

## **CHAPTER XI - The Orphans**

The eagle now bade them good-bye and flew away in search of prey, while the bluejay and the child-larks directed their flight toward that part of the great forest where they lived.

"Are you sure the men have gone?" asked Chubbins.

"Yes," replied the policeman; "they left the forest as soon as they had shot Jolly Joe, for the brown bear was so heavy that they had to carry him on a pole resting across their shoulders. I hope they won't come again very soon."

"Did they take Mrs. Hootaway with them?" asked Twinkle.

"Yes; she will probably be stuffed, poor thing!"

Presently they passed near the rosy glow that lighted up the center of the forest with its soft radiance, and the girl said:

"That is the Paradise Land, where the Birds of Paradise live. The eagle has promised to ask one of those birds to let us visit their country."

"Oh, I can do better than that, if you wish to visit the Paradise," responded the bluejay; "for the Guardian of the Entrance is a special friend of mine, and will do whatever I ask him to."

"Will he, really?" asked the girl, in delight.

"To be sure. Some day I will take you over there, and then you will see what powerful friends Policeman Bluejay has."

"I'd like that," declared Twinkle.

Their swift flight enabled them to cover the remaining distance very rapidly, and soon they were at home again.

They first flew to the nest of the goldfinches, which was in a tree not far from the maple where the lark-children lived. There they found the tiny birds, who were yet so new that they were helpless indeed. Mrs. Redbreast was sitting by the nest when they arrived, and she said:

"The poor orphans are still hungry, although I have fed them all the insects I could find near. But I am glad that you have come, for it is time I was at home looking after my own little ones."

"Chubbins and I have 'dopted the goldfinches," said Twinkle, "so we will look after them now. But it was very nice of you, Mrs. Redbreast, to take care of them until we arrived."

"Well, I like to be neighborly," returned the pretty bird; "and as long as cruel men enter our forest no mother can tell how soon her own little ones will be orphaned and left helpless."

"That is true," said the policeman, nodding gravely.

So Mrs. Redbreast flew away and now Chubbins looked curiously into the nest, where several fluffy heads were eagerly lifted with their bills as wide open as they could possibly stretch.

"They must be just awful hungry, Twink," said the boy.

"Oh, they're always like that," observed Policeman Bluejay, calmly. "When anyone is around they open their mouths to be fed, whether they are hungry or not. It's the way with birdlets."

"What shall we feed them?" asked Twinkle.

"Oh, anything at all; they are not particular," said the bluejay, and then he flew away and left the child-larks to their new and interesting task.

"I'll be the father, and you be the mother," said Chubbins.

"All right," answered Twinkle.

"Peep! peep! peep!" said the tiny goldfinches.

"I wonder if the luncheon in our basket would agree with them," remarked the girl, looking at the open mouths reflectively as she perched her own brown body upon the edge of the deep nest.

"Might try it," suggested the boy. "The cop says they're not particular, and what's good enough for us ought to be good enough for them."

So they flew to where the basket hung among the thick leaves of the tree, which had served to prevent the men from discovering it, and crept underneath the cloth that covered it.

"Which do you think they'd like best," asked Chubbins, "the pickles or the cheese?"

"Neither one," Twinkle replied. "The sandwiches will be best for them. Wait; I'll pick out some of the meat that is between the slices of bread. They'll be sure to like that."

"Of course," agreed Chubbins, promptly. "They'll think it's bugs."

So each one dragged out a big piece of meat from a sandwich, and by holding it fast in one claw they managed to fly with the burden to the nest of the goldfinch babies.

"Don't give it to 'em all at once," cautioned the girl. "It would choke 'em."

"I know," said Chubbins.

He tore off a tiny bit of the meat and dropped it into one of the wide-open bills. Instantly it was gone and the mouth was open again for more. They tried to divide the dinner equally among them, but they all looked so alike and were so ravenous to eat everything that was dropped into their bills that it was hard work to keep track of which had been fed and which had not. But the child-larks were positive that each one had had enough to keep it from starving, because there was a big bunch in front of each little breast that was a certain proof of a full crop.

The next task of the guardians was to give the birdlets drink; so Twinkle and Chubbins flew to the brook and by hunting around a while they found an acorn-cup that had fallen from one of the oak trees. This they filled with water, and then Twinkle, who was a trifle larger than the boy-lark, clutched the cup firmly with her toes and flew back to the orphans without spilling more than a few drops. They managed to pour some of the water into each open mouth, and then Twinkle said:

"There! they won't die of either hunger or thirst in a hurry, Chub. So now we can feed ourselves."

"Their mouths are still open," returned the boy, doubtfully.

"It must be a habit they have," she answered. "Wouldn't you think they'd get tired stretching their bills that way?"

"Peep! peep! peep!" cried the baby goldfinches.

"You see," said the boy, with a wise look, "they don't know any better. I had a dog once that howled every time we shut him up. But if we let him alone he

stopped howling. We'll go and get something to eat and let these beggars alone a while. Perhaps they'll shut their mouths by the time we get back again."

"Maybe," replied Twinkle.

They got their own luncheon from the basket, and afterward perched on the tree near the nest of the little goldfinches. They did not feel at all comfortable in their old nest in the maple, because they could not forget the tragic deaths of the inhabitants of the three hollows in the tree--the three "flats" as poor Wisk had merrily called them.

During the afternoon several of the birds came to call upon the orphans, and they all nodded approval when they found the child-larks watching over the little ones. Twinkle questioned some of the mothers anxiously about that trick the babies had of keeping their bills open and crying for food, but she was told to pay no attention to such actions.

Nevertheless, the pleadings of the orphans, who were really stuffed full of food, made the child-larks so nervous that they hailed with delight the arrival of Policeman Bluejay in the early evening. The busy officer had brought with him Mrs. Chaffinch, a widow whose husband had been killed a few days before by a savage wildcat.

Mrs. Chaffinch declared she would be delighted to become a mother to the little goldfinches, and rear them properly. She had always had good success in bringing up her own children, she claimed, and the goldfinches were first cousins to the chaffinches, so she was sure to understand their ways perfectly.

Twinkle did not want to give up her charges at first, as she had become interested in them; but Chubbins heaved a sigh of relief and declared he was glad the "restless little beggars" had a mother that knew more about them than he did. The bluejay hinted that he considered the widow's experience would enable her to do more for the baby goldfinches than could a child-lark who had never yet laid an egg, and so Twinkle was forced to yield to his superior judgment.

Mrs. Chaffinch settled herself in a motherly manner upon the nest, and the two bird-children bade her good-night and returned to their own maple tree, where they had a rather wakeful night, because Chubbins thoughtlessly suggested that the place might be haunted by the ghosts of the gray owl, Wisk, and Mrs. 'Possum.

But either the poor things had no ghosts or they were too polite to bother the little child-larks.