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BIRDS OF THE MERRY FOREST

By **LILIAN LEVERIDGE**

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CHAPTER XIX.

The Sparrows.

THE children walked on in thoughtful silence for a little way. Then, where the path crossed a swamp, they stopped to listen to a new song in the red osier dogwood by a tinkling little brook. As they listened their attention was caught for a few minutes by a pair of small, dark-coloured birds, with coats of blended brown, black and chestnut. They were feeding beneath some low cedar shrubs, creeping about silently with only an occasional feeble chirp. They hopped to within a few feet of the children, who stood motionless and unobserved.

"They are Swamp Sparrows," whispered Boy Blue to Jimmie. "We've seen them two or three times before, but have never heard them sing."

At that very moment one of the modest little birds hopped on to a low cedar spray and sang his sweet, simple song—just a "Tweet-tweet-tweet," repeated all on one note, but it expressed him and his surroundings perfectly.

Before they had time to make any comment, the singer in the dogwoods flew to an elder bush quite close to them, where they could see him quite plainly.

"That's a Fox Sparrow, I believe," said Boy Blue. "Just watch him."

"He's just the colour of a fox, with some grey mixed in," whispered Jimmie. "Isn't he big and handsome?"

"He must be nearly as big as a Robin," replied Boy Blue. "You'd never take him to be a cousin of those other little birds down on the ground, would you?"

The newcomer eyed the children curiously during this low-voiced conversation, but seemed to understand that he had nothing to fear, for the next minute he burst out again into song. It was a joyous song, full-toned, clear and liquidly musical, and until it had softened into silence again no one thought of interrupting.

Soon he disappeared into the bushes and went about his own affairs. Then the children hastened to look up his picture and description in the little brown book, and this left them in no doubt of the name of their new friend.

Unnoticed by the others, Boy Blue stole away into the undergrowth, and catching another glimpse of the bird, he called softly: "Foxye, you make six different Sparrows we've seen to-day. If you meet any more of your relations, send them along to us, will you?"

The Fox Sparrow nodded understandingly, and Boy Blue went back to his companions silently triumphant.

They went on across a little ridge of hardwood, then the path dipped deeply into a low gully. Beyond this was a rugged hill of solid rock, known as the Big Pine Bluff. Not that any pines worth mentioning were to be found there now. Years ago, the woodman's axe and forest fires had laid low the last stately monarch, and now the hill was covered with a sparse growth of poplar, wild cherry, tamarack, spruce, bilberry, sumach and white birch.

The jagged grey and pink and white rocks were in many places quite bare, and in others softly carpeted with green moss and grey lichen. Between the crevices a few wild flowers found standing room, and

huckleberry bushes were just coming into bloom. This was a favourite spot, and the twins had occasionally come there alone.

To-day the three climbed breathlessly up the narrow, fern-bordered pathway, until they had reached the top, where they had a wide view of the country for miles around.

After standing for a few minutes to enjoy this sweeping view they turned aside to a favourite spot, a little nook near the top of the steep, southern slope where Nature in a long-ago day had hewn the rock into benches and arm chairs, and, more recently, cushioned them with the softest and greenest of her mosses. They did not talk much, they simply let the joy and the beauty of the summer wild sink into their hearts and minds.

Up from the green valley there floated a clear, ringing song—three slow notes of "linked sweetness long drawn out," as the poet puts it, then a rippling trill of shorter notes, the whole strain magically suggestive of trees and brooks and wide, windswept spaces.

The children were instantly alert and eager. "Do you know that bird, Jimmie?" questioned Dimple. "We keep trying every day to get a glimpse of it, but it stays away up in the tree-tops and won't come near us."

Again Jimmie shook his head, feeling a little ashamed of his own ignorance of the wood folk which year by year all his life had added so much to his pleasure.

They took out the field glasses and each in turn scanned the tree-tops all around and below, but in vain. The minstrel evidently preferred to remain behind the scenes.

"Suppose we go down there and try to get closer," Dimple suggested, but at this Boy Blue demurred.

"Daddy says the best way to watch for new birds is to keep still and let them come to you," he reminded her, and we've always found it worked out all right. Let's stay just where we are and be quiet. We couldn't have a better place; we can see into the tops of the trees just below, and we are close to the ground, too."

This seemed to be a good argument, and the others agreed. Boy Blue had his own reasons for waiting. "There's no doubt the Fox Sparrow knows where we are," he said to himself, "and he won't forget."

The unseen musician kept on singing, with little pauses between pieces, and then the music ceased.

"I expect he's come to the end of his programme," said Jimmie.

Boy Blue didn't answer, but kept on watching more intently than ever. Presently there was a slight rustling in the foliage of a little cherry tree just below them. They saw a twig move here and there and heard little low chirpings.

The three children waited, almost breathless with eagerness, until at last a new bird emerged from the leaves and sat in full sight, swinging lightly on a slender spray. Then another came into view, and another.

The newcomers were dressed in rich, reddish brown and black striped coats, with grey vests, and caps of white and black; but the most noticeable thing about them was their snow-white throats.

"Aren't they pretty, though!" whispered Jimmie. "I never saw any like them before, did you?"

"Oh, we have," Dimple answered quickly. "They are White-throated



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Sparrows. We've seen them several times, but have never heard them sing. Daddy says there's only one of the Sparrows handsomer, and that is the White-crowned. We've never seen any of them. Daddy says these are famous singers. I do wish they'd tune up for us now."

All this time Boy Blue was watching in silence and listening patiently for the song he felt sure the bird was keeping in reserve.

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