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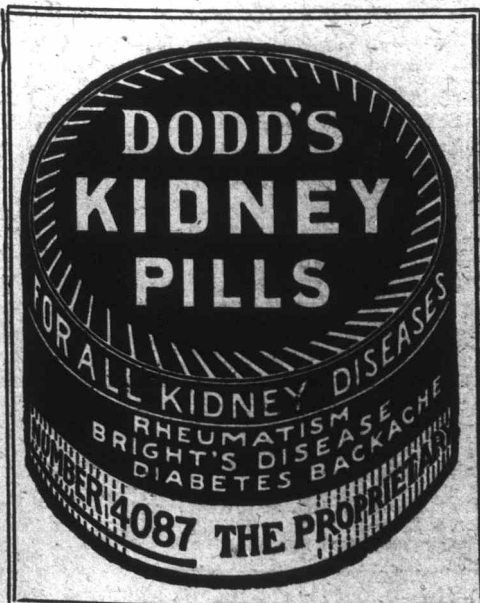
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BIRDS OF THE MERRY FOREST

By LILIAN LEVERIDGE

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CHAPTER XVIII.

One Lovely Secret.

IN the middle of the daisy meadow a Vesper Sparrow fluttered up in the grass at the children's feet and hopped along in front of them with one wing drooping.

"Oh, dear!" cried Dimple. "It has broken its wing. Let's see if we can bind it up or help it in some way. Poor birdie! How did you get hurt?"

The bird looked up at her and then at Jimmie, who tried his best to catch it. But in vain. It kept just a little ahead until they were at the far end of the meadow, when it suddenly flew up, as strong and whole as possible, and perched on the fence.

"Why," cried the twins in surprise and relief, "it has got all right again, and its wing isn't broken at all," and Dimple added: "I wonder what made its wing go that way."

Jimmie and Boy Blue looked at each other and laughed, and it really seemed as if the bird were joining in. "She was only fooling us," said Jimmie. "I've seen them do that lots of times. She has a nest somewhere near there, and she was enticing us away from it. Partridges are up to that little dodge, too."

"She wouldn't have done that if we had been alone," said Dimple, "because she knows we wouldn't touch her nest, but she must have been afraid of you, Jimmie."

"Was that it, Vesper?" Boy Blue asked the bird, which still sat on the fence, looking at them intently.

Vesper nodded her head very gravely, and Jimmie laughed. "You'd think she understood you and meant that for an answer," he said.

"So she does," the twins answered eagerly. "She would have spoken to us if you hadn't been here."

"See here," said Jimmie curiously. "You don't really mean that nonsense about the birds talking to you, do you?"

"It isn't nonsense—they do talk," Boy Blue declared stoutly. "We don't say much about it to other people because they don't believe us; and the birds don't talk to us when there's anybody else around. I don't suppose they'll say a word to us to-day."

"Well, I'll give it up," said Jimmie with a puzzled look on his face. "You two must be related to the fairies; you're little enough."

The twins laughed at this novel idea. Nothing more was said on the subject, and they went on.

The woods were lovely enough for a fairyland, certainly. All the leaves whispered and rustled in the morning breeze; chipmunks and squirrels chirped and chattered here and there; in the distance a partridge was drumming, and in the trees and bushes the birds were singing gaily at their work.

The children had not gone far before they met a number of their old friends—Chickadee, Nuthatch, Yellow Warbler, Sapsucker, Bluejay, Crow, Golden Crowned Kinglet, and even an Owl. Others not so familiar were fitting about in the higher branches or singing some new, enticing song just out of sight.

There was one elusive bird which was undoubtedly the prima donna, the leading singer, of all this woodland orchestra. Wonderfully varied, wonderfully melodious, thrillingly sweet, its music echoed through the woods that bright June day. The song began with a rippling trill of soft, sweet notes in a sort of prelude which you could not hear unless

you were close; then came a very slight pause while the musician took breath for the clear, strong notes that rang out in such a lovely tune all down the valleys and across the hills. Then in a moment or two from somewhere in the distance would float an answering song, just like the first, only perhaps it might be in a higher or lower key. You never could tell just the spot that music was coming from—it seemed to be everywhere.

"Jimmie," cried Boy Blue in a tense, eager tone, "do you know that bird? We never can get more than a glimpse of it."

"No. I don't know either," answered Jimmie slowly. "There isn't a bird in the woods can beat it singing, but it always seems to keep out of sight."

"I'm pretty sure it is one of the Thrushes," said Boy Blue, "either a Hermit Thrush or a Wood Thrush. Both are brown birds with spotted breasts, but the Wood Thrush is the largest and has the most powerful song—so our books tell us."

"If we could only find its nest we'd know," put in Dimple, "because the Wood Thrush builds up in a tree, while the Hermit Thrush and the Veery build in the grass or a low clump of bushes."

"That's a good thing to know," said Jimmie. "Let's try to find that bird's nest right now. There's lots of time, we've a whole day ahead of us, and it is birds we want to find."

"Oh, yes, yes, that will be lovely," cried the twins joyfully, and without more ado they set out in the direction of the hidden singer.

That bird was by no means easy to locate. They felt sure it was in a maple just ahead, then it seemed to be in a white birch behind them, and when they turned back and reached the birch tree, it stole a march on them and was singing on the other side of the hill.

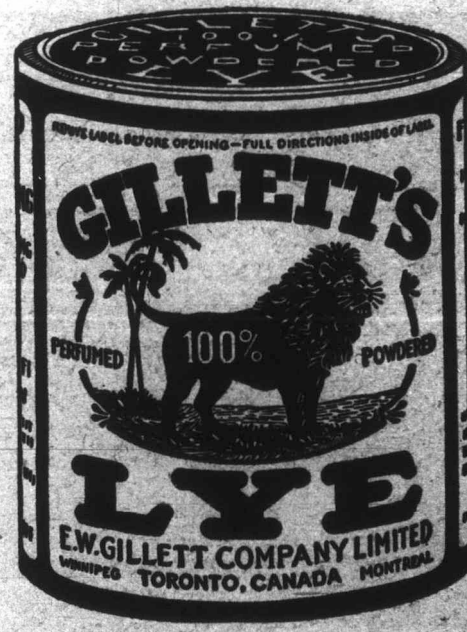
Hither and back they went, through a fragrant bed of sweet cicely, down in a nook where painted trilliums hid, and over the hill where frail white star flowers and wood anemones grew. On and on they followed, breathless and eager, until at last their search was rewarded. There in a little maple sapling, in plain sight, sat a brown bird with whitish breast heavily spotted with black. They saw him throw his head back and his throat swell, while that wonderful song rang out through the listening woods.

Dimple and Boy Blue clasped each other's hands tightly, and no one spoke a word. Suddenly their delighted eyes saw the bird's mate slip out of a nest in a fork of the tree and fly slowly away, while the one they had been following took her place.

"It's a Wood Thrush," Boy Blue whispered. "That's just what I thought all along."

Jimmie nodded assent. In a minute or so a song came from the thicket, and the bird on the nest answered. The two kept singing to each other in this way for about ten minutes, then the mother bird returned and took her place on the eggs, while the other flew away for food and exercise. In this beautifully harmonious way the musical pair shared the duties and joys of house-keeping.

The children stood watching for almost half an hour, and then returned to the trail they had left, the path to Lonely Lake.



"That find is worth a whole lot," said Jimmie. "Yes," returned Boy Blue with a happy sigh. "We have most of the day ahead of us yet, and there's no telling what we may discover next; but, anyway, we have unlocked one lovely secret of the Merry Forest, and I'm glad." "I'm glad, too," replied Jimmie. "I've heard that bird sing, I suppose hundreds of times, but never knew what it looked like. Now, whenever I hear one I'll be able to see it in my mind's eye."



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