My Robin

Frances Hodgson Burnett

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There came to me among the letters I received last spring one which touched me very closely. It was a letter full of delightful things but the delightful thing which so reached my soul was a question. The writer had been reading "The Secret Garden" and her question was this: "Did you own the original of the robin? He could not have been a mere creature of fantasy. I feel sure you owned him." I was thrilled to the centre of my being. Here was some one who plainly had been intimate with robins— English robins. I wrote and explained as far as one could in a letter what I am now going to relate in detail.

I did not own the robin—he owned me—or perhaps we owned each other. He was an English robin and he was a PERSON—not a mere bird. An English robin differs greatly from the American one. He is much smaller and quite differently shaped. His body is daintily round and plump, his legs are delicately slender. He is a graceful little patrician with an astonishing allurement of bearing. His eye is large and dark and dewy; he wears a tight little red satin waistcoat on his full round breast and every tilt of his head, every flirt of his wing is instinct with dramatic significance. He is fascinatingly conceited—he burns with curiosity—he is determined to engage in social relations at almost any cost and his raging jealousy of attention paid to less worthy objects than himself drives him at times to efforts to charm and distract which are irresistible. An intimacy with a robin—an English robin—is a liberal education.

This particular one I knew in my rose−garden in Kent. I feel sure he was born there and for a summer at least believed it to be the world. It was a lovesome, mystic place, shut in partly by old red brick walls against which fruit trees were trained and partly by a laurel hedge with a wood behind it. It was my habit to sit and write there under an aged writhen tree, gray with lichen and festooned with roses. The soft silence of it— the remote aloofness—were the most perfect ever dreamed of. But let me not be led astray by the garden. I must be firm and confine myself to the Robin. The garden shall be another story. There were so many people in this garden—people with feathers, or fur—who, because I sat so quietly, did not mind me in the least, that it was not a surprising thing when I looked up one summer morning to see a small bird hopping about the grass a yard or so away from me. The surprise was not that he was there but that he STAYED there—or rather he continued to hop—with short reflective−looking hops and that while hopping he looked at me— not in a furtive flighty way but rather as a person might tentatively regard a very new acquaintance. The absolute truth of the matter I had reason to believe later was that he did not know I was a person. I may have been the first of my species he had seen in this rose−garden world of his and he thought I was only another kind of robin. I was too— though that was a secret of mine and nobody but myself knew it. Because of this fact I had the power of holding myself STILL—quite STILL and filling myself with softly alluring tenderness of the tenderest when any little wild thing came near me. "What do you do to make him come to you like that?" some one asked me a month or so later. "What do you DO?" "I don't know what I do exactly," I said. "Except that I hold myself very still and feel like a robin."

You can only do that with a tiny wild thing by being so tender of him— of his little timidities and feelings—so adoringly anxious not to startle him or suggest by any movement the possibility of your being a creature who COULD HURT—that your very yearning to understand his tiny hopes and fears and desires makes you for the time cease to be quite a mere human thing and gives you another and more exquisite sense which speaks for you without speech.

As I sat and watched him I held myself softly still and felt just that. I did not know he was a robin. The truth was that he was too young at that time to look like one, but I did not know that either. He was plainly not a thrush, or a linnet or a sparrow or a starling or a blackbird. He was a little indeterminate−colored bird and he had no red on his breast. And as I sat and gazed at him he gazed at me as one quite without prejudice unless it might be with the slightest tinge of favor— and hopped—and hopped—and hopped.

That was the thrill and wonder of it. No bird, however evident his acknowledgement of my harmlessness, had ever hopped and REMAINED. Many had perched for a moment in the grass or on a nearby bough, had trilled or chirped or secured a scurrying gold and green beetle and flown away. But none had stayed to inquire—to reflect—even to seem—if one dared be so bold as to hope such a thing—to make mysterious, almost occult advances towards intimacy. Also I had never before heard of such a thing happening to any one howsoever bird loving. Birds are creatures who must be wooed and it must be delicate and careful wooing which allures them into friendship.

I held my soft stillness. Would he stay? Could it be that the last hop was nearer? Yes, it was. The moment was a breathless one. Dare one believe that the next was nearer still—and the next—and the next—and that the two yards of distance had become scarcely one—and that within that radius he was soberly hopping round my very feet with his quite unafraid eye full upon me. This was what was happening. It may not seem exciting but it was. That a little wild thing should come to one unasked was of a thrillingness touched with awe.

Without stirring a muscle I began to make low, soft, little sounds to him—very low and very caressing indeed—softer than one makes to a baby. I wanted to weave a spell—to establish mental communication—to make Magic. And as I uttered the tiny sounds he hopped nearer and nearer.

"Oh! to think that you will come as near as that!" I whispered to him. "You KNOW. You know that nothing in the world would make me put out my hand or startle you in the least tiniest way. You know it because you are a real person as well as a lovely—lovely little bird thing. You know it because you are a soul."

Because of this first morning I knew—years later—that this was what Mistress Mary thought when she bent down in the Long Walk and "tried to make robin sounds."

I said it all in a whisper and I think the words must have sounded like robin sounds because he listened with interest and at last—miracle of miracles as it seemed to me—he actually fluttered up on to a small shrub not two yards away from my knee and sat there as one who was pleased with the topic of conversation.

I did not move of course, I sat still and waited his pleasure. Not for mines of rubies would I have lifted a finger.

I think he stayed near me altogether about half an hour. Then he disappeared. Where or even exactly when I did not know. One moment he was hopping among some of the rose bushes and then he was gone.

This, in fact, was his little mysterious way from first to last. Through all the months of our delicious intimacy he never let me know where he lived. I knew it was in the rose−garden—but that was all. His extraordinary freedom from timorousness was something to think over. After reflecting upon him a good deal I thought I had reached an explanation. He had been born in the rose−garden and being of a home− loving nature he had declined to follow the rest of his family when they had made their first flight over the wall into the rose−walk or over the laurel hedge into the pheasant cover behind. He had stayed in the rose world and then had felt lonely. Without father or mother or sisters or brothers desolateness of spirit fell upon him. He saw a creature—I insist on believing that he thought it another order of robin—and approached to see what it would say.

Its whole bearing was confidence inspiring. It made softly alluring—if unexplainable—sounds. He felt its friendliness and affection. It was curious to look at and far too large for any ordinary nest. It plainly could not fly. But there was not a shadow of inimical sentiment in it. Instinct told him that. It admired him, it wanted him to remain near, there was a certain comfort in its caressing atmosphere. He liked it and felt less desolate. He would return to it again.

The next day summer rains kept me in the house. The next I went to the rose−garden in the morning and sat down under my tree to work. I had not been there half an hour when I felt I must lift my eyes and look. A little indeterminate−colored bird was hopping quietly about in the grass—quite aware of me as his dew−bright eye manifested. He had come again—of intention—because we were mates.

It was the beginning of an intimacy not to be described unless one filled a small volume. From that moment we never doubted each other for one second. He knew and I knew. Each morning when I came into the rose−

garden he came to call on me and discover things he wanted to know concerning robins of my size and unusual physical conformation. He did not understand but he was attracted by me. Each day I held myself still and tried to make robin sounds expressive of adoring tenderness and he came each day a little nearer. At last arrived a day when as I softly left my seat and moved about the garden he actually quietly hopped after me.

I wish I could remember exactly what length of time elapsed before I knew he was really a robin. An ornithologist would doubtless know but I do not. But one morning I was bending over a bed of Laurette Messimy roses and I became aware that he had arrived in his usual mysterious way without warning. He was standing in the grass and when I turned my eyes upon him I only just saved myself from starting—which would have meant disaster. I saw upon his breast the first dawning of a flush of color— more tawny than actual red at that stage—but it hinted at revelations.

"Further subterfuge is useless," I said to him. "You are betrayed. You are a robin."

And he did not attempt to deny it either then or at any future time. In less than two weeks he revealed a tight, glossy little bright red satin waistcoat and with it a certain youthful maturity such as one beholds in the wearer of a first dress suit. His movements were more brisk and certain. He began to make little flights and little sounds though for some time he made no attempt to sing. Instead of appearing suddenly in the grass at my feet, a heavenly little rush of wings would

[Illustration: A HEAVENLY RUSH OF WINGS]

bring him to a bough over my head or a twig quite near me where he would tilt daintily, taking his silent but quite responsive part in the conversations which always took place between us. It was I who talked— telling him how I loved him—how satin red his waistcoat was—how large and bright his eyes—how delicate and elegant his slender legs. I flattered him a great deal. He adored flattery and I am sure he loved me most when I told him that it was impossible to say anything which could flatter him. It gave him confidence in my good taste.

One morning—a heavenly sunny one—I was conversing with him by the Laurette Messimys again and he was evidently much pleased with the things I said. Perhaps he liked my hat which was a large white one with a wreath of roses round its crown. I saw him look at it and I gently hinted that I had worn it in the hope that he would approve. I had broken off a handful of coral pink Laurettes and was arranging them idly when—he spread his wings in a sudden upward flight—a tiny swift flight which ended—among the roses on my hat—the very hat on my head.

Did I make myself still then? Did I stir by a single hairbreadth? Who does not know? I scarcely let myself breathe. I could not believe that such a thing of pure joy could be true.

But in a minute I realized that he at least was not afraid to move. He was perfectly at home. He hopped about the brim and examined the roses with delicate pecks. That I was under the hat apparently only gave him confidence. He knew me as well as that. He stayed until he had learned all he wished to know about garden hats and then he lightly flew away.

From that time each day drew us closer to each other. He began to perch on twigs only a few inches from my face and listen while I whispered to him—yes, he LISTENED and made answer with chirps. Nothing else would describe it. As I wrote he would alight on my manuscript paper and try to read. Sometimes I thought he was a little offended because he found my handwriting so bad that he could not understand it. He would take crumbs out of my hand, he would alight on my chair or my shoulder. The instant I opened the little door in the leaf−covered garden wall I would be greeted by the darling little rush of wings and he was beside me. And he always came from nowhere and disappeared into space.

That, through the whole summer—was his rarest fascination. Perhaps he was not a real robin. Perhaps he was a fairy. Who knows? Among the many house parties staying with me he was a subject of thrilled interest. People knew of him who had not seen him and it became a custom with callers to say: "May we go into the rose−garden and see The Robin?" One of my American guests said he was uncanny and called him "The Goblin Robin." No one had ever seen a thing so curiously human—so much more than mere bird.

When I took callers to the rose−garden he was exquisitely polite. He always came when I stood under my tree and called—but he never at such times MET me with his rush to the little door. He would perch near me and talk but there was a difference. Certain exquisite intimate charms he kept for me alone.

I wondered when he would begin to sing. One morning the sun being strong enough to pierce through the leaves of my tree I had a large Japanese tent umbrella arranged so that it shaded my table as I wrote. Suddenly I

heard a robin song which sounded as if it were being trilled from some tree at a little distance from where I sat. It was so pretty that I leaned forward to see exactly where the singer perched. I made a delicious discovery. He was not on a tree at all. He was perched upon the very end of one of the bamboo ribs of my big flowery umbrella. He was my own Robin and there he sat singing to me his first tiny song— showing me that he had found out how to do it.

The effect of singing at a distance was produced by the curious fact that he was singing WITH HIS BILL CLOSED, his darling scarlet throat puffed out and tremulous with the captive trills.

Perhaps a robin's first song is always of this order. I do not know. I only know that this was his "earlier manner." My enraptured delight I expressed to him in my most eloquent phrases. I praised him—I flattered him. I made him believe that no robin had really ever sung before. He was much pleased and flew down on to the table to hear all about it and incite me to further effort.

In a few days he had learned to sing perfectly, not with the low distant−sounding note but with open beak and clear brilliant little roulades and trills. He grew prouder and prouder. When he saw I was busy he would tilt on a nearby bough and call me with flirtatious, provocative outbreaking of song. He knew that it was impossible for any one to resist him—any one in the world. Of course I would get up and stand beneath his tree with my face upturned and tell him that his charm, his beauty, his fascination and my love were beyond the power of words to express. He knew that would happen and revelled in it. His tiny airs and graces, his devices to attract and absorb attention was unending. He invented new ones every day and each was more enslaving than the last.

Could it be that he was guilty—when he met other robins—of boasting of his conquest of me and of my utter subjugation? I cannot believe it possible. Also I never saw other robins accost him or linger in their passage through the rose−garden to exchange civilities. And yet a very strange thing occurred on one occasion. I was sitting at my table expecting him and heard a familiar chirp. When I looked up he was atilt upon the branch of an apple tree near by. I greeted him with little whistles and twitters thinking of course that he would fly down to me for our usual conversation. But though he chirped a reply and put his head on one side engagingly he did not move from his bough.

"What is the matter with you?" I said. "Come down—come down, little brother!"

But he did not come. He only sidled and twittered and stayed where he was. This was so extraordinary that I got up and went to him. As I looked a curious doubt came upon me. He looked like Tweetie—(which had become his baptismal name) he tilted his head and flirted and twittered after the manner of Tweetie—but—could it be that he was NOT what he pretended to be? Could he be a stranger bird? That seemed out of the question as no stranger bird would have comported himself with such familiarity. No stranger surely would have come so near and addressed me with such intimate twitterings and well−known airs and graces. I was mystified beyond measure. I exerted all my powers to lure him from his branch but descend from it he would not. He listened and smiled and flirted his tail but he stayed where he was.

"Listen," I said at last. "I don't believe in you. There is a mystery here. You pretend you know me and yet you act as if you were afraid of me—just like a common bird who is made of nothing but feathers. I don't believe you are Tweetie at all. You are an Impostor!"

Believable or not, just at that moment when I stood there under the bough arguing, reproaching and beguiling by turns and puzzled beyond measure—out of the Nowhere darted a little scarlet flame of frenzy— Tweetie himself—with his feathers ruffled and on fire with fury. The robin on the branch actually WAS an Impostor and Tweetie had discovered him red−breasted if not red−handed with crime. Oh! the sight it was to behold him in his tiny Berseker rage at his impudent rival. He flew at him, he beat him, he smacked him, he pecked him, he shrieked bad language at him, he drove him from the branch—from the tree, from one tree after another as the little traitor tried to take refuge—he drove him from the rose−garden—over the laurel hedge and into the pheasant cover in the wood. Perhaps he killed him and left him slain in the bracken. I could not see. But having beaten him once and forever he came back to me, panting—all fluffed up—and with blood thirst only just dying in his eye. He came down on to my table—out of breath as he agitatedly rearranged his untidy feathers—and indignant—almost unreconcilable because I had been such an undiscriminating and feeble− minded imbecile as to be for one moment deceived.

His righteous wrath was awful to behold. I was so frightened that I felt quite pale. With those wiles of the serpent which every noble woman finds herself forced to employ at times I endeavored to pacify him.

"Of course I did not really believe he was You," I said tremulously. "He was your inferior in every respect. His waistcoat was not nearly so beautiful as yours. His eyes were not so soul compelling. His legs were not nearly so elegant and slender. And there was an expression about his beak which I distrusted from the first. You HEARD me tell him he was an Impostor."

He began to listen—he became calmer—he relented. He kindly ate a crumb out of my hand.

We began mutually to understand the infamy of the situation. The Impostor had been secretly watching us. He had envied us our happiness. Into his degenerate mind had stolen the darkling and criminal thought that he—Audacious Scoundrel—might impose upon me by pretending he was not merely "a robin" but "The Robin"—Tweetie himself and that he might supplant him in my affections. But he had been confounded and cast into outer darkness and again we were One.

I will not attempt to deceive. He was jealous beyond bounds. It was necessary for me to be most discreet in my demeanor towards the head gardener with whom I was obliged to consult frequently. When he came into the rose−garden for orders Tweetie at once appeared.

He followed us, hopping in the grass or from rose bush to rose bush. No word of ours escaped him. If our conversation on the enthralling subjects of fertilizers and aphides seemed in its earnest absorption to verge upon the emotional and tender he interfered at once. He commanded my attention. He perched on nearby boughs and endeavored to distract me. He fluttered about and called me with chirps. His last resource was always to fly to the topmost twig of an apple tree and begin to sing his most brilliant song in his most thrilling tone and with an affected manner. Naturally we were obliged to listen and talk about him. Even old Barton's weather−beaten apple face would wrinkle into smiles.

"He's doin' that to make us look at him," he would say. "That's what he's doin' it for. He can't abide not to be noticed."

But it was not only his vanity which drew him to me. He loved me. The low song trilled in his little pulsating scarlet throat was mine. He sang it only to me—and he would never sing it when any one else was there to hear. When we were quite alone with only roses and bees and sunshine and silence about us, when he swung on some spray quite close to me and I stood and talked to him in whispers—then he would answer me—each time I paused—with the little "far away" sounding trills—the sweetest, most wonderful little sounds in the world. A clever person who knew more of the habits of birds than I did told me a most curious thing.

"That is his little mating song," he said. "You have inspired a hopeless passion in a robin."

Perhaps so. He thought the rose−garden was the world and it seemed to me he never went out of it during the summer months. At whatsoever hour I appeared and called him he came out of bushes but from a different point each time. In late autumn however, one afternoon I SAW him fly to me from over a wall dividing the enclosed garden from the open ones. I thought he looked guilty and fluttered when he alighted near me. I think he did not want me to know.

"You have been making the acquaintance of a young lady robin," I said to him. "Perhaps you are already engaged to her for the next season."

He tried to persuade me that it was not true but I felt he was not entirely frank.

After that it was plain that he had discovered that the rose−garden was not ALL the world. He knew about the other side of the wall. But it did not absorb him altogether. He was seldom absent when I came and he never failed to answer my call. I talked to him often about the young lady robin but though he showed a gentlemanly reticence on the subject I knew quite well he loved me best. He loved my robin sounds, he loved my whispers, his dewy dark eyes looked into mine as if he knew we two understood strange tender things others did not.

I was only a mere tenant of the beautiful place I had had for nine years and that winter the owner sold the estate. In December I was to go to Montreux for a couple of months; in March I was to return to Maytham and close it before leaving it finally. Until I left for Switzerland I saw my robin every day. Before I went away I called him to me and told him where I was going.

He was such a little thing. Two or three months might seem a lifetime to him. He might not remember me so long. I was not a real robin. I was only a human being. I said a great many things to him—wondering if he would even be in the garden when I came back. I went away wondering.

When I returned from the world of winter sports, of mountain snows, of tobogganing and skis I felt as if I had been absent a long time. There had been snow even in Kent and the park and gardens were white. I arrived in the

evening. The next morning I threw on my red frieze garden cloak and went down the flagged terrace and the Long Walk through the walled gardens to the beloved place where the rose bushes stood dark and slender and leafless among the whiteness. I went to my own tree and stood under it and called.

"Are you gone," I said in my heart; "are you gone, little Soul? Shall I never see you again?"

After the call I waited—and I had never waited before. The roses were gone and he was not in the rose−world. I called again. The call was sometimes a soft whistle as near a robin sound as I could make it— sometimes it was a chirp—sometimes it was a quick clear repetition of "Sweet! Sweet! Sweetie"—which I fancied he liked best. I made one after the other—and then—something scarlet flashed across the lawn, across the rose−walk—over the wall and he was there. He had not forgotten, it had not been too long, he alighted on the snowy brown grass at my feet.

Then I knew he was a little Soul and not only a bird and the real parting which must come in a few weeks' time loomed up before me a strange tragic thing.

* * *

I do not often allow myself to think of it. It was too final. And there was nothing to be done. I was going thousands of miles across the sea. A little warm thing of scarlet and brown feathers and pulsating trilling throat lives such a brief life. The little soul in its black dew−drop eye—one knows nothing about it. For myself I sometimes believe strange things. We two were something weirdly near to each other.

At the end I went down to the bare world of roses one soft damp day and stood under the tree and called him for the last time. He did not keep me waiting and he flew to a twig very near my face. I could not write all I said to him. I tried with all my heart to explain and he answered me—between his listenings—with the "far away" love note. I talked to him as if he knew all I knew. He put his head on one side and listened so intently that I felt that he understood. I told him that I must go away and that we should not see each other again and I told him why.

"But you must not think when I do not come back it is because I have forgotten you," I said. "Never since I was born have I loved anything as I have loved you—except my two babies. Never shall I love anything so much again so long as I am in the world. You are a little Soul and I am a little Soul and we shall love each other forever and ever. We won't say Good−bye. We have been too near to each other—nearer than human beings are. I love you and love you and love you—little Soul."

Then I went out of the rose−garden. I shall never go into it again.