

CHAPTER VII - The Bluejay's Story

"There is no more faithful mother in the forest than the blue titmouse, which is a cousin to the chickadee," continued the policeman, "and this spring Tom Titmouse and his wife Nancy set up housekeeping in a little hollow in an elm-tree about half a mile north of this spot. Of course, the first thing Nancy did was to lay six beautiful eggs--white with brown spots all over them--in the nest. Tom was as proud of these eggs as was Nancy, and as the nest was hidden in a safe place they flew away together to hunt for caterpillars, and had no thought of danger. But on their return an hour later what was their sorrow to find the nest empty, and every pretty egg gone. On the ground underneath the tree were scattered a few bits of shell; but the robber was nowhere to be seen.

"Tom Titmouse was very indignant at this dreadful crime, and came to me at once to complain of the matter; but of course I had no idea who had done the deed. I questioned all the birds who have ever been known to slyly steal eggs, and every one denied the robbery. So Nancy Titmouse saw she must lay more eggs, and before long had another six speckled beauties in the bottom of her nest.

"They were more careful now about leaving home; but the danger seemed past. One bright, sunny morning they ventured to fly to the brook to drink and bathe themselves, and on their return found their home despoiled for a second time. Not an egg was left to them out of the six, and while Nancy wept and wailed Tom looked sharply around him and saw a solitary shrike sitting on a limb not far away."

"What's a shrike?" asked Chubbins.

"It is a bird that looks a good deal like that mocking-bird sitting next you; but it bears a bad character in the forest and has earned the vile name of 'butcher-bird.' I admit that I am always obliged to keep an eye upon the shrike, for I expect it to get into mischief at any time. Well, Tom Titmouse naturally thought the shrike had eaten Nancy's eggs, so he came to me and ordered me to arrest the robber. But the shrike pleaded his innocence, and I had no proof against him.

"Again Nancy, with true motherly courage and perseverance, laid her eggs in the nest; and now they were never left alone for a single minute. Either she or

Tom was always at home, and for my part I watched the shrike carefully and found he did not fly near the nest of the titmice at all.

"The result of our care was that one fine day the eggs hatched out, and six skinny little titmice, with big heads and small bodies, were nestling against Nancy's breast. The mother thought they were beautiful, you may be sure, and many birds gathered around to congratulate her and Tom, and the brown thrush sang a splendid song of welcome to the little ones.

"When the children got a little stronger it did not seem necessary to guard the nest so closely, and the six appetites required a good many insects and butterfly-eggs to satisfy them. So Tom and Nancy both flew away to search for food, and when they came back they found, to their horror, that their six little ones had been stolen, and the nest was bare and cold. Nancy nearly fainted with sorrow, and her cries were pitiful and heart-rending; but Tom Titmouse was dreadfully angry, and came to me demanding vengeance.

"If you are any good at all as a policeman,' said he, 'you will discover and punish the murderer of my babies.'

"So I looked all around and finally discovered, not far from the nest of the titmice, four of their children, all dead and each one impaled upon the thorn of a bush that grew close to the ground. Then I decided it was indeed the shrike, for he has a habit of doing just this thing; killing more than he can eat and sticking the rest of his murdered victims on thorns until he finds time to come back and devour them.

"I was also angry, by that time; so I flew to the shrike's nest and found him all scratched and torn and his feathers plucked in many places.

"What has happened to you?' I asked.

"I had a fight with a weasel last night,' answered the shrike, 'and both of us are rather used up, today.'

"Still,' said I, sternly, 'you had strength enough to kill the six little titmice, and to eat two of them.'

"I never did,' said he, earnestly; 'my wings are too stiff to fly.'

"Do not lie about it, I beg of you,' said I; 'for we have found four of the dead titmice stuck on the thorns of a bush, and your people have been known to do such things before.'

"At this the shrike looked worried.

"Really,' said he, 'I cannot understand it. But I assure you I am innocent.'

"Nevertheless, I arrested him, and made him fly with me to the Judgment Tree, where all the birds had congregated. He was really stiff and sore, and I could see it hurt him to fly; but my duty was plain. We selected a jury of twelve birds, and Judge Bullfinch took his seat on a bough, and then the trial began.

"Tom Titmouse accused the shrike of murder, and so did Nancy, who had nearly cried her eyes out. I also gave my evidence. But the prisoner insisted strongly that he was innocent, and claimed he had not left his nest since his fight with the weasel, and so was guiltless of the crime.

"But no one had any sympathy for him, or believed what he said; for it is often the case that when one has earned a bad character he is thought capable of any wickedness. So the jury declared him guilty, and the judge condemned him to die at sundown. We were all to fall upon the prisoner together, and tear him into bits with bill and claw; but while we waited for the sun to sink Will Sparrow flew up to the Judgment Tree and said:

"Hello! What's going on here?"

"We are just about to execute a criminal,' replied the judge.

"What has he been doing?' asked Will, eyeing the shrike curiously.

"He killed the titmice children this morning, and ate two of them, and stuck the other four upon a thorn bush,' explained the judge.

"Oh, no; the shrike did not do that!' cried Will Sparrow. 'I saw the crime committed with my own eyes, and it was the cunning weasel--the one that lives in the pine stump--that did the dreadful murder.'

"At this all the birds set up an excited chatter, and the shrike again screamed that he was innocent. So the judge said, gravely: 'Will Sparrow always speaks the truth. Release the prisoner, for we have misjudged him. We must exact our vengeance upon the weasel.'

"So we all flew swiftly to the pine stump, which we knew well, and when we arrived we found the weasel sitting at the edge of his hole and laughing at us.

"That is the very weasel I fought with,' said the shrike. 'You can see where I tore the fur from his head and back with my sharp beak.'

"So you did,' answered the weasel; 'and in return I killed the little tomtits.'

"Did you stick them on the thorns?' asked Judge Bullfinch.

"Yes,' said the weasel. 'I hoped you would accuse the shrike of the murder, and kill him to satisfy my vengeance.'

"We nearly fell into the trap,' returned the judge; 'but Will Sparrow saw your act and reported it just in time to save the shrike's life. But tell me, did you also eat Nancy Titmouse's eggs?'

"Of course,' confessed the weasel, 'and they were very good, indeed.'

"Hearing this, Tom Titmouse became so excited that he made a furious dash at the weasel, who slipped within his hole and escaped.

"I condemn you to death!' cried the judge.

"That's all right,' answered the weasel, sticking just the tip of his nose out of the hole. 'But you've got to catch me before you can kill me. Run home, my pretty birds. You're no match for a weasel!'

"Then he was gone from sight, and we knew he was hidden safely in the stump, where we could not follow him, for the weasel's body is slim and slender. But I have not lived in the forest all my life without learning something, and I whispered a plan to Judge Bullfinch that met with his approval. He sent messengers at once for the ivory-billed woodpeckers, and soon four of those big birds appeared and agreed to help us. They began tearing away at the stump with their strong beaks, and the splinters flew in every direction. It was not yet dark when the cunning weasel was dragged from his hole and was at the mercy of the birds he had so cruelly offended. We fell upon him in a flash, and he was dead almost instantly."

"What became of the shrike?" asked Twinkle.

"He left the forest the next day," answered Policeman Bluejay. "For although he was innocent of this crime, he was still a butcher-bird, and he knew our people had no confidence in him."

"It was lucky Will Sparrow came in time," said the girl-lark. "But all these stories must have made you hungry, so I'd like to invite my guests to have some refreshments."

The birds seemed much surprised by this invitation, and even Policeman Bluejay wondered what she was going to do. But Twinkle whispered to Chubbins, and both the bird-children flew into their basket and returned with their claws full of cookie. They repeated the journey many times, distributing bits of the rare food to all of the birds who had visited them, and each one ate the morsel eagerly and declared that it was very good.

"Now," said the policeman, when the feast was over, "let us all go to the brook and have a drink of its clear, sweet water."

So they flew away, a large and merry band of all sizes and colors; and the child-larks joined them, skimming the air as lightly and joyously as any of their new friends. It did not take them long to reach a sparkling brook that wound its way through the forest, and all the feathered people drank their fill standing upon the low bank or upon stones that rose above the level of the water.

At first the children were afraid they might fall into the brook; but presently they gained courage, and when they saw the thrush and bullfinch plunge in and bathe themselves in the cool water Chubbins decided to follow their example, and afterward Twinkle also joined them.

The birds now bade the child-larks good-bye and promised to call upon them again, and soon all had flown away except the bluejay, who said he would see Twinkle and Chubbins safe home again, so that they would not get lost.

They thanked him for this kindness, and when they had once more settled upon the limb beside their nest the bluejay also bade them good night and darted away for one last look through the forest to see that all was orderly for the night.