

THE SQUIRRELS THAT LIVE IN A HOUSE

Once upon a time a gentleman went out into a great forest, and cut away the trees, and built there a very nice little cottage. It was set very low on the ground, and had very large bow-windows, and so much of it was glass that one could look through it on every side and see what was going on in the forest. You could see the shadows of the fern-leaves, as they flickered and wavered over the ground, and the scarlet partridge-berry and winter-green plums that matted round the roots of the trees, and the bright spots of sunshine that fell through their branches and went dancing about among the bushes and leaves at their roots. You could see the chirping sparrows and the thrushes and robins and bluebirds building their nests here and there among the branches, and watch them from day to day as they laid their eggs and hatched their young. You could also see red squirrels, and gray squirrels, and little striped chip-squirrels, darting and springing about, here and there and everywhere, running races with each other from bough to bough, and chattering at each other in the gayest possible manner.

You may be sure that such a strange thing as a house for human beings to live in did not come into this wild wood without making quite a stir and excitement among the inhabitants that lived there before. All the time it was building, there was the greatest possible

commotion in the breasts of all the older population; and there wasn't even a black ant, or a cricket, that did not have his own opinion about it, and did not tell the other ants and crickets just what he thought the world was coming to in consequence.

Old Mrs. Rabbit declared that the hammering and pounding made her nervous, and gave her most melancholy forebodings of evil times. "Depend upon it, children," she said to her long-eared family, "no good will come to us from this establishment. Where man is, there comes always trouble for us poor rabbits."

The old chestnut-tree, that grew on the edge of the woodland ravine, drew a great sigh which shook all his leaves, and expressed it as his conviction that no good would ever come of it,--a conviction that at once struck to the heart of every chestnut-burr. The squirrels talked together of the dreadful state of things that would ensue. "Why!" said old Father Gray, "it's evident that Nature made the nuts for us; but one of these great human creatures will carry off and gormandize upon what would keep a hundred poor families of squirrels in comfort." Old Ground-mole said it did not require very sharp eyes to see into the future, and it would just end in bringing down the price of real estate in the whole vicinity, so that every decent-minded and respectable quadruped would be obliged to move away;--for his part, he was ready to sell out for anything he could get. The bluebirds and bobolinks, it is true, took more cheerful views of matters; but then, as old Mrs. Ground-mole observed, they were a

flighty set,--half their time careering and dissipating in the Southern States,--and could not be expected to have that patriotic attachment to their native soil that those had who had grubbed in it from their earliest days.

"This race of man," said the old chestnut-tree, "is never ceasing in its restless warfare on Nature. In our forest solitudes hitherto how peacefully, how quietly, how regularly has everything gone on! Not a flower has missed its appointed time of blossoming, or failed to perfect its fruit. No matter how hard has been the winter, how loud the winds have roared, and how high the snow-banks have been piled, all has come right again in spring. Not the least root has lost itself under the snows, so as not to be ready with its fresh leaves and blossoms when the sun returns to melt the frosty chains of winter. We have storms sometimes that threaten to shake everything to pieces,--the thunder roars, the lightning flashes, and the winds howl and beat; but, when all is past, everything comes out better and brighter than before,--not a bird is killed, not the frailest flower destroyed. But man comes, and in one day he will make a desolation that centuries cannot repair. Ignorant boor that he is, and all incapable of appreciating the glorious works of Nature, it seems to be his glory to be able to destroy in a few hours what it was the work of ages to produce. The noble oak, that has been cut away to build this contemptible human dwelling, had a life older and wiser than that of any man in this country. That tree has seen generations of men come and go. It was a fresh young tree when Shakespeare was

born; it was hardly a middle-aged tree when he died; it was growing here when the first ship brought the white men to our shores, and hundreds and hundreds of those whom they call bravest, wisest, strongest,--warriors, statesmen, orators, and poets,--have been born, have grown up, lived, and died, while yet it has outlived them all. It has seen more wisdom than the best of them; but two or three hours of brutal strength sufficed to lay it low. Which of these dolts could make a tree? I'd like to see them do anything like it. How noisy and clumsy are all their movements,--chopping, pounding, rasping, hammering. And, after all, what do they build? In the forest we do everything so quietly. A tree would be ashamed of itself that could not get its growth without making such a noise and dust and fuss. Our life is the perfection of good manners. For my part, I feel degraded at the mere presence of these human beings; but, alas! I am old; a hollow place at my heart warns me of the progress of decay, and probably it will be seized upon by these rapacious creatures as an excuse for laying me as low as my noble green brother."

In spite of all this disquiet about it, the little cottage grew and was finished. The walls were covered with pretty paper, the floors carpeted with pretty carpets; and, in fact, when it was all arranged, and the garden walks laid out, and beds of flowers planted around, it began to be confessed, even among the most critical, that it was not after all so bad a thing as was to have been feared.

A black ant went in one day and made a tour of exploration up and down, over chairs and tables, up the ceilings and down again, and, coming out, wrote an article for the Crickets' Gazette, in which he described the new abode as a veritable palace. Several butterflies fluttered in and sailed about and were wonderfully delighted, and then a bumble-bee and two or three honey-bees, who expressed themselves well pleased with the house, but more especially enchanted with the garden. In fact, when it was found that the proprietors were very fond of the rural solitudes of Nature, and had come out there for the purpose of enjoying them undisturbed; that they watched and spared the anemones, and the violets, and bloodroots, and dog's-tooth violets, and little woolly rolls of fern that began to grow up under the trees in spring; that they never allowed a gun to be fired to scare the birds, and watched the building of their nests with the greatest interest,--then an opinion in favour of human beings began to gain ground, and every cricket and bird and beast was loud in their praise.

"Mamma," said young Tit-bit, a frisky young squirrel, to his mother one day, "why won't you let Frisky and me go into that pretty new cottage to play?"

"My dear," said his mother, who was a very wary and careful old squirrel, "how can you think of it? The race of man are full of devices for traps and pitfalls, and who could say what might happen if you put yourself in their power? If you had wings like the

butterflies and bees, you might fly in and out again, and so gratify your curiosity; but, as matters stand, it's best for you to keep well out of their way."

"But, mother, there is such a nice, good lady lives there! I believe she is a good fairy, and she seems to love us all so; she sits in the bow-window and watches us for hours, and she scatters corn all round at the roots of the tree for us to eat."

"She is nice enough," said the old mother-squirrel, "if you keep far enough off; but I tell you, you can't be too careful."

Now this good fairy that the squirrels discoursed about was a nice little old lady that the children used to call Aunt Esther, and she was a dear lover of birds and squirrels, and all sorts of animals, and had studied their little ways till she knew just what would please them; and so she would every day throw out crumbs for the sparrows, and little bits of bread and wool and cotton to help the birds that were building their nests, and would scatter corn and nuts for the squirrels; and while she sat at her work in the bow-window she would smile to see the birds flying away with the wool, and the squirrels nibbling their nuts. After a while the birds grew so tame that they would hop into the bow-window and eat their crumbs off the carpet.

"There, mamma," said Tit-bit and Frisky, "only see Jenny Wren and

Cock Robin have been in at the bow-window, and it didn't hurt them, and why can't we go?"

"Well, my dears," said old Mother Squirrel, "you must do it very carefully; never forget that you haven't wings like Jenny Wren and Cock Robin."

So the next day Aunt Esther laid a train of corn from the roots of the trees to the bow-window, and then from the bow-window to her work-basket, which stood on the floor beside her; and then she put quite a handful of corn in the work-basket, and sat down by it, and seemed intent on her sewing. Very soon, creep, creep, creep, came Tit-bit and Frisky to the window, and then into the room, just as sly and as still as could be, and Aunt Esther sat just like a statue for fear of disturbing them. They looked all around in high glee, and when they came to the basket it seemed to them a wonderful little summer-house, made on purpose for them to play in. They nosed about in it, and turned over the scissors and the needle-book, and took a nibble at her white wax, and jostled the spools, meanwhile stowing away the corn on each side of their little chops, till they both of them looked as if they had the mumps.

At last Aunt Esther put out her hand to touch them, when, whisk-frisk, out they went, and up the trees, chattering and laughing before she had time even to wink.

But after this they used to come in every day, and when she put corn in her hand and held it very still they would eat out of it; and finally they would get into her hand, until one day she gently closed it over them, and Frisky and Tit-bit were fairly caught.

Oh, how their hearts beat! but the good fairy only spoke gently to them, and soon unclosed her hand and let them go again. So day after day they grew to have more and more faith in her, till they would climb into her work-basket, sit on her shoulder, or nestle away in her lap as she sat sewing. They made also long exploring voyages all over the house, up and through all the chambers, till finally, I grieve to say, poor Frisky came to an untimely end by being drowned in the water-tank at the top of the house.

The dear good fairy passed away from the house in time, and went to a land where the flowers never fade and the birds never die; but the squirrels still continue to make the place a favourite resort.

"In fact, my dear," said old Mother Red one winter to her mate, "what is the use of one's living in this cold, hollow tree, when these amiable people have erected this pretty cottage, where there is plenty of room for us and them too? Now I have examined between the eaves, and there is a charming place where we can store our nuts, and where we can whip in and out of the garret, and have the free range of the house; and, say what you will, these humans have delightful ways of being warm and comfortable in winter."

So Mr. and Mrs. Red set up housekeeping in the cottage, and had no end of nuts and other good things stored up there. The trouble of all this was, that, as Mrs. Red was a notable body, and got up to begin her housekeeping operations, and woke up all her children, at four o'clock in the morning, the good people often were disturbed by a great rattling and fuss in the walls, while yet it seemed dark night. Then sometimes, too, I grieve to say, Mrs. Squirrel would give her husband vigorous curtain lectures in the night, which made him so indignant that he would rattle off to another quarter of the garret to sleep by himself; and all this broke the rest of the worthy people who built the house.

What is to be done about this we don't know. What would you do about it? Would you let the squirrels live in your house or not? When our good people come down of a cold winter morning, and see the squirrels dancing and frisking down the trees, and chasing each other so merrily over the garden chair between them, or sitting with their tails saucily over their backs, they look so jolly and jaunty and pretty that they almost forgive them for disturbing their night's rest, and think that they will not do anything to drive them out of the garret to-day. And so it goes on; but how long the squirrels will rent the cottage in this fashion, I'm sure I dare not undertake to say.