



A Kentucky Cardinal

by James Lane Allen



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Chapter One

All this New-year's Day of 1850 the sun shone cloudless but wrought no thaw. Even the landscapes of frost on the window-panes did not melt a flower, and the little trees still keep their silvery boughs arched high above the jeweled avenues. During the afternoon a lean hare limped twice across the lawn, and there was not a creature stirring to chase it. Now the night is bitter cold, with no sounds outside but the cracking of the porches as they freeze tighter. Even the north wind seems grown too numb to move. I had determined to convert its coarse, big noise into something sweet—as may often be done by a little art with the things of this life—and so stretched a horse-hair above the opening between the window sashes; but the soul of my harp has departed. I hear but the comfortable roar and snap of hickory logs, at long intervals a deeper breath from the dog stretched on his side at my feet, and the crickets under the hearth-stones. They have to thank me for that nook. One chill afternoon I came upon a whole company of them on the western

slope of a woodland mound, so lethargic that I thumped them repeatedly before they could so much as get their senses. There was a branch near by, and the smell of mint in the air, so that had they been young Kentuckians one might have had a clew to the situation. With an ear for winter minstrelsy, I brought two home in a handkerchief, and assigned them an elegant suite of apartments under a loose brick.

But the finest music in the room is that which streams out to the ear of the spirit in many an exquisite strain from the hanging shelf of books on the opposite wall. Every volume there is an instrument which some melodist of the mind created and set vibrating with music, as a flower shakes out its perfume or a star shakes out its light. Only listen, and they soothe all care, as though the silken-soft leaves of poppies had been made vocal and poured into the ear.

Towards dark, having seen to the comfort of a household of kind, faithful fellow-beings, whom man in his vanity calls the lower animals, I went last to walk under the cedars in the front yard, listening to that music which is at once so cheery and so sad—the low chirping of birds at dark winter twilights as they gather in from the frozen fields, from snow-buried shrubbery and hedge-rows, and settle down for the night in the depths of the evergreens, the only refuge from their enemies and shelter from the blast. But this evening they made no ado about their home-coming. To-day perhaps none had ventured forth. I am most uneasy when the red-bird is forced by hunger to leave the covert of his cedars, since he, on the naked or white landscapes of winter, offers the most far-shining and beautiful mark for Death. I stepped across to the tree in

which a pair of these birds roost and shook it, to make sure they were at home, and felt relieved when they fluttered into the next with the quick startled notes they utter when aroused.

The longer I live here, the better satisfied I am in having pitched my earthly camp-fire, gypsylike, on the edge of a town, keeping it on one side, and the green fields, lanes, and woods on the other. Each, in turn, is to me as a magnet to the needle. At times the needle of my nature points towards the country. On that side everything is poetry. I wander over field and forest, and through me runs a glad current of feeling that is like a clear brook across the meadows of May. At others the needle veers round, and I go to town—to the massed haunts of the highest animal and cannibal. That way nearly everything is prose. I can feel the prose rising in me as I step along, like hair on the back of a dog, long before any other dogs are in sights. And, indeed, the case is much that of a country dog come to town, so that growls are in order at every corner. The only being in the universe at which I have ever snarled, or with which I have rolled over in the mud and fought like a common cur, is Man.

Among my neighbors who furnish me much of the plain prose of life, the nearest hitherto has been a bachelor named Jacob Mariner. I called him my rain-cow, because the sound of his voice awoke apprehensions of falling weather. A visit from him was an endless drizzle. For Jacob came over to expound his minute symptoms; and had everything that he gave out on the subject of human ailments been written down, it must have made a volume as large, as solemn, and as inconvenient as a family Bible. My other nearest neighbor lives across the road—a widow, Mrs. Walters. I call Mrs. Walters my

mocking-bird, because she reproduces by what is truly a divine arrangement of the throat the voices of the town. When she flutters across to the yellow settee under the grape-vine and balances herself lightly with expectation, I have but to request that she favor me with a little singing, and soon the air is vocal with every note of the village songsters. After this, Mrs. Walters usually begins to flutter in a motherly way around the subject of *my* symptoms.

Naturally it has been my wish to bring about between this rain-cow and mocking-bird the desire to pair with one another. For, if a man always wanted to tell his symptoms and a woman always wished to hear about them, surely a marriage compact on the basis of such a passion ought to open up for them a union of overflowing and indestructible felicity. They should associate as perfectly as the compensating metals of a pendulum, of which the one contracts as the other expands. And then I should be a little happier myself. But the perversity of life! Jacob would never confide in Mrs. Walter. Mrs. Walters would never inquire for Jacob.

Now poor Jacob is dead, of no complaint apparently, and with so few symptoms that even the doctors did not know what was the matter, and the upshot of this talk is that his place has been sold, and I am to have new neighbors. What a disturbance to a man living on the edge of a quiet town!

Tidings of the calamity came to-day from Mrs. Walters, who flew over and sang—sang even on a January afternoon—in a manner to rival her most vociferous vernal execution. But the poor creature was so truly distressed that I followed her to the front gate, and we twittered kindly at each other over the fence, and ruffled our plumage

with common disapproval. It is marvellous how a member of her sex will conceive dislike of people that she has never seen; but birds are sensible of heat or cold long before either arrives, and it may be that this mocking-bird feels something wrong at the quill end of her feathers.

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