

Torrey, B.

The passing of the birds.

(1892)

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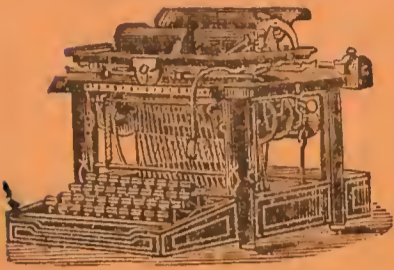
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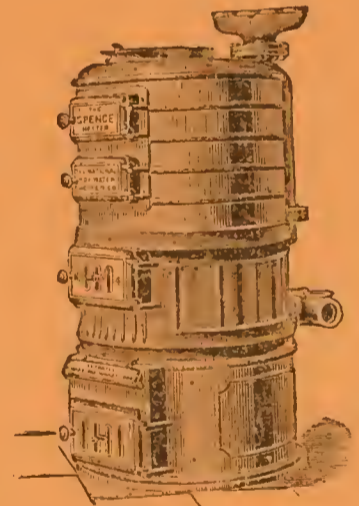
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The Evening of the Bell

Ed. Norton

1892.]

A Florentine Episode.

189

"I suppose I ought to thank you," he said stiffly, in a very low voice. "But a woman cannot perhaps realize what it is for a man to feel that he has been helped out of a position from which there is but one honorable door."

"I assure you, both Mr. Rau and Mr. Steinhof were glad of any excuse. It needed but a word."

"What was that word?" he demanded.

"Mr. Rau said that he could not have presumed to meddle with Miss Phillimore if he had supposed you were her suitor. I told him you were incapable of anything except serious and respectful attentions to a girl." She looked up into his face. "Keith, you see I could speak for you, for once you even put me on a pedestal and worshiped me. You cannot think how deep my sympathy is for this new happiness you have found. I insist that you shall take me to see Miss Phillimore."

"I hardly think" — he began stiffly.

She laid her hand on his sleeve.

"Why are you so cold to me?" she asked coaxingly. "Surely not because that foolish duel is off? Those two men started for Venice this morning at six o'clock. It is actually they who ran away. Surely you cannot consider dueling anything but wicked and absurd, and why should you be angry with me simply because I want you to live and be happy?"

"Much you care about my happiness!" he burst out. "I loved you. I had gone on loving and loving you. You knew that you were my conscience, my aspiration, all that I hoped for or cared about. Then when I put it into words, you said I seemed to you a mere boy."

"Certainly you consoled yourself promptly," said Miss Bellew, with spirit. "And since you have so easily consoled yourself, Keith, I will tell you this; it can make no difference now except that it may help you to forgive my interference. You had not been gone a day, scarcely an hour, before I was wretched. I had nobody to turn to. I suddenly found out" —

She met his startled, incredulous eyes, and broke off.

"You found out" — he repeated. His face was transfigured. He had grasped both her hands, and she found further confession difficult. She blushed more and more deeply, her eyes dropping their lids. She tried to turn away.

"Can you mean," he whispered, detaining her, "that you found out you loved me?"

"Of course I loved you," she said, with a sob. "You understood me so well, you ought to have known it all the time — for you saw that — indeed, instead of being my slave, you actually were my master — I" —

A subtle fire ran through his veins. He longed to play with the possibilities of this moment, to test the reality of this strange, sweet confession, now at last that he had her at his mercy. But the revulsion of feeling made him beside himself with joy, and he clasped her in his arms.

"But Miss Phillimore!" cried Miss Bellew.

"I will take you to see her to-morrow morning," he returned, with a low laugh. "She is to be married. She is to marry an excellent man, a man I honor and rejoice in, — Mr. David Norton, of Ohio."

Ellen Olney Kirk.

THE PASSING OF THE BIRDS.

“The Bird of Time has but a little way
To flutter — and the Bird is on the Wing.”

OMAR KHAYYÁM.

BY the first of August the bird-lover's year is already on the wane. In the chestnut grove, where a month ago the wood thrush, the rose-breasted grosbeak, and the scarlet tanager were singing, the loiterer now hears nothing but the wood pewee's pensive whistle and the sharp monotony of the red-eyed vireo. The thrasher is silent in the berry pasture, and the bobolink in the meadow. The season of jollity is over. Orioles, to be sure, after a month of silence, again have fits of merry fiffing. The field sparrow and the song sparrow are still in tune, and the meadow lark whistles, though rarely. Catbirds still practice their feeble improvisations and mimeries in the thickets along the brooksides as evening comes on, and of the multitudes of robins a few are certain to be heard warbling before the day is over. Goldfinches have grown suddenly numerous, or so it seems, and not infrequently one of them breaks out in musical canary-like twitterings. On moonlight evenings the tremulous, haunting cry of the screech-owl comes to your ears, always from far away; and if you walk through the chestnut grove aforesaid in the daytime you may chance to catch his faint, vibratory, tree-frog whistle. For myself, I never enter the grove without glancing into the dry top of a certain tall tree, to see whether the little rascal is sitting in his open door. More than half the time he is there, and always with his eye on me. What an air he has! — like a judge on the bench! If I were half as wise as he looks, these essays of mine would never more be dull. For his and all other late-summer music let us be thankful; but it is true, nevertheless, that the year is waning. How

short it has been! Only the other day the concert opened, and already the performers are uneasy to be gone. They have crowded so much into so brief a space, — the passion of a lifetime into the quarter of a year! They are impatient to be gone, I say; but who knows how many of them are gone already? Where are the blue golden-winged warblers that sang daily on the edge of the wood opposite my windows, so that I listened to them at my work? I have heard nothing of their rough *dsee, dsee* since the 21st of June, and in all that time have seen them but once, — a single bird, a youngling of the present year, stumbled upon by accident while pushing my way through a troublesome thicket on the first day of August. Who knows, I say, how many such summer friends have already left us? An odd coincidence, however, warns me at this very moment that too much is not to be made of merely negative experiences; for even while I was penciling the foregoing sentence about the blue golden-wing there came through the open window the hoarse upward-sliding chant of his close neighbor, the prairie warbler. I have not heard that sound since the 6th of July, and it is now the 22d of August. The singers had not gone, I knew; I saw several of them (and beautiful creatures they are!) a few days ago among the pitch pines; but why did that fellow, after being dumb for six or seven weeks, pipe up at that precise moment, as if to punctuate my ruminations with an interrogation point? Does he like this dog-day morning, with its alternate shower and sunshine, and its constant stickiness and heat? In any case I was glad to hear him, though I cannot in the spirit of veracity call him a good singer. Whist! There goes an oriole, a gorgeous creature, flashing from one

elm to another, and piping in his happiest manner as he flies. It might be the middle of May, to judge from his behavior. *He* likes dog-day weather, there can be no question of that, however the rest of the world may grumble.

This is a time when one sees many birds, but few species. Bluebirds are several times as abundant as in June. The air is sweet with their calls at this moment, and once in a while some father of the flock lets his happiness run over in song. One cannot go far now without finding the road full of chipping sparrows, springing up in their pretty, characteristic way, and letting the breeze catch them. The fences and wayside apple-trees are lively with kingbirds and phœbes. I am already watching the former with a kind of mournful interest. In ten days, or some such matter, we shall have seen the last of their saucy antics. Gay tyrants! They are among the first birds of whom I can confidently say, "They are gone;" and they seem as wide-awake when they go as when they come. Being a man, I regret their departure; but if I were a crow, I think I should be for observing the 31st of August as a day of annual jubilee.

A few years ago, in September, I saw the white-breasted swallows congregated in the Ipswich dunes,—a sight never to be forgotten. On the morning of the 9th, the fourth day of our visit, a considerable flock, but no more, perhaps, than we had been seeing daily, came skimming over the marshes and settled upon a sand-bar in the river, darkening it in patches. At eight o'clock, when we took the straggling road out of the hills, a good many — there might be a thousand, I guessed — sat upon the fence wires, as if resting. We walked inland, and on our return, at noon, found, as my notes of the day express it, "an innumerable host, thousands upon thousands," about the landward side of the dunes. Fences and haycocks were covered. Multitudes were on the

ground, in the bed of the road, about the bare spots in the marsh, and on the gray faces of the hills. Other multitudes were in the bushes and low trees, literally loading them. Every few minutes a detachment would rise into the air like a cloud, and anon settle down again. As we stood gazing at the spectacle, my companion began chirping to a youngster who sat near him on a post, as one might chirp to a caged canary. The effect was magical. The bird at once started toward him, others followed, and in a few seconds hundreds were flying about our heads. Round and round they went, almost within reach, like a cloud of gnats. "Stop! stop!" cried my companion; "I am getting dizzy." We stopped our squeakings, and the cloud lifted; but I can see it yet. Day after day the great concourse remained about the hills, till on the 13th we came away and left them. The old lighthouse keeper told me that this was their annual rendezvous. He once saw them circle for a long time above the dunes, for several hours if I remember right, till, as it seemed, all stragglers had been called in from the beach, the marsh, and the outlying grassy hills. Then they mounted into the sky in a great spiral till they passed out of sight; and for that year there were no more swallows. This, he insisted, took place in the afternoon, "from three to four o'clock." He was unquestionably telling a straightforward story of what he himself had seen, but his memory may have been at fault; for I find it to be the settled opinion of those who ought to know that swallows migrate by day, and not by night, while the setting out of a great flock late in the afternoon at such a height would seem to indicate a nocturnal journey. Morning or evening, I would give something to witness so imposing a start.

The recollection of this seaside gathering raises anew in my mind the question why, if swallows and swifts

migrate exclusively in the daytime, we so rarely see anything of them on the passage. Our Ipswich birds were all tree swallows, — white-breasted martins, — and might fairly be supposed to have come together from a comparatively limited extent of country. But beside tree swallows there are purple martins, barn swallows, sand martins, cliff swallows, and chimney swifts, all of which breed to the northward of us in incalculable numbers. All of them go south between the middle of July and the first of October. But who in New England has ever seen any grand army of them actually on the wing? Do they straggle along so loosely as to escape particular notice? If so, what mean congregations like that in the Ipswich dunes? Or are their grand concerted flights taken at such an altitude as to be invisible?

On several afternoons of last September, this time in an inland country, I observed what might fairly be called a steady stream of tree swallows flying south. Twice, while gazing up at the loose procession, I suddenly became aware of a close bunch of birds at a prodigious height, barely visible, circling about in a way to put a count out of the question, but evidently some hundreds in number. On both occasions the flock vanished almost immediately, and, as I believed, by soaring out of sight. The second time I meant to assure myself upon this point, but my attention was distracted by the sudden appearance of several large hawks within the field of my glass, and when I looked again for the swallows they were nowhere to be seen. Were the stragglers which I had for some time been watching, flying high, but well within easy ken, and these dense, hardly discernible clusters, — hirundine nebulae, as it were, — were all these but parts of one innumerable host, the main body of which was passing far above me, altogether unseen? The conjecture was one to gratify the imagi-

nation. It pleased me even to think that it *might* be true. But it was only a conjecture, and meantime another question presented itself.

When this daily procession had been noticed for two or three afternoons, it came to me as something remarkable that I saw it always in the same place, or rather on the same north and south line, while no matter where else I walked, east or west, not a swallow was visible. Had I stumbled upon a regular route of swallow migration? It looked so, surely; but I made little account of the matter till a month afterward, when, in exactly the same place, I observed robins and bluebirds following the same course. The robins were seen October 26, in four flocks, succeeding each other at intervals of a few minutes, and numbering in all about 130 birds. They flew directly south, at a moderate height, and were almost certainly detachments of one body. The bluebird movement was two days later, at about the same hour, the morning being cold, with a little snow falling. This time, too, as it happened, the flock was in four detachments. Three of these were too compact to be counted as they passed; the fourth and largest one was in looser order, and contained a little more than a hundred individuals. In all, as well as I could guess, there might have been about three hundred birds. They kept a straight course southward, flying high, and with the usual calls, which, in autumn at least, always have to my ears a sound of farewell. Was it a mere coincidence that these swallows, bluebirds, and robins were all crossing the valley just at this point?

This question, too, I count it safer to ask than to answer; but all observers, I am sure, must have remarked so much as this, — that birds, even on their migrations, are subject to strong local preferences. An ornithologist of the highest repute assures me that his own experience has convinced him so strongly

of this fact that if he shoots a rare migrant in a certain spot he makes it a rule to visit the place again a year afterward on the same day, and, if possible, at the same hour of the day. Another friend sends me a very pretty story bearing upon the same point. The bird of which he speaks, Wilson's black-cap warbler, is one of the less common of our regular Massachusetts migrants. I count myself fortunate if I see two or three specimens during its spring or autumn passage. My correspondent shall tell the story for himself: —

“While I was making the drawings for the *Silva*, at the old Dwight house, I was in the habit of taking a turn every pleasant day in the gardens, after my scanty lunch. On the 18th of May, 1887, in my daily round I saw a Wilson's black-cap for the first time in my life. He was in a bush of *Spiræa media*, which grew in the midst of the rockery, and allowed me to examine him at near range with no appearance of fear. Naturally I made a note of the occurrence in my diary, and talked about it with my family when I got home. The seeing of a new bird always makes a red-letter day.

“The next spring, as I was looking over my notebook of the previous year, I came upon my entry of May 18, and thought I would be on the lookout for a black-cap on that date. Several times during the morning I thought of the matter, and after my lunch I sauntered into the rockery, just as I had done the year before. Imagine my start when there, in the very same bush, was the black-cap peering at me; and I found, on looking at my watch, that it was precisely the same hour, — half past one! I rubbed my eyes and pinched myself to make sure it was not a dream. No, it was all real. Of course I thought the coincidence very singular, and talked about it, not only with my family, but also with other people. You must remember that I had never seen the bird elsewhere.

“Well, another spring came round. The 18th of May was fixed in my mind, and I thought many times of my black-cap (I called it *my* black-cap now), and wondered if it would keep tryst again. On the morning of the 18th, the first thing I thought of when I awoke was my black-cap. That forenoon I actually felt nervous as the time approached, for I felt a sort of certainty (you smile) that I should see my bird again. My lunch was hastier than usual, and I was about to sally forth when it flashed across me, ‘Suppose the bird should be there again, who would believe my story? Hold! I will have a witness.’ I called to Mr. J——, who was at work upstairs, and, after explaining what I wanted, invited him to accompany me. We cautiously entered the rockery, and within a few minutes there flitted from a neighboring thicket into that very spiræa bush my black-cap! I took out my watch. It was just half past one!”

My own experiences in this kind have been much less striking and dramatic than the foregoing, but I may add that a few years ago I witnessed the vernal migration in a new piece of country — ten miles or so from my old field — and found myself at a very considerable disadvantage. I had never realized till then how much accustomed I had grown to look for particular birds in particular places, and not in other places of a quite similar character.

I speak of witnessing a migration; but what we see for the most part (ducks and geese being excepted) is not the actual movement northward or southward. We see the stragglers, more or less numerous, that happen to have dropped out of the procession in our immediate neighborhood, — a flock of sandpipers about the edge of the pond, some sparrows by the roadside, a bevy of warblers in the wood, — and from these signs we infer the passing of the host.

Unlike swallows, robins, bluebirds, blackbirds, and perhaps most of the sparrows, our smaller wood birds, the

warblers and vireos especially, appear to move as a general thing in mixed flocks. Whenever the woods are full of them, as is the case now and then every spring and fall, one of the most striking features of the show is the number of species represented. For the benefit of readers who may never have observed such a "bird wave," or "rush," let me sketch hastily one which occurred a few years ago, on the 22d of September. As I started out at six o'clock in the morning, in a cool northwest wind, birds were passing overhead in an almost continuous stream, following a westerly course. They were chiefly warblers, but I noted one fairly large flock of purple finches. All were at a good height, and the whole movement had the air of a diurnal migration. I could only conjecture that it was the end of the nocturnal flight, so far, at least, as the warblers were concerned; in other words, that the birds, on this particular occasion, did not finish their nightly journey till a little after sunrise. But if many were still flying, many others had already halted; for presently I came to a piece of thin, stunted woods by the roadside, and found in it a highly interesting company. Almost the first specimen I saw was a Connecticut warbler, perched in full view and exposing himself perfectly. Red-bellied nuthatches were calling, and warblers uncounted were flitting about in the trees and underbrush. A hurried search showed blackpolls, black-throated greens, blue yellow-backs, one redstart, one black-and-white creeper, one Blackburnian, one black - and - yellow, one Canadian flycatcher (singing lustily), one yellow redpoll, and one clearly marked bay-breast. The first yellow-bellied woodpecker of the season was hammering in a tree over my head, and not far away was the first flock of white-throated sparrows. After breakfast I passed the place again, and the only bird to be found was one phœbe! Within half a mile of the spot, however, I

came upon at least three goodly throngs, including scarlet tanagers (all in yellow and black), black-throated blue warblers, pine warblers, olive-backed and gray-cheeked thrushes, a flock of chickadees (made up exclusively of adult males, so far as I could discover), red-eyed vireos, one solitary vireo, brown thrashers, with more redstarts, a second Blackburnian, and a second black-and-yellow. Every company had its complement of chickadees. Of the morning's forty species, thirteen were warblers; and of these thirteen, four were represented by one specimen each. For curiosity's sake, I may add that a much longer walk that afternoon, through the same and other woods, was utterly barren. Except for two or three flocks of white-throated sparrows, there was no sign whatever that the night before had brought us a "flight."

Autumnal ornithology may almost be called a science by itself. Not only are birds harder to find (being silent) and harder to recognize in autumn than in spring, but their movements are in themselves more difficult of observation. A few years of note-taking will put one in possession of the approximate dates of arrival of all our common vernal migrants. Every local observer will tell you when to look for each of the familiar birds of his neighborhood; but he will not be half so ready with information as to the time of the same birds' departure. Ask him about a few of the commonest,— the least flycatcher and the oven-bird, or the golden warbler and the Maryland yellow-throat. He will answer, perhaps, that he has seen Maryland yellow-throats in early October, and golden warblers in early September; but he will very likely add that these were probably voyagers from the north, and that he has never made out just when his own summer birds take their leave.

After the work of nidification is over, birds as a rule wander more or less from their breeding haunts; and even if

they do not wander they are likely to become silent. If we miss them, therefore, we are not to conclude as a matter of course that they have gone south. Last year, during the early part of the season, cuckoos, both black-bills and yellow-bills, were unusually plentiful, as it seemed to me. Then I discovered all at once that there were none to be found. After the first of July I neither saw nor heard a cuckoo of either species! Had they moved away? I do not know; but the case may be taken as an extreme illustration of the uncertainty attaching to the late-summer doings of birds in general. Every student must have had experiences of a sort to make him slow to dogmatize when such points are in question. Throughout May and June, for example, he has heard and seen wood thrushes in a certain grove. After that, for a whole month he hears and sees nothing, though he is frequently there. The thrushes have gone? So it would seem. But then, suddenly, they are singing again in the very same trees, and he is forced to conclude that they have not been away, but during their period of mid-summer silence have eluded his notice. On the whole, therefore, after making allowance for particular cases in which we may have more precise information, it would be hard, I think, to say just when our nocturnal travelers set out on their long journey. As the poet prayed Life to do,

They steal away, give little warning,
Choose their own time;
Say not good-night, — but in May's brighter
 clime
Bid us good-morning.

Their departure bereaves us, but, all in all, it must be accounted a blessing. Like the falling of the leaves, it touches the heart with a pleasing sadness, — a sadness more delicious, if one is born to enjoy it, than all the merry-making of springtime. And even for the most unsentimental of naturalists the autumn

season has many a delightful hour. The year is almost done; but for the moment the whole feathered world is in motion, and the shortest walk may show him the choicest of rarities. Thanks to the passing of the birds, his local studies are an endless pursuit. "It is now more than forty years that I have paid some attention to the ornithology of this district, without being able to exhaust the subject," says Gilbert White; "new occurrences still arise as long as any inquiries are kept alive." A happy man is the bird-lover; always another species to look for, another mystery to solve. His expectations may never be realized, but no matter; it is the hope, not its fulfillment, that makes life worth having. How can any New Englander imagine that he has exhausted the possibilities of existence so long as he has never seen the Lincoln finch and the Cape May warbler?

But "I speak as a fool." Our happiness, if we are bird-lovers indeed, waits not upon novelties and rarities. All such exceptional bits of private good fortune let the Fates send or withhold as they will. The grand spectacle itself will not fail us. Even now, through all the northern country, the procession is getting under way. For the next three months it will be passing, — millions upon millions: warblers, sparrows, thrushes, vireos, blackbirds, flycatchers, wrens, kinglets, woodpeckers, swallows, humming-birds, hawks; with sandpipers, plovers, ducks and geese, gulls, and who knows how many more? Night and day, week days and Sundays, they will be flying: now singly or in little groups, and flitting from one wood or pasture to another; now in great companies, and with protracted all-day or all-night flights. Who could ask a better stimulus for his imagination than the annual southing of this mighty host? Each member of it knows his own time and his own course. On such a day the snipe will be in such a

meadow, and the golden plover in such a field. Some, no doubt, will lose their way. Numbers uncounted will perish by storm and flood; numbers more, alas, by human agency. As I write, with the sad note of a bluebird in my ear, I

can see the sea beaches and the marshes lined with guns. But the army will push on; they will come to their desired haven; for there is a spirit in birds, also, "and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding."

Bradford Torrey.

DON ORSINO.¹

XVI.

It was long before Orsino saw Maria Consuelo again, but the circumstances of his last meeting with her constantly recurred to his mind during the following months. It is one of the chief characteristics of Rome that it seems to be one of the most central cities in Europe during the winter, whereas in the summer months it appears to be immensely remote from the rest of the civilized world. From having been the prey of the inexpressible foreigner in his shooting season, it suddenly becomes, and remains during about five months, the happy hunting-ground of the silent flea, the buzzing fly, and the insinuating mosquito. The streets are indeed still full of people, and long lines of carriages may be seen towards sunset in the Villa Borghesa and in the narrow Corso. Rome and the Romans are not so easily parted as London and London society, for instance. May comes, the queen of the months in the south. June follows. Southern blood rejoices in the first strong sunshine. July trudges in at the gates, sweating under the cloudless sky, heavy, slow of foot, oppressed by the breath of the coming dog-star. Still the nights are cool. Still, towards sunset, the refreshing breeze sweeps up from the sea and fills the streets. Then behind closely fastened blinds the glass windows are opened, and the weary hand

drops the fan at last. Then men and women array themselves in the garments of civilization and sally forth, in carriages, on foot, and in trams, according to the degrees of social importance which provide that in old countries the second class shall be made to suffer for the priceless treasure of a respectability which is a little higher than the tram, and financially not quite equal to the cab. Then, at that magic touch of the west wind the house-fly retires to his own peculiar Inferno, wherever that may be, the mosquito and the gnat pause in their work of darkness and blood to concert fresh and more bloodthirsty deeds, and even the joyous and wicked flea tires of the war dance and lays down his weary head to snatch a hard-earned nap. July drags on, and terrible August treads the burning streets, bleaching the very dust upon the pavement, scourging the broad campagna with fiery lashes of heat. Then the white-hot sky reddens in the evening when it cools, as the white iron does when it is taken from the forge. Then, at last, all those who can escape from the condemned city flee for their lives to the hills, while those who must face the torment of the sun and the poison of the air turn pale in their sufferings, feebly curse their fate, and then grow listless, weak, and irresponsible as over-driven galley slaves, indifferent to everything, — work, rest, blows, food, sleep, and the

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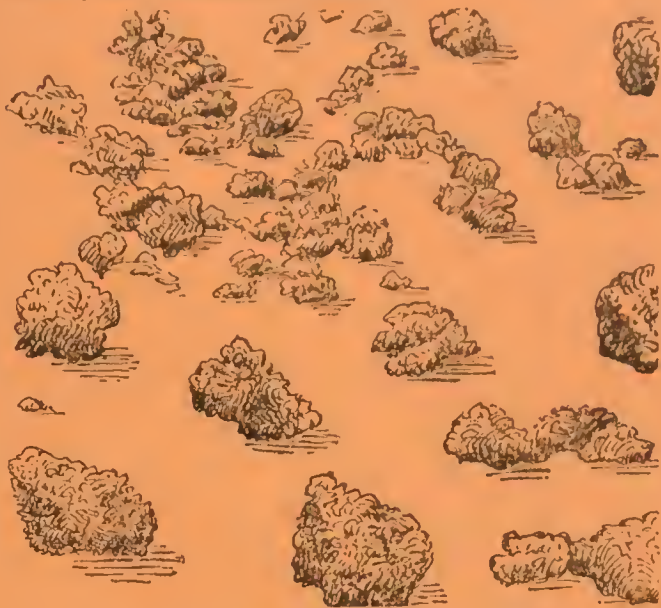
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