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GENE STRATTON-PORTER

A daughter of the American Midwest in a time of rapid transition, Gene Stratton-Porter (1863–1924) wrote sugary (and extremely popular) fiction to underwrite her work in natural history. She spent much of her time wandering the Limberlost Swamp south of Geneva, Indiana, where she learned to photograph birds and flowers. Her novels, especially *Freckles* (1904) and *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and her publisher allowed her to intersperse these tales with somewhat less saleable nature books—such as *Moths of the Limberlost* (1912). She was a great curiosity: one journalist wrote that she "lives in a swamp, arrays herself in man's clothes, and sallies forth in all weathers to study the secrets of nature. I believe she knows every bug, bird, and beast in the woods." She was also a fighter for the world she watched disappearing around her, as Standard Oil of Indiana drilled new wells and farmers drained more land. Her last book, published posthumously in 1927, was a collection of essays on environmental themes entitled *Let Us Highly Resolve*. "The resources of the country were so vast that it never occurred to any one to select the most valuable . . . and store them for the use of future generations," she wrote—and she was one of the early popular writers to try to set that failing right.

The Last Passenger Pigeon

The farm on which I lived as a child was one of the most beautiful at that time that I ever have seen. Three brooks of running water crossed its meadow and valley places. There were thickets and woods pastures between the open, plowed fields, and on the west there was one heavy piece of virgin timber where every bird of deep forest loved to home, and every bird of any kind could find the location it loved under

the eaves of the barn, under the clapboards of the pig pens, in the corn bins, in the chimneys of the house, in the apple trees, in the thickets, beside the brooks, in the forest, and on the earth.

One of the birds with which I was daily familiar was the Passenger Pigeon. We had pigeons as well as doves, and all of us knew the difference between the soft grays, the smaller size and the note of the dove, and the larger frame of the pigeon with its more vivid plumage and red feet, with its whistling whirr of wing and its different call note. It is a fact that in the days of my childhood Nature was still so rampant that men waged destruction in every direction without thought. Nature seemed endlessly lavish; the springs were bubbling everywhere, half a dozen on our land; the water of the wide brooks was singing noisily on its way to the rivers and down to the sea; the grass was long and lush and shining; the forests walled us in everywhere. The cleared soil had been cleared at the expense of inroads into these same forests and this thing had been going on for more than a hundred years before my time. In the days of my childhood I can remember sitting on the gate post and watching the curling violet smoke spirals ascending heavenward in half a dozen different directions, and each of them meant that during the winter farmers had been cutting indiscriminately the finest hardwood timber that God ever made, as well as the softer woods. When a man started to clear a piece of land he chopped down *every tree on it*, cut the trunks into sections, rolled them into log heaps, and burned them to get them out of his way, in order that he might use the land for the growing of wheat, corn, and potatoes. In this way uncounted millions of dollars in bird's eye maple, cherry, in burled oak, golden oak, black walnut, hickory, and the red elm so sought after now for knife handles and gun butts went up in flames and smoke. Nowhere was there even one man who had the vision to see that the forests would eventually come to an end. In our own neighbourhood, lying in the heart of the greatest hardwood belt in the world, log heaps were burned that would to-day, at current prices, make many millionaires. And as the forests fell, the creeks and springs dried up, devastating winds swept from western prairies, and so the work of changing the climatic conditions of a world was well under way.

While the forests were being felled, the fur-bearing animals and all kinds of game birds were being driven farther and farther from the haunts of civilization. I can remember in childhood the haze of smoke that always drifted from the west when the Indians and white settlers rounded up the game and burned over large stretches of prairie to secure meat to cure for their winter food store. In our immediate neighbourhood there were nearly half of the neighbours who did not believe in cutting down the forest, in tilling land, in building big, fine homes and churches and schoolhouses, and paving roads. These men believed in living in log cabins in small clearings devoted to a potato patch and a few acres of corn. Water was drawn from springs. Of milk and butter there was none. The corn was ground for bread; the potatoes were buried for winter; the rivers and the forests furnished the fish and game. There was never a day in my childhood in which from every direction around us there could not be heard the crack of the rifle and diffusion of the shotgun in the hands of men hunting game for food, and the river banks were lined by persistent fishermen seining as they pleased. To an extent there was hunting and fishing in our own family. Three or four times a year Father and the boys took a day off, drove to the river, and came home with fish by the washtubful—huge big fish flushed with red around the gills and under parts that they called "red horses"; pucker-mouthed suckers nearly as big as I was; and big, bullheaded catfish, and the solid sweet meat of the black bass. My own fishing was confined to the chubs and shiners of the small creeks crossing our land until I reached an age when I was large enough to be taken along on some of the real fishing expeditions to the Wabash River or lakes near us.

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, when the corn was husked and in the cribs, and the fall work all done, the boys were allowed to spend some time outside of their school work in hunting with guns and trapping game, and they frequently brought in unbelievable numbers of squirrels and rabbits. In our family we never hunted for nor ate the opossums and 'coons as did many of our neighbours. Father said he never opened his mouth to take a bite of 'possum that he did not think of its long, slick tail. It looked too much like a rat to suit him. He was

perfectly satisfied with rations from our poultry yard and lambs and shoats. But Mother liked to have game to offer guests from the city who were tired of the meat that could be purchased at markets, and so the boys hunted until long strings of quail, rabbits, and squirrels, skinned, dressed, and frozen to bone hardness, hung in the store house ready for use on the arrival of unexpected guests. In those days it was no unusual thing for hunters to bring in wild turkeys and in the spring and fall wild ducks and geese that paused at our creeks during migration, while from the time I can remember until I was perhaps eight years of age, we always trapped quail.

There seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of them and very few of the neighbours paid any attention to anything so small as quail. They were out for big game that would supply a large, hungry family of growing children with meat, while many of them did not have bounteous supplies of the richest milk, cream, butter, lard, and tallow as we did. The quail traps that we made I very frequently helped in constructing. Long strips of light pine wood were cut perhaps three quarters of an inch square. These were built into small square pens beginning with the full length of the strips at the bottom, and each round, as they were laid up four-square, the strips were cut shorter until at a foot or so of height they drew into perhaps a nine-inch opening which was covered with a light board. On each of the four sides as these walls were built a heavy cord was crossed over each stick. These were drawn taut and tied at the top, resulting in a slatted structure that could be picked up in the hand and carried anywhere.

The method of setting one of these traps was interesting. A hair trigger in the shape of a figure four was deftly constructed from pine. The trap was taken to a place where quail were numerous, one edge of it raised and set on this trigger. Then in several directions leading from it wheat was dropped, a few grains at a time. The birds, striking these trails of wheat, would follow them up until they reached the trap beneath which was a generous supply. Usually as many birds as could crowd in would follow the lure and when they were busy picking the grains, some bird would espy the wheat on the trigger and the slightest touch would spring it. The trap would drop down covering anywhere

from ten to twelve or fifteen birds. These were drawn and frozen as a delicacy to offer guests or in case of sickness.

Quail were so numerous that we were allowed as children to take the eggs. When we found a nest we might take a long stick and roll out and open one egg as a test. If the mother bird had been brooding until the egg was beginning to germinate, the nest was left and given every protection. If the eggs were fresh, we were permitted to bring them home and boil them hard for a treat. I am sure that no other egg was quite so delicious. But by the time I was ten years of age, we began to notice that quail were growing scarcer, so the edict went forth that no more eggs must be eaten and no more traps must be set. Father had discovered by bitter experience that when the quail were not ranging freely through his grain fields bugs and insect pests were damaging his grain until his crops were not so large as when the birds had been more numerous.

These things he studied out and began to pass along to his neighbours, even to put in his sermons that he preached in the pulpit. He began to see even that long ago that the springs were drying up, that the creeks were nearly dry in summer, that the rivers and lakes were lowering in volume, and from that time on our whole family began to practise and to preach conservation along every line.

One of the things that Father never would allow our boys to do was to shoot or to trap the Passenger Pigeons. I think very likely, from his training in Biblical lore, he had in the back of his head a sort of religious reverence for a pigeon or a dove that made him shield them when he did not the quail. He used to tell me that they were among the very oldest birds in the history of the world, that one of the bases of reckoning a man's wealth in Biblical times was to count his dovecotes, and he showed me how these were made and explained how the doves and the wild pigeons were used as a sacrifice to the Almighty, while every line of the Bible concerning these birds, many of them exquisitely poetical, was on his tongue's tip. Father and Mother never would permit the destruction of the wild pigeons which were even more numerous than were the quail. In fact, the pigeons came in such flocks that we frequently found places where they had settled so thickly on the branches

of trees having brittle wood, such as maple and beech, that quite good-sized limbs had been broken down from the weight of the pigeons that swarmed over them to brood by night. In my childhood it was customary for men to take long poles and big bags and lanterns and go searching through the woods until they found one of these perching places of the pigeons. Then half-a-dozen men would flash the lanterns in such a manner that the lights would blind the birds, and with the clubs others would beat the birds from the limbs, strike them down and gather them up by the bagfull.

I remember being at the home of one of our neighbours on an errand for Mother one morning when the birds from a pigeon hunt were being dressed. I was shocked and horrified to see dozens of these beautiful birds, perhaps half of them still alive, struggling about with broken wings, backs, and legs, waiting to be skinned, split down the back, and dropped into the pot-pie kettle. I went home with a story that sickened me, and Father again cautioned our boys not to shoot even one wild pigeon. He said that so many were being taken that presently none would be left. That such a thing could happen in our own day as that the last of these beautiful birds might be exterminated, no one seriously dreamed. We merely used precaution as an eventuality that might remotely occur.

More mercy seemed to be exercised in the case of the doves. For one thing, they did not flock in numbers and could not be attacked in masses as were the pigeons. For another, they were smaller and it was difficult to secure enough of them to make a meal for even a small family, and it may have been, too, that their plaintive, cooing notes made an appeal to the heart that the pigeon did not possess. The pigeons were bigger birds; they had more meat on their bones; they persisted in their flocking tendencies throughout nesting and moulting seasons, so that a hunter, coming into pigeon territory, could be sure with a shotgun by day or a club by night of taking all the birds he could carry. Father said he had eaten a few of them, and that they were very delicious either in pot-pie or when the young were fried, but from my time on, in our family, and as far as our influence extended, the pigeons were protected. I never even tasted one, for which I am thankful. People everywhere

spoke of these pigeon raids at night as a shame when any one mentioned them, especially raids where bags full of birds were maimed and living when carried away to suffer for hours before they were prepared for food by thoughtless and brutal hunters. Soon it became noticeable that the pigeons were not so numerous. We missed their alert call notes, their musical wings, their small clouds in flight. The work that they had done in gathering up untold quantities of weed seeds and chinquapins was missed and the seeds were left to germinate and become a pest, instead of pigeon food. By and by, people began to say that the pigeons were provoked and had gone on farther north to brood. Their powers of flight were well understood and it was known that they flew long distances when they chose. By the time our family moved from the country to the town of Wabash in order to give the three younger children the advantages of higher schooling, such a thing as a wild pigeon was not seen in our woods, and their notes were not heard either in spring or fall migration. Then items began to appear in the papers saying that the pigeons were very rapidly being exterminated, that people who were settling and residing in Michigan and farther north did not see any. Hunters missed them in territory they long had haunted. And in an amazingly short time people were beginning to watch and to listen for the pigeons, and to report that no one had either seen or heard of any.

About the year 1910, on a business trip to Cincinnati, following natural inclinations, I took a day off to visit the Zoölogical Gardens, and while I was going about among the different cages containing what was at that time the largest and finest and the most complete collection of wild birds and animals anywhere in the United States, from the babel of barking hyenas and restless wolves and groaning camels and grunting elephants and chattering monkeys trying to express their longing for home and freedom, all of them nearly breaking my heart in sympathy that creatures embodying the very essence of wild life should be so degraded and frightened and humiliated as were these things in captivity, while I was trying to steel my heart to go on through the collection to get an idea of what really might be there, I heard a faint little "See? See?" that I instantly recognized, and throwing up my head I saw, high

among the confining wires of a cage, a male wild pigeon, and as I stood looking at the noble bird there presently flew across the cage to him from the ground below where she had been picking seed, a female. Before the birds had really become extinct someone had secured a pair and confined them in this cage, but they did not seem to have bred and reproduced themselves in captivity. A few years after this the papers recorded the fact that the male had died, and a few years later I read of the female having been sent, on her death, to the Smithsonian Institution in order that a dead bird might be preserved for future generations; while in one of our magazines at that time (I think the *National Geographic*) there was printed a photograph of this bird after she had been mounted.

Then I followed the history of the vanishing of the pigeons through the sporting and outing and ornithological magazines of the country up to the place where an award of one hundred dollars was offered to any one who would make known to the Audubon Societies of our country the homing place of even one wild pigeon. This award was gradually increased until it reached one thousand dollars. By that time I was beginning to publish records of my findings afield. From the first dove and martin of late February and early March, dependent on the season, to the last migrant wing of November, I was afield with a wagonload of cameras and paraphernalia doing what I could to wrest the secrets of the wild from Nature around me and in an effort to secure illustrations for the works on natural history that I was so intensely interested in writing, and to secure material that I incorporated very largely in books containing a slight amount of fiction as a bait for those who would not take their natural history unless it were sugar-coated.

It was in the busiest part of nesting time, late May and early June, and each day on which light was right for field photography, with the Limberlost as a centre, I was travelling to as distant a circumference as I could attain in any direction with my little black horse and my load of field paraphernalia. Usually my journeyings were to the south, the east, and the north of the Limberlost because to the south lay swampy outskirts, to the east and north wound the lure of the river. I knew more people in those directions and there were oil men who would help me

with my work. But there were times when I went also to the west. There was one memorable day in 1912 on which one of the oil men had sent me word as to where I might find the nest of a bird that he thought very interesting, in a thicket of bushes in a fence corner on the land bordering a highway running north and south. I had travelled west on the broad highway leading from the village to the crossroad, found the location to which I had been directed, and tied my horse in a sheltered place. Then I had carried my cameras, set up and screened the one I wished to use, and focussed my lenses on the nest of a brooding hen goldfinch.

It was no wonder that my informant had thought this nest interesting. It began in the sharp angle of small twigs leaving the trunk of a scrub elm, and in order to reach the proper circumference for the nest at the top, the little hen had built in an unusual amount of foundation. The nest was all of nine or ten inches in depth from foundation to top. It was built with a base of tiny twigs and little bits of moss and dried seed pods with a conglomeration of little dried stuff that the mother bird could gather to raise up her foundations to the place where she began forming the hair cup that held her eggs for brooding. Over the outside of the nest, with her careful building and the dainty material she had used, there was almost the same effect of decoration that is sometimes found on the nest of a red-eyed vireo or a wood pewee, or some of the smaller birds that really do trim the outsides of their nests with bits of moss and decorate them with queer, tiny seed pods. The nest was very beautiful and the little greenish gold hen that brooded on it had reached maturity and years of such discretion and wisdom that she recognized my presence and my touch as that of a friend. Without very much to teach her, merely by a slow and careful approach, I had been able to set my camera and cover it near enough her nest to secure pictures that would not need enlargement.

The nest was sheltered from sun and rain by a branch above it that I could easily bend back for photographic purposes and release when I took the camera away. Running parallel with the fence and high enough above it to allow loads of hay to pass under through the gates or where the snake fences were laid down for the purpose, ran the lines of tele-

phone wires crossing the country, but the wires were high enough to be out of my way and no post was set near where I wanted to work.

The brooding bird had left the nest at a period when I covered the camera with branches, but I had hardly settled myself among the screening bushes of an adjoining fence corner where I had a good view of the work I wished to do when she came back, perched on the edge of the nest and leaning over, with her bill turned her eggs and arranged them in a different position before she again resumed brooding. That picture I secured. By moving softly and waiting until she had brooded perhaps half an hour, I was able to reach the camera, change the plate holder, and reset the shutter. Having nothing else of importance on hand at the minute, I decided that I would remain in the fence corner an hour or two on the chance that she might again leave the nest and I might secure another pose of her on her return, or that the male bird near the noon hour might come with food for his brooding mate as had happened in a few rare instances before my lenses. At any rate, the chance seemed worth waiting for, and it was while I was waiting that far in the distance to the east a pair of ears that were as alert, I will venture to say, as any that ever went forth to field work, picked up a sound, and I raised my head and began watching, and presently I recognized that what I was hearing was the wing music of a bird that should reasonably have been a dove, but was not. The air waves that whistle from a dove's wings in flight make a beautiful sound to hear, but what I heard that morning I recognized as a different thing that was a familiar part of my childhood. I heard the whistling wings of a bird, but the tones were louder, differently vibrating from those of a dove, and the bird was coming straight toward me. Unconsciously I knelt up, holding to the bushes and staring into the sky, so presently I could see the bird approaching, headed straight toward the fence corner in which my camera was set, while it was not flying at much greater height than the wires above me.

This all happened so quickly that I was left in nearly a dazed condition when the bird curved down a bit in flight and alighted on the telephone wires so near to me. So quietly that I was almost breathless, I stared up at that bird and slowly my mouth fell open. I knew every

dove that ever had been native to Indiana, and I had experienced an intimate acquaintance with one dove having a black band around its neck that had been carried in a cage from Egypt to our country, and had escaped its mistress to be captured at my hands. That bird I adored. I had worshipped it for the three days that it remained in my possession; then its owner, hearing that I had a wonderful dove with foreign history, came and proved her rights and carried away a bird that I would have given any reasonable sum to have owned.

This bird that I was kneeling there in the fence corner staring up at, this bird that had come to me with whistling wings and questing eyes, was as large as the largest domestic pigeon I ever had seen, but there was nothing domestic about it. It had the sleek feathering and the trim, alert carriage of the wild bird. But it had not the surety of a bird at home; it seemed restless and alarmed. Its beak and its feet and its nose were bright red. As it plumed its feathers and dressed its wings while it rested on the wire, I could see that over the top of its head and its shoulders there was the most exquisite metallic lustre of bronze and this bronze tempered out to shifting shades of lighter colour having the same evanescent tints across the breast. The back was a reddish slate-gray over which the bronze lights played, and here and there over its wings there seemed to be a tiny dark feather. The tail was long and had not many feathers in it, and the shape of the bird when it drew itself up and turned its head from side to side to study the landscape was beautiful. It remained intensely alert. It seemed to be searching for something. Its eyes were big and liquid and it constantly turned its head in all directions. As it struck the wire it uttered a queer cry. It was not in the least like the notes of doves or pigeons. It was in a high key and it was a questioning note. As nearly as I could translate it into words it cried: "See? See? See?" in hurried utterance.

When it had rested a few seconds, searching the landscape all around, it suddenly tilted forward, spread its wings, and called again loudly, listened intently, and then took up its flight straight west. There was not a bird in the ornithology of our country that this could have been except one of the very last of our wild pigeons. There was no possibility that I could have been mistaken. I had known the bird inti-

mately in my youth. I had seen it not so long before in captivity in the Cincinnati gardens. In order to make sure that I was right, for even in tales you won't believe I can at times adduce evidence, I wrote to S. A. Stephan, for years General Manager of the Cincinnati Zoölogical Gardens, the finest gardens in the world at the time I last visited them, and asked him for the history of the Passenger Pigeons I had seen in captivity there and told him of how people here in California had sent me word of locations in which I could find a few remaining specimens of this noble bird, but search only resulted in Band Tailed or some other pigeon, never a true Passenger. Mr. Stephan wrote this letter in exact confirmation of my memory:

Dear Madam:

I received your letter and note that you are anxious to receive some information in regard to the wild Passenger Pigeons that we formerly had in the Cincinnati Zoo.

In 1878 we bought six pair of Passenger Pigeons. They hatched several young here, but after several years the old ones finally weakened and died off, as did also some of the young. In 1910 we just had two left. These were two that were hatched out here in the Garden—a male and a female. The male died when it was twenty-six years old, and the female died a few years afterward, and was twenty-eight years old. When the female died I presented it to the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, and they mounted it and have it on exhibition there at the present time.

I have been misinformed a number of times the same as you have from people in California who claimed they could get the wild Passenger Pigeons for us. One party went so far as to shoot one of the birds and send it to us in order for me to see whether or not it really was the Passenger Pigeon, but on investigation I found it was the Band Tailed Pigeon. I really believe that the wild Passenger Pigeons are extinct. I am offering $1,000.00 for a pair of them, not injured, but am most positive I will never succeed in getting them.

Yours very truly,
S. A. STEPHAN,
General Manager.

So here I was looking with all my soul at one specimen of a bird bearing on its head a price ranging from one hundred up, with no way and no desire to capture it. Since it was there, sound and alert, possibly in some far corner of the earth it might find a mate and perpetuate its species. At my hands, at least, it had its chance, while I never have seen another or heard of any one else who has. That one male specimen, flying alone, searching for a mate and its species, at a time when for many years a high price had been set on its head was a pathetic figure. It was a blasting accusation. It was no wonder that strained "See? See?" came to me as the best interpretation of its call note. The bird might very well have been crying "See? See? See what you have done to me! See what you have done to your beautiful land! Where are your great stretches of forest? Where are the fish-thronged rivers your fathers enjoyed? Where are the bubbling springs and the sparkling brooks? Why is this land parching with thirst even in the springtime? Why have you not saved the woods and the water and the wildflowers and the rustle of bird wings and the notes of their song? See what you have done to me! Where a few years ago I homed over your land in uncounted thousands, to-day I am alone. See me searching for a mate! See me hunting for a flock of my kind! See what you have done to me! See! See! See!"

Tales You Won't Believe (1925)