

SUSPENSE

By CHARLES BRUCE

IN mid-April the swallows came back from Brazil to the Channel Shore.

There was little drama to this migration; nothing to compare with the high flight of geese between the continents. The geese were a matter of wonder, a speckled veil in the sky, a net, tiny with distance, drawn by invisible ropes of wind. But their wonder was brief and strange; they came and went in the far channels of grey scud, never alighting to join the life of the settlements.

The swallows were different. They combined the strange and the far-away with the ordinary and usual. You woke up one day and they were there, already at work; flying briskly between the roadside ditch and the barn's north side, building their pebbly bungalows of mudballs and wool and last year's hay. They did their travelling, but they came back home, common as dirt, and the casual magic of their presence was a part of the Channel Shore's flaring summer.

On a Sunday morning in late May, Stan Currie and Dan Graham found the nestling, half-dead, on the ground below the eaves. Pale skin showed through sparse down, but the body was unbroken; the minutely ravenous bill gaped wide with instinctive hunger in Stan's cupped hands. Tiny claws tickled his palms with the weightless stirring of threadlike horn.

"Gosh," Dan said, "The littlest I ever saw."

Stan glanced up, but the masonry of the dozen nests in the eaves was unbroken. Hugh Currie was careful of birds. Some farmers would sweep the nests down, after they were half built, to drive the builders with their bothersome droppings to other sites; but Hugh, in nesting time, would not even leave a ladder against the wall lest it carry a marauding cat within claw's reach of the swallows.

"Must've fallen out by accident," Dan said. "What c'n you do with it, Stan? No good trying to put it back. You can't tell which nest."

Stan shook his head. "I'm going to raise it. Harry Neill had one once; he kept it in a shoe box. It was nearly big enough to let go, in haying time, when the cat got it."

He looked down into his cupped hands. "Cat won't get this one."

Dan said doubtfully, "They're awful hard to keep alive."

"I know," Stan said. "This one'll stay alive. I know what I'm doing."

Christine Currie, busy with preparations for Sunday dinner, looked up with vague interest and mild apprehension, the slight caution of a careful woman for the absorptions of boyhood.

"What've you got now!"

"A baby swallow, Aunt Chris."

She clicked tongue against teeth in sympathy edged with realism. "You'd best get rid of it, then. It won't live to grow up, and you'll just feel bad."

Stan shook his head stubbornly. "Not this bird, Aunt Chris. I'll look after it."

He knew what he was going to do. Among his possessions in the attic was an empty chocolate box, a relic of last Christmas. He floored it with tags of wool, scraps left over from last spring's carding, and settled the box and the nestling in the shelf behind the kitchen stove-pipe, under a smoke-blackened lithograph of Lord Roberts and next to Hugh's canister of chewing tobacco.

Christine eyed him occasionally with a hint of patient disapproval as she moved from stove to table, but his father, stirring from the lounge in the dining room to visit the kitchen in shirt-sleeves and sock feet, observed his activity with a tolerant amusement.

"What do you plan on feeding this ostrich, Stan!"

He had not considered that. He thought about it now. "Worms, I guess."

Hugh nodded. "Little ones, then. He's an awful small bird."

Hugh went back to the dining room, humming "Maryland, my Maryland," while Christine set the table and frowned at his back. Stan and Dan went out to dig worms.

Nothing, apparently, could appease the nestling's hunger. They watched two small worms disappear down the tiny pulsing gullet and Stan called a halt: "We better look out, he'll eat himself to death if we don't look out."

Twice during dinner he left the table to visit the shelf behind the stove-pipe. At the touch of his fingers on the box the bird's head went back, beak gaping wide. The avidity of this tiny scrap of life puzzled him all through the meal and the preparations for church afterward.

He would have preferred to stay at home today, but there was no use in suggesting it. Christine turned to Hugh, "You coming with us?"

Hugh said, "No, I guess not today, Christine." He was already settled again on the lounge, knee across knee, one grey-stockinged toe moving slowly from side to side as he dampened a pencil beneath his moustache and considered a crossword puzzle. The question and answer were automatic. The matter of church-going for Hugh had long ago passed beyond argument. As Stan and Christine left the house to walk the mile and a half up the highway and the old church road, he was already humming "Maxwelton's Braes are Bonnie."

All the way to church Stan's mind played with the future, his eager imagination roving to the end of summer, and all the time touched with a pervasive sense of something forgotten, something that eluded him, a worry, an uneasiness he couldn't define but which he knew would come to him, shaped and definite, before the day was over.

Late in the season he would let the bird go, big enough to look after itself, big enough to fly south with the rest of them. In the spring it would come back, to build on the north side of the barn. He wondered whether you could band a swallow, like a pigeon, or mark it with some distinguishing sign, so that you'd know, when you woke up one morning and found them building . . . No; already the refuge of illusion was latent in his mind. It would be best to let the bird go unmarked.

But in the meantime, now, today, there was the absorbing interest of watching, guarding, feeding . . .

Their heads were bowed for the long prayer when the creeping flush of realization gripped his body like sudden illness.

Water . . .

The nagging thing at the back of his mind was plain. He half rose, seeing with sick clarity the gaping beak, the scrawny pulsing throat.

From the corner of an eye he caught Christine's frown, and subsided. Through the hymn, the sermon, the benediction, the clutch of the inevitable held him.

At the juncture of the main highway with the church road, he began to run. This was no leisurely jog in which you pleasantly imagined yourself leading the field in the Boston Marathon. His breath rasped in a gusty panting while his mind kneaded the rancid dough of IF. If he had thought of water before leaving; if he had remembered, before committing himself to more than an hour in church; if he had summoned the courage to leave the pew and slip away; if, even, he had started to run sooner.

He set objectives—this telephone pole and that dogwood bush by Neill's corner—and all the time he knew that five minutes more or less were of little account. There was no moment of crisis to be measured in minutes or averted by any breathless arrival now.

The thing that drove him, as his Sunday shoes pounded the dried mud of the road, was the need to end suspense, the need to know.

Hugh, abstracted as usual, was slowly marching up and down . . . up and down . . . kitchen . . . dining room . . . kitchen . . . dining room . . . humming to himself and still in his sock feet. He paid no attention to Stan's entrance. It was only when he noticed his son motionless by the stove, peering at the sleeping bird, the half-filled tumbler and the eye-dropper, that he looked around with an absent-minded smile.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "I watered your stock."

He pulled open the stove's damper, then; deposited a used-up end of twist, and resumed his sock-footed march between kitchen and dining-room.