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ROADRUNNER, A WISE OLD BIRD

by

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Photographs by William L. Finley

If by any chance you are a bit fed up with your fellow man, as probably he is with you, it won't hurt you at all to have a look at your counterpart among what we are too quick to call dumb animal life. He may not be able to think as we intellectuals are supposed to, but that animal instinct, intuition, or whatever it is, keeps him from falling on his nose pretty often.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and a hot side-winder wind was whistling across the Arizona desert, rattling the dry limbs of the leafless, scraggly trees and bushes. I was sitting behind a low, gray headstone in a cemetery. "Of all things, what for?" you will say. This is a desert land, and those who beautify cemeteries with green trees and flowers included native ones such as the mesquite and the beautiful palo-verdes so the wild birds would feel at home. And that is why I was mousing in a cemetery.

The cemetery had hoaxed the birds with water, shade, and safety from marauding kids with pop-guns, had lured them away from their family traditions, especially nesting sites. We hunted the trees in the farthest green lawn spot and found a roadrunner with half-grown young in a stick nest about eight feet up in a fluffy smoke tree. It seemed a foreign location for this paisano of the hot sands and prickly cactus, but at that it was canny of her to choose such a bushy, cool home for her young. Not far away a Gambel Gambel quail had also gone modern and had a nest with thirteen eggs hidden snugly in the thick center of a tall, decorative evergreen tree. A temperature of 120° in the shade would induce even a dumb bird to do a little figuring.

Even this late in the day, we found the mother roadrunner still in bed with the children. She almost had to be pried out, so sure was she

Three o'clock of a scorching afternoon

CHAPTER IV

THE sun was high in the sky, and the air was hot and still. The leaves of the trees were dry and brittle, and the ground was parched and cracked. The only sound was the low hum of the bees in the distance. The old man sat on the bench, his head bowed, his hands clasped in prayer. He had been waiting for her for so long, and now she was not coming. The tears came to his eyes, and he wiped them away with his hand. He knew that she was out there somewhere, but he did not know where. He had searched every corner of the town, but she was not there. He had searched the fields and the woods, but she was not there. He had searched the mountains and the valleys, but she was not there. He had searched everywhere, but she was not there. He was alone, and he was lonely. He was old, and he was weak. He was tired, and he was sad. He was alone, and he was lonely. He was old, and he was weak. He was tired, and he was sad.

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of oblivion if she sat frozen with staring round eyes and irridescent, mottled green and brown colors as if they had grown into to the tree. After being gently urged to step out of her frame in the picture, she scratched down the bark of the tree and put on a Sinatra show of wild ravings and wallowings, flattening her head on the ground with weird whinings and shakings as if she had the palsy. She pretended all sorts of troubles, or was she saying, "Kill me, but spare my children." She was fidgety and nervous. How she could scuttle along so fast on her knees was a puzzle. When that camera man she was trying to vamp stepped out of his car, she wallowed close around his feet, uttering her excited rattle, the only language she knew.

From one to another, she tried every grave stone for a perch. Fidgeting, she sat on the hard slab, shuffled her feathers, ran them through her bill, always playing for time, her yellow eye watchful. Then she was off again, squirming along, trying some new wrinkle to keep the man's attention. When he walked under the nest tree, she put on all the shimmying tricks she knew, like a Holy Roller in ecstasy. She began to play hide-and-seek, scuttling behind one tombstone after another, sliding down a dirt bank where they were digging a grave, lying behind a mound of dirt with just her eyes showing over the top, her bill snapping like a wound-up rattlesnake.

She was now the tormentor, for no camera could work that fast. I laughed to see her slide out from under the click of that ogre with a black hood - one spoiled film after another, and the unsacred explosions that followed. Only when the car drove off in jumpy exasperation did she ascend to her nest in the thick smoke screen. No sir, she kept him so busy he never found out where her children were hidden. It was a game of "Button, button, who's got the button?" Of course she out-played him. Wise old bird.

I wondered why hover warmly dressed children with the weather at Hades temperature. Then it occurred to me that there may have been still unhatched eggs in the nest. Like those of the barn owl, roadrunner eggs

do not all hatch at one time, but day after day as they had been laid. So the children range in age and size like the steps of a ladder. One would think that the older, well fed pot-bellied squabs would furnish enough heat to hatch the later eggs.

The two roa drunners being so much alike, in size and color, we couldn't tell which from tuther when they came in to feed. If they showed themselves about the nest at the same time, we judged that the calmer and more wary one was the father. He played no hysterics and after stop-and-goes, shied around to the back of the tree and slid up the trunk to poke his lizard down a big wide mouth. Sometimes when he brought in a lizard, she met him just over the bank and took the dinner from him, perhaps having impressed upon him that she knew more about feeding babies than he did. The diet consisted of desert dainties, caterpillars, grasshoppers and lizards, but mostly lizards and more lizards coming from a regular caravan route across the hot sands.

The roadrunner is both wily and winsome, a lively pet that clings to the hand that feeds him, fits into jalopy travel, loves sun baths, and an impish trick of trying to swallow the terrier's tail. He is the Mexican paisano (pheasant), snake-killer, ground cuckoo, chaparral cock, or better still, the cock o'the desert. He fits into the picture of the blazing desert, but is widening his territory to the north, the turned-up furrows of the farm, and even the further wide cattle ranges of the uplands. Who can tell where he will stop?