



by Winthrop Packard

Chapter 17: Moonlight and March Mornings

To be sure, March came blustering, but it blew in out of a succession of moon-flooded nights, soft and brilliant, in which the ineffable love of the heavens for the earth was so great that the humblest might know it. The moon did not rise in distant eastern heavens beyond the limit of human ken. In the pink afterglow of the sunset it was born from the Indian River, a new golden Venus rising from the silver foam of a sapphire sea that save for the path of moon-silver was as clear as the brooding truthful sky.

For nights the trade winds were lulled and sighed in across the savannas in little whispered words of peace, whispers that were like the touch of rose petals on the cheek, as warm as the breath of a sleeping child. It was as if the fond sky leaned upon the loving shoulder of the world and was content to dream there. In this nearness and intimacy, this warmth and peace, wee creatures of the tropic night woke and sang for very joy of living. The moonlit nights of the very last days of January had been beautiful, but silent and with a chill in them that hushed all vibrant life and one did not wonder when the morning sun glinted on hoar frost on all the long grass. There was no frost under this moon of the last days of February, only a gentle warmth and softness that seemed to woo all things to life and love. In Massachusetts we are wont to take the statement that on the fourteenth of February the birds choose their mates with a somewhat grim smile of forgiving disbelief. In Florida we know that these are days for all nature to go a wooing, and the voices that come beneath the late February moon and echo along the winds of blustering March mornings prove it true.

It is a wiser man than I that knows the source of all these songs of love that thrill through the amorous, perfumed air of night. The fragile, green beauty of the long-horned grasshoppers



seems to be reflected in their night songs that differ in tone from those which they sing under the searching vigor of the Southern sun. I fancy they needs must sing differently, and that it is a physical difference rather than a change of feeling that changes their tune. The soft coolness of the nights must slack the texture of their wing cases, as damp air changes the tension of the strings of one's violin, and they seem to play a reedier, less strident tune. The Southern cricket that vies with the long-horned grasshoppers must be larger than the Northern cricket which chirps so cozily by the October hearth, if one may judge by voices. Nor is his cry the same, though it has a resemblance. It is rounder, fuller, and has something of the tinkling resonance of a metallic instrument.

The songs that came from the grass under the full light of the February moon were those of an orchestra that sang with silver throats to an accompaniment played upon bell metal. Yet the sonorous staccato of each was so blended with the many that the whole melted into a dreamy haze of harmony that seemed merely to give a clearer expression of the moonlight of which it was a part. So when Melba sings, the exquisite harmony of the hundred quivering strings of the orchestra is but the vocal expression of the hush of the hearts that wait her voice.

There were other voices under the moon that ushered in March that made no harmony with the moonlight, but cut across it with a clear individuality of their own. The frogs that seemed some weeks ago to be playing tiny xylophones have given up the wooden bars and now play by night on pebbles which they strike together, making a quaint, penetrating shrilling which could be done on no other instruments. Where they get the pebbles, which are not to be found by man in any part of the State which I have yet visited, I cannot say. Moonlight is rarely helpful to too literal inquiry. The sound is very musical with a fairy-like quality. It is as if elves played musical glasses in this orchestra in which the grasshoppers and crickets are masters of the stringed instruments.

Another frog voice is that of the Southern bullfrog, which might better be named pigfrog, if voices are to count. The Northern bullfrog is a hoarse-voiced toper who bellows most sonorously- for his favorite liquor. "Ah-hr-u-m!" he roars. "Ah-hr-u-m!" with the accent on the rum. This is wicked, of course, but there is a rough virility about it which bends one's mind towards forgiveness. Here is Jack Falstaff roaring for sack; Falstaff, the embodiment of coarse wickedness, and yet the best-loved rogue in the whole catalogue. No such engaging roisterer is the Southern bullfrog. His voice is but a grunt out of the fairyland which the moon makes over the misty savanna with its shallow lakes gleaming with roughened silver.



Cased in this silver sits the Southern bullfrog, with his nose just out, and grunting like a young razorback. The similarity is startling, or rather it is not a similarity, but the same thing.

None of these pigfrogs grunted till the full moon of late February had brought the requisite warmth. Then, one night I heard them, and went out in search of the drove of pigs that I was convinced was rooting in the bean patch of my neighbor across the road. The bean patch was empty, and the voices lured me on, for then I thought them to be young alligators, which grunt in similar fashion. The alligator hunter when he wishes to call the big ones sits motionless in the bow of his boat, under the gleam of his bull's-eye lantern, shuts his mouth tight, and with a peculiar motion of the throat makes a ventriloquial grunt that is much like this, the difference being that the cracker-alligator grunt is a mournful one that seems to speak of an internal pain, that of the pigfrog is a three-syllable grunt of porcine content.

No wonder I thought them young razorbacks eating beans at seven dollars a half-bushel crate. But I was wrong. It was merely the love calls of Southern bullfrogs happy in the witchery of glorious moonlight, and the full warmth of late February which was jumping joy into all vegetation and into the hearts of all wild things.

On nights like this the little screech owl likes to sit up in the palmettos by the house and sing his little murmurous, quavering song. It is hard to hear anything mournful or foreboding in this, rather it seems to voice contentment with perhaps just a note of longing when it is a call for the mate. Sometimes this is answered, the two qualities of inquiry and reply being distinctly audible though difficult to define. I think it is the difference between the rise and fall of an inflection. Another owl voice of the full moonlight is that of the Florida barred owl.

The first sound of his "hoo, hoo, hu-hu" is a disquieting one, especially when near-by. My first hearing of it was near an unoccupied house, miles from any other, on the bank of the river. Murder had been done on the place years before and my companion had just finished telling me about it when in the deep shade of the palmettos, almost over our heads, a barred owl shouted with his weird, inquiring laugh. It came the nearest to a materialization of anything I have seen lately. Up on a stub we soon discovered this big, dark spook of a bird with human-like, big brown eyes and this disquieting laugh. Soon he sailed on bat-like wings across the river, where we heard him laughing to himself again and again in this deep, cynical tone.

Further acquaintance with the barred owl makes his voice seem less spooklike. A neighbor

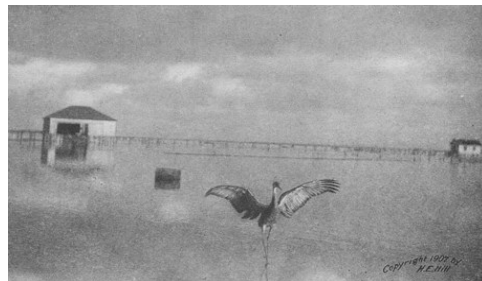


of mine has that rarity in southern Florida, a big fireplace with a genuine brick chimney above it. On the top of this chimney of a moonlight night a barred owl loves to sit and there hoots companionably in a subdued, almost conversational tone.

He has an eye out for the main chance, though, for if I watch him from outside while my neighbor squeaks like a rat in the big fireplace, I see him cock his head like a flash and glare down chimney with one eye, hoping to get it fixed on the cause of this invitation to dinner. So far we have not been able to get him to come down chimney after it. The voice of the barred owl is a familiar night sound at almost any time of the year in Florida, but it is particularly prevalent now that the birds are breeding.

Under such sounds and sights as these fades the full moon of February, and with March mornings comes a blustering vigor into the trade winds which blow up from the southeast full of the freshness of salt spray, driving scuds of clouds that smell of the brine torn from Bahama reefs. This has none of the rough frigidity of the Northern March wind which seems to hurl javelins through its uproar, following them with threatening words. These winds bluster words of good cheer and jovial invitation and slap your face with scent of roses pickled in fresh brine. It is as much difference as there is between galloping horses when the one bears the sheriff approaching with a warrant, the other your true love with a rose.

It has taken this bluster of winds to make some birds know that it is time to sing. We had just a touch of them in late February, and after the touch had passed I heard my first mocking bird for months. Mocking birds were singing in November in the northern part of the State, but they ceased when December cold came in and I did not hear one till that March bluster started them up. This morning I had but to go out in the gray of dawn to hear golden melodies from a half dozen, sitting in tops of sapling pines among the long leaves, swelling gray throats and flirting long tails that remind me always of the pump handle in the old-time organ loft. I do not know if it is the power of good example which sets the loggerhead shrike to singing or not. He rarely gets beyond a few rather insipid notes, before he sees a grasshopper or some other defenseless creature which he needs in his collection, and which he proceeds to capture and impale on the thorn of a sprout in his favorite orange tree. The butcher bird does now and then capture a small bird and add it to this collection, but I am convinced that he is not so bad a sinner, after all. Most of his prey is insects. Looking at my own butterfly collection



I have almost a fellow feeling for him.

Another great insect destroyer is the little sparrow-hawk which winters in the savannas in countless numbers. If one would see sparrow hawks he should go to a fire. The birds do not flock at ordinary times but may be seen singly, watching for game much as the butcher bird does. But let a wisp of smoke appear in the air and you find them sailing in on swift wings from all directions. As the fire gathers headway in the dry grass and young pine growth they sail about like bats, whirling down into dense smoke and darting back again to a perch not far from the fire, always with a fat, flying grasshopper or other insect driven to flight by the fire. These they seize in their talons in true hawk fashion and devour when perched.

How such small birds—the sparrow-hawk is only ten inches long, no bigger than a robin—manage to include as many fat grasshoppers as I have seen one pick as brands from the burning, it is hard to tell. He who shoots a sparrow-hawk shoots a bird whose main record as a destroyer of insects outweighs his sparrow killing a thousand to one. But the sparrow-hawk is hardly a morning singer, though he does sometimes pipe up “killy-killy-killy-killy,” whence the name in some sections, “killy hawk.”

With the coming of the first spring month I am convinced that the northward movement of migrating birds has begun. The redwing blackbirds have already gone, so far as the migrating flocks are concerned. Yet this morning a redwing sat up on the tree-top and showed me his handsome epaulette and sang lustily. He was a trifle smaller than the average blackbird of my northern meadow-side acquaintance and his bill seemed slenderer. Moreover on the end of his song was just an extra gleeful twist that changed “konkaree” into “konkareedle” and marked the difference between the Florida redwing who stays at home in the State, summers and brings up his children there, and the migrants who are already on the way to distant Northern swamps. In the same way I heard a robin singing for the first time. The world has been alive with robins in huge flocks that scatter during the day and re-gather at night for roosting. These are half way home already, perhaps just stopping off at Washington to see what is doing in conservation legislation, which is a matter of vital interest to all birds.

Yet here was a robin greeting the first day of the first spring month with the good old home song with nary a twist or an extra syllable in it. It wakened a thousand memories that echoed among gray New England hills, not yet touched with the green of spring. Yet I smelled it in the swollen brooks and heard it in their roar; and then the wind was in the palm trees again and there was only the shout of the salt-laden trades, heavy with the odor of newborn orange blossoms, and I knew that my robin was probably one of those that elect to



stay behind and chance it with the summer weather in the far South. The March day was a little farther advanced when the meadow-lark chorus began. Like the robin the meadow-lark breeds from the Gulf to New Brunswick, but whereas most robins migrate well North, the proportion seems to be somewhat the other way with the meadow-larks. How their ground-built nests and eggs escape gliding snakes and prowling opossums and raccoons with which the savannas are infested I do not know. I have but to examine the mud along ditch sides of a morning to find it literally crisscrossed with the tracks of these night prowlers, till it seems impossible that any ground-nesting bird could escape. Yet the savannas are full of larks' nests every summer, and the numbers of them singing cheerily all about are a proof that the birds are wiser or the vermin stupider than anyone might suppose.

The meadow-lark's song is a sweet little trilling whistle. The neighbors say that it says, "Laziness will kill you," and after you have once fitted these words to it you can hear no other translation. I think they sing it to each other in gentle raillery, for they are among the last of the singing birds to begin in the morning.

