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21. Living white lake.

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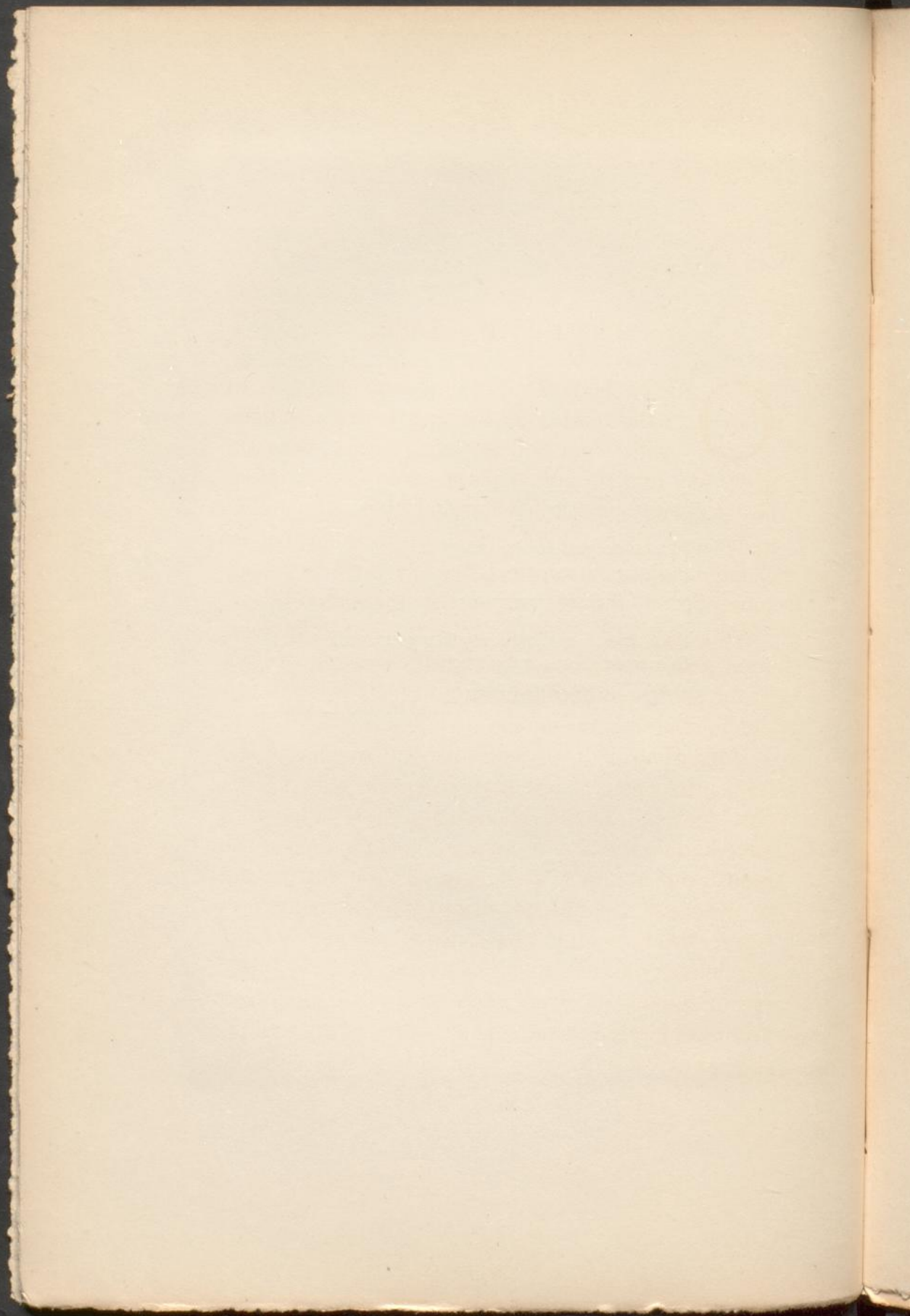
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21. LIVING WITH A LAKE.

I know no gladder dreaming
In all the haunts of men,
I know no silent seeming
Like to your shore and fen ;
No world of restful beauty like your world
Of curvèd shores and waters,
In sunlight vapours furled.

W. W. CAMPBELL.



LIVING WITH A LAKE.

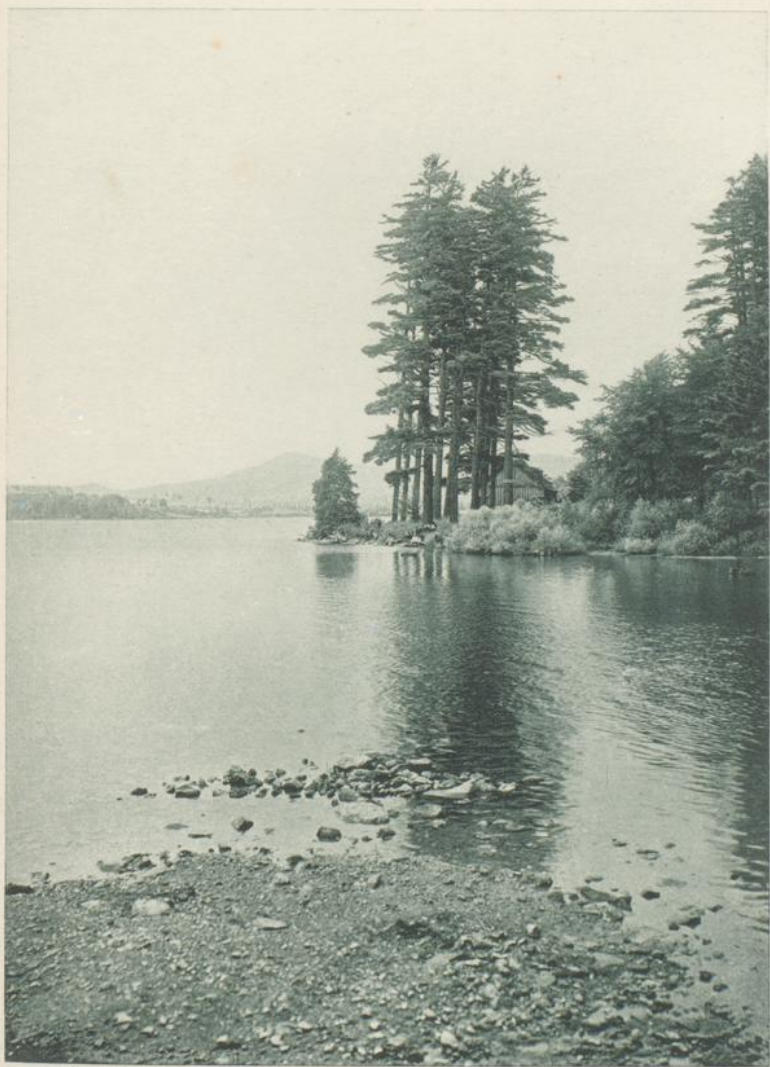
ONE of the necessities of a complete life is to have had intimate and varied relations with water in all its scenic forms. Man can never feel that he knows nature until he has dwelt near to every natural division of water long enough to become thoroughly sensible of its influence, its changing phases, its distinctive effect. One need not subscribe to the old saying of the nature-lover, "Water is best." But one must at least know how good water really is, in its ministry through the eye to the spirit, ere he can be said to have passed even the novitiate's degree in nature lore.

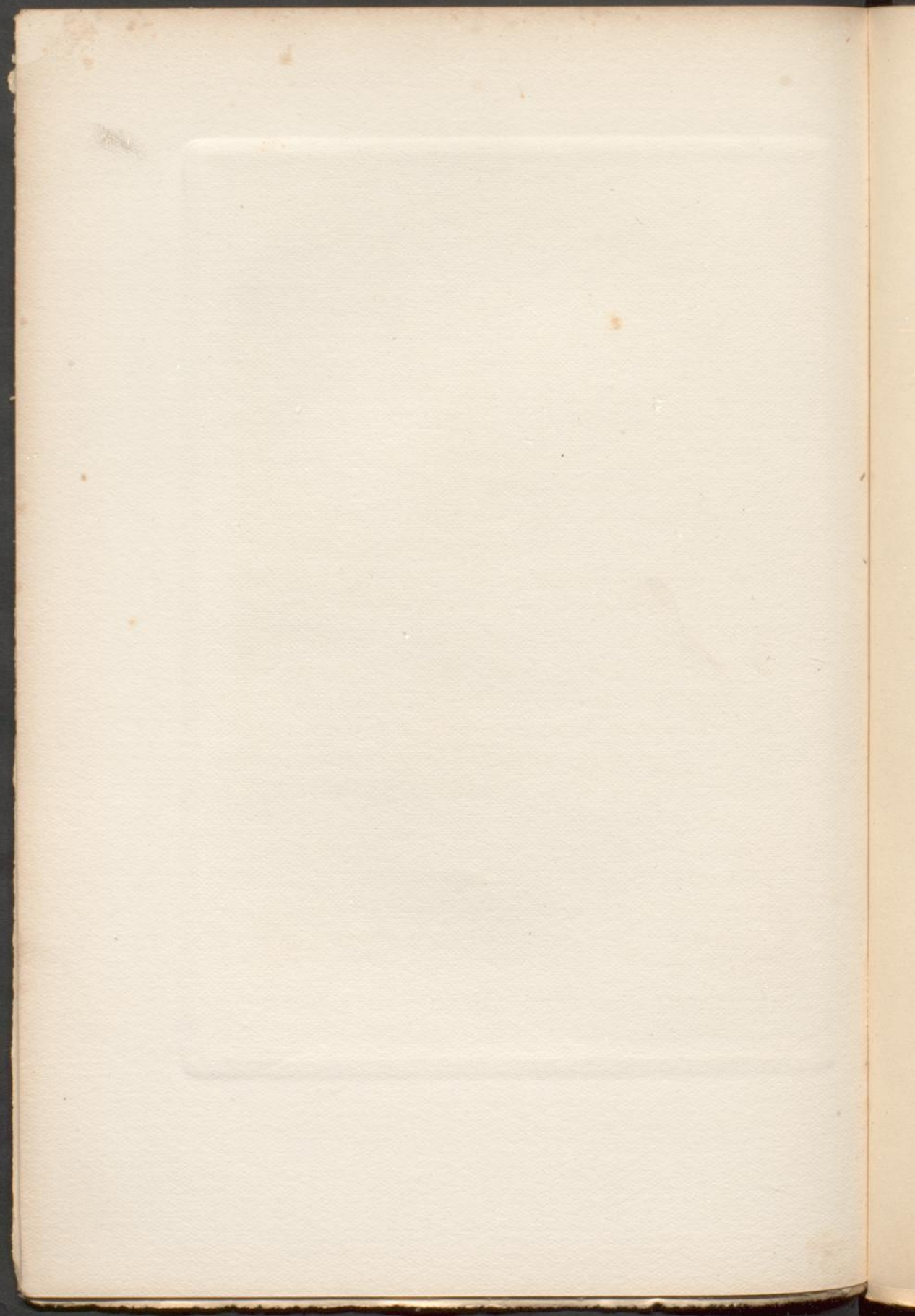
I have had all the joy and enlargement which come from intercourse, if one may so speak, with all the chief forms of aquatic scenery and surroundings. I have known the charm of rivers; and pictures of the industrious Merrimac and of the leisurely Mystic and of the classic Charles still rise to gladden many a retrospective thought. I have rich recollections of the sea, in every aspect, under every sort of a sky, beating or rippling upon all sorts of coasts. Countless brooks of blessed memory make music in my soul to-day, as sweet as when I heard with ear of sense the

gurgle of their waters in the forest, or over the stones in open meadow-reaches. I have seen, with homesick heart, how the great lakes mimic the great ocean, which they can never counterfeit with success to the eye trained to look upon the sea.

But a little corner of experience has been lacking, to make it all complete. It has still remained to try the pleasures of a few weeks' life by the side of a lake; not a vast inland sea, nor one whose opposite shores always wear the haze of distance,—but a small, a convenient, a manageable lake, not too large to grasp and comprehend in all its aspects nor to allow the feeling of intimacy and even spiritual ownership. Such an opportunity has offered at length; and it becomes a sort of duty to record one's impressions.

M. Michelet has a theory, which he presents in a very interesting book, that mountains are a sort of organism; that they grow, and decay, and pass through stages analogous to those of organic life. Doubtless most of us have felt the power of this thought when we have stood face to face with some grand peak, or have watched it from day to day. But whether M. Michelet, or the average observer of nature, would credit a lake with any such approach of personality, I hardly dare affirm. There seems, however, to be a trace of this distinctive character, a sort of low form of vitality, about a lake. It has its moods. It impresses its individual life upon one. It comes to stand for a certain sort of companionship, much like that of the mountain. It is less masterful





than the mountain. But for that very reason perhaps, it is more companionable. It does not impress its own mood upon the spirit of man. It rather lends itself to his temper, and blends with his humour. Stability is the word which defines the soul of the mountain; flexibility is the characteristic of the lake.

Chief of all its charms is an infinite play of lights and shades, hues and shadows, colour in constant flux, subtle blendings of tints in all keys and tones, incessant alliances with shore and sky whose issues are rich in all the resources of colour which can be conferred by earth and sky and water itself. The lake has its own individual key-note of colour, which it takes from the rich greens of its wooded shores, mixed to a darker shade in the depths of its own waters. But in that particular key the variations are almost endless. Not a cloud drifting across the sky; not a breeze rippling the water's surface; not a change in the angle at which the sunlight falls; not a variation in the humidity of the air; not a shift of colour in the foliage in spring or autumn days,—that does not find an instant report and correspondence in the upturned waters. There is no more delicate colour-gauge in all nature. The mountains are responsive to the same influences, but they do not begin to be as subtle, as sensitive, as vivid in the report they render to the eye.

When you watch the sky as it is reflected on the mountain, you think of the mountain; when you watch it in the lake you think of the sky. But every

instant of the day, and even in the darkness of the night, the lake offers to the eye some new combination, some surprise in colour, some attractive disposition of light and shade. Last night it was so grey and monotonous under the high fog which drifted in with the twilight that it could have been reproduced in monochrome. The night before under the sunset light that flushed, not the west alone, but every inch of space in the firmament, it was a weltering tide of subtlest pink and rose. This morning, reflecting the steely clouds which have slowly spread over the heavens, it has all the neutral sheen of a mirror. To-morrow, when the north wind blows, and a clear blue shines in the sky, its rushing waves will darkle into indigo and cobalt, picked out with the flecks of the foam. And so from day to day and from hour to hour the lover of colour who lives with a lake has incessant joys as his portion. His eye is gladdened with a chromatic play which never grows wearisome, never satiates, an endless optical symphony.

But man cannot live by colour alone. Nor is that all which the friendly lake offers to beguile the days. Its sinuous shores invite the feet of the stroller, and the skiff of the loitering rower. Within the compass of its ten miles of shore line it offers the large variety of a little world. Its head waters reach the banks of long upland meadows, stretching away to distant ranges, while it finds its outlet toward the sea in a notch between steep, wooded hills which have all the semblance of the Adirondacks. Here its banks are dressed

in hemlock, maple, and chestnut, and there the bright green of the willows at the low water edge contrasts with the darker tints of the elms in the meadows behind. On one side, bold, rocky ledges fall abruptly away into deep water, and opposite, the sedges and the rushes grow far out into the shallows. This is the rich green summer setting of the lake. How fortunate the eye privileged to follow all the transformations in the foliage and herbage around it, from the early, tender greens of April, till the last brown leaf is whisked into its waves by November gales !

Companionship with the lake involves, of course, some degree of association with the forms of life which surround it, of which it is a sort of centre and rallying-point. This includes, perhaps, the human beings who haunt its surface, and linger about its shores. Though really these are rather adjuncts, foreign to its real life, than part of its being, or essentials of its character. They seem like the flies which crawl over the body of a man, yet are no part of him ; and so far as the lake is a spectacle, it cannot be said that its human neighbours succeed in making themselves very distinguished or important as elements thereof. They go pulling about over its bright waves in their little skiffs ; but the glint of their oars is only one more flash added to the millions which greet the eye from every wavelet and billow. Or they sit dejectedly hour after hour, watching the floats of their fishing-lines, which rarely give any sign of being agitated by the wary fish below ; and

in this relation to the scene they are less interesting than so many floating logs. Only when they plunge into its depths, and as bathers and swimmers become a part of it, do they float up, so to speak, to the level of its own charm upon the eye and the mind.

But it is far different with the other creatures who inhabit its shores, and soar or flit above its waters, and swim within them. These belong to the lake. Its life and theirs blend as the sky and the clouds mingle with the waves. One thinks of the two together, as they belong. The birds love its banks, and frequent them as an evidently approved summer-resort. Nor is there any doubt in my mind that in the days and weeks of the mild southern winter, there is much chatter and chirp in the pine groves and the rice-swamps over the charms of this far northern lake as a place where it is good to rear one's brood and get cheap and wholesome fare, during the summer months, with small liability to gunshot fatalities. The swallows hereabouts are plump and lively, and when they skim and dart and dive after their suppers in the glow of the sunset, it is evident that they are faring well and taking far better catches than the stolid fishermen around whom they circle.

A little later, down among the trees on the point where the willows grow, there begins a tremendous chatter, as these lively little fellows go to roost, a clear case of easy, satisfied, self-sufficient gossip, full of importance in the bird-world, and amusing even to the dull mortals who can only half understand it

all. In the fields which skirt the water's edge the robins love to forage ; and one day I had the pleasure of assisting, as a spectator, at the first flight of a brood of nestlings over which not only the whole robin family, but half a dozen other bird households watched with noisy solicitude. There is a family of belted kingfishers living down by the mouth of the brook yonder which never fails to protest against our invasions of its premises, in a sharp, rattling note like the drawing of a stick along the fence-paling. Nor do we ever lose an opportunity to beat up the handsome pair and set them to clattering and plunging from one thicket to another ; for they are beautiful to behold and in perfect harmony with their surroundings.

One day as we were floating idly near the sedges which grace the mouth of the brook, suddenly there came dropping down from the air the gaunt form of a bird whose long bill and lean breast were matched by the slim legs which he pulled behind him. With much awkward flapping of his wings he settled among the reeds and grasses ; then we knew that we were honoured by the visit of a heron. Breathlessly we awaited his movements, and hoped he would not find our presence objectionable, and that he would deign to trust in our good will. But the diffidence and shyness of his retiring nature could not be overcome by any telepathy of ours ; and presently he awkwardly shifted still farther into the thicket ; and then seeming to make up his mind that where there were so many inquisitive spectators was no place for

him, he floundered into the air again and was soon sailing calmly to some quieter retreat. A few days later he reappeared with a mate; but this time did not deign to alight, ignoring our attractive marsh, possibly on account of its remembered publicity.

But the chief lion in our bird community,—if one may be pardoned for putting it thus,—is an eagle. He is a splendid fellow, and it is the episode of a day when he appears in the sky spaces, soaring with that stately ease which so mocks our human resources of motion, or rushing forward upon his way. He seems to have learned the immunity he enjoys under the laws of the State; for he is a fearless creature, so far as man is in question, and permits his human admirers to come within easy speaking distance of him when he is resting upon some favourite perch. How the smaller creatures regard his presence I am not prepared to say, nor whether the king-bird who bullies the crows and the hawks, ever ventures to chase an eagle! But for those of us who have nothing to fear from him he is one of the joys of life upon this water-margin.

The lake has fallen a little from its high-water level, and there are rusty patches on the wooded hillsides which suggest the waning of the summer. The lake and its verdant setting will soon be entering upon another phase of their life. The bullfrog seldom sings any more to his lady love; but the katydid sharply reiterates at night his absurd insistence—"she did," "she did." By these and other infallible signs

we know that the friendly birds will soon vacate their summer homes. The stripping of the trees will shortly begin, and before we realise that it is time, there will be a hoar frost in the swampy field yonder, and the sharp needles of ice will dart to and fro on the black water, and some fine morning there will be six inches of hard, cold, glassy tiling laid down over its surface.

But long before that, our life with the lake will be only a sweet dream of the summer, a memory to be called up in winter days, and to be grateful for always.



