

## THE BIRDS IN THE LETTER-BOX

*By Rene Bazin*

Nothing can describe the peace that surrounded the country parsonage. The parish was small, moderately honest, prosperous, and was used to the old priest, who had ruled it for thirty years. The town ended at the parsonage, and there began meadows which sloped down to the river and were filled in summer with the perfume of flowers and all the music of the earth. Behind the great house a kitchen-garden encroached on the meadow. The first ray of the sun was for it, and so was the last. Here the cherries ripened in May, and the currants often earlier, and a week before Assumption, usually, you could not pass within a hundred feet without breathing among the hedges the heavy odor of the melons.

But you must not think that the abbé of St. Philémon was a gourmand. He had reached the age when appetite is only a memory. His shoulders were bent, his face was wrinkled, he had two little gray eyes, one of which could not see any longer, and he was so deaf in one ear that if you happened to be on that side you just had to get round on the other.

Mercy, no! he did not eat all the fruits in his orchard. The boys got their share--and a big share--but the biggest share, by all odds, was eaten by the birds--the blackbirds, who lived there very comfortably all the year, and sang in return the best they could; the orioles, pretty birds of passage, who helped them in summer, and the sparrows, and the warblers of every variety; and the tomtits, swarms of them, with feathers as thick as your fingers, and they hung on the branches and pecked at a grape or scratched a pear--veritable little beasts of prey, whose only "thank you" was a shrill cry like a saw.

Even to them, old age had made the abbé of St. Philémon indulgent. "The beasts cannot correct their faults," he used to say; "if I got angry

at them for not changing I'd have to get angry with a good many of my parishioners!"

And he contented himself with clapping his hands together loud when he went into his orchard, so he should not see too much stealing.

Then there was a spreading of wings, as if all the silly flowers cut off by a great wind were flying away; gray, and white, and yellow, and mottled, a short flight, a rustling of leaves, and then quiet for five minutes. But what minutes! Fancy, if you can, that there was not one factory in the village, not a weaver or a blacksmith, and that the noise of men with their horses and cattle, spreading over the wide, distant plains, melted into the whispering of the breeze and was lost. Mills were unknown, the roads were little frequented, the railroads were very far away. Indeed, if the ravagers of his garden had repented for long the abbé would have fallen asleep of the silence over his breviary.

Fortunately, their return was prompt; a sparrow led the way, a jay followed, and then the whole swarm was back at work. And the abbé could walk up and down, close his book or open it, and murmur: "They'll not leave me a berry this year!"

It made no difference; not a bird left his prey, any more than if the good abbé had been a cone-shaped pear-tree, with thick leaves, balancing himself on the gravel of the walk.

The birds know that those who complain take no action. Every year they built their nests around the parsonage of St. Philémon in greater numbers than anywhere else. The best places were quickly taken, the hollows in the trees, the holes in the walls, the forks of the apple-trees and the elms, and you could see a brown beak, like the point of a sword, sticking out of a wisp of straw between all the rafters of the roof. One year, when all the places were taken, I suppose, a tomtit, in her embarrassment, spied the slit of the letter-box protected by its

little roof, at the right of the parsonage gate. She slipped in, was satisfied with the result of her explorations, and brought the materials to build a nest. There was nothing she neglected that would make it warm, neither the feathers, nor the horsehair, nor the wool, nor even the scales of lichens that cover old wood.

One morning the housekeeper came in perfectly furious, carrying a paper. She had found it under the laurel bush, at the foot of the garden.

"Look, sir, a paper, and dirty, too! They are up to fine doings!"

"Who, Philomène?"

"Your miserable birds; all the birds that you let stay here! Pretty soon they'll be building their nests in your soup-tureens!"

"I haven't but one."

"Haven't they got the idea of laying their eggs in your letter-box! I opened it because the postman rang and that doesn't happen every day. It was full of straw and horsehair and spiders' webs, with enough feathers to make a quilt, and, in the midst of all that, a beast that I didn't see hissed at me like a viper!"

The abbé of St. Philémon began to laugh like a grandfather when he hears of a baby's pranks.

"That must be a tomtit," said he, "they are the only birds clever enough to think of it. Be careful not to touch it, Philomène."

"No fear of that; it is not nice enough!"

The abbé went hastily through the garden, the house, the court planted with asparagus, till he came to the wall which separated the parsonage

from the public road, and there he carefully opened the letter-box, in which there would have been room enough for all the mail received in a year by all the inhabitants of the village.

Sure enough, he was not mistaken. The shape of the nest, like a pine-cone, its color and texture, and the lining, which showed through, made him smile. He heard the hiss of the brooding bird inside and replied:

"Rest easy, little one, I know you. Twenty-one days to hatch your eggs and three weeks to raise your family; that is what you want? You shall have it. I'll take away the key."

He did take away the key, and when he had finished the morning's duties--visits to his parishioners who were ill or in trouble; instructions to a boy who was to pick him out some fruit at the village: a climb up the steeple because a storm had loosened some stones, he remembered the tomtit and began to be afraid she would be troubled by the arrival of a letter while she was hatching her eggs.

The fear was almost groundless, because the people of St. Philémon did not receive any more letters than they sent. The postman had little to do on his rounds but to eat soup at one house, to have a drink at another and, once in a long while, to leave a letter from some conscript, or a bill for taxes at some distant farm. Nevertheless, since St. Robert's Day was near, which, as you know, conies on the 29th of April, the abbé thought it wise to write to the only three friends worthy of that name, whom death had left him, a layman and two priests: "My friend, do not congratulate me on my saint's day this year, if you please. It would inconvenience me to receive a letter at this time. Later I shall explain, and you will appreciate my reasons."

They thought that his eye was worse and did not write.

The abbé of St. Philémon was delighted. For three weeks he never entered his gate one time without thinking of the eggs, speckled with pink, that were lying in the letter-box, and when the twenty-first day came round he bent down and listened with his ear close to the slit of the box. Then he stood up beaming:

"I hear them chirp, Philomène; I hear them chirp. They owe their lives to me, sure enough, and they'll not be the ones to regret it any more than I."

He had in his bosom the heart of a child that had never grown old.

Now, at the same time, in the green room of the palace, at the chief town of the department, the bishop was deliberating over the appointments to be made with his regular councillors, his two grand vicars, the dean of the chapter, the secretary-general of the palace, and the director of the great academy. After he had appointed several vicars and priests he made this suggestion:

"Gentlemen of the council, I have in mind a candidate suitable in all respects for the parish of X-----; but I think it would be well, at least, to offer that charge and that honor to one of our oldest priests, the abbé of St. Philémon. He will undoubtedly refuse it, and his modesty, no less than his age, will be the cause; but we shall have shown, as far as we could, our appreciation of his virtues."

The five councilors approved unanimously, and that very evening a letter was sent from the palace, signed by the bishop, and which contained in a postscript: "Answer at once, my dear abbé; or, better, come to see me, because I must submit my appointments to the government within three days."

The letter arrived at St. Philémon the very day the tomtits were hatched. The postman had difficulty in slipping it into the slit of the

box, but it disappeared inside and lay touching the base of the nest, like a white pavement at the bottom of the dark chamber.

The time came when the tiny points on the wings of the little tomtits began to be covered with down. There were fourteen of them, and they twittered and staggered on their little feet, with their beaks open up to their eyes, never ceasing, from morning till night, to wait for food, eat it, digest it, and demand more. That was the first period, when the baby birds hadn't any sense. But in birds it doesn't last long. Very soon they quarrelled in the nest, which began to break with the fluttering of their wings, then they tumbled out of it and walked along the side of the box, peeped through the slit at the big world outside, and at last they ventured out.

The abbé of St. Philémon, with a neighboring priest, attended this pleasant garden party. When the little ones appeared beneath the roof of the box--two, three--together and took their flight, came back, started again, like bees at the door of a hive, he said:

"Behold, a babyhood ended and a good work accomplished. They are hardy and strong, every one."

The next day, during his hour of leisure after dinner, the abbé came to the box with the key in his hand. "Tap, tap," he went. There was no answer. "I thought so," said he. Then he opened the box and, mingled with the débris of the nest, the letter fell into his hands.

"Good Heavens!" said he, recognizing the writing. "A letter from the bishop; and in what a state! How long has it been here?"

His cheek grew pale as he read.

"Philomène, harness Robin quickly."

She came to see what was the matter before obeying.

"What have you there, sir?"

"The bishop has been waiting for me three weeks!"

"You've missed your chance," said the old woman.

The abbé was away until the next evening. When he came back he had a peaceful air, but sometimes peace is not attained without effort and we have to struggle to keep it. When he had helped to unharness Robin and had given him some hay, had changed his cassock and unpacked his box, from which he took a dozen little packages of things bought on his visit to the city, it was the very time that the birds assembled in the branches to tell each other about the day. There had been a shower and the drops still fell from the leaves as they were shaken by these bohemian couples looking for a good place to spend the night.

Recognizing their friend and master as he walked up and down the gravel path, they came down, fluttered about him, making an unusually loud noise, and the tomtits, the fourteen of the nest, whose feathers were still not quite grown, essayed their first spirals about the pear-trees and their first cries in the open air.

The abbé of St. Philémon watched them with a fatherly eye, but his tenderness was sad, as we look at things that have cost us dear.

"Well, my little ones, without me you would not be here, and without you I would be dead. I do not regret it at all, but don't insist. Your thanks are too noisy."

He clapped his hands impatiently.

He had never been ambitious, that is very sure, and, even at that moment, he told the truth. Nevertheless, the next day, after a night spent in talking to Philomène, he said to her:

"Next year, Philomène, if the tomtit comes back, let me know. It is decidedly inconvenient."

But the tomtit never came again--and neither did the letter from the bishop!