

Some Unlikely Relatives

by Thornton W. Burgess

Having other things to attend to, or rather having other things to arouse his curiosity, Peter Rabbit did not visit the Old Orchard for several days. When he did it was to find the entire neighborhood quite upset. There was an indignation meeting in progress in and around the tree in which Chebec and his modest little wife had their home. How the tongues did clatter! Peter knew that something had happened, but though he listened with all his might he couldn't make head or tail of it.

Finally Peter managed to get the attention of Jenny Wren. "What's happened?" demanded Peter. "What's all this fuss about?"

Jenny Wren was so excited that she couldn't keep still an instant. Her sharp little eyes snapped and her tail was carried higher than ever. "It's a disgrace! It's a disgrace to the whole feathered race, and something ought to be done about it!" sputtered Jenny. "I'm ashamed to think that such a contemptible creature wears feathers! I am so!"

"But what's it all about?" demanded Peter impatiently. "Do keep still long enough to tell me. Who is this contemptible creature?"

"Sally Sly," snapped Jenny Wren. "Sally Sly the Cowbird. I hoped she wouldn't disgrace the Old Orchard this year, but she has. When Mr. and Mrs. Chebec returned from getting their breakfast this morning they found one of Sally Sly's eggs in their nest. They are terribly upset, and I don't blame them. If I were in their place I simply would throw that egg out. That's what I'd do, I'd throw that egg out!"

Peter was puzzled. He blinked his eyes and stroked his whiskers as he tried to understand what it all meant. "Who is Sally Sly, and what did she do that for?" he finally ventured.

"For goodness' sake, Peter Rabbit, do you mean to tell me you don't know who Sally Sly is?" Then without waiting for Peter to reply, Jenny rattled on. "She's a member of the Blackbird family and she's the laziest, most good-for-nothing, sneakiest, most unfeeling and most selfish wretch I know of!" Jenny paused long enough to get her breath. "She laid that egg in Chebec's nest because she is too lazy to build a nest of her own and too selfish to take care of her own children. Do you know what will happen, Peter Rabbit? Do you know what will happen?"

Peter shook his head and confessed that he didn't. "When that egg hatches out, that young Cowbird will be about twice as big as Chebec's own children," sputtered Jenny. "He'll be so big that he'll get most of the food. He'll just rob those little Chebecs in spite of all their mother and father can do. And Chebec and his wife will be just soft-hearted enough to work themselves to skin and bone to feed the young wretch because he is an orphan and hasn't anybody to look after him. The worst of it is, Sally Sly is likely to play the same trick on others. She always chooses the nest of some one smaller than herself. She's terribly sly. No one has seen her about. She just sneaked into the Old Orchard this morning when everybody was busy, laid that egg and sneaked out again."

"Did you say that she is a member of the Blackbird family?" asked Peter.

Jenny Wren nodded vigorously. "That's what she is," said she. "Thank goodness, she isn't a member of MY family. If she were I never would be able to hold my head up. Just listen to Goldy the Oriole over in that big elm. I don't see how he can sing like that, knowing that one of his relatives has just done such a shameful deed. It's a queer thing that there can be two members of the same family so unlike. Mrs. Goldy builds one of the most wonderful nests of any one I know, and Sally Sly is too lazy to build any. If I were in Goldy's place I—"

"Hold on!" cried Peter. "I thought you said Sally Sly is a member of the Blackbird family. I don't see what she's got to do with Goldy the Oriole."

"You don't, eh?" exclaimed Jenny. "Well, for one who pokes into other people's affairs as you do, you don't know much. The Orioles and the Meadow Larks and the Grackles and the Bobolinks all belong to the Blackbird family. They're all related to Redwing the Blackbird, and Sally Sly the Cowbird belongs in the same family."

Peter gasped. "I—I—hadn't the least idea that any of these folks were related," stammered Peter.

"Well, they are," retorted Jenny Wren. "As I live, there's Sally Sly now!"

Peter caught a glimpse of a brownish-gray bird who reminded him somewhat of Mrs. Redwing. She was about the same size and looked very much like her. It was plain that she was trying to keep out of sight, and the instant she knew that she had been discovered she flew away in the direction of the Old Pasture. It happened that late that afternoon Peter visited the Old Pasture and saw her again. She and some of her friends were busily walking about close to the feet of the cows, where they seemed to be picking up food. One had a brown head, neck and breast; the rest of his coat was glossy black. Peter rightly guessed that this must be Mr. Cowbird. Seeing them on such good terms with the cows he understood why they are called Cowbirds.

Sure that Sally Sly had left the Old Orchard, the feathered folks settled down to their personal affairs and household cares, Jenny Wren among them. Having no one to talk to, Peter found a shady place close to the old stone wall and there sat down to think over the surprising things he had learned. Presently Goldy the Baltimore Oriole alighted in the nearest apple-tree, and it seemed to Peter that never had he seen any one more beautifully dressed. His head, neck, throat and upper part of his back were black. The lower part of his back and his breast were a beautiful deep orange color. There was a dash of orange on his shoulders, but the rest of his wings were black with an edging of white. His tail was black and orange. Peter had heard him called the Firebird, and now he understood why. His song was quite as rich and beautiful as his coat.

Shortly he was joined by Mrs. Goldy. Compared with her handsome husband she was very modestly dressed. She wore more brown than black, and where the orange color appeared it was rather dull. She wasted no time in singing. Almost instantly her sharp eyes spied a piece of string caught in the bushes almost over Peter's head. With a little cry of delight she flew down and seized it. But the string was caught, and though she tugged and pulled with all her might she couldn't get it free. Goldy saw the trouble she was having and cutting his song short, flew down to help her. Together they pulled and tugged and tugged and pulled, until they had to stop to rest and get their breath.

"We simply must have this piece of string," said Mrs. Goldy. "I've been hunting everywhere for a piece, and this is the first I've found. It is just what we need to bind our nest fast to the twigs. With

this I won't have the least bit of fear that that nest will ever tear loose, no matter how hard the wind blows.”

Once more they tugged and pulled and pulled and tugged until at last they got it free, and Mrs. Goldy flew away in triumph with the string in her bill. Goldy himself followed. Peter watched them fly to the top of a long, swaying branch of a big elm-tree up near Farmer Brown's house. He could see something which looked like a bag hanging there, and he knew that this must be the nest.

“Gracious!” said Peter. “They must get terribly tossed about when the wind blows. I should think their babies would be thrown out.”

“Don't you worry about them,” said a voice.

Peter looked up to find Welcome Robin just over him. “Mrs. Goldy makes one of the most wonderful nests I know of,” continued Welcome Robin. “It is like a deep pocket made of grass, string, hair and bark, all woven together like a piece of cloth. It is so deep that it is quite safe for the babies, and they seem to enjoy being rocked by the wind. I shouldn't care for it myself because I like a solid foundation for my home, but the Goldies like it. It looks dangerous but it really is one of the safest nests I know of. Snakes and cats never get 'way up there and there are few feathered nest-robbers who can get at those eggs so deep down in the nest. Goldy is sometimes called Golden Robin. He isn't a Robin at all, but I would feel very proud if he were a member of my family. He's just as useful as he is handsome, and that's saying a great deal. He just dotes on caterpillars. There's Mrs. Robin calling me. Good-by, Peter.”

With this Welcome Robin flew away and Peter once more settled himself to think over all he had learned.

Source:

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