

Leslie Madeline

Little Robins Learning to Fly



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CHAPTER I

MR. ROBIN'S POOR COUSINS

Early one May morning, Fred Symmes was sent by his mother upon an errand to the next farm. He did not go around by the road, but jumped over the stone wall, and passed along through the pleasant orchard. As he came near the pear tree, he saw a large robin flying back and forth from it, and stopping to look, soon discovered a nest in the fork formed by two of the lower limbs.

What was his surprise, as the robin flew toward the ground, to have it alight on his arm! when he at once recognized it as Mr. Robin, who had a wife and family in the elm tree near the cottage.

"Why, what are you doing here this bright morning?" he asked, holding out his finger, upon which the familiar bird readily perched.

Mr. Robin cocked his head, turned up his bright eye, and tried to explain. But as Fred did not seem to understand, and kept saying, "I hope you have not forsaken your wife and little nestlings, pretty birdie," he alighted on the ground, picked up a worm, and flew away into the tree.

Fred quickened his steps, did his errand at the farm, and on his return, found Mr. Robin had flown away. He climbed into a tree, from which he could look into the nest. There he saw a female bird sheltering her young, who were feebly chirping as she partly rose to meet the intruder.

She uttered a cry of distress, and began to flutter her wings; but Fred quickly slid down from the tree, and put an end to her alarm.

When he reached home, both Mr. and Mrs. Robin were picking up crumbs at the cottage door.

"Grandpa," said he, when they were seated at breakfast, "I saw something very funny this morning. I found our robin in a pear tree near Mr. Bacon's farm, feeding a whole nest full of birds."

"Were they alone?" inquired Mr. Symmes.

"No, father. The mother bird was there; and he fed her too."

"I suppose the father has been killed," suggested the old gentleman. "It is very cruel to kill birds when they have little families to take care of. But I have read many instances where birds have assisted each other when in distress: where the male bird has been killed, one of his neighbors has fed and assisted in rearing the young brood, at the same time he attended to the wants of his own family."

An hour or two later, grandpa sat in his arm chair under the shade of the graceful elm. Fred had brought his tools, and was converting a large wooden box into a playhouse for his little sister. Annie stood near him, her apron filled with small bits of broken china, which she called her dishes, and which she was waiting to arrange in her new cupboard.

It was very warm; and the boy's forehead was wet with perspiration. He drew his jacket sleeve across his face, as he exclaimed, "There, Annie, your house is done."

"Thank you, thank you, dear brother," cried the little girl, in an ecstasy of delight. She emptied the bright-colored crockery on the ground, and ran to the house for her dolly and two chairs; the latter her mother had made of pieces of smooth cornstalks, fastened together with pins.

"O, doesn't it look pretty, grandpa?" she asked, jumping up and down in her glee. "See Minnie sitting in her parlor. Now I'll set up my dishes. O dear!" she added, with a quick, appealing glance at her brother, "how nice it would be if I had a table!"

"Well, some time I'll make you one," answered Fred, with a smile. "And you can put your dolly's cradle into the bedroom."

"O yes," shouted Annie, with a cry of joy; and she ran away to fetch it.

"I will help you make a table," said grandpa to Fred; "and I think we can manage to put together a very pretty one between us."

"I want to hear more about birds helping each other," said the boy. "It seems so queer that they should know enough to do it."

"It is a most interesting study," answered the old gentleman, "to watch the character and habits of birds, and one which has engaged the attention of many learned men. There is no portion of God's creation in which his wisdom is more displayed than in the formation of birds. Each and every variety are exactly fitted for the circumstances in which they are to be placed. For instance, the eagle, who lives on high crags or rocks, almost inaccessible to man, has a short, strong beak, hooked at the end, wings of immense strength, and claws large and sharp. He is gifted with extraordinary clearness of sight. Sitting on the summit of a huge rock, or sailing around at a great height in the air, he discerns his prey. Sometimes it is a fish just below the surface of the water, or a lamb accidentally separated from its mother. He shoots down, down, and with the speed, sure aim, and straightness of an arrow, pounces upon the prey, and carries it off in his strong talons."

"How different from our pretty little robins!" exclaimed Fred.

"Yes, the eagle is a bird of prey, and is formed accordingly. The robin lives upon grubs, insects, or seeds and fruit. It is not necessary, therefore, for him to be possessed of much strength. His beak is just fitted for the kind of labor he must perform in getting his food. It is slightly notched near the end. He is a very social bird, and is remarkable for the bravery with which he defends his young.

Then there is the pelican of the wilderness, who is furnished with a large pouch, joined to the lower part of his beak, in which he can carry a considerable quantity of food to his young."

CHAPTER II

THE HEN HAWK

While grandpa and Fred were talking, they suddenly heard a loud cry of distress from the hen in the coop, quickly followed by the cluck, cluck, with which she summoned her chickens under her wings.

Presently Mr. and Mrs. Robin seemed to partake of the fright. She uttered continual sharp cries, while her husband flew with quick, violent motions over his nest.

Fred hastened toward the barn, and saw a large hawk sailing in the air above them. He ran to call his father, who was, fortunately, near at hand.

"Bring my gun," said Mr. Symmes, taking down a flask of powder from a high shelf in the shed.

"Now we'll soon bring him down," he continued, stationing himself at the back door. He took his aim. Annie turned pale, and pressed her hands over her ears. Then came the report; and, true enough, the great, brown bird fell to the ground just in front of the hen-coop at which it had been aiming.

"That was a good shot," remarked grandpa, walking slowly to the place.

"I seldom miss fire," said Mr. Symmes, with a look of honest pride. "My hand is steady, and the gun is a faithful old fellow, that has served honorably in war, and has helped me to get rid of many an enemy."

"O, father, see how it flutters! It is not quite dead."

"Bring it here, child, and I'll put an end to its pain. We should always avoid keeping any living being in misery." He wrung the hawk's neck, though Annie screamed, and then began to cry.

"Why, sis, do you want our chickens and birdies all carried off?" asked Fred. "This is a bad bird, and would have stolen them away if father had not killed it. Hark! there are the robins now singing us a song to thank us for protecting them."

They all stopped for a moment to listen, as the beautiful songsters warbled forth their sweet strains, filling the air with their rich melody.

"Do you suppose they really know what we have done for them?" inquired the boy.

"Certainly I do," answered grandpa, "They made known their wants as well as they were able, and in language that it was easy to understand. The little nestlings knew at once, from the cries of their parents, that there was danger near, and joined in the notes of distress. Now, while their father and mother sit quietly upon the bough singing their thanks, they feel sure the danger is past, and that no accident will happen to them."

"I'm sure the chickies knew," said Annie. "They ran in to their mother as quick as they could, and cuddled together under her wings."

"They knew just as well," replied her father, "and understood her language as quick as you would if your mother saw a great lion in the yard, and called you, [**?]" Annie, come here! run quick into the house, or you will be killed! [**?]"

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