



CHAPTER 17

WHITEFOOT FINDS A HOLE JUST IN TIME



*Just in time, not just too late,
Will make you master of your fate.*

—Whitefoot.

Whitefoot, half-way up that dead tree, flattened himself against the trunk and, with his heart going pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat with fright, peered around the tree at an enemy he had not seen for so long that he had quite forgotten there was such a one. It was Butcher the Shrike. Often he is called just Butcher Bird. He did not look at all terrible. He was not quite as big as Sammy Jay. He had no terrible claws like the Hawks and Owls. There was a tiny hook at the end of his black bill, but it wasn't big enough to look very dreadful. But you can not always judge a person by looks, and Whitefoot knew that Butcher was one to be feared.

So his heart went pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat as he wondered if Butcher had seen him. He didn't have to wait long to find out. Butcher flew to a tree back of Whitefoot and then straight at him. Whitefoot dodged around to the other side of the tree. Then began a dreadful game. At least, it was dreadful to Whitefoot. This way and that way around the trunk of that tree he dodged, while Butcher did his best to catch him.

Whitefoot would not have minded this so much, had he not been so tired, and had he known of a hiding-place close at hand. But he was tired, very tired, for you remember he had had what was a very long and terrible journey to him. He had felt almost too tired to climb that tree in the first place to see if it had any holes in it higher up. Now

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he didn't know whether to keep on going up or to go down. Two or three times he dodged around the tree without doing either. Then he decided to go up.

Now Butcher was enjoying this game of dodge. If he should catch Whitefoot, he would have a good dinner. If he didn't catch Whitefoot, he would simply go hungry a little longer. So you see, there was a very big difference in the feelings of Whitefoot and Butcher. Whitefoot had his life to lose, while Butcher had only a dinner to lose.

Dodging this way and dodging that way, Whitefoot climbed higher and higher. Twice he whisked around that tree trunk barely in time. All the time he was growing more and more tired, and more and more discouraged. Supposing he should find no hole in that tree!

"There must be one. There must be one," he kept saying over and over to himself, to keep his courage up. "I can't keep dodging much longer. If I don't find a hole pretty soon, Butcher will surely catch me. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Just above Whitefoot was a broken branch. Only the stub of it remained. The next time he dodged around the trunk he found himself just below that stub. Oh, joy! There, close under that stub, was a round hole. Whitefoot didn't hesitate a second. He didn't wait to find out whether or not any one was in that hole. He didn't even think that there might be some one in there. With a tiny little squeak of relief he darted in. He was just in time. He was just in the nick of time. Butcher struck at him and just missed him as he disappeared in that hole. Whitefoot had saved his life and Butcher had missed a dinner.