THE ANNA HUMMING BIRD: A MIDWINTER FAIRY IN FEATHERS. BY ELIZABETH GRINNELL

ERE I to select the most wonderful being with which I am acquainted, it could be no other than the humming bird. From a family numbering three or four hundred distinct individuals, all having similar characteristics, I choose the Anna hummer, for the reason that she has been my daily companion for many years, and that we know each other well. This species is said to have received its name from some ardent early bird lover who wished thus to honor Anna, Duchess of Rivoli; both male and female birds being designated in the same way.

Humming birds, like turkeys, are natives of America, mostly of South America; only one species, the Ruby-throat, being found East of the Rockies. To me they seem related to both birds and bees; having peculiarities common to both. Have not bees feathers? Have they not tongues wherewith to sip nectar? Are they not arborial, seldom so much as alighting on the ground, and do they not buzz, or hum, with the vibration of their wonderful wings in sad or happy rhythm, as the spell is on them? There are some species of hummers not much larger than bumble bees, but the Anna measures about three and one-half inches from tip to tip; this measurement including the slender, straight, black beak, which, for purposes of its own, is nearly an inch long.

Although very beautiful in outward appearance, the male bird does not appeal to my affection. His overcoat is brilliant green, while the lining, or under parts, are greenish white. The top of his head and the throat patch are of iridescent metallic hues of rose and bronze, changeable with greens. The green of the whole coat changes to indescribable hues whose exact nature is unknown. These hues remain unfaded after death, and so, in the days of the Incas, they were prized by royalty for ornamental robes; the little skins being sewed overlapping one another upon durable foundations. The metallic feathers on the head and throat are called scales, which they do resemble closely.

Now this gay Lothario has more polish than heart, for he cares for his sweetheart only during a brief season. As soon as the actual
THE ANNA HUMMING BIRD

cares of a prospective family confront him, off he goes to the distant fields for carousel among the wild flowers with other individuals of his own sex. Alone, yet resigned, as if she understood that she is better off without her mate at this trying time, little Anna works cheerfully and unceasingly in the interests of posterity.

It is in the dead of winter that she begins her annual duties,—usually in December, and continuing as late as mid-August; rearing brood after brood fearlessly, although surrounded by foes in the shape of hawks, and owls, and shrikes, yes, and human depredators. In the case of winged foes, I will say that in some unaccountable way they do respect little Anna’s affairs. Often the nests are in plain sight, yet never have I known one of them to be disturbed by larger birds. Anna herself, alone and unattended, is the soul of courage. I have seen her many times attack a mocking-bird, who, innocently enough, happened to come within her zone. And I have seen her drive away a great, gray tree squirrel from the vicinity of a tree upon which she had set up her tiny government claim. Not that she actually strikes any foe, but she makes him feel so “ashamed” with her reiterated “Tzp, tzp, tzp,” repeated with emphasis in their very ears, and the constant whizzing vibration of her gauzy wings, that they retire.

Every year Anna builds her nest within my reach, and I watch unrebuked from start to finish this most remarkable achievement. It is the middle of December. Gentle rain has decked every living shrub and tree with matchless gems that flicker in the sun like jets from last night’s rainbow. I hear a whirr of invisible wings, and see Anna gathering spider web from the hedge. She sustains herself upon nothing, save the vibration of her wings, while she snatches strand after strand of the finest thread. Then she whirrs past me, and I turn to look. At my very side, she pauses on her wings, and lays the thread upon a tiny crotch of a blue gum tree of last year’s setting. Back and forth from hedge to nest, she flits, until a platform suitable to hold her feather-weight is properly formed. Then, returning with more web, she stands on the initial foundation of her future nest, and weaves about her, while she turns swiftly to form the cup with her breast. Soon she minglecs lichens and plant-down with the web, or perchance fluffy white cotton which I have placed in her sight.

As soon as the nest is the size of an acorn saucer, Anna, “takes
"We like sugar too"

HUMMING BIRDS (from life)
Feeding the Young
HUMMING BIRDS (from life)
time by the forelock,” and deposits two white eggs in the saucer, of the size and color of a couple of Boston beans, before they are baked; never more than two. Then, at intervals, while she is incubating the eggs, she adds to the nest brim; building it up about an inch in depth. And this continues after the birds have grown to mature size, the mother building as they grow, until, at last, the whole structure gives out at the rim by pressure of her returning feet, and the young leave the cradle. Often, do storms of wind and rain come down from the mountains, and threaten the frail structure. At these times, Anna never leaves the nest, but patiently she sits with the water running in streams off from her sheltering back and outspread wings, and dripping from the end of her magic beak. Sometimes I go out in the storm, if I know where to locate her, and spread a little shelter above the nest—an apron, or a sunshade—which my friend accepts gladly; she flying in under it, and out from it, with the confidence of an intimate. Often, the storm tears the fragile structure, and then Anna flies to the hedges for web between the showers, and repairs damages. In exactly ten days I peer into the nest in Anna’s absence, and behold two little naked black beings too weak to lift their own heads, with bulging black eye-places no bigger than a pin head. Anna returns, looks confidently at me, and alights on the brim. Then, she lifts the tiny heads one at a time into proper place and feeds the babes of her affection.

I have spoken of the beak of this bird, but not of the tongue. The tongue is the marvel. It is double tubed, of the same length as the beak, or sheath. The two combined make a shaft long enough to reach into the nectar cups of our deepest flowers. If, perchance, the blossom be a trumpet indeed, Anna pierces it at the base and thrusts her tongue in from beneath. Through the tongue, she sips nectar and brings it home to her nurslings. I believe them to be fed exclusively upon nectar at first, although it is possible the mother mixes spider soup with the nectar. It was supposed that the hummers ate nothing save fluids saved up by the flowers; but now we know that small insects, gnats and garden spiders form a larger part of their food. When not in actual use, Anna’s tongue is curled up at the base of the skull behind, as you have seen the tongue of certain moths curled under the chin outside. To return to my Anna: she fed the nurslings every fifteen minutes for many days. You can see, in the picture,
THE ANNA HUMMING BIRD

her beak far down the throat of the nursling. A twig of the tree appears longitudinally between the old bird and the young one which spoils the symmetry. But this can be excused, since this is probably the first photograph ever made of a hummer feeding her young. Later, the small birds were fed not oftener than every hour. I myself volunteered as nurse, and fed them with honey-water from my finger tips. They grew to know me and look for the between-meal lunch. In three weeks, they left the nest, the one a day preceding its mate, for the reason that the egg which contained it was deposited a day in advance of the other. The mother found and fed them for many weeks; they remaining in their birthplace site.

Often, before the babes had left the nest, I broke the twig from its holdings and carried it to other parts of the garden. The mother knew and followed me, nor was she frightened at all. On the contrary, all summer long, even after she had raised other broods, did she come to me and sip nectar from flowers that I held in my hand or between my lips. Often, did she assume to plunge into my open eyes for a bath, as she was in the habit of plunging into the dew in a curled-over rose leaf, but I closed my eyes.

To tell the story of Anna would take a book, and a season to write. Enough in this fragment to make a sojourner in the frozen East wish that he were in Anna’s land for a single winter that he, too, might make the acquaintance of so ethereal a creature.

Below, the noisy World drags by
In the old way, because it must,
The bride with heartbreak in her eye,
The mourner following hated dust:
Thy duty, winged flame of Spring,
Is but to love, and fly, and sing.

Oh, happy life, to soar and sway
Above the life by mortals led,
Singing the merry months away.
Master, not slave of daily bread,
And, when the Autumn comes, to flee
Wherever sunshine beckons thee!

—James Russell Lowell: The Nest.