



## THE MISTLETOE

CHRISTMAS is here, and the houses are decked with evergreens; round the picture frames the red-berried holly is wreathed; over the chimney-piece are the soft branches of the fresh green fir; and hanging from the lamp in the hall is a fine bunch of the mystic mistletoe. How well we know the thick forked stem with its branching twigs, bearing the small rounded green leaves, and the opaque yellowish berries. We know it was beloved of the Druids, and most of us perhaps have a vague idea that it grows upon oak trees, which it sometimes does, only I think most of us might visit all the oak trees within a radius of ten miles, and not find a single clump of mistletoe on the whole lot; because it is very scarce in most parts of England, and does not grow upon the oak if it can find any other of its favourite trees handy. It is an unscrupulous plant, this mistletoe which we make free of in the house every Christmas-tide, and even wear in our buttonholes; it is one of those vegetables which does not obtain its living honestly, by taking root in the soil and using up the carbon contained in the air in the form of carbonic acid gas, but it lives as a parasite, that is to say, it sponges upon another plant, robbing it of the sap which is its source of life and strength.

Like the interloping cuckoo, who lays her eggs in the nest of the hedge-sparrow, so that they may flourish at the expense of their unconscious hosts, the mistletoe settles upon the apple tree or hawthorn, without so much as by your leave or with your leave, and calmly commences to deprive its unfortunate entertainer of the very juices which it has stored up in his woody tissues for its own profit.

You will always find the mistletoe growing in a great bush from the forked branch of a tree, and it is in the centre of this fork that the roots of the parasite take hold. Here the bark is thinner and more delicate, and the long fibres of the parasite can more easily penetrate through the woody coating down to the soft tissue and juicy sap below. Now perhaps you will wonder how the seed of the mistletoe ever got to this convenient fork, and found a resting-place just at the point where two apple stems unite. You may think that perhaps the seed was blown thither by the wind, or carried by those great gardeners, the insect family.

No, this time it is a bird who is responsible for planting the mistletoe just where it will thrive the best.

This bird is called the missel-thrush, because he is so fond of the berries of the mistletoe, and commonly feeds upon them. These berries contain the seed of the plant, for you know that all plants which bear berries are propagated by this means. The berry consists of some eatable stuff surrounding the seed, which is usually hard—in the case of the plum, you know, it has a stony coat which is strong enough to protect it from the digestive juices of any animal that chances to eat the fruit. The missel-thrush, attracted by the sticky pulp of the mistletoe berries, eats away, but does not swallow the hard, nut-like seeds which lie safely embedded in the viscid mass; they, being sticky, are gummed to the feet and bill of the bird, and when he has finished his repast he flies away with them safely attached to him. By-and-bye he grows hungry again, and visits other trees in search of food, perhaps a healthy apple tree on which he hopes to find a good crop of mistletoe berries; but alas! he is disappointed, and having perched on a branch only to find none of the fruit which he so dearly loves, he begins—not as the old man in the rhyme, to “scratch his head and think” what he shall do next, but—to rub off the uncomfortable adhesions against a forked branch, which is the very spot which best suits the young mistletoe for sprouting.

So the bird and the plant are really a small co-operative society, each having a share in the profits; while, I am afraid, the apple tree represents the unfortunate shareholder, who supplies the capital and receives no dividends; because the mistletoe, whom we must regard as the sleeping partner in this concern, is as fraudulent and dishonest a one as could be found in the whole length and breadth of the vegetable kingdom.

The missel-thrush is pursued by a singular nemesis for his unconscious share in this swindling of the defenceless apple tree, because from the berries of the mistletoe man makes the very bird-lime which so often lures him to destruction.

SUTHERLAND WALKER.