

## MOTHER MAGPIE'S MISCHIEF

Old Mother Magpie was about the busiest character in the forest. But you must know that there is a great difference between being busy and being industrious. One may be very busy all the time, and yet not in the least industrious; and this was the case with Mother Magpie.

She was always full of everybody's business but her own--up and down, here and there, everywhere but in her own nest, knowing everyone's affairs, telling what everybody had been doing or ought to do, and ready to cast her advice gratis at every bird and beast of the woods.

Now she bustled up to the parsonage at the top of the oak-tree, to tell old Parson Too-Whit what she thought he ought to preach for his next sermon, and how dreadful the morals of the parish were becoming. Then, having perfectly bewildered the poor old gentleman, who was always sleepy of a Monday morning, Mother Magpie would take a peep into Mrs. Oriole's nest, sit chattering on a bough above, and pour forth floods of advice, which, poor little Mrs. Oriole used to say to her husband, bewildered her more than a hard north-east storm.

"Depend upon it, my dear," Mother Magpie would say, "that this way of building your nest, swinging like an old empty stocking from a bough, isn't at all the thing. I never built one so in my life, and I never

have headaches. Now you complain always that your head aches whenever I call upon you. It's all on account of this way of swinging and swaying about in such an absurd manner."

"But, my dear," piped Mrs. Oriole timidly, "the Orioles always have built in this manner, and it suits our constitution."

"A fiddle on your constitution! How can you tell what agrees with your constitution unless you try? You own you are not well; you are subject to headaches; and every physician will tell you that a tilting motion disorders the stomach and acts upon the brain. Ask old Dr. Kite. I was talking with him about your case only yesterday, and says he, 'Mrs. Magpie, I perfectly agree with you.'"

"But my husband prefers this style of building."

"That's only because he isn't properly instructed. Pray, did you ever attend Dr. Kite's lectures on the nervous system?"

"No, I have no time to attend lectures. Who would sit on the eggs?"

"Why, your husband, to be sure; don't he take his turn in sitting? If he don't, he ought to. I shall speak to him about it. My husband always sits regularly half the time, that I may have time to go about and exercise."

"O Mrs. Magpie, pray don't speak to my husband; he will think I've been complaining."

"No, no, he won't. Let me alone. I understand just how to say the thing. I've advised hundreds of young husbands in my day, and I never gave offence."

"But I tell you, Mrs. Magpie, I don't want any interference between my husband and me, and I will not have it," says Mrs. Oriole, with her little round eyes flashing with indignation.

"Don't put yourself in a passion, my dear; the more you talk, the more sure I am that your nervous system is running down, or you wouldn't forget good manners in this way. You'd better take my advice, for I understand just what to do,"--and away sails Mother Magpie; and presently young Oriole comes home all in a flutter.

"I say, my dear, if you will persist in gossiping over our private family matters with that old Mother Magpie--"

"My dear, I don't gossip. She comes and bores me to death with talking, and then goes off and mistakes what she has been saying for what I said."

"But you must CUT her."

"I try to, all I can; but she won't BE cut."

"It's enough to make a bird swear," said Tommy Oriole.

Tommy Oriole, to say the truth, had as good a heart as ever beat under bird's feathers; but then he had a weakness for concerts and general society, because he was held to be, by all odds, the handsomest bird in the woods, and sung like an angel; and so the truth was he didn't confine himself so much to the domestic nest as Tom Titmouse or Billy Wren. But he determined that he wouldn't have old Mother Magpie interfering with his affairs.

"The fact is," quoth Tommy, "I am a society bird, and Nature has marked out for me a course beyond the range of the commonplace, and my wife must learn to accommodate. If she has a brilliant husband, whose success gratifies her ambition and places her in a distinguished public position, she must pay something for it. I'm sure Billy Wren's wife would give her very bill to see her husband in the circles where I am quite at home. To say the truth, my wife was all well enough content till old Mother Magpie interfered. It is quite my duty to take strong ground, and show that I cannot be dictated to."

So, after this, Tommy Oriole went to rather more concerts, and spent less time at home than ever he did before, which was all that Mother Magpie effected in that quarter. I confess this was very bad in

Tommy; but then birds are no better than men in domestic matters, and sometimes will take the most unreasonable courses, if a meddling Magpie gets her claw into their nest.

But old Mother Magpie had now got a new business in hand in another quarter. She bustled off down to Water-Dock Lane, where, as we said in a former narrative, lived the old music-teacher, Dr. Bullfrog.

The poor old doctor was a simple-minded, good, amiable creature, who had played the double-bass and led the forest choir on all public occasions since nobody knows when. Latterly some youngsters had arisen who sneered at his performances as behind the age. In fact, since a great city had grown up in the vicinity of the forest, tribes of wandering boys broke up the simple tastes and quiet habits which old Mother Nature had always kept up in those parts. They pulled the young checkerberry before it even had time to blossom, rooted up the sassafras shrubs and gnawed their roots, fired off guns at the birds, and on several occasions, when old Dr. Bullfrog was leading a concert, had dashed in and broken up the choir by throwing stones.

This was not the worst of it. The little varlets had a way of jeering at the simple old doctor and his concerts, and mimicking the tones of his bass-viol. "There you go, Paddy-go-donk, Paddy-go-donk--umph--chunk," some rascal of a boy would shout, while poor old Bullfrog's yellow spectacles would be bedewed with tears of honest indignation. In time, the jeers of these little savages began to tell on the society in the forest, and to corrupt their simple

manners; and it was whispered among the younger and more heavy birds and squirrels that old Bullfrog was a bore, and that it was time to get up a new style of music in the parish, and to give the charge of it to some more modern performer.

Poor old Dr. Bullfrog knew nothing of this, however, and was doing his simple best, in peace, when Mother Magpie called in upon him one morning.

"Well, neighbour, how unreasonable people are! Who would have thought that the youth of our generation should have no more consideration for established merit? Now, for my part, I think your music-teaching never was better; and as for our choir, I maintain constantly that it never was in better order, but--Well, one may wear her tongue out, but one can never make these young folks listen to reason."

"I really don't understand you, ma'am," said poor Dr. Bullfrog.

"What! you haven't heard of a committee that is going to call on you, to ask you to resign the care of the parish music?"

"Madam," said Dr. Bullfrog, with all that energy of tone for which he was remarkable, "I don't believe it,--I CAN'T believe it. You must have made a mistake."

"I mistake! No, no, my good friend; I never make mistakes. What I know, I know certainly. Wasn't it I that said I knew there was an engagement between Tim Chipmunk and Nancy Nibble, who are married this very day? I knew that thing six weeks before any bird or beast in our parts; and I can tell you, you are going to be scandalously and ungratefully treated, Dr. Bullfrog."

"Bless me, we shall all be ruined!" said Mrs. Bullfrog; "my poor husband--"

"Oh, as to that, if you take things in time, and listen to my advice," said Mother Magpie, "we may yet pull you through. You must alter your style a little,--adapt it to modern times. Everybody now is a little touched with the operatic fever, and there's Tommy Oriole has been to New Orleans and brought back a touch of the artistic. If you would try his style a little,--something Tyrolean, you see."

"Dear madam, consider my voice. I never could hit the high notes."

"How do you know? It's all practice; Tommy Oriole says so. Just try the scales. As to your voice, your manner of living has a great deal to do with it. I always did tell you that your passion for water injured your singing. Suppose Tommy Oriole should sit half his days up to his hips in water, as you do,--his voice would be as hoarse and rough as yours. Come up on the bank and learn to perch, as we birds do. We are the true musical race."

And so poor Mr. Bullfrog was persuaded to forego his pleasant little cottage under the cat-tails, where his green spectacles and honest round back had excited, even in the minds of the boys, sentiments of respect and compassion. He came up into the garden, and established himself under a burdock, and began to practise Italian scales.

The result was, that poor old Dr. Bullfrog, instead of being considered as a respectable old bore, got himself universally laughed at for aping fashionable manners. Every bird and beast in the forest had a gibe at him; and even old Parson Too-Whit thought it worth his while to make him a pastoral call, and admonish him about courses unbefitting his age and standing. As to Mother Magpie, you may be sure that she assured every one how sorry she was that dear old Dr. Bullfrog had made such a fool of himself; if he had taken her advice, he would have kept on respectably as a nice old Bullfrog should.

But the tragedy for the poor old music-teacher grew even more melancholy in its termination; for one day, as he was sitting disconsolately under a currant-bush in the garden, practising his poor old notes in a quiet way, THUMP came a great blow of a hoe, which nearly broke his back.

"Hallo! what ugly beast have we got here?" said Tom Noakes, the gardener's boy. "Here, here, Wasp, my boy."



What a fright for a poor, quiet, old Bullfrog, as little wiry, wicked Wasp came at him, barking and yelping. He jumped with all his force sheer over a patch of bushes into the river, and swam back to his old home among the cat-tails. And always after that it was observable that he was very low-spirited, and took very dark views of life; but nothing made him so angry as any allusion to Mother Magpie, of whom, from that time, he never spoke except as OLD MOTHER MISCHIEF.