

ABOUT HUMMING-BIRDS.

BY MRS. HOMER H. STUART.



ONE day in a certain June an excited lad brought to his mother a young humming-bird. The child had accomplished the capture so deftly, with his straw hat, that the wee, delicate creature had suffered no injury,—not a feather was ruffled. The lad's home was a country place where, to shut out mosquitoes and other annoying insects, the house was completely barricaded with wire-gauze, like one of Sir Humphrey Davy's safety-lamps. Wire windows and wire doors, from garret to cellar, made the cottage a safe and spacious cage where the bird could roam at will.

It was caught on the very day when it first flitted from its tiny nest, before it could discover how wide the world is, and therefore it felt no sense of captivity. We called it "Hum," after Mrs. Stowe's "son of Buz," and it responded to its name as eagerly as a child or a kitten. The one thing it did not love was solitude. Its joyous flutter when any of the family entered the room seemed the greeting of a happy sprite. Its resting-place was the tassel of the window-shade, whither it withdrew when tired of flitting from room to room. Stairways were no obstacle to it, and it loved to explore the garret whenever the door was left open.

The only food we gave Hum was sugar, dissolved in water, which stood ready in a silver cup. When hungry or thirsty, he hovered about the cup and received his drink from a spoon I held up, while he balanced himself in the air. And he would vibrate over a bunch of petunias from the garden, thrusting his long tongue into each flower, and drawing out the honey with evident enjoyment. He spent much time at the top of the windows, going back and forth, just touching the glass with his tongue. We thought he was longing for the world outside, until, with something of a shock, we discovered that each thrust of his tongue impaled a gnat so small as to be almost invisible; and we soon found that these minute insects answered for the solid half of his luncheon.

I was an early riser in the country, but Hum

generally awoke me by buzzing over my eyelids, until I opened them. Whether he did this because he was lonely, or because he wanted a drink from the cup that stood at hand, I could not decide. In the family was an aged lady, whose custom it was to take a nap on the sofa every summer afternoon. When she awoke, Hum was always perched within an inch or two of her cap. Sometimes he would alight upon the top of his yellow-haired captor's head as composedly as if the head had been a sunflower or a daffodil. Though perfectly tame, he never confided in any other member of the family to that extent. When we went to dinner, we were obliged to close the doors against Hum, for he hovered over the table with so much curiosity that we feared he would pounce into some hot dish. Once I gave him a bath in a saucer of water. How small and helpless he looked after it!—not larger than a humble-bee. Until the sun had dried his regalia, he was unable to move because of the weight of water in the feathers. I did not repeat the wetting.

All summer long Hum gladdened us with his company, and the neighbors far and near came to see him.

When autumn came, the birds of passage seemed to linger for a while on their way to the South. Not far from our house a florist had a bulb-garden of several acres in extent, and countless humming-birds flocked about his gladiolus plants and the Japan lilies. From these, one glorious September Sunday, they came by troops to our trumpet-creeper, and it was plain that they were mustering for a final flight.

Then we thought of poor Hum, and pictured him left behind this gay throng,—lonely, and perishing in an unfriendly climate. A family council was called. Dear Grandmother said, "Give Hum his freedom." Father and Mother appealed to the children. They replied, almost tearfully, "We must let Hum go." Then we called to our pet, and he came with his quick, bright chirp. We opened the mosquito bar. He passed out leisurely into the bright sunshine, then with quick darts sprang forward and upward to the trumpet-creeper, and soon joined his winged brethren. For days he hovered about, and when his silver cup was held up, he would approach; but he never came back to his cage. And by and by he disappeared with his companions.

The humming-birds, of which there are more

than two hundred and fifty different kinds, belong wholly to the American continent, and chiefly to the tropical portions. The West India islands, and the glades of the upper Amazon are particularly their home. Central America and Mexico have a less number, and about a dozen species penetrate the United States in Arizona and New Mexico. A few of them spread through California and the Rocky Mountains, while one solitary species bends its course eastward, and in rapid flight wings its way to the Middle and Atlantic States, to Canada, and even to the far forests of Hudson's Bay. This is the ruby-throated hummer, and Hum and his friends about the creeper-vine were of that race.

The "Ruby-throat"—charming and expressive name!—generally appears here in May, and begins its nest-building in June. The nest is a little cup, holding perhaps two thimblefuls. Its walls are usually made of the soft down from flying seeds or fern-stalks. It is then thickly and prettily covered with wood lichens, and the whole is firmly attached to the upper side of a branch. One species, known as the black humming-bird, uses cotton instead of down, and other great differences are to be found in the architecture of the different sorts. Many South American species, for instance, tuck their warm beds into the curled pocket-like tip of a pendent leaf on some outer drooping branch of a tall tree. The eggs of every known humming-bird are pure white in color, which is remarkable; and those of our ruby-throat are smaller than peas in size. After ten days of sitting, the mother-bird is rewarded by the cracking of the shell, and the appearance of the two little ones. While the eggs are hatching, the parent birds guard them with keen interest and care; and should any enemy approach their home, the tiny creatures fly at its eyes, picking with their sharp bills; their throats swell, they shriek, and really become little winged furies. They will even fly at a man and strike him.

The baby birds resemble blue-bottle flies both in size and appearance. Most persons suppose, as we thought when we caught Hum, that the food

of humming-birds is wholly the honey of flowers. But to get and keep their strength they must have meat; and insects, therefore, form the staple of the hummer's diet. These they procure to a great extent by striking them down in the air, spearing them with their sharp tongues, as our pet speared the gnats at the window, where he could see them well against the light. If you watch one of these "bright little, light little, slight little hummers" in the woods, you may notice him constantly leaving his perch and darting into the air on short journeys. This is his way of insect-catching.

The nectar-cups deep in the heart of open-mouthed, sweet-scented flowers give the humming-birds their dessert. Poising on whirring wings before one of these deep blossoms, the bird thrusts in its



long beak and slender head, until with its tongue it can reach the little sugar-fountain at the base of the blossom where the seed is growing. Its

tongue is as sharp as an awl, and it is easy work for it to pierce the honey-capsule and lap up the sweets. But here the humming-bird often finds other delicacies; for the sweet, sticky gum of the flower attracts honey-loving insects, who, caught in this pleasant trap, can not pull their feet out

of the nectar, and so die at once or live but a short time in vain struggles. Botanists will explain how this may be a curious arrangement for the benefit of the plant; but the humming-bird knows not whether the plant thrives by this sort of food. He knows only that he himself is very fortunate when he finds such a well-stored flower,—a sort of top-

shelf where his preserves are kept.

The peculiar humming noise which gives the bird its name is made by the exceeding rapidity of the beating of its wings against the air as it poises before a flower or elsewhere. If it could not move its wings very swiftly, it would be impossible for it

thus to balance itself; and if its wings were not very large, long and pointed, quite out of proportion to its size, it would be impossible for it to endure the continued exertion necessary in thus sustaining its stationary position in the air. The muscular power of a humming-bird's wings is undoubtedly greater, in proportion to the weight of its body, than that of an eagle. The length of the wings is so great that their quills often reach far beyond the end of the tail; and when they are shut, the tips of the wings cover each other above the back.

The only voice belonging to most if not all of the hummers is an exceedingly fine little shriek or squeal; just such a sharp, thin note as you would expect from so needle-like a beak. I have known persons who thought they heard them *sing*, but I think this must be a fancy and not a fact.

It is one of the pleasantest qualities of these gem-like, flashing, miniature birds, that they can easily be tamed. Hum's docility has been told;

many similar instances are recorded, and I once received a letter from a little friend near Los Angeles, California,—Anna F. Ruth,—who wrote as follows:

“I wish to tell you a little story that I think will prove interesting, and it is every word true. One day, when our flower-garden was being watered, a little humming-bird which was flitting from flower to flower became senseless from the effects of darting into a spray of the cold water.

So sister and I took it into the house and laid it in the sun on the table. It soon began to show signs of life, when we fed it with sugar out of a petunia, which it ate quite heartily, and then it drank water out of a tea-spoon; after which it was so far recovered that it flew about the room. We then let it fly out of doors; and for several weeks afterward it would come and light on a rose-bush by our window and look in at us, not flying away when we would open the window and reach out our hands toward it.”



What are you studying,
my little maid?"

"I'm learning to read in a book," she said.

"And what is your favorite word?" said I.

Then the little maiden made reply,
"Big 'A' is the nicest word I know."

And when I asked why she thought it so,
She gravely answered—
(The sly little Tot!)

"Because big 'A' is as far as I've dot!"