



PARTING GUESTS

By MARGARET EMERSON BAILEY

IN THE Chinese language there is a picture for the word hospitality. Almost any one could guess it. Two quick strokes of the pen in a fork for a biped, a flat stroke above him, the proffered roof. Take the horizontal stroke away and you have mere man, destitute, seeking shelter. Add it, and you stand committed, what you have is his. That that simple act is fraught with responsibilities we discovered when, in a similar attempt to communicate by sign language, we planted vines about our porch. And how lavish we were with our offer, much as if the Chinaman had repeated his symbol down the length of an interminable scroll to catch first, not the understanding, but the eye. At one end it took the form of a pipe vine, its great leaves a flat curtain against the sun. In front rambler roses whose comfortable crotches could not be missed, and over which, to eke out the foliage, the akebia twined its delicate five-fingered leaves. At the other end were soft tangles of clematis and a wisteria to furnish stiff support. Was it any wonder that those who flew might read?

Such an offer we should never have extended to human beings. We live in a churlish fashion back from the road, and talk a great deal of our privacy and the length of our approach. We like people to come when invited. We do not like to have them drop in. But let there be a flicker of an early redbreast and there is a supply of string already cut. In a moment it is strewn about the grass where a quick eye can see it. Let the chipmunk scamper across the lawn: he will hardly have assumed his pauper's attitude, have settled himself upon his little haunches, before a handful of grain is under his quivering nostrils. It takes bird or beast to find our manners.

When, then, on our arrival we found a robin installed upon our porch, we at once surrendered ownership. Since she had taken possession of the front door in answer to our invitation, as proper hosts we took the back. There was a magnificence about that act of surrender that should have been attended with a greater pomp. No royal abdication could have wrought more personal inconvenience. Bags, boxes, trunks, were heaped up by an irate expressman who had no patience with such fineness of courtesy, and who refused to manipulate them through the smaller door. It seemed a pity that it should look less like an act of hospitality than an eviction. But that day no foot was set upon the porch, and when night came the curtain was drawn early that the light might not shine into the robin's eyes.

LATER we found that we had acted with an excess of courtesy. Our guest was quite willing to share her province. Indeed, I think she preferred to, for as she sat spread out above her eggs with the tip of her tail and her shy head showing, she would cast a friendly eye upon me as I passed beneath, quite as though I gave diversion to her patient vigil. Sometimes her mate would scold me as I whisked a broom about the porch, and from his vantage point on the top maple twig would flap his wings and give sharp, testy squawks. But his displeasure seemed to come more from a masculine irritation at my housecleaning than from any personal dislike. And on the day the eggs were hatched I was surely taken into confidence. There was a tap of the bill, a quick turn of a listening ear, an eye cocked to see if I were watching. Then as I betrayed my eagerness, the mother would settle to her task again with an upward tilt of the beak that was sure reproof to my mere spinster's patience.

But after that day she had little time for me in the midst of her flurried trips. Her mate, with whom I now made acquaintance, was far more formal. His advance was methodical, made in calculated stages. Three hops up the steps, the flick of the tail, and a flutter to the chair back. Then a quick dart to the nest, and

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all the time a worm dangling down his waistcoat. It was his duty to provide, but he took his time about it and gave it an air of pompous condescension.

In a short time three yellow beaks appeared above the rim, opening at the first sign of approach. Then only I knew the meaning of the word "maw." There was no closing them. A quick gulp and again they were open. After a few days three long necks appeared, and it was at this stage that I marveled at maternal pride. But when at last the birds had feathered out and sat facing me, their beaks tilted upward, their white bibs showing, I berated myself for my distrust. By this time they had begun to give themselves airs. They plumed themselves like old fops. They resented cuddling. Even on cold days when their mother tried to hover them she found it awkward work, for no sooner would she settle over them than a head pried up each wing, and a small plump figure would sprawl out from beneath her breast.

AT LAST an evening came when protection was no longer possible. That night as I pulled down the curtain, I think I sensed their danger, tucked in for the first time without a sheltering wing, but I was not prepared for the sharp cry of anguish that later brought me to my feet. I arrived just in time to flash my torch upon two beady eyes and a gray figure scampering down the vines. When at last I had clambered to the nest and put my hand in, it was empty. Then as my mother held a flaring lamp, I felt about the ground below. In a moment my hands touched something soft and warm—a fat, downy little ball. Then another. The last I thought that I should never find; and indeed, had I not had in mind the evil face among the vines, I had given up the search. But finally I came across it, cowering perilously under foot. The first receptacle for the evicted family that we found in our desperation was the big tin to the fireless cooker, and there, after covering it with a warm cloth, we left them, ill-contented with their new abode.

I slept impatiently that night; I could not bear to think of the long weeks of patient brooding with no reward. At an early hour I heard a quick, eager caroling, followed by a hush, the silence of discovery. When in the cool, gray dawn I had rushed out with my burden, the father was already on the trellis, a worm dribbling from his beak, the mother making frantic search among the leaves. Swiftly I moved the tin upon the lawn and waited, but for the first time they eyed me with suspicion, as though I were but making sport of tragedy. Then lifting out one fledgling, I placed it fluttering in the grass. There was an instant sign of recognition, a quick tilt of the head. Back I put the bird and disappeared. In a moment I saw the mother swoop to within a few feet of the tin, hop cautiously toward it, peck its gleaming surface, and then listen, head cocked on one side. Round and round she went, much as I might have encircled an oil tank had I known it to contain my offspring, and at last, after a breathless summoning of courage, she hopped upon the rim, where she stood regarding fixedly the miracle before her eyes. But she was above all things practical, and was soon on the wing in search of food. Once I was sure that the tin had conveyed the idea of home, I moved it to the porch, and as she fluttered toward it, almost before I set it down, I knew that I was vindicated in her eyes.

And well I might be, for from that day my labors never ceased. Each morning when I arose to put out my hungry charges, their parents were already waiting, though now quite patiently, with worm in beak. But after all they were providers and had intermittent duties. I was nursemaid and mine never ceased. There was no reasoning with my foundlings, and no amount of pressure could convince them of their present safety. They simply didn't like the fireless cooker. They had only tolerated the nest because it gave an unimpeded outlook on the world outside. Sometimes a bee had buzzed by and they had opened their little beaks, or a fishhawk had swooped past and they had cowered in a delightful terror. But this was prison without a view. They protested. They summoned up their growing strength, and in two days the strongest of the trio had fluttered to the rim, where he sat hunched like an old man, but with a look of inquiry and daring in his young eyes.

IT WAS not long before, one and all, they had passed from my control. I could only guard them from afar, heading them off from places of danger by driving them in a quick process of hops across the lawn. In the daytime the mother seemed quite confident of her ability to cope with peril, and as I met her running down the path attended by her hungry brood, she would scold me roundly for my officious watchfulness. But at dusk she grew anxious and made sacrifice of her pride, summoning me to her assistance by squawks which were fretful at first, and insistent if I delayed. Then as I appeared, bearing the fireless cooker, she would flutter before me until one by one I had gathered in her brood. They, too, seemed to expect me as they crouched low in the grass like young runaways, their beaks uptilted for a peck at my covering hand. But with this one sign of resistance their bravado was ended and they were ready to snuggle down.

In these bedtime rites the father never took part. He would merely select his perch as spectator and watch with an interest which, if keen, was detached. But once I had started off to the house with my burden he would follow me with his song, uttered just before flight—an act of exquisite courtesy.

AT LAST an evening came when I heard no summons. I suspected that silence meant my release, but I wished to make sure. Low on the syringa bush I found the mother, but she made no move to share secrets, and, indeed, as she flew by without sign of recognition, I might have been a nursemaid whom she had dismissed. Yet though I was glad to be rid of my charges, I could not return her slight with indifference. I had been in the family too long for that. Instead I continued my search until high in the grape vines I came on a figure, wee and defenceless, but with a determined clutch to his claws and a set to his stubby tail that bade me defiance. He was no mollycoddle, but a man of the world, and empty-handed I returned.

Lonely as I was at their departure, I was determined that I should have no more guests. Had I been the Chinaman with the scroll I should have quickly made an erasure and scratched out my roof. But unfortunately my offer of hospitality had been put in more permanent form. I could not uproot it. Whenever it met with an eager acceptance I could only rush forth with a broom and by acts of persistent discourtesy proclaim that my invitation had been recalled.



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