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Maggie the Magnificent



by
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Chapter II.

THE COMING OF MAGGIE.

THOUGH old Broken Beak regarded himself as an aristocrat among magpies, he was not too haughty to work. In their nest-building, his new mate found him a ready laborer and a first-class architect. Day by day the home of their future brood grew and took shape—a deep, bowl-like stick structure at the top of the ironbark tree.

At last all was ready and Broken Beak handed over complete occupancy to his mate. This did not mean, however, that he could loaf around the countryside with friends and cronies idling the time away; on the contrary, his real responsibilities had only just commenced.

In due course, four large eggs appeared in the nest. They were green-blue, with reddish-brown streaks, smears and scratches; and though it was no novelty either to Broken Beak or his mate to be the producers of such precious atoms of potential life, familiarity certainly did not breed contempt or carelessness. Broken Beak had always been a fearless and pugnacious bird, but the sight of those eggs caused such a surge of pride in his old breast that he was ready to lay down his very life if necessary in their protection.

His mate felt exactly the same about it. In between nestings she was rather a mild-mannered bird as magpies go, content to live and let live. Fearless like all her kind,

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she would brook no liberties or indignities, but was willing to live in peace if permitted to do so.

Gone now was that mildness of manner. With the laying of her eggs she had shed her placidity as a snake casts off its old skin. Of course, a great deal of her time now would be occupied in hatching the eggs and she would have to depend upon Broken Beak to do the major part of the guard duty; but she was more than ready to assist him if the occasion should warrant it.

In placing her reliance in her old mate, she was depending upon no broken reed. The old fellow was prepared to take on anything from a wedge-tailed eagle to a human being, large or small. He did, too, playing no favorites. Anything that came within easy radius of the ironbark tree was given tangible evidence of his battered presence.

Actually Broken Beak, like many of his species, was a more conscientious sentry than he needed to be. The paddock that contained the ironbark was not often visited by human beings, big or little, but when it was, Broken Beak swooped. He did not pause to weigh the possible consequences. It never entered his head, intelligent though he was, that these people would be ignorant of the existence of the nest if he refrained from advertising it.

He was a bird who believed in taking no chances. Every human being was a potential nest-wrecker and egg-stealer, and he took the war into the enemy's territory. He worked on the theory that though thrice is one armed who has his quarrel just, four times is that one armed who gets his blow in first. Broken Beak was a strong advocate of the military maxim that attack was the best method of

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defence.

Guard duty, of course, had to be interrupted in feeding his mate and keeping himself going with necessary nourishment. She used to join him occasionally, mainly for exercise, but it was not until after the eggs hatched that she left the nest for any great length of time.

With the appearance of four hungry nestlings, Broken Beak had to work overtime. It was a busy period for both parents. The youngsters had voracious appetites and the old birds were almost run off their legs and wings keeping up an adequate supply of food.

Broken Beak had been pugnacious while the eggs were in the nest, but with the advent of the youngsters he became definitely vicious. He even evolved a new plan of warfare with the assistance of his mate. Human beings entering the paddock would catch sight of Mrs. Broken Beak flying conspicuously in view having every appearance of a bird about to attack. But she never did. Her task was to keep the unwelcome visitor's attention occupied while old Broken Beak swooped unknown from behind. A swish of wings and a sharp peck was the first intimation the luckless human had of his cunning presence.

Broken Beak's plan of campaign—to attack everyone venturing near the nest and to punish the innocent with the potentially guilty—was based on the slogan that it was better to be certain than to be sorry. It was, therefore, just sheer ill-fortune that a most unusual set of circumstances brought unhappiness to him and his mate.

In an adjoining paddock there lived, in a post and rail enclosure behind a barn, a big black bull, the property of a dairy farmer named McFarlane. This bull was never

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permitted the wider freedom of the home paddock because it was a savage animal liable to attack man or beast if free. There had been occasions in the past that the bull had broken free and it had caused consternation in the district.

One morning the bull managed to make its escape. Continual butting and bumping against a particular rail had weakened the support until eventually it had given way. The bull soon burst out into the paddock and, after giving a triumphant bellow to announce the fact, commenced to graze around the vicinity. It was not in a particularly bad mood and as long as it was unmolested might continue to keep its temper under control.

On the other side of the paddock and behind the farmhouse, the bull's owner, blissfully ignorant of the animal's freedom, was ploughing an area of ground. Old Broken Beak observed this activity from the top of his tree, and it made him restless. He was torn between desire to do his duty in guarding the nest and desire to fly rapidly across to that ploughed ground and feed royally on the fat grubs and worms turned up by the ploughshares. He had followed ploughs before and knew of the sumptuous repasts to be had in the furrows.

From the top of his tree he could see around him for miles. All seemed peaceful and of human enemies there were none. No matter where his eyes wandered, however, they always came back to that farmer and his plough. Mrs. Broken Beak was away temporarily scouting round for food for the hungry quadruplets in the nest. When she returned, he told himself, he would take time off to venture across to the ploughed ground.

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Merely thinking of the fat grubs and crickets made his old beak water and when his mate arrived with a large caterpillar and thrust it deftly into the gaping beak of a nestling, he was ready to depart.

But here he struck a snag. His mate, who had also observed the ploughing, wanted to accompany him. They argued and squabbled about this in their own fashion, and then Broken Beak took off and flapped rapidly across the paddock, his mate closely following. They alighted together some yards behind the moving plough, dived into the furrow and, within a few seconds had completely forgotten their nest and nestlings as they hopped along, guzzling the fat white cockchafer grubs lying plentifully in the freshly-turned earth.

Back in the dairy paddock, the bull had grazed his way to the fence separating the paddock from Broken Beak's domain. Finding the top rail of one panel of fencing had fallen away, the bull stepped over the bottom and entered the magpie's territory.

In his grazing, the animal proceeded slowly in the direction of a thick clump of tea-tree and as he disappeared behind it, fate brought more actors into the drama, the climax of which would greatly annoy Broken Beak.

Scarcely had the bull disappeared behind the tea-tree scrub than three boys crawled under the fence at the far end of the paddock. One of them carried a bird trap which contained a diamond sparrow as a decoy, and their intention was to scour the bush until they found a suitable place wherein to set the trap in the hope of catching some more of those pretty little bush birds.

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They had not the slightest knowledge of the magpie's nest in the ironbark tree and possibly would never have known of its existence had the black bull stayed in its enclosure that day. Certainly, it would appear that the Fates were working against old Broken Beak. In the final analysis, it would be difficult to decide who was really to blame—the bull, or Broken Beak and his longing for a grub-feast.

The three boys, Reggie Jones, Ben Worth and Bill Thomas, had no intention of trying to trap birds in that particular paddock. Their destination was the thick bush and scrub on the other side of McFarlane's dairy farm. The paddock provided a short cut. Except for a few trees, including Broken Beak's, and the patch of tea-tree scrub behind which McFarlane's bull was now peacefully grazing, the paddock was unrelieved grassland.

Walking three abreast and talking among themselves, the boys reached the tea-tree scrub and rounded it. When they caught sight of the bull, they stopped dead and regarded it in wild surmise. The bull raised its head and looked at them. The boys returned the compliment. The bull gave a loud roar, lowered its head and began to paw the ground, sending small clods of dirt up on to its back.

That was enough for the boys. They knew the ways of bulls. Ben Worth and Bill Thomas immediately streaked for the fence, but young Jones paused long enough to pick up a huge stone, which he threw at the bull, hitting it on the head. Then, as he turned to run, he tripped over another big stone and crashed to earth. He had his wits about him, however, and when he sprang to his feet, saw he had no chance to reach the fence. Urgency lent extra

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strength to his already first class climbing prowess, and he had scaled the nearest tree before the bull had rushed ten yards.

From their safe position behind the fence, Ben Worth and Bill Thomas began to hurl at young Jones maledictions and advice that he did not appreciate. They pointed out to him, with what he thought was unnecessary emphasis, that he would not be in his present predicament if he had not lingered behind to throw a stone at the bull. They told him that the bull probably would not have troubled to chase them had he refrained from angering it.

“You are a first-rate idiot, Jonesy,” wound up Ben Worth.

Young Jones was in no mood for censure. He was wedged in a fork of the tree while down below the bull was doing sentry-go around the trunk.

“Come and hunt this wretched hound of a thing away,” he roared.

“Wretched bull of a thing, you mean,” pointed out young Thomas.

“That’s right, be funny!” howled Jones from the tree fork. “Don’t stand there like a pair of stuffed mullets. Do something, can’t you?”

“Do what?” yelled Ben.

“Come and hunt this thing away so that I can come down out of this tree!” roared Reggie. “Do you think I want to stay up here all night?”

“It’s all your fault, Jonesy,” called out Bill. “Who threw the stone at the bull?”

“Are you going to go through all that again?” howled

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young Jones. "I know I threw the stone. I know I am to blame. I know I shouldn't have done it. I know that you two have all the brains and that I'm the village idiot. I agree with everything you say. Now, will you please hunt this bull away and let me get down out of this tree?"

"How?" shouted Bill.

"I'm too big a fool to work that out. You've got all the brains, you know," replied Reggie, with a hint of sarcasm.

"Perhaps you would like me to go into the paddock and let the bull chase me, and while he is goring me to death, you can get away safely, eh?" asked Ben, who could be sarcastic too when he chose.

"Now that's what I call a great idea!" roared Reggie, eagerly. "Thanks a lot. I'll be ready. In you come!"

"Hey?" exclaimed Ben heatedly. "I'll do nothing of the kind! Who do you think you are, anyway?"

"Let me see if I can shift it," said Bill, picking up a stone and throwing it unerringly at the bull, which had stopped its sentry-go to paw up some more earth. The stone hit it on the back. It let out a bellow and rubbed its neck vigorously against the trunk of the tree.

"Stop that, for heaven's sake!" bellowed Reggie, clinging madly to a limb. "I'll get shook out of the tree, you fool!"

"Shaken out," said Bill reprovingly.

"It will save you having to climb down if you do," called out Ben, who always looked for the silver lining in the dark cloud.

Reggie's reply to both these comments was inaudible. He spluttered something most uncomplimentary, but neither Ben nor Bill could catch it.

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“Listen,” Reggie called out when he had got his breath back, “Get hold of some long sticks or saplings and then come in and charge the bull as if you had rifles and bayonets. The bull won’t like being charged with long sticks.”

“And it won’t like us for doing it, either,” Ben pointed out.

Young Jones then changed his tune. He ceased reviling his two friends and began to appeal to their better natures. He mentioned that they had all been intimate pals for many years and had always helped each other. Through thick and thin they had stuck to each other, come what might, rain, hail or sunshine. Mateship was a wonderful and a precious thing.

He was speaking really well and might have gone on indefinitely in the same sentimental strain had not the bull suddenly rubbed itself vigorously against the tree trunk. Reggie ceased his exhortations and, pulling a branch off the tree, threw it down at the bull. The branch fell on the animal’s horns and its efforts to dislodge the encumbrance annoyed the animal exceedingly. It roared loudly and charged the tree trunk, its head meeting it with a dull thud. The force of the impact almost threw Reggie out of the fork. He gave a startled grunt and began to climb higher.

“We have got to do something about this,” said Ben to Bill. “Let us walk down the fence a bit and then enter the paddock. If we attract the bull’s attention, it might chase us. We can easily get back through the fence again and Jonesy might have a chance to get clear.”

“I’m willing,” said Bill, and yelled out to Reggie exactly

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what they proposed to do. Reggie climbed down to the lower fork again and held himself in readiness to move swiftly.

Ben and Bill walked a good distance down the fence and crawled through it, advancing a few yards into the paddock. Then they started to shout loudly.

The bull, which had been watching them moving along the fence, resented the noise and, putting down its head, charged in their direction. Reggie immediately slid down the trunk to solid earth and when he reached it let out a wild, exultant cheer and began to do a species of war dance. Hearing him, the bull turned and went rushing back to the tree. Reggie made a headlong dive for the fence, realised that he could not reach it in time, so doubled back to the tree and shinned up it like a goanna, reaching the lower fork again in the very nick of time.

“Oh, you double-dyed idiot!” shouted Ben. “Why in the name of all that’s stupid, couldn’t you hold your silly tongue? Now we are in the same boat as before.”

“The same tree fork, anyway,” said Bill.

“Oh, keep quite and go home and get me a bed!” screamed Reggie. “I’m staying here for the night. I like the view.”

Ben and Bill debated the matter at length and then decided to do what they should have done in the very first place—go and tell Mr. McFarlane that his bull was on the warpath.

Ben undertook the journey while Bill remained and exchanged insults with Reggie. The bull stayed beneath the tree. Ben crossed over a long way from the scene and gained McFarlane’s paddock without being observed by

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the bull. He quickly made his way to where the farmer was ploughing and acquainted him with the news. McFarlane immediately left the plough to the magpies—Broken Beak and his mate were still there, competing with several domestic fowls for the fruits of the furrow—saddled up a horse and, whistling to his dog, cantered down to the scene of young Jones's discomfiture. He lost no time in rounding up the bull and, with the dog's aid, drove it through the broken panel of fencing and so into its own yard.

Jones was now in a position to descend the tree, but he stayed up in the fork, much to the surprise of his two friends.

"Come on down out of that tree, Jonesy," yelled Ben. "We've wasted enough time as it is because of your stupidity. It will be dark before we reach the bush, set our trap, catch some birds, and get home again."

Reggie did not reply. He stayed in the fork, glaring up towards the top of the tree. Then, to his friends' surprise, he climbed to the higher fork.

"What do you think you are, Jonesy, a blessed magpie?" Bill called out impatiently.

"No," shouted Reggie, "I don't, but there is a magpie's nest up the top of this tree and I'm going up after it."

"Better leave it alone," counselled Ben. "If the old birds see you, you'll be in for it."

"You two keep your eyes open for them. I'm going to see if there are any young ones in the nest."

Cautiously he began to climb upwards. It was fairly easy going because of the number of projecting branches, and he succeeded in reaching the fork which contained the

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big nest.

“Hey, Ben and Bill!” he bawled excitedly, “there are four young ’uns in it and they’ve got feathers. Do you want one each?”

“You bet!” cried Ben and Bill in chorus.

The four young magpies looked at the strange intruder with interest but without fear. They did not realise that they were being inspected by a representative of their greatest enemies. Indeed, one of them gave a shrill squeak and opened its beak as if expecting something to eat.

“You’ll do me, maggie. You seem to have some spirit in you,” Reggie told the fledgling and, seizing it with one hand, thrust it into a capacious pocket, a proceeding to which the young bird objected with an indignant but muffled squawk.

He was about to grab another when a yell from below made him change his mind.

“Get down out of that tree as fast as you can, Jonesy,” roared Ben Worth. “Here comes the old birds, both of them. Hurry up, or you’ll suffer for it!”

When McFarlane ceased ploughing in order to round up the bull, Broken Beak, his mate and the fowls soon disposed of all the available grubs, worms and crickets. They stayed there for a time awaiting the return of the farmer, but McFarlane did not put in an appearance. He was making sure that the bull’s enclosure was secure and temporarily had forgotten the ploughing.

And it was while they were waiting for more grubs to be ploughed up that Mr. and Mrs. Broken Beak suddenly remembered their unguarded nest. Conscience-stricken and anxious, they took off from the field and flew swiftly

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in the direction of the ironbark tree. They were still some distance away when Ben Worth chanced to see them and shouted his warning to Reggie Jones.

Leaving the other fledglings in the nest, Reggie made his way to earth as fast as he could and joined his friends at the moment the two magpies reached their nest.

Quickly pulling the young bird from his pocket and holding its beak between his fingers to prevent it calling out, Reggie made for the dividing fence with all speed, closely followed by Ben and Bill, the latter carrying the bird trap.

They had not reached the fence before both magpies were upon them, squawking and screaming. The boys dived under the fence and made for the safety of the thick brush beyond, waving their arms above their heads and shouting to scare away the vengeful birds.

Racing through the trees, the trio reached the road and immediately crawled under a low bridge or culvert where the angry birds could not reach them. Squawking their baffled rage, Broken Beak and his mate whirled away into the sky and flew back to their ironbark home.

When Reggie and his two friends emerged from beneath the culvert and found that the coast was clear, they debated whether they should continue with their diamond sparrow trapping expedition. Reggie settled the matter as far as he, personally, was concerned, by announcing that he was going home to make a cage for his new pet.

“I’ll bet your father won’t let you keep it,” said Ben Worth with jealousy, as young Jones stroked the fledgling’s back.

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“Yes he will, you’ll see. Won’t he, Maggie?” Reggie asked the bird, whose sole reply was a squawk of protest. He was feeling hungry and ruffled and wanted to be back with his three brothers and sisters in the nest.

“I’m off,” said his new owner. “I’ll see you chaps later on. Goodbye.”

“A nice sort of a friend he is,” said Bill morosely, as he and Ben watched Reggie’s retreating figure.

“It wouldn’t have hurt him to get two more young ones while he was at the nest, would it? After all, didn’t we save him from the bull? Talk about gratitude!”

“We could go back to the nest and get two more,” suggested Ben.

“Yes, and who is going to climb the tree?” demanded his friend. “Not me, anyway. I’m not anxious to have my eyes pecked out. Those two old birds will be fighting mad by now. If you want a young maggie, you go and get it. I’m off home.”

“I don’t want any maggie,” said Bill. He paused and then added with savage envy, “I hope that thing dies that Jonesy has.”

“So do I,” grunted Ben, and mooched off down the road, the bird trap with its chirping occupant still under his arm. That small songster was the only participant in the exciting events of the afternoon which still maintained a vestige of good humor.