THE LOVE-BIRD

". . . The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

IT was impossible not to wonder what Robert Mainwroth would be like as an old man, or even as a middle-aged one, for elusive, witty and individual as he was, one yet could not fail to assign him to these especial years of which I write. And it is, actually, so much more difficult to be purposely amusing at seventy-five years of age than at thirty-five, so much easier to be so without the intention. His little eccentricities might by that time have sunk into absurdities. But old age was to be spared him. We shall never know now what manner of development or deterioration would have ensued, for he died, a few years ago, in his early forties.

He left me his journals and writings, but these served to reveal little of his character. One simple entry, however, I thought was an exception: though this may have interested me so much more than his ambitious pieces of writing only because I had witnessed the beginnings of, or at any rate prelude to, the episode described. Yet it certainly seemed to me that this slight, obviously true, story contained

more poignance than all his efforts at literature. It implied, one felt, a curious and sad allegory, which, though he may have been unconscious of this, summed up a side of his life, and filled him, even if he did not interpret it, with a deep sense of melancholy. I know, from the diary, that a sense of dejection out of all proportion to the trivial event itself, did, actually, attend it in his mind.

The facts, then, slight as they are, were jotted down quite plainly, with no attempt to throw them into any form. I had always intended to sort them out, but time passed, my memory betrayed me and I might never have done so, if I had not happened, a week or two ago, to look in at the window of a large antique-dealer's shop in King Street, St. James's. There in front of me, behind its sheet of ice, stood a very magnificent bird-cage, containing a stuffed or made-up bird that would doubtless chirrup when a spring was pressed. This rich and artificial prison seemed about to waken in my mind a very definite string of associations, for I was sure I had seen it before, though at first could not remember where. I wasted a little time, therefore, in staring at it, and suddenly the scene of our first acquaintance materialized for me, summoning up round it a number of varied and scintillating objects. Convinced that it was the identical cage itself, and recalling very vividly the part it had once played in the life of my friend, the minute drama it had once housed, I went back to the forgotten diaries, determined to try to draw together the fine threads of which this story is composed.

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To those who did not care for him, Robert Mainwroth gave an impression of being a scoffer, one who was rather eccentric and outside life. To those, on the other hand, who liked him—and, as his sensitiveness gradually evolved round itself the defensive armour of a perfect but laughing worldliness, they formed a steadily increasing band—he was a pivot of very modern, if mocking, activity. He was so intensely aware of all that was going on in the many different worlds round him, albeit so much of this action and effort appeared to him in itself to be ridiculous. In any case his character, under its outward suavity, whether assumed or innate, was definite enough to drive even those who met him for the first time into either one or the other pen, and matched the strongly drawn, rather Habsbourg cast of his features, his natural air of quiet, ugly distinction.

His chief interests had always lain in art, music and literature. But as a young man he had passed a year or two in the Civil Service, and had during that time quickly obtained a reputation, deserved if not difficult of achievement, as a wit. Indeed, in the decorous deserts of our public offices, amid the glue, the ink, the roll-topped desks, he must have seemed an oasis of pure fun. In those days he had been penniless except for his salary, but a sudden heritage both removed him from his office and provided a much wider circle of appreciation for his wit.

Most people take the extreme strokes of Fortune, whether good or bad, in much the same manner: there is little variety in their reception of them. But Robert, it must be admitted by enemy as much as

friend, regarded his good luck from a personal angle and treated it in his own particular fashion. Finding himself encumbered with family-houses and estates that lay scattered over half England, the new Sir Robert Mainwroth, in spite of a certain family pride which stiffened him at moments, proceeded at once, and with characteristic energy and enjoyment, to divest himself of everything that did not appeal to him personally, either esthetically or through his humour—and his senses of esthetics and humour were perilously akin. By so doing, he defeated in many different parts of the land rustic proverbs, such as

> "Come may, come what, much ill will fall
> When Mainwroth parts from Mainwroth Hall,"

and, I apprehend, was rather pleased at the storm of tumbling superstitions he had provoked, thereby sharing that particular modern sensation originated by the famous lady who first carried a pig up in an airplane, and thus killed a proverb stone-dead. It was so simple, he said, to build up for one short generation your own part of an antiquated family machine, but so hard to smash it deliberately and inaugurate in its stead a new instrument tuned to the times.

Consequently, estates, which had belonged to the Mainwroths since first they had begun to bully their male and marry their female neighbours, were sold, without apparently causing their vendor a pang of any sort—but then they were very well sold. This was not all. The portraits of his ancestors in armour, as much as the armour itself, the pictures of later

Mainwroths in long coats and periwigs, in tie-wigs, in powdered wigs of short, natural hair, the loose-lipped ugly beauties of Charles II's court, caressing the most innocent and beribboned of white sheep, then the family beauties, eighteenth-century sisters as a rule, swaying outward from, as it appeared, one slender-waisted stem, miniatures of Elizabethan and Jacobean members of the family, in ruffs and with their coats spattered with the spring flowers of English history, miniatures again, of the later epoch, mincing, rose-coloured but wistful—all, all were disposed of in dusty auction rooms, together with two vast libraries, one of which had been formed for an ancestor by Gibbon, and a whole corps-de-ballet of Meissen and Chelsea figures, pirouetting with their fragile, too pink-and-white legs over the greenest of green grass, sprinkled with the little blossoms of innocence, or blowing their minute, soundless pipes under the shade of never fading trees. He also caused to move in the direction of the sale room a jingling mountain of plate, Charles II and Queen Anne silver, the second of which, especially, by its utter simplicity and want of imagination, sent a thrill of excitement through every silver-bore in London (and the silver-bore, to be seen top-hatted and at work each Sunday afternoon in the marble halls of the Victoria and Albert Museum, constitutes a sub-species sans-pareil of his tribe). Still the work of breaking up the centuries continued. Now oak settees of elaborate and embossing design, tall, gilded chairs and tortoiseshell cabinets, ivory dressing-tables from Mogul India, painted chests from Italy, leather screens from Spain

and lacquer ones from China, French clocks of green enamel, tapestries that re-created the tents of the Middle Ages, were all torn apart, snatched out of the entity they had helped to form, and went to find a living death in the petrified perfection of some millionaire period-room.

Such smaller, in the sense of less valuable, objects as the moth-eaten heads of stag and buffalo, eagles with fly-blown plumage, rare albino-rabbits, the varnished masks of ferocious fish, their glass eyes glaring wildly, and fossils that resembled small Catherine-wheels, which must, at some time or other, have caught Medusa's eye, Robert divided among his numerous relatives. More especially did he distribute among them the multitudinous triumphs of the chase, furry or feathered mementoes. And a very long chase it had been: for, ever since the dawn of English history, the Mainwroth family had carried on a ceaseless but victorious feud against stags, otters, hares, badgers, rabbits and any bigger non-domestic animal of which they were able to get within reach, every kind of fish, and pheasants, grouse, snipe, woodcock, partridges and a quantity of other birds, and thus, during the passing of the centuries, had collected innumerable, but rather frayed, bits of them. All these Robert now, as we have said, presented to the Mainwroths, and felt a great joy both in giving of them and in their reception. But of the large, valuable things, he kept practically none and certainly gave none away. And the disposing of all this accumulated matter was no light business, occupied him for many months: nor do I regard it as inspired by selfish motives, though

there is little doubt in my mind that he was pleased at having created this false impression of brutal lack of sentiment.

Actually and in fact, he had been thoughtful and practical, had adapted his situation to his time. It was pointless and hopeless, he felt, in these days to own vast, draughty, machicolated mansions, ugly in their conglomerated selves, even if full of beautiful objects, all over one small land. The modern world dictated its terms to the rich, and the moneyed nomad, with a few tents pitched ready for his use in various parts of the world in, let us say, Paris, London, New York, Seville and Budapest, and with very easy means both of reaching them and leaving them, was the fortunate man of to-day. His heirs, as much as himself, ought to be gratified at the firmness and foresight he had evinced, for many a man would have been intimidated by the mere weight of such possessions into keeping them. Now they, too, would be equipped as modern men out of the increased income into which all these belongings had been transmuted, and would have no desire, and certainly no room in their small houses and large motor-cars, either for monumental pictures and pieces of furniture or for loads of clustering, clattering little things. No! Housemaids, those cross, shrill and superannuated vacuum-cleaners, were the only ones who must incur an inevitable loss. (Moreover, he used to add, he had been forced to these actions by the horde of indigent uncles and cousins inherited with the estates.)

Far from the ruthlessness of this prodigious sale being founded on a want of proper feeling, he maintained,

on the contrary, that it had been to a great extent inspired by sentiment. Consider, for example, the family pictures. To display a preference for one ancestor over another constituted a species of favouritism: he hated favouritism—and in any case, what principle was to guide you in it? If you decided to retain one picture, because it was a fine one, excellently painted, you both made a considerable financial sacrifice and slighted the other dead members of your family, who were doubtless just as estimable in life: probably more so, for, alas, the wicked man, no one will ever know why, is inevitably recorded by a better artist than the righteous man. Perhaps, Robert suggested, this might be because the profligate never considers expense or his heirs, and therefore pays the best artist of his time to paint his portrait: whereas the good man, ever mindful of future generations, at the time saves money on their behalf by commissioning a fifth-rate artist, recommended by a country neighbour, instead of a first-rate one, to execute his likeness, and through this act of thrift fines them an enormous fortune in subsequent years. It could not be too much stressed that in buying or ordering contemporary works there is nothing that pays in the end like "wanton extravagance."

Similarly, how could you be guided in your selection by the interest attaching to the persons represented? For the rake and wastrel notoriously absorb more of the attention of later generations than the prudent, diligent or prudish—Rochester and Pepys are remembered where so many more worthy are nameless and forgotten—and, indeed, the excesses of an ancestor

tend in time, he thought, to become a source of real pride to his descendants.

Out of the very substantial wreckage of his inheritance, then, all that Sir Robert Mainwroth elected to keep was such light flotsam as a musical-box, on the top of which, when you turned a handle, a few white-wigged figures in minute, ever so dusty, brocaded dresses danced a very staccato minuet; a French *singerie* panel of playful indecency, which was rescued from a gutted panelled room; a photograph, in a red plush frame, of two of his great-aunts, now very much of the old *régime*, and proving it by their constant abuse of Robert and his behaviour, but here depicted riding on a tandem bicycle, dressed in bloomers and straw hats; some humming birds in a glass case; some birds of paradise mounted in the same way; a silver snuff-box which played a tune by Mozart; an illustrated contemporary edition of Mrs. Hemans's poems; an 1820 razor, with a carved ivory handle and a hunting scene engraved on the blade; a tablecloth in blue and pink sateen, with a lace fringe, bought at the 1851 Exhibition; a signed photograph of Lord Tennyson, wearing a Scotch cape; a group (1848) of the Royal Family in Derby Biscuit; some water-colours representing the arrival of King Louis Philippe in England, on a state-visit, with all the details of the decoration of the dining-car and saloon of his train, and culminating in a meeting, bright with uniforms, of the English and French Royal Houses; a French eighteenth-century watch of ingenious mechanism and impropriety; a copy of the first of Bradshaw's Railway Guides; a

water-colour by one of his aunts of a lonely lighthouse and a sunset; and two rare Victorian ornaments, again under glass covers, wrought in pinchbeck that comprised three shades of gold. Since these require a more elaborate description than the items catalogued above, but are most difficult to sum up in words, it may be best to state plainly that they represent little dolphins, holding bunches of grapes in their mouths, and climbing, or wriggling, up rose bushes, of which the actual blossoms are fashioned in pink-and-white and blue-and-white porcelain, and to ask the reader to construct them boldly for himself in his own imagination. These last, airy if substantial, mixed metaphors were a source of keen pleasure to their new owner, as was one other object we have not mentioned in the list: a really magnificent bird-cage made of tortoiseshell and nacre, in which a bird, feathered but inanimate, sang very sweetly when a spring was pressed. If one were to seek the derivation of this lovely toy, one would evoke Turkey, the eighteenth-century turbaned Turkey of Bluebeard's Palace and a thousand irrigated gardens of rose and myrtle, as its natural home. The materials of which it was made were much esteemed, though in quite ordinary use, there. It might well have been the solace in long, idle hours of some Sultana in a harem; for the secluded life, the lack of education and outside interest, induced in its victims a great passion for all mechanical toys, and, more especially, for such other artificial beings, singing in their ornate and costly prisons. Robert, however, used to say that he liked it because the sham bird sang just as well as any real

one, needed much the same care and affection and differed only from the living creature in that it was cleaner, never sang save when you wished it, and did not impose upon its proprietor the necessity of ever peering about in fields and gardens for a tuft of groundsel.

Robert, now that he had successfully disengaged himself from his inherited effects, bought a small house in London, a flat in Paris, an apartment in Venice, a cottage in Bavaria, a little wooden palace on the shores of the Bosphorus, and two motor-cars, all of which resembled one another in their comfort and gaiety. Thus fitted out, he turned away from any profession toward his own enjoyment.

He was, in fact, a dilettante, but one in the best sense: for he aspired to be nothing but what he was. He talked well and amusingly; painted and wrote fluently, even with talent of an order. He often asked me to read what he had written, and occasionally, very occasionally, I thought I could distinguish another quality ruffling the surface of it, something sad and understanding that, it might be, he was at great pains to hide. So it seemed to me. Yet when others averred that he was artificial, cynical, and heartless, these were accusations difficult to rebut, for such sayings and tastes of his as we have detailed lent some colour to them. People wondered if he had ever loved, loved anybody or anything, had ever really cared? And what could one say, for as he sat in his drawing-room, smoking a cigarette, laughing—his usual mood—and surrounded by his, it must be admitted delightful, toys and musical-boxes, it could

but appear to the casual onlooker rather as though he was engaged in keeping life at arm's-length.

Yet if this was so, there must—and this his enemies could not comprehend—be some very good reason for it. It is easy, of course, to credit people with too much feeling, but had not something, I wondered, wounded him very deeply in early life? Might it not be that this Puck at the end of a long line, who mocked us all with his practical modernity, hid far down, but very far down, an unusual sensitiveness; that perhaps, he had so much felt the fear, love, excitement, terror and beauty of existence, had been so early singed by these things, that he would rather avoid life if he could, while yet, in attempting this, he had understood that by so doing he was forfeiting many things of inestimable value, and ran the risk of losing among them the very thing which might have tamed and humanized life for him? Or again, had these emotions existed formerly, and were they now, under the mask of fun and witty observance with which he had overlaid them, atrophied through long disuse? Creative talent might have cured him, I thought, but he had, and by so little, missed it. As it was, the refuge of the romantic lay, as ever, in illusion. Just as Pirandello's Enrico Quarto found his happiness and his reality in a false and distant epoch, from which he refused to emerge, so, perhaps, did Robert Mainwroth discover his reality and his happiness, which in this case signified calm, among all the paraphernalia of his carefully-planned months, full of little, beautiful surprises, birds that jumped out of boxes and sang, or photograph-albums that played the wedding march.

However, whether he loved or did not love, whether he felt so deeply or did not feel at all, there was no doubt that he was a delightful companion and a very good friend. Numberless people genuinely liked him. His nature was interesting, too: because in spite of its mocking quietude, there were obscure lapses of hot temper, and one was able to obtain out of him suddenly, when it was least expected, some angry response. At the time of which I am writing he was in his early or middle thirties, yet in some ways, in manner for example, gave an impression of being older. Underneath his calmness, moreover, he could fret about small things after the fashion of the elderly: and, though he knew many people and entertained many, when he was alone he seemed more alone than anybody I knew. Not that he was often bored, for he was in his own way energetic, and made a continual use of his continual leisure: in addition to writing and painting, he read an enormous amount. Or again he was perfectly happy engaged for hours in some perfectly futile and pointless occupation, such as himself inventing a small, silly toy, or executing drawings and caricatures from old photographs. At such things, he evinced considerable skill: and the more futile they were, the better he was amused. Yet it looked as though every year there would be less room, less use, for singing birds, real or artificial: even less for artificial than for real ones. (Perhaps this was why he loved his toys; some predilection for lost causes?) And he was, I believed, too wise behind his frivolous mask not to be aware of this.

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Though, as we have suggested, Robert was usually too busy, too much engaged in weaving his silken web of life, to be bored, he was nevertheless occasionally liable to moods of apparently reasonless depression: but are any moods of depression in fact unjustified? In his case, the origin of them may have been that he was conscious of possessing everything that, according to his own theory of life, was necessary to his happiness . . . and therefore, if temporarily he knew himself to be unhappy, his misery was by that much further aggravated.

In the full dead heat of one chattering July in London he was virulently attacked by such a feeling of heaviness at heart. It was, perhaps, because he was tired; so he comforted himself, but for some days it had seemed to him that nothing he did was worth doing, nothing he said worth saying, nothing he bought worth buying. He had, in fact, bought a model of a small piano, in ivory, which played Chopin waltzes when wound up: for he had attempted to use money in this way as a drug, to make him forget. And the antique-shops were so many caves of oblivion and hallucination. But it was not a success: the melancholy, nostalgic, minute tinkling that ensued served merely to emphasize his state of mind. Naturally his gloom deepened as Saturday night set in, with its misleading, noisy promise of incipient Sunday. And he had made no plans for warding it off.

On Sunday morning, he thought of a thousand pleasant things to combat the calendar—motor down to Bath for the day, visit some friends in the country,

spend the afternoon at Millbank examining the modern pictures, or go to sea or river to bathe—but no sooner did one of these ideas occur to him than it at once lost its attraction.

Outside it was brilliantly warm and fine. The Boy Scouts, or some kindred black-hand association, were making a great noise of marching milk-cans and mad motor-horns not far away. Further, there was a group of sweating Salvationists not far off, howling in joyous unison to the tinny accompaniment of their tambourines, while two maimed soldiers in the distance were playing "The Rosary" on a clarionet and phono-fiddle. (And then, Robert reflected, people insist that we are a musical nation: as though any other people in the world would tolerate such musical dementia in public places!) For the rest, top-hats and prayer-books and feather boas could be seen returning from church, and the smell of warm tar came in heavy gusts of acrid scent through the open windows. It was, in fact, a typical Sunday noon, and he felt that he did not want to go out. Yet he could settle to nothing. He sat down at the piano, and played for a few minutes, then shut it, and got up. He turned on every musical-box in his rooms in rotation, pressed all the buttons on his various trick-clocks, so that little figures shot out at him unexpectedly, while an eighteenth-century tune lifted its sweet but feeble rings of sound into the air. He tried the wireless, but found himself listening to the sermon which was rounding off a children's service in Edinburgh. The clergyman was just explaining to "his little ones," as he called them, that every flower was a love-letter from God (Robert

decided not to go to Kew, that afternoon, after all, and switched it off). He went back to the piano: then looked through some caricatures he had done, and an old album of valentines. Now he rapped out a newly invented spelling-game on the dial of his automatic telephone. Then he played for a little with those strange Victorian pictures, in cut-paper frames, of sailing-ships which, when a tag at the bottom is pulled, turn into mid-Victorian beauties, with ringlets, holding a bouquet, next into a cornfield sprinkled with red poppies, and in the end into a bleeding heart bordered with pansies and forget-me-nots. Alas! nothing really amused him. He could not read, but began to examine each sentence critically. Now everything outside was quiet: but suddenly a hymn-tune, called up by the Sunday quality of the day outside, and borne to him on a wave of ennui issuing from the countless dead hours spent in school-chapel, buzzed round inside his head like a sleepy bluebottle. For a moment, its inevitable, wheezy circlings amused him. But there was no means of ridding himself of it. Finally, he went to the piano and played a few bars of "God Save the King," hoping in this manner to impress mechanically upon the stranger within, who was responsible for the melancholy outburst, that he had endured enough of it. Even this did not suffice. He now, therefore, deliberately summoned up in his memory the most vapid refrains to combat it. Eventually the tune left him, but still he could settle to nothing, was more than ever depressed. It was ridiculous, a confession of failure, he felt, to be surrounded here by everything one wanted and yet

to suffer this vague discomfort, this sense of something lacking or amiss. . . .

At last, just before luncheon, an excellent meal to which he sat down alone, a new plan entered his head. He knew what he must do. It was best to struggle no longer, but instead submit, yield utterly to Sunday. (Why had he not gone to Church? It would for him have been an experience.) Was there anything, he asked himself, that was more typical of a London Sunday afternoon than a visit to the Zoological Gardens? Alas, he was not a member of the Society, and so would not be able to obtain the necessary ticket of admission—and then remembering that I was in London, he rang me up and asked if I could take him there. It was arranged: and he would send his car round for me first.

I came into the house for a few minutes before we started. When I entered, he was finishing luncheon, and on the sideboard were little mounds of fruit, peaches and grapes. Real this time, not artificial, and I recall asking him whether he fed his clockwork birds on them? Then he took me up to the drawing-room. I decided that the house was charming. There was about it an enchanted absurdity, of which beauty was born. And how refreshing, I thought to myself, to see a rich man in possession of a house which he has made for himself, that has not been foisted on him by some firm of exotic but willowy decorators, or taken out of cold-storage on his behalf by immensely learned period-mongers. How happy he ought to be here, in his own world! The sunlight struck glittering reflections out of countless glass-cases,

each one of which held in its convexity the dissolving mirage of another until the entire room seemed full of variously-shaped, transparent bubbles, and played within them upon the lyre-shaped tail of a bird of paradise, crystal flowers or a miniature ship, of which the hull, sails and rigging were all wrought of glass, or drew flights of colour from the flashing throats and wings of humming-birds as you walked. Each footstep made little jewelled nightingales, in their glass cages, quiver among their enamelled, blossoming trees, of which the branches were made of watch-springs, so that bird and flower ever moved as though upon an invisible breeze, and the room was soon filled with trills of bell-like music that resembled the smallest jets of fountains. Everything, flowers, carpets, chair-covers, the modern pictures which hung on the walls, praised life, as it were, against the living death that every period-room hymns. Many of the objects were beautiful in themselves, and all seemed so here, linked together as they were by the elusive personality of their owner. I remember particularly admiring the magnificent cage that has been already described, and the very tuneful singing of its mechanical prisoner, as, at a touch of the spring, he fluttered into life, opening and shutting his beak and wings. Once more I thought, as I looked round, how happy Robert ought to be here, in his own world. But to-day I could see he was restless, unsettled, and longing to escape out of his artificial paradise: and we hurried down into the car and off to the Zoo.

Samuel Butler has said somewhere, I suppose in his note-books, that there is no cure for nerves or

unhappiness so complete and effective as to watch the quiet antics of the larger animals; it is possible to lose oneself entirely in observing these moving hills of natural energy. Certainly the healing effect of it upon Robert was remarkable. His mood was changed abruptly. First we went to see the elephants, plodding heavily, swinging their trunks lithely from side to side, and regarding the world of men with an infinite wisdom, a great experience of good and evil, from those narrow little eyes set in the enormous, grey, wrinkled bulk of their heads. Then, there were the polar-bears, with their little heads set upon cruel, thick necks and clumsy shoulders, beckoning with abrupt and coaxing gestures to their keepers for more, many more, still-living fish. The terrible, beautiful whiteness of these animals imparted a spectral quality to their movements, and made one think of the men done to death by these quietly padding, shuffling ghosts in the frozen silence of a Polar night. Nothing, one knew, could stand up against the machinery of their strong and stealthy muscles. Meanwhile, near-by, little brown bears were rattling at the bars of their dens, screaming with rage like spoiled children, at the sight of jars of honey or golden syrup being carried past them to other animals. Then there were lions and tigers, panthers and black pumas, all of them executing within their dens, for they expected to be fed soon and were restless in consequence, the superb *chassés* of their lithe and ferocious tangos; and hippopotamuses and rhinoceroses, deep in their armoured dreams of Africa and its hot and turbid rivers, or, it may be, lost in some far more ancestral,

prehistoric vision of a quilted world-dominance, when the steaming swamps of the world were their playground, and they could wallow in the conquered mud of the five continents. Well, those days were over; and here they were, limited to small, cement baths within a den, and, temper to be deduced in each gouty, swollen limb, they grunted loudly, after the fashion of old men in clubs. Other dreamers, too, we visited: giraffes lost in their high-minded visions of the young, green shoots of palm-trees—palm-trees that were ever trying to starve them, for the higher up grew these tender morsels and the barer grew their long and plaited trunks, so much the farther up had their necks to stretch through the generations. We watched, too, the tribes of deer and antelope, leaping, spitting, and butting on their terraces, the supercilious, self-indulgent camel, carrying the burden of its seven stomachs, and that paragon of virtuous motherhood, the kangaroo. We ignored the turtles, peering cautiously out of their armoured umbrellas, the crocodiles smiling within their heated, stinking pools, and the monkeys leaping and chattering on their hill, swinging and hanging head-downwards from the branches of their trees. The seals and sea-lions, combining all the charm and cleverness of both land and water animals, engaged our interest for a little by their evident enjoyment of their own obviously highly perfected technique in games and tricks. But now we passed on to lesser things, to the blue-crested pigeons of Australia, and, from them, to a venomous little rock-garden sprinkled with delicate flowers. Indeed, this small plot of ground offered a rational

explanation for the horror of rock-gardens, which every person possessed of an esthetic sense must feel. It had always seemed a strange phobia, without foundation: but here, under every demure, Alpine or sub-arctic blossom was coiled a very malignant little serpent, or stretched in pretended death like a dead twig, lay a virulent lizard. At first you did not notice them. Only a running movement along the coil, a glimmer down the scales, would give warning of the viper, only a wicked, occasional flickering of the tongue would betray the presence of all these dwarf dragons. New ones quivered into squamous life each instant, as one gazed at rocks and flowers. Robert, I remember, pointed out to me the similarity between this sensation and the one which seizes on him who looks for a minute or two at "The Convent Garden," that masterpiece of pre-Raphaelite art, in the Ashmolean at Oxford. The Nun, in her grey clothes, stands in a garden. The grass at her feet is powdered with the innocent faces of spring flowers; in the foreground lies a pool, with a tadpole floating through it . . . apparently a solitary tadpole. But if you regard the painted water with sufficient care, tadpole after tadpole wriggles itself into your consciousness, and where before you saw only this one, now you see half a hundred. Counting them, seeing who could spot the greatest number, was at one time a recognized sport. So it was here, in this garden, where gradually, if you watched long enough, every pansy and rock-pink revealed a minute, spotted, and poisonous monster. All the same, I reflected, this little, flowery enclosure displayed rather

the same brightness, the same counterfeit innocence and cheerfulness as Robert's home. But then, as for that, so did the parrot-house—into which he insisted on going, for he was very much attached to the conjunction of their brilliant colours and inconsequent chatter—albeit the squawking and screaming there was very different from the clear but stifled music that issued out of his every room.

We spent a considerable time in watching the birds; blush-coral, stately cockatoos like palest-pink dowagers, that mumbled gently for a few minutes and then suddenly emitted an ear-splitting screech, their crests rising on their heads as though we had pressed the spring of one of Robert's toys; the macaws, like lackeys in their gorgeous liveries of blue and scarlet, chained to their perches, and pecking at the world with cruel, sneering beaks; and then the little love-birds, nestling close to each other in couples—all, that is to say, except a solitary, green-feathered one who sat quietly on a perch of its own. It could not have mated yet, we surmised, for they say that when a love-bird dies its mate dies too.

Sometimes an animal or bird shows an immediate response to a human being, and this little bird showed signs of a[illegible] as we approached him, coquetting with head on one side, and advancing along the perch to meet us. Perhaps he thought we brought him food; he remained extremely amiable, but on closer acquaintance evinced a quite unmistakable preference for Robert Mainwroth. This was a love, too, that was returned, for Robert could not tear himself away, stayed there for nearly half an hour, stroking its

green, downy head and talking to it. Moreover, as he turned away, he confessed how much he wished that he was the owner of this fascinating little creature —or one resembling it. But probably, even if he could contrive to get possession of it, there would be no room for it in his house, he added.

He drove me home. We parted, and the rest of the episode, or shall one say the sequel to this episode, is extracted from his diary. No sooner had he returned to a solitary, very solitary tea, in his drawing-room, when in at the wide-open window, from this typical Sunday afternoon of chirping sparrows and distant, rasping-voiced dogs, there flew a green love-bird—to all appearances the same one he had so recently left. It fluttered round the pink-painted ceiling, but without any of the bumping of fear or surprise: nor did it for an instant, as might so easily have happened, knock into any of his clustered fragilities.

Robert was startled at the coincidence, for though it could scarcely be the actual bird from the Zoological Gardens, this, too, was an Indian love-bird, identical to look at, so that only another love-bird could have presumed to tell the difference. He had expressed a wish. Here, and in so short a time, it had been answered. That, in itself, constituted an occurrence of such rarity that it was sufficient both to please enormously and rather to frighten one. And, after all, the love-bird was not a common feature of the English landscape or townscape. No, it was a surprising, extraordinary event, which one would never forget. And, as the bird fluttered round about him,

there seemed to him something symbolic and incomprehensible in its flight, in its arrival. It must have escaped from somewhere, he supposed. He had heard it said by the superstitious that it brought bad luck to the owner of a house if a bird flew into it; but that, he comforted himself, applied more to choleric, red bull-finches and homely starlings than to a jade-green parakeet from distant Asia. Meanwhile the bird was shortening the circles of its flight. Suddenly it settled near him, showing no terror, but remaining there quite contentedly. He grasped it firmly, and placed it on his other hand. It balanced itself on an outstretched finger, and allowed him to promenade with it round the room. He rang for the footman, and told him to bring some fruit for it up from the dining-room. It was brought, and the bird accepted a freckled strawberry from his fingers with grace and promptitude.

And now a quite irrational joy seized on Sir Robert Mainwroth for his good fortune. He was more pleased, excited, than he had ever been at his large and unexpected inheritance. A deep, inner joy welled up in him, and he was in a different world from that of the morning, when the gloom of this particular Sunday had for him summed up and crowned the depression of a hot and tiring week; a tiring, pointless week that had seemed the epitome of a lifetime. A different world—and yet the same, save that his whole house looked as he had wished it to look, and that every object, every toy was fresh in its appeal. But now a fear swept down on his heart, a new fear—lest he would lose this lovely, living

green toy, which appeared to know that it belonged to him: a terror that it might fly away again, be caught by cats, or singed by the lights in the room even. It was necessary to be practical. But there was no bird-cage in the house. It was Sunday, and impossible to buy one.

And then he remembered his cage. The only thing to be done was to place the newcomer in the grand mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell affair that contained the stuffed bird. The living thing could not injure the dead one. But the parakeet would not enter, and Robert was afraid of hurting it. They resorted to stratagem. The small gate in the vast cage was left open, and grapes, strawberries, and bits of peaches were pressed enticingly between the precious bars of the further side, opposite the door. At last the love-bird responded, entered the trap, consented to be shut into this transparent, harem-like magnificence and solitude. Alone again, perhaps it thought. Alas, not so alone, after all; for now, of a sudden, its round, twinkling eyes espied the brightly-coloured, though somewhat moulting, bird-effigy that, with a certain stiff pride, occupied the centre of the golden perch. Its staring, unquivering beads of glass mocked the whole parrot-tribe. The love-bird was first struck motionless, and then made a high, shrill sound of anger. For a moment it hovered, a green flame in the air, round this stuffed image in a minute but quite comprehensible dance of rage; after which, it fluttered at it with sharp claws and tearing little beak in full battle-array of ruffled plumage. In the beginning it must have thought the creature alive,

but this hard, inanimate dummy of an enemy that it proved to be, was even more unendurable: and it pecked at it long and viciously, loosening one or two feathers. The scene was in its way so comic that Robert was almost tempted to wind up the machine and make the effigy pipe out its song. But this would be unkind, he felt. Already the little bird was disheartened, spurned the cornucopia of honeyed, jewel-like fruits with which it had been provided, and that matched so well the richness of its prison. Retreating now to the far end of the perch, it swivelled its green head right round behind, after the manner of all parakeets, and burying it in the green, soft feathers under the back of its neck, appeared to sleep. In any case it remained completely irresponsive to the coaxing of its new master, paid no heed at all to him. But after about an hour's rest, it roused itself again, sidled gently toward its hated rival, and proceeded to peck it once more, but this time slowly, deliberately, and with no sign of anger, as though to discover to what lengths one could go, to what extent attack it without provoking an onslaught in return from this larger and most unusual bird. Then, having carried out this scouting expedition, it retired again to the farther end of its golden perch, and slept, or pretended to sleep. So it remained that evening, until a cloth was put over the cage for the night.

But none of these happenings altered Robert's new mood. They only made him love this toy the more. At any rate, it was safe in the cage for the night: nothing could attack it. And he went to bed in this new happiness and easiness of spirit, his only fear

that in the morning the owners might trace, and attempt to reclaim it.

The next morning Robert found his love-bird still cross and sulky. The fruit was untouched. But this did not worry him, for soon it would have a cage to itself; and he left the house at once to buy it one.

When, within half an hour, he returned with his new purchase, the drama was over. The artificial bird had been torn feather from feather, its remains spread all over the splendid cage; even the glue, with which the plumage had been stuck on, was revealed upon this now hideous, bare mockery. But the little love-bird lay dead, too, in a corner.

There seemed to have been no reason for its death: though it might, the housekeeper suggested, have died, poisoned by some preservative in the feathers of the sham bird it had fought, or perhaps the sparrows had chased it and pecked it the evening before. But it had seemed well enough on its arrival in the house. . . . So the real bird, then, had been killed by the artificial one it had fought, had died from jealousy of it.

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An intense sadness, it appears from Robert's journal, fell down upon him: a sadness quite out of all proportion, sensible people would have said, to the actual loss. Here he possessed everything he wanted, could possibly want, and yet was moping over a bird —and one he had only known for a few hours. If he had not minded selling all the furniture and pictures of his own family, why should he mind a small thing like this, they asked? Perhaps it was only because

a perfect and beautiful little incident had ended so pitifully. Or was it that some meaning he could not fathom was concealed in it?

He never found out to whom the bird belonged or where it had come from. The cage he had bought for it was hidden and put away: but he could not bear to see the other, beautiful cage, either. The effigy was never repaired, nor a new one constructed. And now Robert, too, is dead—has been dead three or four years. The bric-à-brac he loved, the mechanical nightingales, the clocks and musical-boxes, are broken or in dusty shops for sale, since nobody wants them. Little is left of him save this story—and this itself was dependent on the chance which led me to look in at the window of the antique-shop in King Street. But certainly I recognized the large bird-cage of tortoiseshell and nacre: and I thought that the renovated, stuffed bird within looked younger and more modern than when I last heard him sing in Sir Robert Mainwroth's house.