

EWALD CARL

THE POND

Carl Ewald

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CHAPTER I

The Beginning

One day in early spring, a young reed-warbler sat in a bush in Italy and hung his beak.

This was not because he really had anything to complain of. The sun was shining; there were flies in plenty; and no one was doing him harm. A little while before, a pretty girl, with jet-black eyes, had sat under the bush and listened to his song and kissed her hand to him.

And yet he wanted something.

He was tired of the Italian flies. He had a feeling in his wings as if he could do hundreds of miles at a stretch. There were notes in his throat which he was unable to get out and his little heart was filled with a longing which he could not understand and which would have made him cry, if a reed-warbler knew how to cry. But he can only sing and he sings just alike on all days, whether he be glad or sorry.

So he sang. And, when he stopped, he heard a voice, from a bush close by, which resembled his own to a nicety, only it was not so strong.

He was off in a moment and alighting on a twig gazed at the sweetest little lady reed-warbler that one could wish to set eyes on.

There was no one to introduce them to each other and so they introduced themselves. For there is not the same stiff etiquette among birds as at a court ball. Also things move more quickly; and, when they had chatted for five minutes or so, the reed-warbler said:

"Now that I have seen you, I know what's the matter with me. I am longing to go back to the land where I was born. I have a distinct recollection of a quiet pond, with reeds and rushes and green beeches round it."

"I am longing to go there, too," said the little reed-warbler. "I remember it also."

"Then the best thing that we can do is to get engaged," said he. "As soon as we come to the pond, we will celebrate our marriage and build a nest."

"Will you love me till I die?" she asked.

"I can't answer for more than the summer," he replied. "But I promise you that."

Then she said yes. They had no one to announce the engagement to, for they had seen none of their relations since the autumn. So they had a little banquet to themselves. He treated her to some fat flies; and they sang a little duet and started on their journey.

They flew for many days.

Sometimes they rested a little, when they came to a green valley, and they also made travelling-acquaintances. For there were many birds going the same way and they often flew in flocks and flights. But the two reed-warblers always kept close together, as good sweethearts should. And, when they were tired, they cheered each other with tales of the quiet pond.

At last they arrived.

It was a beautiful morning towards the end of May. The sun was shining; and white clouds floated slowly through the sky. The beeches were quite out and the oaks nearly. The reeds and rushes were green, the little waves danced merrily in the sun and all things wore a look of sheer enjoyment.

"Isn't it lovely?" asked the reed-warbler.

"Yes," she said. "We will live here."

Close to the shore they found a place which they liked. They bound three reeds together with fine fibres, a yard above the water, and then wove the dearest little basket, which they lined with nice down. When the reeds swayed in the wind, the nest swayed too, but that did not matter, for it was bound fast and reed-warblers are never seasick.

It took them eight days to build it; and they were awfully happy together all the time. They sang, so that they could be heard right across the pond; and, in the evening, when they were tired, they hopped about in the reeds and smiled upon each other or peeped at their neighbours on either side and opposite.

"There's the water-lily shooting up through the water," said little Mrs. Reed-Warbler. "I remember her well; she is so stately and so beautiful."

"There is the green frog sitting on the edge," said he. "He catches flies and grubs, just as I do, but there are enough here for both of us, so we shan't fall out."

"Look at the cray-fish crawling down below!" cried she. "And there's the roach ... and the perch ... and oh, look, there's quite a green wood at the bottom of the pond and fish swimming between the branches and caddis-grubs rocking in their cases!.."

"Yes, it's charming here," he said, in a tone as though it all belonged to him.

"And they all look so nice," she said, "and so happy. I feel sure they are all newly married like ourselves."

"Of course," said the reed-warbler. "Every one gets married in the spring. But I don't believe there's anybody in the wide world as happy as we are."

And then he stretched out his neck and sang, for all to hear:

There's not in the wide world a sweetheart like mine,

So fair, so fine,
And no singer on earth sings better!
Let others go worship whomever they will,
I'm true to my beautiful sweetheart still
And shall never, forget her.

"And so you're only going to love me for the summer?" she said.

"That's just a way of talking," said he.

CHAPTER II

A Man of The World

Little Mrs. Reed-Warbler heaved five deep sighs and, at each sigh, she laid an egg. Then she sat down on the eggs and sighed again.

And the reeds swayed in the balmy wind and the nest swayed and the eggs swayed that lay in the nest and the dear little brown bird that sat on the eggs. Even the husband swayed. For, when one rush sways, the other sways too; and he was sitting on one just beside the nest.

"You're no worse off than others, darling," he said. "Look down into the water and see for yourself."

"I can see nothing," she said sadly.

"Fiddlesticks!" said the reed-warbler. "You can peep over for a minute, if you sit down again at once."

And so she peeped over.

It was certainly very busy down below.

The pond-snail was swimming with her pointed shell on her back. She stood right on her head in the water and made a boat of her broad foot, which lay level with the surface of the pond and supported the whole fabric. Then she stretched out her foot and the boat was gone and she went down to the bottom and stuck a whole heap of slimy eggs to the stalk of a water-lily.

The pike came and laid an egg in a water-milfoil bush. The carp did the same; and the perch hung a nice nest of eggs in between the reeds where the warblers had built their nest. The frog brought her eggs, the stickleback had almost finished his nest and hundreds of animals that were so small that one could hardly see them ran about and made ready for their young ones.

Just then, the eel put his head up out of the mud:

"If you will permit me, madam ... I have seen a bit of the world myself ..."

Mrs. Reed-Warbler gave a faint scream.

"I can't stand that person," she said to her husband. "He's so like the adder, who ate my little sister last year, when she fell to the ground as she was learning to fly. He has the same offensive manners and is just as slippery."

"Oh," said the eel, "it's a great misfortune for me if I meet with your disapproval, madam, on that account. And it's quite unjust. I am only a fish and not the slightest relation to the adder, who took that little liberty with your sister, madam. We may have just a superficial resemblance, in figure and movement: one has to wriggle and twist. But I am really much more slippery. My name, for that matter, is Eel ... at your service."

"My wife is hatching her eggs," said the reed-warbler. "She can't stand much excitement."

"Thank you for telling me, Mr. Reed-Warbler," said the eel. "I did not mean to intrude ... But as I have travelled considerably myself, like you and your good lady, I thought I might venture to address you, in the hope that we may hold the same liberal opinions concerning the petty affairs of the pond."

"So you are a traveller. Can you fly?" asked the reed-warbler.

"Not exactly," said the eel. "I can't fly. But I can wriggle and twist. I can get over a good stretch of country, which is more than most fish are able to say. I feel grand in the damp grass; and give me the most ordinary ditch and you'll never hear me complain. I come straight from the sea, you know. And, when I've eaten myself fat here, I shall go back to the sea again."

"That's saying a good deal," said the reed-warbler.

"Yes," said the eel, modestly. "And just because I have seen something of the world, all this fuss about children in the pond here strikes me as a bit absurd."

"You're talking rather thoughtlessly, my good Eel," said the reed-warbler. "I can see you have neither wife nor children."

"Oh," said the eel, making a fine flourish with his tail, "that depends on how you look at it! Last year, I brought about a million eels into the world."

"Goodness gracious me!" said Mrs. Reed-Warbler.

"Aren't you exaggerating?" asked her husband, who was equally impressed, but did not wish to show it.

"Possibly," replied the eel. "That's easily done, with such large figures. But it's of no consequence. You can divide it by two, if that eases your conscience."

"And what about your own conscience, as the father of such an enormous progeny?"

"I never really consulted it," said the eel.

"And how's your wife?" asked little Mrs. Reed-Warbler.

"Can't say. I never saw her."

"You never saw your wife?"

"No, madam. Nor my children either."

"Indeed, you do your friends an injustice," said the reed-warbler. "For, only a moment ago, with my own eyes I saw how the stickleback built a nest down there for his children."

"The stickleback!" said the eel, with a sneer. "I can't stand sticklebacks: they prick me so horribly in the neck. But that has nothing to do with the case. What is a stickleback, I ask you? I remember once when I was caught and about to be skinned. I was very small at the time and the cook, who was going to put a knife into me, said 'No bigger than a stickleback!'"

"Were you caught? Were you about to be skinned?" asked the reed-warbler. "How on earth did you escape?"

"I slipped away from the cook," replied the eel. "Thanks to my slipperiness, which your good lady disliked. Then I got into the sink ... out through the gutter, the gutter-pipe, the ditch and so on. One has to wriggle and twist."

"You may well say that!" said the reed-warbler.

"One goes through a bit of everything, you see," said the eel. "But to return to what we were saying, take us eels, for instance. We fling our young into the sea and, for the rest, leave them to their own resources. Like men of the world that we are, we know what life is worth and therefore we fling them out wholesale, by the million, as I said just now: I beg pardon, by the half-million; I don't want to offend your love of accuracy. In this way, the children learn to shift for themselves at once. I was brought up in this way myself and learnt to wriggle and twist."

"I can't understand it," said Mrs. Reed-Warbler.

"Very sorry," said the eel. "Perhaps my conversation is rather too much for a lady who is sitting on her eggs."

"I think children are the sweetest things in the world," she said. "One can't help being fond of them, whether they're one's own or another's."

"The ladies are always right," said the eel, eating a couple of caddis-grubs and a little worm. "But am I mistaken, or did I see you eat a grub just now, madam, which your husband brought you?"

"A grub...?"

"Yes ... isn't that a child too?"

"I shall faint in a minute," said Mrs. Reed-Warbler; and she did.

"Wriggle and twist!" said the eel; and off he went.

The reed-warbler brought his wife back to life with three fat flies, seven sweet songs and a jog on her neck.

"You ought to appreciate me, at any rate!" he said, when she was sufficiently recovered for him to speak to her. "The way I feed you and sing to you! Think what other husbands are like."

"So I do," she replied.

CHAPTER III

A Mother

Time passed and all respectable bird-wives were sitting on their eggs and wearing a serious look in their eyes, while their husbands went hunting for flies or sang to them.

It was the same at the Reed-Warblers'. But there was no denying that the husband was sometimes a little tired and cross. Then he would reflect upon the easy time which the Eel husband had and the Frog husband and the Perch husband and all the others.

One evening he sat in the nest and sang:
Now spring is here, to God all praise!

Though in hard work I'm up to the eyes.
For billing and cooing I'd just seven days;
Now I've to flutter about after flies
For my little wife, who our eggs is hatching;
And don't those flies just take some catching!
And each chick will want food for the good of its voice.
Aha, I have every right to rejoice!

"If you're tired of it, why did you do it?" said little Mrs. Reed-Warbler. "You took pains enough to curry favour with me at first. How smart you used to look. I believe you're already beginning to lose your colouring."

"It's weary work," he said. "When a fellow has to go after flies like this, in all weathers, his wedding-finery soon wears out."

"I don't think you're singing as nicely as you did," said she.

"Really? Well, I can just as easily stop. It's for your sake that I pipe my tune. Besides, you can see for yourself that I'm only joking. I'm tremendously glad of the children. It will be an honour and a pleasure to me to stuff them till they burst. Perhaps we might have been satisfied with three."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" she said.

"So I am, dear, because of the other two. But, as I don't know which two those are, it makes no difference."

She put on a very serious face. But he caught a fat fly that was passing, popped it into her mouth and struck up so pretty a trill that she fell quite in love with him again.

At that moment a deep sigh rose from the water under the bank.

"That came from a mother," said Mrs. Reed-Warbler. "I could hear that plainly."

"That's what it did," said a hoarse voice.

The Reed-Warblers peeped down and beheld a cray-fish, who sat in the mud staring with her stalked eyes.

"Dear me, is that you, Goody Cray-Fish?" said Mrs. Reed-Warbler.

"It is indeed, dear madam," said the cray-fish. "It's myself and no other. I was just sitting down here in my dirt listening to what the quality were saying. Heavens, what a good time a fine lady like you enjoys, compared with another!"

"Every one has his burden," said Mrs. Reed-Warbler. "Believe me, it's no joke sitting here and perspiring."

The cray-fish crossed her eyes and folded her antennæ.

"Yes, you may well talk," said she. "How long does it last with you? Four or five weeks, I should say. But I have to go for six months with mine."

"Goodness gracious! But then you can move about."

"Oh," said Goody, "moving is always a rather slow matter for a cray-fish. And then you have only five eggs, ma'am, but I have two hundred."

"Dear me!" said the reed-warbler. "Then your poor husband has to slave to provide food for that enormous family."

"He? The monster!" replied the cray-fish. "He knows too much for that. I haven't so much as seen him since the wedding."

"Then you must have a huge, big nest for all those eggs," said the wife.

"It's easy to see that you don't know poor folks' circumstance, dear madam," said the cray-fish. "People of our class can't afford nests. No, I just have to drag the eggs about with me as best I may."

"Where are they, then, Goody Cray-Fish?"

"I carry them on my hind legs, lady. I have ten little hind legs, you see, besides my eight proper legs and my claws, which are very necessary to bite one's way through this wicked world with. And on each of my hind legs there is a heap of twenty eggs. That makes two hundred in all. I'll show them to you, if you like. The eggs are worth looking at."

So saying, the cray-fish turned over on her back and stuck out her tail as far as she could. And there the eggs were, just as she had said, on ten little back legs.

"That comes of having too many hind-legs," said the reed-warbler.

"For shame! To poke fun at the poor woman!" said his wife.

But the cray-fish slowly turned round again and said, quietly:

"Gentlemen are always so witty. We women understand one another better. And I shouldn't so much mind about the eggs, if it wasn't that one can't change one's clothes."

"Change your clothes?" asked Mrs. Reed-Warbler.

"Yes, ma'am ... you change yours too, from time to time, I know. I have seen the feathers with my own eyes, floating on the water. And it goes so easily and quickly: a feather here, a feather there and it's done. But other people, who wear a stiff shirt, have to take it all off at once. And I can't do that, you see, as long as I am carrying the eggs about. Therefore, since I have been married, I change only once a year. Now one always grows a bit stouter, even though one is but a common woman; and so I feel pretty uncomfortable sometimes, I assure you."

Mrs. Reed-Warbler was greatly touched; and her husband began to sing, for he was afraid lest all this sadness should make the eggs melancholy and spoil the children's voices.

But, at that moment, the cray-fish screamed and struck out with her claws and carried on like a mad woman.

"Look!.. Ma'am ... do look!.. There comes the monster!"

Mrs. Reed-Warbler leant so far over the edge of the nest that she would have plumped into the pond if her husband had not given her a good shove. But he had no time to scold her, for he was curious himself. They both stared down into the water.

And there, as she had said, came Goody Cray-Fish's husband slowly creeping up to her backwards.

"Good-day, mother," he said. "I'm going to change."

"Oh, are you?" she screamed. "Yes, that's just like you. You can run and change at any moment while your poor lawfully-wedded wife has to go about in her old clothes. You would do better to think of me and the children."

"Why should I, mother?" he replied, calmly. "What good would it do if I thought of you? And what need have I to meddle with women's work? What must be must be. Hold your tongue now, while it lasts, for this is no joke!"

Then the reed-warblers saw how he raised himself on his tail and split across the middle of his back. Then he bent and twisted and pulled off his coat over his head.

"That's that," he said, puffing and blowing. "Now for the trousers!"

Mrs. Reed-Warbler drew back her head, but immediately peeped down again. And the cray-fish stretched and wriggled until, with a one, two, three, the shell of his tail was shed as well.

Now he was quite naked and funny to look at and talked with a very faint voice:

"Good-bye, mother," he said. "Give the young ones my love, for they will be gone, I daresay, before I come back again. I am retiring for ten days or so and shall be at home to nobody."

"You monster!" yelled Goody. "Just look at him ... now he'll creep into his hole and lie there idle. In ten days' time he'll come out again, in brand-new clothes, looking most awfully arrogant." She wrung her claws and glared terribly with her stalked eyes. "I should really like to crawl into the hole after him and bite him to death," she continued. "His life isn't worth twopence in his present condition. But I loved him once. And one is and remains just a silly woman."

"Yes, Goody Cray-Fish, and then you have the children," said little Mrs. Reed-Warbler.

"That's true," she replied. "And, indeed, they are my only comfort. The dear little things, I feel as if I would love to eat them. You should just see, ma'am, how they hang on to my skirts during the first week. They are so fond of me that they simply can't leave me."

"How nice that is!" said Mrs. Reed-Warbler.

"Yes. And afterwards I have no trouble with them at all. You may believe me or not, as you please, dear lady, but, as soon as they are a week old, they go into the world and look after themselves. It's in their blood. It has never been known in the pond for a twelve-day-old cray-fish to be a burden on his family. And then you're done with them; and that may be rather sad, but, of course, it's a relief as well: two hundred children like that, in a small household! But you shall see them, ma'am, when they come ... I really have to control myself in order not to eat them, they're such dears!"

"Well, I'll tell you something, Goody Cray-Fish," said Mrs. Reed-Warbler. "When my young ones are out, you shall have the shells."

"Oh, how good of you, ma'am!" said the cray-fish. "You could not possibly do me a greater kindness. For I promise you I shall eat them. I eat as much chalk as I can get hold of against the time when I change my things, for that puts starch into the new shirt. But then, also, you must really promise me, ma'am, to look at my young ones. They are so sweet that, goodness knows, I should like to eat them..."

At that moment, a large carp appeared in the water, with a sad, weary face:

"You do eat them," he said.

"Oh!" yelled Goody, and went backwards into her hole and showed herself no more.

But Mrs. Reed-Warbler fainted on her five eggs and the carp swam on with his sad, weary face.

CHAPTER IV

The Water-Spider

Little Mrs. Reed-Warbler was not feeling very well.

She was nervous and tired from sitting on the eggs and she had just a touch of fever. She could not sleep at night, or else she dreamt of the cray-fish and the carp and the eel and screamed so loud that her husband nearly fell into the pond with fright.

"I wish we had gone somewhere else," she said. "Obviously, there's none but common people in this pond. Just think how upset I was about Goody Cray-Fish. Do you really believe she eats her children?"

Before he could reply, the eel stuck his head out of the mud and made his bow:

"Absolutely, madam," he said, "ab-so-lutely. That is to say, if she can get hold of them. They decamp as soon as they can, for they have an inkling, you know, of what's awaiting them. Children are cleverer than people think."

"But that's terrible," said Mrs. Reed-Warbler.

"Oh, well," said the eel, "one eats so many things from year's end to year's end! I don't condemn her for that. But, I admit, it doesn't look well amid all that show of affection... Hullo, there's the pike!.. Forgive me for retiring in the middle of this interesting conversation."

He was off.

And the pike appeared among the reeds with wide-open mouth and rows of sharp teeth and angry eyes.

"Oof!" said Mrs. Reed-Warbler.

"Come down here and I'll eat you," said the pike, grinning with all his teeth.

"Please keep to your own element," said Mrs. Reed-Warbler, indignantly.

"I eat everything," said the pike, "ev-e-ry-thing. I smell eel, I smell cray-fish, I smell carp. Where are they? Tell me at once, or I'll break your reed with one blow of my tail!"

The reed-warblers were silent for sheer terror. And the pike struck out with his tail and swam away. The blow was so powerful that the reeds sighed and swayed and the birds flew up with startled screams. But the reeds held and the nest remained where it was. Mrs. Reed-Warbler settled down again and her husband began to sing, so that no one should see how frightened he had been. Then she said:

"A nice place this!"

"You take things too much to heart," said he. "Life is the same everywhere; and we must be satisfied as long as we can get on well together. I am very much afraid that all this excitement will hurt the children's voices and then they will disgrace us at the autumn concert. Pull yourself together and control yourself!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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