

The Dance of the Sand-Hill Cranes

by Clara Dillingham Pierson

One fine day in spring, a great flock of Sand-hill Cranes came from the south. They were flying high and quietly because the weather was bright. If it had been stormy, or if they had been flying by night, as they usually did, they would have stayed nearer the ground, and their leader would have trumpeted loudly to let his followers know which way he was going. They would also have trumpeted, but more softly, to tell him that they were coming after.

They were a fine company to look upon, orderly, strong, and dignified. Their long necks were stretched out straight ahead, their long legs straight behind, and they beat the air with slow, regular strokes of the strong wings. As they came near the pond, they flew lower and lower, until all swept down to the earth and alighted, tall and stately, by the edge of the water.

They had eaten nothing for several days, and were soon hunting for food, some on land, and some in the water, for they had stopped to feed and rest. Those who hunted in the water, did so very quietly. A Crane would stand on one leg, with his head against his breast, so quietly that one might think him asleep: but as soon as anything eatable came near, he would bend his body, stretch out his neck, open his long, slender bill, and swallow it at one gulp. Then he would seem to fall asleep again.

While most of the Cranes were still feeding, some of them were stalking through the woods and looking this way and that, flying up to stand on a tree, and then flying down to stand on the ground. They were those who thought of staying there for the summer.

When the flock arose to fly on again, eight Cranes stayed behind. They watched their friends fly away, and stood on the ground with their necks and bills uplifted and mouths open, while they trumpeted or called out, "Good-bye! Stop for us in the fall!" The flying Cranes trumpeted back, "We will! Don't forget us!"

That night they slept near together, as they had done when with the large flock, and one Crane kept awake to watch for danger while the others tucked their heads under their wings. They were fine looking, even when they slept, and some people never look well unless they are awake. They were brownish-gray, with no bright markings at all, and their long legs gave them a very genteel look. The tops of their heads were covered with warty red skin, from which grew short black feathers that looked more like hairs.

One morning, when the Cranes awakened, a fine young fellow began to strut up and down before the rest, bowing low, and leaping high into the air, and every now and then whooping as loudly as he could. The Gulls, who had spent the winter by the pond, screamed to each other, "The Crane dance has begun!" Even the Frogs, who are afraid of Cranes, crept quietly near to look on.

It was not long before another young Crane began to skip and hop and circle around, drooping his wings and whooping as he went. Every Crane danced, brothers, and sisters, and all, and as they did so, they looked lovingly at each other, and admired the fine steps and enjoyed the whooping. This went on until they were so tired they could hardly stand, and had to stop to eat and rest.

When they were eating, the young fellow who had begun the dance, stalked up to the sister of

one of his friends, as she stood in the edge of the pond, gracefully balanced on one leg. She did not turn her head towards him, although, having such a long and slender neck, she could have done so with very little trouble. She stood with her head on her breast and looked at the water. After a while, he trumpeted softly, as though he were just trying his voice. Then she gave a pretty little start, and said, "Oh, are you here? How you did frighten me!"

"I am sorry," he said. "I did not want to frighten you." And he looked at her admiringly.

"It was just for a minute," she answered. "Of course I am not frightened now that I know who it is."

Then they stood and fished for a long time without saying anything. When she flew away, she said, "That is a very pleasant fishing-place." He stood on the other leg for a while, and thought how sweet her voice sounded as she said it. Then he thought that, if she liked the place so well, she might come there again the next day. He wondered why he could not come too, although everybody knows that a Crane catches more if he fishes alone.

The next morning, when the Cranes danced, he bowed to her oftener than to any of the rest, and he thought she noticed it. They danced until they were almost too tired to move, and indeed he had to rest for a while before he went to feed. As she stalked off toward the pond, she passed him, and she said over her shoulder, "I should think you would be hungry. I am almost starved." After she had gone, he wondered why she had said that. If he had been an older Crane, and understood the ways of the world a little better, he would have known that she meant, "Aren't you coming to that [Pg 19]fishing-place? I am going now." Still, although he was such a young Crane and had never danced until this year, he began to think that she liked him and enjoyed having him near. So he flew off to the fishing-place where he had seen her the day before, and he stalked along to where she was, and stood close to her while she fished. Once, when he caught something and swallowed it at one gulp, she looked admiringly at him and said, "What fine, big mouthfuls you can take!"

That pleased him, of course, because Cranes think that big mouthfuls are the best kind, so he tipped his head to one side, and watched his neck as the mouthful slid down to his stomach. He could see it from the outside, a big bunch slowly moving downward. He often did this while he was eating. He thought it very interesting. He pitied short-necked people. Then he said, "Pooh! I can take bigger mouthfuls than that. You ought to see what big mouthfuls I can take."

She changed, and stood on her other leg. "I saw you dancing this morning," she said. Now it was not at all queer that she should have seen him dancing, for all the eight Cranes had danced together, but he thought it very wonderful.

"Did you notice to whom I bowed?" he asked. He was so excited that his knees shook, and he had to stand on both legs at once to keep from falling. When a Crane is as much excited as that, it is pretty serious.

"To my sister?" she asked carelessly, as she drew one of her long tail-feathers through her beak.

"No," said he. "I bowed to her sister." He thought that was a very clever thing to say. But she suddenly raised her head, and said, "There! I have forgotten something," and flew off, as she had done the day before. He wondered what it was. Long afterward he asked her what she had forgotten and she said she couldn't remember—that she never could remember what she had forgotten.

It made him feel very badly to have her leave him so. He wanted a chance to tell her something, yet, whenever he tried to, it seemed to stick in his bill. He began to fear that she didn't like him; and the next time the Cranes danced he didn't bow to her so much, but he strutted and leaped and whooped even more. And she strutted and leaped and whooped almost as loudly as he. When they were all tired out and had stopped dancing, she said to him, "I am so tired! Let us go off into the woods and rest."

You may be very sure he was glad to go, and as he stalked off with her, he led the way to a charming nesting-place. He didn't know just how to tell what he wanted to, but he had seen another Crane bowing to her, and was afraid she might marry him if he was not quick. Now he pointed with one wing to this nesting-place, and said, "How would you like to build a nest there?"

She looked where he had pointed, "I?" she said. "Why, it is a lovely place, but I could never have a nest alone."

"Let me help you," he said. "I want to marry and have a home."

"Why," said she, as she preened her feathers, "that is a very good plan. When did you think of it?"

So they were married, and Mrs. Sand-Hill Crane often told her friends afterward that Mr. Crane was so much in love with her that she just *had* to marry him. They were very, very happy, and after a while—but that is another story.

Source:

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