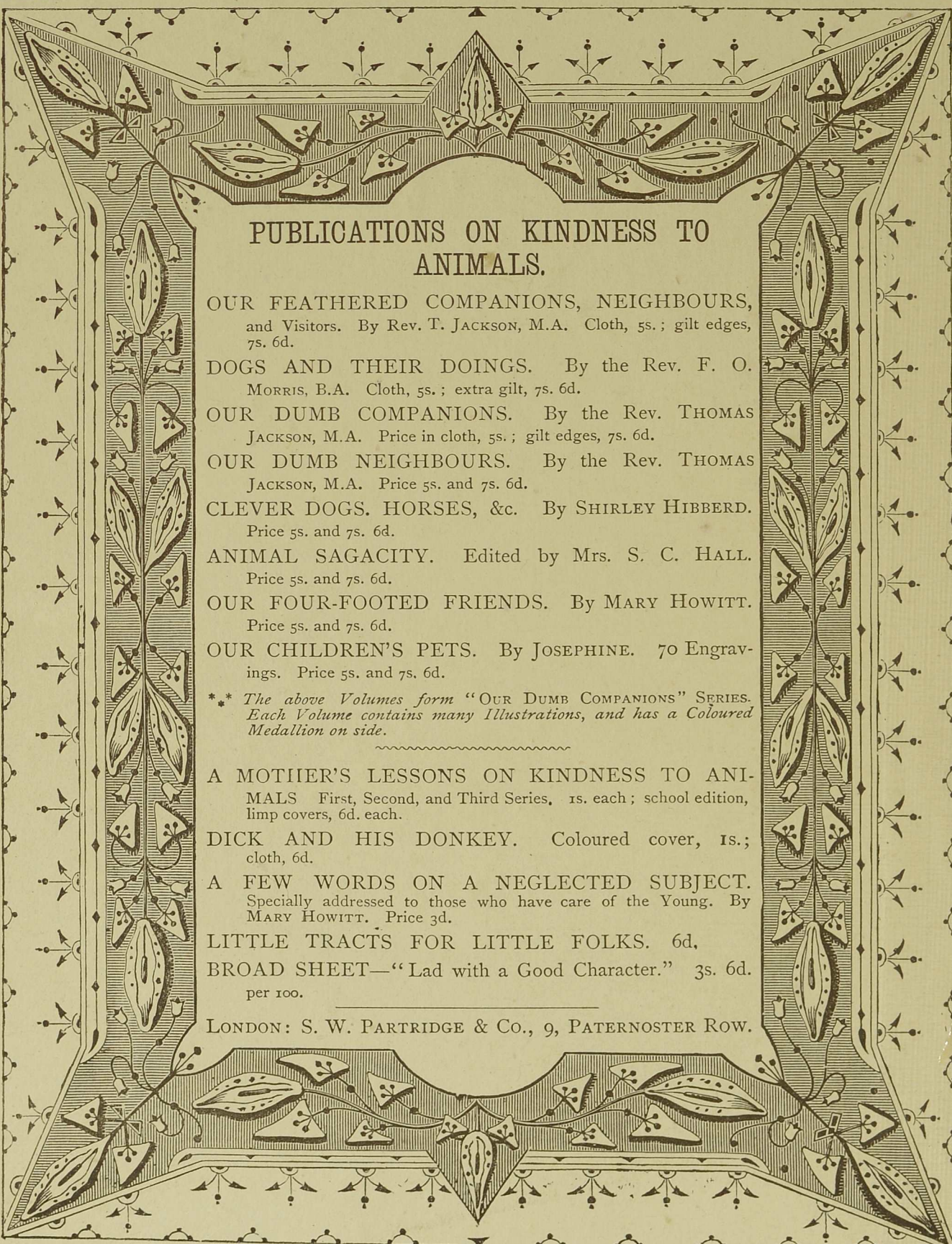


BIRDS & THEIR NESTS



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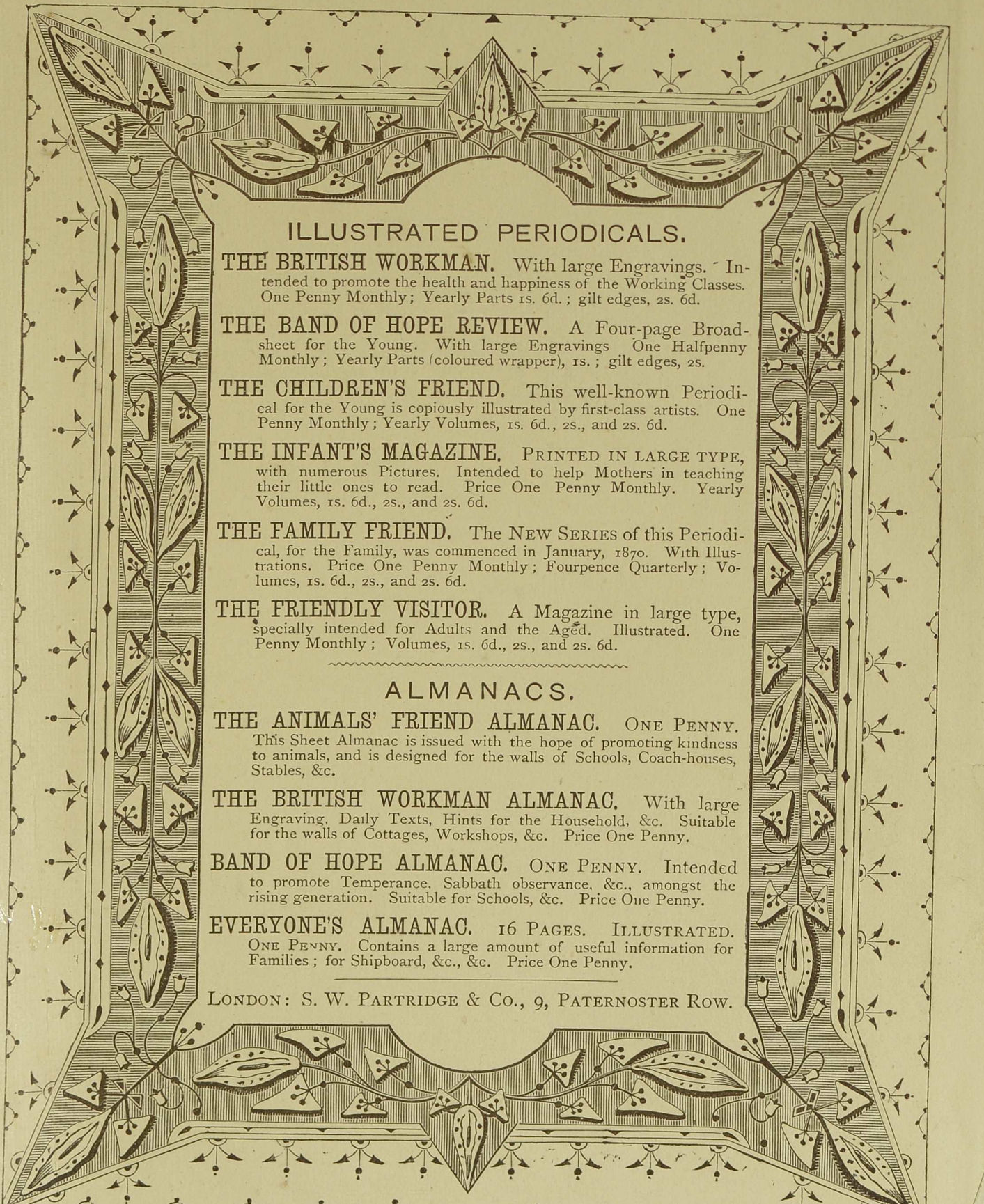
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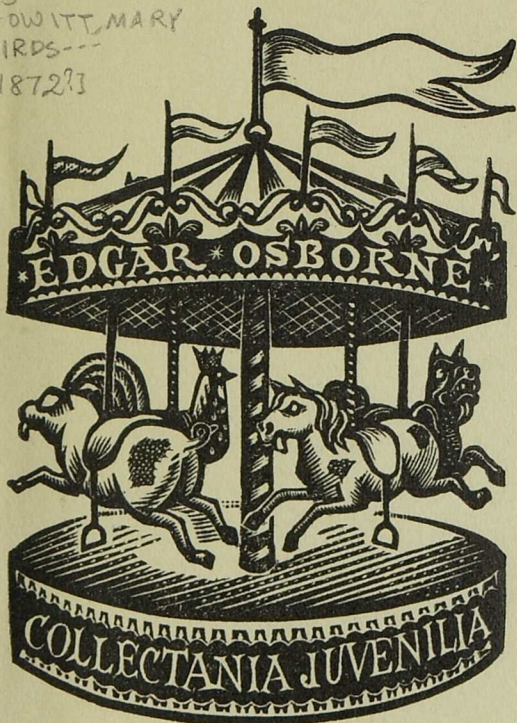
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BIRDS AND THEIR NESTS.



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BY

MARY HOWITT.



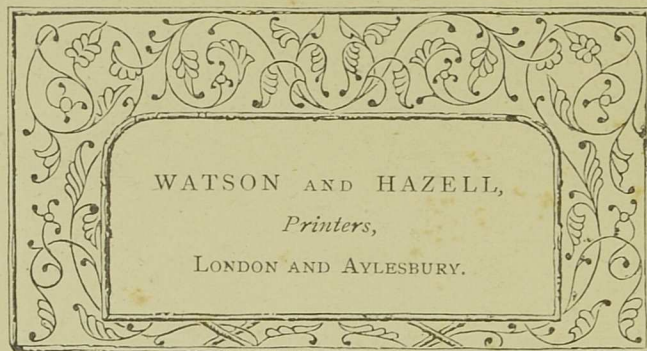
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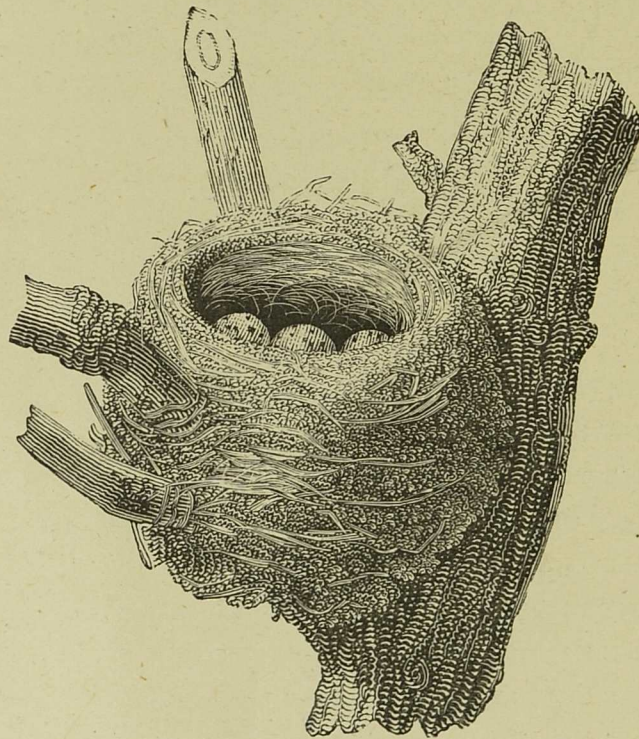
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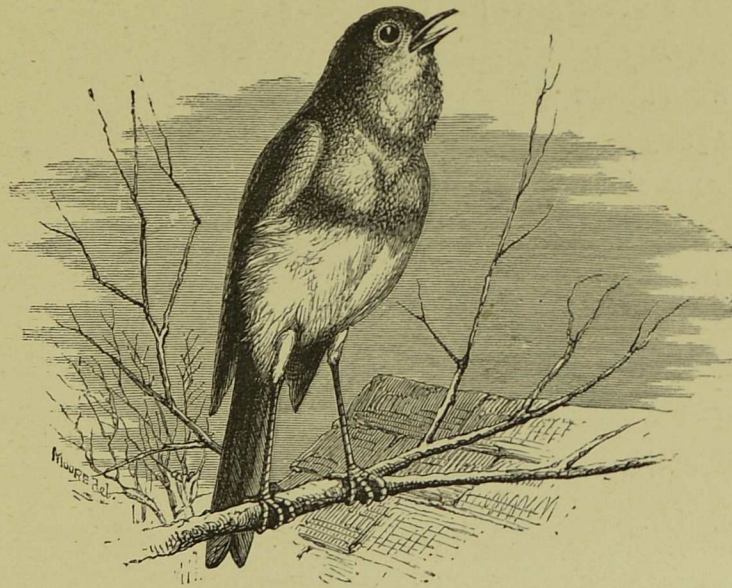


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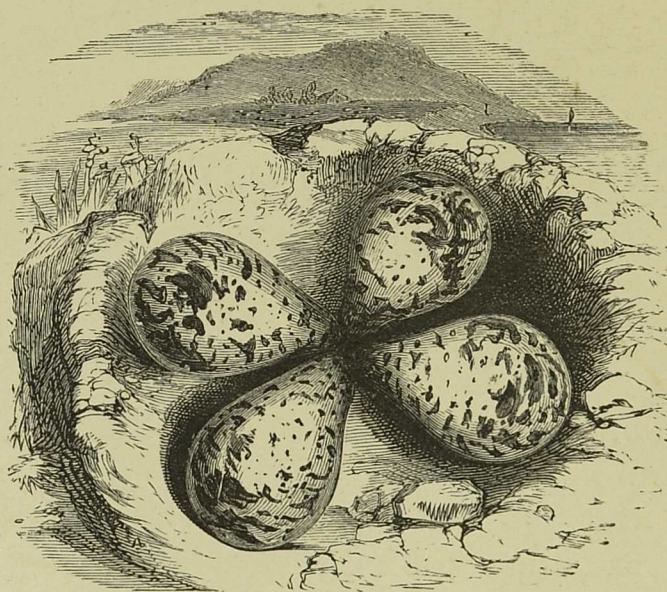




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Birds and their Nests.

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

THE birds in these pictures of ours have all nests, which is as it should be; for how could the bird rear its young without its little home and soft little bed, any more than children could be comfortably brought up without either a bed to lie upon, or a home in which to be happy.

Birds-nests, though you may find them in every bush, are

wonderful things. Let us talk about them. They are all alike in the purpose for which they are intended, but no two families of birds build exactly alike; all the wrens, for instance, have their kind of nest; the thrushes have theirs; so has the swallow tribe; so has the sparrow, or the rook. They do not imitate one another, but each adheres to its own plan, as God, the great builder and artist, as well as Creator, taught them from the very beginning. The first nightingale, that sang its hymn of joyful thanksgiving in the Garden of Paradise, built its nest just the same as the bird you listened to last year in the coppice. The materials were there, and the bird knew how to make use of them; and that is perhaps the most wonderful part of it, for she has no implements to work with: no needle and thread, no scissors, no hammer and nails; nothing but her own little feet and bill, and her round little breast, upon which to mould it; for it is generally the mother-bird which is the chief builder.

No sooner is the nest wanted for the eggs which she is about to lay, than the hitherto slumbering faculty of constructiveness is awakened, and she selects the angle of the branch, or the hollow in the bank or in the wall, or the tangle of reeds, or the platform of twigs on the tree-top, exactly the right place for her, the selection being always the same according to her tribe, and true to the instinct which was implanted in her at the first.

So the building begins: dry grass or leaves, little twigs and root-fibres, hair or down, whether of feather or winged seed, spangled outside with silvery lichen, or embroidered with green mosses, less for beauty, perhaps—though it is so beautiful—than for the birds' safety, because it so exactly imitates the bank or the tree-trunk in which it is built. Or it may be that her tene-

ment is clay-built, like that of the swallow; or lath and plaster, so to speak, like an old country house, as is the fashion of the magpie; or a platform of rude sticks, like the first rudiment of a basket up in the tree-branches, as that of the wood-pigeon: she may be a carpenter like the woodpecker, a tunneller like the sandmartin; or she may knead and glue together the materials of her nest, till they resemble thick felt; but in all this she is exactly what the great Creator made her at first, equally perfect in skill, and equally undeviating year after year. This is very wonderful, so that we may be quite sure that the sparrow's nest, which David remarked in the house of God, was exactly the same as the sparrow built in the days of the blessed Saviour, when He, pointing to that bird, made it a proof to man that God's Providence ever watches over him.

Nevertheless, with this unaltered and unalterable working after one pattern, in every species of bird, there is a choice or an adaptation of material allowed: thus the bird will, within certain limits, select that which is fittest for its purpose, producing, however, in the end, precisely the same effect. I will tell you what Jules Michelet, a French writer, who loves birds as we do, writes on this subject:—"The bird in building its nest," he says, "makes it of that beautiful cup-like or cradle form by pressing it down, kneading it and shaping it upon her own breast." He says, as I have just told you, that the mother-bird builds, and that the he-bird is her purveyor. He fetches in the materials: grasses, mosses, roots, or twigs, singing many a song between whiles; and she arranges all with loving reference; first, to the delicate egg which must be bedded in soft material; then to the little one which, coming from the egg naked, must

not only be cradled in soft comfort, but kept alive by her warmth. So the he-bird, supposing it to be a linnet, brings her some horse-hair : it is stiff and hard ; nevertheless, it is proper for the purpose, and serves as a lower stratum of the nest—a sort of elastic mattress : he brings her hemp ; it is cold, but it serves for the same purpose. Then comes the covering and the lining ; and for this nothing but the soft silky fibre of certain plants, wool or cotton, or, better still, the down from her own breast, will satisfy her. It is interesting, he says, to watch the he-bird's skilful and furtive search for materials ; he is afraid if he see you watching, that you may discover the track to his nest ; and, in order to mislead you, he takes a different road back to it. You may see him following the sheep to get a little lock of wool, or alighting in the poultry yard on the search for dropped feathers. If the farmer's wife chance to leave her wheel, whilst spinning in the porch, he steals in for a morsel of flax from the distaff. He knows what is the right kind of thing ; and let him be in whatever country he may, he selects that which answers the purpose ; and the nest which is built is that of the linnet all the world over.

Again he tells us, that there are other birds which, instead of building, bring up their young underground, in little earth cradles which they have prepared for them. Of building-birds, he thinks the queerest must be the flamingo, which lays her eggs on a pile of mud which she has raised above the flooded earth, and, standing erect all the time, hatches them under her long legs. It does seem a queer, uncomfortable way ; but if it answer its end, we need not object to it. Of carpenter-birds, he thinks the thrush is the most remarkable ; other writers say the woodpecker. The shore-birds plait their nests, not very skilfully it is true, but

sufficiently well for their purpose. They are clothed by nature with such an oily, impermeable coat of plumage, that they have little need to care about climate; they have enough to do to look after their fishing, and to feed themselves and their young; for all these sea-side families have immense appetites.

Hérons and storks build in a sort of basket-making fashion; so do the jays and the mocking birds, only in a much better way; but as they have all large families they are obliged to do so. They lay down, in the first place, a sort of rude platform, upon which they erect a basket-like nest of more or less elegant design, a web of roots and dry twigs strongly woven together. The little golden-crested wren hangs her purse-like nest to a bough, and, as in the nursery song, "When the wind blows the cradle rocks." An Australian bird, a kind of fly-catcher, called there the razor-grinder, from its note resembling the sound of a razor-grinder at work, builds her nest on the slightest twig hanging over the water; in order to protect it from snakes which climb after them. She chooses for her purpose a twig so slender that it would not bear the weight of the snake, and thus she is perfectly safe from her enemy. The same, probably, is the cause why in tropical countries, where snakes and monkeys, and such bird-enemies abound, nests are so frequently suspended by threads or little cords from slender boughs.

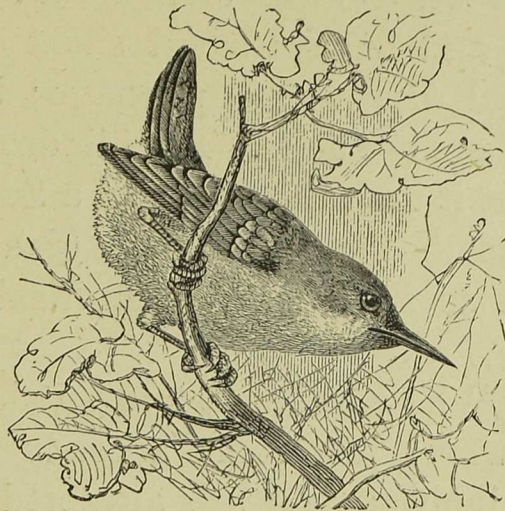
The canary, the goldfinch, and chaffinch, are skilful cloth-weavers or felt makers; the latter, restless and suspicious, speckles the outside of her nest with a quantity of white lichen, so that it exactly imitates the tree branch on which it is placed, and can hardly be detected by the most accustomed eye. Glueing and felting play an important part in the work of the bird-

weavers. The humming-bird, for instance, consolidates her little house with the gum of trees. The American starling sews the leaves together with her bill; other birds use not only their bills, but their feet. Having woven a cord, they fix it as a web with their feet, and insert the weft, as the weaver would throw his shuttle, with their bill. These are genuine weavers. In fine, their skill never fails them. The truth is, that the great Creator never gives any creature work to do without giving him at the same time an inclination to do it—which, in the animal, is instinct—and tools sufficient for the work, though they may be only the delicate feet and bill of the bird.

And now, in conclusion, let me describe to you the nest of the little English long-tailed titmouse as I saw it many years ago, and which I give from “Sketches of Natural History” :—

There, where those boughs of blackthorn cross,
Behold that oval ball of moss ;
Observe it near, all knit together,
Moss, willow-down, and many a feather,
And filled within, as you may see,
As full of feathers as can be ;
Whence it is called by country folk,
A fitting name, the feather-poke ;
But learned people, I have heard,
Parus caudatus call the bird.
Yes, here's a nest ! a nest indeed,
That doth all other nests exceed,
Propped with the blackthorn twigs beneath,
And festooned with a woodbine wreath !
Look at it close, all knit together,
Moss, willow-down, and many a feather ;
So soft, so light, so wrought with grace,
So suited to this green-wood place,

And spangled o'er, as with the intent
Of giving fitting ornament,
With silvery flakes of lichen bright,
That shine like opals, dazzling white.
Think only of the creature small,
That wrought this soft and silvery ball,
Without a tool to aid her skill,
Nought but her little feet and bill—
Without a pattern whence to trace
This little roofed-in dwelling-place—
And does not in your bosom spring
Love for this skilful little thing?
See, there's a window in the wall;
Peep in, the house is not so small,
— But snug and cosy you shall see
A very numerous family!
Now count them: one, two, three, four, five—
Nay, *sixteen* merry things alive—
Sixteen young, chirping things all sit,
Where you, your wee hand, could not get!
I'm glad you've seen it, for you never
Saw ought before so soft and clever.



CHAPTER I.

THE WREN.

TRULY the little Wren, so beautifully depicted by Mr. Harrison Weir, with her tiny body, her pretty, lively, and conceited ways, her short, little turned-up tail, and delicate plumage, is worthy of our tender regard and love.

The colouring of the wren is soft and subdued—a reddish-brown colour; the breast of a light greyish-brown; and all the hinder parts, both above and below, marked with wavy lines of dusky brown, with two bands of white dots across the wings.

Its habits are remarkably lively and attractive. “I know no pleasanter object,” says the agreeable author of “British Birds,” “than the wren; it is always so smart and cheerful. In gloomy weather other birds often seem melancholy, and in rain the sparrows and finches stand silent on the twigs, with drooping wings and disarranged plumage; but to the merry little wren all weathers are alike. The big drops of the thunder-shower no more wet it than the drizzle of a Scotch mist; and as it peeps from beneath the bramble, or glances from a hole in the wall, it seems as snug as a kitten frisking on the parlour rug.

“It is amusing,” he continues, “to watch the motions of a young family of wrens just come abroad. Walking among furze, broom, or juniper, you are attracted to some bush by



WRENS AND NEST.

hearing issue from it the frequent repetition of a sound resembling the syllable *chit*. On going up you perceive an old wren flitting about the twigs, and presently a young one flies off, uttering a stifled *chirr*, to conceal itself among the bushes. Several follow, whilst the parents continue to flutter about in great alarm, uttering their *chit, chit*, with various degrees of excitement."

The nest of the wren is a wonderful structure, of which I shall have a good deal to say. It begins building in April, and is not by any means particular in situation. Sometimes it builds in the hole of a wall or tree; sometimes, as in this lovely little picture of ours, in the mossy hollow of a primrose-covered bank; and because it was formerly supposed to live only in holes or little caves, it received the name of *Troglodytes*, or cave-dweller. But it builds equally willingly in the thatch of outbuildings, in barn-lofts, or tree-branches, either when growing apart or nailed against a wall, amongst ivy or other climbing plants; in fact, it seems to be of such a happy disposition as to adapt itself to a great variety of situations. It is a singular fact that it will often build several nests in one season—not that it needs so many separate dwellings, or that it finishes them when built; but it builds as if for the very pleasure of the work. Our naturalist says, speaking of this odd propensity, "that, whilst the hen is sitting, the he-bird, as if from a desire to be doing something, will construct as many as half-a-dozen nests near the first, none of which, however, are lined with feathers; and that whilst the true nest, on which the mother-bird is sitting, will be carefully concealed, these sham nests are open to view. Some say that as the wrens, during the cold weather, sleep in

some snug, warm hole, they frequently occupy these extra nests as winter-bedchambers, four or five, or even more, huddling together, to keep one another warm."

Mr. Weir, a friend of the author I have just quoted, says this was the case in his own garden; and that, during the winter, when the ground was covered with snow, two of the extra-nests were occupied at night by a little family of seven, which had hatched in the garden. He was very observant of their ways, and says it was amusing to see one of the old wrens, coming a little before sunset and standing a few inches from the nest, utter his little cry till the whole number of them had arrived. Nor were they long about it; they very soon answered the call, flying from all quarters—the seven young ones and the other parent-bird—and then at once nestled into their snug little dormitory. It was also remarkable that when the wind blew from the east they occupied a nest which had its opening to the west, and when it blew from the west, then one that opened to the east, so that it was evident they knew how to make themselves comfortable.

And now as regards the building of these little homes. I will, as far as I am able, give you the details of the whole business from the diary of the same gentleman, which is as accurate as if the little wren had kept it himself, and which will just as well refer to the little nest in the primrose bank as to the nest in the Spanish juniper-tree, where, in fact, it was built.

"On the 30th of May, therefore, you must imagine a little pair of wrens, having, after a great deal of consultation, made up their minds to build themselves a home in the branches of a Spanish juniper. The female, at about seven o'clock in the

morning, laid the foundation with the decayed leaf of a lime-tree. Some men were at work cutting a drain not far off, but she took no notice of them, and worked away industriously, carrying to her work bundles of dead leaves as big as herself, her mate, seeming the while to be delighted with her industry, seated not far off in a Portugal laurel, where he watched her, singing to her, and so doing, making her labour, no doubt, light and pleasant. From eight o'clock to nine she worked like a little slave, carrying in leaves, and then selecting from them such as suited her purpose and putting aside the rest. This was the foundation of the nest, which she rendered compact by pressing it down with her breast, and turning herself round in it: then she began to rear the sides. And now the delicate and difficult part of the work began, and she was often away for eight or ten minutes together. From the inside she built the underpart of the aperture with the stalks of leaves, which she fitted together very ingeniously with moss. The upper part of it was constructed solely with the last-mentioned material. To round it and give it the requisite solidity, she pressed it with her breast and wings, turning the body round in various directions. Most wonderful to tell, about seven o'clock in the evening the whole outside workmanship of this snug little erection was almost complete.

“Being very anxious to examine the interior of it, I went out for that purpose at half-past two the next morning. I introduced my finger, the birds not being there, and found its structure so close, that though it had rained in the night, yet that it was quite dry. The birds at this early hour were singing as if in ecstasy, and at about three o'clock the little he-wren came

and surveyed his domicile with evident satisfaction; then, flying to the top of a tree, began singing most merrily. In half-an-hour's time the hen-bird made her appearance, and, going into the nest, remained there about five minutes, rounding the entrance by pressing it with her breast and the shoulders of her wings. For the next hour she went out and came back five times with fine moss in her bill, with which she adjusted a small depression in the fore-part of it; then, after twenty minutes' absence, returned with a bundle of leaves to fill up a vacancy which she had discovered in the back of the structure. Although it was a cold morning, with wind and rain, the male bird sang delightfully; but between seven and eight o'clock, either having received a reproof from his wife for his indolence, or being himself seized with an impulse to work, he began to help her, and for the next ten minutes brought in moss, and worked at the inside of the nest. At eleven o'clock both of them flew off, either for a little recreation, or for their dinners, and were away till a little after one. From this time till four o'clock both worked industriously, bringing in fine moss; then, during another hour, the hen-bird brought in a feather three times. So that day came to an end.

“The next morning, June 1st, they did not begin their work early, as was evident to Mr. Weir, because having placed a slender leaf-stalk at the entrance, there it remained till half-past eight o'clock, when the two began to work as the day before with fine moss, the he-bird leaving off, however, every now and then to express his satisfaction on a near tree-top. Again, this day, they went off either for dinner or amusement; then came back and worked for another hour, bringing in fine moss and feathers.

“The next morning the little he-wren seemed in a regular ecstasy, and sang incessantly till half-past nine, when they both brought in moss and feathers, working on for about two hours, and again they went off, remaining away an hour later than usual. Their work was now nearly over, and they seemed to be taking their leisure, when all at once the hen-bird, who was sitting in her nest and looking out at her door, espied a man half-hidden by an arbor vitæ. It was no other than her good friend, but that she did not know; all men were terrible, as enemies to her race, and at once she set up her cry of alarm. The he-bird, on hearing this, appeared in a great state of agitation, and though the frightful monster immediately ran off, the little creatures pursued him, scolding vehemently.

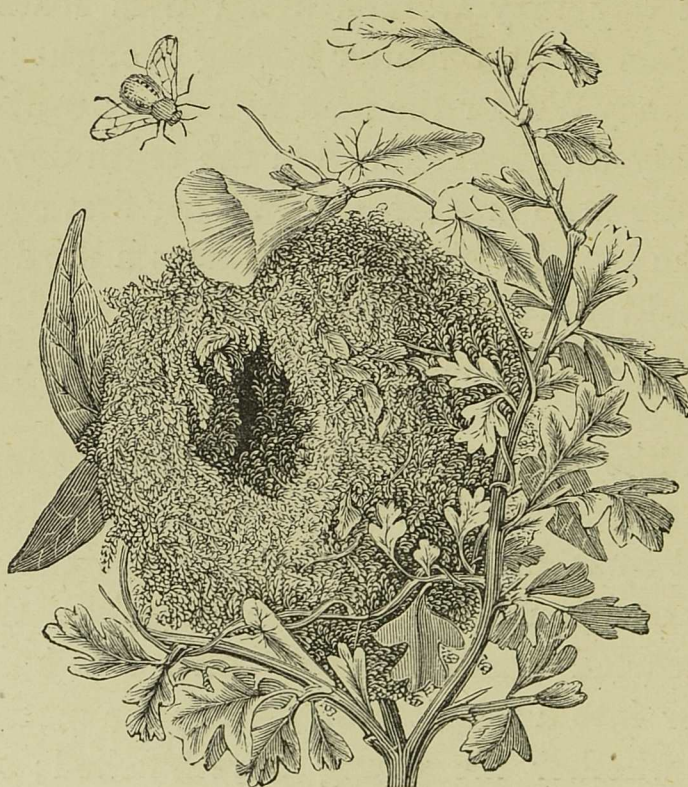
“The next day they worked again with feathers and fine moss, and again went off after having brought in a few more feathers. So they did for the next five days; working leisurely, and latterly only with feathers. On the tenth day the nest was finished, and the little mother-bird laid her first egg in it.”

Where is the boy, let him be as ruthless a bird-nester as he may, who could have the heart to take a wren's nest, only to tear it to pieces, after reading the history of this patient labour of love?

The wren, like various other small birds, cannot bear that their nests or eggs should be touched; they are always disturbed and distressed by it, and sometimes even will desert their nest and eggs in consequence. On one occasion, therefore, this good, kind-hearted friend of every bird that builds, carefully put his finger into a wren's nest, during the mother's absence, to ascertain whether the young were hatched; on her return,

perceiving that the entrance had been touched, she set up a doleful lamentation, carefully rounded it again with her breast and wings, so as to bring everything into proper order, after which she and her mate attended to their young. These particular young ones, only six in number, were fed by their parents 278 times in the course of a day. This was a small wren-family; and if there had been twelve, or even sixteen, as is often the case, what an amount of labour and care the birds must have had! But they would have been equal to it, and merry all the time.

For all these little creatures, which so lightly we regard,
They love to do their duty, and they never think it hard.



CHAPTER II.

THE GOLDFINCH.

THE Goldfinch, which is cousin to the Linnet, is wonderfully clever and docile, as I shall show you presently. In the first place, however, let me say a word or two about bird cleverness in general, which I copy from Jules Michelet's interesting work, "The Bird." Speaking of the great, cruel, and rapacious family of the *Raptores*, or Birds of Prey, he expresses satisfaction in the idea that this race of destroyers is decreasing, and that there may come a time when they no longer exist on the earth. He has no admiration for them, though they may be the swiftest of the swift, and the strongest of the strong, because they put forth none of the higher qualities of courage, address, or patient endurance in taking their prey, which are all weak and powerless in comparison with themselves; their poor unoffending victims. "All these cruel tyrants of the air," he says, "like the serpents, have flattened skulls, which show the want of intellect and intelligence. These birds of prey, with their small brains, offer a striking contrast to the amiable and intelligent species which we find amongst the smaller birds. The head of the former is only a beak, that of the latter is a face." Afterwards, to prove this more strongly, he gives a table to show the proportion of brain to the size of the body in these different species of birds. Thus the chaffinch, the spar-

row, and the goldfinch, have more than six times as much brain as the eagle in proportion to the size of the body. We may look, therefore, for no less than six times his intelligence and docile ability. Whilst in the case of the little tomtit it is thirteen times as much.

But now for the goldfinch, of which our cut—which is both faithful and beautiful—shows us a pair, evidently contemplating with much satisfaction the nest which they have just finished on one of the topmost boughs of a blossomy apple-tree. This nest is a wonderful little fabric, built of moss, dry grass, and slender roots, lined with hair, wool, and thistle-down; but the true wonder of the nest is the exact manner in which the outside is made to imitate the bough upon which it is placed. All its little ruggednesses and lichen growths are represented, whilst the colouring is so exactly that of the old apple-tree that it is almost impossible to know it from the branch itself. Wonderful ingenuity of instinct, which human skill would find it almost impossible to imitate!

The bird lays mostly five eggs, which are of a bluish-grey, spotted with greyish-purple or brown, and sometimes with a dark streak or two.

The goldfinch is one of the most beautiful of our English birds, with its scarlet forehead, and quaint little black velvet-like cap brought down over its white cheeks; its back is cinnamon brown, and its breast white; its wings are beautifully varied in black and white, as are also its tail feathers. In the midland counties it is known as “The Proud Tailor,” probably because its attire looks so bright and fresh, and it has a lively air as if conscious of being well dressed.



GOLDFINCHES AND NEST.

Like its relation, the linnet, it congregates in flocks as soon as its young can take wing, when they may be seen wheeling round in the pleasant late summer and autumn fields, full of life, and in the enjoyment of the plenty that surrounds them, in the ripened thistle-down, and all such winged seeds as are then floating in the air.

How often have I said it is worth while to go out into the woods and fields, and, bringing yourself into a state of quietness, watch the little birds in their life's employment, building their nests, feeding their young, or pursuing their innocent diversions! So now, on this pleasant, still autumn afternoon, if you will go into the old pasture fields where the thistles have not been stubbed up for generations, or on the margin of the old lane where ragwort, and groundsel, and burdock flourish abundantly, "let us," as the author of "British Birds" says, "stand still to observe a flock of goldfinches. They flutter over the plants, cling to the stalks, bend in various attitudes, disperse the down, already dry and winged, like themselves, for flight, pick them out one by one and swallow them. Then comes a stray cow followed by a herd boy. At once the birds cease their labour, pause for a moment, and fly off in succession. You observe how lightly and buoyantly they cleave the air, each fluttering its little wings, descending in a curved line, mounting again, and speeding along. Anon they alight in a little thicket of dried weeds, and, in settling, display to the delighted eye the beautiful tints of their plumage, as with fluttering wings and expanded tail, they hover for a moment to select a landing place amid the prickly points of the stout thistles whose heads are now bursting with downy-winged seeds."

The song of the goldfinch, which begins about the end of March, is very sweet, unassuming, and low—similar to that of the linnet, but singularly varied and pleasant.

Now, however, we must give a few instances of this bird's teachable sagacity, which, indeed, are so numerous that it is difficult to make a selection.

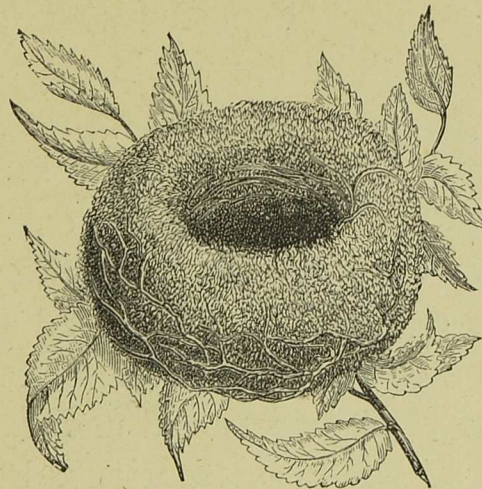
Mr. Syme, in his "British Song Birds," says, "The goldfinch is easily tamed and taught, and its capacity for learning the notes of other birds is well known. A few years ago the Sieur Roman exhibited a number of trained birds: they were goldfinches, linnets, and canaries. One appeared dead, and was held up by the tail or claw without exhibiting any signs of life; a second stood on its head with its claws in the air; a third imitated a Dutch milkmaid going to market with pails on its shoulders; a fourth mimicked a Venetian girl looking out at a window; a fifth appeared as a soldier, and mounted guard as a sentinel; whilst a sixth acted as a cannonier, with a cap on its head, a firelock on its shoulder, and a match in its claw, and discharged a small cannon. The same bird also acted as if it had been wounded. It was wheeled in a barrow as if to convey it to the hospital, after which it flew away before the whole company. The seventh turned a kind of windmill; and the last bird stood in the midst of some fireworks which were discharged all round it, and this without showing the least sign of fear."

Others, as I have said, may be taught to draw up their food and water, as from a well, in little buckets. All this is very wonderful, and shows great docility in the bird; but I cannot greatly admire it, from the secret fear that cruelty or harshness

may have been used to teach them these arts so contrary to their nature. At all events it proves what teachable and clever little creatures they are, how readily they may be made to understand the will of their master, and how obediently and faithfully they act according to it.

Man, however, should always stand as a human Providence to the animal world. In him the creatures should ever find their friend and protector; and were it so we should then see many an astonishing faculty displayed; and birds would then, instead of being the most timid of animals, gladden and beautify our daily life by their sweet songs, their affectionate regard, and their amusing and imitative little arts.

The early Italian and German painters introduce a goldfinch into their beautiful sacred pictures—generally on the ground—hopping at the feet of some martyred saint or love-commissioned angel, perhaps from an old legend of the bird's sympathy with the suffering Saviour, or from an intuitive sense that the divine spirit of Christianity extends to bird and beast as well as to man.



CHAPTER III.

THE SONG THRUSH.

WE have here a charming picture of one of the finest and noblest of our song-birds—the thrush, throstle, or mavis. The trees are yet leafless, but the bird is in the act of building, whilst her mate, on the tree-top, pours forth his exquisite melody. The almost completed nest, like a richly ornamented bowl, is before us.

This bird belongs to a grandly musical family, being own cousin to the missel-thrush and the blackbird, each one having a kindred song, but all, at the same time, distinctly characteristic.

The colouring of the thrush is soft and very pleasing; the upper parts of a yellowish-brown; the chin, white; the under part of the body, grayish white; the throat, breast, and sides of the neck, yellowish, thickly spotted with dark brown.

The thrush remains with us the whole year, and may occasionally be heard singing even in the winter, though April, May, and June are the months when he is in fullest song. They pair in March, and by the end of that month, or early in April, begin to build. They have several broods in the year. The nest, which, as we see, is commodious, is placed at no great height from the ground, in a thick bush or hedge, and sometimes, also, in a rough bank, amongst bushes and undergrowth. They are particularly fond of spruce-fir plantations, building on one of



SONG THRUSH AND NEST.

the low, spreading branches, close to the stem. Though the structure is so solid and substantial, yet it is built very rapidly ; indeed, the thrush seems to be wide awake in all its movements ; he is no loiterer, and does his work well. As a proof of his expedition I will mention that a pair of these birds began to build a second, perhaps, indeed, it might be a third nest, on a Thursday, June 15 ; on Friday afternoon the nest was finished, and on Saturday morning the first egg was laid, though the interior plastering was not then dry. On the 21st the hen began to sit, and on the 17th of July the young birds were hatched.

The frame-work, so to speak, of the nest is composed of twigs, roots, grasses, and moss, the two latter being brought to the outside. Inside it is lined with a thin plastering of mud, cow-dung, and rotten wood, which is laid on quite smoothly, almost like the glaze on earthenware ; nor is there an internal covering between this and the eggs. The circular form of the nest is as perfect as a bowl shaped upon a lathe, and often contracts inwards at the top. The eggs, which are generally five in number, are of a bright blue-green, spotted over with brownish-black, these spots being more numerous at the larger end.

The food of the thrush is mostly of an animal character, as worms, slugs, and snails ; and, by seashores, small molluscs, as whelks and periwinkles. On all such as are enclosed in shells he exercises his ingenuity in a remarkable way. We ourselves lived at one time in an old house standing in an old garden where were many ancient trees and out-buildings, in the old ivied roots and walls of which congregated great quantities of shell-snails. One portion of this garden, which enclosed an old,

disused dairy, was a great resort of thrushes, where they had, so to speak, their stones of sacrifice, around which lay heaps of the broken shells of snails, their victims. I have repeatedly watched them at work: hither they brought their snails, and, taking their stand by the stone with the snail in their beak, struck it repeatedly against the stone, till, the shell being smashed, they picked it out as easily as the oyster is taken from its opened shell. This may seem easy work with the slender-shelled snail, but the labour is considerably greater with hard shell-fish. On this subject the intelligent author of "British Birds" says, that many years ago, when in the Isle of Harris, he frequently heard a sharp sound as of one small stone being struck upon another, the cause of which he, for a considerable time, sought for in vain. At length, one day, being in search of birds when the tide was out, he heard the well-known click, and saw a bird standing between two flat stones, moving its head and body alternately up and down, each downward motion being accompanied by the sound which had hitherto been so mysterious. Running up to the spot, he found a thrush, which, flying off, left a whelk, newly-broken, lying amongst fragments of shells lying around the stone.

Thrushes are remarkably clean and neat with regard to their nests, suffering no litter or impurity to lie about, and in this way are a great example to many untidy people. Their domestic character, too, is excellent, the he-bird now and then taking the place of the hen on the eggs, and, when not doing so, feeding her as she sits. When the young are hatched, the parents may be seen, by those who will watch them silently and patiently, frequently stretching out the wings of the young as if to

exercise them, and pruning and trimming their feathers. To put their love of cleanliness to the proof, a gentleman, a great friend of all birds, had some sticky mud rubbed upon the backs of two of the young ones whilst the parents were absent. On their return, either by their own keen sense of propriety, or, perhaps, the complaint of the young ones, they saw what had happened, and were not only greatly disconcerted, but very angry, and instantly set to work to clean the little unfortunates, which, strange to say, they managed to do by making use of dry earth, which they brought to the nest for that purpose. Human intellect could not have suggested a better mode.

This same gentleman determined to spend a whole day in discovering how the thrushes spent it. Hiding himself, therefore, in a little hut of fir boughs, he began his observations in the early morning of the 8th of June. At half-past two o'clock, the birds began to feed their brood, and in two hours had fed them thirty-six times. It was now half-past five, the little birds were all wide awake, and one of them, whilst pruning its feathers, lost its balance and fell out of the nest to the ground. On this the old ones set up the most doleful lamentations, and the gentleman, coming out of his retreat, put the little one back into the nest. This kind action, however, wholly disconcerted the parents, nor did they again venture to feed their young till an artifice of the gentleman led them to suppose that he was gone from their neighbourhood. No other event happened to them through the day, and by half-past nine o'clock at night, when all went to rest, the young ones had been fed two hundred and six times.

Thrushes, however, become occasionally so extremely tame that the female will remain upon her eggs and feed her young,

CHAPTER IV.

THE BLACKBIRD.

THE Blackbird is familiar to us all. It is a thoroughly English bird, and, with its cousin the thrush, is not only one of the pleasantest features in our English spring and summer landscape, but both figure in our old poetry and ballads, as the "merle and the mavis," "the blackbird and the throstle-cock;" for those old poets loved the country, and could not speak of the greenwood without the bird.

When shaws are sheen and fields are fair,
And leaves both large and long,
'Tis merry walk'ng in the green forest
To hear the wild birds' song ;

The wood merle sings, and will not cease,
Sitting upon a spray ;
The merle and the mavis shout their fill,
From morn till the set of day.

The blackbird takes its name from a very intelligible cause—its perfectly black plumage, which, however, is agreeably relieved by the bright orange of its bill, the orange circles round its eyes, and its yellow feet; though this is peculiar only to the male, nor does he assume this distinguishing colour till his second year. The female is of a dusky-brown colour.

Sometimes the singular variety of a *white* blackbird occurs,



BLACKBIRD AND NEST.

which seems to astonish even its fellow birds; the same phenomenon also occurs amongst sparrows; a fatal distinction to the poor birds, who are in consequence very soon shot.

This bird is one of our finest singers. His notes are solemn and flowing, unlike those of the thrush, which are short, quick, and extremely varied. The one bird is more lyrical, the other sings in a grand epic strain. A friend of ours, deeply versed in bird-lore, maintains that the blackbird is oratorical, and sings as if delivering an eloquent rhythmical oration.

This bird begins to sing early in the year, and continues his song during the whole time that the hen is sitting. Like his relatives, the thrush and the missel thrush, he takes his post on the highest branch of a tree, near his nest, so that his song is heard far and wide; and in fact, through the whole pleasant spring you hear the voices of these three feathered kings of English song constantly filling the woods and fields with their melody. The blackbird sings deliciously in rain, even during a thunderstorm, with the lightning flashing round him. Indeed, both he and the thrush seem to take great delight in summer showers.

The blackbird has a peculiar call, to give notice to his brood of the approach of danger; probably, however, it belongs both to male and female. Again, there is a third note, very peculiar also, heard only in the dusk of evening, and which seems pleasingly in harmony with the approaching shadows of night. By this note they call each other to roost, in the same way as partridges call each other to assemble at night, however far they may be asunder.

The nest of the blackbird is situated variously; most frequently

in the thicker parts of hedges; sometimes in the hollow of a stump or amongst the curled and twisted roots of old trees, which, projecting from the banks of woods or woodland lanes, wreathed with their trails of ivy, afford the most picturesque little hollows for the purpose. Again, it may be found under the roof of out-houses or cart-sheds, laid on the wall-plate; and very frequently in copses, in the stumps of pollard trees, partly concealed by their branches; and is often begun before the leaves are on the trees. The nest is composed of dry bents, and lined with fine dry grass. The hen generally lays five eggs, which are of a dusky bluish-green, thickly covered with black spots; altogether very much resembling those of crows, rooks, magpies, and that class of birds.

Universal favourite as the blackbird deservedly is, yet, in common with the thrush, all gardeners are their enemies from the great liking they have for his fruit, especially currants, raspberries, and cherries. There is, however, something very amusing, though, at the same time, annoying, in the sly way by which they approach these fruits, quite aware that they are on a mischievous errand. They steal along, flying low and silently, and, if observed, will hide themselves in the nearest growth of garden plants, scarlet runners, or Jerusalem artichokes, where they remain as still as mice, till they think the human enemy has moved off. If, however, instead of letting them skulk quietly in their hiding-place, he drives them away, they fly off with a curious note, very like a little chuckling laugh of defiance, as if they would say, "Ha! ha! we shall soon be back again!" which they very soon are.

But we must not begrudge them their share, though they

neither have dug the ground nor sowed the seed, for very dull and joyless indeed would be the garden and the gardener's toil, and the whole country in short, if there were no birds—no blackbirds and thrushes—to gladden our hearts, and make the gardens, as well as the woods and fields, joyous with their melody. Like all good singers, these birds expect, and deserve, good payment.

The blackbird, though naturally unsocial and keeping much to itself, is very bold in defence of its young, should they be in danger, or attacked by any of the numerous bird-enemies, which abound everywhere, especially to those which are in immediate association with man. The Rev. J. G. Wood tells us, for instance, that on one occasion a prowling cat was forced to make an ignominious retreat before the united onset of a pair of blackbirds, on whose young she was about to make an attack.

Let me now, in conclusion, give a day with a family of blackbirds, which I somewhat curtail from Macgillivray.

“On Saturday morning, June 10th, I went into a little hut made of green branches, at half-past two in the morning, to see how the blackbirds spend the day at home. They lived close by, in a hole in an old wall, which one or other of them had occupied for a number of years.

“At a quarter-past three they began to feed their young, which were four in number. She was the most industrious in doing so; and when he was not feeding, he was singing most deliciously. Towards seven o'clock the father-bird induced one of the young ones to fly out after him. But this was a little mistake, and, the bird falling, I was obliged to help it into its nest again, which made a little family commotion. They were

exceedingly tidy about their nest, and when a little rubbish fell out they instantly carried it away. At ten o'clock the feeding began again vigorously, and continued till two, both parent-birds supplying their young almost equally.

“The hut in which I sat was very closely covered; but a little wren having alighted on the ground in pursuit of a fly, and seeing one of my legs moving, set up a cry of alarm, on which, in the course of a few seconds, all the birds in the neighbourhood collected to know what was the matter. The blackbird hopped round the hut again and again, making every effort to peep in, even alighting on the top within a few inches of my head, but not being able to make any discovery, the tumult subsided. It was probably considered a false alarm, and the blackbirds went on feeding their young till almost four o'clock: and now came the great event of the day.

“At about half-past three the mother brought a large worm, four inches in length probably, which she gave to one of the young ones, and flew away. Shortly afterwards returning, she had the horror of perceiving that the worm, instead of being swallowed was sticking in its throat; on this she uttered a perfect moan of distress, which immediately brought the he-bird, who also saw at a glance what a terrible catastrophe was to be feared. Both parents made several efforts to push the worm down the throat, but to no purpose, when, strange to say, the father discovered the cause of the accident. The outer end of the worm had got entangled in the feathers of the breast, and, being held fast, could not be swallowed. He carefully disengaged it, and, holding it up with his beak, the poor little thing, with a great effort, managed to get it down, but was by

this time so exhausted that it lay with its eyes shut and without moving for the next three hours. The male-bird in the meantime took his stand upon a tree, a few yards from the nest, and poured forth some of his most enchanting notes—a song of rejoicing no doubt for the narrow escape from death of one of his family.

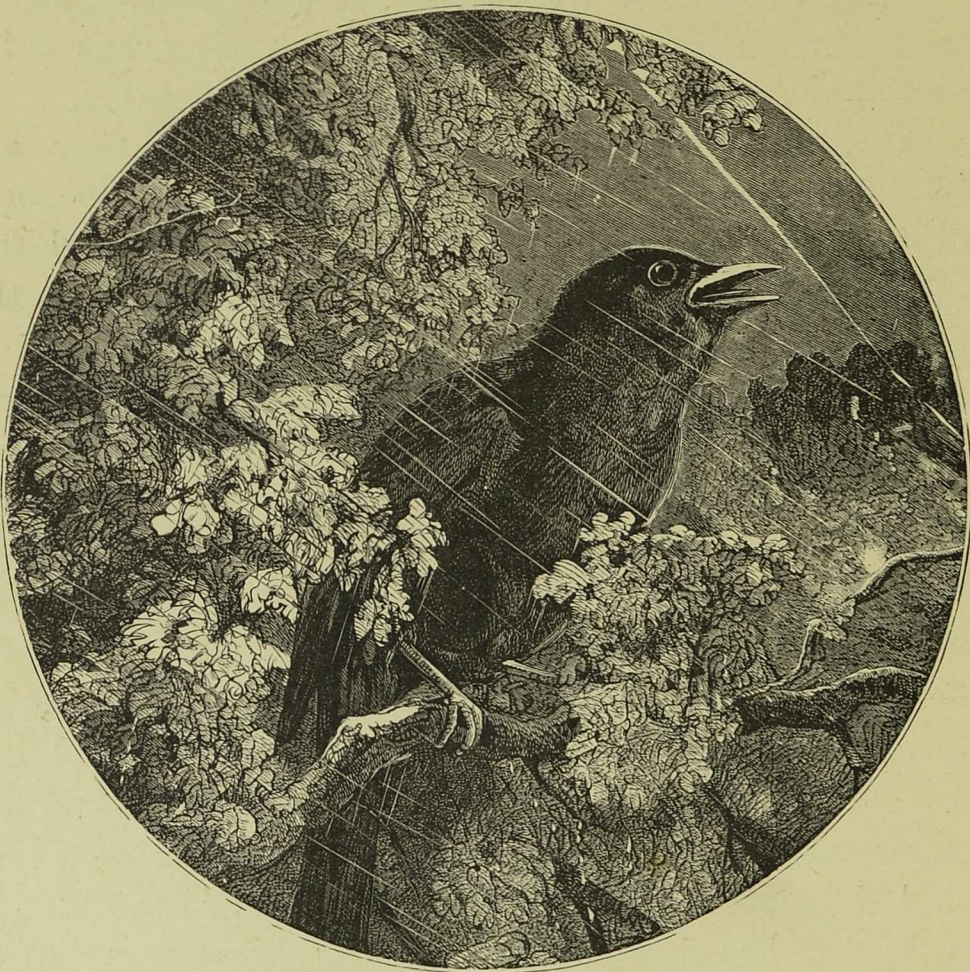
“From four till seven o'clock both birds again fed their young, after which the male bird left these family duties to his mate, and gave himself up to incessant singing. At twenty minutes to nine their labours ceased, they having then fed their young one hundred and thirteen times during the day.

“I observed that before feeding their young they always alighted upon a tree and looked round them for a few seconds. Sometimes they brought in a quantity of worms and fed their brood alternately; at other times they brought one which they gave to only one of them.

“The young birds often trimmed their feathers, and stretched out their wings; they also appeared to sleep now and then.

“With the note of alarm which the feathered tribes set up on the discovery of their enemies all the different species of the little birds seem to be intimately acquainted; for no sooner did a beast or bird of prey make its appearance, than they seemed to be anxiously concerned about the safety of their families. They would hop from tree to tree uttering their doleful lamentations. At one time the blackbirds were in an unusual state of excitement and terror, and were attended by crowds of their woodland friends. A man and boy, who were working in my garden, having heard the noise, ran to see what was the cause of it, and on looking into some branches which were lying on

the ground, observed a large weasel stealing slyly along in pursuit of its prey. It was, however, driven effectually from the place without doing any harm. It is astonishing how soon the young know this intimation of danger; for I observed that no sooner did the old ones utter the alarm-cry, than they covered in their nest, and appeared to be in a state of great uneasiness."



CHAPTER V.

THE DIPPER, OR WATER-OUSEL.

THE Dipper, or Water-ousel, of which Mr. Weir has given us a charming and faithful portrait, is very like a wren in form and action, with its round body and lively little tail. Its mode of flight, however, so nearly resembles the king-fisher that, in some places, the country people mistake it for the female of that bird. But it is neither wren nor kingfisher, nor yet related to either of them. It is the nice little water-ousel, with ways of its own, and a cheerful life of its own, and the power of giving pleasure to all lovers of the free country which is enriched with an infinite variety of happy, innocent creatures.

The upper part of the head and neck, and the whole back and wings of this bird, are of a rusty-brown ; but, as each individual feather is edged with gray, there is no deadness of colouring. The throat and breast are snowy white, which, contrasting so strongly with the rest of the body, makes it seem to flash about like a point of light through the dark shadows of the scenes it loves to haunt.

I said above that this bird gave pleasure to all lovers of nature. So it does, for it is only met with in scenes which are especially beloved by poets and painters. Like them, it delights in mountain regions, where rocky streams rush along with an unceasing murmur, leaping over huge stones, slumbering in

deep, shadowy pools, or lying low between rocky walls, in the moist crevices and on the edges of which the wild rose flings out its pale green branches, gemmed with flowers, or the hardy polypody nods, like a feathery plume. On these streams, with their foamy waters and graceful vegetation, you may look for the cheerful little water-ousel. He is perfectly in character with the scenes.

And now, supposing that you are happily located for a few weeks in summer, either in Scotland or Wales, let me repeat my constant advice as regards the study and truest enjoyment of country life and things. Go out for several hours; do not be in a hurry; take your book, or your sketching, or whatever your favourite occupation may be, if it be only a quiet one, and seat yourself by some rocky stream amongst the mountains; choose the pleasantest place you know, where the sun can reach you, if you need his warmth, and if you do not, where you can yet witness the beautiful effects of light and shade. There seat yourself quite at your ease, silent and still as though you were a piece of rock itself, half screened by that lovely wild rose bush, or tangle of bramble, and before long you will most likely see this merry, lively little dipper come with his quick, jerking flight, now alighting on this stone, now on that, peeping here, and peeping there, as quick as light, and snapping up, now a water-beetle, now a tiny fish, and now diving down into the stream for a worm that he espies below, or walking into the shallows, and there flapping his wings, more for the sheer delight of doing so than for anything else. Now he is off and away, and, in a moment or two, he is on yonder gray mass of stone, which rises up in that dark chasm of waters like a rock in



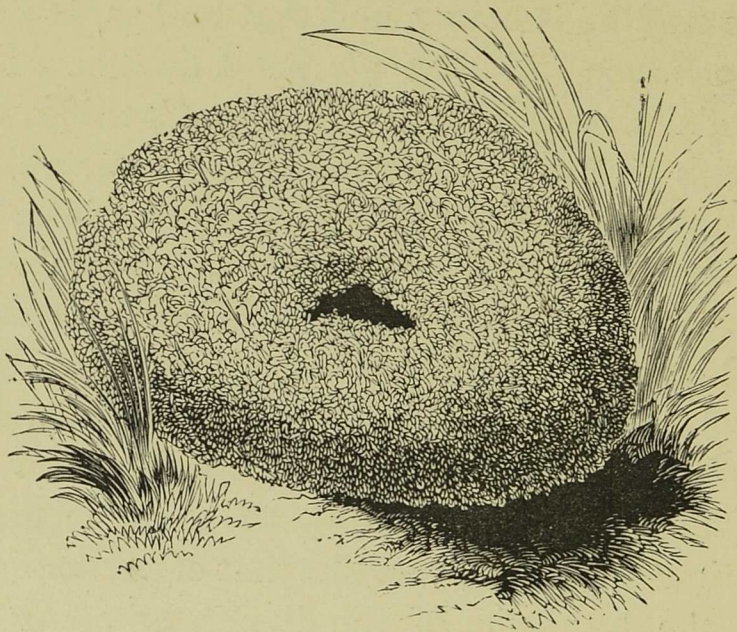
DIPPERS AND NEST.

a stormy sea, with the rush and roar of the water full above him. Yet there he is quite at home, flirting his little tail like a jenny wren, and hopping about on his rocky point, as if he could not for the life of him be still for a moment. Now listen! That is his song, and a merry little song it is, just such a one as you would fancy coming out of his jocund little heart; and, see now, he begins his antics. He must be a queer little soul! If we could be little dippers like him, and understand what his song and all his grimaces are about, we should not so often find the time tedious for want of something to do.

We may be sure he is happy, and that he has, in the round of his small experience, all that his heart desires. He has this lonely mountain stream to hunt in, these leaping, chattering, laughing waters to bear him company, all these fantastically heaped-up stones, brought hither by furious winter torrents of long ago—that dashing, ever roaring, ever foaming waterfall, in the spray of which the summer sunshine weaves rainbows. All these wild roses and honeysuckles, all this maiden hair, and this broad polypody, which grows golden in autumn, make up his little kingdom, in the very heart of which, under a ledge of rock, and within sound, almost within the spray of the waterfall, is built the curious little nest, very like that of a wren, in which sits the hen-bird, the little wife of the dipper, brooding with most unwearied love on four or five white eggs, lightly touched with red.

This nest is extremely soft and elastic, sometimes of large size, the reason for which one cannot understand. It is generally near to the water, and, being kept damp by its situation, is always so fresh, looking so like the mass of its immediate sur-

roundings as scarcely to be discoverable by the quickest eye. When the young are hatched they soon go abroad with the parents, and then, instead of the one solitary bird, you may see them in little parties of from five to seven going on in the same sort of way, only all the merrier because there are more of them.



CHAPTER VI.

THE NIGHTINGALE.

PHILOMELA, or the Nightingale, is the head of the somewhat large bird-family of Warblers, and is the most renowned of all feathered songsters, though some judges think the garden-ousel exceeds it in mellowness, and the thrush in compass of voice, but that, in every other respect, it excels them all. For my part, however, I think no singing-bird is equal to it; and listening to it when in full song, in the stillness of a summer's night, am ready to say with good old Izaak Walton:—

“The nightingale, another of my airy creatures, breathes such sweet music out of her little instrumental throat, that it might make mankind to think that miracles had not ceased. He that at midnight, when the weary labourer sleeps securely, should hear, as I have very often heard, the clear airs, the sweet descants, the natural rising and falling, the doubling and redoubling of her voice, might well be lifted above earth and say, ‘Lord, what music hast Thou provided for the saints in heaven, when Thou affordest bad men such music on earth!’ ”

In colour, the upper parts of the nightingale are of a rich brown; the tail of a reddish tint; the throat and underparts of the body, greyish-white; the neck and breast, grey; the bill and legs, light brown. Its size is about that of the garden warblers,

which it resembles in form—being, in fact, one of that family. Thus, the most admired of all singers—the subject of poets' songs and eulogies, the bird that people walk far and wide to listen to, of which they talk for weeks before it comes, noting down the day of its arrival as if it were the Queen or the Queen's son—is yet nothing but a little insignificant brown bird, not to be named with the parrot for plumage, nor with our little goldfinch, who always looks as if he had his Sunday suit on. But this is a good lesson for us. The little brown nightingale, with his little brown wife in the thickety copse, with their simple unpretending nest, not built up aloft on the tree branch, but humbly at the tree's root, or even on the very ground itself, may teach us that the world's external show or costliness is not true greatness. The world's best bird-singer might have been as big as an eagle, attired in colours of blue and scarlet and orange like the grandest macaw. But the great Creator willed that it should not be so—his strength, and his furiousness, and his cruel capacity were sufficient for the eagle, and his shining vestments for the macaw; whilst the bird to which was given the divinest gift of song must be humble and unobtrusive, small of size, with no surpassing beauty of plumage, and loving best to hide itself in the thick seclusion of the copse in which broods the little mother-bird, the very counterpart of himself, upon her olive-coloured eggs.

Mr. Harrison Weir has given us a sweet little picture of the nightingale at home. Somewhere, not far off, runs the high-road, or it may be a pleasant woodland lane leading from one village to another, and probably known as "Nightingale-lane," and traversed night after night by rich and poor, learned and

unlearned, to listen to the bird. In our own neighbourhood we have a "Nightingale-lane," with its thickety copses on either hand, its young oaks and Spanish chestnuts shooting upwards, and tangles of wild roses and thick masses of brambles throwing their long sprays over old, mossy, and ivied stumps of trees, cut or blown down in the last generation—little pools and water courses here and there, with their many-coloured mosses and springing rushes—a very paradise for birds. This is in Surrey, and Surrey nightingales, it is said, are the finest that sing. With this comes the saddest part of the story. Bird-catchers follow the nightingale, and, once in his hands, farewell to the pleasant copse with the young oaks and Spanish chestnuts, the wild rose tangles, the little bosky hollow at the old tree root, in one of which the little nest is built and the little wife broods on her eggs!

Generally, however, the unhappy bird, if he be caught, is taken soon after his arrival in this country; for nightingales are migratory, and arrive with us about the middle of April. The male bird comes about a fortnight before the female, and begins to sing in his loneliness a song of salutation—a sweet song, which expresses, with a tender yearning, his desire for her companionship. Birds taken at this time, before the mate has arrived, and whilst he is only singing to call and welcome her, are said still to sing on through the summer in the hope, long-deferred, that she may yet come. He will not give her up though he is no longer in the freedom of the wood, so he sings and sings, and if he live over the winter, he will sing the same song the following spring, for the want is again in his heart. He cannot believe but that she will still come. The cruel bird-catchers,

therefore, try all their arts to take him in this early stage of his visit to us. Should he be taken later, when he is mated, and, as we see him in our picture, with all the wealth of his little life around him, he cannot sing long. How should he—in a narrow cage and dingy street of London or some other great town—perhaps with his eyes put out—for his cruel captor fancies he sings best if blind? He may sing, perhaps, for a while, thinking that he can wake himself out of this dreadful dream of captivity, darkness, and solitude. But it is no dream; the terrible reality at length comes upon him, and before the summer is over he dies of a broken heart.

It is a curious fact that the nightingale confines itself, without apparent reason, to certain countries and to certain parts of England. For instance, though it visits Sweden, and even the temperate parts of Russia, it is not met with in Scotland, North Wales, nor Ireland, neither is it found in any of our northern counties excepting Yorkshire, and there only in the neighbourhood of Doncaster. Neither is it known in the south-western counties, as Cornwall and Devonshire. It is supposed to migrate during the winter into Egypt and Syria. It has been seen amongst the willows of Jordan and the olive trees of Judea, but we have not, to our knowledge, any direct mention of it in the Scriptures, though Solomon no doubt had it in his thoughts, in his sweet description of the spring—"Lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land." A recent traveller in Syria tells me that she heard nightingales singing at four o'clock one morning in April of last year in the lofty regions of the Lebanon.



There have been various attempts to introduce the nightingale into such parts of this country as it has not yet frequented; for instance, a gentleman of Gower, a sea-side district of Glamorganshire, the climate of which is remarkably mild, procured a number of young birds from Norfolk and Surrey, hoping that they would find themselves so much at home in the beautiful woods there as to return the following year. But none came. Again, as regards Scotland, Sir John Sinclair purchased a large number of nightingales' eggs, at a shilling each, and employed several men to place them carefully in robins' nests to be hatched. So far all succeeded well. The foster-mothers reared the nightingales, which, when full fledged, flew about as if quite at home. But when September came, the usual month for the migration of the nightingale, the mysterious impulse awoke in the hearts of the young strangers, and, obeying it, they suddenly disappeared and never after returned.

Mr. Harrison Weir has given us a very accurate drawing of the nightingale's nest, which is slight and somewhat fragile in construction, made of withered leaves—mostly of oak—and lined with dry grass. The author of "British Birds" describes one in his possession as composed of slips of the inner bark of willow, mixed with the leaves of the lime and the elm, lined with fibrous roots, grass, and a few hairs; but whatever the materials used may be, the effect produced is exactly the same.

In concluding our little chapter on this bird, I would mention that in the Turkish cemeteries, which, from the old custom of planting a cypress at the head and foot of every grave, have now become cypress woods, nightingales abound, it having been also an old custom of love to keep these birds on every grave.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SKYLARK.

THE Skylark, that beautiful singer, which carries its joy up to the very gates of heaven, as it were, has inspired more poets to sing about it than any other bird living.

Wordsworth says, as in an ecstasy of delight:—

Up with me ! up with me into the clouds !
For thy song, lark, is strong ;
Up with me ! up with me into the clouds !
Singing, singing.
With clouds and sky about me ringing,
Lift me, guide me till I find
That spot that seems so to my mind.

Shelley, in an ode which expresses the bird's ecstasy of song, also thus addresses it, in a strain of sadness peculiar to himself:—

Hail to thee, blithe spirit !
Bird, thou never wert—
That from heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art !
Higher, still, and higher
From the earth thou springest,
Like a cloud of fire ;
The deep blue thou wingest,
And singing still doth soar, and soaring ever singest !

* * * *

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground.

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips should flow ;
The world should listen then, as I am listening now.

James Hogg, the Ettrick shepherd, who had listened to the bird with delight on the Scottish hills, thus sings of it:—

Bird of the wilderness,
Blithesome and cumberless,
Sweet is thy matin o'er moorland and lea !
Emblem of happiness,
Blest is thy dwelling-place—
Oh, to abide in the desert with thee !

Wild is thy lay, and loud ;
Far in the downy cloud
Love gives it energy, love gave it birth.
Where on thy dewy wing,
Where art thou journeying ?
Thy lay is in heaven, thy love is on earth.

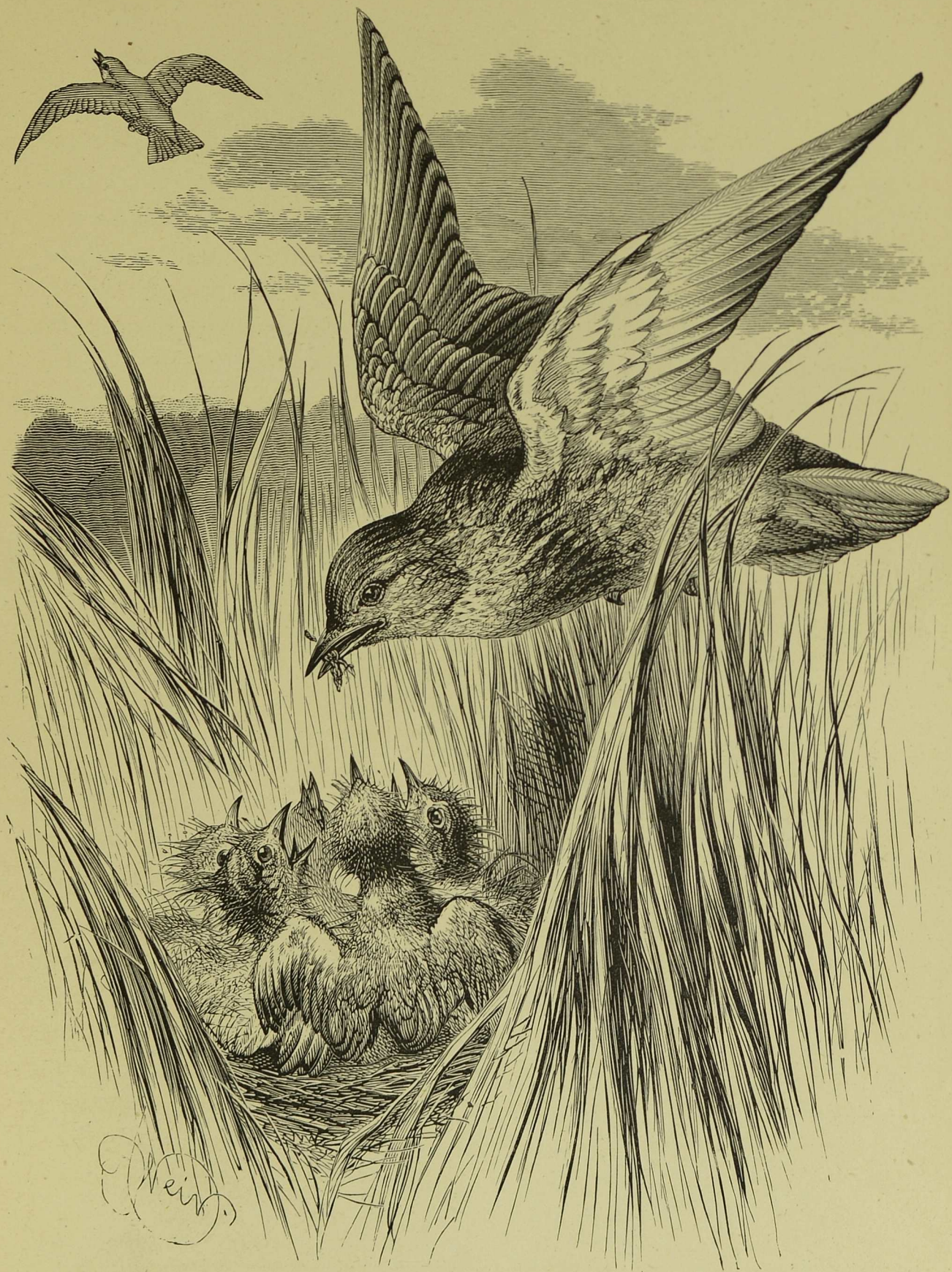
O'er fell and fountain sheen,
O'er moor and mountain green,
O'er the red streamer that heralds the day ;
Over the cloudlet dim,
Over the rainbow's rim,
Musical cherub, soar, singing away !

Then when the gloaming comes,
Low in the heather blooms,
Sweet will thy welcome and bed of love be !
Emblem of happiness,
Blest is thy dwelling-place—
Oh, to abide in the desert with thee !

But we must not forget the earthly life of the bird in all these sweet songs about him.

The plumage of the skylark is brown, in various shades; the fore-part of the neck, reddish-white, spotted with brown; the breast and under part of the body, yellowish-white. Its feet are peculiar, being furnished with an extraordinarily long hind claw, the purpose of which has puzzled many naturalists. But whatever nature intended it for, the bird has been known to make use of it for a purpose which cannot fail to interest us and call forth our admiration. This shall be presently explained. The nest is built on the ground, either between two clods of earth, in the deep foot-print of cattle, or some other small hollow suitable for the purpose, and is composed of dry grass, hair, and leaves; the hair is mostly used for the lining. Here the mother-bird lays four or five eggs of pale sepia colour, with spots and markings of darker hue. She has generally two broods in the year, and commences sitting in May. The skylark begins to sing early in the spring. Bewick says, "He rises from the neighbourhood of the nest almost perpendicularly in the air, by successive springs, and hovers at a vast height. His descent, on the contrary, is in an oblique direction, unless he is threatened by birds of prey, or attracted by his mate, and on these occasions he drops like a stone."

With regard to his ascent, I must, however, add that it is in a spiral direction, and that what Bewick represents as springs are his sudden spiral flights after pausing to sing. Another peculiarity must be mentioned: all his bones are hollow, and he can inflate them with air from his lungs, so that he becomes, as it were, a little balloon, which accounts for the buoyancy



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with which he ascends, and the length of time he can support himself in the air: often for an hour at a time. Still more extraordinary is the wonderful power and reach of his voice, for while, probably, the seven hundred or a thousand voices of the grand chorus of an oratorio would fail to fill the vast spaces of the atmosphere, it can be done by this glorious little songster, which, mounting upwards, makes itself heard, without effort, when it can be seen no longer.

The attachment of the parents to their young is very great, and has been seen to exhibit itself in a remarkable manner.

The nest being placed on the open-ground—often pasture, or in a field of mowing grass—it is very liable to be disturbed; many, therefore, are the instances of the bird's tender solicitude either for the young or for its eggs, one of which I will give from Mr. Jesse. "In case of alarm," he says, "either by cattle grazing near the nest, or by the approach of the mower, the parent birds remove their eggs, by means of their long claws, to a place of greater security, and this I have observed to be affected in a very short space of time." He says that when one of his mowers first told him of this fact he could scarcely believe it, but that he afterwards saw it himself, and that he regarded it only as another proof of the affection which these birds show their offspring. Instances are also on record of larks removing their young by carrying them on their backs; in one case the young were thus removed from a place of danger into a field of standing corn. But however successful the poor birds may be in removing their eggs, they are not always so with regard to their young, as Mr. Yarrell relates. An instance came under his notice, in which the little fledgling proved too

heavy for the parent to carry, and, being dropped from an height of about thirty feet, was killed in the fall.

Of all captive birds, none grieves me more than the skylark. Its impulse is to soar, which is impossible in the narrow spaces of a cage; and in this unhappy condition, when seized by the impulse of song, he flings himself upwards, and is dashed down again by its cruel barriers. For this reason the top of the lark's cage is always bedded with green baize to prevent his injuring himself. In the freedom of nature he is the joyous minstrel of liberty and love, carrying upwards, and sending down from above, his buoyant song, which seems to fall down through the golden sunshine like a flood of sparkling melody.

I am not aware of the height to which the lark soars, but it must be very great, as he becomes diminished to a mere speck, almost invisible in the blaze of light. Yet, high as he may soar, he never loses the consciousness of the little mate and the nestlings below: but their first cry of danger or anxiety, though the cry may be scarce audible to the human ear, thrills up aloft to the singer, and he comes down with a direct arrow-like flight, whilst otherwise his descent is more leisurely, and said by some to be in the direct spiral line of his ascent.

Larks, unfortunately for themselves, are considered very fine eating. Immense numbers of them are killed for the table, not only on the continent, but in England. People cry shame on the Roman epicure, Lucullus, dining on a stew of nightingales' tongue, nearly two thousand years ago, and no more can I reconcile to myself the daily feasting on these lovely little songsters, which may be delicate eating, but are no less God's gifts to gladden and beautify the earth.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LINNET.

LINNETS are a branch of a larger family of finches, all very familiar to us. They are cousins, also, to the dear, impudent sparrows, and the pretty siskin or aberdevines.

The linnets are all compactly and stoutly built, with short necks and good sized heads, with short, strong, pointed bills, made for the ready picking up of seed and grain, on which they live. Most of them have two broods in the season, and they build a bulky, deep, and compact nest, just in accordance with their character and figure; but, though all linnet-nests have a general resemblance of form, they vary more or less in the material used.

Linnets change their plumage once a year, and have a much more spruce and brilliant appearance when they have their new summer suits on. They are numerous in all parts of the country, and, excepting in the season when they have young, congregate in flocks, and in winter are attracted to the neighbourhood of man, finding much of their food in farm-yards, and amongst stacks.

The linnet of our picture is the greater red-pole—one of four brothers of the linnet family—and is the largest of the four; the others are the twit or mountain-linnet, the mealy-linnet, and the lesser red-pole—the smallest of the four—all

very much alike, and easily mistaken for each other. The name red-pole is given from the bright crimson spot on their heads—*pole* or *poll* being the old Saxon word for head. The back of our linnet's head and the sides of his neck are of dingy ash-colour, his back of a warm brown tint, his wings black, his throat of a dull white, spotted with brown, his breast a brilliant red, and the under part of his body a dingy white.

The linnet, amongst singing birds, is what a song writer is amongst poets. He is not a grand singer, like the blackbird or the thrush, the missel-thrush or the wood-lark, all of which seem to have an epic story in their songs, nor, of course, like the skylark, singing up to the gates of heaven, or the nightingale, that chief psalmist of all bird singers. But, though much humbler than any of these, he is a sweet and pleasant melodist; a singer of charming little songs, full of the delight of summer, the freshness of open heaths, with their fragrant gorse, or of the Scottish brae, with its "bonnie broom," also in golden blossom. His are unpretending little songs of intense enjoyment, simple thanksgivings for the pleasures of life, for the little brown hen-bird, who has not a bit of scarlet in her plumage, and who sits in her snug nest on her fine little white eggs, with their circle of freckles and brown spots at the thicker end, always alike, a sweet, patient mother, waiting for the time when the young ones will come into life from that delicate shell-covering, blind at first, though slightly clothed in greyish-brown—five little linnets gaping for food.

The linnet mostly builds its nest in low bushes, the furze being its favourite resort; it is constructed outside of dry grass, roots, and moss, and lined with hair and wool. We have it



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here in our picture ; for our friend, Mr. Harrison Weir, always faithful in his transcripts of nature, has an eye, also, for beauty.

Round the nest, as you see, blossoms the yellow furze, and round it too rises a *chevaux de frise* of furze spines, green and tender to look at, but sharp as needles. Yes, here on this furzy common, and on hundreds of others all over this happy land, and on hill sides, with the snowy hawthorn and the pink-blossomed crab-tree above them, and, below, the mossy banks gemmed with pale-yellow primroses, are thousands of linnet nests and father-linnets, singing for very joy of life and spring, and for the summer which is before them. And as they sing, the man ploughing in the fields hard-by, and the little lad leading the horses, hear the song, and though he may say nothing about it, the man thinks, and wonders that the birds sing just as sweetly now as when he was young ; and the lad thinks how pleasant it is, forgetting the while that he is tired, and, whistling something like a linnet-tune, impresses it on his memory, to be recalled with a tender sentiment years hence when he is a man, toiling perhaps in Australia or Canada ; or, it may be, to speak to him like a guardian angel in some time of trial or temptation, and bring him back to the innocence of boyhood and to his God.

Our picture shows us the fledgeling brood of the linnet, and the parent-bird feeding them. The attachment of this bird to its young is very great. Bishop Huntley, in his "History of Birds," gives us the following anecdote in proof of it :—

"A linnet's nest, containing four young ones, was found by some children, and carried home with the intention of rearing and taming them. The old ones, attracted by their chirping,

fluttered round the children till they reached home, when the nest was carried up stairs and placed in the nursery-window. The old birds soon approached the nest and fed the young. This being observed, the nest was afterwards placed on a table in the middle of the room, the window being left open, when the parents came in and fed their young as before. Still farther to try their attachment, the nest was then placed in a cage, but still the old birds returned with food, and towards evening actually perched on the cage, regardless of the noise made by several children. So it went on for several days, when, unfortunately, the cage, having been set outside the window, was exposed to a violent shower of rain, and the little brood was drowned in the nest. The poor parent-birds continued hovering round the house, and looking wistfully in at the window for several days, and then disappeared altogether."



CHAPTER IX.

THE PEEWIT.

THE Peewit, lapwing, or plover, belongs to the naturalist family of *Gallatores* or Waders, all of which are furnished with strong legs and feet for walking, whilst all which inhabit watery places, or feed their young amongst the waves, have legs sufficiently long to enable them to wade; whence comes the family name.

The peewit, or lapwing, is a very interesting bird, from its peculiar character and habits. Its plumage is handsome; the upper part of the body of a rich green, with metallic reflections; the sides of the neck and base of the tail of a pure white; the tail is black; so is the top of the head, which is furnished with a long, painted crest, lying backwards, but which can be raised at pleasure. In length the bird is about a foot.

The peewit lives in all parts of this country, and furnishes one of the pleasantly peculiar features of open sea-shores and wide moorland wastes, in the solitudes of which, its incessant, plaintive cry has an especially befitting sound, like the very spirit of the scene, moaning in unison with the waves, and wailing over the wide melancholy of the waste. Nevertheless, the peewit is not in itself mournful, for it is a particularly lively and active bird, sporting and frolicking in the air with its fellows, now whirling round and round, and now ascending to a great

height on untiring wing; then down again, running along the ground, and leaping about from spot to spot as if for very amusement.

It is, however, with all its agility, a very untidy nest-maker; in fact it makes no better nest than a few dry bents scraped together in a shallow hole, like a rude saucer or dish, in which she can lay her eggs—always four in number. But though taking so little trouble about her nest, she is always careful to lay the narrow ends of her eggs in the centre, as is shown in the picture, though as yet there are but three. A fourth, however, will soon come to complete the cross-like figure, after which she will begin to sit.

These eggs, under the name of plovers' eggs, are in great request as luxuries for the breakfast-table, and it may be thought that laid thus openly on the bare earth they are very easily found. It is not so, however, for they look so much like the ground itself, so like little bits of moorland earth or old sea-side stone, that it is difficult to distinguish them. But in proportion as the bird makes so insufficient and unguarded a nest, so all the greater is the anxiety, both of herself and her mate, about the eggs. Hence, whilst she is sitting, he exercises all kinds of little arts to entice away every intruder from the nest, wheeling round and round in the air near him, so as to fix his attention, screaming mournfully his incessant *pee-wit* till he has drawn him ever further and further from the point of his anxiety and love.

The little quartette brood, which are covered with down when hatched, begin to run almost as soon as they leave the shell, and then the poor mother-bird has to exercise all her little



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arts also—and indeed the care and solicitude of both parents is wonderful. Suppose, now, the little helpless group is out running here and there as merry as life can make them, and a man, a boy, or a dog, or perhaps all three, are seen approaching. At once the little birds squat close to the earth, so that they become almost invisible, and the parent-birds are on the alert, whirling round and round the disturber, angry and troubled, wailing and crying their doleful *pee-wit* cry, drawing them ever further and further away from the brood. Should, however, the artifice not succeed, and the terrible intruder still obstinately advance in the direction of the young, they try a new artifice; drop to the ground, and, running along in the opposite course, pretend lameness, tumbling feebly along in the most artful manner, thus apparently offering the easiest and most tempting prey, till, having safely lured away the enemy, they rise at once into the air, screaming again their *pee-wit*, but now as if laughing over their accomplished scheme.

The young, which are hatched in April, are in full plumage by the end of July, when the birds assemble in flocks, and, leaving the sea-shore, or the marshy moorland, betake themselves to downs and sheep-walks, where they soon become fat, and are said to be excellent eating. Happily, however, for them, they are not in as much request for the table as they were in former times. Thus we find in an ancient book of house-keeping expenses, called “The Northumberland Household-book,” that they are entered under the name of *Wypes*, and charged one penny each; and that they were then considered a first-rate dish is proved by their being entered as forming a part of “his lordship’s own mess,” or portion of food; *mess*

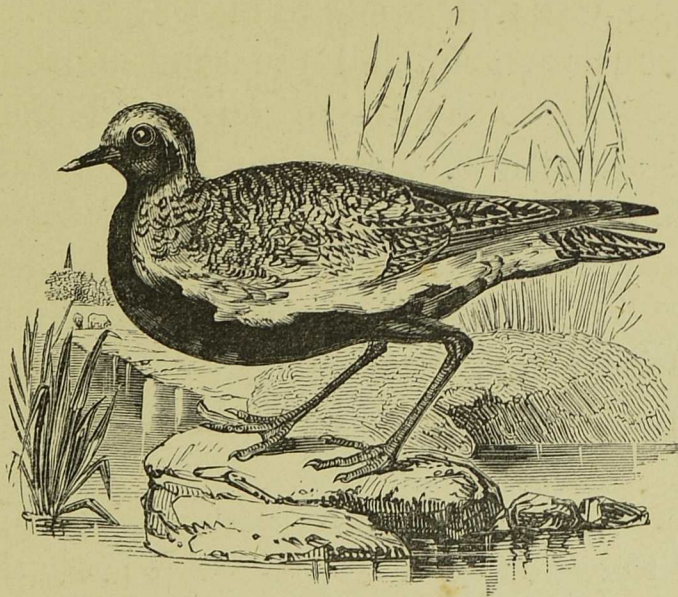
being so used in those days—about the time, probably, when the Bible was translated into English. Thus we find in the beautiful history of Joseph and his brethren, “He sent messes to them, but Benjamin’s mess was five times as much as any of theirs.”

Here I would remark, on the old name of *Wypes* for this bird, that country-people in the midland counties still call them *pie-wypes*.

But now again to our birds. The peewit, like the gull, may easily be tamed to live in gardens, where it is not only useful by ridding them of worms, slugs, and other troublesome creatures, but is very amusing, from its quaint, odd ways. Bewick tells us of one so kept by the Rev. J. Carlisle, Vicar of Newcastle, which I am sure will interest my readers.

He says two of these birds were given to Mr. Carlisle, and placed in his garden, where one soon died; the other continued to pick up such food as the place afforded, till winter deprived it of its usual supply. Necessity then compelled it to come nearer the house, by which it gradually became accustomed to what went forward, as well as to the various members of the family. At length a servant, when she had occasion to go into the back-kitchen with a light, observed that the lapwing always uttered his cry of *pee-wit* to gain admittance. He soon grew familiar; as the winter advanced, he approached as far as the kitchen, but with much caution, as that part of the house was generally inhabited by a dog and a cat, whose friendship the lapwing at length gained so entirely, that it was his regular custom to resort to the fireside as soon as it grew dark, and spend the evening and night with his two associates, sitting

close to them, and partaking of the comforts of a warm fireside. As soon as spring appeared he betook himself to the garden, but again, at the approach of winter, had recourse to his old shelter and his old friends, who received him very cordially. But his being favoured by them did not prevent his taking great liberties with them ; he would frequently amuse himself with washing in the bowl which was set for the dog to drink out of, and whilst he was thus employed he showed marks of the greatest indignation if either of his companions presumed to interrupt him. He died, poor fellow, in the asylum he had chosen, by being choked with something which he had picked up from the floor. During his confinement he acquired an artificial taste as regarded his food, and preferred crumbs of bread to anything else.



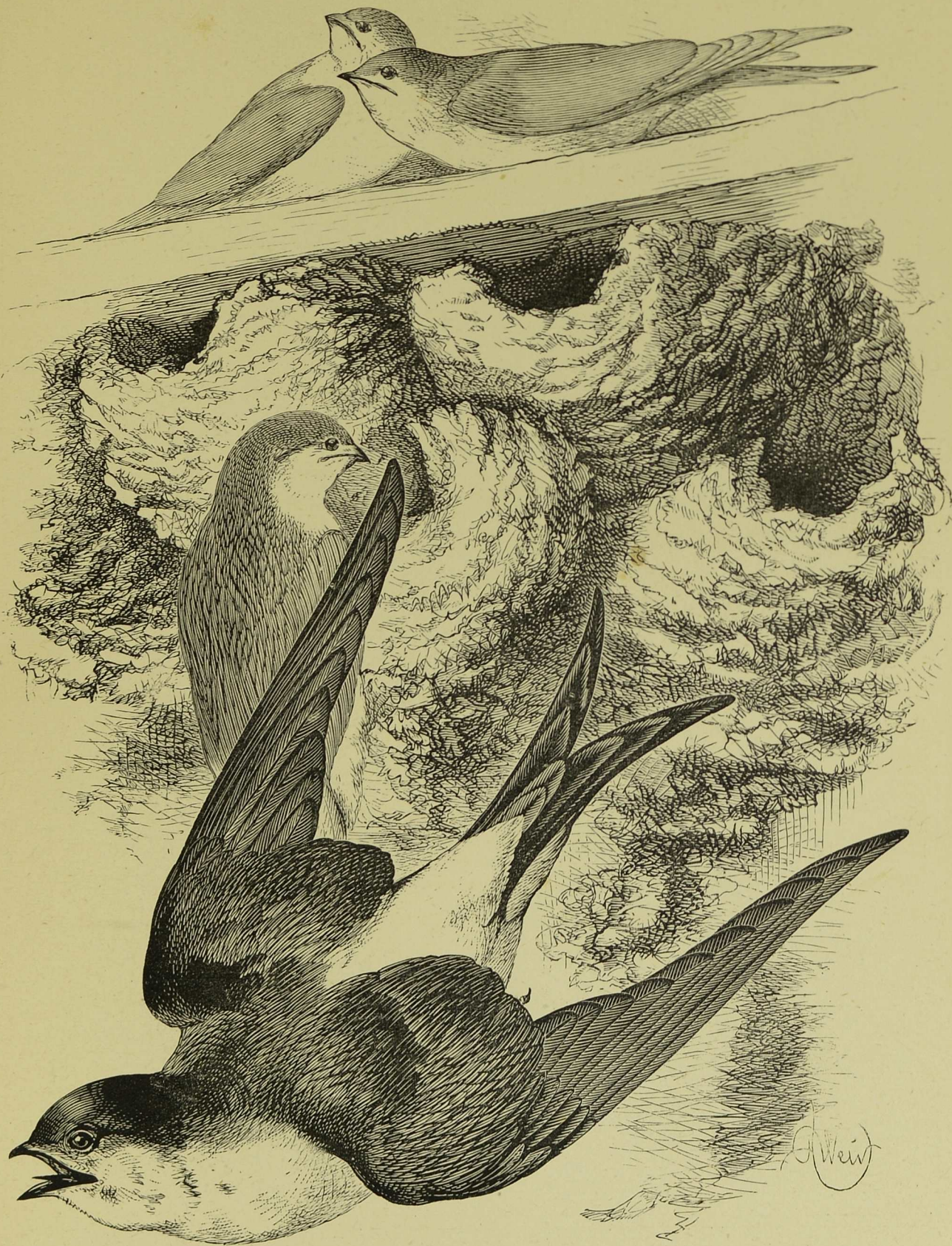
CHAPTER X.

THE HOUSE-MARTIN, OR WINDOW-SWALLOW.

DURING our winter, swallows inhabit warm tropical countries, migrating northwards with the first approaches of summer. They are usually seen with us from the 13th to the 20th of April, and are useful from the first day of their arrival, by clearing the air of insects, which they take on the wing; indeed, they may be said to live almost wholly on the wing, and, except when collecting mud for their nests, are seldom seen to alight, and, in drinking, dip down to the water as they skim over it on rapid wing.

We have three kinds of swallows in England: the chimney-swallow, the house-martin, and the sand-martin, of which I shall have something to say in due course. The chimney swallow and house-martin are especially worthy of the affectionate regard of man; for they love his society, build around his dwelling, destroy nothing that he values, have no appetite for his fruits; they live harmoniously amongst themselves, and have no other disposition than that of cheerfulness, unwearied industry and perseverance, and the most devoted parental affection.

Mr. Weir has given us a lively picture of swallow-life—four nests grouped together on a house-side: more there probably are; but there are as many as we can manage with; indeed we



will presently confine our attention to one single nest, and, by so doing, I flatter myself that I shall win your admiration for these birds, and that you will agree with me in thinking that if we all, men and women, boys and girls, had only their persevering spirit, and their courage under adversity, there would not be so much unsuccess, either at school or in life, as is now, too often, the case.

Some people are very fond of having martins about their houses, under their eaves, and even in the corners of their windows. The Earl of Traquair was one of these; he was, indeed, a great lover of all kinds of birds, and all were protected on his premises. In the autumn of 1839, there were no less than one hundred and three martins' nests on Traquair House—which is a very fine old place—besides several which had been deserted, injured, or taken possession of by sparrows, which is a very unwarrantable liberty taken by these birds.

From six to twenty days are required to build a martin's nest. If all goes on well it may be finished in the shorter time.

Let us now see how the birds set about building. Here are several nests in our picture; and turning to the pages of Macgillivray's "British Birds," I shall find exactly the information we need. I will, therefore, extract freely from this interesting writer, that my young readers may be as grateful to him as I am myself.

Again turning to our picture, we find four nests. "A party of eight martins arrived here on the 1st of May. As this was quite a new location, they spent the whole day in examining the eaves of the house, the corners of the windows, and the out-buildings. By the following morning the question was settled, and they had, as you see, fixed upon a high wall with a slate

coping, and an eastern aspect, and at once commenced making a general foundation for their nests. Suitable materials are procured from the banks of an adjoining pond, or a puddle in the lane. Let us go down and see them. Here they come, sailing placidly over the tree-tops; now they descend so as almost to sweep the surface of the pond; some of them alight at once, others skim round, as if borne away by a brisk wind. Those that have alighted walk about with short steps, looking round for materials. Some seem not to find the mud suitable, but seize on a piece of straw, or grass, which, tempering in the mud, they then fly off with. Returning now to the building, we see one using its tail planted against the wall, or against the nest, if sufficiently advanced, as a support, deposit the material it has brought by giving its head a wriggling motion, so that the mud slides gently into the crevices of yesterday's work; then he retouches the whole. See, one has now arrived with his supply before the other has finished: he is impatient to disburden himself, and wants to drive off the worker, who rather snappishly retorts, and he, poor fellow, goes off for a while with the mud sticking to his bill. Now she has finished; there is room for him, and he goes back again and works hard in his turn. They never alight on the nest without twittering. At noon, if the weather be hot, they betake themselves to the fields, or, after a dip in the pond, sun themselves on the house-top for half an hour or so. Then they will hawk about for food, and after awhile one of them may, perhaps, return and give another touch or two to the work, or seat herself in the nest to consolidate the materials. But if cold, wet, or windy, they keep away. What they do with themselves I know not; but as soon as it clears

up, they are at work again. At the beginning of their building, they seem to have no objection to leave it for a whole day; but as it advances, they become more interested or anxious, and one or both will sit in it all night, even though the weather be bad."

So much for the building of these four nests of our picture; and now I will bespeak your attention to a little narrative of the joys and sorrows of the domestic life of a pair of martins, which, we will suppose, belong also to our group.

"The building began on the 1st of May, at daybreak. But the weather was very much against them, being cold and stormy, and it was the 18th of the month before it was finished.

"Seeing their labours thus brought to a close, one could not help wishing, considering how much it had cost, that the nest might last them for many years. But on the 23rd of June, during a heavy fall of thunder rain, almost the entire nest was washed to the ground, together with the young birds which it contained. A short time before the catastrophe, the old birds were observed hovering about, and expressing great uneasiness. Almost immediately after it happened they left the place, but returned the following day, and spent it in flying about and examining the angle of the wall.

"Next morning they commenced repairing the nest. In three days they had made great progress; but again rain fell, and their work was stayed. On the 30th, they advanced rapidly, and both remained sitting on the nest all night. The next day it was finished; and now they began to rejoice: they twittered all the evening till it was dark, now and then pruning each other's heads, as, seated side by side, they prepared to spend the dark hours in the nest. Eggs were soon laid again, but,

sad to say, on the morning of the 18th of July, again, during a great storm of wind and rain, the upper wall fell, carrying with it one of the eggs. The old birds again fluttered about, uttering the most plaintive cries, and early the next morning began to repair the damage, though it rained heavily all day. Part of the lining hanging over the side was incorporated with the new layers of mud. The urgency of the case was such, that they were obliged to work during the bad weather. Throughout the day one bird sat on the nest, whilst the other laboured assiduously. Kindly was he welcomed by his mate, who sometimes, during his absence, nibbled and retouched the materials which he had just deposited. In a few days it was finished, the weather became settled, the young were hatched, and all went well with them.

“ Sometimes when the nests are destroyed, the birds, instead of attempting to repair the damage, forsake the neighbourhood, as if wholly disheartened. Nothing can be more distressing to them than to lose their young. In the storm of which I have just spoken, another martin’s nest was washed down with unfledged young in it. These were placed on some cotton wool in a basket, covered with a sheet of brown paper, in an open window, facing the wall. During that day and the following, the parents took no notice of them, and their kind human protector fed them with house-flies. That evening he tried an experiment. He gently placed the young ones in a nest of that same window, where were other young. It was then about eight o’clock in the evening; the rain was falling heavily, and no sound was heard save the *cheep, cheep*, of the young birds, and the dashing of the storm against the window-glass. A minute elapsed,

when forth rushed the parents shrieking their alarm notes, and, again and again wheeled up to the nest, until at last they drifted away in the storm. He watched them till they disappeared about half-past-nine. During all this time they only twice summoned courage to look into the nest. Next morning I was rejoiced to see them attending assiduously to the young ones."

And now, turning again to our group of four nests on the walls, supposing it be the month of July, every one of them with its fledgeling brood sitting with gaping mouths, ever ready for food, you may, perhaps, like to know how many meals are carried up to them in the course of the day. If, then, the parents began to feed them at about five in the morning, and left a little before eight at night, they would feed them, at the lowest calculation, about a thousand times.

With all this feeding and care-taking, the young ones, as the summer goes on, are full-fledged, and have grown so plump and large that the nest is quite too small for them; therefore, they must turn out into the world, and begin life for themselves.

It is now a fine, brisk, August morning, and at about eight o'clock, you can see, if you look up at the nests, how the old birds come dashing up to them quite in an excited way, making short curves in the air, and repeating a note which says, as plain as a bird can speak,

This is the day
You must away !
What are wings made for, if not to fly ?
Cheep, cheep,
Now for a leap !—
Father and mother and neighbours are by !

This flying away from the nest is a great event in swallow-life, as you may well believe. Let us therefore now direct our attention to one nest in particular, in which are only two young ones—a very small family; but what happens here is occurring all round us.

One of these little ones balances itself at the entrance, looking timidly into the void, and, having considered the risk for awhile, allows its fellow to take its place.

During all this time, the parents keep driving about, within a few feet of the entrance, and endeavour, by many winning gestures, to induce their charge to follow them. The second bird also, after sitting for some time, as if distrustful of its powers, retires, and the first again appears. Opening and shutting his wings, and often half inclined again to retire, he, at length, summons up all his resolution, springs from the nest, and, with his self-taught pinions, cleaves the air. He and his parents, who are in ecstasies, return to the nest, and the second young one presently musters courage and joins them. And now begins a day of real enjoyment; they sport chiefly about the tree-tops till seven in the evening, when all re-enter the nest.

In several instances I have seen the neighbours add their inducements to those of the parents, when the young were too timid to leave their home. If the happy day prove fine, they seldom return to the nest till sunset; if otherwise, they will come back two or three times. On one occasion, when the young were ready to fly, but unwilling to take the first leap, the parents had recourse to a little stratagem, both ingenious and natural. The he-bird held out a fly at about four inches from the entrance

to the nest. In attempting to take hold of it, they again and again nearly lost their balance. On another occasion, the mother bird, trying this plan to no purpose, seemed to lose patience, and seizing one of them by the lower mandible, with the claw of her right foot, whilst it was gaping for food, tried to pull it out of the nest, to which, however, it clung like a squirrel. But the young, every one of them, fly in time, and a right joyous holiday they all have together.

So the summer comes to an end; and towards the middle of September, the great family cares being over, and the young having attained to an age capable of undertaking the fatigues of migration, that mysterious impulse, strong as life itself, and probably affecting them like some sickness—the necessity to exchange one country and climate for another—comes upon them. Under this influence, they congregate together in immense numbers, every neighbourhood seeming to have its place of assembly—the roofs of lofty buildings, or the leafless boughs of old trees: here they meet, not only to discuss the great undertaking, but to have a right merry time together—a time of luxurious idleness, lively chatterings, singing in chorus their everlasting and musical *cheep, cheep*, eating and drinking, and making ready for the journey before them.

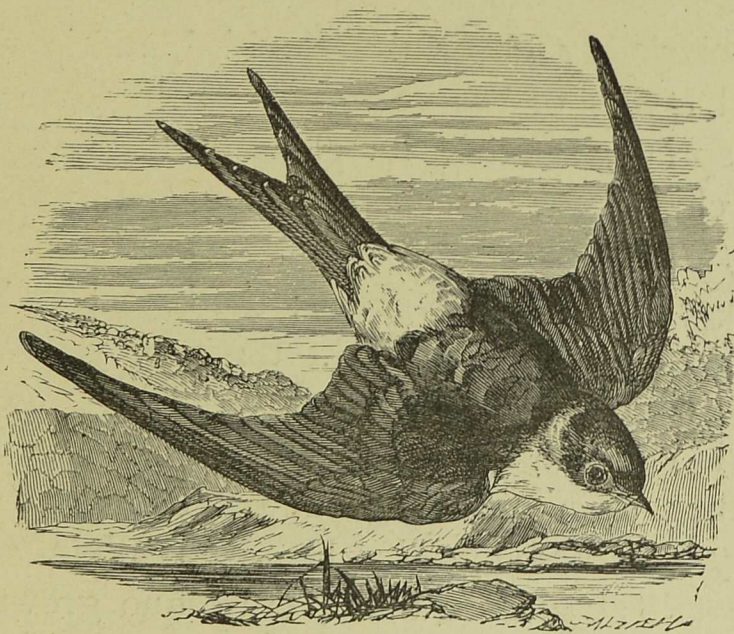
At length the moment of departure is come, and at a given signal the whole party rises. Twittering and singing, and bidding a long farewell to the scenes of their summer life, they fly off in a body, perhaps, if coming from Scotland, or the north of England, to rest yet a few weeks in the warmer southern counties; after which, a general departure takes place to the sunny lands of Africa.

Though gifted with wings wonderfully constructed for prolonged flight, and though having passed every day of so many successive months almost wholly on the wing, the swallow frequently suffers great fatigue and exhaustion in its long migration. Sometimes, probably driven out of its course by adverse winds, it is known to alight by hundreds on the rigging of vessels, when worn out by hunger and fatigue it is too often shot or cruelly treated. Nevertheless the swallow, protected by Him who cares for the sparrow, generally braves the hardships of migration, and the following spring, guided by the same mysterious instinct, finds his way across continents and seas to his old home, where, identified by some little mark which has been put upon him—a silken thread as a garter, or a light silver ring—he is recognised as the old familiar friend, and appears to be no less happy to be once more with them than are they to welcome him. Sometimes swallows coming back as ordinary strangers, prove their identity, even though the scene of their last year's home may have been pulled down, together with the human habitation. In this case, he has been known to fly about in a distracted way, lamenting the change that had taken place, and seeming as if nothing would comfort him.

Though the fact of swallows coming back to their old haunts does not need proving, yet I will close my chapter with an incident which occurred in our own family. During a summer storm, a martin's nest, with young, was washed from the eaves of my husband's paternal home. His mother, a great friend to all birds, placed the nest with the young, which happily were uninjured, in a window, which, being generally open, allowed

the parent-birds access to their young. They very soon began to feed them, making no attempt to build any other nest; so that the young were successfully reared, and took their flight full-fledged from the window-sill.

The next spring, when the time for the arrival of the swallows came, great was the surprise and pleasure of their kind hostess, to see, one day, a number of swallows twittering about the window, as if impatient for entrance. On its being opened, in they flew, and, twittering joyfully and circling round the room, as if recognising the old hospitable asylum of the former year, flew out and soon settled themselves under the eaves with the greatest satisfaction. There could be no doubt but that these were the birds that had been reared there.



CHAPTER XI.

THE CHIFF-CHAFF, OR OVEN-BUILDER.

THE Chiff-chaff, chill-chall, lesser pettichaps, or oven-builder, is one of the great bird family of warblers, and the smallest of them in size; indeed, it is not much larger than the little willow-wren. Like all its family it is a bird of passage, and makes its appearance here, in favourable seasons, as early as the 12th of March—earlier than the warblers in general—and also remains later, having been known to remain here to the middle of October.

It is a remarkably cheerful little bird, and is warmly welcomed by all lovers of the country as being one of the first visitants of spring, sending its pleasant little voice, with an incessant “chiff-chaff,” “chery-charry,” through the yet leafless trees.

Its plumage is dark olive-green; the breast and under part of the body, white, with a slight tinge of yellow; the tail, brown, edged with pale green; legs, yellowish-brown.

The nest is not unlike that of a wren, built in a low bush, and, sometimes, even on the ground. The one so beautifully and faithfully depicted by Mr. Harrison Weir, seems to be amongst the tallest grasses and picturesque growths of some delicious woodland lane. It is a lovely little structure; a hollow ball wonderfully put together, of dry leaves and stems of



CHIFF-CHAFFS AND NEST.

grass, and a circular hole for entrance at the side ; lined with soft feathers—a little downy bed of comfort. The mother-bird, as we now see her, sits here in delicious ease on five or six white eggs, beautifully spotted with rich red-brown.

This dainty little bird, which seems made alone for pleasure, is very useful to man, and should be made kindly welcome everywhere, living entirely on caterpillars and other troublesome and destructive creatures. The Rev. J. G. Wood says that it saves many a good oak from destruction by devouring, on its first arrival, the caterpillars of the well-known green oak-moth, which roll up the leaves in so curious a manner, and come tumbling out of their green houses at the slightest alarm.

He says, also, that a little chiff-chaff, which had been caught and tamed, was accustomed to dash to the ceiling of the room in which it was kept, and to snatch thence the flies which settled on the white surface.

My husband, writing of this bird, says :—

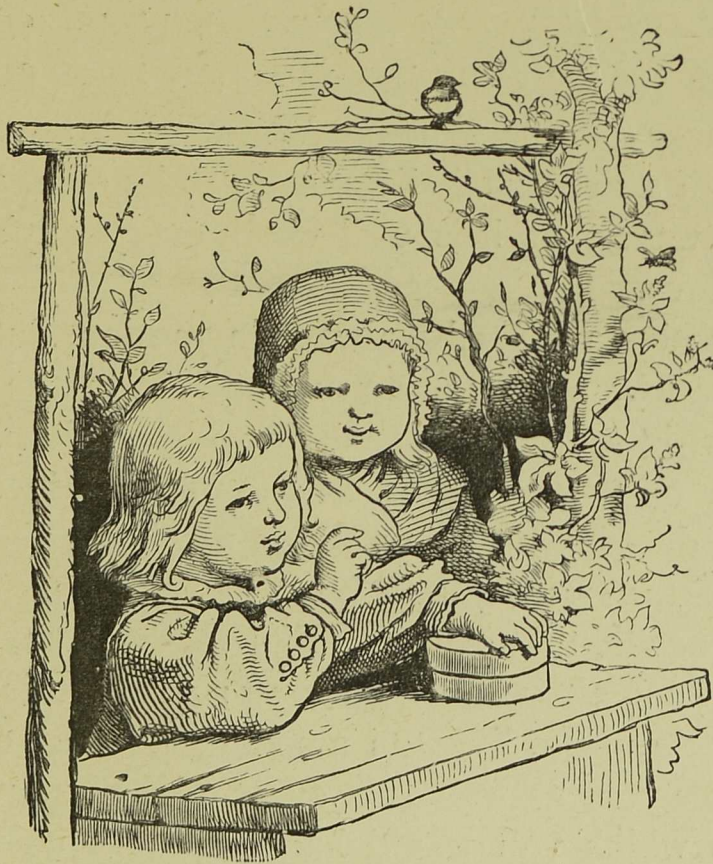
“ Gilbert White gave, I believe, the name of chiff-chaff to this little bird from its note. In the midland counties it is called the chill-chall from the same cause ; and, indeed, this name is, to my ear, more accordant with its continuous ditty. Its cheery little voice is one of the pleasantest recognitions of returning spring. It is sure to be heard, just as in former years, in the copse, the dell, the belt of trees bordering a way-side ; we catch its simple note with pleasure, for it brings with it many a memory of happy scenes and days gone by. We see the little creature hopping along the boughs of the yet only budding oak, and know that it is as usefully employed for man as agreeably for itself. It tells us, in effect, that sunny days,

flowers, and sweet airs, and the music of a thousand other birds, are coming. We revert to the time when, tracing the wood-side or the bosky dingle in boyhood, we caught sight of its rounded nest amongst the screening twigs of the low bush, and the bleached bents of last year's grapes. We remember the pleasure with which we examined its little circular entrance, and discovered, in its downy interior, its store of delicate eggs, or the living mass of feathery inmates, with their heads ranged side by side and one behind another, with their twinkling eyes and yellow-edged mouths. Many a time, as we have heard the ever blithe note of chill-chall, as it stuck to its unambitious part of the obscure woodland glade, we have wished that we could maintain the same buoyant humour, the same thorough acceptance of the order of Providence for us. As Luther, in a moment of despondency, when enemies were rife around him, and calumny and wrong pursued him, heard the glad song of a bird that came and sang on a bough before his window, we have thanked God for the lesson of the never-drooping chill-chall. The great world around never damps its joy with a sense of its own insignificance; the active and often showy life of man, the active and varied existence of even birds, which sweep through the air in gay companies, never disturb its pleasure in its little accustomed nook. It seems to express, in its two or three simple notes, all the sentiment of indestructible content, like the old woman's bird in the German story by Ludwig Tieck—

Alone in wood so gay,
'Tis good to stay,
Morrow like to-day
For ever and aye;
Oh, I do love to stay
Alone in wood so gay!

“ This little bird appears to feel all that strength of heart, and to put it into its little ditty, which seems to me to say—

“ Here I continue ‘ cheery cheery, and still shall, and still shall ! ’ ”



CHAPTER XII.

THE GOLDEN-CRESTED WREN.

WE have here the Golden-crested Wren—the *Regulus cristatus* of naturalists—the tiniest of our British birds, “the pleasing fairy-bird,” as Bewick calls it, one of the large family of warblers, and a near relation to Jenny Wren. It is a very charming little bird, with a sweet melodious song of its own, and so many curious little ways that it is well worth everybody’s notice and everybody’s love.

It is very active and lively, always in motion, fluttering from branch to branch, and running up and down the trunks and limbs of trees, in search of insects on which it lives. It may as often be seen on the under as on the upper side of a branch, with its back downwards, like a fly on a ceiling, and so running along, all alert, as merry and busy as possible. In size it is about three inches, that is with all its feathers on, but its little body alone is not above an inch long; yet in this little body, and in this little brain, lives an amazing amount of character, as I shall show you, as well as a great deal of amusing conceit and pertness which you would hardly believe unless you were told.

The colour of the bird is a sort of yellowish olive-green, the under part of pale, reddish white, tinged with green on the sides; the quill feathers of the wing are dusky, edged with pale



GOLDEN-CRESTED WRENS AND NEST.

green, as are also the tail feathers. Thus attired by nature, that is, by the great Creator who cares for all His creatures, this little bird, creeping and fluttering about the branches and bole of the leafy summer tree, can scarcely be distinguished from the tree itself: hence it is that the bird is so unfamiliar to most people. The he-bird, however, has a little distinguishing glory of his own—a crest of golden-coloured feathers, bordered on each side with black, like a sort of eye-brow to his bright hazel eyes. This crest, which gives him his distinguished name, can be erected at pleasure, when he is full of life and enjoyment, or when he chooses to lord it over birds ten times as big as himself.

It is worth anybody's while, who has a love for the innocent denizens of nature, and no desire to do them harm, to go into a wood on a summer's day on purpose to watch the doings of this lively little bird amongst the tree branches. Fir-woods are the best for this purpose, as this bird has an especial liking for these trees, and ten to one, if you will only be patient and quite still, you may soon see him at work busily looking after his dinner, running along the branches, up one and down another, then like a little arrow off to the next tree, scudding along its branches, then back again, up and down, round and round the bole, going like a little fire, so rapid are his movements; now running up aloft, now hanging head downward, now off again in another direction. What a wonderful activity there is in that little body! He must devour hundreds of insects, as well as their eggs, which he thus seeks for under the scaly roughnesses of the bark, and finding, devours.

Pretty as he is, his nest, of which Mr. Harrison Weir has

given a most accurate drawing, is quite worthy of him. It is always the same, swung like a little hammock from a branch, and always hidden, it may be by leaves or a bunch of fir-cones. The cordage by which it is suspended is of his own weaving, and is made of the same materials as the nest, which are moss and slender thread-like roots. In form it is oval, as you see, with a hole for entrance at the side, and is lined with the softest down and fibrous roots. It is a lovely little structure, like a soft ball of moss, within which the mother-bird lays from six to a dozen tiny eggs, scarcely bigger than peas, the delicate shell of which will hardly bear handling. The colour of the egg is white, sprinkled over with the smallest of dull-coloured spots.

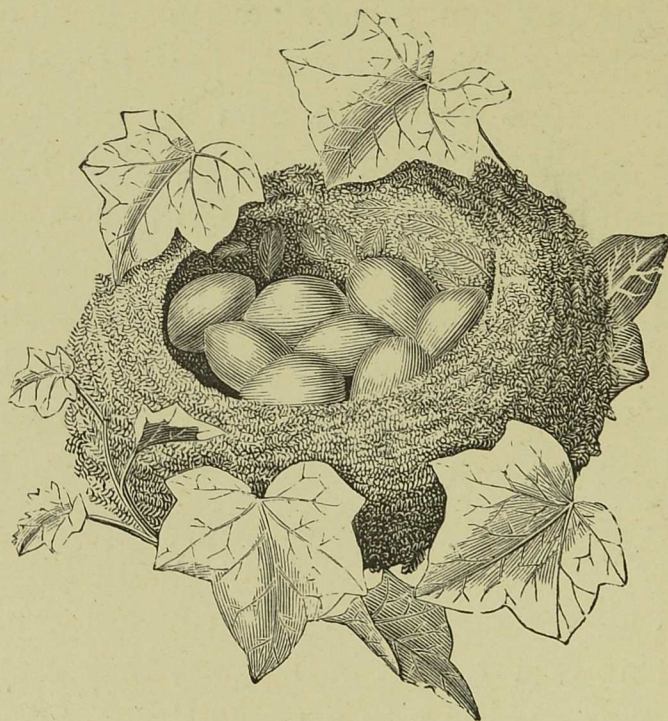
Mr. Jesse describes one of these lovely nests which was taken from the slender branches of a fir-tree where it had been suspended, as usual, by means of delicate cordage, secured to the branch by being twisted round and round, and then fastened to the edge or rim of the nest, so that one may be sure that the making and securing of these tiny ropes must be the first work of the clever little artizan. The nest thus suspended sways lightly to and fro with the movement of the bird. We cannot see in our cut the slender ropes that suspend it; they are concealed under the thick foliage; but we can easily see what a dainty little structure it is.

Delicate and lovely as is this bird, and pleasing and harmless as is his life, he yet possesses some curious traits of character, as I said. For instance, though so small, with a body only an inch long, he has, apparently, a wonderful conceit of himself, and loves to be lord and master of creatures that will not dispute with him, as not worth their while, or perhaps because there

really is some inherent mastership in him by which he contrives, under certain circumstances, to rule over them. In proof of this, I will tell you what the Rev. J. G. Wood relates from the experience of a lady, a friend of his. One severe winter, when she had housed and fed a number of birds, amongst which were a jackdaw, a magpie, two skylarks, a goldfinch, and a robin, in a warm aviary, feeding them regularly and abundantly, other birds came, of course, to partake of the plentiful feast, and amongst them two golden-crested wrens. These little things made themselves not only quite at home, but lorded it over the other birds in the most extraordinary way possible. For instance, if the jackdaw had possessed himself of a nice morsel which he was holding down with his foot to eat comfortably, and the golden-crested wren had also set his mind on it, he hopped on the jackdaw's head and pecked in his eye, on the side where his foot held the delicacy. On this the poor jackdaw instantly lifted his foot to his head where he thought something was amiss, and the mischievous little fellow snatched up the treasure and was off. At first the jackdaw would pursue him in great wrath, but he soon learned that it was no use, for the creature would only jump upon his back where he could not reach him, and so was safe from punishment. "Before the winter was over," continues the lady, "the little gold-crests were masters of all the birds, and even roosted at night on their backs; finding, no doubt, that in this way they could keep their little feet much warmer than on a perch."

Conceited and dominant, however, as these little birds may be, they are yet either extremely timid, or their nervous system is so delicately constituted, that a sudden fright kills them.

Thus if, when they are all alert and busy on the tree-branch, seeking for insects and fearing no evil, the branch be suddenly struck with a stick, the poor bird falls dead to the ground. The shock has killed it. It has received no apparent injury—not a feather is ruffled—but its joyous, innocent life is gone for ever. This fact is asserted by Gilbert White, and was proved by my husband, who brought me home the bird which had thus died.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE WAGTAIL.

THIS elegant little bird belongs to the *Motacilla*, or Wagtail family. There are three brothers of them in this country—the pied, the grey, and the yellow. The pied is the most familiar, and our friend Mr. Harrison Weir has given us a lovely picture of it at home in a cleft of the rock, with fleshy-leaved lichens above, and green springing friends of the great fern, which will presently overshadow it. Around are the solemn mountains, and the never silent water is foaming and rushing below.

This bird has many names besides his Latin one of *Motacilla*. In Surrey he is called washer, or dish-washer, by the common people, from his peculiar motions in walking, which are thought to resemble those of a washer-woman at her tub. The colours of the pied wagtail are simply black and white, but so boldly and clearly marked as to produce a very pleasing and elegant effect.

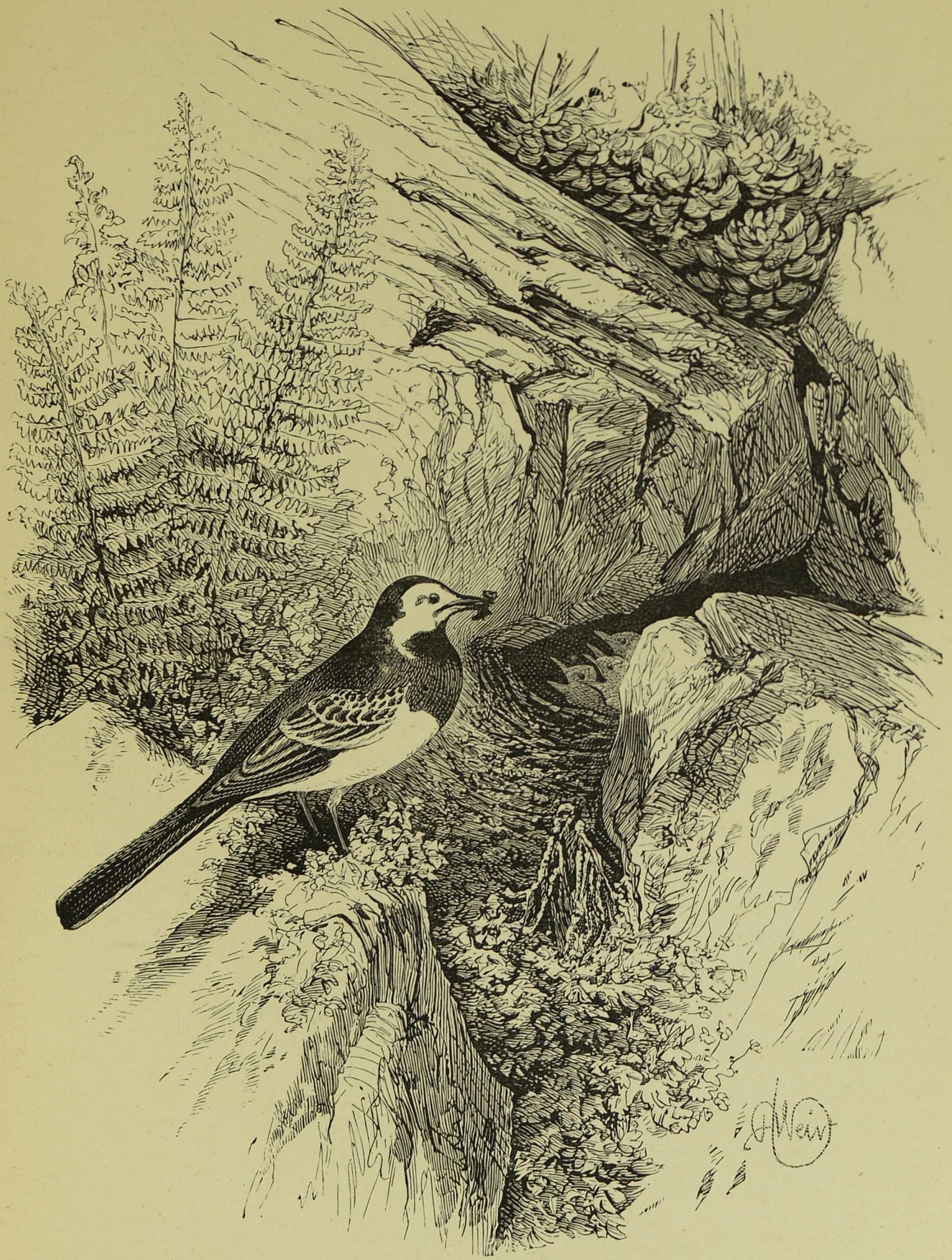
We have, every year, several wagtails in our garden, to which they add a very cheerful feature, walking about, nodding their heads and tails as if perfectly at home, afraid neither of dog nor cat, much less of any human being about the place. A little running brook as one boundary of the garden is, no doubt, one of the attractions; but here they are seen less frequently than on the smoothly-mown lawn, where they pick up tiny

insects, gliding along with a smooth motion, accompanied by the quick movement of head and tail.

It is bitterly cold wintry weather as I write this, and they now visit the kitchen door, where, no doubt, little delicacies of various kinds attract them. They are more fearless and familiar than either sparrows, robins, or blackbirds; yet all of these are our daily pensioners, having their breakfast of crumbs as regularly before the parlour window as we have our own meal. Yet they fly away at the slightest sound, and the appearance of the cat disperses them altogether. They have, evidently, the old ancestral fear of man, stamped, as powerfully as life itself, upon their being. They are suspicious, and always in a flutter: nothing equals the calm self-possession of the wagtail, excepting it be the state of mind into which the robin gets when the gardener is turning up the fresh soil, just on purpose, as he supposes, to find worms for him.

And now let me give you a wagtail picture, drawn by a faithful hand.* It is the end of July, the young wagtails are abroad with their parents, like human families, a month or two later, gone out or abroad to take their holiday. "Often," he says, "one may see them wading in shallow places, in quest of insects and worms, carefully holding up their tails to prevent them being draggled. If you watch the motions of an individual just coming up to join the party, you see it alight abruptly, twittering its shrill notes, and, perching on a small stone, incessantly vibrate its body, and jerk out its tail." This of course is the polite way in which a stranger wagtail introduces

* "British Birds."



WAGTAIL AND NEST.

itself amongst its friends. There they are; now walking out into the water, and looking round for food. Now they are on the shore again, running rapidly along, picking up, now and then, a dainty morsel, and every moment spreading out the ever-vibrating tail. Now they are in the adjoining meadow, each one in pursuit of a fly, which it has no sooner caught, than it spies another. The lazy geese, which have nibbled the grass bare, allow the wagtail to pass in their midst without molestation. When the cows are grazing in the midst of a swarm of gnats and other insects, as Gilbert White says, as they tread amongst the bush herbage they rouse up multitudes of insects which settle on their legs, their stomachs, and even their noses, and the wagtails are welcomed by the cows as benefactors. Watch them, for they are worth the trouble; see, one comes forward and catches a small fly, bends to one side to seize another, darts to the right after a third, and springs some feet in the air before it secures a fourth, and all this time others are running about after other flies, passing close to the cows' noses or amongst their feet. With all this running to and fro, and hither and thither, they every now and then run in each other's way; but they do not quarrel, aware, no doubt, that there is room enough for them in the world, nay, even in the meadow, though it now seems to be full of wagtails, all busily occupied, some walking, others running, a few flying off and many arriving. You may walk in amongst them; they are not very shy, for they will allow you to come within a few yards of them. They may always be met with on the shore when the tide is out, as well as in the meadow; you will meet with them by the river-side, or by the mill-dam. Occasionally you may see

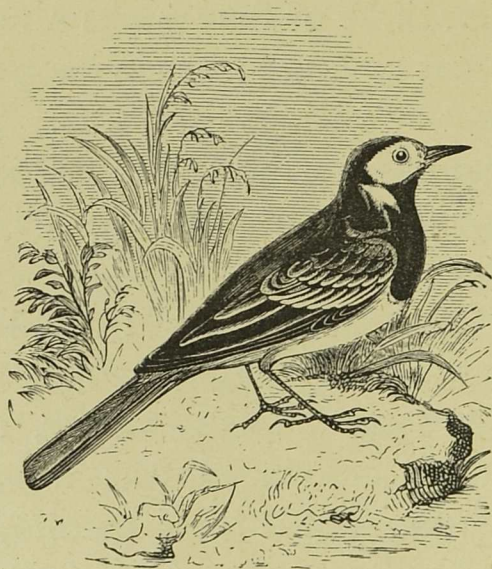
them perched on a roof, a wall, or a large stone, but very rarely on a tree or bush.

They pair about the middle of April, and build by the side of rivers in crevices of rock—as in our picture, on a heap of stones, in faggot or wood stacks, or in a hole in a wall, but always near water and carefully hidden from sight. The nest is made of dry grass, moss, and small roots, thickly lined with wool and hair. The eggs are five or six in number, of a greyish white, spotted all over with grey and brown. As a proof of the confiding nature of this bird, I must mention that occasionally it builds in most unimaginable places, directly under the human eye—as, for instance, “a pair of them last summer,” says Mr. Jesse, “built their nest in a hollow under a sleeper of the Brighton Railway, near the terminus at that place. Trains at all times of the day were passing close to the nest, but in this situation the young were hatched and reared.” Mr. Macgillivray also mentions that a pair of these birds built their nest in an old wall near a quarry, within a few yards of four men who worked most part of the day in getting the stone, which they occasionally blasted. The hen-bird laid four eggs, and reared her brood, she and her mate becoming so familiar with the quarry-men as to fly in and out without showing the least sign of fear; but if a stranger approached they would immediately fly off, nor return till they saw him clear off from the place. Another nest was built beneath a wooden platform at a coal-pit, where the noisy business of unloading the hutches brought up from the pit, was continually going forward. But soon the wagtails were quite at home, becoming familiar with the colliers and other people connected with the work, and flew in

and out of their nest without showing the slightest sign of fear. Again, another pair built close to the wheel of a lathe in a workshop at a brass manufactory at Taunton amid the incessant din of the braziers; yet here the young were hatched, and the mother-bird became perfectly familiar with the faces of the workmen; but if a stranger entered, or any one belonging to the factory, though not to what might be called her shop, she quitted her nest instantly, nor would return till they were gone. The male, however, had much less confidence, and would not come into the room, but brought the usual supplies of food to a certain spot on the roof whence she fetched it. All these anecdotes prove how interesting would be the relationship between the animal creation and man, if man ceased to be their tyrant or destroyer.

As regards this particular bird, it is not only elegant in its appearance, but amiable and attractive in all its ways. "They are," says Bewick, "very attentive to their young, and continue to feed and train them for three or four weeks after they can fly; they defend them with great courage when in danger, or endeavour to draw aside the enemy by various little arts. They are very attentive also to the cleanliness of their nests, and so orderly as to have been known to remove light substances, such as paper or straw, which have been placed to mark the spot." As regards this proof of their love of order, however, I would rather suggest that it may be a proof of their sagacity and sense of danger: they suspected that some human visitor, of whose friendly character they were not convinced, was intending to look in upon them, and they thought it best, therefore, to decline the honour of his visit.

The ordinary note of this bird, uttered rapidly if alarmed, is a sort of *cheep, cheep*. In the summer morning, however, it may be heard singing a pleasant, mellow and modulated little song. Like the swallow, for which it is a match in elegance, it lives entirely on insects. If you would only stand silently for a few minutes by a water-side, where it haunts, you would be delighted with the grace and activity of its movements. "There it stands," says one of its friends, "on the top of a stone, gently vibrating its tail, as if balancing itself. An insect flies near; it darts off, flutters a moment in the air, seizes its prey, and settles on another stone, spreading and vibrating its tail. Presently it makes another sally, flutters around for a while, seizes two or three insects, glides over the ground, swerving to either side, then again takes its stand on a pinnacle." Not unfrequently too it may be seen on the roof of a house, or in a village street, still in pursuit of insects.



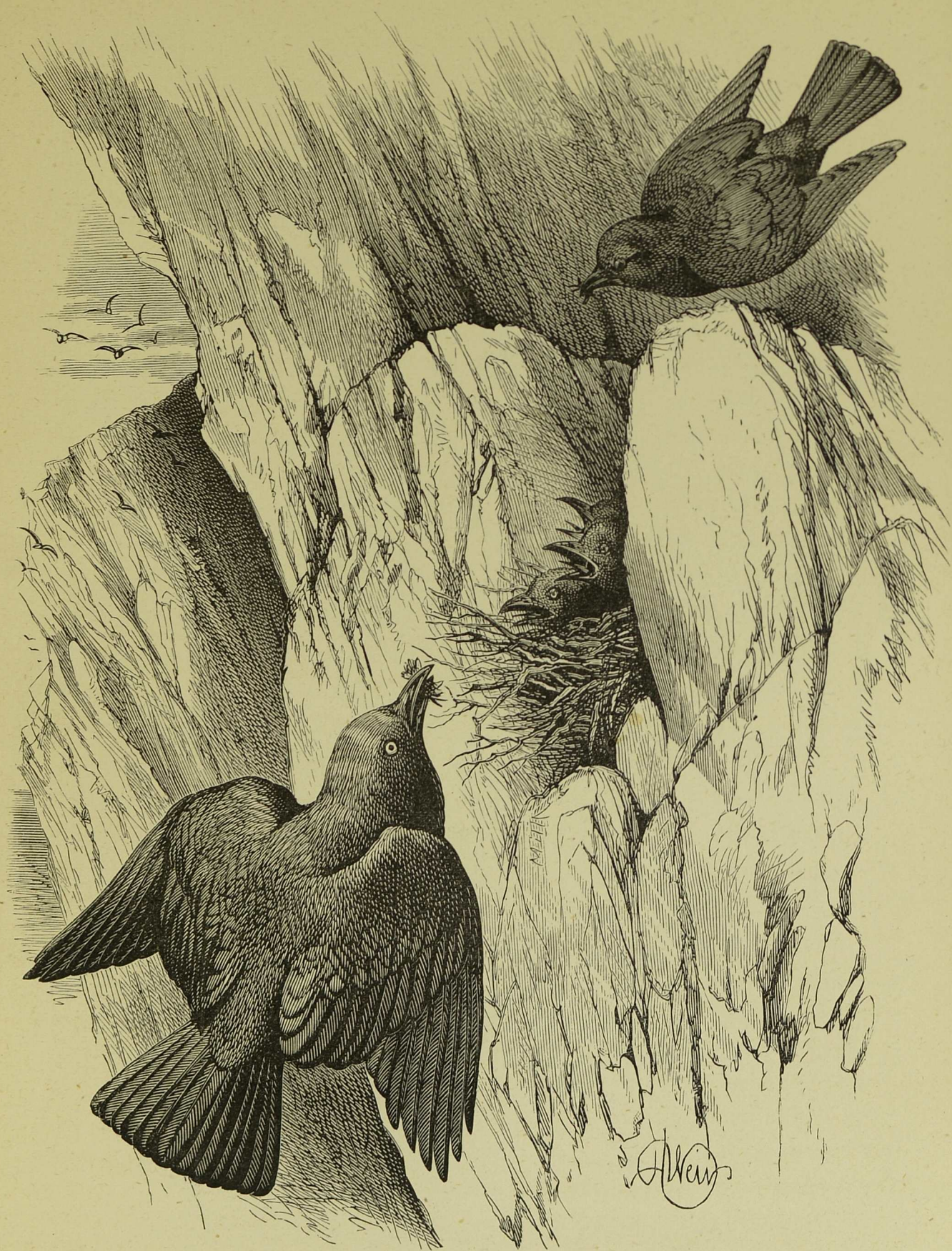
CHAPTER XIV.

THE JACKDAW.

WE have called the Rook and Jackdaw first cousins. They are so, and are greatly attached to each other. There is a difference, however, in their character; the rook is grave and dignified, the jackdaw is active and full of fun. But they are fond of each other's society, and agree to associate for nine months in the year: during the other three they are both occupied with their respective family cares.

Rooks build in trees in the open air, the nests of the young being exposed to all the influences of wind and weather. The jackdaw does not approve of this mode. He likes to live under cover, and, therefore, makes his nest in holes and crannies, amongst rocks, as in our picture; in old and tall buildings, as church towers and steeples, old ruinous castles, or old hollow trees. The traditional structure of the family nest is certainly that of the rook; a strong frame-work of sticks upon which the eggs can be laid, and the clamorous young jackdaws be brought up. This our friend Mr. Weir has shown us plainly. But, after all, it does not appear that the jackdaw, with all his sharpness, has much scientific knowledge, the getting the sticks into the hole being often a very difficult piece of work. Mr. Waterton amused himself by watching the endless labour and pains which the jackdaw takes in trying to do

impossibilities. Thinking it absolutely necessary that a framework of sticks should be laid in the hole or cavity as the foundation of the nest, he brings to the opening just such sticks as the rook would use in open spaces, and may be seen trying for a quarter of an hour together to get a stick into a hole, holding it by the middle all the time, so that the ends prop against each side, and make the endeavour impossible. He cannot understand how it is; he knows that sticks ought to go into holes, but here is one that will not; and, tired out at length, and thinking perhaps that it is in the nature of some sticks not to be got into a hole by any means, he drops it down and fetches another, probably to have no better result, and this may happen several times. But jackdaws have perseverance, and so, with trying and trying again, he meets with sticks that are not so self-willed, and that can be put into holes, either by being short enough or held the right way, and so the foundation is laid, and the easier part of the work goes on merrily; for the jackdaw is at no loss for sheets and blankets for his children's bed, though we cannot see them in our picture, the clamorous children lying at the very edge of their bed. But if we could examine it, we should most likely be amused by what we should find. The jackdaw takes for this purpose anything soft that comes readily—we cannot say to *hand*—but to *bill*. In this respect he resembles the sparrow, and being, like him, fond of human society, gleans up out of his neighbourhood all that he needs for the comfort of his nestlings. Thus we hear of a nest, built in the ruins of Holyrood Chapel, in which, on its being looked into for a piece of lace which was supposed to be there, it was found also to be lined with part of a worsted stocking, a silk



JACKDAWS AND NESTLINGS.

handkerchief, a child's cap, a muslin frill, and several other things which the busy jackdaw had picked up in various ways ; for it must be borne in mind that he is own cousin to the magpie, whose thievish propensities are well known.

The call of the jackdaw is much quicker and more lively than the rook, somewhat resembling the syllable *yak*, variously modulated, and repeated somewhat leisurely, but at the same time cheerfully. Its food is similar to that of the rook, and going forth at early dawn it may be seen in pastures or ploughed fields, busily searching for larvæ, worms, and insects. They walk gracefully, with none of the solemn gravity either of the rook or raven, and may occasionally be seen running along and sometimes quarrelling amongst themselves.

Like the rook, the jackdaw stows away food in its mouth or throat-bag to feed its young. Its plumage is black, with shining silvery grey behind the head. Occasionally they are found with streaks or patches of white, as are also rooks, but these are mere sports of nature.

Mr. Waterton was of opinion that jackdaws lived in pairs all the year round, as he had seen them sitting in November on the leafless branches of a sycamore, side by side, pruning each other's heads, and apparently full of mutual affection; and as they mostly left the trees in pairs, and so returned, he was inclined to think that it was their custom always to remain paired.

I will now give you his *carte de visite* from Macgillivray's "British Birds." "He is a remarkably active, pert, and talkative little fellow, ever cheerful, always on the alert, and ready either for business or frolic. If not so respectable as the grave and sagacious raven, he is, at least, the most agreeable of the

family, and withal extremely fond of society, for, not content with having a flock of his own folk about him, he often thrusts himself into a gang of rooks, and in winter sometimes takes up his abode entirely with them."

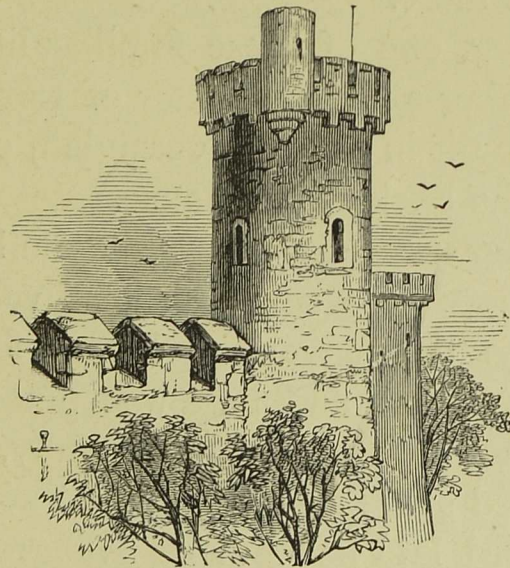
As to *thrusting* himself into a gang of rooks, I am, however, of opinion that the rooks make him heartily welcome. How do we know what amusement they, with their stolid gravity and solemn dignity, find in him with all his fun and loquacity? That rooks are really fond of the society of jackdaws is proved by an observation of Mr. Mudie. He says that "in the latter part of the season, when the rooks from one of the most extensive rookeries in Britain made daily excursions of about six miles to the warm grounds by the seaside, and in their flight passed over a deep ravine, in the sunny side of which were many jackdaws, he observed that when the cawing of the rooks in their morning flight was heard at the ravine, the jackdaws, who had previously been still and quiet, instantly raised their shriller notes, and flew up to join the rooks, both parties clamouring loudly as if welcoming each other; and that on the return, the daws accompanied the rooks a little past the ravine as if for good fellowship; then both cawed their farewell: the daws returned to their home and the rooks proceeded on their way."

Jackdaws, like rooks, are said to be excellent weather-prophets. If they fly back to their roost in the forenoon, or early in the afternoon, a storm may be expected that evening, or early in the morning.

The anecdotes of tame jackdaws are numerous. The Rev. J. G. Wood speaks of one which had learnt the art of kindling lucifer matches, and thus became a very dangerous inmate,

busying himself in this way when the family was in bed, though, fortunately, he seems to have done nothing worse than light the kitchen fire which had been laid ready for kindling over night. Clever as he was, however, he could not learn to distinguish the proper ignitable end of the match, and so rubbed on till he happened to get it right. He frightened himself terribly at first by the explosion and the sulphur fumes, and burned himself into the bargain. But I do not find that, like the burnt child, he afterwards feared the fire and so discontinued the dangerous trick.

The jackdaw is easily domesticated, and makes himself very happy in captivity, learns to articulate words and sentences, and is most amusing by his mimicry and comic humour.



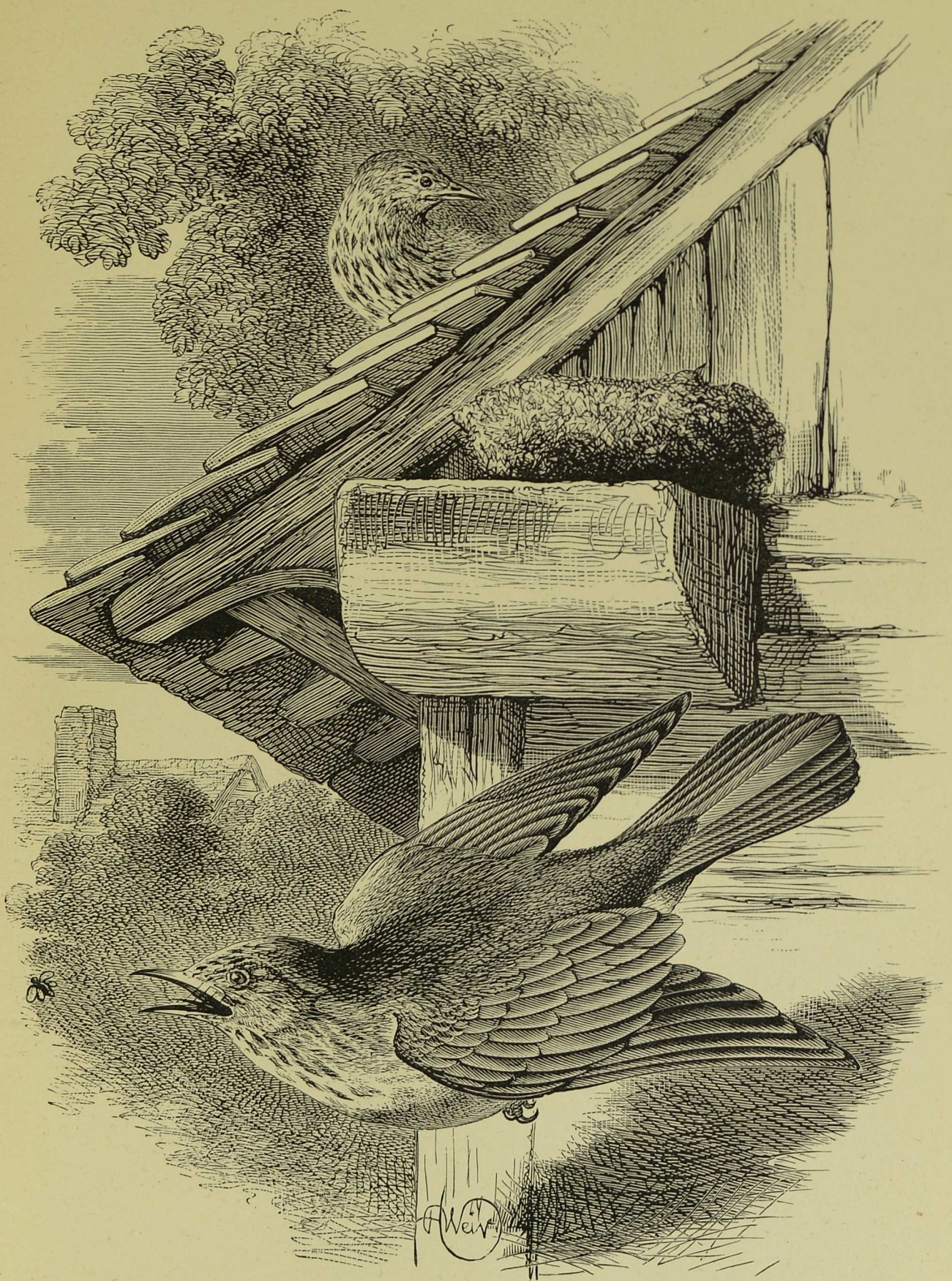
CHAPTER XV.

THE SPOTTED FLY-CATCHER.

THIS pretty little bird is also called the Beam or Pillar-Bird from the position which it chooses for its nest. Building mostly in gardens, it selects the projecting stone of a wall, the end of a beam or piece of wood, under a low roof, or by a door or gateway, the nest being, however, generally screened, and often made a perfect little bit of picturesque beauty, by the leaves of some lovely creeping rose, woodbine, or passion-flower, which grows there.

This last summer, one of these familiar little birds, which, though always seeming as if in a flutter of terror, must be fond of human society, built in a rustic verandah, overrun with Virginian creeper, at the back of our house.

According to her peculiar fancy she built exactly in the doorway, though there were some yards of verandah on either hand; but here was the convenient ledge, forming an angle with the upright support; and here was placed, as in our picture, the small, somewhat flat nest, beautifully, though slightly, put together, of dried grass and moss, lined with wool and hair. Here the mother-bird laid her four or five greyish-white eggs, with their spots of rusty red, and here she reared her young. She had, however, it seemed to us, an uncomfortable time of it,



SPOTTED FLY-CATCHERS AND NEST.

for, though we carefully avoided giving her needless disturbance that we almost ceased to use the door, yet there was an unavoidable passing to and fro to which she never seemed to get accustomed, starting off her nest with a little flutter whenever we came in sight; nor—although before she had finished sitting the quick-growing shoots of the Virginian creeper, with its broadly-expanding leaves, hid her nest so completely that, had it not been for her own timidity, we need not have known of her presence—she never lost this peculiar trait of character.

The nest which Mr. Harrison Weir has drawn is, doubtless, taken from life. I wish, however, he could have seen ours, only about ten feet from the ground, a little dome of love, embowered amongst young shoots, vine-like leaves and tendrils—a perfectly ideal nest, in which our friend, who has as keen a sense of natural beauty as any artist living, would have delighted himself.

The colours of this bird are very unobtrusive: the upper parts brownish-grey, the head spotted with brown, the neck and breast streaked or spotted with greyish-brown. It is a migratory bird, and arrives in this country about the middle or end of May, remaining with us till about the middle of October, by which time the flies on which it lives have generally disappeared.

Its mode of taking its winged prey is curious. Seated, stock-still, in a twig, it darts or glides off at the sight of an insect, like the bird of our picture, and seizes it with a little snapping noise; then returns to its perch ready for more, and so on; incessantly darting out and returning to the same spot, till it has satisfied its hunger, or moves off to another twig to commence the same pursuit.

When they have young, the number of flies consumed only by one little family must be amazing. It is recorded* in one instance that a pair of fly-catchers, beginning to feed their nestlings at five-and-twenty minutes before seven in the morning, and continuing their labour till ten minutes before nine at night, supplied them with food, that is to say with flies, no less than five hundred and thirty-seven times. The gentleman who made these observations says:—"Before they fed their young they alighted upon a tree for a few seconds, and looked round about them. By short jerks they usually caught the winged insects. Sometimes they ascended into the air and dropped like an arrow; at other times they hovered like a hawk when set on its prey. They drove off most vigorously all kinds of small birds that approached their nest, as if bidding them to go and hunt in their own grounds, where there were plenty of flies for them. Sometimes they brought only one fly in their bills, sometimes several, and flies of various sizes."

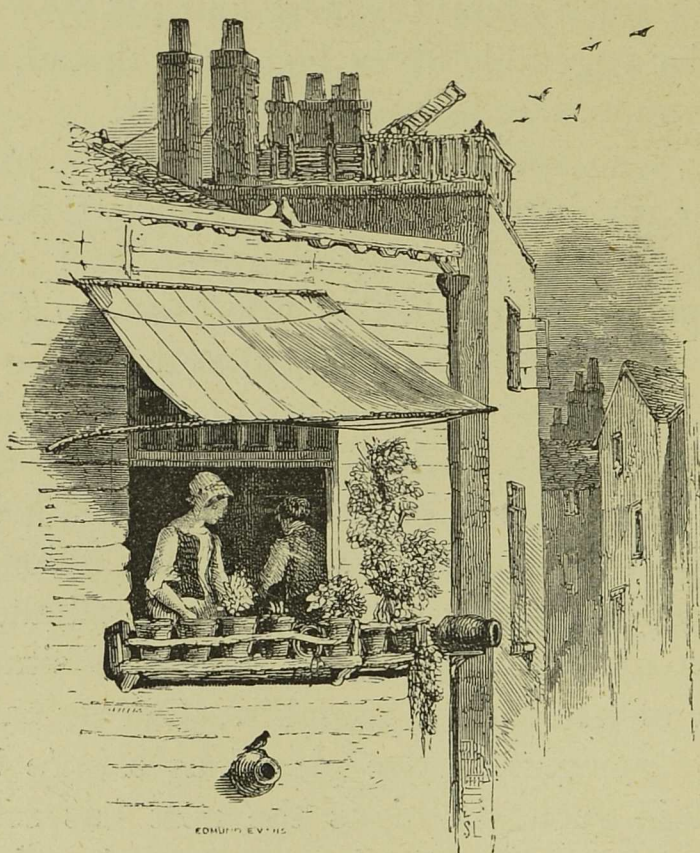
This bird seems to become attached to particular localities, where he finds himself conveniently situated and undisturbed. Mr. Mudie mentions, in his "Feathered Tribes," "that a pair of these birds had nested in his garden for twelve successive years." What is the length of life of a fly-catcher I cannot say; but probably if they were not the same birds, they would be their descendants—birds hatched there, and consequently at home. The Rev. J. G. Wood also speaks of the same locality having been used by this bird for twenty successive years; and he supposes that the young had succeeded to their ancestral home. He gives also an interesting account of the commence-

* See Macgillivray's "*British Birds.*"

ment of a nest-building by this bird. He says that the female, who seems to be generally the active builder, placed, in the first instance, a bundle of fine grass in some conveniently-forked branches, and after having picked it about for some time, as if regularly shaking it up, she seated herself in the middle of it, and there, spinning herself round and round, gave it its cuplike form. She then fetched more grasses, and after arranging them partly round the edge, and partly on the bottom, repeated the spinning process. A few hairs and some moss were then stuck about the nest and neatly woven in, the hair and slender vegetable fibres being the thread, so to speak, with which the moss was fastened to the nest.

Mr. Mudie, also speaking of their nest-building, says that, in one instance which came under his notice, "the bird began at seven o'clock on a Tuesday morning, and the nest was finished in good time on Friday afternoon." This was certainly rapid work. Mr. Yarrell says that the he-bird brings the materials to the hen, who makes use of them—which is stated as a general fact by Michelet—and that in constructing her nest the little fly-catcher, after she had rounded it into its first form, moves backwards as she weaves into it long hairs and grasses with her bill, continually walking round and round her nest. This, however, can only be when the situation of the nest will allow of her passing round it. Our fly-catcher's nest, and the nest of our picture, are placed as a little bed close to the wall, and in such situations the nest has sometimes no back, but simply the lining. A very favourite place with the fly-catcher for her nest is the hole in a wall, the size of a half brick, in which the builder fixed the spar of his scaffolding, and

omitted to fill up when he had finished. In these convenient little nooks the fly-catcher's nest fills the whole front of the opening, but has seldom any back to it. From all this, I think it is clear that the fly-catcher is, in her arrangements, guided by circumstances: only, in every case, her little home is as snug as it can be.



CHAPTER XVI.

THE WOOD-PIGEON.

THE wood-pigeon, ring-dove, or cushat is one of the most familiar and poetical of our birds. Its low, plaintive coo-goo-roo-o-o is one of the pleasantest sounds of our summer woods.

“Tell me, tell me, cushat, why thou moanest ever,
Thrilling all the greenwood with thy secret woe?
‘I moan not,’ says the cushat, ‘I praise life’s gracious Giver
By murmuring out my love in the best way that I know.’”

The wood-pigeon belongs to a large family of birds—*columbinæ* or doves. The earliest mention of them in the world is in Genesis, when Noah, wearied with the confinement of the ark, and seeing that the mountain tops were visible, selected from the imprisoned creatures—first the raven, then the dove, to go forth and report to him of the state of the earth. The raven, however, came not back, no doubt finding food which tempted him to stay; whilst the dove, finding no rest for the sole of her foot, returned, and Noah, putting forth his hand, took her in. Again he sent her forth, and she came back in the evening, and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off. A third time she was sent forth, but now she returned no more. So Noah looked out, and behold the face of the earth was dry. And he and his family, and all the creatures, again went forth and possessed all things.

This dove might probably be of the carrier-pigeon tribe, which is more nearly related to the rock-pigeon, also a native of this country, or rather, of the northern parts of Scotland. These carrier-pigeons were, in the old times, long enough before the invention of electric telegraphs, or even before post-offices were established, used instead of both. Anacreon, the Greek poet, speaks of them as being used to convey letters; the pigeon, having, as it were, two homes, being fed in each; thus, a letter from a friend in one home was tied to the wing, and the bird turned into the air, probably without his breakfast, when he immediately flew off to his distant home, where the letter was joyfully received, and he fed for his pains. Whilst the answer was prepared he would rest, and it, perhaps, taking some little time, he grew hungry again; but they gave him nothing more, and, again securing the letter on his little person, he was sent back, making good speed, because he would now be thinking of his supper. Thus, the answer flew through the air.

“Come hither, my dove,
And I'll write to my love,
And I'll send him a letter by thee!”

So says the old song. And we are told that a young man named Taurosthenes, one of the victors in the great Olympian games of Greece, sent to his father, who resided at a considerable distance, the tidings of his success, on the same day, by one of these birds. Pliny, the Roman historian, speaks of them being used in case of siege; when the besieged sent out these winged messengers, who, cleaving the air at a secure height above the surrounding army, conveyed the important intelligence of their need to their friends afar off. The crusaders are



WOOD-PIGEONS AND NEST.

said to have made use of them at the siege of Jerusalem, and the old traveller, Sir John Maundeville—"knight, warrior, and pilgrim," as he is styled—who, in the reign of our second and third Edwards, made a journey as far as the borders of China, relates that, "in that and other countries beyond, pigeons were sent out from one to another to ask succour in time of need, and these letters were tied to the neck of the bird."

But enough of carrier-pigeons. Let us come back to our ring-dove or cushat, brooding on her eggs in the sweet summer woods, as Mr. Harrison Weir has so truthfully represented her. She is not much of a nest-maker.

"A few sticks across,
Without a bit of moss,
Laid in the fork of an old oak-tree ;
Coo-goo-roo-o-o,
She says it will do,
And there she's as happy as a bird can be."

The nest, however, is not at all insufficient for her needs. You see her sitting brooding over her two white eggs in every possible bird comfort ; and whether her mate help her in the building of the nest or not, I cannot say, but he is certainly a very good domesticated husband, and sits upon the eggs alternately with her, so that the hatching, whatever the building may be, is an equally divided labour.

Wordsworth sees in this bird an example of unobtrusive home affection. He says :—

"I heard a stock-dove sing or say
His homely tale this very day :
His voice was buried among the trees,
Yet to be come at by the breeze ;

He did not cease, but cooed and cooed,
And somewhat pensively he wooed ;
He sung of love with quiet blending,
Slow to begin, and never ending ;
Of serious faith and inward glee ;
That was the song—the song for me.”

Wood-pigeons have immense appetites, and, being fond of all kinds of grain, as well as peas and beans, are looked upon by the farmer with great disfavour. They are, however, fond of some of those very weeds which are his greatest annoyance—for instance, charlock and wild mustard ; so that they do him some good in return for the tribute which they take of his crops. They are fond, also, both of young clover and the young green leaves of the turnip, as well as of the turnip itself. Either by instinct or experience, they have learned that, feeding thus in cultivated fields, they are doing that which will bring down upon them the displeasure of man. “ They keep,” says the intelligent author of “ Wild Sports in the Highlands,” “ when feeding in the fields, in the most open and exposed places, so as to allow no enemy to come near them. It is amusing to watch a large flock of these birds whilst searching the ground for grain. They walk in a compact body ; and in order that all may fare alike—which is certainly a good trait in their character—the hindermost rank, every now and then, fly over the heads of their companions to the front, where they keep the best place for a minute or two, till those now in the rear take their place. They keep up this kind of fair play during the whole time of feeding. They feed, also, on wild fruit and all kinds of wild berries, such as the mountain-ash, and ivy ; and where acorns abound, seem to prefer them to any-

thing else. At the same time, I must confess that they are great enemies to my cherry-trees, and swallow as many cherries as they can hold. Nor are strawberries safe from them, and the quantity of food they manage to stow away in their crops is perfectly astonishing."

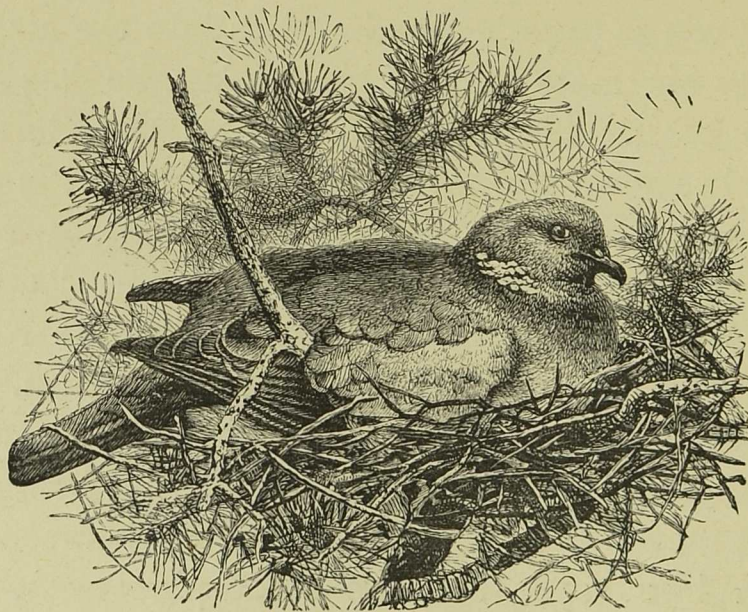
Besides man, the wood-pigeon has its own bird-enemies. "In districts where the hooded crow abounds," says the author whom I have just quoted, "he is always on the look-out for its eggs, which, shining out white from the shallow, unsubstantial nest, are easily seen by him. The sparrow-hawk seizes the young when they are half-grown and plump; he having been carefully noticed watching the nest day by day as if waiting for the time when they should be fit for his eating. The larger hawks, however, prey upon the poor wood-pigeon himself."

With all his pleasant cooings in the wood, therefore, and all his complacent strutting about with elevated head and protruded breast—with all his gambols and graces, his striking the points of his wings together as he rises into the air, to express a pleasure to his mate beyond his cooing, he has not such a care free life of it. He is always kept on the alert, therefore, and, being always on the watch against danger, is not at all a sound sleeper. The least disturbance at night rouses him. "I have frequently," continues our author, "attempted to approach the trees when the wood-pigeons were roosting, but even on the darkest nights they would take alarm. The poor wood-pigeon has no other defence against its enemies than its ever watchful and never sleeping timidity; not being able to do battle against even the smallest of its many persecutors."

Gilbert White says that the wood-pigeons were greatly

decreasing, in his time, in Hampshire, and there were then only about a hundred in the woods at Selborne, but in former times the flocks had been so vast, not only there, but in the surrounding districts, that they had traversed the air morning and evening like rooks, reaching for a mile together, and that, when they thus came to rendezvous there by thousands, the sound of their wings, suddenly roused from their roosting-trees in an evening, rising all at once into the air, was like a sudden rolling of distant thunder.

Although the wood-pigeon is considered to be the original parent of the tame pigeon, yet it does not seem possible to tame the young of this bird, though taken from the nest quite young. It is a bird which appears to hate confinement, and, as soon as it has the opportunity, spite of all kindness and attention, it flies away to the freedom of the woods.



CHAPTER XVII.

THE WHITE-THROAT.

WITH none of our migratory birds, our spring visitants from southern lands, is the lover of the country more familiar than with the White-throat, which, with its nest, is here so beautifully and livingly depicted by Mr. Harrison Weir.

This bird, with its many names—White-throat, Peggy-white-throat, Peggy-chaw, Charlie-muft, Nettle-creeper, Whishey-whey-beard or Pettichaps—comes to us in April, about the same time as the cuckoo and the swallow; the male bird, like his cousin the nightingale, coming before the female, but he does not make himself very conspicuous till the hedges and bushes are well covered with leaves; then he may be found in almost every lane and hedge the whole country over.

As soon as the female is here, and the birds have paired, the business of nest-building begins, and they may then be seen flying in and out of the bushes with great alertness, the he-bird carolling his light and airy song, and often hurling himself, as it were, up into the air, some twenty or thirty feet, in a wild, tipsy sort of way, as if he were fuller of life than he could hold, and coming down again with a warble into the hedge, where the little hen-wife is already arranging her dwelling in the very spot probably where she was herself hatched, and her ancestors before her, for ages. For I must here remark that one of the

most remarkable properties of birds is, that facility by which they so regularly disperse themselves over the whole country on their arrival after their far migration, each one, in all probability, attracted by some attachment of the past, stopping short at, or proceeding onward to, the exact spot where he himself first came into the consciousness of life. This is one of the wonderful arrangements of nature, otherwise of God, by which the great balance is so beautifully kept in creation. If the migratory bird arrives ever so weary at Dover, and its true home be some sweet low-lying lane of Devonshire, a thick hedgerow of the midland counties, or a thickety glen of Westmoreland, it will not delay its flight nor be tempted to tarry short of that glen, hedgerow, or lane with which the experience of its own life and affection is united.

At this charming time of the year none of the various performers in nature's great concert bring back to those who have passed their youth in the country a more delicious recollection of vernal fields and lanes than this bird of ours, the little white-throat.

Yes, along those hedges, fresh and fragrant with their young leaves, along those banks studded with primroses, champions, blue-bells and white starwort, and through the thick growth of the wild-rose bushes, all of which have a beauty especially their own, the white-throat salutes you as you pass, as if to recognise an old acquaintance. He is brimful of fun; out he starts and performs his series of eccentric frolics in the air, accompanied by his mad-cap sort of warble; or, almost as if laughing at you, he repeats from the interior of the bushes his deep grave note, *chaw! chaw!* whence comes the name of



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peggy-chaw. This, however, is to tell you—and to those who understand bird-language it is intelligible enough—that he has now a family to attend to, and he begs, very respectfully, that you will not trouble yourself about it.

A Scotch naturalist says that “the peasant boys in East Lothian imagine that the bird is mocking or laughing at them, as it tumbles over the hedge and bushes in the lane, and, therefore, they persecute it at all times, even more mercilessly than they do sparrows.”

The white-throat is an excitable little bird, rapid in all its movements; and though it will apparently allow a person to come near, it incessantly flits on, gets to the other side of the hedge, warbles its quaint little song, flies to a short distance, sings again, and so on, for a long time, returning in the same way. It erects the feathers of its head when excited, and swells its throat so much when singing, that the feathers stand out like a ruff, whence it has obtained the name of *Muffety*, or *Charlie-muft*, in Scotland.

Its colour, on the upper parts of the body, is reddish-brown, brownish-white below, with a purely white throat. Its food is principally insects and larvæ of various kinds, for which it is always on the search amongst the thick undergrowth of the plants and bushes where it builds. One of its many names is *Nettle-creeper*, from this plant growing so generally in the localities which it haunts.

Its nest—one of the most light and elegant of these little abodes—may truly be called “gauze-like,” for being constructed wholly of fine grasses, and very much of the brittle stems of the *Galium aparine*, or cleavers, which, though slender, are not

pliant, and bend only with an angle; they prevent the whole fabric from being closely woven, so that it maintains a gauzy texture; the inside, however, is put together more closely of finer and more pliant materials, delicate root-filaments, and various kinds of hair. The eggs, four or five in number, are of a greenish-gray colour, often with a tawny hue, blotched and spotted over with dark tints of the same colour.

A correspondent of the author of "British Birds" says that, one morning in June, when walking in his shrubbery within about eighty yards of a white-throat's nest, which he was taking great interest in, he found a portion of the shell of one of the eggs of this bird, and, fearing that a magpie had been plundering it, hastened to the spot, but found to his satisfaction that the nest was then full of newly-hatched birds. "The shell had," he says, "been instinctively taken away by the mother in order to prevent the discovery of the place of her retreat." He adds that the mother-bird was very shy, and usually dropped from her nest with the most astonishing rapidity, and, treading her way through the grasses and other entanglements, disappeared in a moment. The young, too, seemed greatly to dislike observation, and on his taking one into his hand to examine it, it uttered a cry, no doubt of alarm, on which all the other little things leapt out of their abode, although not more than half-fledged, and hopped amongst the grass. It is a singular fact that almost every kind of young bird, if they be caused to leave their nest through alarm, or by being handled, can never be induced to stay in the nest again, though they may be put back into it time after time.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BULL-FINCH.

THIS bird, which is common to all parts of the country, is very shy, and for the greater part of the year haunts the woods and thickets. In spring, however, its fondness for tender fruit-buds tempts it into gardens and orchards, where, being considered an enemy, it is destroyed without mercy. It is a question, however, whether it devours these young buds as favourite food, or whether it may not be the equally distinctive grub or insect which is the temptation; and thus, that it ought rather to be regarded as the friend than the enemy of the gardener and fruit-grower. At all events, the general opinion is against the poor bull-finch. He is declared to be a devourer of the embryo fruit, and no mercy is shown to him. The Rev. J. G. Wood, always a merciful judge where birds are concerned, thinks that public opinion is unfairly against him. He says that a gooseberry tree, from which it was supposed that the bull-finches had picked away every blossom-bud, yet bore the same year an abundant crop of fruit, which certainly proved that they had picked away only the already infected buds, and so left the tree in an additionally healthy state, doubly able to mature and perfect its fruit.

Bull-finches seldom associate with other birds, but keep together in small flocks as of single families. Its flight, though

quick, is somewhat undulating or wavering ; and in the winter it may sometimes be seen in large numbers flitting along the roadsides and hedges, being probably forced out of some of its shyness by the stress of hunger. Its ordinary note is a soft and plaintive whistle ; its song, short and mellow. It is, in its native state, no way distinguished as a singing-bird, but at the same time it is possessed of a remarkable faculty for learning tunes artificially, of which I may have more to say presently.

The bull-finch begins to build about the beginning of May. She places her nest, as we see in our illustration, in a bush, frequently a hawthorn, at no great distance from the ground. The nest is not very solidly put together ; the foundation, so to speak, being composed of small dry twigs, then finished off with fibrous roots and moss, which also form the lining. The eggs, five or six in number, are of a dull bluish-white, marked at the larger end with dark spots.

Although there is so little to say about the bull-finch in his natural state—excepting that he is a handsome bird, with bright black eyes, a sort of rich black hood on his head ; his back, ash-grey ; his breast and underparts, red ; wings and tail, black, with the upper tail-coverts white—yet when he has gone through his musical education, he is not only one of the most accomplished of song-birds, but one of the most loving and faithfully attached little creatures that can come under human care. These trained birds are known as piping bull-finches.

Bishop Stanley, in his “History of Birds,” thus describes the method by which they are taught :—

“In the month of June, the young ones, which are taken from the nest for that purpose, are brought up by a person,



BULL-FINCH AND NESTLINGS.

who, by care and attention, so completely tames them that they become perfectly docile and obedient. At the expiration of about a couple of months, they first begin to whistle, from which time their education begins, and no school can be more diligently superintended by its master, and no scholars more effectually trained to their own calling, than a seminary of bull-finches. They are formed first into classes of about six in each, and, after having been kept a longer time than usual without food, and confined to a dark room, the tune they are to learn is played over and over again, on a little instrument called a bird-organ, the notes of which resemble, as nearly as possible, those of the bull-finch; sometimes, also, a flageolet is used for this purpose, and birds so taught are said to have the finer notes. For awhile the little moping creatures will sit in silence, not knowing what all this can mean; but after awhile one by one will begin to imitate the notes they hear, for they have great power of imitation as well as remarkably good memories. As soon as they have said their lesson all round, light is admitted into the room, and they are fed.

“By degrees the sound of the musical instrument—be it flageolet or bird-organ—and the circumstance of being fed, become so associated in the mind of the hungry bird, that it is sure to begin piping the tune as soon as it hears it begin to play. When the little scholars have advanced so far they are put into a higher class, that is to say, are turned over each to his private tutor; in other words, each bird is put under the care of a boy who must carry on its education, and who plays on the little instrument from morning to night, or as long as the bird can pay attention, during which time the head-master

or feeder goes his regular rounds, scolding or rewarding the little feathered scholars by signs and modes of making them understand, till they have learned their lessons so perfectly, and the tune is so impressed on their memories, that they will pipe it to the end of their days; and let us hope, as I believe is the fact, that they find in it a never-ending delight.

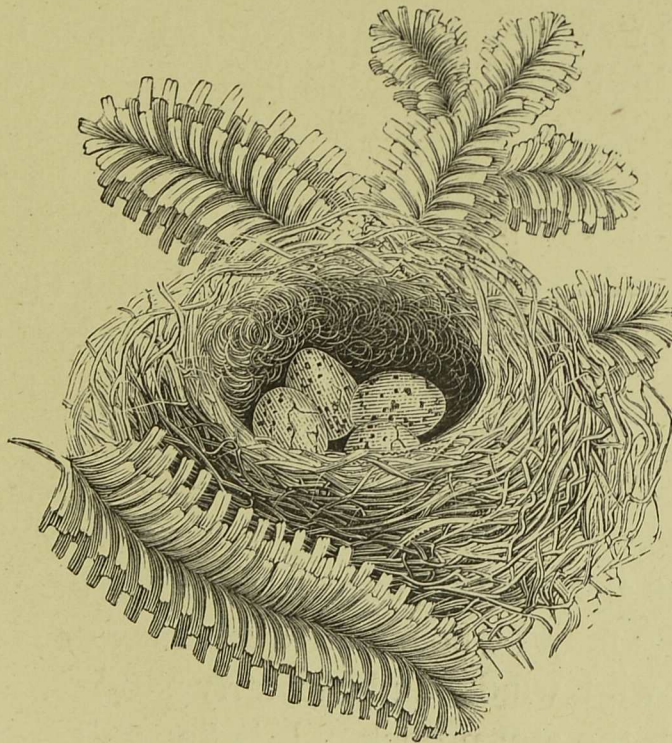
“Just as in human schools and colleges, it is only the few out of the great number who take the highest honours or degrees, or become senior wranglers, so it is not above five birds in every hundred who can attain to the highest perfection in their art! but all such are valued at a very high price.”

It is allowable to hope that the poor bull-finch, which has thus industriously applied himself to learn, and has thus become artificially gifted with the power of pleasing, takes great satisfaction in his accomplishment. Perhaps also the association with his human teacher calls forth his affection as well as his power of song, for it is a fact that the piping bull-finch is, of all birds, given to attach itself to some one individual of the family where it is kept, expressing, at their approach, the most vehement delight, greeting them with its piping melody, hopping towards them, and practising all its little winning ways to show its love, and to court a return of caresses.

“An interesting story,” says the bishop, “was told by Sir William Parsons, who was himself a great musician, and who, when a young man, possessed a piping bull-finch, which he had taught to sing, ‘God save the king.’ On his once going abroad, he gave his favourite in charge to his sister, with a strict injunction to take the greatest care of it. On his return, one of his first visits was to her, when she told him that the

poor little bird had been long in declining health, and was, at that moment, very ill. Sir William, full of sorrow, went into the room where the cage was, and, opening the door, put in his hand, and spoke to the bird. The poor little creature recognised his voice, opened his eyes, shook his feathers, staggered on to his finger, piped 'God save the king,' and fell down dead."

We see in the piping bull-finch—a bird which in its education is closely associated with man—the deep and devoted affection of which it is capable; and if we could only live with the animal creation as their friends and benefactors, we should no longer be surprised by such instances of their intelligence and love.



CHAPTER XIX.

THE MISSEL-THRUSH.

THIS is the largest of our British song birds. It remains with us through the whole year, not being migratory, excepting in so far as it moves off in considerable flocks into Herefordshire and Monmouthshire for the sake of the mistletoe which abounds in the orchards there, on the viscous berries of which it delights to feed, and whence it has obtained its familiar name of missel, or mistletoe thrush. It is generally believed that this curious parasitic plant was propagated or planted upon the branches of trees, by this bird rubbing its bill upon the rough bark to clean it from the sticky substance of the berry, and thus introducing the seeds into the interstices of the bark.

The Missel-thrush is a handsome bird; the head, back, and upper coverts of the wings olive-brown, the latter tipped with brownish-white, spotted with brown; the breasts and under parts pale yellow, covered with black spots; the legs are yellow and the claws black.

It is a welcome bird, being the earliest harbinger of spring, the first singer of the year. Long before the swallow is thought of, before even the hardy familiar robin has begun his song, its clear rich voice may be heard on Christmas or New Year's day, often amidst wild winds and winterly storms, whence its also familiar name, the storm-cock. It is known by different names



MISSEL-THRUSHES AND NEST.

in different parts of the country. The origin of its more general appellation—the missel-thrush—I have already mentioned. In the midland counties it is called the thrice cock, but why I know not. In Wales it is known as *Pen-y-llwyn*, which means the head or master of the coppice. Why it is so called I will mention presently.

The nest of the missel-thrush is large and well constructed, being made of almost every material ordinarily used for nest-making purposes—moss, and hay, and straw, and dry leaves, and little twigs, and locks of wool, with occasional odds and ends of every possible kind. All these are woven and wrought together very compactly; not, however, without loose straws and little tangles of wool hanging about. Within is a smooth casing of mud, as in the nest of the throstle, and within that a second coating of dry grass. Our picture represents all as being now complete. The busy labours of the year are now over; the eggs, four or five in number, of a greenish-blue, marked with reddish spots, are laid, and the mother-bird has taken her patient seat upon them, whilst her mate, from the branch above, sings as if he never meant to leave off again.

The song of this bird is loud, clear, and melodious—a cheering, hopeful song; and when heard amidst the yet prevailing winter-storms, as if in anticipation of better times, it well deserves our admiration. It resembles, to a certain degree, the song of the blackbird and the thrush, and is often mistaken for them; but it has not the short, quick, and varied notes of the one, nor the sober, prolonged, and eloquent melody of the other. On the contrary it is of an eager, hurrying character,

as if it could not sufficiently express its emotion, and yet was trying to do so.

The missel-thrush is a bird of very marked character, and is both bold and chivalrous. Its harsh, jarring note of anger and defiance is the first to be heard when a bird-enemy is at hand. If a cuckoo or hawk is anywhere near meditating mischief, the missel-thrush is vehement in his expression of displeasure. In our own neighbourhood, where the jays in summer come from the wood to carry the young of the sparrows from their nests in the ivied boles of the trees round our garden, the outcry of the parent sparrows instantly arouses the sympathetic missel-thrushes, who, with a scolding defiance, rush to the rescue. Of course these birds, which are of so militant a character, and so loud in protesting against a wrong done to another, will be equally alive to their own rights, and active in defending their own nests and young. Some naturalists have suggested that this combatant temper and extraordinary courage are but the natural consequence of the bird finding its nest open to common attack; for, being of a large size, and built early in the year whilst the trees are yet leafless, it is visible to every enemy and depredator.

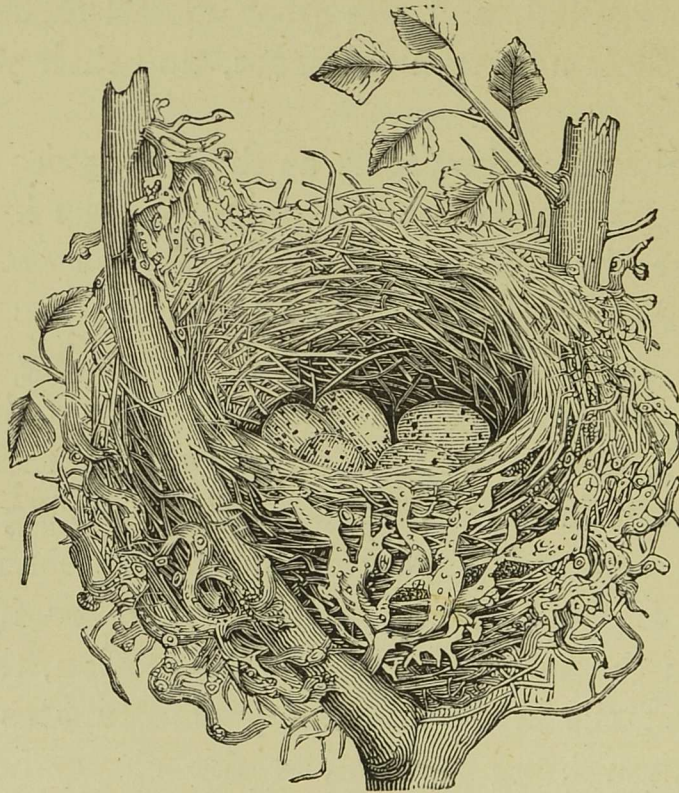
Mr. Thompson says: "Often have I seen a pair of these birds driving off magpies, and occasionally fighting against four of them. One pair which I knew attacked a kestrel which appeared in their neighbourhood when the young were out. One of them struck the hawk several times, and made as many more fruitless attempts, as the enemy, by suddenly rising in the air, escaped the cunning blow. They then followed the kestrel for a long way, until they were lost to our sight in the distance."

The old Welsh name of "master, or head of the coppice," refers to the same warlike spirit. "The missel-thrush," says Gilbert White, "suffers no magpie, jay, or blackbird to enter the garden where he haunts, and is, for the time, a good guardian of the new-sown crops. In general, he is very successful in defence of his family. Once, however, I observed in my garden that several magpies came determined to storm the nest of the missel-thrush. The parent-birds defended their mansion with great vigour, and fought resolutely. But numbers at last prevailed, and the poor missel-thrushes had the pain of seeing their nest torn to pieces, and their young carried off."

The missel-thrushes, however, as the year goes on, make for themselves enemies even more formidable than hawks or magpies; these are the gardeners. Towards the end of summer, when the young have flown, and they and the parent-birds congregate in large flocks, having then nothing to do but to enjoy themselves, like human families when children are all home for the holidays, they too go abroad on their excursions of pleasure; not, however, to sea-side watering places, but into gardens where the cherries and raspberries are ripe. Poor birds! Little aware of their danger, or if they be so, defiant of it in the greatness of the temptation, they make sad havoc amongst the fruit, and many unfortunates are shot or snared, and then hung up amidst the cherry-boughs or the raspberry-canes as a terror to their associates. It is a pity we cannot make them welcome to some and yet have enough left for ourselves.

The berries of the mountain-ash and the arbutus, and later

on in the year those of the holly and ivy, supply them with food, as do also in the spring and summer insects of various kinds—caterpillars and spiders—so that in this respect they are good friends to the gardener, and might, one thinks, be made welcome to a little fruit in return.



CHAPTER XX.

THE YELLOW-HAMMER, OR YELLOW-HEAD.

THIS, though an extremely pretty bird, is so common that very little notice is taken of it. Its colours are varied and beautiful: the back and wings, bright red; the central part of each feather, brownish-black; the head and throat, bright yellow; the feathers of the upper part tipped with black; the breast, brownish-red. The colours of the female are much duller.

The yellow-hammer resembles linnets, finches, and sparrows in character and habits, and often associates with them, resorting to the fields in open weather, and often perching in hedges and bushes as well as in trees. In the winter, when the weather is severe, it congregates, with other birds, about houses, farm-buildings, and stack-yards.

One of the most pleasing features of autumn is, to my mind, these flocks of kindred birds, which are at that time all abroad and yet together, circling in their flight, all rising as you approach, and wheeling away into the stubble-field, or into the distant hedges, now rich with their wild fruits—the black-berry, the wild-rose hip, and the bunches of black-privet berries—and then away again, as you approach, with their variously modulated notes, through the clear air into the yet more distant stubble or bean-field.

The flight of the yellow-hammer is wavy and graceful, and,

alighting abruptly, he has a curious way of jerking out his tail feathers like a little fan. All at once a whole flock of them will descend from a considerable height and settle on the twigs of a tree, clothing it as with living leaves. Whatever number the flock may consist of, there is no impatient hurry or jostling among them to get the best perch, every individual settling as if on its own appointed place. As I have already observed, nothing is more charming at this season than these congregated companies of small birds. All the cares of life are now over, their young broods are around them, and now, with nothing to do but to enjoy themselves in the freedom of nature, where—on every hand, on every bush and tree, and in every outlying field—though the crops are now carried, all except, perhaps, here and there a solitary field in which the bean-shocks stand up black in the golden autumnal sunshine; but here, and there, and everywhere, a full table is spread, and they are welcome to enjoy.

In spring and summer, the yellow-hammer sings a peculiar but mournful sort of little ditty, composed of a few short, sonorous notes, concluding with one long drawn out. In the midland counties, where stocking-weaving is the business of the people, the note of the bird is said to resemble the working of the machine—ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-e-e-chay—the prolonged latter syllable being what the stockinger calls, in the machine movement, “pressing over the arch.” In other parts of the country this bird’s song is interpreted as “A little bit of bread, and—no-cheese!” which may just as well be “A little bird am I, and—no thief!”

The food of this bird consists of the seeds of all kinds of



YELLOW-HAMMER AND NEST.

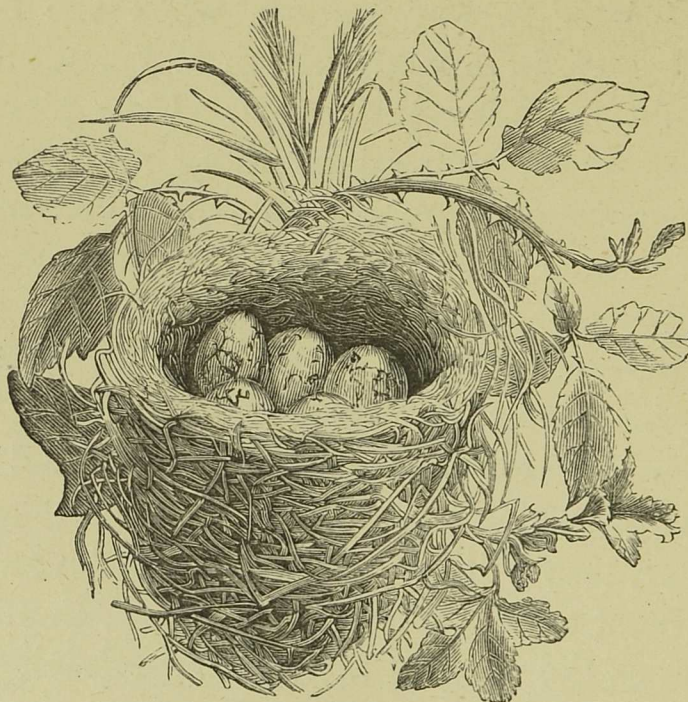
grasses, chickweeds, polygonums, and other such weeds; also, in summer, when food is needed for the young, insects and larvæ.

The winter congregations break up in April, and then the yellow-hammer begins to think of family joys and cares. But, unlike their relations the sparrows and finches, the he-birds take everything quietly, without having their little skirmishes to show their spirit and prowess, like the knights of old, at the tournament, before the admiring ladies. The yellow-hammer does everything quietly, choosing his mate in an orderly way; and now that the buds are swelling on the trees, the primroses gemming the hedge-banks, and the golden catkins hanging on the willows by the watersides, hither come the little yellow-hammers, and, having selected some sweet, hidden spot, under a bush, or on the fieldy banks amongst the thick herbage—we see it a month later in our picture, when the buds have expanded into leaves, in a wild growth of beautiful grasses and herbage—begin to make their nest. How picturesque it is!

William Hunt never painted anything more beautiful. The nest itself is somewhat large, and of simple construction, woven externally of coarse bents and small pliant twigs, and lined with hair and wool. Here the hen lays four or five eggs of a purplish white, marked with dark, irregular streaks, often resembling musical notes.

These poor little birds are extremely attached to their home and their young, so much so, that if these be taken by the pitiless bird-nester, they will continue for some days about the place uttering the most melancholy plaint, which, though still to the same old tune as the song of their spring rejoicing, has now the expression of the deepest woe.

The author of "British Birds" thus sums up their various characteristic actions:—"When perched on a tree, especially in windy weather, they crouch close to the twigs, draw in their necks, and keep their tails declined. After pairing, the male is generally seen on a bush or tree, raising his tail by sudden jerks, and slightly expanding it. His notes are then usually two chirps, followed by a harsher note—cit, chit, chirr—with considerable intervals. When feeding in the stubble-fields, they advance by very short leaps, with their breasts nearly touching the ground; when apprehensive of danger they crouch motionless, and when alarmed give information to each other by means of their ordinary short note."



CHAPTER XXI.

THE MAGPIE.

You have here a living portrait of the Magpie, sitting, so to speak, on his own door-sill, and contemplating it with rather a sentimental air, perhaps rather with tender admiration; and as to his dwelling, it is, we must confess, a wonderful structure—a half-timbered edifice, so to speak, walled-round and roofed-in, with its front-door and all complete.

The magpie is one of our most beautiful as well as most amusing and characteristic birds. He is cousin to the jackdaw, and has, like him, odd ways of his own. In all countries where he is found, he is just the same. An old Greek poet, who lived two thousand years ago, speaks of him as a great mimic, and such an inordinate talker, that, in his own satirical humour, he pretends to believe that magpies were originally a family of young ladies, in Macedonia, who were noted for the volubility of their tongues. Handsome he is, as well as talkative, and very droll and mischievous.

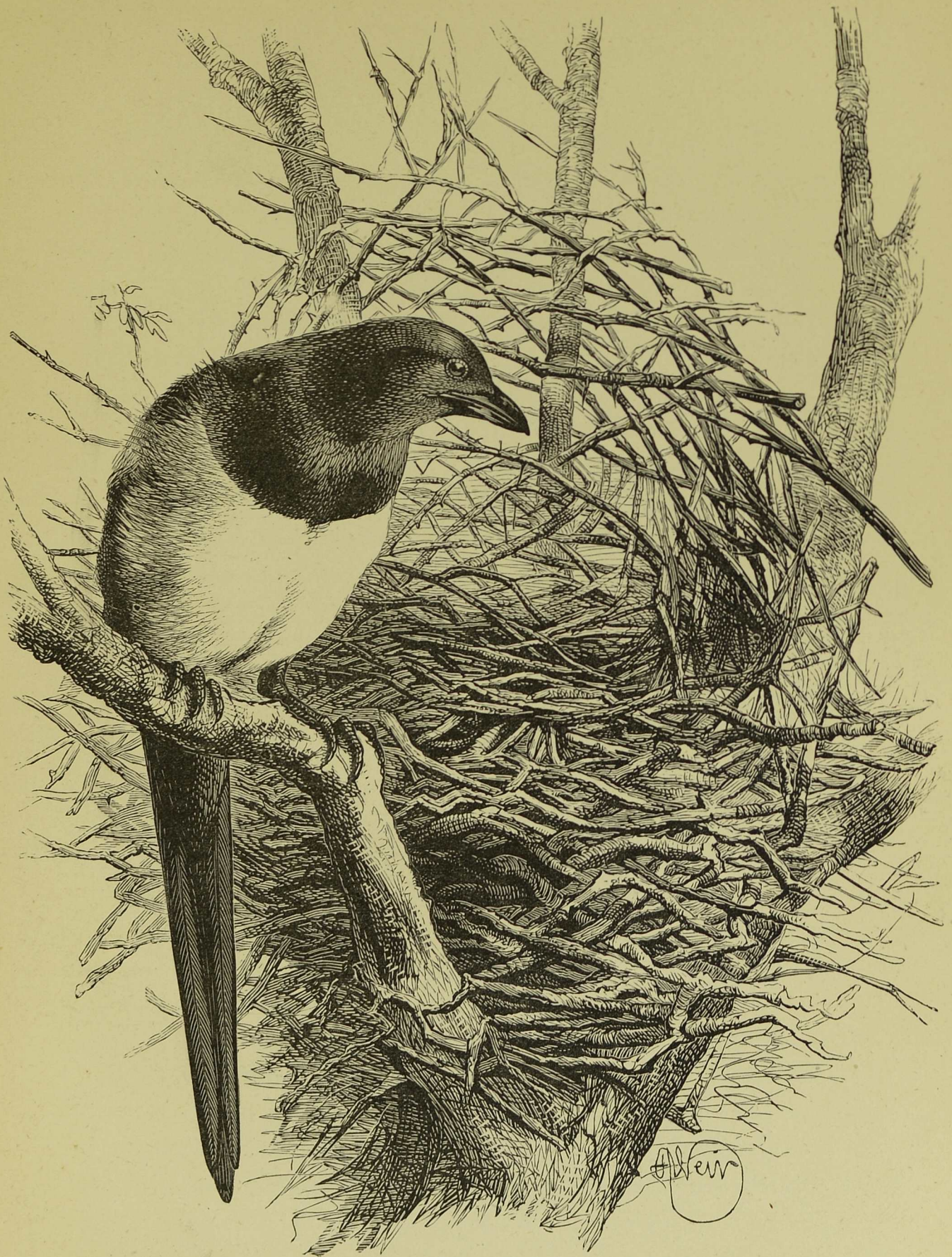
Being such, we need not wonder that his nest is very original. He likes to place it in a secure angle of branches, on some lofty tree, as we see it here, fifty feet or so from the ground; and prefers to have it on a tree bare of branches to a considerable height, knowing that it is then more inaccessible. He is wise in all this, for its bulk being so large it is discernible to a great

distance. As magpies, however, are found almost everywhere, and in some parts of the country, the north of Scotland for instance, where there are no trees, the poor magpie is then obliged to build in a bush, and do the best he can. In such a case, in Norway, he was known to barricade his nest with thorny branches, brought thither by himself for that purpose, till it was next to impossible for the domicile to be invaded. A cat could not get to it, and a man only with hedging-mittens on his hands, and by help of a bill-hook.

Like the rook, the magpie inhabits the same nest for several years, perhaps for the whole of his life, putting it into repair every year before he again needs it for family use—like a wealthy country family taking possession of their ancestral mansion in the spring.

And now, turning to our picture, we find our magpie in excellent circumstances. Every thing has gone well with him. Here he is, and I will have the pleasure of giving you a bit of every-day magpie life, as sketched by that true pen-and-ink artist, the author of “British Birds.” Our scene opens a few minutes before the time indicated in our picture:—

“There, on the old ash-tree, you may see a pair, one perched on the topmost twig, the other hopping on the branches below, keeping up an incessant chatter. How gracefully she, on the topmost twig, swings in the breeze! Off she starts, and directs her flight to the fir-woods opposite, chattering all the way, seemingly to call her mate after her. But he prefers remaining behind. He is in a brown study, or something of that kind, as we can plainly see. Now, having spied something below, he hops downwards from twig to branch, and



MAGPIE AND NEST

descends to the ground. His ash-tree, you must understand, grows close to, and in part overshadows, a farmyard; so now he is on ground which, as is customary in such places, is not over clean; therefore, lifting up his tail to prevent it being soiled or wet, as the farmer's wife might hold up her Sunday gown, and raising his body as high as possible, he walks a few paces, and, spying an earth-worm half out of his hole, drags it forth by a sudden jerk, breaks it in pieces, and swallows it. Now, under the hedge, he has found a snail, which he will presently pick out of its shell, as an old woman would a periwinkle. But now something among the bushes has startled him, and he springs lightly upwards, chattering the while, to regain his favourite tree. It is a cat, which, not less frightened than himself, for both are intent on mischief, runs off towards the barn. The magpie again descends, steps slowly over the grassy margin of the yard, looking from side to side, stops, listens, advances rapidly by a succession of leaps, and encounters a whole brood of chickens, with their mother at their heels. If she had not been there he would have had a delicious feast of one of those chickens; but he dare not think of such a thing now, for, with fury in her eye, bristled plumage, and loud clamour, the hen rushes forward at him, overturning two of her younglings, and the enemy, suddenly wheeling round to avoid the encounter, flies off to his mate.

“There again you perceive them in the meadow, as they walk about with their elevated tails, looking for something eatable. By the hedge, afar off, are two boys, with a gun, endeavouring to creep up to a flock of plovers on the other side. But the magpies see them, for there are not many things which

escape their sharp eyes, and presently rising, they fly directly over the field, chattering vehemently, and the flock of plovers on this take wing, and the disappointed young sportsmen sheer off in another direction."

Magpies always make a great chattering when they are disturbed, or when they apprehend that danger is near. Waterton says that they are vociferous at the approach of night, and that they are in truth valuable watchmen on that account. "Whoever enters the wood," he says, "is sure to attract their notice, and then their challenge is incessant. When I hear them during the night, or even during the day, I know that mischief is on the stir. Three years ago, at eleven o'clock in the day, I was at the capture of one of the most expert and desperate poachers, to whose hiding-place we were directed by the chatter of the magpies."

The poor magpie has many enemies, and, knowing this, is always on the watch, and easily alarmed.

Its mode of walking is like that of the rook, but not having any dignity to maintain, it every now and then leaps in a side-long direction. When alarmed itself, or wishing to announce danger to other birds, it utters a sort of chuckling cry or chatter. If a fox or cat, or any other unfriendly animal, approaches, it hovers about it, and alarms the whole neighbourhood by its cries till the enemy is out of sight.

Like the jackdaw, it generally keeps in pairs the whole year round; and, indeed, when birds continue to inhabit the same nest, season after season, it is quite natural that they should do so. It is a curious fact, however, that if by any accident the hen-magpie is killed, whilst sitting on her eggs, her mate sets

off at once and brings home another wife, who takes to the nest and eggs, just as if she had laid them ; and if by another mischance she too should come to an untimely end, the widower again goes off, and, without any loss of time, brings back a third wife, and she takes to her duties quite as naturally and lovingly as the other did ; but where all these surplus mothers come from is a question which no naturalist has yet answered, and the magpie, with all his chattering, is not clever enough to explain the wonder.

The beauty of this bird's plumage is familiar to all ; and although it is simply black and white, yet the exquisitely-coloured gloss of green, blue, and purple, with their varying and intermingling tints, produce such a charming effect that one cannot sufficiently admire them.

With the external structure of the magpie's nest we are acquainted : the lower part, inside, is neatly plastered with mud, "and is furnished," says Bewick, "with a sort of mattress, formed of wool or fibrous roots, on which from three to six eggs are laid." The eggs frequently vary, both in size and colour ; sometimes they are of a pale green, freckled over with amber-brown and light purple ; sometimes pale blue, with smaller spots of the same dark colours.

The nest is, so to speak, a sort of little domed chamber, of a good size for its purpose ; but then comes the question—What does the magpie do with her long tail as she sits on her eggs ? It would certainly poke a hole through the wall if left to its full extent ; she must, therefore, lift it up, as she does when walking amongst the wet grass, and sit with it laid flat against the wall, which probably is not inconvenient to her.

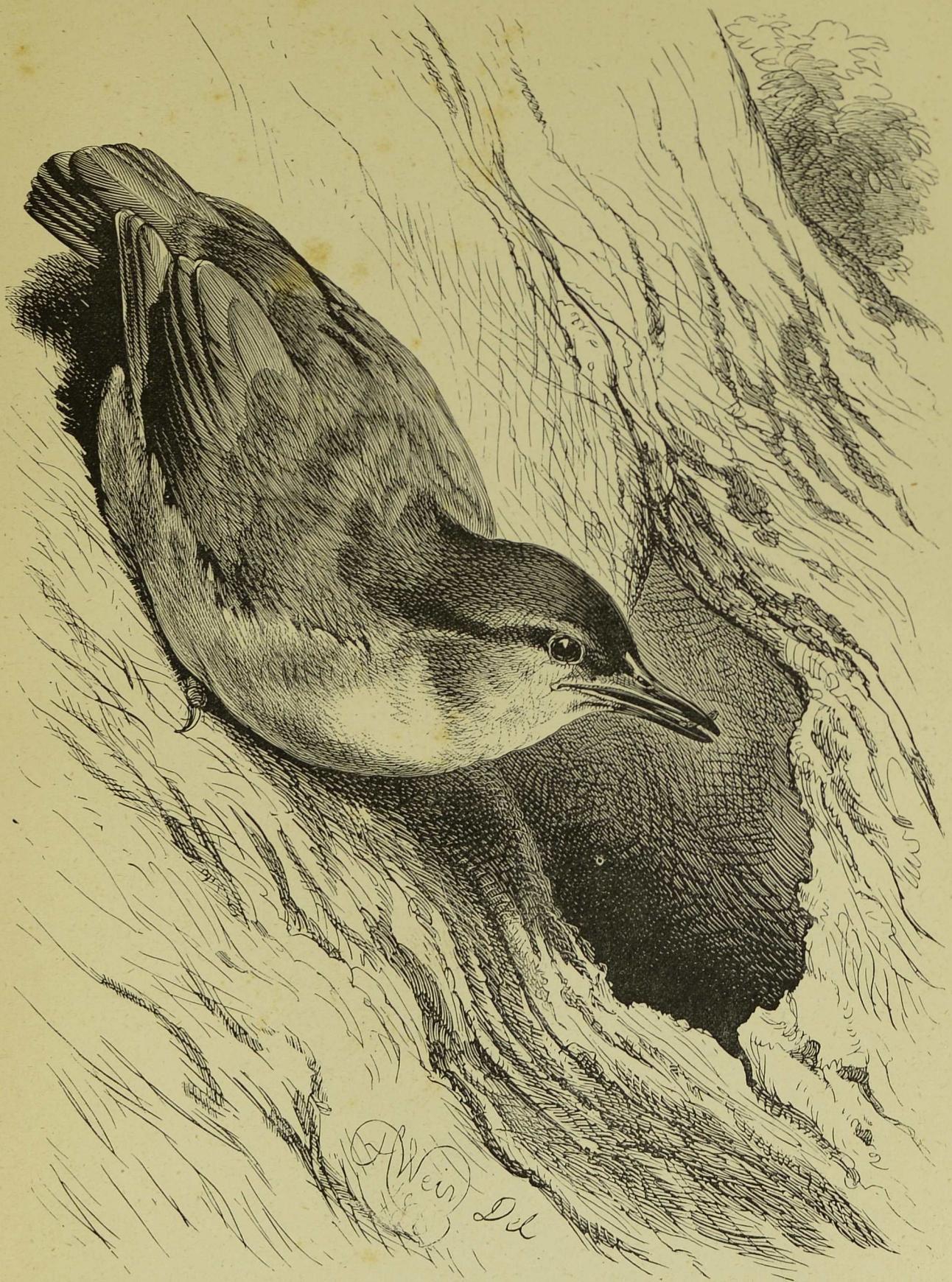
CHAPTER XXII.

THE NUTHATCH.

THIS bird is almost an entire stranger to most people. It belongs to the rather large family of creepers; birds which, like the woodpecker and the little golden-crested wren, run up the holes and branches of trees in search of food. The nuthatch, however, has an advantage over all its other creeping relatives, by being gifted with the power of coming down the tree head foremost, which none of them have. It can also sleep with its head downwards; neither in its rapid ascent has it occasion to press its tail against the tree for help; so that it is the most accomplished little acrobat of the whole race of creepers.

The nuthatch cannot be called a rare bird, and yet it is not often seen, being of a shy and retiring disposition, though naturally lively and active. The plumage is very pleasing in colour; the upper parts of the body are bluish-grey; a black line passes from the corners of the mouth to the back of the neck; the breast and under parts light reddish-yellow, and the sides reddish-brown.

It delights in woods and trees; nor need it be looked for elsewhere, as it derives its food entirely amongst them, either of insects and larvæ, hidden in the bark, or of fruits and nuts, as kernels of fir-cones, beech, and other nuts, the shells of which it



NUTHATCH AND NEST.

breaks in a very ingenious manner, as I shall presently describe. Now and then it alights on the ground, and then advances by short leaps. It has no song; but in winter, when living in small companies, perhaps the whole summer-family associating together, it has a little piping note, which, however, is supposed to be simply the call to each other. It is said to be sensitive to the cold, and always feeds on the side of the wood or of the tree which is defended from the wind. In spring, however, when all nature is renovated with a quicker pulse of life—for, as Tennyson says:—

In the spring a fuller crimson comes upon the robin's breast;
In the spring the wanton lapwing gets himself another crest;
In the spring a livelier iris changes on the burnished dove—

then, also, the silent nuthatch sends forth through the awakening solitude of the woods his two little notes, one short and twittering, the other a low, mellow, flute-like whistle, which is so clear that it may be heard to a considerable distance.

The graphic author of the "British Birds" says, "It is, at all times, a busy and cheerful bird, particularly at nesting-time. Its favourite food is nuts of any kind. It builds and roosts in hollow trees, and is seldom seen in the open fields, unless when in quest of the stones of the white-thorn or sloe. It may, therefore, be properly called a forester. Its dexterity in opening nuts and the stones of fruit is curious. It fixes the nut in a crack, on the top of a post, or in the bark of a tree, and, placing itself above it, head downwards, striking with great force and rapidity, with its strong, wedge-shaped bill on the edge of the shell, splits it open. When their food is plentiful,

they have a favourite crack for unshelling the kernels, as sometimes a peck of broken shells may be seen under this crack."

The Rev. W. T. Bree tells us that "the tapping of the bird on the hard shell may be heard at a considerable distance, and that during the operation it sometimes happens that the nut swerves from its fixture and falls towards the ground. It has not descended, however, for the space of more than a few yards, when the nuthatch, with admirable adroitness, recovers it in the fall, and, replacing it in its former position, commences the attack afresh. The fall of the nut in the air, and the recovery by the bird on the wing, I have seen repeated several times in the space of a few minutes."

This is a little act of skill in the bird which it would be charming to observe; and here again I would remark, as I have so often done before, that this is but a single instance of what many of us, living in the country, might witness in some woodland nook near at hand, if we would only be lovingly still and patient, and interest ourselves in the ways and means of the innocent animal-life around us.

The nest of the bird also deserves our notice; and let me here call your attention to the beautiful and living little portrait of the bird at home, given us by Mr. Harrison Weir, than which we have nothing more truthful from his pencil. The home of the nuthatch is nothing more, to begin with, than the hole in an old tree, which, probably, has been deserted by the woodpecker. As, however, the woodpecker either requires a more enlarged entrance to her nursery, or considers it more seemly, the nuthatch, who merely likes a snug little hole to creep in at, and nothing more, walls up the opening with a plastering of

clay or mud, leaving only just room enough for herself to enter. Perhaps she may be afraid of the old tenants returning and again taking possession, so builds up a little defence in front; but of that I cannot say; certain it is she makes herself comfortably at home in rather an untidy nest, composed mostly of dead oak-leaves, and here she lays six or seven white eggs, with ruddy spots on them.

If the plaster wall be by any chance removed, the poor bird loses not a moment in replacing it; and though she has apparently great dread of any enemy—the woodpecker, snake, man, or whatever else he may be, disturbing her—yet so faithfully devoted is she to her duties, that scarcely anything will induce her to leave the eggs or young. She fights vigorously in defence of her home and its treasures, striking out with her bill and wings, and making a hissing, angry noise. Nay, timid and shy as she naturally is, she will suffer herself to be carried off captive rather than desert her charge.

Let me conclude with one of Bechstein's anecdotes of the nuthatch:—

“A lady amused herself in the winter by throwing seeds on the terrace, below the window, to feed the birds in the neighbourhood. She put some hemp-seed and cracked nuts even on the window-sill, and on a board, for her particular favourites, the blue-tits. Two nuthatches came one day to have their share of this repast, and were so well pleased that they became quite familiar, and did not even go away in the following spring to get their natural food and to build their nest in the wood. They settled themselves in the hollow of an old tree near the house.

“As soon as the two young ones which were reared here were

ready to fly, they brought them to the hospitable window, where they were to be nourished, and soon after disappeared entirely. It was amusing to see these two new visitors hang or climb on the walls or blinds, whilst their benefactress put their food on the board. These pretty creatures as well as the tits, knew her so well, that when she drove away the sparrows, which came to steal what was not intended for them, they did not fly away also, but seemed to know what was done was only to protect and defend them. They remained near the house for the whole summer, rarely wandering, till one fatal day, at the beginning of the sporting season, in autumn, on hearing the report of a gun, they disappeared and were never seen again."



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