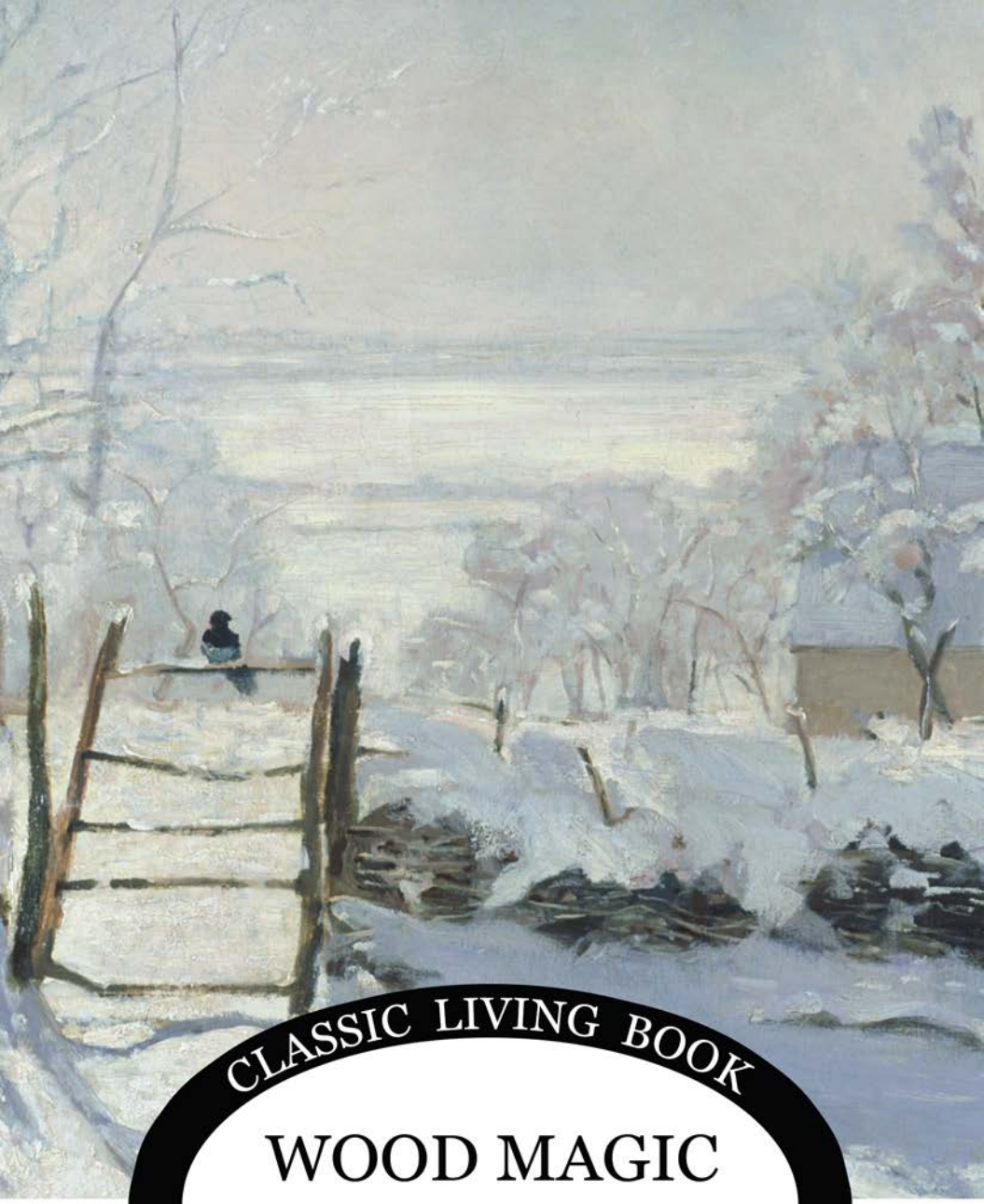

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

WOOD MAGIC

Richard Jefferies

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Wood Magic

A Fable

Richard Jefferies

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CHAPTER I.

SIR BEVIS.

One morning as little "Sir" Bevis (such was his pet name) was digging in the farmhouse garden, he saw a daisy, and throwing aside his spade, he sat down on the grass to pick the flower to pieces. He pulled the pink-tipped petals off one by one, and as they dropped they were lost. Next he gathered a bright dandelion, and squeezed the white juice from the hollow stem, which drying presently, left his fingers stained with brown spots. Then he drew forth a bennet from its sheath, and bit and sucked it till his teeth were green from the sap. Lying at full length, he drummed the earth with his toes, while the tall grass blades tickled his cheeks.

Presently, rolling on his back, he drummed again with his heels. He looked up at the blue sky, but only for a moment, because the glare of light was too strong in his eyes. After a minute, he turned on his side, thrust out one arm, placed his head on it, and drew up one knee, as if going to sleep. His little brown wrist, bared by the sleeve shortening as he extended his arm, bent down the grass, and his still browner fingers played with the blades, and every now and then tore one off.

A flutter of wings sounded among the blossom on an apple-tree close by, and instantly Bevis sat up, knowing it must be a goldfinch thinking of building a nest in the branches. If the trunk of the tree had not been so big, he would have tried to climb it at once, but he knew he could not do it, nor could he see the bird for the leaves and bloom. A puff of wind came and showered the petals down upon him; they fell like snowflakes on his face and dotted the grass.

Buzz! A great bumble-bee, with a band of red gold across his back, flew up, and hovered near, wavering to and fro in the air as he stayed to look at a flower.

Buzz! Bevis listened, and knew very well what he was saying. It was: "This is a sweet little garden, my darling; a very pleasant garden; all grass and daisies, and apple-trees, and narrow patches with flowers

and fruit-trees one side, and a wall and currant-bushes another side, and a low box-hedge and a haha, where you can see the high mowing grass quite underneath you; and a round summer-house in the corner, painted as blue inside as a hedge-sparrow's egg is outside; and then another haha with iron railings, which you are always climbing up, Bevis, on the fourth side, with stone steps leading down to a meadow, where the cows are feeding, and where they have left all the buttercups standing as tall as your waist, sir. The gate in the iron railings is not fastened, and besides, there is a gap in the box-hedge, and it is easy to drop down the haha wall, but that is mowing grass there. You know very well you could not come to any harm in the meadow; they said you were not to go outside the garden, but that's all nonsense, and very stupid. *I* am going outside the garden, Bevis. Good-morning, dear." Buzz! And the great bumble-bee flew slowly between the iron railings, out among the buttercups, and away up the field.

Bevis went to the railings, and stood on the lowest bar; then he opened the gate a little way, but it squeaked so loud upon its rusty hinges that he let it shut again. He walked round the garden along beside the box-hedge to the patch by the lilac trees; they were single lilacs, which are much more beautiful than the double, and all bowed down with a mass of bloom. Some rhubarb grew there, and to bring it up the faster, they had put a round wooden box on it, hollowed out from the sawn butt of an elm, which was rotten within and easily scooped. The top was covered with an old board, and every time that Bevis passed he lifted up the corner of the board and peeped in, to see if the large red, swelling knobs were yet bursting.

One of these round wooden boxes had been split and spoilt, and half of it was left lying with the hollow part downwards. Under this shelter a toad had his house. Bevis peered in at him, and touched him with a twig to make him move an inch or two, for he was so lazy, and sat there all day long, except when it rained. Sometimes the toad told him a story, but not very often, for he was a silent old philosopher, and not very fond of anybody. He had a nephew, quite a lively young fellow, in the cucumber frame on the other side of the lilac bushes, at whom Bevis also peered nearly every day after they had lifted the frame and propped it up with wedges.

The gooseberries were no bigger than beads, but he tasted two,

and then a thrush began to sing on an ash-tree in the hedge of the meadow. "Bevis! Bevis!" said the thrush, and he turned round to listen: "My dearest Bevis, have you forgotten the meadow, and the buttercups, and the sorrel? You know the sorrel, don't you, that tastes so pleasant if you nibble the leaf? And I have a nest in the bushes, not very far up the hedge, and you may take just one egg; there are only two yet. But don't tell any more boys about it, or we shall not have one left. That is a very sweet garden, but it is very small. I like all these fields to fly about in, and the swallows fly ever so much farther than I can; so far away and so high, that I cannot tell you how they find their way home to the chimney. But they will tell you, if you ask them. Good-morning! I am going over the brook."

Bevis went to the iron railings and got up two bars, and looked over; but he could not yet make up his mind, so he went inside the summer-house, which had one small round window. All the lower part of the blue walls was scribbled and marked with pencil, where he had written and drawn, and put down his ideas and notes. The lines were somewhat intermingled, and crossed each other, and some stretched out long distances, and came back in sharp angles. But Bevis knew very well what he meant when he wrote it all. Taking a stump of cedar pencil from his pocket, one end of it much gnawn, he added a few scrawls to the inscriptions, and then stood on the seat to look out of the round window, which was darkened by an old cobweb.

Once upon a time there was a very cunning spider—a very cunning spider indeed. The old toad by the rhubarb told Bevis there had not been such a cunning spider for many summers; he knew almost as much about flies as the old toad, and caught such a great number, that the toad began to think there would be none left for him. Now the toad was extremely fond of flies, and he watched the spider with envy, and grew more angry about it every day.

As he sat blinking and winking by the rhubarb in his house all day long, the toad never left off thinking, thinking, thinking about the spider. And as he kept thinking, thinking, thinking, so he told Bevis, he recollected that he knew a great deal about a good many other things besides flies. So one day, after several weeks of thinking, he crawled out of his house in the sunshine, which he did not like at all, and went across the grass to the iron railings, where the spider had

then got his web. The spider saw him coming, and being very proud of his cleverness, began to taunt and tease him.

"Your back is all over warts, and you are an old toad," he said. "You are so old, that I heard the swallows saying their great-great-great-grandmothers, when they built in the chimney, did not know when you were born. And you have got foolish, and past doing anything, and so stupid that you hardly know when it is going to rain. Why, the sun is shining bright, you stupid old toad, and there isn't a chance of a single drop falling. You look very ugly down there in the grass. Now, don't you wish that you were me and could catch more flies than you could eat? Why, I can catch wasps and bees, and tie them up so tight with my threads that they cannot sting nor even move their wings, nor so much as wriggle their bodies. I am the very cleverest and most cunning spider that ever lived."

"Indeed, you are," replied the toad. "I have been thinking so all the summer; and so much do I admire you, that I have come all this way, across in the hot sun, to tell you something."

"Tell *me* something!" said the spider, much offended, *"I* know everything."

"Oh, yes, honoured sir," said the toad; "you have such wonderful eyes, and such a sharp mind, it is true that you know everything about the sun, and the moon, and the earth, and flies. But, as you have studied all these great and important things, you could hardly see all the very little trifles like a poor old toad."

"Oh, yes, I can. I know everything—everything!"

"But, sir," went on the toad so humbly, "this is such a little—such a very little—thing, and a spider like you, in such a high position of life, could not mind me telling you such a mere nothing."

"Well, I don't mind," said the spider—"you may go on, and tell me, if you like."

"The fact is," said the toad, "while I have been sitting in my hole, I have noticed that such a lot of the flies that come into this garden presently go into the summer-house there, and when they are in the summer-house, they always go to that little round window, which is sometimes quite black with them; for it is the nature of flies to buzz over glass."

"I do not know so much about that," said the spider; "for I have

never lived in houses, being an independent insect; but it is possible you may be right. At any rate, it is not of much consequence. You had better go up into the window, old toad." Now this was a sneer on the part of the spider.

"But I can't climb up into the window," said the toad; "all I can do is to crawl about the ground, but you can run up a wall quickly. How I do wish I was a spider, like you. Oh, dear!" And then the toad turned round, after bowing to the clever spider, and went back to his hole.

Now the spider was secretly very much mortified and angry with himself, because he had not noticed this about the flies going to the window in the summer-house. At first he said to himself that it was not true; but he could not help looking that way now and then, and every time he looked, there was the window crowded with flies. They had all the garden to buzz about in, and all the fields, but instead of wandering under the trees, and over the flowers, they preferred to go into the summer-house and crawl over the glass of the little window, though it was very dirty from so many feet. For a long time, the spider was too proud to go there too; but one day such a splendid blue-bottle fly got in the window and made such a tremendous buzzing, that he could not resist it any more.

So he left his web by the railings, and climbed up the blue-painted wall, over Bevis's writings and marks, and spun such a web in the window as had never before been seen. It was the largest and the finest, and the most beautifully-arranged web that had ever been made, and it caught such a number of flies that the spider grew fatter every day. In a week's time he was so big that he could no longer hide in the crack he had chosen, he was quite a giant; and the toad came across the grass one night and looked at him, but the spider was now so bloated he would not recognise the toad.

But one morning a robin came to the iron railings, and perched on the top, and put his head a little on one side, to show his black eye the better. Then he flew inside the summer-house, alighted in the window, and gobbled up the spider in an instant. The old toad shut his eye and opened it again, and went on thinking, for that was just what he knew would happen. Ever so many times in his very long life he had seen spiders go up there, but no sooner had they got fat than a robin or a wren came in and ate them. Some of the clever spider's

web was there still when Bevis looked out of the window, all dusty and draggled, with the skins and wings of some gnats and a dead leaf entangled in it.

As he looked, a white butterfly came along the meadow, and instantly he ran out, flung open the gate, rushed down the steps, and taking no heed of the squeak the gate made as it shut behind him, raced after the butterfly.

The tall buttercups brushed his knees, and bent on either side as if a wind was rushing through them. A bennet slipped up his knickerbockers and tickled his leg. His toes only touched the ground, neither his heels nor the hollow of his foot; and from so light a pressure the grass, bowed but not crushed, rose up, leaving no more mark of his passage than if a grasshopper had gone by.

Daintily fanning himself with his wings, the butterfly went before Bevis, not yet knowing that he was chased, but sauntering along just above the buttercups. He peeped as he flew under the lids of the flowers' eyes, to see if any of them loved him. There was a glossy green leaf which he thought he should like to feel, it looked so soft and satin-like. So he alighted on it, and then saw Bevis coming, his hat on the very back of his head, and his hand stretched out to catch him. The butterfly wheeled himself round on the leaf, shut up his wings, and seemed so innocent, till Bevis fell on his knee, and then under his fingers there was nothing but the leaf. His cheek flushed, his eye lit up, and away he darted again after the butterfly, which had got several yards ahead before he could recover himself. He ran now faster than ever.

"Race on," said the buttercups; "race on, Bevis; that butterfly disdains us because we are so many, and all alike."

"Be quick," said a great moon-daisy to him; "catch him, dear. I asked him to stay and tell me a story, but he would not."

"Never mind me," said the clover; "you may step on me if you like, love."

"But just look at me for a moment, pet, as you go by," cried the purple vetch by the hedge.

A colt in the field, seeing Bevis running so fast, thought he too must join the fun, so he whisked his tail, stretched his long floundering legs, and galloped away. Then the mare whinnied and galloped too, and the ground shook under her heavy hoofs. The cows lifted their

heads from gathering the grass close round the slender bennets, and wondered why any one could be so foolish as to rush about, when there was plenty to eat and no hurry.

The cunning deceitful butterfly, so soon as Bevis came near, turned aside and went along a furrow. Bevis, running in the furrow, caught his foot in the long creepers of the crowfoot, and fell down bump, and pricked his hand with a thistle. Up he jumped again, red as a peony, and shouting in his rage, ran on so quickly that he nearly overtook the butterfly. But they were now nearer the other hedge. The butterfly, frightened at the shouting and Bevis's resolution, rose over the brambles, and Bevis stopping short flung his hat at him. The hat did not hit the butterfly, but the wind it made puffed him round, and so frightened him, that he flew up half as high as the elms, and went into the next field.

When Bevis looked down, there was his hat, hung on a branch of ash, far beyond his reach. He could not touch the lowest leaf, jump as much as he would. His next thought was a stone to throw, but there were none in the meadow. Then he put his hand in his jacket pocket for his knife, to cut a long stick. It was not in that pocket, nor in the one on the other side, nor in his knickers. Now the knife was Bevis's greatest treasure—his very greatest. He looked all round bewildered, and the tears rose in his eyes.

Just then Pan, the spaniel, who had worked his head loose from the collar and followed him, ran out of the hedge between Bevis's legs with such joyful force, that Bevis was almost overthrown, and burst into a fit of laughter. Pan ran back into the hedge to hunt, and Bevis, with tears rolling down his cheeks into the dimples made by his smiles, dropped on hands and knees and crept in after the dog under the briars. On the bank there was a dead grey stick, a branch that had fallen from the elms. It was heavy, but Bevis heaved it up, and pushed it through the boughs and thrust his hat off.

Creeping out again, he put it on, and remembering his knife, walked out into the field to search for it. When Pan missed him, he followed, and presently catching scent of a rabbit, the spaniel rushed down a furrow, which happened to be the very furrow where Bevis had tumbled. Going after Pan, Bevis found his knife in the grass, where it had dropped when shaken from his pocket by the jerk of his

fall. He opened the single blade it contained at once, and went back to the hedge to cut a stick. As he walked along the hedge, he thought the briar was too prickly to cut, and the thorn was too hard, and the ash was too big, and the willow had no knob, and the elder smelt so strong, and the sapling oak was across the ditch, and out of reach, and the maple had such rough bark. So he wandered along a great way through that field and the next, and presently saw a nut-tree stick that promised well, for the sticks grew straight, and not too big.

He jumped into the ditch, climbed half up the mound, and began to cut away at one of the rods, leaning his left arm on the moss-grown stole. The bark was easily cut through, and he soon made a notch, but then the wood seemed to grow harder, and the chips he got out were very small. The harder the wood, the more determined Bevis became, and he cut and worked away with such force that his chest heaved, his brow was set and frowning, and his jacket all green from rubbing against the hazel. Suddenly something passed between him and the light. He looked up, and there was Pan, whom he had forgotten, in the hedge looking down at him. "Pan! Pan!" cried Bevis. Pan wagged his tail, but ran back, and Bevis, forsaking his stick, scrambled up into the stole, then into the mound, and through a gap into the next field. Pan was nowhere to be seen.

There was a large mossy root under a great oak, and, hot with his cutting, Bevis sat down upon it. Along came a house martin, the kind of swallow that has a white band across his back, flying very low, and only just above the grass. The swallow flew to and fro not far from Bevis, who watched it, and presently asked him to come closer. But the swallow said: "I shall not come any nearer, Bevis. Don't you remember what you did last year, sir? Don't you remember Bill, the carter's boy, put a ladder against the wall, and you climbed up the ladder, and put your paw, all brown and dirty, into my nest and took my eggs? And you tried to string them on a bennet, but the bennet was too big, so you went indoors for some thread. And you made my wife and me dreadfully unhappy, and we said we would never come back any more to your house, Bevis."

"But you have come back, swallow."

"Yes, we have come back—just once more; but if you do it again we shall go away for ever."

"But I won't do it again; no, that I won't! Do come near."

So the swallow came a little nearer, only two yards away, and flew backwards and forwards, and Bevis could hear the snap of his beak as he caught the flies.

"Just a little bit nearer still," said he. "Let me stroke your lovely white back."

"Oh, no, I can't do that. I don't think you are quite safe, Bevis. Why don't you gather the cowslips?"

Bevis looked up and saw that the field was full of cowslips—yellow with cowslips. "I will pick every one," said he, "and carry them all back to my mother."

"You cannot do that," said the swallow, laughing, "you will not try long enough."

"I *hate* you!" cried Bevis in a passion, and flung his knife, which was in his hand, at the bird. The swallow rose up, and the knife whizzed by and struck the ground.

"I told you you were not safe," said the swallow over his head; "and I am sure you won't pick half the cowslips."

Bevis picked up his knife and put it in his pocket; then he began to gather the cowslips, and kept on for a quarter of an hour as fast as ever he could, till both hands were full. There was a rustle in the hedge, and looking up he saw Pan come out, all brown with sand sticking to his coat. He shook himself, and sent the sand flying from him in a cloud, just like he did with the water when he came up out of the pond. Then he looked at Bevis, wagged his tail, cried "Yowp!" and ran back into the hedge again.

Bevis rushed to the spot, and saw that there was a large rabbits' hole. Into this hole Pan had worked his way so far that there was nothing of him visible but his hind legs and tail. Bevis could hear him panting in the hole, he was working so hard to get at the rabbit, and tearing with his teeth at the roots to make the hole bigger. Bevis clapped his hands, dropping his cowslips, and called "Loo! Loo!" urging the dog on. The sand came flying out behind Pan, and he worked harder and harder, as if he would tear the mound to pieces.

Bevis sat down on the grass under the shadow of the oak, by a maple bush, and taking a cowslip, began to count the spots inside it. It was always five in all the cowslips—five brown little spots—that

he was sure of, because he knew he had five fingers on each hand. He lay down at full length on his back, and looked up at the sky through the boughs of the oak. It was very, very blue, and very near down. With a long ladder he knew he could have got up there easily, and it looked so sweet. "Sky," said Bevis, "I love you like I love my mother." He pouted his lips, and kissed at it. Then turning a little on one side to watch Pan, in an instant he fell firm asleep.

Pan put his head out of the hole to breathe two or three times, and looked aside at Bevis, and seeing that he was still, went back to work again. Two butterflies came fluttering along together. The swallow returned, and flew low down along the grass near Bevis. The wind came now and then, and shook down a shower of white and pink petals from a crab-tree in the hedge. By-and-by a squirrel climbing from tree to tree reached the oak, and stayed to look at Bevis beneath in the shadow. He knew exactly how Bevis felt—just like he did himself when he went to sleep.

CHAPTER II.

AT HOME.

"Yowp, yow; wow-wow!" The yelling of Pan woke Bevis, who jumped up, and seeing the bailiff beating the spaniel with a stick, instantly, and without staying the tenth of a second to rub his eyes or stretch himself, rushed at the man and hit him with his doubled fists. As if he had seen it in his sleep, Bevis understood what was taking place immediately his eyelids opened. So the bailiff beat the dog, and Bevis beat the bailiff. The noise made quite an echo against the thick hedges and a high bank that was near. When the bailiff thought he had thrashed Pan sufficiently, he turned round and looked down at Bevis, whose face was red, and his knuckles sore with striking the bailiff's hard coat.

"How fess you be, measter," said the bailiff (meaning fierce), "you mind as you don't hurt yourself. Look'ee here, there've bin a fine falarie about you, zur." He meant that there had been much excitement when it was found that Bevis was not in the garden, and was nowhere to be found. Everybody was set to hunt for him.

First they thought of the brook, lest he should have walked in among the flags that were coming up so green and strong. Then they thought of the tallet over the stable,—perhaps he had climbed up there again from the manger, over the heads of the great cart-horses, quietly eating their hay, while he put his foot on the manger and then on the projecting steps in the corner, and into the hayrack—and so up. He had done it once before, and could not get down, and so the tallet was searched. One man was sent to the Long Pond, with orders to look everywhere, and borrow the punt and push in among the bulrushes.

Another was despatched to the Close, to gruffly inquire where the cottage boys were, and what they had been doing, for Bevis was known to hanker after their company, to go catching loach under the stones in the stream that crossed the road, and creeping under the arch of the bridge, and taking the moor-hens' eggs from the banks of the ponds where the rushes were thick. Another was put on the pony,

to gallop up the road after the carter and his waggon, for he had set off that morning with a load of hay for the hills that could be seen to the southward.

Running over every possible thing that Bevis could have done in his mind, his papa remembered that he had lately taken to asking about the road, and would not be satisfied till they had taken him up to the sign-post—a mile beyond the village, and explained the meaning of it. Some one had told him that it was the road to Southampton—the place where the ships came. Now, Bevis was full of the ships, drawing them on the blue wall of the summer-house, and floating a boat on the trough in the cow-yard, and looking wistfully up the broad dusty highway, as if he could see the masts and yards sixty miles away or more. Perhaps when the carter went with the waggon that way, Bevis had slipped up the footpath that made a short cut across the fields, and joined the waggon at the cross-roads, that he might ride to the hills thinking to see the sea on the other side.

And the bailiff, not to be behindhand, having just come in for his lunch, ran out again without so much as wetting his stubbly white beard in the froth of the drawn quart of ale, and made away as fast as his stiff legs could carry him to where there was a steam ploughing engine at work—a mile distant. The sight of the white steam, and the humming of the fly-wheel, always set Bevis "on the jig," as the village folk called it, to get to the machinery, and the smell of the cotton waste and oil wafted on the wind was to him like the scent of battle to the war-horse.

But Bevis was not in the tallet, nor the brook, nor among the bulrushes of the Long Pond, nor under the bridge dabbling for loach, nor watching the steam plough, and the cottage boys swore their hardest (and they knew how to swear quite properly) that they had not seen him that morning. But they would look for him, and forthwith eagerly started to scour the fields and hedges. Meantime, Bevis, quite happy, was sleeping under the oak in the shadow, with Pan every now and then coming out of the rabbit-hole to snort out the sand that got into his nostrils.

But, by-and-by, when everything had been done and everybody was scattered over the earth seeking for him, the bailiff came back from the steam plough, weary with running, and hungry, thirsty, and cross.

As he passed through the yard he caught a glimpse of Pan's kennel, which was a tub by the wood pile, and saw that the chain was lying stretched to its full length. Pan was gone. At first the bailiff thought Bevis had loosed him, and that he had got a clue. But when he came near, he saw that the collar was not unbuckled; Pan had worked his head out, and so escaped.

The bailiff turned the collar over thoughtfully with his foot, and felt his scanty white beard with his hard hand; and then he went back to the cart-house. Up in the cart-house, on the ledge of the wall beneath the thatch, there were three or four sticks, each about four feet long and as thick as your thumb, with the bark on—some were ground ash, some crab-tree, and one was hazel. This one was straight and as hard as could be. These sticks were put there for the time when the cows were moved, so that the men might find their sticks quick. Each had his stick, and the bailiff's was the hazel one. With the staff in his hand the bailiff set out straight across the grass, looking neither to the right nor the left, but walking deliberately and without hesitation.

He got through a gap in one hedge, and then he turned to the corner making towards the rabbit-burrows, for he guessed that Pan had gone there. As he approached he saw Bevis sleeping, and smiled, for looking for the dog he had found the boy. But first stepping softly up to Bevis, and seeing that he was quite right and unhurt, only asleep, the bailiff went to the hedge and thrust his staff into the hole where Pan was at work.

Out came Pan, and instantly down came the rod. Pan cowered in the grass; he was all over sand, which flew up in a cloud as the rod struck him again. "Yowp!—yow—wow—wow!" and this row awoke Bevis.

Bevis battled hard for his dog, but the bailiff had had his lunch delayed, and his peace of mind upset about the boy, and he was resolutely relieving himself upon the spaniel. Now the hazel rod, being dry and stiff, was like a bar of iron, and did not yield or bend in the least, but made the spaniel's ribs rattle. Pan could not get low enough into the grass; he ceased to howl, so great was the pain, but merely whimpered, and the tears filled his brown eyes. At last the bailiff ceased, and immediately Bevis pulled out his handkerchief, and sat down on the grass and wiped away the spaniel's tears.

"Now, measter, you come along wi' I," said the bailiff, taking his

hand. Bevis would not come, saying he hated him. But when the bailiff told him about the hunt there had been, and how the people were everywhere looking for him, Bevis began to laugh, thinking it was rare fun.

"Take me 'pick-a-back,'" said he.

So the bailiff stooped and took him. "Gee-up!" said Bevis, punching his broad back and kicking him to go faster. Pan, now quite forgotten, crept along behind them.

Bevis listened to the lecture they gave him at home with a very bad grace. He sulked and pouted, as if he had himself been the injured party. But no sooner was he released from the dinner-table, than he was down on his knees at his own particular corner cupboard, the one that had been set apart for his toys and things ever since he could walk. It was but a small cupboard, made across the angle of two walls, and with one shelf only, yet it was bottomless, and always contained something new.

There were the last fragments of the great box of wooden bricks, cut and chipped, and notched and splintered by that treasure, his pocket-knife. There was the tin box for the paste, or the worms in moss, when he went fishing. There was the wheel of his old wheelbarrow, long since smashed and numbered with the Noah's arks that have gone the usual way. There was the brazen cylinder of a miniature steam-engine bent out of all shape. There was the hammer-head made specially for him by the blacksmith down in the village, without a handle, for people were tired of putting new handles to it, he broke them so quickly. There was a horse-shoe, and the iron catch of a gate, and besides these a boxwood top, which he could not spin, but which he had payed away half the savings in his money-box for, because he had seen it split the other boys' tops in the road.

In one corner was a brass cannon, the touch-hole blackened by the explosion of gunpowder, and by it the lock of an ancient pistol—the lock only, and neither barrel nor handle. An old hunting-crop, some feathers from pheasants' tails, part of a mole-trap, an old brazen bugle, much battered, a wooden fig-box full of rusty nails, several scraps of deal board and stumps of cedar pencil were heaped together in confusion. But these were not all, nor could any written inventory exhaust the contents, and give a perfect list of all that cupboard held. There

was always something new in it: Bevis never went there, but he found something.

With the hunting-crop he followed the harriers and chased the doubling hare; with the cannon he fought battles, such as he saw in the pictures; the bugle, too, sounded the charge (the bailiff sometimes blew it in the garden to please him, and the hollow "who-oo!" it made echoed over the fields); with the deal boards and the rusty nails, and the hammer-head, he built houses, and even cities. The jagged and splintered wooden bricks, six inches long, were not bricks, but great beams and baulks of timber; the wheel of the wheelbarrow was the centre of many curious pieces of mechanism. He could see these things easily. So he sat down at his cupboard and forgot the lecture instantly; the pout disappeared from his lips as he plunged his hand into the inexhaustible cupboard.

"Bevis, dear," he heard presently, "you may have an apple."

Instantly, and without staying to shut the door on his treasures, he darted upstairs—up two flights, with a clatter and a bang, burst open the door, and was in the apple-room. It was a large garret or attic, running half the length of the house, and there, in the autumn, the best apples from the orchard were carried, and put on a thin layer of hay, each apple apart from its fellow (for they ought not to touch), and each particular sort, the Blenheim Oranges and the King Pippins, the Creepers and the Grindstone Pippins (which grew nowhere else), divided from the next sort by a little fence of hay.

The most of them were gone now, only a few of the keeping apples remained, and from these Bevis, with great deliberation, chose the biggest, measuring them by the eye and weighing them in his hand. Then downstairs again with a clatter and a bang, down the second stairs this time, past the gun-room, where the tools were kept, and a carpenter's bench; then through the whole length of the ground floor from the kitchen to the parlour slamming every door behind him, and kicking over the chairs in front of him.

There he stayed half-a-minute to look at the hornet's nest under the glass-case on the mantelpiece. The comb was built round a central pillar or column, three stories one above the other, and it had been taken from the willow tree by the brook, the huge hollow willow which he had twice tried to chop down, that he might make a boat of

it. Then out of doors, and up the yard, and past the cart-house, when something moved in the long grass under the wall. It was a weasel, caught in a gin.

The trap had been set by the side of a drain for rats, and the weasel coming out, or perhaps frightened by footsteps, and hastening carelessly, had been trapped. Bevis, biting his apple, looked at the weasel, and the weasel said: "Sir Bevis, please let me out, this gin hurts me so; the teeth are very sharp and the spring is very strong, and the tar-cord is very stout, so that I cannot break it. See how the iron has skinned my leg and taken off the fur, and I am in such pain. Do please let me go, before the ploughboy comes, or he will hit me with a stick, or smash me with a stone, or put his iron-shod heel on me; and I have been a very good weasel, Bevis. I have been catching the horrid rats that eat the barley-meal put for the pigs. Oh, let me out, the gin hurts me so!"

Bevis put his foot on the spring, and was pressing it down, and the weasel thought he was already free, and looked across at the wood pile under which he meant to hide, when Bevis heard a little squeak close to his head, and looked up and saw a mouse under the eaves of the cart-house, peeping forth from a tiny crevice, where the mortar had fallen from between the stones of the wall.

"Bevis, Bevis!" said the mouse, "don't you do it—don't you let that weasel go! He is a most dreadful wicked weasel, and his teeth are ever so much sharper than that gin. He does not kill the rats, because he is afraid of them (unless he can assassinate one in his sleep), but he murdered my wife and sucked her blood, and her body, all dry and withered, is up in the beam there, if you will get a ladder and look. And he killed all my little mouses, and made me very unhappy, and I shall never be able to get another wife to live with me in this cart-house while he is about. There is no way we can get away from him. If we go out into the field he follows us there, and if we go into the sheds he comes after us there, and he is a cruel beast, that wicked weasel. You know you ate the partridge's eggs," added the mouse, speaking to the weasel.

"It is all false," said the weasel. "But it is true that you ate the wheat out of the ears in the wheat-rick, and you know what was the consequence. If that little bit of wheat you ate had been thrashed, and ground, and baked, and made into bread, then that poor girl would

have had a crust to eat, and would not have jumped into the river, and she would have had a son, and he would have been a great man and fought battles, just as Bevis does with his brazen cannon, and won great victories, and been the pride of all the nation. But you ate those particular grains of wheat that were meant to do all this, you wicked little mouse. Besides which, you ran across the bed one night, and frightened Bevis's mother."

"But I did not mean to," said the mouse; "and you did mean to kill my wife, and you ate the partridge's eggs."

"And a very good thing I did," said the weasel. "Do you know what would have happened, if I had not taken them? I did it all for good, and with the best intentions. For if I had left the eggs one more day, there was a man who meant to have stolen them all but one, which he meant to have left to deceive the keeper. If he had stolen them, he would have been caught, for the keeper was watching for him all the time, and he would have been put to prison, and his children would have been hungry. So I ate the eggs, and especially I ate every bit of the one the man meant to have left."

"And why were you so particular about eating that egg?" asked Bevis.

"Because," said the weasel, "if that egg had come to a partridge chick, and the chick had lived till the shooting-time came, then the sportsman and his brother, when they came round, would have started it out of the stubble, and the shot from the gun of the younger would have accidentally killed the elder, and people would have thought it was done to murder him for the sake of the inheritance."

"Now, is this true?" said Bevis.

"Yes, that it is; and I killed the mouse's wife also for the best of reasons."

"You horrid wretch!" cried the mouse.

"Oh, you needn't call me a wretch," said the weasel; "I am sure you ought to be grateful to me, for your wife was very jealous because you paid so much attention to the Miss Mouse you want to marry now, and in the night she meant to have gnawn your throat."

"And you frightened my mother," said Bevis, "by running across her bed in the night;" and he began to press on the spring of the gin.

"Yes, that he did," said the weasel, overjoyed; "and he made a hole in the boards of the floor, and it was down that hole that the half-

sovereign rolled and was lost, and the poor maid-servant sent away because they thought she had stolen it."

"What do you say to that?" asked Bevis.

But the mouse was quite aghast and dumb-founded and began to think that it was he after all who was in the wrong, so that for the moment he could not speak. Just then Bevis caught sight of the colt that had come up beside his mother, the cart mare, to the fence; and thinking that he would go and try and stroke the pretty creature, Bevis started forward, forgetting all about the weasel and the mouse. As he started, he pressed the spring down, and in an instant the weasel was out, and had hobbled across to the wood pile. When the mouse saw this, he gave a little squeak of terror, and ran back to his hiding-place.

But when Bevis put out his hand to stroke the colt, the colt started back, so he picked up a stick and threw it at him. Then he took another stick and hunted the hens round and round the ricks to make them lay their eggs faster, as it is well known that is the best way. For he remembered that last year they had shown him three tiny bantam chicks, such darling little things, all cuddled cosily together in the hollow of a silver table-spoon. The hens clucked and raced, and Bevis raced after and shouted, and the cock, slipping on one side, for it hurt his dignity to run away like the rest, hopped upon the railings, napped his wings, crew, and cried: "You'll be glad when I'm dead". That was how Bevis translated his "hurra-ca-roorah".

In the midst of the noise out came Polly, the dairy-maid, with a bone for Pan, which Bevis no sooner saw, than he asked her to let him give Pan his dinner. "Very well, dear," said Polly, and went in to finish her work. So Bevis took the bone, and Pan, all weary and sore from his thrashing, crept out from his tub to receive it; but Bevis put the bone on the grass (all the grass was worn bare where Pan could reach) just where the spaniel could smell it nicely but could not get it. Pan struggled, and scratched, and howled, and scratched again, and tugged till his collar, buckled tightly now, choked him, and he gasped and panted, while Bevis, taking the remnant of his apple from his pocket, nibbled it and laughed with a face like an angel's for sweetness.

Then a rook went over and cawed, and Bevis, looking up at the bird, caught a glimpse of the swing over the wall—it stood under the sycamore tree. Dropping the bit of apple, away he ran to the swing, and

sat in it, and pushed himself off. As he swung forward he straightened his legs and leant back; when he swung back he drew his feet under him and leant forward, and by continuing this the weight of his body caused the swing to rise like a pendulum till he went up among the sycamore boughs, nearly as high as the ivy-grown roof of the summer-house, just opposite. There he went to and fro, as easily as possible, shutting his eyes and humming to himself.

Presently a cock chaffinch came and perched in the ash close by, and immediately began to sing his war-song: "I am lord of this tree," sang the chaffinch, "I am lord of this tree; every bough is mine, and every leaf, and the wind that comes through it, and the sunshine that falls on it, and the rain that moistens it, and the blue sky over it, and the grass underneath it—all this is mine. My nest is going to be made in the ivy that grows half-way up the trunk, and my wife is very busy to-day bringing home the fibres and the moss, and I have just come back a little while to tell you all that none of you must come into or touch my tree. I like this tree, and therefore it is mine. Be careful that none of you come inside the shadow of it, or I shall peck you with all my might."

Then he paused awhile, and Bevis went on swinging and listening. In a minute or two another chaffinch came to the elm in the hedge just outside the garden, and quite close to the ash. Directly he perched, he ruffled up and began to sing too: "I am lord of this tree, and it is a very high tree, much higher than the ash, and even above the oak where that slow fellow the crow is building. Mine is the very highest tree of all, and I am the brightest and prettiest of all the chaffinches. See my colours how bright they are, so that you would hardly know me from a bullfinch. There is not a feather rumpled in my wing, or my tail, and I have the most beautiful eyes of all of you."

Hardly had he done singing than another chaffinch came into the crab-tree, a short way up the hedge, and he began to sing too: "I have a much bigger tree than either of you, but as it is at the top of the field I cannot bring it down here, but I have come down into this crab-tree, and I say it is mine, and I am lord of two trees. I am stronger than both of you, and neither of you dare come near me."

The two other chaffinches were silent for a minute, and then one of them, the knight of the ash-tree, flew down into the hedge under

the crab-tree; and instantly down flew the third chaffinch, and they fought a battle, and pecked and buffeted one another with their wings, till Bevis's tears ran down with laughing. Presently they parted, and the third chaffinch went home to his tree at the top of the field, leaving one little feather on the ground, which the first chaffinch picked up and carried to his nest in the ash.

But scarcely had he woven it into the nest than down flew the second chaffinch from the elm into the shadow of the ash. Flutter, flutter went the first chaffinch to meet him, and they had such a battle as Bevis had never seen before, and fought till they were tired; then each flew up into his tree, and sang again about their valour.

Immediately afterwards ten sparrows came from the house-top into the bushes, chattering and struggling all together, scratching, pecking, buffeting, and all talking at once. After they had had a good fight they all went back to the house-top, and began to tell each other what tremendous blows they had given. Then there was such a great cawing from the rook trees, which were a long way off, that it was evident a battle was going on there, and Bevis heard the chaffinch say that one of the rooks had been caught stealing his cousin's sticks.

Next two goldfinches began to fight, and then a blackbird came up from the brook and perched on a rail, and he was such a boaster, for he said he had the yellowest bill of all the blackbirds, and the blackest coat, and the largest eye, and the sweetest whistle, and he was lord over all the blackbirds. In two minutes up came another one from out of the bramble bushes at the corner, and away they went chattering at each other. Presently the starlings on the chimney began to quarrel, and had a terrible set-to. Then a wren came by, and though he was so small, his boast was worse than the blackbird's, for he said he was the sharpest and the cleverest of all the birds, and knew more than all put together.

Afar off, in the trees, there were six or seven thrushes, all declaring that they were the best singers, and had the most speckled necks; and up in the sky the swallows were saying that they had the whitest bosoms.

"Oo! whoo," cried a wood-pigeon from the very oak under which Bevis had gone to sleep. "There are none who can fly so fast as I can. I am a captain of the wood-pigeons, and in the winter I have three hundred and twenty-two pigeons under me, and they all do exactly as

I tell them. They fly when I fly, and settle down when I settle down. If I go to the west, they go to the west; and if I go to the east, then they follow to the east. I have the biggest acorns, and the best of the peas, for they leave them especially for me. And not one of all the three hundred and twenty-two pigeons dares to begin to eat the wheat in August till I say it is ripe and they may, and not one of them dares to take a wife till I say yes. Oo-whoo! Is not my voice sweet and soft, and delicious, far sweeter than that screeching nightingale's in the hawthorn yonder?"

But he had no sooner finished than another one began in the fir copse, and said he was captain of one thousand pigeons, and was ever so much stronger, and could fly ten miles an hour faster. So away went the first pigeon to the fir copse, and there was a great clattering of wings and "oo-whoo"-ing, and how it was settled Bevis could not tell.

So as he went on swinging, he heard all the birds quarrelling, and boasting, and fighting, hundreds of them all around, and he said to the chaffinch on the ash:—

"Chaffinch, it seems to me that you are all very wicked birds, for you think of nothing but fighting all day long".

The chaffinch laughed, and said: "My dear Sir Bevis, I do not know what you mean by wicked. But fighting is very nice indeed, and we all feel so jolly when fighting time comes. For you must know that the spring is the duelling time, when all the birds go to battle. There is not a tree nor a bush on your papa's farm, nor on all the farms all around, nor in all the country, nor in all this island, but some fighting is going on. I have not time to tell you all about it; but I wish you could read our history, and all about the wars that have been going on these thousand years. Perhaps if you should ever meet the squirrel he will tell you, for he knows most about history. As we all like it so much, it must be right, and we never hurt one another very much. Sometimes a feather is knocked out, and sometimes one gets a hard peck; but it does not do any harm. And after it is over, in the autumn, we are all very good friends, and go hunting together. You may see us, hundreds of us in your papa's stubble-fields, Bevis, all flying together very happy. I think the skylarks fight the most, for they begin almost in the winter if the sun shines warm for an hour, and they keep on all day in the summer, and till it is quite dark and the stars are out, besides

getting up before the cuckoo to go on again. Yet they are the sweetest and nicest of all the birds, and the most gentle, and do not mind our coming into their fields. So I am sure, Bevis, that you are wrong, and fighting is not wicked if you love one another. You and Mark are fond of one another, but you hit him sometimes, don't you?"

"Yes, that I do," said Bevis, very eagerly, "I hit him yesterday so hard with my bat that he would not come and play with me. It is very nice to hit any one."

"But you cannot do it like we do it," said the chaffinch, swelling with pride again, "for we sing and you can't, and if you can't sing you have no business to fight, and besides, though you are much older than me you are not married yet. Now I have such a beautiful wife, and to tell you the truth, Bevis, we do the fighting because the ladies love to see it, and kiss us for it afterwards. I am the knight of this tree!"

After which Bevis, being tired of swinging, went to the summer-house to read what he had written with his stump of pencil till he was called to tea. In the evening, when the sun was sinking, he went out and lay down on the seat—it was a broad plank, grey with lichen—under the russet apple-tree, looking towards the west, over the brook below. He saw the bees coming home to the hives close by on the haha, and they seemed to come high in the air, flying straight as if from the distant hills where the sun was. He heard the bees say that there were such quantities of flowers on the hills, and such pleasant places, and that the sky was much more blue up there, and he thought if he could he would go to the hills soon.