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Birds of the Merry Forest

By LILIAN LEVERIDGE

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CHAPTER XIV.

The Unexpected Happens.

"I WANT you children," said Mrs. Marlowe one day at tea-time, "to run an errand for me this evening, please."

"All right, Mother," answered Boy Blue. "I just feel like a nice run. What is it?"

"There's a couple of plants I want you to take over to Mrs. West, the little Japanese primrose and the shamrock in the green pot. Most of Mrs. West's flowers got frozen last winter, and I have so many. The primrose is one of my seedlings. I would have given it to her when she was over last week, but I didn't know what colours they were going to be. She especially admired that deep pink one, and it is lovely. This is going to be just like it."

"Oh, how pleased she will be!" cried Dimple. "I just love to go on errands like that, carrying things to make people glad."

"Maybe we'll see Jimmie," suggested Boy Blue. "He hasn't been over here for a long time, and the few times we've been there he was at school."

"He'll be sure to be home now," replied Dimple. "I like Jimmie, don't you?"

Boy Blue nodded. "I like him best of all the boys."

"Jimmie's all right," put in Mr. Marlowe. "I've no doubt he's working hard at school just now, getting ready for his Entrance Exam."

The children hurried over their supper and set out in high spirits through the mile of woods separating their home from Mr. West's farm. There was no road, only a footpath, which was little traversed except by members of the two families. It was a lovely wood and a pleasant walk at any time, but in the springtime it seemed almost a Paradise.

The children had crossed the brook, gurgling musically over its glistening pebbles and mossy stones; they had carefully set down their burdens upon the moss and drank, like birds, from the clear, cool stream; they had paused a while to let their eyes drink in the beauty of the purple violets, the pinky, creamy foam flowers, the fairy-like mitrewort that clustered along the banks, and the crimson columbine, waving its honey cups in the wind. And now they stood on the crest of the little hill, trying to catch sight of a bird that was singing as if its little heart were bursting with joy.

"I think the woods is the happiest place in the world, don't you?" whispered Boy Blue, dreamily. "The birds and animals are happy, the trees and the flowers are happy, the butterflies are happy, the sunshine is happy—everything is happy; and the world seems made of music and beauty and sweetness."

Dimple looked at her brother a moment without speaking. She sometimes wondered at the thoughts that came into his head and the pretty way he had of saying them. It reminded her of the poetry their Mother sometimes read to them. Boy Blue always liked the poetry best of all. Dimple wasn't quite sure of herself, but thought if she couldn't have both, she would choose stories.

"Yes," she said at last, slowly, "I think so, too. I don't know about the world, but anyway the Merry Forest is all music and beauty and sweetness."

Dimple truly didn't know about the world; neither did Boy Blue. They

didn't even know about the Merry Forest.

"This world is full of beauty, Like other worlds above, And if we did our duty, It might be full of love."

Before they were many minutes older they were to learn one of life's sad lessons—that the world, and even the Merry Forest, isn't full of love, and so it can't be full of happiness.

It happened all in a moment, and in that moment the light went out for one little life, the black shadow of sorrow fell upon one little home, and all the Merry Forest music was out of tune.

Loud and sharp, and startlingly near a gun went off. The children gave a little, frightened cry and clung to one another. The plants in the pretty green pots dropped from their hands and rolled down the hill, while, with horrified eyes, they watched a little, fluffy, golden ball fall from the very tree into which they had been peering to discover the singer. It fell almost at their feet, but neither attempted to pick it up.

At the same moment there was the sound of a quick footstep on the slope, and there came into view—who but Jimmie? He had a smile on his face, and didn't look to be one bit ashamed or sorry.

"Hello, kids!" he called. "Did I frighten you? I wouldn't have shot if I had known you were so near."

He picked up the dead bird and went on talking: "It was a dandy shot. Think you could beat it, Boy Blue?"

"Say, Dimple—," and the tone of his voice suddenly changed—"you look as white as a ghost. I'm sorry. But I was going over to your place, and when I saw the yellow bird in the tree I thought, 'Now, if I can hit that, I'll stuff it and give it to Dimple to wear on her hat.' I will, too. Would you like it, Dimple?"

Dimple, who all this time had stood as if frozen to an icicle, suddenly came to life. "Jimmie!" she cried, fiercely, "how could you kill that dear, little Yellow Warbler—how could you? And do you think I'd wear a dead bird in my hat? I tell you, I'd go bare-headed, summer and winter, all my life, rather than do it. I'd—I'd feel like—"

Here she burst into a violent storm of tears and sobs. Dimple didn't often cry, but when she did, she certainly made a thorough job of it, for, you see, it had to last a considerable time.

Jimmie had never seen her cry before; in fact, he had never seen any girl cry like that, and he, in his turn, was frozen with surprise and dismay.

Boy Blue rose manfully to the occasion. He put his arms around his sister, just as Mother would have done, and spoke to her soothingly: "There, little sister; don't cry, don't cry. The bird didn't feel the hurt. I don't believe, and it's a little angel bird now."

"But it had a nest," sobbed Dimple. "I—I saw it. And what—what will all the little orphans do now?"

This pathetic picture was too much for Boy Blue, and for a few moments he had a hard struggle with his own tears.

"I say," began Jimmie, in despair, "I'm as sorry as I can be. I never thought of it that way. I'm practising shooting so I can kill off the chipmunks and woodchucks that eat up Dad's grain, and a bird is a good mark, but I wouldn't have done it if I'd thought. And you two foolish, little kids—it won't do to take on like

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that every time a bird dies. Why, something's killing them off all the time. If they weren't kept down we'd be overrun."

"What!" exclaimed Boy Blue, straightening up and drying his eyes in a hurry, for he realized that when somebody was making a mistake that had to be corrected right off, tears were apt to be very much in the way. Dimple, too, made a heroic effort to calm herself.

"What do you mean by that, Jimmie?" Boy Blue asked.

"Why, I mean, of course, that if there were too many birds they'd eat up the grain and fruit and things."

"Well, there aren't too many birds," declared Boy Blue with emphasis; "there aren't nearly enough. If you think the birds do harm to your Dad's crops, you never made a bigger mis-



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