

CHAPTER VI - A Merry Adventure

"Talking about men," said the cuckoo, in a harsh but not very unpleasant voice, "reminds me of a funny adventure I once had myself. I was sitting in my nest one day, at the time when I was quite young, when suddenly a man appeared before me. You must know that this nest, which was rather carelessly built by my mother, was in a thick evergreen tree, and not very high from the ground; so that I found the man's eyes staring squarely into my own.

"Most of you, my dears, have seen men; but this was the strangest sort of man you can imagine. There was white hair upon his face, so long that it hung down to his middle, and over his eyes were round plates of glass that glittered very curiously. I was so astonished at seeing the queer creature that I sat still and stared, and this was my undoing. For suddenly there came a rapid 'whish!' through the air, and a network of cords fell all around and over me. Then, indeed, I spread my wings and attempted to fly; but it was too late. I struggled in the net without avail, and soon gave up the conflict in breathless despair.

"My captor did not intend to kill me, however. Instead, he tried to soothe my fright, and carried me very gently for many, many miles, until we came to a village of houses. Here, at the very top of a high house, the man lived in one little room. It was all littered with tools and bits of wood, and on a broad shelf were several queer things that went 'tick-tock! tick-tock!' every minute. I was thrust, gently enough, into a wooden cage, where I lay upon the bottom more dead than alive because the ticking things at first scared me dreadfully and I was in constant terror lest I should be tortured or killed. But the glass-eyed old man brought me dainty things to eat, and plenty of fresh water to relieve my thirst, and by the next day my heart had stopped going pitty-pat and I was calm enough to stand up in my cage and look around me.

"My white-whiskered captor sat at a bench with his coat off and his bald head bare, while he worked away busily putting little wheels and springs together, and fitting them into a case of wood. When one of them was finished it would sing 'tick-tock! tick-tock!' just like the other queer things on the shelf, and this constant ticking so interested me that I raised my head and called:

"Cuck-oo! cuck-oo!"

"That's it!" cried the old man, delightedly. "That's what I wanted to hear. It's the real cuckoo at last, and not a bit like those cheap imitations."

"I didn't understand at first what he meant, but he worked at his bench all day, and finally brought to my cage a bird made out of wood, that was carved and painted to look just as I was. It seemed so natural that I flapped my wings and called 'cuck-oo' to it, and the man pressed a little bellows at the bottom of the bird and made it say 'cuck-oo!' in return. But that cry was so false and unreal that I just shouted with laughter, and the glass-eyed old man shook his head sadly and said: 'That will never do. That will never do in the world.'

"So all the next day he worked hard trying to make his wooden bird say 'cuck-oo!' in the proper way; and at last it really spoke quite naturally, so that it startled even me when I heard it. This seemed to please my captor very much; so he put it inside one of the ticking things on the shelf, and by-and-by a door opened and the wooden bird jumped out and cried 'Cuck-oo! Cuck-oo! Cuck-oo!' and then jumped back again and the door closed with a snap.

"'Bravo!' cried old white-hair; but I was rather annoyed, for I thought the wooden bird was impudent in trying to ape the ways of live cuckoos. I shouted back a challenge to it, but there was no reply. An hour later, and every hour, it repeated the performance, but jumped behind the door when I offered to fight it.

"The next day the man was absent from the room, and I had nothing to eat. So I became angry and uneasy. I scratched away at the wooden bars of my cage and tried to twist them with my beak, and at last one of them, to my great joy, came loose, and I was able to squeeze myself out of the cage.

"But then I was no better off than before, because the windows and the door of the room were fast shut. I grew more cross and ill-tempered than before, when I discovered this, and to add to my annoyance that miserable wooden bird would every once in awhile jump out and yell 'Cuck-oo!' and then bounce back into its house again, without daring to argue with me.

"This at last made me frantic with rage, and I resolved to be revenged. The next time the wooden bird made its appearance I new upon it in a flash and knocked it off the little platform before it had uttered its cry more than twice. It fell upon the floor and broke one of its wings; but in an instant I dashed myself upon it and bit and scratched the impudent thing until there was not a bit of paint left upon it. Its head came off, too, and so did its legs and the other wing, and before I was done with it no one ever would have known it was once a clever imitation of myself. Finding that I was victorious I cried 'Cuck-oo!' in triumph, and just then the little door of the ticking thing opened and the platform where the wooden bird had stood came out of it and remained for

a time motionless. I quickly flew up and perched upon it, and shouted 'Cuck-oo!' again, in great glee. As I did so, to my amazement the platform on which I stood leaped backward, carrying me with it, and the next instant the door closed with a snap and I found myself in darkness.

"Wildly I fluttered my wings; but it was of no use. I was in a prison much worse than the cage, and so small that I could hardly turn around in it. I was about to die of terror and despair when I chanced to remember that at certain times the door would open to push out the bird and allow it to say 'Cuck-oo!' before it shut again. So, the next time it opened in this way, I would be able to make my escape.

"Very patiently I waited in the dark little hole, listening to the steady 'tick-tock!' of the machinery behind me and trying not to be nervous. After awhile I heard the old man come into the room and exclaim sorrowfully because his captive cuckoo had escaped from its cage. He could not imagine what had become of me, and I kept still and laughed to myself to think how I would presently surprise him.

"It seemed an age before I finally heard the click that opened the door in front of me. Then the platform on which I sat sprang out, and I fluttered my wings and yelled 'Cuck-oo! Cuck-oo!' as loud as I could. The old man was standing right in front of me, his mouth wide open with astonishment at the wonderfully natural performance of his wooden bird, as he thought me. He shouted 'Bravo!' again, and clapped his hands; and at that I flew straight into his face, and clawed his white hair with all my might, and screamed as loud as I could.

"He screamed, too, being taken by surprise, and tumbled over backward so that he sat down upon the floor with a loud bump. I flew to the work-bench, and then the truth dawned upon him that I was not the wooden bird but the real one.

"'Good gracious!' said he, 'I've left the window open. The rascal will escape!'

"I glanced at the window and saw that it was indeed wide open. The sight filled me with triumphant joy. Before the old man could get upon his feet and reach the window I had perched upon the sill, and with one parting cry of 'Cuck-oo!' I spread my wings and flew straight into the air.

"Well, I never went back to enquire if he enjoyed the trick I had played upon him, but I've laughed many a time when I thought of the old fellow's comic

expression when a real cuckoo instead of a painted one flew out of his ticking machine."

As the cuckoo ended his tale the other birds joined in a chorus of shrill laughter; but Chubbins said to them, gravely:

"He was a smart man, though, to make a cuckoo-clock. I saw one myself, one time, and it was a wonderful thing. The cuckoo told what time it was every hour."

"Was it made of wood?" asked the bluejay.

"I don't know that," replied the boy-lark; "but of course it wasn't a real bird."

"It only shows," remarked the bobolink, "how greatly those humans admire us birds. They make pictures of us, and love to keep us in cages so they can hear us sing, and they even wear us in their bonnets after we are dead."

"I think that is a dreadful thing," said the goldfinch, with a shudder. "But it only proves that men are our greatest enemies."

"Don't forget the women," said Twinkle. "It's the women that wear birds in their hats."

"Mankind," said Robin Redbreast, gravely, "is the most destructive and bloodthirsty of all the brute creation. They not only kill for food, but through vanity and a desire for personal adornment. I have even heard it said that they kill for amusement, being unable to restrain their murderous desires. In this they are more cruel than the serpents."

"There is some excuse for the poor things," observed the bluejay, "for nature created them dependent upon the animals and birds and fishes. Having neither fur nor feathers to protect their poor skinny bodies, they wear clothing made of the fleece of sheep, and skins of seals and beavers and otters and even the humble muskrats. They cover their feet and their hands with skins of beasts; they sleep upon the feathers of birds; their food is the flesh of beasts and birds and fishes. No created thing is so dependent upon others as man; therefore he is the greatest destroyer in the world. But he is not alone in his murderous, despoiling instinct. While you rail at man, my friends, do not forget that birds are themselves the greatest enemies of birds."

"Nonsense!" cried the magpie, indignantly.

"Perhaps the less you say about this matter the better," declared the bluejay, swinging his club in a suggestive manner, and looking sharply at the magpie.

"It's a slander," said the blackbird. "I'm sure you can't accuse me of injuring birds in any way."

"If you are all innocent, why are we obliged to have a policeman?" enquired the little wren, in a nervous voice.

"Tell me," said Twinkle, appealing to the bluejay; "are the big birds really naughty to the little ones?"

"Why, it is the same with us as it is with men," replied the policeman. "There are good ones and bad ones among us, and the bad ones have to be watched. Men destroy us wantonly; other animals and the sly serpents prey upon us and our eggs for food; but these are open enemies, and we know how we may best avoid them. Our most dangerous foes are those bandits of our own race who, instead of protecting their brethren, steal our eggs and murder our young. They are not always the biggest birds, by any means, that do these things. The crow family is known to be treacherous, and the shrike is rightly called the 'butcher-bird,' but there are many others that we have reason to suspect feed upon their own race."

"How dreadful!" exclaimed the girl-lark.

The birds all seemed restless and uneasy at this conversation, and looked upon one another with suspicious glances. But the bluejay soothed them by saying:

"After all, I suppose we imagine more evil than really exists, and sometimes accuse our neighbors wrongfully. But the mother birds know how often their nests have been robbed in their absence, and if they suspect some neighbor of the crime instead of a prowling animal it is but natural, since many birds cannot be trusted. There are laws in the forest, of course; but the guilty ones are often able to escape. I'll tell you of a little tragedy that happened only last week, which will prove how apt we are to be mistaken."