

George M. Wright

The Magic Window

This is a story of many years ago, of things that were told by the magic kitchen window in an old home on Laguna Street in San Francisco. A very magic window this, for grown-ups could rub and rub its glass without ever seeing more than a very indifferent backyard, while children had merely to press their adaptable little noses against its cool surface to find themselves in an enchanted world full of the most exciting adventures.

Great tears rolled down the cheeks of two small brothers, one four, one five, huddled in the window watching the twilight of a summer day in 1909. Their pet guinea pig had disappeared down the dark alley-way and out of their tender young hearts forever, grasped in the jaws of a marauding Scotch terrier.

Six years later, a bird-bath devised from the saucer of a large jardiniere was installed in one corner of the little garden. For three weeks the water was freshened daily, but no bird was tempted, and only a cat, black and ominous, came to drink and leer up at the window. Then one morning, at breakfast time, a bird came fluttering down through the vines on the old board fence and gingerly hopped on to the rim of the bath, dipping up a billful or two of water, before hastening off in the greatest confusion. But—most horrible of doubts—perhaps this was just a common “chippy.” Not until his birthday brought a bird guide to his

hands did the embryonic ornithologist who watched at the kitchen window identify his guest as a song sparrow. A big game hunter bagging his first white rhinoceros could never have been more puffed with pride of success. From that day on, little song sparrow was his favorite bird, and neither sandhill crane, nor surfbird, nor trumpeter swan, met with in faraway places in later years, ever challenged its throne.

The song sparrow must have been the trail-blazer who told others, for soon the Nuttall's sparrows came. After that there were green-backed goldfinches, Anna's and Allen's hummers, and others. In autumn, winter migrants came to swell the list. The magic window revealed yellow warblers, western tanagers, and red-breasted nuthatches, to the one who possessed its secret, but ordinary folk could never see anything but “those dirty sparrows,” and they fretted about smudge marks on the glass and the putty that was

crumbling on the sills.

One winter, a hermit thrush, most chic of birds, came to live in the block. A bath a week more than satisfied the bird student at the window, but the hermit was not content with one a day. Two or three, each followed by a complete toilet, were necessary to maintain the perfection of order that marked its dress. One morning in early spring just before the regular time for the northward departure of its kind, it was found feet up at the foot of a wall near a small tree. Not a feather was deranged, and the cause of death remains a mystery to this day. The thrush was buried under the moss-covered wall.

Another year a flock of restless robins blew down out of the sky, like leaves scuttling before a storm. They feasted on the black berries of an English ivy hedge that had grown and spread for years over a nearby garden bulkhead. Theirs was not the faint-hearted way, and they seemed to give confidence to the shier birds. Even the red-shafted flicker followed their lead into the garden. Three robins tried to occupy the bath at once, and the little song sparrows, the ruby-crowned kinglets, and the bush-tit bided their turn in the safety of the bushes.

A Wilson's snipe with a broken wing was rescued at Merced Lake and brought to the Laguna Street house. After a futile attempt to put the wing in splints, the bird was released in the garden. Though it

would follow the fence line all around, it did not seem to know how to get the earth worms that were so quickly discovered and pulled out by the robins. So the worms were first dug in the garden, then packed into some damp earth which was carried in on a flat piece of cardboard and deposited right next to a wall in one of the carpeted rooms. As soon as the snipe came to this earth in its patrol along the walls, it would begin to feed by thrusting its long bill with sensitive expansible tip straight downward into the earth and drawing out the worms. Apparently the hit-and-miss method was used in locating food.

A feeding table was mounted on a long willowy pole out in the central flower bed. This bed was planted with narcissus bulbs, which still lay dormant. The saucy English sparrows, the golden-crowned sparrows, and the Nuttall's sparrows scattered the food off the table on to the ground, and the more timid birds learned to come there for the seeds long before they dared to venture on the table.

Early one spring morning in 1920, it must have been about seven o'clock, a robin was busy on the feeding table when a large rat ran out from under a shed to feed on the crumbs scattered below. In an instant the robin was down on the ground and chasing that rat around and around the feed table at such speed that it was not possible to distinguish anything beyond a blur of motion.

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After a few seconds of this, the rat
darted off at a tangent headed for the
shed, in complete rout.

That fall the boy who had been
born in the old house moved away,
and with him went the secret of the
magic window.

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