

A Cuckoo In The Morning
By Elsie Locke

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Do you ever wish that you didn't have to live along with grown-ups?

I used to wish it sometimes. Often when I had taken special trouble to think about their wishes and feelings, it would turn out that just because of that, I had done the wrong thing! Luckily, my grown-ups usually saw my reasons, in the end.

When I was ten years old, we lived in a house on a hill in the midst of dairy country. I was fond of watching birds, and knew every nest in the hedges and trees within a quarter of a mile of home, and often further away than that, I discovered that the sitting birds soon became used to me if I talked softly to them. Later on I learned from a book why this was so. Gentle and harmless sounds are ordinary life to a bird; but her enemies – cats and stoats and weasels – creep towards her in silence. If we try to do the same, they take fright at once.

My mother loved the birds too, and would sometimes come to see my friends.

Our family were keen swimmers. The harbour was reached most easily by a short cut across country, through paddocks and what we called Lover's Lane. This was a road which had been marked off and fenced, but not leveled or surfaced, so that while the paddocks around were of grass and clover, Lovers' Lane was filled with small trees and moss and ferns. As we came down the narrow path that wound through it, I would look to right and left for birds, and one day I saw a pair of grey warblers building their nests.

If you have not seen one of these nests you have missed something very beautiful. It is made of tiny twigs and soft moss and feathers, and hangs from the branch like a pear, with a hole in the side. The eggs are hidden inside it, so that all you can see is the bird's head looking out.

I did not tell my brothers and sisters about the nest, for fear that they would alarm the warblers; and I used to hang behind, going through Lovers' Lane so that I could make friends with them. The nest was completed, the eggs laid, and the babies hatched. My sisters would run past and never notice their cheeping! Only my mother knew about the secret.

One Sunday afternoon I noticed that the sound was different. There was only one big, greedy cheep! I guessed at once what this meant. A shining cuckoo had laid her egg in this very nest, and the hungry noise must surely come from a baby cuckoo.

The mother warbler, with an insect in her beak, flitted down from the top of the manuka and perched some distance away, watching me. At that moment my sister called me to

hurry up, and I could hear boys' voices coming down Lovers' Lane behind me. I had to go on.

I could not stop thinking about the baby cuckoo. How big was he? How soon would he fly? We would not come this way again until next Saturday, since the way to school led in the opposite direction, and I had too many jobs to do after school to make a special visit. I was troubled by the thought that he would leave the nest before I could see him, or that someone else would discover and harm him.

I made up my mind that I would go in secret the very next morning. If I willed myself to wake with the dawn, there would be an hour and a half before breakfast-time.

Sure enough, I woke when there was just enough light to see my school clothes laid out for Monday morning on the chair by my bed. I was half dressed before I realized that it was raining steadily.

Rain was never any bother to us children, and would not keep us at home if we wanted to go out. The trouble was that my raincoat was in the hall cupboard just outside my parents' room; and to reach it I would have to go through two doors, with handles that turned with a clacking noise like gunshot. I would be sure to wake my mother, who was a light sleeper and in poor health; whereas there was another door leading on to the verandah. I thought very hard about it, and then I remembered the plush coat.

Plush was a material rather like the fur fabrics that we buy today. The coat had belonged to my cousin. Although I did not like it very much because of its dark brown colour, my mother was delighted when it arrived.

We could not afford to buy good clothes, and it was a neat fit and looked like a new one. I took the plush coat from the wardrobe and told myself that I must not get it scratched or muddy. Then I put a towel over my head and went out barefooted, so that my one pair of shoes would be dry for school.

Down through the paddocks I ran. The clay banks of the stream were steep and covered with scrub. I had to climb down very carefully so that the yellow clay would not mark my coat; but my bare toes were good for digging into the slippery places, and my arms were strong for pulling on the roots and branches. Next was a gorse paddock. Because of my bare feet I had to take a longer route around it, through a pine plantation. The railway line had to be crossed by a cutting.

If all this had made me damp, Lovers' Lane made me very wet indeed. With every step I was shaking branches and bringing down showers of heavy drops, while my feet went squelch, squelch through the pads of moss, and the ferns brushed my hips. To tell the truth I rather enjoyed the wetness.

Yes! I had been right about the cuckoo. There was the fat nestling, already bigger than his foster-mother, leaning out of the nest and shouting for his breakfast. I stood quietly

back and talked to him as we do to human babies, listening to the hidden birds of many kinds singing out of their joy in the rain, which brings the food out for them. Soon the parent birds appeared. They were wary of me for quite a time. After all, they had only one baby left - the cuckoo had pushed the warbler chicks from the nest - and they didn't want human beings meddling in their affairs. But the cuckoo grew very bad-tempered and at last they brought their insects and fed him. Greedy fellow! He at once began shouting for more!

I had seen what I had come for and had no way of telling the time, so I set off at top speed for home. By the time I came out of Lovers' Lane the water was running off me, and I began worrying whether there would be any dry clothes left out of the wash. My plush coat was not keeping the rain out at all. But still I was careful, going through the barbed-wire fences and among the pines and down the banks of the stream, that no snags or stains should mark the coat.

Mother was in the kitchen cooking breakfast when I ran up the back steps and shook myself like a wet dog.

"Mum, Mum! I've seen the grey warbler's nest and there's a baby cuckoo in it – and I saw them feed him -"

She turned and saw me as I stood in the doorway with a pool of water rapidly falling from my hair, my clothes and my limbs.

The spoon fell from her hand into the porridge, and she leaned back against the mantelpiece.

"Your plush coat!" she said sadly. "Why did you wear your plush coat in the *rain*?"

I looked down. The cuffs were almost up to my elbows, the hem far above my knees, the buttons pulling at the button-holes.

How was I to know that plush was to be worn only for warmth and to look nice, and would shrink and dry hard after a wetting? The coat was ruined.

We had an unhappy breakfast. But when my sisters came in and began to get on to me too, my mother felt sorry for me as well as for the coat, and said: "Oh well, it wasn't a very pretty colour, anyway. And how lovely to see a cuckoo chick! Why, I haven't seen one since we lived in the bush!"

The next Saturday she came with me, all the way to Lovers' Lane. I had to help her down the banks and over the stepping-stones in the stream and through the barbed-wire fences. We found that the nest was empty, but we could hear the warblers trilling their song.

"The cuckoo may still be somewhere around. Let's look," said Mother.

And it was Mother who found him, perched on a branch and wondering how he should set about this tricky game of flying.