

THE ROBINS

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AT first the robins and I did not get on very well together. There was a good deal of misunderstanding on both sides, and it is difficult to clear up a misunderstanding when the two parties to a dispute are unable to comprehend each other's language. The dispute tends to grow more acrimonious every minute, because the explanations each party makes, possibly quite reasonable and satisfying explanations, are not understood by the other party to the argument: the only part of the argument that does "get across" is the emotion, and that is likely to become more violent and to be translated into action. One day, for instance, a robin and I had a squabble which nearly ended in resort to force. I had come across the lawn suddenly, and found her in a strawberry bed just below the level of the lawn. Of course I thought she was after the strawberries, and protested. She was annoyed at being disturbed and said so, very emphatically. Just as I was about to chase her, she explained that it was only a worm she had, and she would like to finish it off before she flew away. Fortunately, although I did not understand her explanation, I did see that she was eating a worm, and I stood by until she had finished chopping it up and consuming it.

During the first summer of occupation of the new house, there was a series of misunderstandings, and relations became strained on more than one occasion. The lot was an irregular one, a bit of orchard sloping down to a watercourse. With land and house paid for, and title deeds all in good order, I naturally thought I owned the property. Nothing had been said about other claimants who had previously enjoyed possession and might appear to enter upon it again. Since we had moved in late in the autumn, we had enjoyed undisturbed possession for some months before the birds returned. The first arrival was a woodpecker, who flew from the cherry tree in front to the apple trees on the north, then to the neighbour's orchard at the back, and around to the front again by way of the apple tree at the dining-room window and the cherry tree outside the living-room. Having viewed the house from every point, he tapped out word of this monstrosity that had been erected, and the robins heard of it on their way north. The first robin expressed his feelings in no uncertain terms when he arrived and

found me pruning the largest cherry tree. I tried to explain to him that I was only cutting out the dead limbs, which would not be suitable for nest-building in any case, but he could not understand, and continued to scold. Various theories were advanced to account for the displeasure he manifested. One was that this particular robin who was so vituperative was a real estate agent who had sold sites in that tree before leaving Florida. Another was that he had had a home in one of the apple trees formerly on the site of the house, and had expected reoccupying his last year's dwelling.

When spring had come and the robins had returned, it soon became evident that I had not sole possession of the estate. I was permitted to enjoy the shade of the cherry trees, and there was nobody to prevent my revelling in their gorgeous succession of colours in the autumn: but was I allowed a single cherry from those trees? Not one. True, they are only wild cherries, very small and, I suspect, very sour, but they were abundant that first summer, and I planned to make cherry jelly. My plans, however, were not destined to be fulfilled, for the robins began their feasting long before the cherries were ripe. From four o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock in the evening they haunted the cherry trees, they worried at the cherries, they fluttered and scolded at them, and they dropped messes of pits over the garden paths. Although several years have passed, I still have not been able to test the jelly-making capabilities of those cherries.

Had the robins showed the same partiality for cutworms that they did for cherries, much might have been forgiven. If only they had taken over the task of destroying the cutworms that ate off the asters and stocks, they would have saved me much setting out of plants. As it was, a daily slaughter of cutworms before breakfast was not sufficient to prevent a ravaged-looking flower bed. Had the robins attended to such little matters, and the worms and grubs in the cabbages, their return next spring might have been more cordially welcomed.

Their behaviour that second season did not endear them. It was the first year the strawberries were bearing. Eagerly all the household watched them blossom, form, increase in size, begin to redden. The day came when we said, "Tomorrow the strawberries will be ripe enough to pick. We shall have our own strawberries for supper." Next morning we went out to gloat over the final stages of the ripening. We remained to mourn. Where there had been almost ripe berries, there now dangled portions and fragments. After two or three days of that, we put up an elaborate protection of string, crisscrossed from poles supported on forked

twigs. The robins loved it; they thought it was put up for their protection; while we stood on the lawn above the strawberry beds, they would run under the network of string and snatch an almost ripe strawberry. At the end of the season we found four small, misshapen berries, which the robins had overlooked or despised, and those were the only strawberries we had from our vines that year.

It wasn't only the strawberries that the greedy beggars gobbled up. They ate the raspberries, and the red currants too, which the oldest inhabitant said had never happened before. There was one occasion when I had no difficulty in understanding robin language. As I passed a neighbour's raspberry patch one afternoon, a robin flew out to a nearby apple tree and made remarks. It needed no interpreter to make those remarks intelligible: "I do wish you would hurry along and get out of the way, so I can get back to those raspberries."

On account of these depredations, relations did not improve that second season. And yet, and yet, when the robins had left for their winter homes, there was a feeling of emptiness. Somewhat to my surprise, I found that I was missing them. Mischievous though they were, they were beginning to seem a part of the place, and the noticeable increase in the number of insects and flies around after the robins' departure made their absence the more regretted.

The next spring saw the beginning of more cordial relations. It was impossible to frown upon a cheerful visitor who came hopping about outside the kitchen window and chirruped that he was back again and glad of it, and please were there any bits of spring lying around. By that time the lawn was being recognized as a much better place for worms than an unkempt orchard, and a safer place for lessons in worm-pulling to bespeckled youngsters whose wings and legs were still unsteady. My gardening was being appreciated, too, and a robin was sure to fly down to inspect my digging as soon as I left it. Usually he found it good, and would protest if I came back to disturb his examination. There was one friendly fellow who would follow me around as I worked at the flower beds, and would encourage a cautious stalking until I was within three feet of him, when he would exert himself to escape on wings. A curiously deformed bird, with a head set very closely on his body and a slow, awkward appearance about him, he was easily recognizable when he returned the following spring. He formed a habit of sitting on a fence post in sight of the dining-room window, and staying there almost motionless during dinner. But Fat-and-Lumpy disappeared, and I am wondering if he was as

slow as he looked, and if the ginger cat that prowled the neighbour's orchard that summer knows anything about his disappearance.

That third year, *a domo condita*, the strawberries were larger and more luscious than ever, and—now guess again. Surprising though it may seem, this is what happened. The robins took only an occasional peck at them; no more, we all agreed, than a just reward for their labours in the garden. The members of the household feasted on strawberries morning, noon, and night, for an unusually long season. This most unexpected restraint on the part of the robins may have been due to the more friendly feeling in the air; it may have been due to the fact that a neighbour had a larger strawberry patch than our modest one; it may have been due to the pan of water that was kept on the lawn. Well, a pan of water is easily set out; the neighbours increase the size of their strawberry patch every year; and the friendly relations flourish.

The robins and I are the best of friends now. I have seeded down more lawn, enlarged the borders of my flower garden, and extended the vegetable rows. Many families have been brought up on the lawn, chattering away happily and undisturbed as they ran about looking for worms under the tutelage of their proud parents. That may make them feel at home here. It certainly did in the case of one young thing who landed on the edge of the table while we were having tea in the garden. Unluckily, I had been looking the other way when he arrived, and was so startled when an exclamation from my companion called attention to the addition to our tea party, that I ventured a little scream which frightened him away. The shelf underneath that table is a favorite shelter in a heavy rain. The bean poles have always been popular as resting places and lookouts, and the setting out of posts down by the grapevines was greatly appreciated.

There remain only two grievances to be adjusted. One is the matter of traffic control. Robins flying out of the spruce trees, which stand along the watercourse at the foot of the slope, do not seem to realize that they are very close to the ground level at the top of the hill, and several times collisions have been narrowly avoided. The strain on the nerves of the innocent bystander—or if the person in question is sitting on the lawn, would you call him a bysitter?—is becoming serious, and some satisfactory solution of the problem must be worked out. Belisha beacons have been suggested, but the papers have reported some misunderstandings of their function in the country that invented them, and there might be more serious difficulties about introducing them and explaining them to the robins. If it were English sparrows with whom we

were negotiating, Belisha beacons might serve, but Heaven forbid that any English sparrows find their way to our hillside. Another suggestion was a tennis net stretched along the edge of the lawn, a suggestion that was rejected instantly because the net would spoil the view across the valley. Neither did red lights nor barbed wire entanglements find favour. The matter will be reconsidered next summer.

The other grievance arises out of the elimination of a favorite bathing and drinking rendezvous at the northeast corner of the grounds, where the driveway ceases to be. Last year a tile drain was put in to carry off the water, which formerly would accumulate and make a soft place where several unwary motorists were bogged. It was feared that the robins would resent the change. However, sods were put down, and madam and her family from the nearest apple tree seemed to consider the additional lawn some compensation for the pond. We are working hard, the robins and I, for a continuance of the peace, harmony, and good feeling which now prevail.