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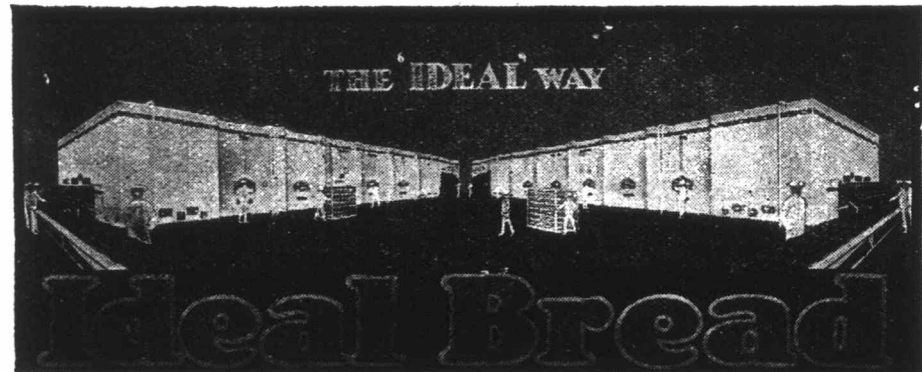
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Boys and Girls

Birds of the Merry Forest

BY LILLIAN LEVERIDGE

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CHAPTER XXV. (Continued.)

"Follow the Gleam."

"Oh! Is that so!" cried Moonwinks sorrowfully. "I, too, was very fond of Veery, and have often listened to her by the hour. She was a quiet, well-behaved bird—and to think that villain has put an end to her music! Well, he's got what he deserved, I'm glad to say."

"Oh, ho! You don't say so! What has he got?"

"Whoo-who-who, who-who-to-who-ah!" laughed Moonwinks; "You never guess. How would you like to see proud Mr. Puss chained up by his foot in a yard, in sight of chickens and ducks and geese; gnashing his teeth and snapping his claws because he couldn't get at them; mewed at by cats and barked at by dogs, and laughed at by people—and have to take it all without a chance to help himself?"

"Good enough! Ho-ho-hoo!" laughed Long-Ears, "but surely it can't be true!"

"True as my name's Moonwinks."

"But how did it happen?"

"I'll tell you all about it. It happened away off at the other end of the Merry Forest, where I have been putting in a few weeks, though really, on account of Puss, it was hardly safe. I was always hearing of his bad tricks, and it made me madder and madder, for a cannibal in feathers is something I detest and hate. Not only did he kill and eat our own little innocent neighbors and friends, the Merry Forest birds, but he sneaked around barnyards and pastures and just gorged himself on chickens, little and big, and geese and young turkeys."

"Of course you can guess the result—the people, who, considering the number of years they spend in school, know surprisingly little, got out their guns and just went for us. Anything in the shape of an Owl they fired at whenever they got a chance; for, of course, as usual, the whole Owl family got the blame for a single scoundrel."

"Now, you know as well as I do, and every bird in the Merry Forest knows, that the Great Horned Owls are the only ones who do any harm worth mentioning, and the rest of us are among the farmers very best friends. Yet the farmers don't stop to think how their places would be overrun with rats and mice if we didn't hunt them continually and keep them down."

"Yes, I know. Why, we fairly live on rats and mice and little mischievous animals like that. I wouldn't touch a feather of any bird."

"No, nor me. And the fact is, there are none of us who would, except the Great Horned Owls—Cat Owls, some people call them."

"A good name, too. With their big ears and vicious eyes, they look for all the world like cats, and are just as mean. A cat is an animal I haven't much use for."

"What bird has? Aren't cats the birds' mortal enemies?" said Moonwinks, and then he went on with his story:—

"As I was saying, an Owl's life wasn't safe in those parts. I had it out with Puss one night, told him just what I thought of him, and we came near having a fight—it was just after my little friend, the Screech Owl, had

been shot. But he's a bigger bird than I am, and fighting is more in his line than mine, so I decided not to give him the satisfaction of tearing me to bits."

"But the very next evening as I was going over the yard, flying low in search of mice, I saw him there on the ground, hunting mice, too, with a chain clanking after him. I could hardly believe my eyes. When I asked him what had happened, he looked as if he'd like nothing better than to pick my eyes out, and he wouldn't answer me."

"I got the story, however, from a pigeon on the peak of the barn. He said that Puss had been after some chickens in a coop and had somehow got his foot down between the slats and couldn't get it out. Then that nice preacher man with the kind eyes and silvery hair—but I forgot, you don't know him—anyway, he came along and found Puss caught in the very act."

"The pigeon thought that was the last of Puss all right, and of course, Puss thought so, too; but the preacher man had a kind heart and didn't want to kill the thief. He made sure the bird couldn't get away, then wound up a long light chain and fastened one end to Puss's foot, and the other end to a tree. He told Puss that as long as he would catch every mouse or rat within reach, and otherwise behave himself, he might have his life as a reward."

"Of course it was an awful fate for a bird—though the people are kind to him—but it was so much better than Puss expected or deserved, that he was thankful enough to get off so easy."

"And there he is, and there he's likely to stay, a prisoner for the rest of his life."

Long Ears had listened with deep interest to this long story, and when it was finished he said, "That's the best news I've heard for many a day. I sincerely hope that the fate of Puss will teach his family a lesson."

Then the two Owls began to laugh. It was the loudest laughter Boy Blue had ever heard, and the funniest. He couldn't help laughing, too, and he was still laughing very hard when both Owls suddenly stopped.

As you may suppose, they were a little startled and very much surprised to see a boy under the tree so close to them.

When Boy Blue saw he was discovered he jumped up and told them he was lost. "I guess you know the Merry Forest better than I do," he concluded, "and if you could find me, please, I'd be so thankful."

"Why, bless your heart, yes!" cried Moonwinks. "Just follow me and I'll lead you home by the shortest, easiest way. We'll just about have time to get there before the moon sets."

So once more Boy Blue played the game of "Follow the Leader," but this time his leader was more dependable than a little wandering fire-fly gleam. Just as the moon was setting he got home, and crept into bed, very tired and happy, without having been missed.

(To Be Continued)

Mike went to a druggist to get an empty bottle. Selecting one that answered his purpose, he asked, "How much?" "Well," said the clerk, "if you want the empty bottle it'll be five cents, but if you have something put in it we won't charge anything for the bottle." "Sure, that's fair enough," observed Mike. "Put in a cork."