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Birds of the Merry Forest

By LILIAN LEVERIDGE

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CHAPTER I

What the Chickadee Heard.

LONG the banks of the Winding River the woods were very still. Only one moving thing was visible—a small bird in a dove-blue suit, trimmed with white and black. That was Neddy Nuthatch.

Neddy was busy as usual, looking for his dinner of insects on the tree-trunks. For some reason, known only to himself, he always worked with his head downwards and tail pointing to the sky. As his chum, Black-Cap, the Chickadee, used to say, it was no trick for him to stand on his head. It was as easy and natural for him as it is for most people to stand on their heels. He would begin near the top of a tree, and come down, circling around the trunk like a corkscrew, and not many insects escaped his bright, little eyes. When he had finished one tree he would fly into another, and begin once more the leisurely descent, all the time talking to himself or his mate in a soft, little voice.

Neddy Nuthatch had been watching something besides his dinner, and presently he flew to a sturdy little maple and perched on a limb a few feet from his friend, the Chickadee. This little fellow was smaller than the Nuthatch, and very dainty in appearance and habits. Like Neddy, he wore a black cap, and had black and white trimmings on his grey suit. "Black-Cap," said Neddy, "I've been keeping my eye on you this last half-hour or so, and I'd just like to know what mischief you are up to. When a Chickadee keeps still as long as that without moving a feather or saying a word there's something in the air."

"Hush!" said Black-Cap. "Listen!" "Listen to what? I don't hear anything." "Put your ear down close to the tree like I do and you'll hear it." Neddy Nuthatch did so, and in a few moments looked up with a gleam in his beady eyes. "The sap!" he whispered. "Is that what you heard?" Black-Cap nodded. "Yes," he said; "the sap is running, and its music is the sweetest I have heard this long time. Did you catch the words of the song it sings?"

"No," said the Nuthatch. "What are the words?" "Spring is here! Spring is here! Spring is here! Listen again and you'll hear it." The Nuthatch did listen again, and heard the sweet little song of the sap. "Oh! that sounds good!" he exclaimed, "for it means that very soon the sun will be warm and the flowers will bloom; all our old friends will be coming back to the Merry Forest, and there will be nests to build, and all kinds of lovely things to do."

"That's just what I was thinking," said the Chickadee, "and it makes me feel so glad, I want to sing myself." And he lifted up his head, there and then, and sang his own little Spring Song:—
"Sweet, Sweetheart! Sweet, Sweet-heart!
Be cheery, be gay!
Snow's going, sap's flowing,
Sweet Spring's on the way."
It was true. Spring had come to the Merry Forest. As yet, no one caught a glimpse of the Green Dancer; no one had seen her foot-print; no one had heard her voice; no one had breathed a whiff of her woody perfume. And yet, for all that, Spring had come, the snow-fairies knew it; the Sunbeams knew it; the West Wind knew it; the tall,

bare maples knew it, and the dark and dreamy firs; the little, four-footed creatures of the woods knew it; but the birds knew it best of all.

"Yes; I'm certainly glad to see the Spring again," said the Nuthatch. "The winter has been long and cold. But we have had a pretty good time, you and I. Our nests—yours in the hollow birch tree and mine in the elm—are snug and warm. If those other birds, the robins and orioles and warblers and all the rest of them, would only learn to make nests the way we do, by boring a nice hole in an old tree-trunk, they might whistle at the storms and stay at home all the year round."

"Yes," agreed the Chickadee. "Those airy, little nests, with only the green leaves for shelter, are very pretty, no doubt, but they wouldn't suit me. Give me good, solid comfort every time, and I don't care a jumble about style."

"Yah, yah," assented the Nuthatch. "Them's my sentiments exactly." "We've both had a good store of food right along, too," the Chickadee went on, "thanks to the boys and girls of the Merry Forest School. They're a pretty decent lot, aren't they?"

"Just about O.K.—especially Doll Dimple and Boy Blue. It was Dimple who first began putting bread and cake crumbs on the gate-posts for us, wasn't it?" "I guess it was, and the others soon got the notion. You remember the feast first, don't you remember? And then you told me and Sweetheart about it."

"Yah, yah," said the Nuthatch. "That was when summer was nearly over, and we've never had to go hungry since. Whenever it was awfully cold and stormy we could just stay in and be cozy. I'm fond of crumbs, but, after all, there's nothing quite so good as the nice, juicy bugs and grubs we find on the trees, and it's such fun finding them. I'm so glad the Spring has come back. Oh! don't you just love this beautiful old woods?"

"It's the very best place in the world," said the Chickadee, "and in the Springtime it's all the heaven I want. Neddy, I sometimes wonder what sort of a place that school is inside, and what the children do there so long."



"Dee-dee-dee!" "Yah, yah, yank!" "Dee-dee-dee!" Neddy Nuthatch still kept laughing softly to himself as he started again on his head-first hunt for grubs; and Black-Cap, as he fitted among the boughs, sang his little Spring song with many variations:—
"Sweet, Sweetheart! Sweet, Sweet-heart!
Chick-a-dee-dee-dee!
Spring's coming, Spring's coming,
Chick-a-dee-dee-dee!"

Each went to sleep that night in his own snug nest, dreaming of the planned adventure, but neither of them guessed how much of an adventure it was really going to be. (To be continued.)

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