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Birds of the Merry Forest

By LILIAN LEVERIDGE

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CHAPTER VI

The Surprise Party.

"DIMPLE," said Boy Blue, a couple of days later, "we haven't seen anything of this Chickadee to-day, have we? I wonder why he hasn't been to visit us." "Maybe he's tired of bread and cake," she said. "I'll run downstairs and see if mother can give us something else that birds like, just for a change," and away she flew.

Boy Blue was sitting in his little, red rocking-chair by the low window of his room. He was feeling much better now, but still a little tired, and, as the rapidly-melting snow had made the roads very slushy, the twins had not been allowed to go out.

It was a beautiful, warm spring day; the sunshine was drinking up the snow-water thirstily, and there was scarcely a breath of wind. The twins had been reading fairy tales to each other and talking about their bird friends until the Merry Forest out yonder, across the glistening fields, seemed to them like some enchanted wood, where nothing was too wonderful or too lovely to happen. They longed to explore its shadowy depths and become more intimately acquainted with its happy, little people in feathers.

In a very short time Dimple returned with a big piece of stringy suet. "Mother says birds are very fond of this," she said, "especially when the snow is on the ground. Help me tear it up into shreds and strips and we'll just hang it on the tree."

Boy Blue assisted very willingly, and then they opened the window and flung out the strips of suet so that they lodged in the twigs and branches of the tree.

Very reluctantly they shut down the window again, and, with heads bent together over their book, went on with the story of the "Chinese Nightingale."

"Chick-a-dee-dee-dee!" At the little, familiar call the book was hastily thrown aside. "It's our dear, little Chickadee come at last," said Dimple. "Oh! oh!"

"Oh! oh!" echoed Boy Blue. "What a lot of birds! Just look at them, Dimple. Did you ever see anything like it?"

"They must have smelt the suet," said Dimple, under her breath. "Let's open the window."

They opened it very softly, and there sat their old friend, the Chickadee, on the ledge.

"Hello, Dimple! Hello, Boy Blue!" he chirped, gaily. "You see, I didn't come alone this time. I've brought some of my friends from the Merry Forest for a little surprise party."

"A surprise party! Oh, how lovely!" cried Dimple and Boy Blue together, and Dimple began to clap her hands and dance.

"Hush, Dimple!" whispered her brother, warningly. "You'll scare the birds away," and Dimple thought she had already done so when they all rose from their perches and fluttered their wings. The sight was so pretty that the twins almost ceased to breathe for a few eager moments. There was a beautiful blending of grey and blue and white and black and red.

"Don't be scared," said the Chickadee. "They aren't going to fly away; that's just our form of greeting in bird land."

"I guess I'd better introduce them to you," he went on. "My Sweetheart you know already, and these are our

cousins, the Chickadee family. Come on, you saucy little rascals, and bow your prettiest."

At this, about a dozen Chickadees flew up to the bough that tapped against the window-pane. Every little, black-capped head bobbed in the cunningest way; every pair of grey wings fluttered, showing their white tips beautifully, and little, white-tipped tails seemed to nod assent to every word that was spoken.

They all began to talk at once, for there are no bashful members in the Chickadee family. "Day, day, Dimple! Day, day, Boy Blue! Glad to meet you! How do? How do? Nice day, eh? Nice day, nice day! Chick-a-dee-dee-dee!"

"There; that'll do," Black-Cap interrupted. "Now, give somebody else a chance to get in a word. Neddy, bring Mrs. Neddy and all your Nut-hatch cousins along."

Quick as wink the Chickadees had flown to a higher limb, and the Nut-hatches were in their places. Very handsome they looked in their dove-blue suits, black caps and white shirt fronts. They were not so talkative as the Chickadees, but they gave their greetings in pleasant, cheerful tones. Then suddenly they all turned a summersault round the limb, and down the tree trunk they started, head first, laughing softly as they went.

"Come along, Redpolls," called the Chickadee. "Where are you off to? I declare, there's no keeping a string on you madcaps."

In answer to his call a tiny cloud of grey and black and rosy red rose from a little patch of weeds beyond the fence, crossed the sunny space with a wave-like motion, and with gay, musical, little notes and calls, settled on the bough at the window.

"Oh! Aren't they pretty birds?" cried Dimple.

"I never saw any like them before," replied Boy Blue. "Did you?"

"No; I never did. I never knew there were such birds. Do you see their red caps? I suppose that's how they got their names. Poll is another word for head, you know."

"Is it? Some of them have rosy breasts and some haven't. Hello, little fellow! Why haven't you got a rosy breast like those other chaps?"

"I was just wondering," the modestly-dressed little bird said, "if you were just going to talk about us and not say a word to us—as if we were stuffed specimens at a show."

"Oh! I beg your pardon, little chappie," Boy Blue hastened to say. "I'm sorry we forgot our manners like that. I really am."

"You're making a mistake," the bird went on. "I'm not a 'chappie' nor a 'fellow.' All the brothers in our family have rosy breasts and the sisters haven't. I'm a sister."

"Oh! I see," answered Boy Blue. "That's funny," said Dimple. "I should think the lady birds would want to dress the prettiest—girls do. They're more fond of colour than boys."

The bird shook its head thoughtfully. "We are as fond of colour as anybody," she said, "but it wouldn't be safe for our little ones if we dressed up."

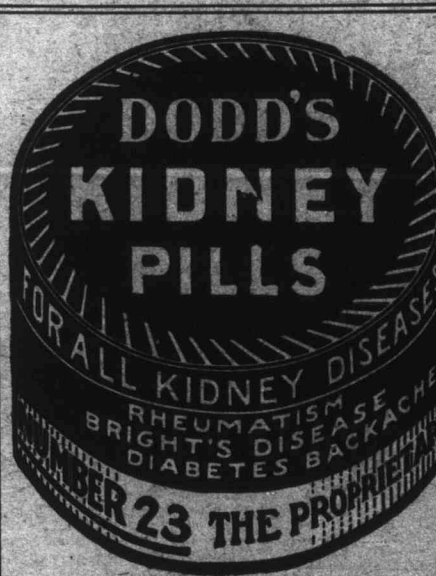
"Wouldn't be safe! Why?" But the bird didn't stop to answer. In a moment the little flock were on the wing again, and almost before you could wink your eye half a dozen Bluejays sat in their places.

"Good-day to you, Mr. Bluejay," cried Boy Blue. "I guess we don't need any introduction, do we? We've met before."

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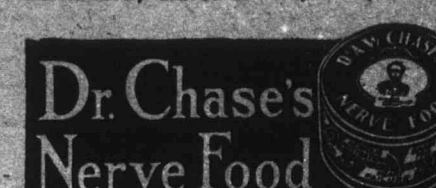
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