

A PICUS AND HIS POTS.

BY MAURICE THOMPSON.

IN very ancient times, when men believed that almost every mountain and river, brook and grove, was presided over by a deity of some sort, it was said that nectar and ambrosia were the drink and food of these gods. Because those old poets and philosophers indulged in those fine stories about nymphs and satyrs, fawns, naiads, and dryads, we call them heathen; but, after all, their myths, like the fictions of our own writers, are beautiful and entertaining. I have often thought of a charming story which might be written by some imaginative boy or girl about a wood deity which haunts some of the groves of America. It can be said with much truth that nectar and ambrosia fill the cups and pots of this bright and joyous being. I have seen him sipping nectar more fragrant than the fabled sweets of Hybla and Hymettus. This is saying much, for Hybla used to be the most famous town in the world for its honey, and Hymettus was a mountain, south-east of Athens, in Greece, where the bees stored their combs with the purest distillations from the flowers. But I have looked into the clean, curiously wrought cups of our American grove-god, when they were full to overflowing with clear fluid. I have even tasted the nectar, although the cups were so small that only the merest bit of my tongue could enter. It is slightly acrid, this nectar, but it has in its taste, hints, so to speak, of all the perfumes and sweets of the winds and leaves and flowers—a fragrance of green wood when cut, and of the inner tender bark of young trees. And a racy flavor, too, which comes from the aromatic roots of certain of our evergreens, is sometimes discoverable in it.

The being of which I speak is an industrious little fellow. Many times I have watched him making pots to catch nectar in, and cups to hold the precious ambrosia. These he hollows out so neatly that they all look alike, and he arranges them in rows around the bole of a tree—sometimes a maple, often an ash, may be a pine, and frequently a cedar. He has a great many of these pots and cups—so many, indeed, that it seems to keep him busy for a great part of the day drinking their delicious contents. He has very quiet ways, and you must be silent and watchful if you wish ever to see him. He rarely uses his voice, except when disturbed, and then he utters a keen cry and steals off through the air, soon disappearing in the shadows of the woods.

In the warm, dreamful weather of our early

spring days you may find him by keeping a sharp lookout for his pots, which are little holes or pits bored through the bark and through the soft outer ring of the wood of certain trees. Very often you



THE SAP-SUCKER.

can find rings and rings of these pits on the trunks of the apple-trees of the orchards, every one of them full of nectar.

And now you discover that, after all, my winged grove-deity is nothing but a little bird that many persons call by the undignified but very significant name of Sap-sucker! Well, what of it? My story is truer than those of the old Greek and Latin poets, for mine has something real in it, as well as something beautiful and interesting. I suspect that many of the ancient myths are based upon the facts of nature and are embellished with fantastic dressing, just as some imaginative boy or girl might dress up this true story of our sap-drinking woodpecker.

In fact, how much happier, how much more redolent of joyous sweets, is the life of this quiet bird than that of any such beings—if they could have existed—as those with which the ancients peopled their groves and mountains! Think of flying about on real wings among the shadows of the spring and summer woods, alighting here and

there to sip real nectar and ambrosia from fragrant cedar pots !

The sap-drinking woodpecker is of the *Picus* family, or *Picidae*, which name was given to a bird of his kind in ancient times. The story runs that a king of Latium, named Picus, renowned for his beauty and for his love of horses and the chase, went forth one day to hunt in the woods, dressed in a splendid purple robe with a gold neck-band. Circe, a sorceress, became angry at him, and, striking him with her wand, turned him into the bird that has ever since borne his name.

Several of the smaller American woodpeckers are sap-drinkers ; but only one kind, the one of which I am writing, ever pecks holes for the purpose of getting at the sap. He is named by naturalists *Centurus Carolinus*. He is a very cunning bird. One of his habits is to move around the bole of a tree just fast enough to keep nearly hid from you as you walk around trying to get a good look at him. This he will continue to do for a considerable length of time, but, finally getting the tree-trunk fairly between you and him, he takes to his gay wings and flies in such a line as to keep hidden from your eyes. Usually he says good-bye with a keen squeal as he starts away.

Down in the mountain valleys of Northern Georgia I used to amuse myself with watching the little half-naked negro boys trying to shoot sap-suckers by means of their blow-guns. Such a blow-gun as they had is a straight reed or cane about six feet long, through the whole length of which a smooth bore is made by punching out the joints. The arrow used in this gun is made of a sharp piece of cane-wood not longer or larger than a knitting-needle, with a ball of cotton-lint bound on the end opposite the point. The arrow is blown out of the gun by the breath from the shooter's mouth. It flies with so great force that I have seen a bird killed at a distance of forty yards. Some of the little negro boys were very skillful in using the blow-gun, and as sly as cats in creeping up close to a bird before shooting at it. Many people in Northern Georgia have China trees on their lawns. The berries of these trees intoxicate or render drowsy the robins which feed upon them, and then the poor birds are killed very easily by these blow-gun Nimrods ; but the sap-sucker never eats berries of any kind, so he keeps sober and gives his persecutors great trouble, nearly always outwitting them, for birds, like people, succeed better by keeping clear of everything intoxicating.

In our Northern States, when the winter is very cold and all the maples and ash and hickory trees are frozen so that their sap will not flow into our bird's pots, he is compelled to depend upon the cedar trees for food, since their resinous sap is not

affected by the cold. Often I have seen him pecking away at the gnarled bole of an evergreen when the thermometer's mercury stood ten degrees below zero, and the air was fairly blue with winter's breath. Even in Georgia it is sometimes so cold that he chooses the pine trees, finding between their bark and the underlying wood a sort of diluted turpentine upon which he feeds. While busily engaged pecking his holes on cold, windy days he is not so watchful as in fine weather. At such times I have seen a little negro "blow-gunner" stick three or four arrows into the soft bark all around the busy bird before it would fly, and have been just as much surprised at the boy as at the bird ; because, if it was strange how the bird could be so busy as not to notice an arrow "chucking" into the tree close by him, it was equally strange how that little negro could "stand it" to be out so long in such a cold, raw wind with nothing on but a shirt !

But in spring and summer it seems to me this little bird ought to be supremely happy, having



AT HOME, BUT ON THE LOOKOUT!

nothing to do but to fly from tree to tree and attend to his brimming pots of nectar and ambrosia, now sipping the amber wine of the hickory, now the crystal juice of the maple, and anon the aromatic sap of the cedar.

The nest of the sap-sucker is in a hole pecked in a rotten tree. A beautiful little home it is, cunningly carved to fit the bird's body. Its door is



THE YOUNG HUNTER AND HIS BLOW-GUN.

usually shaded by a knot or bough, and sometimes its cavity is a foot or two deep, lined in the bottom with finely pulverized wood and leaves of lichen.

One peculiarity of the woodpecker family is extremely strong in the sap-sucker. This peculiarity may be called a *rolling flight*, and is produced by a single vigorous stroke of the wings, which are then held for a second or more closely pressed to the bird's sides. Of course, with each of these wing-strokes the bird mounts high in the air; then while the wings are closed it falls a certain distance. Another stroke causes it to mount again, and so on, this peculiar flight giving it a galloping motion, or a motion like that of a boat riding on high-rolling waves.

For a long while I felt sure this bird ate nothing but the sap or *blood* of trees; but, finally, I discovered one very complacently sipping the juice of a ripe peach. *I* do not blame him for that, however,—do *you*? If I were a bird I should take a sample sip from every ripe peach I came across, particularly such great blood-red Indian peaches as that one was.

Many owners of orchards are of the opinion that the sap-sucker injures their trees by pecking so many holes in them, but after closely studying the subject for several years I have concluded that, instead of hurting them, he really benefits them; for some of the finest bearing apple-trees I ever saw were just as full of pits from root to top as they could be, many of these pits having been pecked ten years before I saw them. So our nectar-loving bird should not be killed as an enemy, but ought to be loved for his beauty and admired for his rare cunning.

One notable habit of the sap-sucker is that of returning year after year to the same tree for his food. I spent three consecutive winters in a cheery old farm-house, in front of whose hospitable door stood a knotty and gnarled cedar tree, to which every January came a solitary sap-sucker. It was quite a study to examine the holes he had pecked, all up and down the entire length of its rugged surface. Some of them had been made so long ago they were almost grown over; others were a little more distinct, and the latest were bright and

new, overflowing with clear, viscid fluid. By carefully comparing the number of pits made each year, and the yearly change in their appearance, I concluded that this bird had been drawing upon this tree for food every winter for at least ten years. Of course some other bird may have helped at times, but my opinion is that the sap-sucker is a very long-lived bird, and that if not frightened away he will return to his pots or make new ones in the same tree every year for a long period of time.

The red-head, the flicker, and the smaller varieties of woodpecker, all of close kin to the sap-sucker, take great delight in occasionally drinking to the health of the latter out of his own pots, first driving him away by furiously attacking him; but they are either too lazy or too ignorant to make any pots of their own. Our nectar-loving little friend, however, does not seem to care much for this kind of robbery. He knows where all the best trees are, and if he is driven from one he gives a sharp squeal and flies away to another.

A SUDDEN SHOWER.

