all that a recorder of the actual doings of birds has to contend against, should he aim at bringing these to the notice of an adult intelligent audience. Thus in my “Ornithological Extracts from the Field-Diaries of a Life-Loving Naturalist,” there was so much alike in the general conduct of birds—all, for instance, flew, made nests and laid eggs—that the public, it was feared, would find such lack of variety tedious, and so, though it was expressly admitted that the thing could not be helped—that *birds* would be *birds*, etc.—back came the MS. Another one (“Alone with Birds in Iceland”) was last returned to me with the verdict that I had, indeed, produced an exceedingly interesting compilation “(sic)” but that, unfortunately, there was no classification in it; and when I pointed out that ornithology, like other sci-

ences, was or, at any rate, ought to be based upon the raw material of observed fact, I was informed, in reply, that it was "difficult for anyone not an expert on the subject to form an adequate conception of what was demanded in a work of ornithology now-a-days."

Not being able to follow either of these positions, I sought friendly expert enlightenment, and found it in the explanation that whatever, in any or all of my MSS, best justified my claim to be a "*life-loving*" naturalist would be likely to give too much offence to the established public of the sayers of these hard sayings, for them to care to risk the consequences of braving such displeasure. Also, I was given to understand that my hostility to mortuary methods very much lessened the general chances of the bulk of my ornithological field-notes ever becoming known to ornithology, at least through the eyes and enlightened understandings of orthodox ornithologists. "*Into the ears of babes and sucklings*," then, said I, and in that spirit wrote what follows, being well assured that in making birds talk imaginatively, I should be no farther off, even if no nearer to, any true exposition of their psychology than are those who, in discussing them, speak in their own person only. Both methods are alike substitutions of the human for the avine mind, and any kind of handling by the known factor leaves the unknown one equally unknown.

So, as the medium of conveyance matters nothing, these pages are addressed not to children only, but to all who are interested in the ways and acts of birds, for insofar as these are recorded, it is I who am Tommy Smith here.

EDMUND SELOUS

CHAPTER I

THE STARLING

WHEN Tommy Smith went out for a walk the day after that last conversation of his which stands recorded in Tommy Smith's Other Animals, he expected to find the same starling that had spoken to him in the shrubbery, on his return home, waiting for him there, so that he might be number one in the next little series of interviews, which were to be with birds only. But, however, there was no starling that he could see, either in the shrubbery or anywhere else in the garden. But that was not at all the case when he came to rather a large sand-pit in a field not far off, where the workmen were not digging any more, for there were a great many starlings *there*, and, almost directly, one of them flew over to him and perched on a little hawthorn bush, quite near to him, just on the lower edge of the opening, and said:—"Here you are!—and here I am, you see. Sit down—sit down."

So Tommy Smith did sit down, and that made as good a beginning for the conversation which followed, as it does for so many other ones.

"You haven't forgotten seeing me yesterday, I suppose, and what I said then?" said the starling.

"Oh no, Mr. Starling, I haven't at all," Tommy Smith answered, "only I—"

"Well, it holds—it holds," said the starling. "So now let us get on. Well, are you surprised to find me here, instead of in the shrubbery?"

Tommy Smith was more surprised to have found the starling here than not to have found him in the shrubbery, and he said so. He knew that starlings flew all about the country, and it would never have surprised him to see them in the fields, or in woods or plantations, or in any shrubbery, or even on the lawn of any garden, or the roof of any house, or, in fact, almost anywhere. But he did not remember having seen them—at least not so many of them—in a sand-pit before. It is true he was not so very much in the habit of going to sand-pits, but it did not occur to him that this might have something to do with it. "There are such a lot of you here together, Mr. Starling," he said.

"Why, yes, we form a colony," said the starling. "It is one of our advanced outposts."

"But what are you all doing here, Mr. Starling?" asked Tommy Smith. One might call anywhere an outpost, he thought, without really knowing how far out it was. But that didn't explain anything.

"Why, we're establishing ourselves," said the starling. "That's the first thing, of course. One can't do anything before one's established, but when once one is, a most important work has been accomplished."

"Oh, Mr. Starling," cried Tommy Smith all at once, "are you making your nests in the sand here?" For he noticed now that the face of the sand-pit had a great many large round holes or recesses in it—like little caves they were—and in



STARLING

each of these there was either a starling, or a starling was just flying out of or into it.

"Oh, they must be your nests, Mr. Starling," he went on, "or, at least, the places where you're making them, because some of you are bringing things out of them in your beaks—sticks or straw or—"

"Straws, grasses, hair, wool, dry leaves, with a green one or two, or a blossom, perhaps, for decorative purposes, a little moss, feathers—anything, in short, that is adaptable, in accordance with the stage of construction and the character of the surroundings," said the starling glibly, just as if he was reading it out of a natural history book. "That's what we're doing, to be sure. It's the best way there is of establishing ourselves."

"Oh, and there was a bird flew out of a hole with something!" Tommy Smith cried all of a sudden. "That couldn't have been from his own hole—he'd only fly *into* that with it. Oh, and he's gone into another! Oh, and there's one that was just flying into one, and another's flown out and driven him away. Oh, but that one's got something, and he's being chased by the other, but he's got into his with it, and now he's looking out at the entrance and singing. Oh, and he's waving his wings so!—and the other's flown back into his own hole again, and *he's* singing there too, now, and waving *his* wings. Why, you're all stealing things from each other, Mr. Starling—that's what you're doing. Only you don't seem to mind much when they're taken."

"Not we," said the starling. "Our frame of mind is 'never mind'—which is a bracing one. We couldn't take again if we kept minding. We should get too depressed."

"But it isn't right, you know, Mr. Starling," said Tommy Smith.

"It works out right," said the starling.

"But for all that, you know, Mr. Starling—" Tommy Smith was beginning.

"So there can't be much wrong about it," said the starling.

"But—" said Tommy Smith.

"I call that a test," said the starling.

"Yes, it's all very well, Mr. Starling," said Tommy Smith, "but if stealing is wrong—and you know that it is—"

"It's a beautiful principle, I think," said the starling. "Striving to disestablish each other, we end by establishing ourselves."

"Yes, Mr. Starling," said Tommy Smith, "but you might do that without—"

"Which is what we want to do, you know, and *the* most important thing there is," said the starling. "Oh, it's beautiful—quite beautiful, the way it works out."

Tommy Smith knew that that was not a right way of describing it, because, of course, there is nothing beautiful about stealing. But he did think it funny that with such a lot of stealing, or trying to steal, going on, the nests should all get made and the starlings all be quite happy, as he was sure they were—they kept singing so. It almost seemed as though it didn't matter, but of course it did matter really—and very much, too, because it was stealing.

"But why are there so many round holes in the side of the sand-pit—and such large ones, too, Mr. Starling?" Tommy Smith went on, for he thought the starlings must have found them there, and then begun making their nests in them, and yet he never remembered seeing such holes as that anywhere.

"Why are there?" said the starling. "Why, because we make them, of course. Most of them are finished now, and furnishing, as you see, is in full progress. Still, if you watch, you'll see one or other of us pecking at the sand with our bills,

or scratching it with our claws, and sometimes you may see us quivering our wings inside the cavern, so that their points brush the roof or the sides of it, and that makes them smooth and polished. You may even see lines on them, sometimes, that have been made, like that, with our wings—we vibrate them so strongly and rapidly. Look here!" And the starling flew into one of the caverns, as he called them, and began to quiver his wings, just as he had said, and Tommy Smith could see that where their points touched any part of the inside of it, some of the sand or finer gravel—for there were both in the pit—was brushed away. Then he jumped up and scratched at it with his claws and pecked into it with his beak, so that it fell in a little shower, and all this was just what some of the other starlings were doing too. "There," he said, as he came flying back again, "that's how we do it. Why it should be supposed that our large, airy caverns have anything to do with those absurd little tunnels of the sand-martins—some of which, with their minor-sized occupants, you may have observed here (and this was true—there were a lot of sand-martins flying about)—I can't imagine; and as for their being the holes of woodpeckers and our driving them out of them, whoever can say *that*—Well—"

"No, of course they're not, Mr. Starling," said Tommy Smith, "and I think it's wonderful, the way you make them. But then, nobody ever did say that, you know, because woodpeckers don't make their holes in sand. But they do in trees, and you know you take those from them."

"Oh, when we come to trees," said the starling, "that's another thing. The freedom of the woods comes in there, and we have to go by what's been handed down to us. Why, it's our charter—the freedom of the woods is. Trees are growing things, you know, and all that grows is for all. Sand-pits, of

course, are artificial. That makes them subject to the law of property, but it's not the same with trees—oh no.”

“But if the woodpecker *makes* the hole in the tree, Mr. Starling,” said Tommy Smith.

“That’s nothing,” said the starling. “If he made the tree, it might be different, but he can’t, because it’s a growing thing, so that, by the freedom of the woods, no bird can take a tree to itself.”

“Not a whole tree, perhaps, Mr. Starling,” said Tommy Smith, “but—”

“And not a hole in it either,” said the starling, “because that’s a part of it, if it’s anything, and one part’s as growing as another, and as much the tree as any other part. If he could take any part, he could take all the parts, which would be the whole tree, and then where would the freedom of the woods be?”

“But is just a hole in a tree a part of the tree, Mr. Starling?” said Tommy Smith.

“Oh yes, it’s been found so,” said the starling, “because, you see, if it were not, it couldn’t be a hole in a *tree* at all. Take away the tree from the hole, and what is the hole? Why, air, so far as I can see, and air by itself is not a hole. It wants something round it, and so, as in this case the tree is round it, it’s made by the tree, and as the tree grows, it grows—at least the tree part of it does, and you can’t separate the two. Do you follow the legal argument?”

“Yes, I think I see what you mean, Mr. Starling,” said Tommy Smith, though he thought it was rather confusing.

“That’s been held in the Court of Green-Leaves,” said the starling. “There was only one appeal—in Rustle Court—and the settlement there was made final. Very well then. On those plain principles, why should a woodpecker, just because he’s

made a hole in a tree by tampering with it, have the right to keep that hole from us starlings, when we find it there? That would make the freedom of the woods a mere name."

"But why should you keep it from *him* either, if it comes to that, Mr. Starling?" said Tommy Smith. "It's not *more* your hole than the woodpecker's, *because* the woodpecker made it."

"But it isn't *less*," said the starling. "*That's* the point. By the freedom of the woods, every bird has an equal right with every other bird to all that the woods contain, whether it's a woodpecker's hole or any other hole. It would be wrong for us starlings to take holes away from woodpeckers, if we were *only* cleverer and more active and more persevering than they are, and hadn't an equal right to them as well. But we have, and so, of course, we exercise it, and how can one be wrong in exercising an equal right?"

This was a puzzling question for Tommy Smith, who was only a little boy, and all he could answer was that he didn't know.

"Neither do I," said the starling, "and neither does anyone, because one can't. If it were unequal, of course, it would be different, because then it would be wrong, and how can what is wrong be a right? Ask a lawyer that. So now, if anyone should talk to you, after this, about the poor woodpeckers having their holes taken from them by us wicked starlings, so that they can't lay their eggs in them, I want you to tell them about the freedom of the woods, and explain the true principles of our conduct. Will you?"

"Oh yes, I will, of course, Mr. Starling," said Tommy Smith, "but—"

"Be just, as between us and them," said the starling, "and I ask no more. There is an equal right for us both—that's clear. But we exercise it better. Are we the worse for that?"

"But it's very hard on the woodpeckers all the same, Mr.

Starling," said Tommy Smith, "because they can't lay their eggs, you know."

"Not in that hole, of course," said the starling, "but they can always make another."

"Yes—just for you to take, Mr. Starling," said Tommy Smith.

"Not if we don't find it," said the starling, "and often we don't. Besides, a woodpecker makes a new hole every year, which means that the holes which we find and lay our eggs in, by the superior exercise of our equal right, as I explained, are generally old ones, so that even if we hadn't found them, no eggs would have been laid in them. What harm does that do, then? Even if we did take a new hole, do you suppose that the woodpeckers who made it wouldn't lay their eggs on that account? If you think that, it's because you don't know their character. They'd just make another hole, and another if we were too clever for them again, and go on like that till we'd no more eggs to lay, and then lay theirs and think they'd got the better of us. They'd never give up and do without laying. Not they—that's not their character. They're far too self-indulgent."

"You needn't speak in that way of them anyhow, Mr. Starling," said Tommy Smith, for he thought it was very unjust.

"I speak of them as I find them," said the starling. "It's what they'd do. That's their character. So the only difference would be that they'd have their family later, and what harm would that do them, I'd like to know?"

"I don't suppose it would hurt them very much if it comes to that, Mr. Starling," said Tommy Smith.

"Of course not, or their family either," said the starling. "Far from it, because, you see, the later they were in laying their eggs, the later it would be before their family life was broken up, and when one thinks what the joys of domesticity are—"

"What are they, please, Mr. Starling?" said Tommy Smith.

And then, all at once, there was “pee-wee-eet, pee-wee-eet” quite close, and he called out without waiting for an answer: “Oh, what peewit was that, Mr. Starling, and where can it be? It seemed almost as near to me as you are.”

“Nearer than you are to me, it sounded,” said the starling, “and yet I see nothing. How can that be? A peewit is not at all an invisible bird.”

“No, I should think not, indeed, Mr. Starling,” said Tommy Smith. “Why, we *must* have seen it, if—Oh, Mr. Starling,” for all at once he remembered—“it was you made it. You can imitate peewits, I know, and all sorts of other birds, too.”

“Well, I’m going. Good-bye,” said the starling, almost as if he hadn’t heard. “I must find that peewit, wherever he is.”

“But it’s been rather a short conversation, Mr. Starling,” said Tommy Smith.

“Can’t help it,” said the starling. “Some birds have time to recount their whole life-histories at any time—but a starling has not. You see what’s in progress—the busy hive—all those vast operations involved in the process of establishing ourselves. They barely leave me leisure to feel hungry—as I do at this moment—and get a few titbits about the fields. Besides, there’s that peewit.”

“No, there isn’t, Mr. Starling, because it was you,” said Tommy Smith. He felt quite sure now that it had been.

“Impossible! It sounded so life-like,” said the starling—which was just a way of praising himself.

Then he ruffled out his feathers, drew himself up a little, curved one wing in front of his breast—ceremoniously, it seemed to Tommy Smith—and said, in a way that was more like a speech than just conversation: “My object in impressing these facts upon you has been to make your mind easy about us and the woodpeckers. The world has been anxious

on this subject for some time, and inclined, I fear, to take a harsh view of our conduct. However, the truth is now before you. I have made it clear that, in these relations between us, the woodpecker, at any rate, has nothing at all to complain of, that we act within our rights, and that whatever takes place is in accordance with the well-established principle of the freedom of the woods. As to sand- or gravel-pits, it has been held, not once but many times, that they are neither of them included in the term 'woods.' As an artificial product, *they can* be owned. We recognise that, and any woodpecker wishing to make his hole in one has nothing to fear from our presence. Speak about this generally. Tell your friends in particular. Do what you can with the natural history books. May I venture to hope this—especially the last?"

"I'll do what I can, of course, Mr. Starling," said Tommy Smith, "but I don't write the natural history books, you know."

"Thank you. What you can—anything you can," said the starling, "to allay the fears of the public. Good-bye."

And he flew away so quickly that Tommy Smith was hardly able to say "Good-bye" in time to be sure that he heard it. "What a funny little bird," he said to himself, "and how important he thinks he is. But animals all do, I think."

Then he went on watching the other starlings for a little—for they were amusing as well as important—but as none of them came to him to continue the conversation—they were all so busy—he thought he would go on, for he had come out to have a good walk, and that "one cannot get a good walk in a sand-pit" is a Chinese proverb, or, at least, it might be—it sounds just like one.

CHAPTER II

THE MELODIOUS WARBLER

OMMY SMITH had often seen, during the last few days, whilst he was walking about the woods and plantations and copses and bramble-brakes—anywhere, in fact, where there were trees and bushes—a pretty little bird—it was *one* of the warblers, he knew *that*—whose name he was not quite sure about. This would not have been the case—at least not in quite the same way—if he had still been in England, but his father's business had brought him to France, and as his father did not like travelling except in the way which the French call *en famille* (it was the only way, he said, in which one could go on feeling comfortably at home), Tommy Smith was there too.

So this was a little French bird, and some of the birds in France are different from any there are in England though the two countries are so near to each other. But this was not what surprised Tommy Smith. What did surprise him, at first, was that *all* the birds were not different and, after that, that they did not speak to him in French instead of English, so that he understood them just the same. Only they told him that they knew nothing about that and didn't speak either

in French or English, really, but only in the little boy language, and the very first principle of that language was that the little boy should understand them. It was only because he did understand them that it seemed to a little boy to be English or French or any other language that was his own language, and some of them told him that there were so few little boys who cared about talking to animals, as he did, that they might just as well call it the "Tommy Smith language." This pleased Tommy Smith very much (instead of making him feel sorry, as it should have done) but he ought to have remembered that, as he was in France now, even the birds were likely to be polite.

This little bird, that was one of the warblers, was about the size of a willow-warbler or wood-warbler, only even more elegantly shaped, Tommy Smith thought, and its plumage was so sleek and glossy that sometimes it looked as if it had been oiled and polished. The yellowish gloss on its breast, too, was deeper and went farther down, and the two together made it look quite beautiful in a humble way. It kept singing, at intervals, and its song was beautiful too (without any apology) though Tommy Smith did not think it was quite so beautiful as that of either the garden-warbler or willow-warbler. But it was more varied, so that sometimes, if he had not seen the bird, all the while, he might almost have thought that two or three different kinds of warblers were warbling, at different times, one just after the other.

In short, it was a very pretty and melodious little bird, but what surprised Tommy Smith a good deal, and disappointed him still more, was that it would not come to him in the way he was accustomed to now, or even fly down from the tree in which it was singing—for it liked to sing in trees—into the bushes underneath, where he was listening to it; and when

he looked up at it, in a way that ought to have showed it that he wanted to have a conversation, somehow it would generally be looking another way, and even if it wasn't, it would never catch his eye, or do anything to show that it saw him. So as one can't well shout a conversation from the ground into the top of a tree that is not a very low one, there never could be a conversation, and once or twice, when Tommy Smith had just called out "Good morning" or "I see you," or things like that, to it, just to begin one, so that it might fly down and go on with it—instead of that, this bird had flown further off, or even quite away—so that at last Tommy Smith felt quite offended. "Perhaps it's because it's got a nest," he said to himself, and I believe it has got one, too, though it needn't mind me because of that. It's in one tree it's generally singing, and then it flies down into all those osier bushes and brambles that there are there, but only after I've gone away, and then, if I come back, I can never see it amongst them. But I *will* find its nest, because I *know* that it's somewhere there."

So Tommy Smith—it was not wrong, because, of course, he didn't mean to touch the eggs—sat down near the edge of the dense, marshy thicket that grew all down a quiet little valley, with a tiny little stream flowing through it, or that would have flowed if it could, but it was so tiny, and the grass and fern through which it went were so thick and strong and tufty, and the ground so level, that it was only able to ooze. Of course, he chose the best place he could to get a good view and not be seen himself, and soon he saw this bird fly down from a tree nearly opposite to where he was sitting, into one of the osier and bramble and bracken bushes—for all three were growing together—and then fly out to somewhere else, and then in again and out again, quite a number of times, and always into one part or other



The Melodious Warbler

of the same bush; only it was difficult to distinguish it from other ones, there were so many, and all crowded together. Sometimes, before going off altogether (until it came back again), it would fly near about, catching insects that were flying too, and looking as pretty as possible.

Tommy Smith felt sure that it was the female, because it was so very interested in the nest. For what else could it be but the nest which took her to the same place so often, though he was not quite near enough to see if she was carrying things to it in her bill? But he felt sure she was, and that they were insects to feed the young with, not grass or anything to finish building it. He would have seen that, he thought, but when she caught insects flying, they disappeared altogether—or indeed they were so small that he never saw them—though he saw her look as if she did, and as if she had not swallowed them, too. From time to time, too, he could see her perch somewhere near to where the nest was (as he felt sure), and then she would sing—oh, so sweetly!—just a little snatch or two, before flying off again. Sometimes she was a shorter time away and sometimes a little longer, but always she came back to that particular place. And then, once or twice, the male came too. Perhaps he did oftener, really, for he and his wife were very like each other, but anyhow, once or twice (or even perhaps twice or thrice), they were both there together; and then it seemed to Tommy Smith that it was not only about the nest that the male came, but to be in his wife's company and fly about with her, through the bushes, and chase her sometimes, just because he was so fond of her—there could be no other reason for *that*.

So now Tommy Smith knew—or at all events he thought he knew—whereabouts the nest was, but that was a very different thing from finding it, for it was a perfect labyrinth

of bramble and osier and alder bushes and bracken fern that its proprietors flew down into, and it might be very difficult to find indeed. Only Tommy Smith was determined to find it—it was too bad that he should be treated like a stranger by these two little warblers—so after having watched them coming and going for quite a little while, he took one very long look, for the last, at the place where he thought it was, and then went down on his hands and knees and began to crawl through the undergrowth in what he thought was the right direction, stopping every now and again and raising his head just high enough to see over the tops of the bushes, without being seen himself. Then down he went again and crept along a little farther, and in this way he guided himself, till, all at once, as he peered through the tangle without looking up, he caught a glimpse of a small brown shadow passing across a leaf not far in front of him, and then the same leaf, and just afterwards another beyond it, twitched, and one particular stem of a bramble shook. Oh, how still Tommy Smith kept then! The birds were there, sure enough, but peer about as he might, and put his head to this or that side as he would, he could never quite see the little brown shadow again, until—oh dear me, what was happening? For, all in a moment, there was such a harsh scolding sound—something like a rattle, it sounded, but a very angry one—and several birds that did not look at all shadowy now were all round about him, clinging to the brambles or willow-sprays close to where he was, and coming down quite low on them, to threaten and scold him—almost to peck him, it sometimes seemed. At least, that was what the two little warblers did, but there were other birds as well, all of them angry, but nothing like so angry as the two whose nest he was looking for, as, of course, was quite natural. It was only they who