

DOWN TO EARTH

By ALAN DEVOE

The Tiger of the Skies

BY LATTER autumn now, most of the birds that nested and sang in the green summer woods have migrated to regions where the coming months will be less bitterly cold and snowbound than in the northern earth scene. The time that lies ahead, until the shadblow shall bloom again, is not a season easily endured: enormous drifts lie over the tops of the weed seeds, threatening starvation; icy gales numb small warm bodies that cannot find a refuge from them; and always, pattering through the snow in the wintry moonlight, are sharp-muzzled foxes with hunger in their bellies, and silent-footed weasels eager for new prey. There are not many kinds of birds that find the northern winter bearable. But there are a few; and there is one preeminently. It is the great horned owl, the tiger of the woods. The great horned owl is feathered against the bitterest cold and it has no insistent need in its spirit for green sunlit leaves or summer sky or the warm earth. A hunter in every season of the deep darkness of the loneliest

woods, it has no needs but for solitude and blood. Its fierce, wild spirit is not alien to the grimmest and darkest seasons of earth and the icy blackness of midwinter nights is not less propitious than a mild May twilight for its silent-winged death errands in the forest. In harsh midwinter as in summer the great horned owl can contrive to keep its crooked claws stained with the coagulated blood of victims. It needs no more than this to know contentment in its solitary place in the heart of the hemlock woods, and to utter its howling, quavering scream of dark exultancy.

The life cycles of most birds begin in May or June, the fledglings entering into a universe of blossoming flowers and shining sky and the scent of growing things. The harsh and somber life cycle of the great horned owl begins, appropriately, in the most formidable time of latter winter, the season of final desperate effort among surviving wild creatures to keep alive until the spring solstice. In early March or even February, the owl

prowls in the stripped woods in search of the abandoned nest of a hawk or crow. On its enormous wings, five feet in spread from tip to tip, it glides through the tree-tops seeking. When it has found such a deserted cradle of coarse twigs and branches as will serve it, it appropriates the structure, ejects the mounded snow from it with scuffings and kickings of its tremendous talons, and settles down to the depositing and brooding of its two round, soiled-white eggs. The season of snows has not ended and as the female owl broods motionless in the nest, day after day, snowfalls often drift down upon her, covering her tawny back and peaked ear tufts and making a mounded white rim upon the edge of the nest. She is as unregarding of this as of any of the other elemental happenings which might daunt a creature of less wild savage strength.

The great horned owl's eggs are not laid, as are most birds', in quick succession. The layings are spaced by several days. Commonly, as winter passes into early spring, the owl nest contains one unhatched egg and one young chick. When the parent owl leaves her nest periodically now, to sail silently through the dark woods, with huge yellow eyes peering at the earth for a stir of hare or deer mouse, the chick

maintains fierce guard over the unhatched egg beside it. The chick has nothing of the look or manner of a fledgling soft-beaked robin or any baby bird of the June hedgerows. Thickly down-covered, standing strongly upright upon its powerful, small claws, it stares from its tree-top cradle with defiant, gleaming eyes. Its horny owl beak, hooked for tearing flesh, is snapped in a staccato of fury at sight of any passing danger.

The infant owl feeds enormously. All through the night the parents hunt, gliding soundlessly through the darkness to where the partridges roost asleep in the pines, skimming on outstretched wings close to the tree boles, where the white-footed mice have made their tunnels, pouncing in incredibly quick, swooping dives upon any living thing that can be found venturing abroad in the spring darkness. Trip after trip they make to the nest, bringing squealing prey in their talons. As week succeeds week, the owl nest becomes littered with picked bones and gobbets of rotten meat and it takes on the same stench that clings forever to the feathers of all great horned owls: the rank smell of putridity and stale blood. The fledgling owls, like their parents, feed in the characteristic owl fash-

ion. Such small prey as mice and infant rabbits they gulp whole, stretching their hooked beaks and contorting their necks to engulf the morsel; such larger game as hares they tear into bulky chunks. When they have digested the flesh of the food, the indigestible ingredients — hair and bones and claws of the eaten creatures — are spewed forth as pellets of vomit. The owl nest, by the time full spring has come, is piled with regurgitations and with the débris of weeks of carnivorous feeding — the little, pointed skulls of white-footed mice, the spines of rabbits, feathers torn out of the warm bodies of small birds. Even the earth beneath the owl tree is strewn with the relics of many hundred deaths.

It is in their tenth or twelfth week of life that the young owls leave the nest. They move from it into the fork of a nearby branch, flapping their great wings, preening their smeary feathers, staring down into the dark forest which now, as adults, they are to make their hunting grounds. The young owls look nearly like their parents now. Their sooty-brown bodies, blotched and mottled with grayish-white, are marked by a facial circle of black feathers; black-webbed tufts like the ears of a lynx rise

pointedly at each side of their broad, powerful heads in peaks nearly two inches high; heavy featherings sheathe their black-tipped, horny claws. Their cumbersome bodies are almost two feet long now from beak to tail and when they stretch their wings the span is nearly the height of a man. They are equipped for adulthood as tigers of the air. They are ready to prowl the darkness, peering this way and that with their contractile-pupilled yellow eyes, and with silent expertness to spread death among the small inhabitants of the forest.

Before the young owls finally leave the region of the nest, the parents do a curious thing. It is an act oddly eloquent of the harsh, wild temper that pervades their lives, the mood of violence and fierce uncompanionable aloneness. They go to the rank-smelling nest that has been the cradle of their young and furiously, methodically, tear it to pieces. The limed twigs and blood-fouled little branches of the nest are ripped asunder and scattered to the earth. When at last the young owls fly from the region of their birth as a part of the company of adult great horned owls, no sign remains of the place where their infancy was spent. No sign but the decaying litter, among

the leaf mould at the owl tree's base, of little skulls and claws and pellets of vomited fur.

The adult days of great horned owls are mostly spent dozing in the deep fastnesses of evergreen forest. The owl sits rumped, somnolent, away from the glare of the sun and from all the singing, soaring, frolicking of the rest of bird life in the bright fields and woods. These are not hours, or company, for which it has a taste. It remains solitary, deep withdrawn into itself, in the kind of gloomy, silent place that is congenial to its dark spirit. Only when dusk comes and the night quietness lies over the woods does it stir and stare about it with tiger-yellow eyes and presently lift its enormous wings in flight. No sound does it make as it slips into the dusk. The featherings of its wings are loose and down-tipped, in order that it may move through the night in utter soundlessness. Quiet as the falling of a leaf is the long, swift, downward glide when the owl has seen a rab-

bit, nibbling in the meadow grass under the moon; unsuspected is the coming of the death it brings. When it has crushed a victim in its stained talons, it repairs as unnoticeably as it came to its dark retreat in the furthest forest. Silently, in solitary contentment, it tears the hot flesh, gulps fur and bone. Sometimes, presently, it utters the cry that is the sound of its satisfaction, a snarling and yelping like a fox's, or a hooting squall like the howl of a great cat.

As the years pass, a great horned owl's claws become black with the stainings of blood and its feathers have perpetually the odor of decay and death. There is also another smell, commingling rankly. It is the smell of skunk. The great horned owl attacks skunks without hesitancy. As it snaps their spines with its talons, it is as unheeding of their stench as it was of the falling of snow in its birth nest, or of any other happening in the violent woods world of which its harsh spirit is disdainfully unfrightened.



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Critics and History

BY MARY M. COLUM

A CRITIC, if he is more than a mere book reviewer assessing contemporary writing, has always a line of his own which he believes interprets literature more revealingly than any other critic's line. Among critics, Edmund Wilson has a line which interprets works of fiction and explains their genesis in a way that is distinctive, revealing and original. One remembers that in *Axel's Castle* the most distinguished essay was on Proust and the least valuable the one on Yeats, and this chiefly for the reason that he started his study from wrong information — Yeats' supposed connection with Mallarmé and the French Symbolists.

But in *The Wound and the Bow*,¹ where every essay except one is concerned with novelists, he is at his very best as a critic. The study of Dickens, which opens the book, is a very fine piece of criti-

cism. The style is vigorous, entertaining and compact. In it are combined an examination of Dickens's life experience, a psychological analysis of his mind, and a study of his novels as to their motives and their characters in such a way as to give us a fresh and notable portrait of the author and an appraisal of Dickens's work from the viewpoint of today. Superficially, the method Edmund Wilson uses is not new, but he makes of it a new instrument. The method was first given power and range by Sainte-Beuve in his *Portraits* — "*Tel arbre, tel fruit*," Sainte-Beuve explained — as is the tree, so is the fruit; as is the man, so is his book. The method has its drawbacks and its dangers. In the debunking era, a biographer with a personal bias and a little half-baked knowledge of psychoanalysis could prove almost anything.

The essay in *The Wound and the Bow* is above all that: In Edmund Wilson's use of the method,

¹ *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*, by Edmund Wilson. \$3.00. Houghton Mifflin Co.