

## \* \* \* The Story Page. \* \* \*

### Fluff.

BY HARRIET J. SCRIPPS.

Fluff sat balancing himself at the edge of the nest among the ivy leaves on the old church tower, looking at the world.

It was just sunset, and his mother had flown off "to stretch her wings a bit," as she said; his father was busy food hunting, and Whitey, his twin brother, was fast asleep at the bottom of the nest, so it was a capital time to sit on the edge and try to see something. Fluff was nothing more than a downy, grey owl, a week old, but he was such a clever, wide-awake little fellow! Almost as soon as he had come out of his shell, he had begun to stare about and ask questions, and he had already made up his mind that he would never copy his father and mother, sit perched on the bough of a tree dozing all day, and only go out when it was too dark to see anything. He wished his round, bright eyes were stronger, though, and that the sun would not dazzle them so just now; and he rather hoped that something would come by for him to look at. At that very moment, he heard voices under the church tower, and, by stretching his neck out from among the ivy leaves, he was able to see a boy and girl, talking together very earnestly. His mother could have told him well enough who they were. The girl, a delicate, fairy-like little creature, with blue eyes and curly brown hair, was the vicar's only child; and the boy, a year or two older, the son of Mr. Hilton, whose farm lay close to the church where Fluff's home was. Vera had no brother or sister, so Jack Hilton was her constant friend, and companion, and without him she would have been lonely indeed.

"That's where they live," the boy was saying, as Fluff began to listen. "They've built in that old tower, father says, ever since he can remember, those owls have."

"What, the same birds?" said Vera. "Aren't they very old?"

"Oh! owls live ever so long! and father won't let anyone touch them. They're much too useful to be killed."

"I wish I could have a little baby one for a pet," said Vera. "I'd like to keep a new kind of bird; and owls are awfully clever, aren't they?"

"I'll get you one," cried Jack, eagerly, always ready to please his friend; "I dare say there are some young ones in the nest already."

Fluff would like to have called down to them that there were some young ones in the ivy bush nest, only they didn't mean to be caught, and shut up in a stupid old cage all their lives. But before he could get the words out, the children had passed on, and, after all, he thought, they might not have been able to understand him. Human beings have so very little sense, as even a baby owl knew.

Soon the father flew back with a delicious, fat field mouse in one claw, and a nice, juicy mole in the other, followed by his wife; and Fluff was obliged to lie down by the side of Whitey, leave off looking at the world, and think only of feeding.

Time went on, and if the little owl did not grow up quite so quickly as he would have liked, he was certainly more forward than any child Mrs. Owl had ever had. His feathers grew so thickly, and his wings were so strong, that he could fly quite well before Whitey was even able to perch on the ivy bough outside their nest. But a more obstinate, self-willed little owl surely never was born! His mother often sighed over him, and said how sad it was to have a son who always did just as he liked, and who was so different from any other owl that he actually used to go out in the daytime. But Fluff didn't care a bit. He went on his own way, and it really was quite wonderful how clever he grew at hunting, and what curious food he would sometimes bring home.

"Here, Whitey," he cried, one morning, dropping a couple of minnows by his brother's side. "You don't deserve them, but I just want you to see what you lose by sticking at home all day in this stupid old nest."

"Who gave them to you?" asked Whitey, as he turned the shiny creatures over with his beak; "and how do you know they're good to eat?"

"Gave them to me!" said Fluff, scornfully. "Do you think I'd take things from people? Why, I got them myself out of that pond in the wood."

"Out of the water?" said Whitey, shivering. "How horrid! Didn't you get your claw all wet? And I don't like them; they're slippery and bony."

"Go down your throat all the better if they're slippery," and every creature has bones," cried Fluff, gobbling up the second fish, and flying off in a rage. They're wasn't a bit of fun in Whitey!

"I suppose my wings will be quite strong, mother, before the cold comes?" Fluff asked one day, "so that I can fly a long way—miles away, I mean?"

It was so seldom her young son asked her a question now that Mrs. Owl was delighted at his wanting to know something from her, and answered in a great hurry. "Oh, yes, Fluff, dear, they'll grow as strong as an owl's wings ever are by winter, only we never fly miles, you know; our wings are too heavy."

"I mean to fly miles, anyhow," said Fluff, decidedly. "Why shouldn't we travel like other birds?"

"Travel," said his mother in a faint voice, "travel! Why, we've always been stay at home birds. Father and I have built in this same ivy bush for the last twenty springs, and I don't believe I've ever flown a mile on either side of it!"

"Awful slow lives you must have had!" cried Fluff. "Mine shan't be like that! Twenty years in one ivy bush! Good gracious!" And he shook his wise little owl's head in horror as he flew off.

Only a few days after this Fluff disappeared. He went out, as usual, one fine morning, and, though his father and mother and Whitey sat waiting and watching for him all that day, and many days after, he did not come back.

"I'm quite sure he must have got into bad company, and they've led him wrong," sighed his father, while his mother sat and sobbed, and Whitey almost wished he had gone off, too; it was so dull in the nest alone. If they had but known what friends Fluff had picked up, and what danger he was in! Almost the first day he had gone out by himself, as he was sitting under the eaves of an old barn, trying to think he liked the sun, a small bird had perched on a tree close by him, and, after staring at him a few minutes (he had never seen an owl before), had hopped up to him and begun to talk, which Fluff had enjoyed very much. After this, the two birds became great friends, though Fluff rather despised the swallow for living in an ugly mud nest, instead of in a pretty ivy-covered home like his.

"I suppose you'll soon be going off?" said the swallow to Fluff "one day in the middle of September. My mother says it's such a cold autumn we shall start early this year."

"Going off? Start early?" cried Fluff, his eyes big with wonder. "Why, and where too?"

"We've not quite settled that," said the swallow, grandly. "Somewhere sunny and warm, of course."

"I should like to, awfully," said Fluff. "I wonder if owls ever do?"

"I'll ask my mother," said the young swallow; "she's been everywhere."

And the next day he brought word that his mother had seen owls in every country she'd been to, and that, if he liked to go with them, he might. Fluff thought he would go, and on the very day when his family had sat so sadly waiting for him to come home, he had started off on his travels with a large flock of friendly swallows.

He liked it at first. It was so exciting, flying with a number of birds, and, though from the very first he could not help lagging behind, his own special friend had gone slowly, too, to keep him company. Very soon they came to the sea. Fluff had never seen it, and had no idea that he would have to go across water; so he stood shivering and trembling on the shore.

"Come along," cried his friend, impatiently, as the other swallows flew on without stopping a moment. "We must keep up with the rest. I'm not sure of the way."

Fluff saw for himself that they must not dawdle, so, in spite of his wings being stiff, and all his breath gone, he began bravely to fly over the blue sea. But it was no use. Slowly and more slowly moved the white wings, shorter and shorter grew the sobbing breath; and just as his friend felt that he could not stay behind the others another minute, poor little Fluff fell with a dull thud into the water, and his travels came to an end. Fortunately for the little drowning owl, others were out on the water that fine September morning, and when he next opened his eyes, he found himself in a small boat, lying on the lap of a little girl, who was gently drying his wet feathers with her pocket handkerchief, while a good-natured looking boatman and a boy rather older than the girl were rowing. It was one of Vera's great delights to be on the sea with her friend, Jack Hilton, and one of her great wishes to have an owl for a pet, and now, through Fluff's daring, these two pleasures came to her the same morning.

"It's just what I've been wanting for ever so long," she was saying, as the bird came to himself. "I'll take him home and tame him."

So she did, and all Fluff's grand plans for seeing the world came to an end by his being caught, shut up in an old parrot cage the housekeeper at the vicarage routed out, and living quite close to his old home! Not for long, though. Perhaps he did not care for the bits of sopped bread and meat with which Vera fed him, or perhaps being a prisoner did not agree with him, for he grew thinner and thinner, and weaker and weaker, every day, till, at last, Jack Hilton, who came very often to see him, declared it was no good, "the poor little beggar was dying!"

"Will he live if I let him go?" said Vera, sorrowfully. And Jack thought there was nothing else to be done.

So the two children, the very next morning, carried the cage to the lawn, opened the door, and lifted the sick prisoner out.

How Fluff managed to crawl back to the old nest,

he never could remember; but he did find his way there, and, after a great deal of pecking and feeding up, he gradually got strong again.

"I wish you would tell me some of your adventures," said Whitey, when the invalid was quite well. "I'm sure they were exciting!"

But no! Fluff could not bear even to speak of what he had gone through; only he made up his queer little owl's mind that, if ever he did try to go and see the world again, it would not be by water.

So I don't fancy the poor fellow will ever get very far, for, wise little owl as he is, he does not know that he lives on an island.—Little Folks.

### Polly Tomlin's Funeral Sermon.

BY MARY E. BALDWIN.

It was a chilly, dark day, with slowly falling rain. Indeed, rain had fallen intermittently for two days. It plashed down on the sodden grass and made a lonely sounding music as it dripped from the eaves.

In the farmhouse doorway there was the beginning of a funeral procession. They were carrying out the lifeless form of Deacon Tomlin. The church was only a few rods away. His wife, walking with a sort of muffled tread, went in front of the neighbors, who had come to the funeral.

She entered the church, and tremblingly passed into the old pew to listen to the carefully prepared sermon of the pastor.

The friend who sat close to her with the smelling salts, ready for an emergency, watched the pale face, and wondered how it was possible for the poor, worn creature to hold out so long and bravely through the sermon, but she knew little of what was going on behind the pale face and tear-wet eyes. As the discourse grew from firstly to last, Polly became absorbed, then eager, then actually flushed with excitement, for the minister was talking about her husband in a way that would have astonished the good deacon, who had never laid claim to a tithe of the virtues that the sermon was declaring that he illustrated.

How many times she had heard him cry from his valley of depression that the Lord would make him willing to serve as only a vessel of dishonor in his house. When she knew that all his life he had craved some sign that his service was not altogether menial.

Her heart swelled with a pardonable pride, then sank with a painful regret, for surely the deacon had really been a wonderful man. The minister thought so, and so! if only he could have imagined what would be said of him at the last, what a comfort and joy it would have been.

Mind and heart, Polly was stirred to the very foundation, and it was not strange that the frail body, worn with care and watching, yielded at last to the stress of the situation, and the word went through the village that Mrs. Tomlin would soon follow her husband.

It was a low fever, they said, which a woman of greater physical strength might battle through, but Polly, never. She grew weaker and weaker, and one morning, as she lay nerveless and resistless, her white, thin hands resting upon the home-made covering, she heard the neighbor who had watched with her enter the room above.

She was startled. It was the unused chamber, where the sacred treasures were kept. She was at the corner where the big chest stood. Nothing more was needed to tell the weak woman what the errand was. She could see just what was happening. She saw the heavy lid lifted and then the contents of the chest disclosed. The wedding slippers, a piece of the deacon's vest, worn on the wedding day, the little shoes and the eaten cap of a baby boy, whom the father no doubt had met in heaven. There, too, laid by themselves, were the garments ready for the bride of death.

Suddenly, as if a spring had been touched that set to work all the machinery of mind and heart, Polly was conscious of the thrill of a new purpose. She would not die. She would live, live to become worthy of the deacon's name, and who should say that at the last it might not be possible for the minister to praise her?

She was surprised beyond all of her past experience. It seemed as if a great force outside herself was bearing her beyond anything that she had before thought possible. She heard the foot-steps of her friend as she came away from the closed room, down through the long hall, bearing the burial garments in her arms. What should she do? Should she rise at once and declare the new fact of the miraculous change, and of her purpose to live, to live and be worthy of the deacon's name, and—and perhaps of a funeral sermon at some far-off day?

While she was trying to decide, the knocker sounded at the front door. She heard the minister's voice. He was led into the adjoining room. The attendant came and looked into the sick room. Polly felt that it was fortunate that her eyes were closed. Through the half-shut door came low tones. Her friend was talking with the minister.

"Could you tell me what she has said about her