



# JACLR

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**Abigail the Winged**

Many years ago, when I went to my husband and said to him, "Torvald, isn't it a pity that I did not take up ornithology when I was a young girl, so that I could be more knowledgeable about the subject now?" Torvald said to me, "Abigail! Don't you realize that at this moment, you know more about the bleary-eyed-Norwegian-thrush than any woman alive in England today?"

I marveled.

"Torvald, could it be true?"

"Not only could it be true: it is."

And thusly, at the not-inconsiderable age of 39, I resolved to take up the study of flighted things and fowl of all kinds. It was the year 1927, and I made my headquarters on my husband's ornithological traveling caravan, having the intention of commencing my career with the writing of a volume on the Baghdadi Swallow (a creature I found as beautiful as it was elusive).

It was Torvald of course who brought me to birds. For those who are not yet familiar with Torvald Gunderson's exploits in the field of ornithology I will simply state, endeavoring as I am to keep the focus of this small memoir on the interesting points of my life and my work as unwaveringly as possible (and not on those exceptional people that I surrounded myself with), that Torvald's career was illustrious. He was, simply, the most exciting personage in the ornithology field in years; perhaps ever. Of course, my name always out-shadowed his, to the chagrin of the both of us; I, the author of immensely popular and critically ravaged novels that invariably involved a mysterious murder, an unlikely solution,

an exotic setting with exotic characters in exotic and dangerous situations, running always between 70,000 and 85,000 words—and he, the universally acknowledged master of his field, traveling the world and publishing groundbreaking accounts of his discoveries and adventures to the delight of all of his sedentary colleagues in England.

After my great resolution in 1927, I accompanied Torvald on his expeditions—I think, all of them. I do not recall missing a single one. I would pay my own way, desirous not to influence the funding of his ventures, and occupy a tent of my own, where I could write my stories, inspired by the landscapes around me and the sleepy sounds of bird-whistles and the tinkling of hammers on rock where fossilized avian bones were suspected to lie, always waiting for any sign of the Baghdadi Swallow. It was during one of these adventures that I had the idea for the pursuit that was to lead me on a much more unique journey: would it not be good, I thought, to examine the history of bird-symbols and bird-myths amongst human cultures of history?

And so I put away my work on the Baghdadi Swallow and began to prepare a book on the bird-symbol. It was a sufficiently broad subject to allow me at least my minimum quota of 70,000 words and I originally figured that due to my relative unfamiliarity with the new topic I most likely would not reach much beyond even that modest length— but soon after beginning the first chapters I discovered that the book was growing almost of its own accord, and was shaping up to be rather long; possibly even spread out over multiple volumes.

I was engrossed.

Torvald, I believe, felt threatened by the magnitude of my undertaking and wondered if my new fascination—which hitherto had been mostly amateurish and confined to the odd essay, usually less scientific than artful—was an encroachment that he would be able to bear in good grace. I did not view it as an encroachment. If Torvald, I thought, ever decided to write a mystery novel, I would support him liberally. I would rejoice in his success, sympathize with his failure. However he did not extend the same courtesy to me. In fact, on one occasion, upon entering my tent and seeing me bent over a fossilized vulture-skeleton, he kicked over my hat-rack in a rage.

"I suppose you're ruminating over my downfall," he said, sitting down on the floor in a cross-legged posture that he had learned from some local mystics, which was supposed to aid in concentrating the mind.

"Torvald, whatever are you talking about?"

"You're not giving me an appropriate amount of distance."

"Distance?"

"Distance! You are being uppity. You forget that I run the show. You encroach. For any good marriage to last, the spouses must have vastly different interests, which compliment each other but afford no opportunity for envious comparisons, and you are breaking this paramount rule by doing much too much envious comparing."

"Envious comparisons? Who's envious?"

"You are."

"Not I, sir. I bear you no envy. We merely find ourselves, in this juncture of our matrimonial highway, interested in a similar topic. Not the same topic—no, for I am a symbolist now, and you remain an ornithologist. A hard scientist. My birds interest me only as symbols employed by various cultures to express themselves. You, however, care for nothing but filling the gaps in the taxonomical tree. Discovering the behavior of past and present species. You observe; I extrapolate. "

"Rot! You're jealous of my high regard, being a writer, as you are, of penny-dreadfuls."

"Penny whats?"

"Dreadfuls!"

"Torvald, you are beginning to anger me."

He rose and left with a huff and another kick of the hat-rack. I turned back to my vulture skeleton, but found myself unable to concentrate. Interpersonal conflict always

unsettled me, and now my hands were shaking and my voice if I had spoken then would have been unsteady. Robbed of the ability and presence of mind to concentrate on my work, I got up and went out into the open air. Dusk had all but descended and washed away the day. A soft wind rolled by, scented with the faint salty tang of sand and the sweet odor of the camels. One half of the sky was a black flood of ink and the other was alight with pale yellow and blue, a wisp here and there of distant cloud—it looked even like it could have been raining someplace where the horizon bent out of sight, but the place where I stood was as dry as the brittle bones of my vulture. The moon glittered overhead, smaller than was familiar to me, for the landscape here was open and wide and it swallowed the moon and the stars and the sun—the birds in the sky, unless they flew quite close to the ground, were not birds but little runaway dots, no doubt periods escaped from pages where they were not needed, so to migrate toward run-on lands where they could have a home.

Before me, grouped around the excavation cite (bounded by a rope-fence on which little lanterns burned), were a dozen or so tents, most of them dark, some glowing from the inside with golden candle-light. From these came the tittering of inebriated laughter, and I thought I could smell the wine in the pewter bowls that sloshed there, from lips to lips. I turned from these tents, and desiring the comfort of the landscape, went out into the open sands. A few dozen yards out and the tents became a gilded mirage, burning soft, an odd and minuscule blot in the wide wild desert land. The wind blew around me, and my hair, which I had cut short, flitted about my ears like fresh-mown grass flits when the wind is high. It itched. I decided after a few minutes to turn back to the refuge and comfort that the canvas walls of my tent afforded, but I stopped: a small, single orange dot glowed in the distance, at the edge of a hillock of sand. It bobbed softly to and fro.

Well, reader: I suppose when a lantern bobs at the edge of sight, in a dark desert, there become two different types of people.

I strode toward the light.

As I neared, dragging my feet through the thick sand and pulling my dressing gown closer about my shoulders, the lantern's glow rose and flickered against the hand that held it. The fingers were slender and stretching, the nails long, and the skin green and yellow in the firelight. The arm was bathed in the folds of a flowing robe, and a massive hooded head bent close to the lantern—no face could be seen within. I approached slowly, and stood before the figure. It did not move, save for a rustling of the cloak and the gentle swaying of the lantern in the desert wind. I reflected that, save for our party, there was no human settlement within a hundred miles of the spot. Had she stowed away somehow in our caravan? Impossible, for each camel and rider was accounted for, each wagon stowed to the brim with supplies.

"Are you cold? Do you need shelter?"

No answer.

"Come with me to the tents yonder."

No motion.

I sat down in the sand, which under the gentle hillock's side was ruddy and packed, with small tufts of hardy weed growing here and there. I waited, supposing if the figment before me was an apparition (which were supposed to be so common in the desert) it would dissolve away with time, and if it weren't, well: perhaps my patience would wear it out, and it would speak.

Speak it did not, but after a few minutes of still silence, it stirred—the hand that grasped the lantern turned slowly inward, and the other hand, which had been hidden among the fabric, rose to the hood, pulling it gently back. I gasped: beneath the hood was no demon, no desert-sprite, no grizzled crone with witchy teeth, but a most beautiful young woman, with skin black as the night and eyes like white stars. Her hair rose in an unwieldy cloud above her head, curly and colossal. She put the lantern upon the ground, reached forward, and stroked my head, and the short straight hair that grew there.

She smiled.

"Have you been crying?" she asked, in a graceful accent that I could not place.

It was my turn for taciturnity now, and I leaned back on my knees, my gaze fixed upon the woman's beautiful, smooth features—how could such a creature exist here, a flower in the dead, dry wasteland? She was a vision.

"What are your people looking for?" asked the woman. It seemed an oddly inquisitive and practical question for a vision, and it was spoken in the manner of a very polite but foreboding matron of a household, addressing thieves that happened to cross her living room door. My embarrassment provoked me to speech.

"Are we trespassing? Forgive me."

"You are not trespassing," laughed the woman. "This is not my land. We share it, barren as it is. Beautiful, and barren."

"Yes."

"You have been crying?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't suppose I know," I said. Was it a lie?

"There needn't be a reason. Where do you come from?"

"I come from England. And you?"

"I come from a great city by the ocean, or so I believe—it is but a memory now. I have lived many places since. I have been on a ship at sea, in the wharfs of London, in the orchards of Israel; I have wandered the meadows of Kenya and drunk from the Ganges River. However, I am here now."

"Have you no place to sleep?"

The woman looked about her, at the hillock and the ground, and the stars. She said nothing, and smiled.

"What are your people doing here?" she repeated.

"We are digging for the bones of birds."

The woman laughed. "Ah! What for? How strange."

"I wish to explore the history of the bird-symbol amongst various human cultures."

"It seems a noble thing to write of. 'The bird-symbol.' As such," she rose from the ground and raised her arms in the air, pointing her nose to the sky—how tall she was! I fancied that she would shuffle off the cloak and feathers would spring from her bare arms, and she would leap into the sky like a fish drops into the sea, and I would watch her disappear toward the west horizon. She merely lowered back to the ground, and put her hands upon the lantern-sides, to keep them warm. I did the same, and she put her hands over mine, and they were warm now too.

"I don't think I will write of the bird-symbol after all," I said. "My husband wishes me to stop. I write most often silly stories that have no bearing on anything, no importance at all, about trains and murders and blood and guns and empty bedrooms locked from the inside. These things are inconsequential. I wished to do something of consequence, but I suppose I am unable. It is a pity, don't you think, that I never learned a real subject when I was a girl, so I could be of better use now that I am grown?"

The woman regarded me with a frown.

"But don't you realize, mother, that you know much more of the desert than any other woman of England? I ought to know, the desert is my home."

'Could it be true?' I thought.

It did not irk me to be called mother, though I was but fifteen or so years older than the woman—it filled me with delight, in fact, and when I smiled at this I relished the wrinkles beneath my eyes. The woman stroked my hands.

"What is your name?"

"Abigail."

"Abigail, the Winged."

"Yes, 'The Winged.' And what is your name?"

"My name!" she seemed surprised that I should ask. "My name is Willa."

The woman leaned forward and gave me a sweet kiss upon the lips—she rose, took

the lantern up out of the sand and strode away from me. I prayed that she might not leave, but stay with me all night and awake with me in the morning—but she walked on, and to my great surprise she joined a caravan that was passing quite close, darting the last few steps into the arms of a man, and they became two busy shadows in a great train of shadows. The caravan stretched from far out in the distance to the left, disappearing behind the hillock to my right, and was composed of a wonderful conglomeration of sheep, mules, horses, riders, walkers, candles, lanterns; the scurrying silhouettes of children skipped between the legs of camels; fantastical glittering ornate wagons rolled slowly along, composed not of canvas and wood but flowing embroidered curtains and ivory, lit from within by myriad candles that cast shadow-shapes of stately figures in flowing clothes, moving about and laughing. Young elephants even joined the procession, striding with great steps and taunting the children with their trunks. Despite the grandeur of the rich scene, the caravan was immensely silent, save for an otherworldly rustling, and whispers in strange tongues, and the tinkling of bells fasted to the elephants' tusks.

I sat and watched in wonder. I know not how many hours I sat there, but when the very rear of the caravan had passed behind the hillock and the last tinkling bell was gone, the eastern horizon glowed with the first pale sign of blue morning.

The remainder of my time in the dig was spent mostly in my tent, and I did not permit Torvald to see me, though it was clear that he yearned for forgiveness.

I abandoned my current project: now I had a new bird-symbol of my own now, which would promise to be a much more fruitful and unique impetus. Torvald pestered me no longer. He died some few years later, and left all of his wealth to a commission for the construction of a museum that was to bear my name, and, if I so chose, be directed by myself. I remained there for a great many decades, though it feels now to me as though you could fit it all in the blink of an eye—I am here still, most often somewhere between the aviary (from where the never-ceasing yawp of a thousand beaks barbarously emanates at all hours of the day) and the great bones of the pterodactyl that soar in place over the lobby, and though I no longer 'run the show,' I am still tasked with the solemn responsibility of leading groups of the city's schoolchildren through our many exhibits and passages and corridors, concentrating their wonder into sighs of delight and directing their wide mouths to sights and sounds that I myself wondered at when I was younger.

They are before me now: twenty or thirty of them, with their little red backpacks and ball-caps. I am leading them through the Desert; the winds howl—how the children gasp! and I show them the great Caravan, and I point them to the elephants, and the wagons with the candle-light, and the lanterns. I show them how the weeds grow through the cracked earth, and they giggle at the tickle of it under their feet. I show them what a desert-bird looks like, spreading my arms. They watch me with wonder.

"Don't you realize, grandmother," says a little girl, with a face I recognize, "that you know more about the desert than any woman alive?"

Ah! Could it be true?

**Bioprofile of the author:** Eric Dovigi is an American/Canadian writer living in Northern Arizona.

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