



## Comprehension activity

# HOW DID THE CANARY DO IT?

By Celia Thaxter

A little friend of mine, who was going away for the winter, asked me to take charge of one of her canaries till she returned in the spring. The bird was a foreigner, born and bred in Fayal, and brought across the water in his youth, a gray-green and golden little creature, whose name was Willie.

I gladly consented, and one day Willie was brought over from Jamaica Plains, a distance of ten miles, and deposited in my parlor. His cage was closely covered with brown paper during the journey, and he came in the cars, by the roundabout way of Boston.

At first he seemed somewhat lonely and lost, but soon grew very happy and content in his new home; and well he might be, for he had all his wants supplied, and did not lack companions.

I had two canaries, a robin, and a song-sparrow, and they soon began to make beautiful music all together.

The sun could not rise without shining into the parlor windows; it lingered there all day, till the last glow of the evening-red faded out of the sky. At two windows the light streamed through green leaves and gay flowers, and made a most cheerful atmosphere, in which no bird could possibly help singing. The song-sparrow's clear, friendly notes seemed to bring May to the very door; and the robin executed, sotto voce, all his fine out-of-door melodies, and put one into an April mood with his sweet, melancholy rain-song.

Willie could not choose but be happy. So they all sang and chirruped together the whole winter through, and cheered us in that cold, sad season. Slowly the earth turned daily more and more toward the sun, and before we were ready to realize so much joy, the "willow-wands" were spangled with "downy silver," and the alder catkins began to unwind their long spirals, and swing pliant in the first winds of March. Then the melting airs of April set the brooks free, the frogs began to pipe, and there was rare music! Birds came in flocks, the soft green grass stole gradually over the land, and dandelions shone gay in the meadows. When beneath a southern window the flowering almond blossomed, I kept the windows open during fine weather, and left the bird cages on the sill the whole day. Little wild birds came and sat on the grapevine trellis above, and twittered and talked with the captives, and sometimes alighted on the cages; the pink almond sprays waved round them, and all were, or seemed to be, as happy as the day is long.

Willie's little mistress returned about this time, and I only awaited a proper opportunity to return my charge, safe and well, into her hands. I congratulated myself on his state of health and spirits, and thought how glad she would be to see him again. But, alas! for human calculations. One afternoon I went, as usual, to take in the cage for the night: there was Dick, the robin; and Philip, the sparrow; and slender Rupert, my own canary, and his mate; but Willie of Fayal, the green and golden stranger, was gone, cage and all. I looked out of the window; there lay the cage upon the ground, empty. Imagine my consternation! Had some strange, prowling cat devoured—? I was in despair at the thought.

"If it had been any one but Willie," I said, again and again. He had been intrusted to my care; what should I say when he was required of me? In real sorrow I wrote to my youthful friend and told her all. She mourned her bird as dead, but only for a day; for what do you think happened? The most surprising thing! You never will guess; so I shall tell you all, at once.



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Willie was not devoured; he escaped from his cage, and flew unerringly back to his former home, ten miles from mine. The night after he disappeared from my window, he was heard pecking at the window of the little girl's chamber, but no one noticed him; so he stayed about the house till morning, and flew in when the window was opened, and was found perched on the cage of his old companion.

Great was everybody's astonishment, as you may imagine. There was no mistaking him,—it was Willie, and no other.

Yes, really and truly. Now, how do you suppose he found his way over all those miles of unfamiliar country, straight to that chamber window? What guided him? Did he fly high or low? Probably not high; for his wings were unused to flying at all, and consequently not strong; but they bore him over woods and fields, over streets and people, over hundreds of houses, till at last his tired eyes beheld the tower and gables of his old dwelling-place rising from among the pleasant woods, and then he knew he might rest in safety.

But how could he find the way? Supposing birds to have means of communicating with each other by speech, how would he have put his questions, wishing to ask his way? Meeting a thrush, or sparrow, or any other dainty feathered creature, he might perhaps have hailed it with,—“Good morrow, comrade;” but he couldn't have said, “Can you tell me the way to Jamaica Plains?” or, “Do you know where the little girl lives to whom I belong? Her name is May, and she has golden hair; can you tell me how to find her?” Do you think he could? Yet he did find her, and until last summer, was still living in that pretty chamber among the green trees.

Some time, perhaps, we shall understand those things; but until then, Willie's journey must remain one of the mysterious incidents in natural history.

1. Where was Willie born and bred?

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2. How did Willie travel to his temporary home?

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3. How does the author describe how the canary settled into its temporary home?

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4. How did the presence of the birds in the parlor impact the atmosphere during the cold season?

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5. What signs indicated the arrival of spring in the narrative?

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6. How did the little wild birds interact with Willie and other captives during fine weather?

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7. What do you think the word 'unerringly' mean within the text?

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8. Describe the authors character using evidence from the text.

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9. How is the theme of nature and the changing seasons intertwined within the text?

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10. What is the significance of the final paragraph?

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Answers:

1. Willie was born and bred in Fayal.
2. Willie was brought across the water in his youth and came in the cars, by the roundabout way of Boston.
3. Initially the bird was feeling lonely and lost, but after some time he became much more comfortable as the author described how they provided the canary with all that it could need.
4. The birds singing and chirruping together throughout the winter cheered the household in the cold and sad season.
5. The "willow-wands" were spangled with "downy silver," alder catkins began to unwind, and the frogs started to pipe, signalling the arrival of spring.
6. Little wild birds came, sat on the grapevine trellis, twittered, and talked with the captives, sometimes alighting on the cages.
7. Using clues within the text unerringly refers to how the bird accurately flew back home.
8. The author seems to be a very kind hearted individual to take on care of friends pet. They also share that they felt remorseful and explained that they were 'In real sorrow' which tells us that they were very worried by the situation.
9. The text vividly describes the natural elements, such as the changing seasons, the arrival of spring, and the impact of sunlight on the parlor. Nature plays a significant role in the overall atmosphere and events of the story.
10. In summary, the final paragraph is significant as it not only resolves the mystery within the narrative but also emphasizes the extraordinary nature of Willie's journey and the special connection between animals and humans.