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BIRDS OF THE MERRY FOREST

By LILIAN LEVERIDGE

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CHAPTER XXIII.

The Hummingbird's Nest.

THOUGH their majesties, the Kingbirds, had claimed as their royal rights the first attentions of the little bird students, there were plenty of others none the less welcome and interesting.

A little above them, among the honeysuckles on the hillside, a Catbird kept up his constant complaining mew, a familiar note by which he was recognized before they caught sight of his dark grey coat and black cap.

"You foolish bird!" called Boy Blue. "You sound as if you were out of sorts with everything and everybody and the world didn't suit you—and you know it couldn't be any nicer than it is—especially when there's no seven times table hanging over your head. What makes you so cross, anyway?"

"I'm not cross," the Catbird answered with some spirit. "Why don't you sing, then?" asked Dimple.

"Why don't you sing yourself?" the bird retorted. "We did sing just a little while ago," Dimple replied. "Nobody wants to be singing all the time."

"That's just it," the Catbird said. "I was singing just a little while ago, too."

"Won't you please sing again?" Boy Blue asked. "I think your song is just lovely."

The bird was evidently pleased. "I don't mind if I do," he said. "I know quite a lot of songs, but I'd like to learn one of yours. Will you sing for me if I sing for you first?"

"Oh, yes! Of course we will," the children answered together.

The bird hopped a little closer, perched on the top of a hazel bush, and, after a few little nods and quirks, began to sing. It was a wild, sweet, rollicking song, made up of many varied strains, partly borrowed from other birds, but mostly quite individual, every note overflowing with love and happiness.

All else was forgotten while the children listened. "It's a truly lovely song," sighed Boy Blue, contentedly, when it was finished. "Do you know when we first heard you this spring, Dimple and I were a long time trying to find out who the musician was. We followed you along the river bank and through the cedar swamp, but couldn't get a glimpse of you at all until you led us to our own old garden and we found your nest with the pretty eggs in it in a lilac bush."

The bird laughed. "I knew you were following me, and I led you a chase just for fun. But now it's your turn to sing."

The children sang a Swing Song that all the birds were fond of, and while they sang quite a number of their friends, old and new, came near to listen.

"Let's keep right on singing," whispered Boy Blue when they had come to the end. "You see how they all like it. I don't feel like talking today, but I just love to watch the birds."

"All right," Dimple nodded, and they started another song. The birds gathered closer and listened for a little while, then voice after voice joined in, each singing its own song to its own tune, but always beautifully in harmony with the rest; there was never once a jarring note of discord.

For a long time the children were greatly puzzled by the appearance on the top of a dead tree a few rods

away of a living thing which looked no larger than a grasshopper. Was it bird or insect?

As they watched, it suddenly dropped, as straight and swift as a marble into the undergrowth below. By-and-by it reappeared on the same twig, then, after a short interval, again dropped, and again reappeared.

The children kept their eyes fastened upon it, pausing now and then in their singing to whisper a question or remark to each other. Finally they decided that it was a bird. But what bird?

At last it flew to the honeysuckle bushes just below them, and the mystery was solved. It was, after all, an old friend of theirs, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird, known to them intimately as Jewel-in-the-Sun.

These beautiful little creatures, the Hummingbirds, had long been quite familiar to the children. As soon as the early fruit blossoms were fairly out, while there was still a hint of coolness in the air, they would come and remain, uncertain but very frequent visitors, till the autumn frosts had nipped the garden blooms.

One never thinks of Hummingbirds apart from flowers. Flowers form an essential part of their existence, and an atmosphere laden with flower fragrance is the breath of life to them. An animated flower, a winged jewel, a dream come true, seem equally suitable terms with which to describe this tiniest of birds.

It is only about three and a half inches in length, including its very long and slender bill. As to colour, it is a ruby in an emerald setting, and as it flashes in the sun above the blossoms the ruby seems to radiate light as well as colour. Its food is the nectar of flowers and the insects that are attracted thereby. This food it extracts with its long bill from the flowers over which it hovers, keeping its position in mid-air by the rapid, humming vibration of its wings.

On several occasions the family in the Red Cottage had known a Hummingbird to fly right into the room, attracted by the flowers in the window. Having sipped the sweets, the tiny visitor would attempt to fly out again, but would come at once in contact with the glass—just as the Nut-hatch and Chickadee had done in the schoolroom—and find the experience as terrifying as they had done.

Only last week, Dimple herself had set free from imprisonment one of these frightened little creatures—not their own Jewel-in-the-Sun, who would have felt no fear, but his shy, little mate. Dimple spoke tenderly to it, and told it that she would not hurt the tiniest feather on its tiny body. But it did not understand, and still the little body quivered and the little heart throbbed pitifully.

When it felt her fingers relax their slight pressure and opened its eyes to see the blue sky above it, it seemed for a moment almost too good to be true. A second or two it waited, motionless, then darted away like an illuminated drop from a rainbow cloud.

(To be Continued.)

WHY, INDEED!

Youngsters have curious ideas about age—rather surprising to their elders. Little Marie was sitting on her grandfather's knee one day, and, after looking at him intently for a time, she said: "Grandpa, were you in the Ark?"

"Certainly not, my dear," answered the astonished old man.

"Then why weren't you drowned?"

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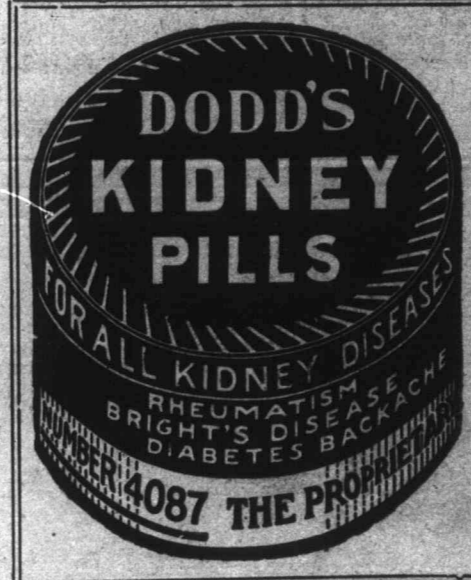
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