

The Lady^d

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Hazel Bell writes on

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WILD LIFE in NEW TOWNS

WE OFTEN HEAR how old houses harbour spiders, wood worm, or death-watch beetles. We, too, living in a new block of flats in a new town, have nature trouble. The original wild life of the district refuses to recognise that the building has arrived, unless they see it, perhaps, as a rectangular, cavernous, newly sprouted oak. On this apparent assumption, wild creatures live on here with an hauteur that seems to make intruders of us—as, from an ant's eye view, indeed we are.

Earwigs are our most prodigious squatters, scurrying about all through the flat. They have learned to adapt their tactics to a new hostile force with its own weaknesses, not only seeking refuge in crevices where we can't squash them, but claiming sanctuary in the centre of carpets where we won't. My most traumatic experience to date is that of pouring out together, one early morn, a stream of cornflakes and a wriggling earwig. A surprise in every packet, the makers say, but I wasn't expecting anything like that.

Above us, tiny black midges swarm densely over the ceiling. We squirt fly spray up at them, they die and fall all over us, minute corpses adding body to the dust. When we get actual house flies with the spray, they settle and die in our yellow plastic bowl of a lamp-shade. Nature will have its revenges.

ALL OVER THE WALLS, we have butterflies. At one time, enough of the pretty things hibernated on our cream distemper to make it seem like gaily patterned wallpaper. The last of the slumberers took, not to the undisturbed recesses of the spare room, but to the bathroom. There was a pair right over the bath taps. Now there is one—the other fell into my bath. A panic-stricken butterfly in one's bath can be a disturbing experience. Disturbed, I yelled for my husband, who was all solicitude—for the butterfly. He rescued it, cherished it, and without much hope left the tiny sodden heap for the night on a wad of blotting paper. Next morning it was beating lustily against the window, and flew off apparently invigorated by its experience. Well, I suppose it would be the ideal way to end a long, stiff hibernation—a deep, hot bath, fragrant with *Parfum de Lilas*.

Then there was the hedgehog affair. Standing, for some reason of his own, on the balcony about eleven o'clock one night, my husband claimed to have glimpsed a hedgehog in a patch of light on the ground beneath. He had always, he said, wanted to meet a hedgehog, so, rationally, he took up a torch and came, just as he was, down four flights, to seek the animal at the foot of the block.

When the lady of the ground-floor flat, due to move out next day and for that one night husbandless and curtainless, quailingly threw open her bedroom window to investigate the stealthy flashing, up rose my spouse in his dressing-gown from the flower-bed

and blandly explained, "I'm looking for a hedgehog." He didn't find it.

WE WAGE an annual war with house martins in our hinges. We can now only ventilate our sitting-room either with a gale from the huge balcony windows, or a tremor from the tiny top one; the hinge of the business window is full of nest, and the nest is full of bird. (I do mean full—we have seen eight of them fly out of the one nest.)

When they first came, we were rather pleased to have so close a view of the nest-building, standing out on the balcony to watch the young being fed, wasting dozens of films on close-ups of a nest just after a bird's head had vanished, even once standing stalwartly out there brandishing rulers against the depredations of an attacking rook.

When they had migrated, though, stifled, we hardened our hearts and opened the window, shattering the nest, ruining the carpet, and drinking in the tepid October air. Next spring, we resolved, we would open the window immediately the first twig was laid, showing clearly THIS SITE NOT TO LET. They beat us by sheer speed—while we foolishly dithered, the nest was built and occupied, all in a day.

Speed in nest-erection was not all they had learned from the previous year. Their entrance was now turned away from our balcony, affording them decent privacy at last. They extended their premises, too, building another nest on to the first, supported merely by blank wall—a neat feat of engineering. Our anxiety lest they should all fall down with the new nest was misplaced.

Room for room, they would soon outnumber us. In accordance with John Wyndham's precepts for a rival form of life existing alongside another, they began to strive for dominion, chirping their protests when our light was on too late and disturbed decent, early-retiring neighbours. They were angry once to find us in, on what must, we suspected, have been a regular afternoon flight round our lounge. Perhaps they plan to take over that ellipsoidal lampshade next, and live there on the dead flies . . .

FRANTIC FOR FRESH AIR, we brought back from a German holiday one of the hollowed (but heavy) logs the Germans place in their park trees, as a ready-made home for a grateful, sensible *vogel* who never had it so good. We cunningly hung it over the balcony so that it obstructed no window, and again demolished the deserted nest, that October, sourly savouring the breezes.

When spring and the settlers returned, they ignored our gift completely, repossessing the vital hinge. We gave up. We let them do it.

It's a question, really, of who sits it out longest, or whether symbiosis can be achieved. They could carry messages for us, perhaps . . . But I never knew that the birds and bees in Subtopia would be like this.

