

A New Friend and an Old One

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit never will forget the first time he caught a glimpse of Glory the Cardinal, sometimes called Redbird. He had come up to the Old Orchard for his usual morning visit and just as he hopped over the old stone wall he heard a beautiful clear, loud whistle which drew his eyes to the top of an apple-tree. Peter stopped short with a little gasp of sheer astonishment and delight. Then he rubbed his eyes and looked again. He couldn't quite believe that he saw what he thought he saw. He hadn't supposed that any one, even among the feathered folks, could be quite so beautiful.

The stranger was dressed all in red, excepting a little black around the base of his bill. Even his bill was red. He wore a beautiful red crest which made him still more distinguished looking, and how he could sing! Peter had noticed that quite often the most beautifully dressed birds have the poorest songs. But this stranger's song was as beautiful as his coat, and that was one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful, that Peter ever had seen. Of course he lost no time in hunting up Jenny Wren. "Who is it, Jenny? Who is that beautiful stranger with such a lovely song?" cried Peter, as soon as he caught sight of Jenny.

"It's Glory the Cardinal," replied Jenny Wren promptly. "Isn't he the loveliest thing you've ever seen? I do hope he is going to stay here. As I said before, I don't often envy any one's fine clothes, but when I see Glory I'm sometimes tempted to be envious. If I were Mrs. Cardinal I'm afraid I should be jealous. There she is in the very same tree with him. Did you ever see such a difference?"

Peter looked eagerly. Instead of the glorious red of Glory, Mrs. Cardinal wore a very dull dress. Her back was a brownish-gray. Her throat was a grayish-black. Her breast was a dull buff with a faint tinge of red. Her wings and tail were tinged with dull red. Altogether she was very soberly dressed, but a trim, neat looking little person. But if she wasn't handsomely dressed she could sing. In fact she was almost as good a singer as her handsome husband.

"I've noticed," said Peter, "that people with fine clothes spend most of their time thinking about them and are of very little use when it comes to real work in life."

"Well, you needn't think that of Glory," declared Jenny in her vigorous way. "He's just as fine as he is handsome. He's a model husband. If they make their home around here you'll find him doing his full share in the care of their babies. Sometimes they raise two families. When they do that, Glory takes charge of the first lot of youngsters as soon as they are able to leave the nest so that Mrs. Cardinal has nothing to worry about while she is sitting on the second lot of eggs. He fusses over them as if they were the only children in the world. Everybody loves Glory. Excuse me, Peter, I'm going over to find out if they are really going to stay."

When Jenny returned she was so excited she couldn't keep still a minute. "They like here, Peter!" she cried. "They like here so much that if they can find a place to suit them for a nest they're going to stay. I told them that it is the very best place in the world. They like an evergreen tree to build in, and I think they've got their eyes on those evergreens up near Farmer Brown's house. My, they will add a lot to the quality of this neighborhood."

Mr. and Mrs. Cardinal whistled and sang as if their hearts were bursting with joy, and Peter sat

around listening as if he had nothing else in the world to do. Probably he would have sat there the rest of the morning had he not caught sight of an old friend of whom he is very fond, Kitty the Catbird. In contrast with Glory, Kitty seemed a regular little Quaker, for he was dressed almost wholly in gray, a rather dark, slaty-gray. The top of his head and tail were black, and right at the base of his tail was a patch of chestnut color. He was a little smaller than Welcome Robin. There was no danger of mistaking him for anybody else, for there is no one dressed at all like him.

Peter forgot all about Glory in his pleasure at discovering the returned Kitty and hurried over to welcome him. Kitty had disappeared among the bushes along the old stone wall, but Peter had no trouble in finding him by the queer cries he was uttering, which were very like the meow of Black Pussy the Cat. They were very harsh and unpleasant and Peter understood perfectly why their maker is called the Catbird. He did not hurry in among the bushes at once but waited expectantly. In a few minutes the harsh cries ceased and then there came from the very same place a song which seemed to be made up of parts of the songs of all the other birds of the Old Orchard. It was not loud, but it was charming. It contained the clear whistle of Glory, and there was even the tinkle of Little Friend the Song Sparrow. The notes of other friends were in that song, and with them were notes of southern birds whose songs Kitty had learned while spending the winter in the South. Then there were notes all his own.

Peter listened until the song ended, then scampered in among the bushes. At once those harsh cries broke out again. You would have thought that Kitty was scolding Peter for coming to see him instead of being glad. But that was just Kitty's way. He is simply brimming over with fun and mischief, and delights to pretend.

When Peter found him, he was sitting with all his feathers puffed out until he looked almost like a ball with a head and tail. He looked positively sleepy. Then as he caught sight of Peter he drew those feathers down tight, cocked his tail up after the manner of Jenny Wren, and was as slim and trim looking as any bird of Peter's acquaintance. He didn't look at all like the same bird of the moment before. Then he dropped his tail as if he hadn't strength enough to hold it up at all. It hung straight down. He dropped his wings and all in a second made himself look fairly disreputable. But all the time his eyes were twinkling and snapping, and Peter knew that these changes in appearance were made out of pure fun and mischief.

"I've been wondering if you were coming back," cried Peter. "I don't know of any one of my feathered friends I would miss so much as you."

"Thank you," responded Kitty. "It's very nice of you to say that, Peter. If you are glad to see me I am still more glad to get back."

"Did you pass a pleasant winter down South?" asked Peter.

"Fairly so. Fairly so," replied Kitty. "By the way, Peter, I picked up some new songs down there. Would you like to hear them?"

"Of course," replied Peter, "but I don't think you need any new songs. I've never seen such a fellow for picking up other people's songs excepting Mocker the Mockingbird."

At the mention of Mocker a little cloud crossed Kitty's face for just an instant. "There's a fellow I really envy," said he. "I'm pretty good at imitating others, but Mocker is better. I'm hoping that, if I

practice enough, some day I can be as good. I saw a lot of him in the South and he certainly is clever.”

“Huh! You don't need to envy him,” retorted Peter. “You are some imitator yourself. How about those new notes you got when you were in the South?”

Kitty's face cleared, his throat swelled and he began to sing. It was a regular medley. It didn't seem as if so many notes could come from one throat. When it ended Peter had a question all ready.

“Are you going to build somewhere near here?” he asked.

“I certainly am,” replied Kitty. “Mrs. Catbird was delayed a day or two. I hope she'll get here today and then we'll get busy at once. I think we shall build in these bushes here somewhere. I'm glad Farmer Brown has sense enough to let them grow. They are just the kind of a place I like for a nest. They are near enough to Farmer Brown's garden, and the Old Orchard is right here. That's just the kind of a combination that suits me.”

Peter looked somewhat uncertain. “Why do you want to be near Farmer Brown's garden?” he asked.

“Because that is where I will get a good part of my living,” Kitty responded promptly. “He ought to be glad to have me about. Once in a while I take a little fruit, but I pay for it ten times over by the number of bugs and worms I get in his garden and the Old Orchard. I pride myself on being useful. There's nothing like being useful in this world, Peter.”

Peter nodded as if he quite agreed. Though, as you know and I know, Peter himself does very little except fill his own big stomach.

Source:

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