

All Parrots Speak

PARROTS are amusing, decorative, long-lived, and faithful in their affections, but the quality which distinguishes them from most of God’s other inventions is their ability to imitate the sounds of human speech. A parrot that cannot talk or sing is, we feel, an incomplete parrot. For some reason it fascinates us to see a small, feather-covered creature with a ludicrous, senile face speaking a human language—so much, indeed, that the more simple-minded of us tend to take seriously the idea suggested by our subconscious: that a parrot really is a person (in disguise, of course), but capable of human thought and feeling.

In Central America and Mexico I have listened for hours while the Indian servants in the kitchen held communion with the parrot—monologues which the occasional interjections from the perch miraculously transformed into conversations. And when I questioned the Indians I found a recurrent theme in their replies: the parrot can be a temporary abode for a human spirit. Our own rational system of thought unhappily forbids such extravagances; nevertheless the atavism is there, felt rather than believed.

The uneducated, unsophisticated Indian, on the other hand, makes an ideal companion and mentor for the parrot. The long colloquies about what to put into the soup, or which rebozo to wear to the fiesta, are in themselves education of a sort that few of us have the time or patience to provide. It is not surprising that most of the parrots that have found their way to the United States have been trained by rural Latin-Americans. As important as the spoken word in these relationships is a continuous association with one or two individuals. A parrot is not a sociable bird; it usually develops an almost obsessive liking for a very few people, and either indifference or hatred toward everyone else. Its human relationships are simple extensions of its monogamous nature. There is not much difference between being a one-man bird and a one-bird bird.

I remember the day when I first became parrot-conscious.

It was in Costa Rica; my wife and I had been riding all morning with the vaqueros and were very thirsty. At a gatehouse between ranch properties we asked a woman for water. When we had drunk our fill, rested and chatted, she motioned us into a dim corner and said "*Miren, qué graciosos!*" There, perched on a stick, were seven little creatures. She carried the stick out into the light, and I saw that each of the seven tiny bags of pinkish-gray skin had a perfectly shaped, hooked yellow beak, wide open. And when I looked closely, I could see miniature brilliant green feathers growing out of the wrinkles of skin. We discussed the diet and care of young parrots, and our hostess generously offered us one. Jane claimed she couldn't bear to think of breaking up the family, and so we went on our way parrotless.

But a week later, while waiting for a river boat, we had to spend the night in the "hotel" of a hamlet called Bebedero. Our room was built on stilts above a vast mud welter where enormous hogs were wallowing, and it shook perilously when they scratched their backs against the supporting piles. The boat came in fifteen hours late, and there was nothing we could do but sit in the breathlessly hot room and wait. Nothing, that is, until the proprietor appeared in the doorway with a full-grown parrot perched on his finger and asked us if we wanted to converse with it.

"Does it speak?" I asked.

"*Claro que sí.* All parrots speak." My ignorance astonished him. Then he added, "Of course it doesn't speak English. Just its own language."

He left the bird with us. It did indeed speak its own language, something that no philologist would have been able to relate to any dialect. Its favorite word, which it pronounced with the utmost tenderness, was "Budupple." When it had said that several times with increasing feeling, it would turn its head downward at an eighty-degree angle, add wistfully: "Budupple mah?" and then be quiet for a while.

Of course we bought it; the proprietor put it into a burlap sugar sack, and we set out downstream with it. The bend of the river just below Bebedero was still visible when it cut its way out of the bag and clambered triumphantly onto my lap. During the rest of the two-day trip to San José the bird was

amenable enough if allowed to have its own way unconditionally. In the hotel at San José it ate a lens out of a lorgnette, a tube of toothpaste, and a good part of a Russian novel. Most parrots merely make mincemeat out of things and let the debris fall where it will, but this one actually ate whatever he destroyed. We were certain that the glass he had swallowed would bring about a catastrophe, but day after day passed, and Budupple seemed as well as ever. In Puerto Limón we had a cage made for him; unfortunately the only material available was tin, so that by the time we got off the ship at Puerto Barrios and were inside its customhouse the convict had sawed his way through the bars and got out on top of his cage. With his claws firmly grasping the cage roof, the bird could lean far out and fasten his beak into whatever presented itself. As we waited in line for the various official tortures to begin, what presented itself was a very stout French lady under whose skirt he poked his head, and up whose fleshy calf he then endeavored to climb, using beak and claw. The incident provided an engrossing intermission for the other voyagers.

The next morning, with six porters in tow, we were running through the streets to catch the train for the capital; at one point, when I set the cage down to shift burdens, Budupple slid to the ground and waddled off toward a mango tree. I threw the cage after him and we hurried on to where the train was waiting. We got in; it had just begun to move when there was a commotion on the platform and Budupple was thrust through the open window onto the seat. The Indian who had perpetrated this enormity had just time to say, "Here's your parrot," and wave the battered cage victoriously up and down as a gesture of farewell. Tin is evidently worth more than parrot flesh in Puerto Barrios.

A few days later we arrived in Antigua, where we let Budupple get up into an avocado tree in the back patio of the *pension* and stay. I have often wondered if he managed to survive the resident iguana that regularly took its toll of ducks and chickens.

It might seem that after so inauspicious an introduction to parrot-keeping, I should have been content to live quietly with my memories. But I kept wondering what Budupple would have been like under happier circumstances. After all, a

parrot is not supposed to travel continually. And the more I reflected, the more firmly I determined to try another bird. Two years later I found myself in Acapulco with a house whose wooded patio seemed to have ample room for whatever birds or beasts I might wish.

I started out with a Mexican *cotorro*. To a casual observer a *cotorro* looks like a rather small parrot. Its feathers are the same green—perhaps a shade darker—and it has the general characteristics of a parrot, save that the beak is smaller, and the head feathers, which would be yellow on a *loro real* (the Latin American's name for what we call parrot), are orange instead. Neither this *cotorro*, nor any other I ever had, learned to say anything intelligible. If you can imagine a tape-recording of an old-fashioned rubber-bulbed Parisian taxi horn run off at double speed, you have a fair idea of what their conversation sounds like. The only sign of intelligence this *cotorro* displayed was to greet me by blowing his little taxi horn immediately, over and over. After I had set him free I went out and got a true parrot.

This one came to be the darling of the servants, because, although he had no linguistic repertory to speak of, he could do a sort of Black Bottom on his perch and perform correctly, imitating the sound of a bugle, a certain military march almost to the end. The kitchen was his headquarters, where, when things got dull for Rosa, Amparo and Antonio, they could bribe him into performing with pieces of banana and tortilla. Occasionally he wandered into the patio or along the *corredor* to visit the rest of the house, but he liked best the dimness and smoke of the kitchen, where five minutes seldom passed without his being scratched or fed, or at least addressed.

The next psittacine annexation to the household (in the interim there came an armadillo, an ocelot and a tejón—a tropical version of the raccoon) was a parakeet named Hitler. He was about four inches high and no one could touch him. All day he strutted about the house scolding, in an eternal rage, sometimes pecking at the servants' bare toes. His voice was a sputter and a squeak, and his Spanish never got any further than the two words *periquito burro* (stupid parakeet), which always came at the end of one of his diatribes; trembling with emotion, he would pronounce them in a way that recalled the

classical orator's "I have spoken." He was not a very interesting individual because his personality was monochromatic, but I became attached to him; his energy was incredible. When I moved away he was the only member of the menagerie that I took with me.

For some time I had had my eye on a spectacular macaw that lived up the street. She was magnificently red, with blue and yellow trimmings, and she had a voice that could have shouted orders in a foundry. I used to go in the afternoon to study her vocal abilities; after a while I decided I wanted her, although I remained convinced that the few recognizable words she was capable of screaming owed their intelligibility solely to chance. It was unlikely that anyone had ever spoken to her of the Oriental dessert known as baklava, or of the Battle of Balaklava, and even less probable that she had overheard discussions concerning Max Ernst's surrealist picture book, *La femme cent têtes*, in which the principal character is a monster called Loplop. These words, however, figured prominently in her monologues. Sometimes she threw in the Spanish word *agua*, giving equal and dire stress to each syllable, but I think even that was luck. At all events, soon she was in my patio, driving the entire household, including the other birds, into a frenzy of irritability. At five o'clock every morning she climbed to the top of the lemon tree, the highest point in the neighborhood, flapped her clipped wings with a sound like bedsheets in the wind, and let loose that unbelievable voice. Nothing could have brought her down, save perhaps the revolver of the policeman who lived three doors away and who came early one morning to the house, weapon in hand, ready do the deed if he could get into the patio. "I can't stand it any longer, *señor*," he explained. (He went away with two pesos to buy tequila.)

There is a certain lizardlike quality still discernible in the psittacine birds; this is particularly striking in the macaw, the most unlikely and outlandish-looking of the family. Whenever I watched Loplop closely I thought of the giant parrots whose fossils were found not so long ago in Brazil. All macaws have something antediluvian about them. In the open, when they fly in groups, making their peculiar elliptical spirals, they look like any other large bright birds; but when they are reduced

by the loss of their wing tips and tail feathers to waddling, crawling, climbing and flopping, they look strangely natural, as if they might have an atavistic memory of a time when they were without those appendages and moved about as they do now in captivity.

The word "captivity" is not really apt, since in Latin America no one keeps macaws in cages; they are always loose, sometimes on perches or in nearby trees, and it seems never to occur to them to want to escape. The only macaws I have seen chained or caged belonged to Americans; they were vicious and ill-tempered, and the owners announced that fact with a certain pride. The parrot, too, although less fierce in its love of freedom and movement, loathes being incarcerated. It has a fondness for its cage (provided the floor is kept clean), but it wants the door left open so it can go in and out as it pleases. There is not much point in having a parrot if you are going to keep it caged.

Loplop was headstrong and incurably greedy. She had her own bowl of very sweet *café con leche* in a corner on the floor, and whatever we gave her she dipped into the bowl before devouring it. The edible contributions we made during meal-times were more like blood money than disinterested gifts, for we would have handed her practically anything on the table to keep her from climbing onto it. Once she did that, all was lost: silverware was scattered, cups were overturned, food flew. She went *through* things like a snowplow. It was not that we spoiled her, but anyone will reflect a moment before crossing a creature with a beak like a pair of hedge clippers.

The afternoon Jane left for a weekend in Taxco, Loplop decided that I was lonely. She came to tell me so while I was lying in a hammock. Reaching up from the floor and using my posterior for leverage, she climbed into the hammock. I moved quickly to another, taking care first to raise it well into the air. She gurgled. If I wanted to make things difficult, it was quite all right with her; she had plenty of time to achieve her aim. She clambered down, pushed across the floor, shinned up one of the posts that held the hammock, and slid down the rope into my lap. By the time I realized what had happened, it was too late. I was in my bathing trunks, and she made it quite clear that if I attempted to lift her off she would

show no mercy. All she wanted was to have her belly scratched, but she wanted it badly and for an indefinite period of time. For two hours I half-heartedly tickled and scratched her underside, while she lay on her back opening and closing her idiotic eyes, a prey to some mysterious, uncatalogued avian ecstasy. From that day onwards she followed me through the house, ogling me, screaming "Baklava! Loplop!" trying to use my legs as a tree trunk to climb up to my face. Absolute devotion, while admirable, tends to become tedious. I sold Loplop back to the ladies from whom I had bought her.

The following year I found the best of all my Amazons, a perfect *loro real* with a great gift for mimicry. I looked into a little garden and there it was, perched in its cage, demurely conscious of being stared at. I approached it, asked it its name, and it slowly turned itself upside down before it put its head to the bars nearest me and replied in a coquettish falsetto that was almost a whisper: "*Co-to-rrri-to.*" This, although it was in truth its name, was obviously a misnomer, for the bird was not a cotorro but a parrot, and a large-sized one. We had a short conversation about the weather, after which I bought my new friend, cage and all, for six dollars and carried it home, to the delight of the Indian maids, who felt that the kitchen was not complete without a *loro* to talk to during the long hours they spent combing their hair. They wanted beauty advice. "Do you like it this way?" they would ask, and then, changing the position of the tresses, comb in mouth, "Or like this?"

Cotorrito was an intelligent bird—well-balanced emotionally, and with a passion for regularity. He wanted his cage uncovered at half past six in the morning, and bananas at seven. At about nine he had to be let out so he could perch on top of his cage, where he would stay until noon. Then he made his tour of inspection of the house, toddling from room to room, just to be sure the place was in order. After that he climbed on to an old bicycle tire, hung in a shady part of the patio, and remained perched there while we ate lunch nearby, joining in the conversation with short comments such as "*Verdad?*" "*Cómo?*" or "*Ay!*" and bursting into hysterical giggles if the talk became more animated than usual. During the afternoon he took his siesta along with the rest of the house-

hold. When the shadows lengthened he grew lyrical, as parrots have a way of doing toward the end of the day; and when the maids gathered in the kitchen to prepare dinner he went back there, climbed atop his cage and superintended their work for two hours or so. When he got sleepy, he stepped into the cage and softly demanded to have the door shut and the cover put over him.

His performing repertory seemed to be a matter of degree of excitement rather than of choice. Tranquillity expressed itself in a whispered monologue, quite unintelligible, punctuated with short remarks in Spanish. One step above that took him completely into Spanish. From there he went into his giggles, from that into strident song. (At some point he must have lived within hearing of a very bad soprano, because the flatted notes of a song which began "*No sé qué frío extraño se ha metido en mi corazón,*" were always identical.) Beyond that there came a strange rural domestic scene which began with a baby that cried, sobbed, and choked for lack of breath, went on to a comforting mother, an effete-sounding father who shouted "*Cállate!*" a very nervous dog that yapped, and several varieties of poultry including a turkey. Lastly, if his emotion exceeded even this stage, which happened very seldom, he let loose a series of jungle calls. Whoever was within hearing quickly departed, in sheer self-protection. Under normal circumstances these different emotional planes were fairly widely separated, but a good loud jazz record could induce a rough synopsis of the entire gamut. The sound of the clarinet, above all, stimulated him: giggling went into wailing and wailing into barking, barking turned swiftly into jungle calls—and at that point one had to take the record off or leave the house.

Cotorrito was a good parrot: he bit me only once, and that was not his fault. It was in Mexico City. I had bought a pair of new shoes which turned out to be squeaky, and I was wearing them when I came into the apartment after dark. I neglected to turn on the light, and without speaking walked straight to where Cotorrito was perched on top of his cage. He heard the unfamiliar shoes, leaned out and attacked the stranger. When he discovered his shameful error he pretended it had been due to extreme sleepiness, but I had previously

roused him from sleep innumerable times with no such deplorable result.

Two parrots live with me now. I put it thus, rather than, "I own two parrots," because there is something about them that makes them very difficult to claim as one's property. A creature that spends its entire day observing the minutiae of your habits and vocal inflections is more like a rather critical friend who comes for an indefinite stay. Both of my present birds have gone away at various times; one way or another they have been found, ransomed from their more recent friends and brought back home. Seth, the African Grey, is the greatest virtuoso performer I have ever had. But then, African Greys are all geniuses beside Amazons; it is unfair to compare them. He was born in a suburb of Leopoldville in August, 1955, and thus by parrot standards is still an infant-in-arms. If he continues to study under his present teacher, a devout Moslem lady who works in my kitchen, he ought, like any good Moslem, to know quite a bit of the Koran by the time he reaches adolescence. The other guest, who has been with me for the past fourteen years, is a yellow-headed Amazon. I bought him from a Moroccan who was hawking him around the streets of Tangier, and who insisted his name was Babarhio, which is Moghrebi for parrot. I took him to a blacksmith's to break the chains which fettered his legs. The screams which accompanied this operation drew an enormous crowd; there was great hilarity when he drew blood from the blacksmith's hand. Much more difficult was the task of finding him a cage—there was not one for sale in Tangier strong enough to hold him. I finally got wind of an English lady living far out on the Old Mountain whose parrot had died some years ago; possibly she would still have its cage. During the week it took her to find it, Babarhio made a series of interesting wire sculptures of the two cages I had bought him in the market, and wreaked general havoc in my hotel room. However much freedom one may give a parrot once it has become accustomed to its surroundings, it certainly is not feasible at the outset; only chaos can ensue.

Almost immediately I got Babarhio used to traveling. I kept him warm by wrapping around the cage two of the long woolen sashes that are worn by the men here, and putting a

child's djellaba of white wool over everything. The little sleeves stuck out, and the cage looked vaguely like a baby with a large brass ring for a head. It was not a reassuring object, particularly when the invisible parrot coughed and chuckled as he often did when bored with the darkness of his cage.

There is no denying that in tropical and subtropical countries a parrot makes a most amusing and satisfactory companion about the house, a friend you miss very much when it is no longer with you. Doña Violeta, a middle-aged widow who sold bread in the market of Ocosingo, had hers for some thirty years, and when a dog killed it, she was so deeply affected that she closed her stall for three days. Afterward, when she resumed business, with the embalmed body of her pet lying in state in a small glass-covered coffin on her counter, she was shattered, disconsolate, and burst into tears whenever one showed signs of commiserating with her. "He was my only friend in the world," she would sob. This, of course, was quite untrue; one can forgive its exaggeration only by considering her bereavement. But when she added, "He was the only one who understood me," she was coming nearer the truth—a purely subjective one, perhaps, but still a truth. In my mind I have a picture of Doña Violeta in her little room, pouring her heart out to the bird that sat before her attentively and now and then made a senseless remark which she could interpret as she chose. The spoken word, even if devoid of reason, means a great deal to a lonely human being.

I think my susceptibility to parrots may have been partly determined by a story I heard when I was a child. One of the collection of parrots from the New World presented to King Ferdinand by Columbus escaped from the palace into the forest. A peasant saw it, and never having encountered such a bird before, picked up a stone to hit it, so he could have its brilliant feathers as a trophy. As he was taking aim, the parrot cocked its head and cried "*Ay, Dios!*" Horrified, the man dropped the stone, prostrated himself, and said, "A thousand pardons, señora! I thought you were a green bird."