

The Young Robin Who Was Afraid to Fly

by Clara Dillingham Pierson

During the days when the four beautiful green-blue eggs lay in the nest, Mrs. Robin stayed quite closely at home. She said it was a very good place, for she could keep her eggs warm and still see all that was happening. The rail-end on which they had built was on the meadow side of the fence, over the tallest grasses and the graceful stalks of golden-rod. Here the Garter Snake drew his shining body through the tangled green, and here the Tree Frog often came for a quiet nap.

Just outside the fence the milkweeds grew, with every broad, pale green leaf slanting upward in their spring style. Here the Milkweed Caterpillars fed, and here, too, when the great balls of tiny dull pink blossoms dangled from the stalks, the Milkweed Butterflies hung all day long. All the teams from the farm-house passed along the quiet, grass-grown road, and those which were going to the farm as well. When Mrs. Robin saw a team coming, she always settled herself more deeply into her nest, so that not one of her brick-red breast feathers showed. Then she sat very still, only turning her head enough to watch the team as it came near, passed, and went out of sight down the road. Sometimes she did not even have to turn her head, for if she happened to be facing the road, she could with one eye watch the team come near, and with the other watch it go away. No bird, you know, ever has to look at anything with both eyes at once.

After the young Robins had outgrown their shells and broken and thrown them off, they were naked and red and blind. They lay in a heap in the bottom of the nest, and became so tangled that nobody but a bird could tell which was which. If they heard their father or their mother flying toward them, they would stretch up their necks and open their mouths. Then each would have some food poked down his throat, and would lie still until another mouthful was brought to him.

When they got their eyes open and began to grow more down, they were good little Robins and did exactly as they were told. It was easy to be good then, for they were not strong enough to want to go elsewhere, and they had all they wanted to eat. At night their mother sat in the nest and covered them with her soft feathers. When it rained she also did this. She was a kind and very hard-working mother. Mr. Robin worked quite as hard as she, and was exceedingly proud of his family.

But when their feathers began to grow, and each young Robin's sharp quills pricked his brothers and sisters if they pushed against him, then it was not so easy to be good. Four growing children in one little round bed sometimes found themselves rather crowded. One night Mrs. Robin said to her husband: "I am all tired out. I work as long as daylight lasts getting food for those children, and I cannot be here enough to teach them anything."

"Then they must learn to work for themselves," said Mr. Robin decidedly. "They are surely old enough."

"Why, they are just babies!" exclaimed his wife. "They have hardly any tails yet."

"They don't need tails to eat with," said he, "and they may as well begin now. I will not have you get so tired for this one brood."

Mrs. Robin said nothing more. Indeed, there was nothing more to be said, for she knew

perfectly well that her children would not eat with their tails if they had them. She loved her babies so that she almost disliked to see them grow up, yet she knew it was right for them to leave the nest. They were so large that they spread out over the edges of it already, and they must be taught to take care of themselves before it was time for her to rear her second brood.

The next morning all four children were made to hop out on to the rail. Their legs were not very strong and their toes sprawled weakly around. Sometimes they lurched and almost fell. Before leaving the nest they had felt big and very important; now they suddenly felt small and young and helpless. Once in a while one of them would hop feebly along the rail for a few steps. Then he would chirp in a frightened way, let his head settle down over his speckled breast, slide his eyelids over his eyes, and wait for more food to be brought to him.

Whenever a team went by, the oldest child shut his eyes. He thought they couldn't see him if he did that. The other children kept theirs open and watched to see what happened. Their father and mother had told them to watch, but the timid young Robin always shut his eyes in spite of that.

"We shall have trouble with him," said Mrs. Robin, "but he must be made to do as he is told, even if he is afraid." She shut her bill very tightly as she spoke, and Mr. Robin knew that he could safely trust the bringing-up of his timid son to her.

Mrs. Robin talked and talked to him, and still he shut his eyes every time that he was frightened. "I can't keep them open," he would say, "because when I am frightened I am always afraid, and I can't be brave when I am afraid."

"That is just when you must be brave," said his mother. "There is no use in being brave when there is nothing to fear, and it is a great deal braver to be brave when you are frightened than to be brave when you are not." You can see that she was a very wise Robin and a good mother. It would have been dreadful for her to let him grow up a coward.

At last the time came when the young birds were to fly to the ground and hop across the road. Both their father and their mother were there to show them how. "You must let go of the rail," they said. "You will never fly in the world unless you let go of the rail."

Three of the children fluttered and lurched and flew down. The timid young Robin would not try it. His father ordered and his mother coaxed, yet he only clung more closely to his rail and said, "I can't! I'm afraid!"

At last his mother said: "Very well. You shall stay there as long as you wish, but we cannot stay with you."

Then she chirped to her husband, and they and the three brave children went across the road, talking as they went. "Careful!" she would say. "Now another hop! That was fine! Now another!" And the father fluttered around and said: "Good! Good! You'll be grown-up before you know it." When they were across, the parents hunted food and fed their three brave children, tucking the mouthfuls far into their wide-open bills.

The timid little Robin on the fence felt very, very lonely. He was hungry, too. Whenever he saw his mother pick up a mouthful of food, he chirped loudly: "Me! Me! Me!" for he wanted her to bring it to him. She paid no attention to him for a long time. Then she called: "Do you think you can fly? Do

you think you can fly? Do you think?"

The timid little Robin hopped a few steps and chirped but never lifted a wing. Then his mother gave each of the other children a big mouthful.

The Robin on the fence huddled down into a miserable little bunch, and thought: "They don't care whether I ever have anything to eat. No, they don't!" Then he heard a rush of wings, and his mother stood before him with a bunch in her bill for him. He hopped toward her and she ran away. Then he sat down and cried. She hopped back and looked lovingly at him, but couldn't speak because her bill was so full. Across the road the Robin father stayed with his brave children and called out, "Earn it, my son, earn it!"

The young Robin stretched out his neck and opened his bill—but his mother flew to the ground. He was so hungry—so very, very hungry,—that for a minute he quite forgot to be afraid, and he leaned toward her and toppled over. He fluttered his wings without thinking, and the first he knew he had flown to the ground. He was hardly there before his mother was feeding him and his father was singing: "Do you know what you did? Do you know what you did? Do you know?"

Before his tail was grown the timid Robin had become as brave as any of the children, for, you know, after you begin to be brave you always want to go on. But the Garter Snake says that Mrs. Robin is the bravest of the family.

Source:

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