

Robin

The old man worked away in his garden with hardly a pause, or even a brief stop. When he did stop to rest, one could see that his back was very bent. bent with the years of stooping over to plant and weed the ground. His once blue eyes were now faded to a washed-out blue, so pale that there was hardly any colour, giving the appearance of being sightless. But he was not! Far from being blind, he could see objects moving far over the distant fields and along the country road half a mile away. He could see the birds perched high in the elm trees on the edge of his garden. However he had no time for birds of any kind, shooing them away from his vegetable patch, spitting angry oaths out from the corner of his mouth.

"Ah, ah-ah!", he would snarl. "Them birds are a bloody nuisance. Git orf with yer!"

He would wave his long arms around his head like windmills, if even one small sparrow settled within six feet from his spade.

It was getting late in the day towards the end of April, and Old Ted, as he was known as by most people, was in a particularly awkward frame of mind. A spate of bills had dropped through his letter-box that morning, General rate, water rate, and ground rent for the coming quarter. He begrudged paying ground rent to a landlord who lived in the lap of luxury in Scotland. HE did not have to scrape and dig for a living! HE just sat back and let the money pour into his lap! Never mind the poor old feller with a bent back and varicose veins who lived all alone with no one to come near for days on end!.

"He'll be under the turf sooner than me." said Old Ted savagely, as he thrust his fork deep into the rich, loamy earth. It was then that he noticed all the birds sitting on the fence waiting to pounce on the worms and grubs with which to feed their young. The blackbirds were timid and flew off at the slightest movement of his hands. The sparrows hopped a few feet nearer, made sudden darts at the worms, and then flew off. But a pair of robins were bolder than the rest of the birds. They flew up and down and round Old Ted's fork, snatching beaks full of worms and grubs, flying off to their nest to feed their young, then returning time and time again for more.

Old Ted picked up his spade, and as the robins came back for the fifth time, he waved it around his head, Then using it as a cricket bat he caught one of the robins on the end, killing it instantly. The cock bird stood still for a while then flew off with its beak full of grubs. Then he came back again to sit beside the dead body of his dead mate. He looked up and down, from left to right, then circled round making sad little noises and whistles.

"Shouldn't have got in my way," roared Old Ted at the robin. The robin flew onto the handle of the old man's spade and stared into his eyes without blinking. The old man shook him off, but the bird came back again as fast as the man shook him off.

"Pesky thing!" shouted Old Ted, flinging down the spade.

The robin immediately perched on top of the old man's hat, resettling there as soon as it was brushed off. When the old man changed the spade for the fork, the robin flew off a little way and perched on top of the compost heap.

Old Ted began to feel very tired, and strangely for him, his back ached and his head felt rather hot, and so he took his hat off to wipe his brow. As he straightened his back to ease it a little, he decided to finish for the day. He picked up his jacket from the grass, and put it on. He then picked up his fork and walked over to where he had left the spade. As he bent down to get it he happened to glance up to where the robin still sat on the heap of rotting vegetation. It was watching him out of its beady little eyes.

"Git orf, you!" he said, and bent down to pick up the spade.

The robin made straight for the old man's hat. It clung on tightly with its tiny claws, pecking viciously until old Ted took his hat off, at which the bird flew off. But as soon as the has was put

on again, the bird resumed its clawing and pecking. And so it went on. No sooner did the hat go on Ted's head but the bird came back and as the hat came off the bird flew off to perch on the fence.

Old Ted opened his shed door to put away all his tools, except the spade which he would use as a support as he walked up the garden path. He carefully locked the shed door and made his way into the house. Once inside he sank down into the nearest chair feeling very tired.

From the corner of his eye he saw a shadow flick across the window and turning round he saw it was the robin clinging to the sash, pecking away at the glass pane. He started to prepare his evening meal. He filled the kettle from the tap, and as he was carrying it from the sink to the gas stove he heard the tapping again.

He looked up, and seeing the bird on the window-sill, dropped the kettle of water on to the floor. With trembling hands he picked up the kettle, mopped the water from the floor and drew the curtains over the window. Although it was late April and mild weather, he felt quite chilly, so he put a match to the fire and sat down in front of it until it started to glow. Feeling unable to keep his eyes open for long he dozed for a while. It was not until his stomach gave a loud rumble that he realised he had forgotten to eat. He put a pot of stew on to heat through and re-filled the kettle for his cup of tea. The hot stew and sweet tea was comforting and soon he felt relaxed enough to take off his boots, put on slippers, and read the daily paper.

The first thing to catch his eye was picture of some house martins building a nest in the eaves of a house. He rustled the paper angrily. He had them last year, four or five of them swirling and swooping over the garden, and making a mess right down the side of his bedroom window. He soon put a stop to that by opening the window and knocking the nest down with a long cane.

"Little perishers, they was." he muttered to himself. He put the paper down, cleared the table, and put the dishes in a bowl in the sink. Usually he was very tidy, clearing up as he went through the day, but tonight he was out of his regular habits.

He climbed the stairs to his small bed-room, which was where he slept since his wife had died. It was a warm room facing west, so the sun did not wake him too early in the morning. Also it was far away from the trees and the dawn chorus of the birds. Suddenly, he jerked his head to one side, thinking that he heard a noise from the kitchen, faint scratchings and squeaks. Down he went plodding in his bare feet expecting to see a mouse, but there on the table was the robin tearing his paper to pieces.

"How did you get in here?" he roared as he picked up what was left of the paper and waved it round his head. Old Ted moved across the room as the bird flew on to the lintel of the door, clinging on with its tiny claws. As Ted lumbered around, the bird flew to the bottom of the stairs, then up the stairs tread by tread until it reached the small bed-room. It rested for a moment on the bed, looking at Ted with unblinking eyes, then flew out of the window through the two inch gap at the bottom that the old man had left open for fresh air. Ted flung the window wide open, and lashed out at the bird, then closed it with a loud bang.

He slept fitfully that night. When he awoke next day he had a slight headache. It seemed to be at the top of his head in the exact spot where the robin had picked at it. His head felt sore just there, even though he had his hat on his head.

"No doubt it will wear off during the day." he thought, "It's cooler today than yesterday."

The clock showed the time to be a quarter to seven, so he rose carefully. pulled the bed-clothes to the bottom of the bed, opened the window to let in the air, dressed himself, and went downstairs to the kitchen.

He checked the front mat for possible letters. Not that he received many letters. A once-a-month duty letter from his daughter in Bristol, due about now, had arrived. He answered it straight away, so that she would know he was alright. She came to see him two or three times a year, staying for four days - which was about as much as they could stand of each other's

company. It was a love-hate relationship.

He opened the back door and walked down the garden to review the work he had done the day before. The air was soft and warm. Old Ted began to feel more like his old self again. He had half forgotten the robins.

"A fair day's going," he said feeling very satisfied with himself.

"If I finish down to here," marking a patch about six feet wide, "I'll call it a day and go to see about getting my saw sharpened."

As soon as he was inside the house the pain in his head started.

He ate a hurried breakfast, put on his gardening boots, and carefully closing the kitchen door behind him, went to the garden shed to select the tools for the day's work. He carried them over his shoulder to the place where he had left off the day before. He took the spade and dug into the ground so that it stood upright the hung his coat on the handle.

He bent down to pick up the fork and as he did so, he became aware of being watched by many eyes around him. He stood up to face the bottom of the garden. There in the trees at the end, were many birds, all looking down at him with their sharp little eyes. They were whistling softly and gently fluffing their feathers. They sharpened their beaks on the sides of the twigs, their little heads moving from side to side as they did so. Then he saw the robin.

It was standing as it had done the day before, on top of the compost heap near the body of it's dead mate. Old Ted quickly looked away and, stamping his feet in irritation, he took up the garden fork, thrusting it into the soft earth.

As he lifted each forkfull, he shook it a little so that the soft, dry loam fell loosely onto the ground. It had a rich, sweet smell of hay and rotting apples. People told him he was lucky to have such good soil, but he always told them that,

"You only got out of the ground what you put into it."

It was good and rich, and he did get good crops from it, but a lot of back breaking, hard work went into working it every day, all the year round. He sold some of the produce, and his daughter would take some home with her on the rare occasions when she came to visit him. Old Ted enjoyed vegetables of all kinds, and was not a big meat eater. He fell to wondering what he should put in the patch he had just turned over.

"Flowers, Ted. Put in some sweet peas!" He seemed to hear a soft voice in his ear. It was the pleading sound of his wife's voice. She loved flowers, which he said were a waste of space. He looked round for her; then remembered that she had been dead for the last fourteen years.

He felt the sting of tears welling up in his eyes. He wished he had planted more flowers for her when she was alive, but then, it was right, flowers didn't do much good; vegetables and fruit were much better. He began to feel very alone; and started to mutter to himself.

"It's very lonely being on your own. It doesn't matter what your partner is as long as you don't quarrel too much over things. Emmy and me used not to see eye to eye over much, but she was there. Even if she was always first up and last to go to bed... Life is for two people together.... mates if you like,.... yes, that is right, MATES!"

Old Ted came across a hard patch of ground which did not yield to his fork. So, throwing it carefully prongs downwards to the ground, he took up the spade to force it into the ground with his foot. He started to sweat a little and after a while his head began to ache in the place where the robin had pecked at the hat. The old man looked up quickly, to find the robin still watching him from the compost heap, still standing close to the tiny body of it's dead mate. Ted suddenly felt tired and a little afraid.

He felt cold and started to shiver. The shivering became violent, almost uncontrollable. So leaving the fork where it was, he slowly walked towards the house, using the spade as a support to help himself along. He opened the kitchen door, and making for the nearest chair, he sank down heavily into it. Through the open doorway he could see the robin hopping up the garden path, pausing now and then to look from side to side, as if to see if the coast was clear

for action. Old Ted just sat there without moving.

The robin came into the house, It hopped onto the handle of the spade which the old man was still holding, and started to peck at his fingers, very gently at first, then vigorously. The old man seemed powerless to move his hand. Strangely enough it did not hurt him. It was as if his hand was numb. Now, to his washed-out blue eyes the bird seemed to be growing larger and larger. It spoke to him, saying one word over and over again.

"Mate... mate..., Mate".

The old man nodded his head and could only repeat in a strangled, throaty voice,

"Mate... Mate... MATE."

The bird, now the size of a wild goose, was perched on top of his head.

Old Ted closed his eyes.

The postman found him next day, dead in his armchair, still clutching the spade in his hand. His knuckles were raw, as if he had been picking at them. As the postman touched the old man, his hat fell from his head to the floor, revealing a round, scarlet patch of skin where the hair had been plucked from the scalp.

The Cause of Death was... or at least was stated to be... Natural Causes.