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A SIX-RINGED BIRD CIRCUS

by

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Everybody likes to go to a circus once in a while. Nothing could be more wholesome than fun for loosening up jangled nerves and stretched tempers. But when a six-ringed circus - not a three-ringed one - lights plump down on your head, it's a different kind of a joke. That is what happened to our usually peaceful household. On July 19, we found ourselves the step-parents of six baby birds, a quadruplet of flickers, a young cedar waxwing, and an infant black-headed grosbeak.

The grosbeak came to us from the Eugene Bowmans who live on the Oatfield Road above Oak Grove. It was found in their yard when they saw a sparrow that happened to pass near the waif stop and feed it a worm. The four flickers came from Mrs. C. H. King of 6030 S. E. 41st Street. Something had broken up these wild birds' home also. We borrowed the cedar waxwing from Mrs. Eliot when we were out at the Sanctuary. We found her nursing a gull all bandaged up with a broken wing. It had been brought in by Mrs. J. J. Parker and some friends of Tigard. Mr. and Mrs. Dean Collins, Frances Kaye, and Mrs. Raymond Gill brought the waxwing. Some one had planted the name of Joe E. Brown on him. After living with the bird for ten days, I suspect that Joy would probably fit better, as I don't think she is a Joe.

Of course, all of these bird children had some clothes on. The mournful, clammy grosbeak had a few feathers here and there, and nothing but sprouts in some spots, barely out of the strip-tease stage. All he knew was to keep his mouth wide open for any manna from heaven to drop in. The cedar waxwing was a demure, gray little thing with mottled breast, a decorative yellow band on her tail, and bright black eyes under an emotional crest that quivered with her genteel twitter of a voice. The four flickers were mad hatters from start to finish. Their heads bobbed, their tails jerked, and they kept up a raucous clatter that filled the air, evidently a loud speaker system intended to keep their mother informed that they were starving to death.

But none of them had any mothers now. And that's where the joke came in - on us. It's a whole job to bring up even one helpless wild bird, unless you are such specialists in this exclusive line as the Willard Eliots, who make a happy success of it,- at least for the birds.

The first worry was food. Mrs. Eliot says when in doubt about birds, feed mush. So mush it was for the main course. It probably should have been made of pabulum, or wheat germ, but there was no such baby stuff in the house. So I made a stiff cream of wheat gruel which, when cold, could be cut in thin slices and poked into a red mouth. Hard-boiled eggs were mixed with this, a life-saver for any bird. These were topped off with ripe raspberries, watermelon, and wild huckleberries for the choosy waxwing. She was so dainty that if the bite was a little too thick or thin, or too long, or too sticky, she closed her mouth and eyes tight and fluttered her wings - as they say, difficult.

The grosbeak swallowed anything that came along without tasting it. When it came to the flickers, it was a picnic. Their tongues are long, slender black spikes covered with a sticky substance and they dart out and capture insects, especially ants, by this method. It was hard for these birds to get onto the idea of opening their mouths wide and have a chunk of food slide down. But they tried their best, guzzling and glugging at the top of their lungs. It was either extreme excruciation or extreme ecstasy, one couldn't tell which. This program for all six infants had to come every little while, and since their stomachs worked by the clock, the alarm went off regularly.

The waxwing took the baby grosbeak under her wing and lived with him in a comfortable sized wire cage with perches, cups of food and water. She edged close to him, chittering softly as if it was a lullaby, watched him bolt his food, then she cleaned the jam off his face and dressed his feathers. All of which soothed him to sleep. Once when she was flying around outside, she lighted on the flickers' cage. A dagger bil darted out through the wires and gave her a nasty jab. "Take that, teacher's pet!" it seemed to say. After that she was always afraid of the flickers and didn't like to have her cage near them.

When the flickers were out of the nursery stage and got their first taste of freedom, they all went punch-drunk. One scaled the stucco wall of the garage, "yarruping" at every hitch. Another reveled and squealed in a dust bath at the edge of the garden. The third one, a bright-cheeked male, started out for the moon and landed in the top of a tall poplar far from home. The youngest one sat under a bush near his cage and said nothing. I whistled the flicker call. No one paid any attention to me. An hour later all four hungry rebels came whining home to be fed and put to bed on the back porch.

They must have been tired and cross from their first jag, for when all were hung up on the wires of their cage like bats, one got a little too close to another. Crack went a bill on his head. The other one jabbed him in the ribs. The grating tones sounded like, "Quit your crowding! Can't you stay on your own side?" But soon all four heads were tucked back under wings, looking like headless dummies.

The next day they came and went about the yard and their jubilant calls were heard from the tall firs down the hillside. But at evening one was missing and never answered the call to come home again. The other three, after their first run-away excitement, have staid about the trees in the garden, and spend most of their time close to the house. They seem to like to stay near their adopted folks, clinging to the screen door trying to get in. If either of us goes outside to work in the garden, they come shouting to light on our shoulders or heads and ride pick-a-back. As I was picking raspberries one morning, a couple burst down upon me, one on my shoulder, another on my arm. Soon I felt a long, soft tongue probing around my neck, and then it darted into my ear and wiggled all around - hunting for ants or aphids, I suppose. The next minute, some impishness seized him and he reared back and commenced to hammer a hole in my head as if it was a tree trunk that might conceal grubs or other delectable flicker bits. These bird children have many human and lovable traits. It's the best kind of a circus after all.

The fourth Ant and PC winter

The flickers and the cedar waxwing had had their freedom for some days, and all played about in the trees and bushes. This at first gave me the jitters, as there are cats all around us - some of them very nice cats. But all cats eat birds. The flickers were punch-drunk with their first outing. One scaled the stucco wall of the garage, "yarruping" at every step. Another was reveling and squealing in a dust bath at the edge of the garden. The third one, a bright-cheeked male, had started out for the moon and landed in the top of a tall poplar above the thickest cat center. The youngest one sat under a bush near his cage and said nothing. I whistled the flicker call. No one paid any attention to it. An hour later all four hungry rebels came whining home, to be fed and put to bed on the back porch.

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