

THE HUMMINGBIRD AT HOME

6 July 1930

He dropped into our garden like the flying fleck from a rainbow, probed at the geranium blossoms and disappeared as the flash from a whirling mirror. I had often watched him and listened to the musical hum of his wings, as it rose and fell in sweetest cadences. I always had the unsatisfied tinge of disappointment as I was left gazing at the trail of this little shooting star of our garden, that hummed as well as glowed. I longed to have him and call him mine. Not caged, mercy, no! I wanted his lichen-shingled home in the Virginia creeper, his two pearly eggs, the horned midgets, the little fledglings, the mother as she plied them with food, and I wanted the glint of real live sunshine that hovered and poised about the flowers and got away, a minute ethereal sprite. And, more than that, I wanted to have forever with me this mite that possess the tiniest soul in feathers.

It was not till we had studied, had watched and waited with the camera for four different nesting seasons about the hillside and along the creek, that we succeeded in getting a series of pictures of the home life of the little rufous humming-bird, our ruby-throat of the West.

The first year, by the merest chance, we found the nest that had been placed in a wild blackberry brier just above the creek. The green fibers and the lichens that shingled the outside of the tiny cup blended exactly with the green

leaves and stems of the vines. The cotton lining of the nest and the two white eggs all looked precisely like the clusters of white blossoms surrounding. One might have searched all over the vine a dozen times and yet not have discovered the nest.

Many<sup>3</sup> a spider suspension-bridge the humming-bird had torn away, and many a mouthful of cotton from the balm, and down from the thistles, she collected. As I watched her, it looked to me as if a bill for probing flowers was not suitable for weaving nests. Maybe it would have been more convenient at times if it had been shorter. But she wove in the webs and fibers, she whirred round and round and shaped the side of her cup as a potter moulds his masterpiece. Then she snatched the outside with irregular bits of lichens.

Another pair of hummers took<sup>4</sup> up a home-stead on the hillside. The bank had been cut down to build a wood-road, but the place had been abandoned a generation ago. The hummer saddled her tiny cup on the lowest branch of a small fir at the top of the bank. It looked as if she had picked out a spot to please the photographer.

When the weather was warm, the mother didn't brood long at a time. It often looked to me as if it was~~only~~ a child's play at setting. Five minutes was such a long, wearisome spell that she just had to take<sup>5</sup> a turn about the garden. I often thought the tiny eggs would chill through before she returned, and I began to lose hope in her restless, shiftless

manner. But she knew better.

At first, the little capsules had such a wonderfully delicate flesh-tint of pink. Then, one morning, I stood over the nest like Thomas of old. Some one had replaced the eggs with two tiny black bugs! It might have been a miracle. There was a tiny knob on the end of each bug that looked as if it might be the beginning of a bill. Each little creature resembled a black bean more than a bird, for each possessed a light streak of brown down the middle of the back. They couldn't be beans, for they were pulsing with life in a lumpy sort of way. I went frequently to look at them. In a few days, the nestlings began to fork out all over with tiny black horns, until they would have looked like prickly pears had they been the right color. At the next stage, each tiny horn began to blossom out into a spray of brown down, the yellow at one end grew into a bill, the black skin cracked a trifle and showed two eyes. It was hard to see just how those black bugs could turn to birds, but day after day the miracle worked till I really saw two young humming-birds.

When they left the nest, the midgets took up their abode in our back yard. The yard was crossed by three clothes-lines for perches, and the large apple tree in the corner gave abundant shade for the hottest days. In the center was a round bed of geraniums and along the fence were gladioli and nasturtiums. The youngsters simply sucked all the honey out of every flower in the yard. Every morning, I saw them going

the rounds and collecting tribute from the hearts of the new blossoms. As I came and went about the house, they soon became accustomed to the presence of a person, and when I filled some flowers with sweet water, it did not take them long to recognize that the flowers in the hand were better than those on the bush.

Then, one day, I dipped my finger in sweetened water and held it up to one of the twins as he sat on the line. <sup>9</sup> I was amused, for such a treat came to him as a complete surprise. Before that, when a finger was put up near his nose, he poked it but found nothing attractive; now, his little tongue darted out and hauled in the sweet. The next instant, he was buzzing all about my face and neck, poking for honey. He seemed as enthusiastic as a man who had suddenly struck a new mine, for it all looked alike to him. If one part was sweet, perhaps it all was, and it was high time he was knowing this new source of <sup>10</sup> food, for he had seen such things as people before.

One morning, I found one of the young hummers sitting muffled up on the clothes-line, sound asleep in the sun. The instant I touched the line, he awoke as if from a bad dream, and was all excitement. I didn't have any sweetened water, but I picked up a ripe plum, tore the skin away and held it up. In went the sharp bill, but it came out with thrice the rapidity. Such a face! He almost fell backward off the perch and nearly shook his head off, scolding in <sup>11</sup> a little squeaky voice all the time.

It was amusing to watch the little fellows, for each had his own perch on a separate line, and every once in a while, when one went too near the perch of the other, there was a little friendly bout and they darted back and forth, chasing each other in the sunshine. But, as the days passed, I noticed these little conflicts seemed to grow more serious. One would dart at the other, and round and round the yard they would go, whizzing and screeching, and then away. Before long, one of the <sup>twins</sup> ceased to come at all.

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I don't believe any sun-worshipper of old could be more devoted to his idol than the humming-bird. He lives in the sun almost as a fish does in the water. The minute a cloud crosses the face of the sun, his feathers puff up and his eye loses its sparkle. It's hard for a hummer to endure cold and cloudy weather, much more a season of rain. But he seems to adapt himself better to the Oregon climate than many other birds. He has profited by the experience of the past. Out of twenty-three <sup>twy</sup> different humming-bird nests, I found the majority built so that they were entirely under shelter. Three were in vines directly under bridges, two in Virginia creepers under porches, another in a blackberry bush under a log, and so on, every time in a place where no amount of rain could bother them.

I was standing on the hillside one bright May morning when two hummers caught my attention. One whirred downward like the rush of a rocket. He ascended, whirling up till I could see only a blurred speck in the blue. Then he dropped

headlong like a red meteor, with his gorget puffed out and his tail spread wide. Instead of striking with a burst of flying sparks, he veered just above the bushes with a sound like the lash of a whip drawn swiftly through the air, and, as the impetus carried him up, a high-pitched musical trill burst out above the whir of his wings. Again and again he swung back and forth like a comet in its orbit. If he was courting his aim was surely to dazzle and move with irresistable charm. I think his method was to sweep at his lady-love with a show of glittering brilliancy and gorgeous display, and win her heart in one grand charge. He must have won her, for the pair built a home in the Virginia creeper. They took one of the loose strings that had been used to tie up the vines and wove it into the fabric of their home; if the floor beneath gave way, they would surely have a support from above.

The way the mother would light on her nest was a marvel to me. She always stopped on the dead twig of a maple before dropping to her home. I saw her do it several times. She came at the nest like a meteoric streak. I held my breath lest the whole thing be splintered to atoms, for she hit the little cup without the slightest pause that I could see, yet she lit as lightly as the touch of floating thistle-down.

Below the hummer's nest, the water trickled down the basin of the canon. In places it formed pools and dropped over the rocky edges. One of these tiny basins was the hummer's bath-tub. It was shallow enough at the edge for her to

wade. For a moment her wing-tips and tail would skim the surface, and it was all over. She dressed and preened with all the formality of a queen. After the bath, I watched her circle about the clusters of geraniums and drink at the honey-cups of the columbine. She seemed only to will to be at a flower and she was there; the hum of the wings was all that told the secret. She was a marvel in the air. She backed as easily as she darted forward. She side-stepped, rose and dropped as easily as she poised.

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While the nestlings were very young, the mother never left them alone long at a time. If the day was warm, if the sun shone on the nest, the mother hovered over with wings and tail spread wide. When it was hottest, I've seen the mother sit forward on the nest-edge, spread her tail till she showed the white tips of her feathers, and keep up a constant quivering, fanning motion with her wings and tail to give protection to the frail midgets in the nest.

When I first crawled in among the bushes close to the nest, the little mother darted at me and poised a foot from my nose, as if to stare me out of countenance. She looked me all over from head to foot twice, then she seemed convinced that I was harmless. She whirled and sat on the nest-edge. The bantlings opened wide their hungry mouths. She spread her tail like a flicker, and braced herself against the nest-side. She craned her neck, and drew her dagger-like bill straight up above the nest. She plunged it down the baby's throat to

the hilt, started a series of gestures that seemed fashioned to puncture him to the toes. Then she stabbed the other baby till it made me shudder. It looked like the murder of the infants. But they were not mangled and bloody: they were getting a square meal after the usual humming-bird method of regurgitation. They ran out their slender tongues to lick the honey from their lips. How they liked it! Then she settled down and ruffled up her breast feathers to let her babies cuddle close to her naked bosom. Occasionally, she reached under to caress them with whisperings of mother-love.

*End.*

I have never seen a humming-bird fledgling fall from the nest in advance of his strength, as a robin often does. When the time comes, he seems to spring into the air full grown, clad in glittering armor, as Minerva sprang from the head of Jove. While I lay quiet in the bushes, I learned the reason. One youngster sat on the nest-edge, stretching his wings, combing his tail, lengthened his neck and preened the feathers of his breast. Then he tried his wings. They began slowly as if getting up steam. He made them buzz till they fairly lifted him off his feet; he had to hang on to keep from going: he could fly, but the time was not ripe. A little gnat buzzed slowly past within two inches of his eyes. The nestling instinctively stabbed at the insect but fell short. Each bantling took turns at practising on the edge of the nest, till they had mastered the art of balancing and rising in the air.

I have never known exactly what to think of the male Rufous. I never saw such an enthusiastic lover during the days of courtship and the beginning of house-building. He reminds me of a diminutive whirl-wind that took every thing by storm. He simply ran crazy-mad in love. As soon as the cottony cup<sup>23</sup> was finished and the mother had cradled her twin white eggs, the father disappeared. He merely dropped out of existence, as Bradford Torrey says of his Ruby-throat, leaving a widow with the twins on her hands.

This always seemed to be the case, for, at the different nests where I have watched, I never but once saw the male hummer near the nest after the children were born. I was lying in the shade of the bushes a few feet from the nest one afternoon. For two whole days I had been watching and photographing, and no other hummer had been near.<sup>24</sup> Suddenly, a male darted up the canon and lit on a dead twig opposite the nest. He hadn't settled before the mother hurtled at him. I jumped up to watch. They shot up and down the hillside like winged bullets, through trees and over stumps, the mother with tail spread, all the while squeeling like mad. It looked like the chase of two meteors, that were likely to disappear in a shower of sparks, had they struck anything. If it was the father, he didn't get a squint at the bantlings. If it was a bachelor <sup>25</sup>wooing, he got a hot reception.

I can't believe the male Rufous is an intentional shirk and deserter. I think that somewhere back through the

generations of humming-bird experience, it was found that such bright colors and such devotion about the home were clues unmistakable for enemies. It is, therefore, the law of self-protection that he keep away entirely during the period of incubation and the rearing of the young.

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Illustration

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David T. Dennis  
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1st Chapter  
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