

The Major and the Miners

Everybody said the new neighbour wasn't likable; in fact, Dad called him a 'gruff old dog' because he'd been in a war somewhere, and coughed a lot. Mostly, he ignored everybody, so they pretty much did the same thing to him. But I'd see him, from my tree cubby, wandering around his garden, tending to his veggies and fruit trees. Most days, he'd sit on his garden chair near his paw-paw trees, reading newspapers and, from what I heard later, writing some of his war stories. That's why he was called Major; well, that's what my older brother said. I suppose the Major must have been a very important man.

But he didn't look it: he was small and bent, like the man who brings sacks of coal for our fireplace each week; with his hat off, his few wisps of hair looked like white spider webs; he always wore dirty boots, baggy khaki pants and the same checkered flannelette shirt everyday, rain or shine; and his face and hands were the colour of dried mud, like after a drought. He did look a bit funny, I suppose, but I couldn't tell if he was as gruff as Dad said.

Until one day I heard him start talking to one of the miner birds. From my perch high up and near the edge of his fence, I had a view of the whole of his yard and there were often lots of miners around. Dad called them pests, and was always shooing them away; he hated them, but I didn't. So I was interested to watch and listen to the Major as the little bird came close to his feet and began to twitter. I put down my BB gun and listened.

'Food is it, eh?'

It was the first time I'd heard him talk, and I was surprised: it wasn't gruff, not like Grandpa at all – it was almost like a song, soft and soothing. I kept watching as he went inside his house to come out, a few moments later, with a bowl and a few pieces of bread, sat down in his chair again and began to crush the bread into miner pieces. As he did so, he flicked a few towards the bird and, after eating a couple it flew away.

Maybe it didn't like the bread?

The Major – and I – watched it go as he finished shredding the bread. Then he threw the crumbs into the air to scatter over the grass and went back to his paper. Moments later, he stopped again when an *army* of miners flew into the yard and settled down to eat.

'Ah, brought your family back, I see....'

For months, after that, I'd watch as he fed those miner birds, giving names to each of them, talking to them, and feeding them until, one day, I saw them begin to take the food from his palm, as though *it* was the bowl. Sometimes, they even sat on his shoulders. I told Mum and Dad, but they just nodded and said 'hmmm...hmmm.'

Anyway, one wintry afternoon I looked down at the Major, sitting still in his chair, surrounded by silent miners. He didn't move for hours and I thought that was funny, so I told Dad. He went to see and I cried and cried when he came back and told me the Major had died in his sleep.

Through my sobs I said, 'But, who'll feed the miner birds, Dad?'

'Aww, no worries, they'll survive....'

I thought about that then said, 'Can ... can ... I feed them in *our* yard, Dad?'

'Well, I dunno – they're a bit of pest, y'know, like I said.' He looked at me. 'Don't worry, boy, where the old Major went there're lots of birds, including miners.' Dad brushed my hair back and wiped my eyes. 'When each of those miners die, why I'll bet they'll know just where to go for food.' He smiled.

I wiped my nose and sighed. 'Oh, all right then, Dad.' Then I had an idea. I looked up at Dad. 'Dad, could I throw old bread over the fence? Can I? Please?'

He rolled his eyes a few times, shrugged and said, 'Well, okay then. But only old bread, okay.' It wasn't a question. 'And mind you keep the bread over there, not here.' He waved his arms about to take in the whole yard.

I nodded quickly. 'Thanks, Dad, thanks.'

He ruffled my hair again. 'Go on, get off with you.'

Next morning, I got the old bread Mum gave me and climbed up onto my tree cubby. The sun was up, it was warming and I felt good. I tore up all the bread into small

pieces, bunched up some into a ball and gave a big throw to get it all into the Major's yard. It all landed with a soft plop, spread out a bit, and I waited. In just a few minutes, one of the miners came in and started to feed. I grinned as more came, and they all started. The Major will be pleased, I thought.

As they ate, I very carefully lifted up my BB gun, put in a pellet and closed it as quietly as I could. Then, I rested the barrel on a tree branch and took careful aim at the biggest bird.

As I exhaled, held, and squeezed the trigger just like Dad taught me, I whispered, every so quietly: 'Please tell the Major hello.'

Copyright © Roger J Burke, 2007. All rights reserved.