



CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

RURAL  
HOURS

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Susan Fenimore  
Cooper

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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RURAL HOURS,



By a Lady

*Endicott's Lith. N.Y.*

Red-Throated Humming Bird



GOLDEN ORIOLE



## *Contents*

SPRING.	1
SUMMER.	59
AUTUMN.	167
WINTER.	237
LATER HOURS.	295

## *PREFACE.*

THE following notes contain, in a journal form, the simple record of those little events which make up the course of the seasons in rural life. In wandering about the fields, during a long unbroken residence in the country, one naturally gleans many trifling observations on rustic matters which are afterwards remembered with pleasure by the fireside, and gladly shared with one's friends. The following pages were written in perfect good faith, all the trifling incidents alluded to having occurred as they are recorded. It is hoped that some of our friends who, like the honored Hooker, love the country, "where we may see God's blessings spring out of the earth," may find something of interest in the volume.

The present edition is a revised one, and some passages not needed to-day have been omitted.

*March 16, 1887.*

## SPRING.

*Saturday, March 4th.*— Everything about us looks thoroughly wintry still, and fresh snow lies on the ground to the depth of a foot. One quite enjoys the sleighing, however, as there was very little last month. Drove several miles down the valley, this morning, in the teeth of a sharp wind and flurries of snow, but after facing the cold bravely, one brings home a sort of virtuous glow which is not to be picked up by cowering over the fireside; it is with this as with more important matters, the effort brings its own reward.

*Tuesday, 7th.*— Milder; thawing. Walking near the river saw three large waterfowl moving northward; we believed them to be loons; they were in sight only for a moment, owing to the trees above us, but we heard a loud howling cry as they flew past, like that of those birds. It is early for loons, however, and we may have been deceived. They usually appear about the first of April, remaining with us through the summer and autumn until late in December, when they go to the seashore; many winter about Long Island, many more in the Chesapeake. Not long since we saw one of these birds of unusual size, weighing nineteen pounds; it had been caught in Seneca Lake on the hook of what fishermen call a set-line, dropped to the depth of ninety-five feet, the bird having dived that distance to reach the bait. Several others have been caught in the same manner in Seneca Lake upon lines sunk from eighty to one hundred feet. It may be doubted if any other feathered thing goes so far beneath the water. There is, however, another, and a much smaller bird, the Dipper, or ousel, which is still more at home in the water than the

loon, and that without being web-footed, but it is probably less of a diver. The Dipper must indeed be a very singular bird; instead of swimming on the surface of the water like ducks and geese, or beneath like the loons, or wading along the shores like many of the long-legged coast tribes, it actually runs or flies about at will over gravelly beds of mountain streams. Mr. Charles Buonaparte mentions having frequently watched them among the brooks of the Alps and Apennines, where they are found singly, or in pairs, haunting torrents and cataracts with perfect impunity, or running hither and thither along the stony bottom of more quiet streams. They cannot swim, however; and they drop suddenly into the water from above, or at times they walk leisurely in from the bank, flying as it were beneath the surface, moving with distended wings. Their nests are said to be usually built on some point projecting over a mountain stream, either in a tree, or upon a rock; and the young, when alarmed, instantly drop into the water below for safety. They are not common birds even in their native haunts, but wild and solitary creatures, smaller than our robin, and of a dark, grave plumage. Until lately the Dipper was supposed to be unknown on this continent, but more recently it has been discovered at several different points in our part of the world, frequenting, as in Europe, wild lakes and rocky streams of limpid water.

*Wednesday, 8th.*— Very pleasant day; quite spring-like. The snow is melting fast. Spring in the *air*, in the *light*, and in the *sky*, although the earth is yet unconscious of its approach. We have weather as mild as this in December, but there is something in the fulness and softness of the light beaming in the sky this morning which tells of spring,—the early dawn before the summer day. A little downy woodpecker and a bluejay were running about the apple-trees hunting for insects; we watched them awhile with interest, for few birds are seen here during the winter.



*Thursday, 9th.*— Winter again; the woods are powdered with snow this morning, and every twig is cased in glittering frost-work. The pines in the churchyard are very beautiful—hung with heavy wreaths of snow; but it is thawing fast, and before night they will be quite green again.

*Friday, 10th.*— A bunch of ten partridges brought to the house; they are occasionally offered singly, or a brace or two at a time, but ten are a much larger number than are often seen together. Last autumn we frequently came upon these birds in the woods—they were probably more numerous than usual. Several times they even found their way down into the village, which we have never known them to do before; once they were surprised in the churchyard, and twice they were found feeding among the refuse of our own garden.

*Saturday, 11th.*— Very pleasant. Walking on the skirts of the village, this afternoon, we came to a fence blown down by some winter storm, and stepping over it strolled about the fields awhile, the first time we had walked off the beaten track since November. We were obliged to cross several snow banks, but had the pleasure at least of treading the brown earth again, and remembering that in a few short weeks the sward will be fresh and green once more. A disappointment awaited us—several noble pines, old friends and favorites, had been felled unknown to us during the winter; unsightly stumps and piles of chips were all that remained where those fine trees had so long waved their evergreen arms. Their fall seemed to have quite changed the character of the neighboring fields; for it often lies within the power of a single group of trees to alter the whole aspect of acres of surrounding lands.

*Saturday, 18th.*— Long walk of several miles on the lake. We fancied the waters impatient to be free: there was a constant succession of dull, rumbling, and groaning sounds beneath our feet,

as we passed over the ice, so much so as to disturb our four-footed companion not a little. Dogs are often uneasy on the ice, especially when they first set out; they do not like the noise from below; but there was no danger whatever this morning. The crust is still eight or ten inches thick, and must have been much strengthened by the last severe weather. A number of sleighs and cutters were gliding about, several of the last driven by children, and well loaded with little people making the most of the last snow.

*Monday, 20th.*— Passing beneath some maples this afternoon, we observed several with small icicles hanging from their lower branches, although there was neither ice nor snow on the adjoining trees; we broke one off, and it proved to be congealed sap, which had exuded from the branch and frozen there during the night; natural sugar candy, as it were, growing on the tree. These little icicles were quite transparent and sweetish, like *eau sucrée*. At this season the sap very frequently moistens the trunk and limbs of sugar maples very plentifully, in spots where there is some crevice through which it makes its way; one often sees it dropping from the branches, and probably the Indians first discovered its sweetness from this habit. One would think that the loss of so much sap would necessarily injure the trees; but it is not so, they remain perfectly healthy, after yielding every spring, gallons of the fluid.

*Wednesday, 22d.*— A thunder-shower last night, by way of keeping the equinox; and this morning, to the joy of the whole community, the arrival of the robins is proclaimed. It is one of the great events of the year, for us, the return of the robins; we have been on the watch for them these ten days, as they generally come between the fifteenth and twenty-first of the month, and now most persons you meet, old and young, great and small, have something to say about them. No sooner is one of these first-comers seen by some member of a family, than the fact is proclaimed through the house; children

run in to tell their parents, "The robins have come!" Grandfathers and grandmothers put on their spectacles and step to the windows to look at the robins; and you hear neighbors gravely inquiring of each other: "Have you seen the robins?"—"Have you heard the robins?" There is no other bird whose return is so generally noticed, and for several days their movements are watched with no little interest, as they run about the ground, or perch on the leafless trees. It was last night, just as the shutters were closed, that they were heard about the doors, and we ran out to listen to their first greeting, but it was too dark to see them. This morning, however, they were found in their native apple-trees, and a hearty welcome we gave the honest creatures.

*Thursday, 23d.*— The snow is going at last; the country has the dappled look belonging properly to March in this part of the world; broad openings of brown earth are seen everywhere, in the fields and on the hillsides. The roads are deep with mud; the stage-coaches are ten and eleven hours coming the twenty-two miles over the hills from the railroad north of us.

*Friday, 24th.*— The first plant that shows the influence of the changing season in this part of the country is very little like the delicate snow-drop, or the fragrant violet of other lands. Long before the earliest trees are in bud, or the grass shows the faintest tinge of green, the dark spathe of the skunk-cabbage makes its way in the midst of snow and ice. It is singular that at a moment when the soil is generally frost-bound, any plant should find out that spring is at hand; but toward the close of February, or beginning of March, the skunk-cabbage makes a good guess at the time of the year, and comes up in marshy spots, on the banks of ponds and streams. With us it is almost a winter plant. The dark spathe or sheath is quite handsome, variegated, when young, with purple, light green, and yellow; within it grows the spadix, not unlike a miniature pine-apple

in shape and color, and covered with little protuberances, from each of which opens a purple flower. Although a very common plant, many persons familiar with its broad glossy leaves in summer have never seen the flower, and have no idea how early it blossoms. Its strong, offensive odor is better known; an American botanist has observed, that "it is exceedingly meritorious of the name it bears;" but this seems too severe, since a harsher thing could not well be said of a plant.

*Saturday, 25th.*— High wind from the south this evening; our highest winds are generally from the southward. The withered leaves of last autumn are whirling and flying over the blighted grass of the lawns, and about the roots of the naked trees,—a dance of death, as it were, in honor of Winter as he passes away.

*Monday, 27th.*— A flock of wild pigeons wheeling beautifully over the mountain this afternoon. We have had but few this spring; there is a great difference in the numbers which visit us from year to year; some seasons they are still very numerous, large flocks passing over the valley morning and evening as they go out from their general breeding-place in quest of food. Some few years ago they selected a wood on a hill, about twenty miles from us, for their spring encampment, making as usual great havoc among the trees and bushes about them; at that time they passed over the valley in its length, large unbroken flocks several miles in extent succeeding each other. There have not been so many here since that season.

*Tuesday, 28th.*— The great final spring thaw going on. Our winter deluge of snow is sinking into the earth, softening her bosom for the labours of the husbandman, or running off into the swollen streams, toward the sea. Cloudy sky with mist on the hills, in which the pines look nobly; the older trees especially, half revealed, half shrouded, seem giant phantoms, standing about the hillsides. The

simple note of the robin is heard through the gloom,—a cheering sound in these dull hours; perched on the topmost boughs of the trees, they are taking an observation, looking out for a convenient building notch.

*Wednesday, 29th.*—Lovely day; soft clear sunshine, and delightful air from the west playing in the leafless branches, and among the green threads of the pine foliage. It is not surprising that the pines, when they

“Wake up into song,  
Shaking their choral locks,”

should make more melody than other trees; the long slender leaves are quivering in the breeze this afternoon like the strings of an instrument, but they are so minute that at a little distance we only remark the general movement of the tufted branches.

The whole country is brown again, save here and there a narrow line of snow under some fence on the hills, or a patch marking a drift which all the storms of winter have helped to pile up.

Nothing can look more dismal than the lake just now; its surface is neither snow, ice, nor water, but a dull crust, which gives it a sullen expression quite out of character with the landscape generally, such a day as this; the sun is warming the brown hills, the old pines, and hemlocks with a spring glow after their long chill, but not a smile can be drawn from the lake, which grows more dark and gloomy every hour. As if to show us what we lose, there is just one corner open near the outlet, and it is beautiful in blended shades of coloring, rose and blue, clear and soft, as the eye of Spring.

*Thursday, 30th.*—The song-sparrows and bluebirds are here, and have been with us several days. The robins are getting quite numerous; they seem to come in detachments, or possibly they only pass from one neighborhood to another in flocks. Their note is very

pleasant, and after the silent winter, falls with double sweetness on the ear. Their portly persons and warm red jackets make them very conspicuous, flying about among the naked branches, or running over the blighted grass. They are more frequently seen on the ground than any other bird we have, excepting the sparrow, and it is amusing to watch the different gait of the two. The sparrow glides along with great agility and ease; whether in the grass or on the gravel, his movement is light and free: but robin usually makes more fuss; he runs by starts, drops his head, raises his tail, moves rapidly for a few feet, and then stops suddenly, repeating the same course of manoeuvres until he takes flight. Our robin never builds on the ground; his nest is placed in trees, where, from its size, it is very conspicuous. He is only musical early in spring; the rest of the year he is a very silent bird. Although differing in many respects from the Robin Redbreast of Europe, yet with the name he also inherits the favor of his kinsman, getting all the credit in this part of the world of watching over the Babes in the Woods, picking berries to feed them, and gathering leaves for their covering. This afternoon, as we saw the robins running over the graves in the churchyard, or perched on a tombstone looking at us with those large thoughtful eyes of theirs, we came to the conclusion that our own Redbreast must be quite as capable of a good deed, as his European brother. At this season, we seldom pass the churchyard without finding robins there; they probably have many nests among the trees.

*Friday, 31st.*— The snowdrop seldom opens here before the middle or third week of April, remaining in flower until the tulips fade, early in June; it would seem less hardy with us than in its native climate, for in England it blooms in February, and it has been found by M. de Candolle on the mountains of Switzerland with its flowers actually encased in snow and ice.

One hears a great deal about the sudden outburst of spring in America, but in this part of the country, the earlier stages of the



BLUE BIRD

season are assuredly very slow, and for many weeks its progress is gradual. It is only later in the day, when the buds are all full and the flowers ready to open, that we see the sudden gush of life and joyousness which is indeed at that moment almost magical in its beautiful effects. But this later period is a brief one; we have scarcely time to enjoy the sudden affluence of spring ere she leaves us to make way for summer, and people exclaim at the shortness of the season in America. Meanwhile, spring is with us in March, when we are yet sitting by the fireside, and few heed her steps; now she betrays her presence in the sky, now in the waters, with the returning birds, upon some single tree, in a solitary plant, and each milder touch gives pleasure to those who are content to await the natural order of things.

*Saturday, April 1st.*— Fresh maple sugar offered for sale to-day. A large amount of this sugar is still made in our neighborhood, chiefly for home consumption on the farms, where it is a matter of regular household use, many families depending on it altogether, keeping only a little white sugar for sickness; and it is said that children have grown up in this country without tasting any but maple sugar.

Some farmers have a regular "sugar-bush," where none but maples are suffered to grow; and on the older farms you occasionally pass a beautiful grove of this kind entirely clear of under-wood, the trees standing on a smooth green turf. More frequently, however, a convenient spot is chosen in the woods where maples are plenty. The younger trees are not tapped, as they are injured by the process; it is only after they have reached a good size—ten or twelve inches in diameter—that they are turned to account in this way; twenty years at least must be their age, as they rarely attain to such a growth earlier; from this period they continue to yield their sap freely until they decay. It is really surprising that any tree should afford to lose so much of its natural nourishment without injury; but maples that have been tapped for fifty years, or more, seem just



as luxuriant in their foliage and flowers as those that are untouched. The amount of sap yielded by different trees varies—some will give nearly three times as much as others; the fluid taken from one tree is also much sweeter and richer than that of another; there seems to be a constitutional difference between them. From two to five pounds of sugar are made from each tree, and four or five gallons of sap are required to every pound. The fluid begins to run with the first mild weather in March; the usual period for sugar-making is about two weeks—one year more, another less.

Two or three hundred trees are frequently tapped in the same wood, and as the sap is running, the fires are burning, and the sugar is boiling all together, day and night, it is a busy moment at the “bush.” The persons at work there, usually eat and sleep on the spot until their task is done; and it is a favorite rallying place with the children and young people of the farms, who enjoy vastly this touch of camp life, to say nothing of the new sugar, and a draught of fresh sap now and then.

There are at present farms in this county where two or three thousand pounds of sugar are prepared in one season. Formerly much of our sugar was sent to Albany and New York, and a portion is still sold there to the confectioners. During the early history of the county, rents were usually paid in produce—wheat, potash, sugar, etc.,—for the convenience of the tenants, and it is on record that in one year sixty thousand pounds were received in this way by the leader of the little colony about this lake; a portion of it was refined and made into pretty little specimen loaves at a sugar-house in Philadelphia, and it was quite as white and pure as that of the cane. Maple sugar sells in the village this year for nine cents a pound, and good Havana for six cents.

A story is told in the village of a Scotch stocking-weaver, who some years since bought a farm near the lake, and the first spring after his arrival in the country was so successful with his maple-trees, that in the midst of his labors he came into the village and

gave large orders for sap-buckets, pans, furnaces, etc. The good folk were rather surprised at the extent of these preparations, and inquiries were made about this grand sugar-bush. They were told by their new neighbor that as yet he had tapped only a small number of trees, but he intended soon to go to work in earnest among the maples, and, indeed, had quite made up his mind, "canny Scot" as he was, to "give up farming altogether, and keep to sugar-making all the year round;"—a plan which, it may be imagined, tickled the fancy of Jonathan not a little, knowing the ways of the maples as he did.

According to the last general census, the whole amount of maple sugar made during one year in this country, with a population of 49,658, was 351,748 pounds, or nearly eight pounds to each individual. The whole amount of sugar made in the State was 10,048,109 pounds.

Sugar of one sort or another is made in almost every State; Delaware and the District of Columbia are the only exceptions. Maple sugar is made in Virginia and Kentucky.

*Monday, 3d.*— Delightful day; first walk in the woods, and what a pleasure it is to be in the forest once more! The earlier buds are swelling perceptibly—those of the scarlet maple and elm flowers on the hills, with the willows and alders near the streams. We were struck more than usual with the mosses and lichens, and the coloring of the bark of the different trees; some of the chestnuts, and birches, and maples show twenty different shades, through grays and greens, from a dull white to blackish brown. These can scarcely vary much with the seasons, but they attract the eye more just now from the fact that in winter we are seldom in the woods; and at this moment, before the leaves are out, there is more light falling on the limbs and trunks than in summer. The ground mosses are not yet entirely revived; some of the prettiest varieties feel the frost sensibly, and have not yet regained all their coloring.

The little evergreen plants throw a faint tinge of verdure over

the dead leaves which strew the forest; in some spots there is quite a patch of them, but in other places they scarcely show at all. We have many in our woods, all pleasant little plants; their glossy leaves have generally a healthy character, and most of them bear pretty and fragrant blossoms at different seasons. Some ferns have been preserved, as usual, under the snow; though they are sensitive to the frost, yet in favorable spots they seem to escape until the snow falls and shields them, preserving them through the winter in a sort of half evergreen state, like some other garden and field plants. This year there are more of these fern leaves than usual, and they are pleasing, though flattened to the ground by the snow which has been weighing them down.

Nothing like a flower in all the wide woods. But the ground laurel is in bud and will blossom before long; we raked up the dead leaves to look for it, and some of the buds are very large and promising.

The robins, and sparrows, and bluebirds were singing very sweetly as we came home toward evening; there are many more birds in the village than in the woods. The wheat is looking green; the other fields are still brown. Every day the lake grows more dull and gloomy.

*Tuesday, 4th.*— The frogs were heard last night for the first time this season.

*Friday, 6th.*— Bright sun, but cool air. There is no current in our lake, or so little, at least, it is scarcely perceptible; not enough to carry the ice off, and it melts slowly away. Heavy rains are a great help in getting rid of it, and after an opening is made in the weak crust, a high wind will work upon it like magic, dashing it into fragments, and piling it on the shores, when it vanishes in a very short time. We have known the lake well covered, and men walking upon the ice at two o'clock, when at four on the same day—thanks to a high wind—the waters were entirely free. For some days now