

MORTIMER'S LESSON

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ONCE upon a time there were four little woodpeckers named Peckie, Chips, Margo, and Mortimer. They lived with their mother and father in a comfortable big hole in an old, old oak tree. Peckie, Chips, and Margo were very good little woodpeckers. They brought home excellent report cards from flying school, ate their worms with perfect manners, and learned to drill neat round holes without leaving too much of a sawdust mess.

But Mortimer was a problem. He never paid attention in flying school and was always out of formation — gliding when he should have been flapping, zooming up when he should have been zooming down, and forever getting lost on long-distance flights. His manners were deplorable. And the holes he drilled — well, you should have seen them! They were disgracefully sloppy and there was always an untidy heap of bark and sawdust on the ground when he finished. Once Mrs. Gopher, whose home was right under the tree where Mortimer was drilling, had a fist-full of sawdust drop right into her front hall. You can be sure she told Mother Woodpecker what she thought about *that* in no uncertain terms.

One day Mother Woodpecker had to go to the store. Before she left, she called the children together and said, "While I am gone, you may peck on the oak tree, you may peck on the elm tree, and you may

peck on the maple tree. But you must not peck on the telephone poles. Telephone poles belong to the people and not to the forest, and we must be careful not to disturb them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," said Peckie.

"Yes, Mother," said Chips.

"Yes, Mother," said Margo.

"Yeah," said Mortimer.

Mother Woodpecker, who had already raised her wings to fly off, put them down and turned back to Mortimer. "What was that?" she asked.

"Yes, Mother," said Mortimer reluctantly.

"That's better," said Mother Woodpecker. "And I hope, Mortimer, that just this once I can leave you and come back to find that you have not gotten into any trouble."

Mortimer shrugged his shoulders and said nothing, and Mother Woodpecker, with an unhappy look on her face, flew away.

"Really, Mortimer," said Peckie, who was the kindest-hearted of the little woodpeckers and very worried about how naughty Mortimer was getting to be, "you should try to be more polite to Mother. Don't you see how sad she is when you don't behave?"

"Aw, fudge," said Mortimer, and sitting down at the door to the hole he began to sulk.

"Come on," said Chips. "Let's go back to that elm tree and see if we can't find some more grubs. I'm starved."

Peckie, Chips, and Margo raced each other to the elm tree, and Mortimer, still sulking, flew along slowly behind. Soon the little woodpeckers, even

Mortimer, were busy pecking away. They found a lot of grubs, and after a while even Chips wasn't hungry any more.

"I'm going to practice pecking designs on the oak tree," said Margo, who was the most artistic of the little woodpeckers, and I am sorry to say, a little vain.

"I'll keep you company," said Peckie. "Maybe I can finish that peony-petal handkerchief I'm making for Mother."

"Well," said Chips, "I'm going to see if Cal Cardinal is home. Maybe we can play some tennis. I saw a lot of acorns lying around that looked as though they might bounce pretty well. Coming, Mort?"

"Naw," said Mortimer, pulling off some of the elm tree's bark with his beak. The elm tree shook its branch warningly and Mortimer stopped.

"What *are* you going to do?" asked Chips.

"I dunno," said Mortimer, pouting.

"Well, I'm going. You know where to find us if you want to play." With that, Chips, Peckie, and Margo flew off, and Mortimer was left alone on the branch.

Mortimer sat down and wondered what to do. There was nothing he really wanted to do except maybe fly down to the glen and strip the bark off the birch tree. That was such fun because the bark came off so easily in lovely long strips. But the last time he had done that the leader of the elves who lived there had complained to Mother Woodpecker and he had gotten into plenty of trouble.

Seems like people were *always* complaining about

him to Mother Woodpecker. Why couldn't they leave a guy alone!!

Mortimer flew around aimlessly. He didn't feel like playing with anyone in particular, and he certainly didn't feel like practicing either his gliding or his hole-drilling. He wasn't hungry and didn't want to go hunting for grubs. What he really wanted was to do something *different*.

Without thinking about where he was going, Mortimer flew down to the road where the telephone poles were. His cousin Bertram had once drilled a very respectable hole in a telephone pole before *he* had gotten caught and into trouble. Bertam said he'd do it again if he had a chance, though. There was something unusually tasty about telephone poles, he said, even though they didn't seem to have any insects in them.

Mortimer perched on top of the first telephone pole he came to and looked down at it. It was really quite long. What possible harm could there be in drilling just one tiny hole in it, up here near the top where no one could see? He'd love to be able to tell Bertram he had done it too.

Mortimer looked around. Almost no one was in sight except Mrs. Rabbit hurrying by with her shopping basket, and she was much too busy to notice what he was doing. Just one little taste, just to see — and then he'd go play tennis with Chips and Cal and no one would ever know.

All right — he'd do it! Nothing could possibly happen.

Mortimer looked around quickly one more time

and then got to work. He drilled quickly through the outside of the pole, and certainly didn't like the taste of *that*. Ugh! What in the world did humans put on these things to make them taste so sour? Certainly nothing *grew* tasting like that.

Bertram was nuts. These things don't taste good — they taste terrible.

Mortimer was about to stop in disgust when he got the first taste of something different — something sweet and very unusual. A little bit like the sap of the dogwood tree and the maple tree combined. Mortimer drilled deeper and deeper. Bertram, it seemed, was right after all. Once you got through that outside section, here was a real treat.

Boy, this was good! Mortimer drilled and drilled, savoring the delicious flavor. He would have to tell his brother and sisters about this. Even Peckie, who never did *anything* wrong, would have to try it.

Mortimer kept on drilling. Soon the tiny hole which he was going to make had turned into an enormous, and very messy, gap in the pole. He was not being the least bit cautious now, and forgot everything except to concentrate on getting more and more tasty morsels. Sawdust was flying everywhere, and anyone coming down the road couldn't help but notice the big pile of it that was accumulating on the ground.

By now Mortimer had his head deep within the pole, and was still drilling away. Suddenly, as he stopped for breath, he heard what sounded like a terrible roar from the ground below. Mortimer was at once very scared, and all the feathers rose on his back. He pulled his head back carefully out of the

hole and looked down. He saw a car parked next to the telephone pole and standing by it, his fists shaking upwards toward Mortimer, was the Man from the Telephone Company!

He was saying something — or rather, shouting it. He was really too far down for Mortimer to hear exactly what it was — and maybe that's just as well — but Mortimer knew that he was very angry. He



shook his fists and shouted a bit more, then turned quickly, jumped into his car, slammed the door and drove off in such a hurry that it scattered all the sawdust everywhere.

Mortimer sat on top of the pole, feeling much too weak even to fly. He knew that the Man from the Telephone Company was going to tell his parents, and that this trouble was probably going to be the biggest he had ever gotten into. He certainly didn't want to go on drilling the hole now — in fact, he was getting a stomach ache!

Oh dear, what was he going to do? He wished he could just fly away and never come back, but he felt too weak from fright and too sick from all that

telephone pole he had eaten even to fly to the nearest tree. Two big tears ran down his face, his feathers drooped, and his wings hung down low at his sides. Then he began to feel dizzy, and to his horror found that he was having a terrible time keeping his balance on top of the pole. Such a thing had never happened to him before.

He swayed dangerously back and forth a few times and knew he was going to fall if he didn't do something. And there was only one thing to do — the worst possible thing that could happen to a woodpecker. He would have to go down to the ground and stay there till he felt better. Mortimer swallowed, got together all the strength he could muster, lifted his wings with a great effort and, closing his eyes, pushed himself off from the top of the pole and glided down to the ground.

He landed right in the sawdust and stayed where he was. Such a bedraggled woodpecker you have never seen! He was covered with sawdust and made no attempt to shake it out of his wings. His feathers looked as though he had been fighting a severe wind-storm. His face was tear-stained — in fact, he was *still* crying — and even his beak drooped.

Mortimer was glad that there was very little traffic on the road right now. He had some idea of how terrible he looked, and knew how much worse he felt, and didn't want anyone to see him in such a predicament. He was too miserable to do anything more than put his head under his wing and try to believe that he was hidden.

And there he was, in the same position and feeling,

if anything, even worse, when half an hour later he heard a car drive up and stop. He heard a door open, and voices, but he still didn't take his head out from under his wing. Then the sound of a familiar voice made his heart almost completely stop beating.

He slowly took his head out from under his wing and opened his eyes. There, looking down at him, were the Man from the Telephone Company and *Father* Woodpecker. Mortimer realized right away what had happened. The Man from the Telephone Company had been so angry that he had gone straight to *Father* Woodpecker's office and told him about the hole that Mortimer had made. And nothing made *Father* Woodpecker so annoyed as being interrupted at his work. Now he was really in for it!

"Well, young man, what have you to say for yourself?" *Father* Woodpecker looked down at him sternly, showing not the slightest sympathy for Mortimer's misery.

Mortimer swallowed and said nothing. Tears started up in his eyes again.

"Did you make that hole and this mess of sawdust?" *Father* Woodpecker continued mercilessly.

Mortimer swallowed again and nodded his head.

"Weren't you told to leave the telephone poles alone?"

Mortimer nodded again, and tried to rub the tears out of his eyes with his wing.

"What do you intent to do about it?"

"I don't know," whispered Mortimer.

"You don't know," echoed *Father* Woodpecker.

"Can you tell me who should know if you don't?"

Mortimer looked miserable and said nothing.

Father Woodpecker turned to the Man from the Telephone Company. "I think he can start to work right now. It's still fairly early in the day and he can have that hole repaired before dark."

"Fine," said the Man from the Telephone Company. "I have all the glue and extra pieces of wood right here in the car."

The two of them turned to go back to the car. "Come along, Mortimer," said Father Woodpecker, looking back over his shoulder.

"B-B-B-But — " stammered Mortimer.

"Come *along*," said Father in a no-nonsense tone of voice. "The Man from the Telephone Company is going to show you what to do and then get back to his work. And I certainly have to get back to mine."

"But my stomach hurts," wailed Mortimer.

"Mortimer," said Father Woodpecker, turning completely around and putting his wings on his hips. "I'm sure your stomach hurts. I'm also sure that your head hurts, your beak hurts, and your feathers hurt. And I hope that your conscience hurts. And all of that makes absolutely no difference. You should have thought of that before you disobeyed your mother. I'm not going to discuss it any further. Come along now and don't waste any more of our time."

So poor Mortimer, weak and sick and miserable as he was, had no choice but to limp along behind Father and the Man from the Telephone Company. He wondered how he could be expected to repair the hole —

how *did* one repair a hole, anyway? All he had ever done was drill them. And how could he possibly work at the top of the pole? He was so dizzy he couldn't even fly up there, let alone stay up there. Oh why, oh why, just once, hadn't he listened to his mother?

When they got to the car, the Man from the Telephone Company took some small pieces of wood and something in a bottle called "Glue" out of the car. Mortimer had never seen glue before and had no idea what it was. The Man from the Telephone Company showed him how to apply the glue to two pieces of wood and hold them together until they seemed to stick.

"This is how you will have to repair the hole," he said. "Find pieces of wood that fit, glue them and hold them together until they stick, and then insert them into the hole. If the wood does not fit, you will have to cut it down to size with your beak. But I'm sure you can do that very well! Any questions?"

Questions! Mortimer had one big question, which was, "How can I do that?" And another big question which was, "Aren't you going to stay here and help me?" But he didn't ask either of them. He just looked down at the ground and said nothing, because deep down inside, he already knew the answers.

"Well, then, since he has no questions, I guess we can leave," said Father Woodpecker to the Man from the Telephone Company. "If you are going past my office I would appreciate a ride back."

"Glad to take you," said the Man. "Hop in."

Father Woodpecker began to get into the car, then turned again to Mortimer. "Incidentally, when you are finished with the hole, clean up all this mess on the ground. No need to litter up the whole countryside. I will pick you up here after work, and I will expect to see your work finished. Neatly."

Father Woodpecker and the Man got into the car and drove off, leaving Mortimer staring sadly after them. He looked at the wood, the glue, and the sawdust. Then he looked up at the hole and felt dizzy all over again. His stomach hurt even harder. He sat down and began to cry. He felt alone and miserable and that nobody cared at all about what happened to him. He had never been so unhappy and helpless in his life. He wished his mother would come by, or his brother and sisters. They would at least be sympathetic. Peckie, he knew, would even do everything she could to help him repair the hole.

But no one came, and Mortimer cried for a long time. Finally, though, he stopped and looked up again. The sun had risen high in the heavens, and he knew it was getting close to noon. He had better, he guessed, at least get started with the work, though he was sure he would never finish it.

Mortimer put some pieces of wood in his beak and flew to the top of the pole with them. That is, he *got* to the top of the pole. You certainly wouldn't call the flopping and fluttering around that Mortimer did real *flying*. But he got there and, dizzy as he was, he stayed there long enough to deposit the wood in the hole. Then he went back down for the glue and brought it up.

Then Mortimer started to work. None of the wood seemed to fit with any of the rest of the wood, and when he tried to cut a piece down to size he usually **just managed** to split it so it was no good at all. When he did manage to get two pieces that seemed to go together and tried to glue them, he also got glue all over his wings and even his feet.

And he felt *awful*. He was glad that he had to work inside the hole, at least at the start, because if he were just standing on the rim he was so dizzy that he would have fallen right down. And his stomach hurt. And his throat was getting parched from all the sawdust he was raising and even from the glue which was gradually getting all over everything in the hole.

Mortimer worked and worked and worked. But try as he would — and I must say, he *did* try — he seemed to be doing nothing but making matters worse. The inside of the hole was layered with a sticky mass of glue, sawdust, broken bits of wood, and more glue. Twice Mortimer's feet got stuck in the glue so badly that it was all he could do to get them out.

The sun sank lower and lower in the heavens and it was getting to be late afternoon. Mortimer had lost all track of time but he knew he wouldn't have anything finished by the time his father returned, and soon new hot tears were mixing with the glue which was now even all over his face.

Suddenly he heard some sounds and felt the pole vibrating just a little bit. He turned around to see the face of the Man from the Telephone Company, who had climbed up the rungs on the side of the pole,

peering into the hole, and Father Woodpecker standing on the rim of the hole beside him.

"Well, Mortimer, I see you haven't finished," said Father.

"No, Sir," mumbled Mortimer miserably.

"Have you made a good start?" inquired Father.

"No, Sir," repeated Mortimer.

"No, I think not. I dare say this hole looks worse now than when you started. And *you* don't look particularly impressive either," Father said, but in a kinder tone than he had used that morning.

He turned to the Man from the Telephone Company. "I'm afraid my son is not going to be able to do this work. So far he has not learned much about doing constructive things — only destructive things. I guess I'll have to pay you for the repair job."

Mortimer listened as Father and the Man talked about the price of fixing the hole, and how best to undo the sticky mess than Mortimer had made. He felt more crushed and insignificant than ever in his life. What had Father said? "He has not learned much about doing constructive things — only destructive things." Destructive! That is what he was and had been all along. Why hadn't he ever realized that before? Everything he did lately seemed to be wrong or disobedient or — destructive!

No wonder he was always in trouble. He thought of Peckie and how *constructive* she was. She was always thinking about making other people happy and being good to everyone. He wished that he could be like that. And he wished that he were out of that hole, and cleaned up, and that his father weren't

angry with him any more. And he wished more than anything that he had played tennis that morning the way Chips had wanted him to. Then he wouldn't have gotten into this mess.

Father and the Man finished their conversation, and Father turned to Mortimer. "All right, son, let's go. I'm going to take you to the birdbath in Mrs. Webster's garden and see if we can't get you cleaned up. It would break your mother's heart to see you looking like this."

Mortimer got up and went slowly to his father's side. Then he suddenly turned to the Man from the Telephone Company. "I'm sorry I was so bad," he said, "I'm sorry I made the hole and I'm sorry I couldn't fix it. I don't know how much Father has to pay, but I will ask him to take it out of my allowance. And I promise to try not to be destructive any more."

Then the Man from the Telephone Company did a surprising thing. He extended his hand and shook hands with Mortimer's wing — sticky as it was. "That's all right, son. I know what it's like to be a boy and do things that get you into trouble. I have a few boys of my own. The main thing is that you learn your lessons — and I think that you have this time."

"You have a fine lad here, Mr. Woodpecker," he continued, turning to Father. "It was very thoughtful of him to apologize without being asked and to offer to pay for the damage himself. I'll tell you what I'd like to do, if it's all right with you and Mortimer. Instead of asking him to pay, I'd like to have him

help me when I repair the hole. That way he'll learn to do it properly and I'll have his assistance in bringing things up here instead of having to climb up and down all the time."

Father looked at Mortimer, and it seemed to Mortimer that there was a new kind of light in his eyes — almost as though he were even a bit proud of him. "What do you say to that, Son?" he asked.

"I'd like to help," said Mortimer. "I *would* like to learn how to fix a hole, and if I can't do anything else I can certainly fly up and down the sides of that pole for him."

"Good, then it's settled," said the Man. "Will you start tomorrow?"

"Sure," said Mortimer.

"Thank you very much," said Father, and he and the Man from the Telephone Company shook hands.

"Let's go, Mortimer," said Father. "There is a lot of washing up to do before we got home."

Mortimer flew along after Father and found, to his surprise, that he was flying much more steadily than before, except, of course, that all the glue sticking to his feathers made things a bit difficult. But he surely felt lighter inside, and strangely, his stomach, head, and feathers had all stopped hurting.

When they got to the birdbath, Father went to work scrubbing Mortimer. It wasn't easy, but by using pussy willows as sponges, and some thistles to remove the worst of the glue, he got it off. The thistles *did* hurt, but that really couldn't be helped. When they were finished Father was rather distressed at the mess in the birdbath, but he knew that

Mr. Webster refilled it each night with fresh water from the hose so that it would be clean the next day. (Father was sure, however, that Mr. Webster was going to be mighty puzzled about how all that glue got into his birdbath!)

As they flew home, even though he found himself quite tired and hungry, Mortimer felt better than he had in a long time. He kept thinking about how the Man from the Telephone Company had called him a "fine lad." Nobody had ever said anything like that about him — it was usually "Oh, what a naughty boy."

"Father," he said suddenly. "Would it be alright if I went to summer flying school after vacation starts? I'd really like to learn to fly in formation on those long distance flights, and I think I'd do a better job if I had another chance."

Father Woodpecker looked at Mortimer with some surprise and smiled. "Why, yes, Mortimer. That would be a fine idea. Mother and I have been quite worried about how you were going to catch up with your class in fall. This way, I think you'll manage."

As they got near home, Chips flew out to meet them. "You should have been with us, Mort," he said. "We had a great game."

"Next time I sure will go with you," said Mortimer. "But today I had something else to do. I had to learn something about being constructive — and from now on, that's what I'm going to be."

As they went inside, Father Woodpecker put his wing affectionately on Mortimer's shoulder. "Fine lad," he said.