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THE BIRDS REMEMBERED

by

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We have always been more or less in the convalescent home business for bird and animal waifs left on our doorstep, and each one has been given a name and invited to stay as long as he could get along peacefully with the rest. Everybody likes to take part in an unexpected circus once in a while, too - and even be the goat. Nothing could be more wholesome than a riot of fun for loosening up jangled nerves and stretched tempers. But when a six-ringed circus - not a three-ringed one - lights plump down in the bosom of the family, it's a near calamity, not a joke.

That is what happened to our usually peaceful household in the middle of last summer. One day we found ourselves the step-parents of six baby birds, four flickers, a cedar waxwing, and a black-headed grosbeak, all but one still in swaddling clothes.

The mournful, clammy grosbeak had a few feathers here and there, and nothing but sprouts and fuzz on his rear - barely out of the striptease stage. All he knew was to keep his mouth wide open for any manna from heaven to drop in. The cedar waxwing was a demure damsel, a little gray thing with mottled breast, a decorative yellow band on her tail, and bright black eyes under an emotional crest that quivered with her genteel twitter of a voice. The four flickers were mad hatters from start to finish. Their heads bobbed, their tails jerked, and they kept up a raucous clatter that filled the air, a loud speaker system intended to keep their mother informed that they were starving to death.

But none of them had mothers now. And that's where the joke came in - on us. It is a whole job to bring up even one helpless wild bird from infancy, unless you are devoted to that kind of specialized philanthropy.

The first worry was food. When in doubt about babies, feed mush. So mush it was for the main course. It probably should have been made of pabulum or wheat germ, but there was no such infant stuff in the house. So I made a stiff cream of wheat gruel which, when cold, could be cut in thin slices and poked into red mouths. Hard-boiled eggs were mixed with this, a life-saver for any bird. A little later these were topped off with ripe raspberries, watermelon, and wild huckleberries especially for the choosy waxwing. She was so dainty that if the bite was a little too thick or too thin, or too long, or too sticky, she closed her mouth and eyes tight and fluttered her wings in a tantrum.

The grosbeak swallowed anything that came along with a gulp and went back to sleep. When it came to the explosive flickers, it was a picnic. Their tongues are long, slender, black rubbery spikes covered with a sticky substance, and they dart out and lick up insects, or suck ant larvae out of holes in old trees. It was hard for these birds to get onto the idea of opening their mouths wide and have chunks of food slide down. But they did their best, guzzling and glugging at the top of their lungs. It was either extreme ecstasy or extreme exorciation, one couldn't tell which. The program for all six infants had to come every little while, and since their stomachs worked by the clock, the alarm went off regularly.

The waxwing's door was always open and she became a "big sister" to the baby grosbeak, living with him in a comfortable sized wire cage with perches, cups of food and water. She edged close to him, chattering softly as if it were a lullaby, watched him bolt his food, then she cleaned the jam off his face and dressed his feathers. All of which soothed him to sleep. Once when she was flying around outside, she lighted on the flickers' cage. A dagger bill darted out through the wires and gave her a nasty jab. "Take that, teacher's pet," it seemed to say. After that she ignored the boisterous flickers and didn't like to have her cage near them.

When the flickers were out of the nursery stage and their door was opened one morning for their first taste of freedom, they all went "punch-drunk." One scaled the stucco wall of the garage, "yarruping" at every hitch. Another reveled and squealed in a dust bath at the edge of the garden. The third one, a bright-cheeked male, started straight for the blue sky and landed in the top of a tall fir tree in a neighbor's yard, a yard infested with pet cats. The smallest one, a rather backward little female, sat under a bush near her cage and did nothing. I whistled the flicker call, but not one paid any attention to it. Some hours later, all four hungry rebels came whining home to be fed and put to bed in their cage.

They must have been tired and cross from their first flight, for when all were hung up on the wires of their cage like bats, one got a little too close to another. Crack went a bill on his head. The other one jabbed him in the ribs. The grating tones sounded like "Quit your crowding! Can't you stay on your own side?" But soon all four heads were tucked back under wings, making them look like headless dummies.

The next day they came and went about the yard, perched in the apple tree above their old home spot, fluttered their wings and begged for some one to climb up and serve lunch. Soon they ventured further away and their jubilant calls rang from the tall firs down the hillside. For some time when I whistled the flicker call, it brought them back to accept from our hands the chunks of mush that never failed. They loved their wide freedom, but still were loath to sever their family bonds. The runt female came back at night as regularly as the sunset, and clung to the screened porch till she was let in, to hang up as she had done in her baby cage. One day the bold, venturesome male was missing and never again answered the evening call to come home. The other three, after their first run-away excitement, stayed about in the garden and orchard, chumming with their adopted folks. If either of us went out to work, one or another would come shouting to light on a shoulder and ride pick-a-back.

As I was picking raspberries one morning, a couple burst down upon

me, one on my shoulder, another on my arm. Soon I felt a long, soft tongue probing around my neck, and then it darted into my ear and wiggled all around, hunting for ants or aphids I suppose. The next minute some impishness seized him, and he reared back and commenced to hammer a hole in my head, as if it was a tree trunk that might conceal grubs or other delectable flicker bits.

In the deadly routine of the first stages of bringing up these baby birds, I sometimes became rebellious and considered it an imposition. Then I faced the music and told myself that I shouldn't have accepted the responsibility of standing by these feathered orphans if I didn't want to prepare them for going out into their world and living their own lives. I knew that I couldn't have neglected them, let them suffer and die. When they were gone, I missed them. I found myself opening the window, looking and listening. Seeing a speckled form with red cheeks busily turning over leaves down the hillside, I gave the old flicker call and was thrilled to see the preoccupied bird start and involuntarily lift, as if the sound brought back the memory of something in his early days. It was payment enough.