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THE WEAVER OF THE WEST. 4

I lay on my back under the OAK hemlock and marveled at the little mansion hanging in the glint of the warm June sun. Yes, a real bird mansion. Not open-roofed for impudent passersby to spy out family secrets; not set in a crotch so it could be tipped over or blown out, but carefully tied, cradle-like, to the drooping branches where it could be rocked by the playing breezes.

It's not a small matter to get a site suited for a Bush-tit's mansion. There should be one or two firm, upright twigs about which to weave the walls, a cross branch or two for rafters, and, if the house is to be modern, a little support for a porch or promenade. Contrary to our first maxim of architectural success, these little builders begin at the top and build down, first weaving the roof, leaving a round door, and then the hallway down to the main living-room. Each is the architect of his own home and each is a born master-builder.

Once I found a bush-tit's nest twenty inches long. The little weavers had started their home on a limb, and apparently it was not low enough to suit them, for they wove a fibrous strap ten inches long and then swung their gourd-shaped nest to that, so it hung in a tussock of willow leaves.

I happened to find the nest in the hemlock when they were putting in the first spider-web cross-beams and supports, for the roof and only six feet from the ground where I could see the whole process. In two days they had all the frame-work

up and started with the furnishings. Each midget would return every few minutes with something new. Down into the bag he would dive and it would shake and bulge for a moment, and then away he would dart for some more material. It took days to furnish the home. What downy draperies! What moss-covered walls, lichen-tinted in greens and browns! And most important of all, there was a thick bed of feathers, the resting-place of seven eggs of delicate whiteness.

You should have seen the way they put me in the same category with small boys, owls and sparrow-hawks. At first they didn't dare go near the nest for fear I'd see it. But mercy, a titmouse might make twenty resolutions not to trust you and the very next minute he'd throw himself and all his hopes right into your arms. There wasn't a fibre of suspicion in his little body, but his race had suffered so long that a good bit of caution had been embedded in his tiny brain. HeHer tried to keep the family secret, but the minute he trusted me he told all he knew.

I stood almost within reach of the nest. The little lover looked me over fromm all sides. Then as a final test, he popped right into the round door. He knew Hewould make a grab at him, nest and all. He was out in a twinkle. He looked amazed, for I didn't move. That was his test of friendship and from that time on he gave me his confidence.

What implicit trust they placed in me! Why, I don't

know. Had they forgotten the thousand wrongs the man-tribe had inflicted upon their kin? They had known me scarcely a week. I really believe the fluffy, gray bodies only remembered the kindnesses of our race, not the evils. Then, maybe, they had not forgotten the feathers I hung about on the limbs. But their happiness was my happiness. I rejoiced when the naked mites broke from the fragile shells. I had a private door all my own; a slit cut in the back wall where I could occasionally peek into the innermost depths, and then pin it carefully together again.

Anybody would fall in love with a bush-tit, even if he were not the chickadee's cousin. If it were not for his tail, the fluffy midget would be no larger than your thumb. He does not possess the aerial grace of a swallow, or even the nimbleness of a warbler. He bustles along in such a jerky way, he often looks as if he would topple heels over head and go whirling to the ground like a tailless kite. But he is a s skilled hunter. He skirmishes every tree and bush. He is not so successful a wing-shot as the flycatcher, but he has an eye that few birds can equal in stalking. He is no mean assistant of the gardener. He is not the kind that hoes a whole garden in a day, cutting off half the new tender shoots, but he's at work early and late and he's constantly at it.

I kept run of bush-tit affairs for several days after the young had hatched. The father fed the nestlings as often

as the mother. He generally paused a moment on the fern tops just below the nest, and by focusing our camera at this point, we got his picture. Sometimes he would stop at the door-way with a look of inquiry that said, "What do you think of that for a dinner?" Occasionally I've seen him swallow the morsel himself. He then justified his conscience to his own satisfaction by appearing too timid to enter the door.

All this was only the prologue to the real play. The real drama of life came when the youngsters were fluttering, full grown, vigorous, impatient to get one glimpse at the great outside from where the mother and father came so often with morsels.

One morning I saw a pair of bright eyes pushed right through the fibrous wall at my own observation door. An ambitious youngster had seen the wall open and close too often not to know there was a way. He had worked it open and it was just where he could sit and look longingly out.

The time had come; we had watched and waited two weeks for this day. The minute one nestling took the idea into his head to get out into the sunshine, it spread like contagion among the whole household. They came not in singles but in battallions! If we'd had a dozen eyes, we couldn't have kept track of them. We put several back on a twig beside the nest where they sat fluffing in the warm sunshine, enjoying their first outing and awaiting their turns to be fed rather impatiently.

Each titmouse had a tiny tinkle for a voice that was almost as hard to hear as the whisper of the flowers. I had to strain my ears to catch it more than a few feet away. One nestling flew over into the deep ferns, but I might have searched till dooms-day in vain for him. But the mother knew where he was the instant she returned. Another flew down into our camera box and I shut the lid to see if the mother would find him. She lit right on the box with a billsome morsel, and looked so uneasy that I had to let her in. It looked to me like wireless telegraphy. Maybe the birds had a system of long distance communication, even before man called through a trumpet, and ages before he ever shipped his thoughts by wire.

We were fairly over-run with titmice. They climbed into our camera and clung to our clothes as easily as a fly walks up a wall. They perched on our fingers and our heads and the parents lit wherever they found the children. Some fairy always told the mother where to go as she came again and again with green cut-worms that seemed as large as the head of one of her babies.

Birds differ only in size and dress to some people, but to one who has studied long and carefully at the homes of the different species, each feathered creature has a real character of its own. What does a cut-and-dried catalogued description mean? Name, Psaltriparus Minimus, (Bush-tit). Nest in hemlock tree six feet from the ground. Identity, positive. Eggs, seven, pure white. This is all right for a city directory, and is almost as interesting. Think of labelling your

ory, and is almost as interesting. Think of labelling your friends in this way! You don't know a bush-tit any more when you have found him with a field glass and identified him in your bird manual, than you do a man when you are introdused to him and shove his card in your pocket. Each bird has a real individuality. Each is different in character and disposition. I knew the bush-tit and chickadee were cousins before I ever heard of the Paradae family. They may not look much alike in dress, but aren't they identical in disposition? They are merry because they can't look on the dark side of things. Let to-morrow take care of itself; they live for to-day.

I've watched the young birds of many spacies where the parents care for them a week or so, after they had left the nest till they were able to hunt a living for themselves, then the family scatters and loses identity inthe great world of feathers. Not so with the bush-tits: they hunt, feed and sleep together, winter as well as summer. Such little talkers! They titter as much as they hunt and eat, and that is all day long. When you meet them in the woodland, it sounds as if the Linnaean bells were clinking a fairy's wedding march and these were the woodland elfins of the bridal train.

I found the little family in the hemlock tree even more interesting after they all learned to fly. Several times I saw them about the patch of woods. One day I stood watching the flock of midgets in an alder copse. Each youngster had

learned to keep up a constant "Tscre-e! Tscre-e! Tsit! Tscre-e!" as id always saying something, but I do not think this gossip is as much for the sake of the conversation as merely to keep the whole flock constantly together. While I was watching, three or four of the little fellows were within a few feet of me. One of the parents in the next tree began a shrill, quavering whistle, and instantly it was taken up by every one of the band. The two tiny birds near me, as well as every one of the others, froze to their perches. Had I not known, I couldn't have told just where the whistle was coming from, it sounded so scattering, like the elusive grating call of the cicada. Then I saw a hawk sweeping slowly overhead, and the confusing chorus lasted as long as the hawk was in sight; nor did one of the little bush-tits seem to move a feather, but just sit motionless and trill in perfect unison. It served as a unique method of protection; the whole flock had learned to act as a unit. It would have been hard for an enemy to tell where a single bird was, the alarm note was so deceiving. They were so quiet and their clothing harmonized so perfectly with the shadows of the foliage.

Millions of destructive insects lay their eggs, live and multiply in the buds and bark of trees, and it seems the bush-tit's life work to keep this horde in check. After the little family left their home, I never found them quiet for a minute. When they took possession of a tree, they took it by

storm. It looked as if it had suddenly grown wings, and every limb was alive. They turned every leaf, looked into every cranny, and scratched up the moss and lichens. They hung by their toes to peek into every bud; they swung around the branches to pry into every crack; then, in a few moments, they tilted off to the next tree to continue the hunt.