

The Lay of the Little Bird

translated by

Eugene Mason

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Once upon a time, more than a hundred years ago, there lived a rich villein whose name I cannot now tell, who owned meadows and woods and waters, and all things which go to the making of a rich man. His manor was so fair and so delightful that all the world did not contain its peer. My true story would seem to you but idle fable if I set its beauty before you, for verily I believe that never yet was built so strong a keep and so gracious a tower. A river flowed around this fair domain, and enclosed an orchard planted with all manner of fruitful trees. This sweet fief was builded by a certain knight, whose heir sold it to a villein; for thus pass baronies from hand to hand, and town and manor change their master, always falling from bad to worse. The orchard was fair beyond content. Herbs grew there of every fashion, more than I am able to name. But at least I can tell you that so sweet was the savour of roses and other flowers and simples, that sick persons, borne within that garden in a litter, walked forth sound and well for having passed the night in so lovely a place. Indeed, so smooth and level was the sward, so tall the trees, so various the fruit, that the cunning gardener must surely have been a magician, as appears by certain infallible proofs.

Now in the middle of this great orchard sprang a fountain of clear, pure water. It boiled forth out of the ground, but was always colder than any marble. Tall trees stood about the well, and their leafy branches made a cool shadow there, even during the longest day of summer heat. Not a ray of the sun fell within that spot, though it were the month of May, so thick and close was the leafage. Of all these trees the fairest and the most pleasant was a pine. To this pine came a singing bird twice every day for ease of heart. Early in the morning he came, when monks chant their matins, and again in the evening, a little after vespers. He was smaller than a sparrow, but larger than a wren, and he sang so sweetly that neither lark nor nightingale nor black bird, nay, nor siren even, was

so grateful to the ear. He sang lays and ballads, and the newest refrain of the minstrel and the spinner at her wheel. Sweeter was his tune than harp or viol, and gayer than the country dance. No man had heard so marvellous a thing; for such was the virtue in his song that the saddest and the most dolent forgot to grieve whilst he listened to the tune, love flowered sweetly in his heart, and for a space he was rich and happy as any emperor or king, though but a burgess of the city or a villein of the field. Yea, if that ditty had lasted a hundred years, yet would he have stayed the century through to listen to so lovely a song, for it gave to every man whilst he hearkened, love, and riches, and his heart's desire.

But all the beauty of the pleasaunce drew its being from the song of the bird; for from his chant flowed love which gives its shadow to the tree, its healing to the simple, and its colour to the flower. Without that song the fountain would have ceased to spring, and the green garden become a little dry dust, for in its sweetness lay all their virtue.

The villein, who was lord of this domain, walked every day within his garden to hearken to the bird. On a certain morning he came to the well to bathe his face in the cold spring, and the bird, hidden close within the pine branches, poured out his full heart in a delightful lay, from which rich profit might be drawn.

"Listen," chanted the bird in his own tongue, "listen to my voice, oh, knight, and clerk, and layman, ye who concern yourselves with love, and suffer with its dolours: listen, also, ye maidens, fair and coy and gracious, who seek first the gifts and beauty of the world. I speak truth and do not lie. Closer should you cleave to God than to any earthly lover, right willingly should you seek His altar, more firmly should you hold to His commandment than to any mortal's pleasure. So you serve God and Love in such fashion, no harm can come to any, for God and Love are one. God loves sense and chivalry; and Love holds them not in despite. God hates pride and false seeming; and Love loveth loyalty. God praiseth honour and courtesy; and fair Love disdaineth them not. God lendeth His ear to prayer; neither doth Love refuse it her heart. God granteth largesse to the generous; but the grudging man, and the envious, the felon and the wrathful, doth He abhor. But courtesy and honour, good sense and loyalty, are the leal vassals of Love, and so you

hold truly to them, God and the beauty of the world shall be added to you besides."

Thus told the bird in his song.

But when he saw the villein beneath the pine hearkening to his words, straight he changed his note, for well he knew him to be covetous and disloyal, and so he sang in quite another fashion.

"Oh, river, cease to flow; crumble, thou manor, keep and tower; let the grass wither with the rose, and the tall tree stand bare, for the gentle dames and knights come no more who once delighted in my song, and to whom this fountain was dear. In place of the brave and generous knights, set upon honour, stands this envious churl, greedy of naught but money. Those came to hear my song for solace, and for love of love; he but to eat and drink the more, and for ease of his gluttony."

And when the bird had thus spoken he took his flight.

Now the villein, who had listened to this song, thought within himself that might he snare so marvellous a bird, very easily could he sell him at a great price; or if he might not sell him, at least he could set him fast in a cage and hearken his lay at pleasure both early and late. So he climbed within the tree and sought and searched and pried until he marked the branch from whence the bird was wont to sing. There he set a cunning snare, and waited to see what time should make clear. At the hour of vespers the bird returned to the orchard, and lighting upon the branch was fast taken in the net. Then the villein came forth, and mounting quickly, joyously seized him in his hand.

"Small profit will you have of your labour," said the bird, "for I can pay but a poor ransom."

"At least I shall be paid in songs," answered the villein. "You were wont to sing for your own pleasure, now you will carol for mine."

"Think not so," replied the bird. "He who is used to the freedom of wood and meadow and river can not live prisoned in a cage. What solace may I find there, or joy? Open your hand, fair sweet friend, for be assured no captive has a heart for songs."

"By my faith, then, you shall be served at table."

"Never will you have dined worse, for there is nothing of me. I pray you to let me go, for it were a sin to slay me."

“By my faith, you talk and talk; the more you plead, the less will I grant.”

“Certes,” answered the bird, “you are in your right, for such is the law. Many a time have I heard tell that the uncharitable granteth no alms. But there is a proverb that teaches that often man gives in his own interest what cannot be taken from him by force. Now, if you release me from this net I will make you free of three secrets which are little known to men of your lineage, and from which you may draw much profit.”

“Tell me these secrets,” said the villein, “and I will open my hand.”

“Such faith have I in you,” answered the bird, “that I will speak only when you free me from the snare.”

The villein opened his hand, and the bird flew to a place of surety. His feathers were all ruffled, for he had been grossly handled by a glove not of silk but of wool, so he preened and plumed himself carefully with his beak. But the villein grew impatient, and urged him to pay his ransom. Now the bird was full of guile, so presently he made answer to the churl.

“Hear now the first of my three weighty secrets—Do not believe all that you may hear.”

The villein frowned with anger, and answered that he knew it well.

“Fair friend, forget it never,” replied the bird.

“Much I fear that I did foolishly in letting you from the snare. This secret was plain to me before; but now tell me the two others.”

“They are fair and wise,” said the bird. “Listen well to my second weighty secret—Do not regret what you have never lost.”

“You mock me,” cried the villein, “and do wrong to the faith you plighted with me. You pledged your word to tell me three secrets known but little to men of such lineage as mine, and you give me musty proverbs told over by all the world. Certes, what manner of man is he who weeps over what he has never had!”

“Shall I tell it once again,” replied the bird, “for great fear have I lest it should travel from your mind.”

“By my head,” answered the villein, “I am a fairer scholar than you think. These two proverbs have naught to teach me; but hold truly to our covenant and bargain, and let the third secret contain a graver matter.”

“Listen well to my third secret,” said the bird, “for he who receives it shall never be poor.”

“Ah, tell me this secret quickly,” cried the churl, “for it draws near the hour of meat, and truly, beyond all things, do I desire to grow rich.”

Now when the bird heard him—

“This be thy punishment, oh, thou false churl—What you hold in your hand, never throw between your feet.”

Then was the villein all wrathful; but when words came to him to speak, he said—

“And are these your three mighty secrets! Why, these are but children’s riddles, which I have known ever since I was born. You have but lied to me, and of all your teaching had I full knowledge long before.”

“By my faith,” responded the bird, “had you known my third secret never would you have let me from your hand.”

“You say well,” said the villein, “but at least knew I the two other proverbs.”

“Ah,” said the bird, with malice, “but this proverb was worth a hundred of the others.”

“In what manner?” inquired the villein.

“What, know you not what has chanced to you? Had you slain me when I was in your power that day would have been the happiest of your life. For in my body is a jewel, so precious and so rare, that it weighs at least three ounces. Yea, the virtue of this stone is such that he who owns it has but to wish, and lo, his desire is fulfilled.”

When the villein heard this thing he beat upon his breast, he tore his raiment, and disfigured his face with his nails, crying out that he was wretched and undone. The bird from his refuge in the tree rejoiced greatly to observe the churl’s miserable plight, and said nothing till his enemy’s clothes were torn to rags, and his hands sore wounded in many places. Then he spake—

“Miserable churl, when you held me fast in your rude hand, easy was it to know that I was no larger than a sparrow or a finch, and weighed less than half an ounce. How, then, could a precious stone, three ounces in weight, be hid in my body? Now will I prove to you that of my three secrets you understood not a single one. You asked me what man was

fool enough to weep over that which he had never lost, and even now I watch your tears fall for a jewel which was never yours, nor will be ever. You had faith in all that I was pleased to tell you, trusting all you heard; and in your folly you flung the bird you held in hand between your very feet. Fair friend, con over my three secrets, and learn wisdom even from the counsel of a bird."

When he had spoken thus he took his flight, and from that hour the orchard knew him no more. With the ceasing of his song the leaves withered from the pine, the garden became a little dry dust, and the fountain forgot to flow. Thus the rich villein lost his pleasaunce, which once was fair beyond content. And remember well, fair lords and dames, that truly speaks the proverb, "He who covet another's good, oft loses his own," as we may learn from the "Lay of the Little Bird."