

The Story of a Green Woodpecker.

BY S. L. BENSUSAN.



WHEN the cattle in the meadows sought the shade of the hedge-side trees, and even the larks did not care to face the sun; when Farmer Giles would suspend field-work for a while and admit to Master Wotter, his horseman, that it was "wunnerful 'ot, an' no mistake," you might have heard a continued "tap, tap" from the Heron Wood. If you could go quietly enough to the spot whence the sound proceeded you would discover the green woodpecker, perhaps the most industrious bird in that part of the country, or, at least, the most industrious at that time of day.

Most of the few people who passed along the overgrown right-of-way in the grove heard the woodpecker from time to time, but very few saw him at his work, he was too careful. Though he laboured hard and sustained his attack upon the bark so long that it was almost impossible to see the head drawn back stroke by stroke, he was the shyest of shy birds, and his eyes were constantly glancing to the right and the left, while he listened most carefully for any sound, beyond his own tapping, that justified alarm.

As soon as such a sound came he would leave work at once, and either run round the tree trunk or dart off through the wood with a harsh ringing cry that not even a Cockney could mistake. His flight was rather an uncommon one, first down until he seemed to be seeking the ground, and then as suddenly up at a wide angle, as though he had decided to reach the tree tops. As he passed you could see little more than a flash of varied colour; but, by waiting in shady parts of the wood within view of some tree he had commenced to attack, it was possible to secure a proper view of the handsome bird. Then you might note at leisure his olive-green and grey-green coat, the scarlet crown on his head, and his black face further relieved by the crimson tuft below the under mandible. If the head was rather more dull in colour, and the mouth-tuft was black instead of red, you might rest assured that you were looking at Mrs. Woodpecker, who had not all her husband's claims to good looks, but was a very industrious bird and brighter than most of her neighbours of either sex.

If the season were spring or summer when the male bird went through the wood at the

first approach of danger, his loud cry was intended to warn his wife, and he spread his feathers out that she might have the best chance of noting the direction of his flight. Perhaps no two birds of this family make quite the same pattern as they fly—at least, this is a country theory. There was no more hysterical bird in the wood than the woodpecker, if you make a possible exception in favour of the blackbird, who thought that every visitor to his neighbourhood had designs upon his life. Against hungry birds of the hawk family the woodpecker could do well enough, for he never lost his nerve; but if Robin, the horseman's son, stood well within the wood and clapped his hands together, the woodpecker would fly out wild with fright. Naturally enough, Robin disturbed him whenever he heard the industrious worker's "tap, tap, tap" and had a few minutes to spare. He called the bird a "yaffle," just as his father and grandfather did, the name "woodpecker" being unknown in Landshire.

"There be a great old hawk or summat," said Master Wotter to the farmer, as they sat side by side under the hedge and took a morning meal of bread, cheese, and beer. They called this meal "beever," a corruption of a word left behind by the Norman-French occupants of that part of the country.

"I count 'e'll be gettin' 'is beever out o' th' grove."

The farmer nodded curtly. He was too busy to reply, and he grudged every moment that was not devoted to the land or to his inner man.

The hawk circled lazily over the wood, but the heat of the day or fear of his presence had sent every bird into the shade. No, not every bird; hard at work on the trunk of an old beech tree the woodpecker was seeking his lunch, and a stray ray of light that flashed across his bright plumage would have betrayed his presence had he been silent. The hawk descended slowly with rapid movement of his wings; he could not fall and strike his victim as he would have done in open ground. The threatening shadow passed over the tree tops; the woodpecker's quick eyes saw it at once. Now, when he might well have been alarmed, he was perfectly cool and collected. As usual, he was clinging close to the trunk, supporting himself by his

broad, outspread tail feathers in such a position that the hawk had to strike at a sharp angle.

A superb marksman, it was with a feeling of pained surprise that the bird of prey just saved himself from sharp collision with the hard wood—the quarry was nowhere to be seen. He rose slowly above the beech tree, wondering whether his intended victim had fallen to the ground through fear, and he saw the woodpecker watching him carefully from the other side of the trunk, apparently quite at his ease.

“You impudent fellow!” screamed the hawk; “how dare you trick me like that?” So saying he made another and more careful dart at the brilliant little bird. Just as soon as his aim was taken and could not be altered, the woodpecker literally ran round the trunk again. He could hear the hiss of the hawk’s feathers through the air, the rustle as they came in contact with the trunk, but the sharp claws and beak were powerless to reach him, the tree was between, and the hawk’s language was really disgraceful. He rose again and repeated his charge three



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or four times, only to be foiled in the same way, and then, speechless at last with rage, he rose high over the wood, circled it once or twice, and dashed away at top speed, as though to leave the scene of his humiliation far behind. The woodpecker remained where he was, unmoved by his triumph over a very dangerous foe, but when little five-year-old May, the horseman’s daughter, came through the grove some two hours later, staggering under the weight of a can of beer from the farm, she sought to lighten her burden with a song, and he dashed right out of the wood, screaming with terror.

As I said, it was possible to catch the woodpecker at work if you combined a little care with a great deal of good luck. It was necessary to choose a very shady place near some of the old trees that had long, bare trunks, and then you might chance to see the woodpecker test them. He would flash down suddenly and silently from the outer space, or from the top of a neighbouring tree that he had been

investigating, and commence operations near the root. His feet being those of a true climber, he could cling quite close to the rough bark with tail feathers well spread, and he would walk up very slowly, tapping as he went. He knew all the variety of sounds that might be expected, and listened for the special response that said all was not well within. A hollow note would excite him—you might see the red crest raised and hear the sharp blows redoubled; but in spite of his attention to the work before him the bird's keen

eyes were ever on the look-out, and he listened for other sounds than those his sharp beak drew from the wood. So soon as eye and ear told him he had found the proper place and he had weakened the protecting bark, he would strip it with great skill and thrust his barbed tongue among the insects and grubs that his work had uncovered. The insects saw the curious tongue and they were astonished. In order to find out for themselves what the strange intruding thing was like they would walk across it. When sufficient were engaged in this pursuit and the tongue was fairly covered it would suddenly dart back to the mouth and return again quite clear. The tip of his tongue was barbed with little bristles, and it was all glutinous, so insects had quite a poor chance. This was a merry little game; the woodpecker never tired of playing it.

His parents had taught him the rules in a wood on the other side of the Whitewater River some three years or so before, and when he set out on his travels he found that method of securing food served him best, though he could not afford to be particular, and followed many another plan when stress of hunger and unfavourable seasons compelled.

In the days of his youth inexperience had led the woodpecker to do a considerable amount of useless work. He had spent hours belabouring perfectly sound trunks upon which even his sharp beak could make little or no impression, but now he seldom made a mistake. Mature instinct taught him

when a tree was passing from its full flush of health, and if he was sure about the matter he would work at the bark quite systematically. Beginning at the root he would tap his way to the fork, and then, if there had been no result, he would fly down again to start from another point and work up again over a fresh track. Sooner or later the bark would ring hollow and he would secure the coveted meal. When the inside of a tree was quite sound and only the bark was riven or rotted, he would not harm



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the core. He had learned by now to see the signs of failing vigour in a manner that would have made a forester wonder, but it is only fair to say that he accepted the assistance of other birds. If, in the spring, he saw the rooks desert any tree they had favoured in past years he would attack it at once, perfectly safe to find incipient rottenness somewhere, for the rooks are first of all birds to note a tree's approaching decay. They test all the high branches before they rebuild a nest, and if the elasticity that makes for safety has gone they will not use the tree, even though they must build up a fresh nest in another. So it happens that if the rooks form no more than

a small colony, well away from houses and people, you may often find the marks of the green woodpecker's attentions to the trees that the rooks have deserted.

Our woodpecker was a comparatively new arrival to the Heron Wood, and had come from a grove some two miles away, where he and his mate had set up house. Unfortunately for them, some cunning bird-nesting lads had marked the hole in the tree, perhaps by the chips that lay on the ground beneath it, and with the help of a bird-limed twig they had drawn out all the eggs, breaking three out of seven in the work of bringing them to the ground. After that the woodpecker and his mate left the far grove and journeyed to the Heron Wood, where there had been no woodpecker since the winter, when the proper tenant of that secluded corner had been struck down by a marsh-hunting

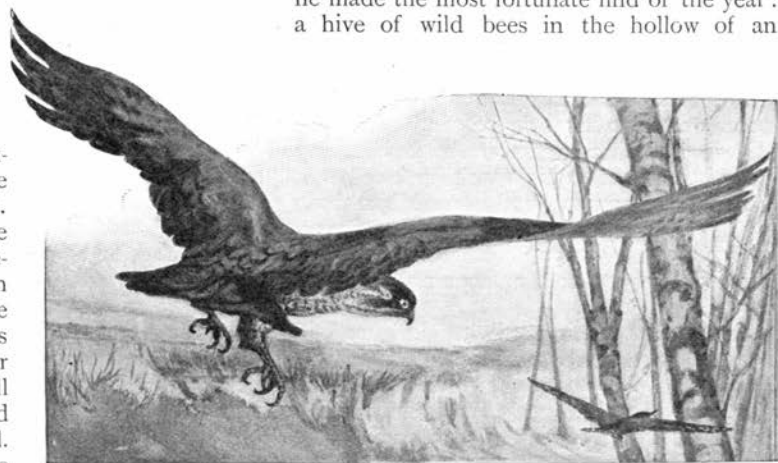
hawk as he wandered far afield in search of food. It was a curious fact that, almost as soon as a rare bird passed from the Heron Wood, another of the same sort would arrive to take its place. You could nearly always find two woodpeckers, two woodcock, two nightingales, two jays at the proper season; you would never find more. I could not pretend to say how this regular succession was brought about, but it was well known to the few who studied the bird life there.

The male and female woodpeckers worked in the wood, but seldom met, and both had beats outside the home boundaries. There were small groves in the neighbourhood that would not have served either bird for long, but were worth an occasional visit, particularly when any change of weather suggested renewed activity in the insect world. The male bird had some of these groves and the female took the others, and it was to be noticed that where the trees were near a house or high road the tapping was heard at daybreak and had ceased by the time people were abroad. Caution was the dominant characteristic of these birds when they went to eat outside their home boundaries.

Summer passed, and autumn strewed the floor of the Heron Wood with yellowing leaves. The season of a plenteous supply had passed, and the time had come when birds must work harder than ever and have little reward for their pains. Drenching rains subdued much of the life within the rotting trees, and if the woodpecker did not relax his efforts he could hardly be said to be as cheerful as before. Sometimes when he reached the fork of one tree and flew off and downwards to start at the root of another he would utter his well-known call though no danger was nigh, and I think that it was intended to express his keen sense of disappointment. But he was never the bird to give the precious hours to vain regrets. When he realized that the trees would no longer supply him with all the food he required he went farther afield. By the edge of the pond in the wood

some wasps had made a nest, and in the season of their torpor he attacked them fiercely, using his bill with great effect to tear down the walls of their home and feasting greedily upon the larvæ. At another season he found an ant-hill and tore a great hole in it; ants' eggs suited his palate to a nicety. In vain the industrious little owners of the place endeavoured to carry away their eggs; the woodpecker had learned to move his head with wonderful rapidity, and ten minutes at an ant-hill gave him a better reward than an hour at a tree. To secure the new dainties he was forced to go far afield to places where his curious flight and loud cry became familiar to people who had heard nothing more than the sustained tapping in the earlier year, and rarely saw the green and crimson feathers shining in the sun. When he was right away from cover he could not help crying out, and his call made his journeys dangerous, attracting the attention of the hawks that swarmed over the country in autumn and winter in the wake of migrating birds. On several occasions he was chased, but always managed to reach the shelter of a tree in time, and once there he could make any pursuing bird give up its task for very weariness.

On a December day, when a huge peregrine had come near to reaching him, he took refuge in a little copse he had not visited before, and when he had convinced his big enemy that any tree of moderate thickness was a complete armour to an understanding woodpecker, he proceeded to tap several trunks on the off-chance of finding a meal, for he was desperately hungry. In that hour he made the most fortunate find of the year: a hive of wild bees in the hollow of an



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oak that the lightning of two summers ago had rent from fork to root. He spent some days in that copse, renewing his strength, and when he returned to his accustomed haunts there was no bird in better condition. His cry was so merry that the other birds wondered at it. But a wild bees' nest is not to be discovered every day, wasps leave few traces in winter, and ant-hills are scarce. In January and February no recollection of past pleasures sufficed to stand between the woodpecker and the pangs of hunger; he was reduced to attacking acorns and hazel nuts—to eat them, declared Robin, who was often successful in catching a glimpse of the "yaffle," while I am inclined to think he did no more than split them open in search of insects that lived within. At last the day came when these failed him, and he went flying through the fields below the Heron Wood screaming for food. He had even ventured to the outhouses or the home farm to look for insects in the thatch, at a time when Master Wotter was working there.

"Come with us," said the captain and sentry of a company of green plover; "if you are really so hungry as you say you are, come down on to the marsh with us and eat the insects there. We will show you the way and you may walk among us quite freely. We like the look of you and want you for a friend."

The woodpecker did not hesitate, and I went on to the marsh towards the fall of afternoon some days later, disturbing the green plover. They flew up and went farther out to sea, but one bird of bright plumage passed in a big zigzag track to the Heron Wood, while I wondered for the moment what manner of plover it might be. Just then it called, and I knew. The winter quite unsettled the woodpecker's mode of life. He was built to climb trees, but ant-

hills and wasps' nests do not grow on trees, and there are no trees on our marshes. Had he lacked adaptability he must have died; only by subordinating his instincts to his necessities could he manage to weather the rough season. So far as I could tell he remained on the marshes for the greater part of two months, protected by the kind-hearted green plover from the attacks of other marsh-faring birds that would have mobbed him had he gone there alone. It was no un-mixed benefit to have plumage of green and crimson and yellow and white—something much quieter would have suited him in those winter days. Happily the lustre that comes with the spring had quite passed, and on the marshes, with grey-green sea beyond and dun fallow fields or sodden pasture on the land side, his colouring suffered a still

further reduction. He could not conquer his fear of the sea; when the alarm was sounded he would go landward by himself rather than seaward with his friends, and he could never face the rising tide. It was well that most of the plover's fears were ill-founded, and that on the few occasions when they were in danger from flesh-eating birds or men the woodpecker was able to pass from their ranks unnoticed. So, in spite of all the dangers and privations in its train, the winter proved powerless to harm this bird, and when the sap began to run and life to stir in the groves, and the days lengthened, and the sun showed a cheerful countenance once more, he went back to the Heron Wood and resumed his tapping operations with success.

To be sure, some weeks passed before his aim was as true and his blow as strong as heretofore. Residence on the marsh had its disadvantages, and when he returned neither his beak nor his feet could work in the old sure fashion.

But the transformation scene that the



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forest witnessed brought back to the woodpecker the joys of the days of a spring that had passed. His plumage brightened, his cry took a note that no winter day had ever heard, and he eyed his sober-plumaged companion of yester year with a love that rose as fresh and strong as the grey-green growths that were hiding the blackness of the trees. What exquisite days were theirs in the Heron Wood. They had found a tree that promised to serve for a nesting-place—no other than the old beech that had witnessed and frustrated the hawk's attack. He was beginning to rot at the core and they attacked it together—that is to say, one hammered while the other looked on. The beech yielded to this repeated knocking. The two woodpeckers, after driving a hole straight in, began to work down the trunk for a distance of nine or ten inches. It was very laborious and unremitting work, and every chip had to be taken out by the pair, except a few of the softest pieces at the bottom of the hole, where they had scooped it wide, and these served in place of a nest, so when the hen bird had arranged them comfortably she laid six eggs, and stayed contentedly in the darkness to hatch them, though I think her mate

relieved her now and again, for I feel sure that I saw her once or twice in the season when the eggs must have been hatching. I did not see the eggs, but they would be white and glossy, and I knew, too, that the nest widened considerably, so that while only one bird could enter the tree at a time there was plenty of room for both within.

And just when May was beginning to develop the tale that March began and April carried on the mother woodpecker hatched her little brood. They were born naked, without even the downy covering of other baby birds. How hard the parents worked to feed them I can but guess, recalling their constant flight to and from the old beech tree, and last week the babies were to be seen trying their feet on the trunk of the tree, walking round and round in the oddest manner, closely watched by the parents.

Yes, only last week, for as I write May is with us still, and new life stirs or flutters throughout the Heron Wood, now at its loveliest, for summer comes as a bridegroom and the woodland is his bride. Will you blame me, then, if I leave the parent birds with their six little strangers that have yet to gain their plumage and to learn to fly?

Haply it may be that the season will be good to them, that they will thrive and go out into the world and find it full of gladness. Or perhaps one of the many tragedies that the grove sees day by day may have marked parents or children for a leading rôle. These things are all beyond my ken, but this afternoon no discordant note mars the har-

mony of the woodland. One hears on all sides a subdued song of joy and praise. I leave the wood very quietly, that never a nesting bird may be disturbed, and seek the high road, content to believe that the happy couple I have watched so long have no thought of future trouble to mar their present joy.



"THE PARENTS WORKED TO FEED THEM."