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THE OFFENSIVE RAT

by

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Once there was an architect who grew weary of the hurry and hubbub of the mad city of Chicago. He hunted for a region far away to build himself a small cottage. He found it in northern New Mexico and built a one-story, rambling adobe house under the rim of red hills, deep canyons, and lofty pinnacles. From the flat roof where he slept, as is the custom of this country, he sat and dreamed away his cares, looking over wide llanos with roaming, white-faced cattle, and a horizon that ended in red sunsets.

Inside it was as simple as a peasant's cottage with a wide, flat fireplace and little built-in cupboards of knotty pine, ornamented with quaint, scalloped mouldings. These and the door casings were the only wood in the house. One summer coming back to his house, he opened the door and caught an old, musky smell.

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Glancing around the empty place, he discovered that prowlers had invaded his sanctuary and played havoc. Who of his sparse neighbors could have done it? That night he heard scurryings and squeakings, and then soft thuddings - one, two, three here, and one, two, three, four over there, as if it was a code of signals. He slipped down the outside stairway from the roof and sneaked inside. It was as ghostly as a tomb and as still. Searching the dark, he saw two round, illuminated eyes staring in his direction. He "froze" in the enveloping darkness. After some little time, distinctly came the sound of gnawing. He switched on a light. There on the top of his cherished mouldings sat a big rat. Here was the villain that had chewed and splintered his neat mouldings, leaving an ugly, saw-toothed border. Later he found that it was an old mother woodrat with half grown children.

In one corner of his little den was a big pile of articles from mussy newspapers to knives, an old cowboy hat, a letter opener, a metal salt-cellar, rubber bands, a pair of old shoes and a checked shirt dug out of a closet, and all topped with a roof of kindlings from the fireplace. The rat must have taken a

rollicking satisfaction in collecting this cache, under which she had made a nest for her young.

Wood rats of the genus *Neotoma*, known also as pack rats or trade rats, are among the most numerous of native rodents in the western United States. They are common throughout the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Coast regions at practically all altitudes save the high Boreal Zone, and in a wide variety of habitats. Nowhere are they more abundant than on the plateaus and desert of Arizona. This silky, pinkish-buff little fellow, <sup>*Neotoma albigula*</sup> white underneath even to his toes, and with big eyes and ears, is so mild in temperament and so much cleaner and less destructive than the brown or wharf rat that it scarcely deserves to be thought of in the same class.

Once in our ramblings, we met this wood rat face to face. Looking into the round doorway of a cactus wren's nest in a jumping cactus bush, who should pop out but a rat. He had probably just feasted on delicate pink eggs. We decided to make him pay for being caught coming out of a bird's nest.

He stood in the ~~round~~ hole, his round, black eyes staring, the light shining on his pink nose and making his big pink ears almost transparent. He started to make a break for freedom. The camera man caught him by the tip of his tail, and then by the back of his neck. In the scuffle, the loose skin of his tail tip slipped easily off as a lizard's does. It bled a little, but soon dried up. He didn't seem to notice it. But it didn't add to the looks of that end of him.

We took him to a big mass of low prickly pear nearby, which we concluded was his home. Under the roots of the sprawling, thorny fortress was a mass of brown debris, dried cactus fans, sticks, and all kinds of trash. One entrance hole was in plain sight, but we knew there were several other runways hidden under the jumble. Shallow trails ran in several directions off into the desert. Many of the cactus lobes over his den had semi-circular chunks eaten out of them, showing where he took his suppers.

It was tedious work standing in the blistering <sup>heat</sup> ~~sun~~ trying to educate the little fellow to pose for his picture on top of a green fan. He wasn't at all excited or apparently afraid, but he didn't like the sun either. It

was not natural for him to be out in the sun, for he does all his perambulating at night when the desert is cool and inviting for little suppers and visits to his mate's hide-away under some other cactus clump, for she doesn't live with him. She and the children have a nest of their own. One rat lives under a bush. It is his or her bailiwick.

The camera was set up. Every time we asked him to sit on the rounded rim of a cactus bobe, he slid quietly off faster than we could put him back. He didn't understand. The needle-sharp spines that stuck up about him didn't bother him at all. But the fine, glassy-brittle hairs that completely cover these big fans were thick between his toes, and a few even got on his nose. They were too insignificant for him to feel, and they were always with him anyway. But to two human beings perspiring and laboring for pictures, it was agony. Reaching in between vicious, spiny fans, or backing up against one brought a howl. It took pliers to pull them out as they penetrated to the skin. One of the regular ceremonies at the end of a day's work was to disrobe and with tweezers and pliers de-spine.

Finally the rat became very docile and clung perfectly still to his green perch, his questioning eyes watching us, his big ears twitching at every sound. I heaved a big sigh of relief when it was all over.

When we had begun working with this little pirate of the desert, I had expected to find a wily, vicious rodent like the northern wharf or sewer (well named) rat that is dangerous to even approach. So I put on heavy gloves. I found out later that this was an insult to Albigula. Finding them hot and clumsy, I pulled the gloves off and was soon handling and stroking the silky coat. Not once did he offer to bite the hand that moved him about.

I took him in my hands, which he didn't like very much. He cried out, more like a scared child than a wild animal. I put him on the ground and he crawled into his hole under the cactus, his rear and tail sticking out. There he lay head down, as if any prickly pillow was a haven. And he was only a rat. What surprises come in meeting the wild folk.