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THE CRAFTY CHIPMUNK

by

Irene Finley

Photo by M.F.

Last spring, something was raiding the bird houses near our study door and breaking up the homes. A Parkman wren couple had taken a little house tacked to the big maple tree just outside the window. We hadn't had a housewren in the yard for ~~eight or ten years~~ ^{several years}, so we were elated when this pair arrived and started housekeeping. In earlier years, the house wrens made up the biggest group of doorway dwellers. They and the violet-green swallows were always vying for the bird houses, and there were quite some scraps before they all got settled. When the first broods were out, the wrens and swallows began to wrangle all over for they wanted to change apartments. Eventually peace came out of it because both were hustled along by the urge to lay their second clutch of eggs.

This pair of wrens had settled down to business and laid their eggs, when all of a sudden there seemed to be a lull in activity about the house. We hadn't seen either bird go in or out for some time, but we supposed the mother was sitting on the eggs. This went on for a couple of days, and then we investigated. The home had an air of being deserted, and sure enough when we opened it up there wasn't a soul at home nor any eggs in the nest. We couldn't account for it, as no other birds around the yard had disturbed it.

There were a number of robin nests being started in the shrubs and trees nearby. One was low down in a cedar near the tennis court, and there were four eggs in it. One day we surprised a chipmunk on the edge of the nest looking down at the eggs. The camera man lifted his black box and shot him. We thought this barrage might keep him from coming back. A couple of days later we heard the mother robin fairly raising the roof, dashing about, and shrieking as if the whole owl army was attacking. Coming up, we found the culprit had come back, this time in the bottom of the nest. His eyes were scared at discovery and all the commotion. He scurried away. The nest was empty.

We have had chipmunks in our woods and scurrying around in the swale below the chicken house for years. We knew they liked to dine on the chickens' grain.

But we had never suspected or seen them robbing the small birds' nests. The chipmunks, however, had never come up around the house, which was some distance away. Now, I thought to myself, the little black villains probably have been committing robberies right under our noses all the time. Perhaps that's where the eggs in the vireo's nest down the hill went, and the yellow warbler's eggs. We had laid these to the sneaking bluejay or the devilish red squirrel, that will swipe bird eggs right in front of your eyes. Now Chippy had been put on the black list.

Next thing, we looked out of the kitchen window and saw mamma chipmunk feasting in the bird tray with only the glass pane between us. The towhee, that lives with us all year around and depends upon the bread crumbs and nuts put daily in "his" tray, was whining piteously in the bushes. The nerve of it!

A few days later when walking under the grape-arbor, there was scampering in the leaves over our heads. Two young chipmunks were having the time of their lives chasing each other back and forth the full length of the thirty-foot trapeze. It was exhilarating to watch them. They were a revelation, too. The chippy den must be close by.

It was time for us to take a hand. This situation must have had something to do with the wrecking of the house wrens' home in the big maple. Each of us took a stand at the ends of the arbor and converged on the enemy. They evaded us easily at first, but they never thought of dropping down to the ground and making off. They stuck to the upper supports of the arbor, hid under the leaves, or camouflaged like the limbs themselves, squatted frozen to the end of a beam. After a while, getting jittery at the persistence of their besiegers, one of them raced clear back to the other end near the big maple - and popped into the wrens' deserted house!

We soon had both of them in prison, a box in the study - with all the comforts of home, of course. We had determined to educate their depraved morals before we gave them another chance at freedom.

For all that, the little chipmunk is an amusing acrobatic sprite and he has the imagination and courage of a mountain climber. When we, breathless and weary, plumped down on a snow bank at the tip of Mt. Rainier, over 14,000 feet up, who should come scurrying out of a little fumarole but a chipmunk. He greeted us

with effusion, climbing up a shoulder, peeking around a neck, then down to find a big pocket and dive in. And he found something - nuts. We sat and watched him fill his own pockets and disappear into the little, steamy hole to cache the treasure in some protected nook in his lofty, refrigerator home. As a companion, he had a little white-footed or deer mouse.

If Mt. Rainier had been the only snow-capped peak of our natural-history surprises, we might have thought it just one of those inexplicable mysteries of life. In scaling the top of Mt. Hood from the north side, we found the last 1200 feet was a snow chute where we jacked our feet up slowly, hanging to a long rope that had been anchored to the top by the guide. When we pulled up over the rim, whom should we meet face to face but a chipmunk, far more at home in this polar region than we were.