THE SWALLOWS

by

S. Erdene

Many years had passed since we abandoned our little summer
country house which grew dark with time. We had knocked it to­
gether quickly out of larch logs; it had an earthen floor, one tiny
window facing north and terribly creaky doors. The scorching sun,
wind and rain greatly marred the outside of the house, while the
walls inside were covered with soot from the fireplace. Yet the
little house remained sturdy and reliable. I can still see my
father's flintlock and the swallows' nest right under the roof.

I revisited my old home where we used to spend the summer and
was greatly surprised to see how long the soil preserves traces of
human habitation.

When I went there at the end of summer I saw the goosefoot and
nettle sprawling around the house, a few rickety timeworn posts and
the pit in which my mother used to fumigate hides.

I sat and thought of my childhood and recalled how I would sit
for hours watching the swallows which used to live under our roof
every summer. When I was about ten years old two small birds built
a nest. They had probably had another nest somewhere else which
was destroyed, because when they came to our house the other swal­
lows already had grown fledglings.

I observed with great interest how the two birds hauled mud
tirelessly from the two nearby streams, reinforcing the nest with
grass and feathers. In a matter of a few days they had built a
sturdy little nest, after which they disappeared for several days.
I tried to spot them among the multitude of other swallows flying
around, but my efforts were fruitless.

One morning I noticed a swallow with a light-colored breast perching snugly in the nest with its eyes closed. Another little bird with a long reddish breast was fussing around the nest and chirping softly to its mate. The light-breasted one stayed at home several days, and I got the impression that it was both hungry and thirsty. Somewhat later I noticed the other one bring some insects in its beak and feed the little light-breasted bird. I also discovered that the bird supplied its mate with water in the same way and I was overjoyed with my discovery.

A few days later I heard a faint squeak coming from the nest and looked in to see five tiny yellow-beaked skinny nestlings. I scrutinized the helpless little fledglings and was overcome with worry; the little swallows in other bird families were already flying with their parents. Would these grow up and gain strength by the end of summer?

They grew very quickly, however. In a few days they were covered with fluff and sat with widely opened beaks which seemed incongruously large in proportion to their bodies. They made a terrible noise demanding food. The parent swallows worked tirelessly bringing them insects, while the greedy little things devoured everything immediately and clamored for more.

By mid-summer they were bustling about their nest and soon learned to perch on its edge. Once they even ventured forth with their parents. At first they returned in the evenings, but finally they abandoned the nest for good.

The following spring I awaited their return with great impatience. I felt very pleased that such a large family had found shelter under our roof. Only the old couple returned to the nest for four summers, and I became very attached to them.

The time came for me to "fly away" like the fledglings from my father's house and I left my native soil and home.
Many years went by before I returned to our summer house, and I meditated sadly that my childhood was gone forever.

Our little house has long disappeared as well as the swallows' nest, but the children and nestlings that grew up there have built themselves new homes and new nests. Life is eternal.