BIRDS AND THEIR NESTS

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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 tenement 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 sand-martin; 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.

Herons 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.

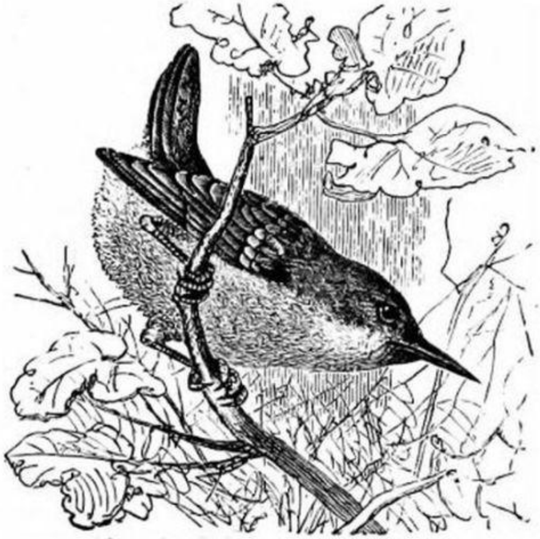
The canary, the goldfinch, and chaffinch, are skilful cloth-weavers or felt makers; the latter, restless and suspicious, speckles the outside of her nest with a quantity of white lichen, so that it exactly imitates the tree branch on which it is placed, and can hardly be detected by the most accustomed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



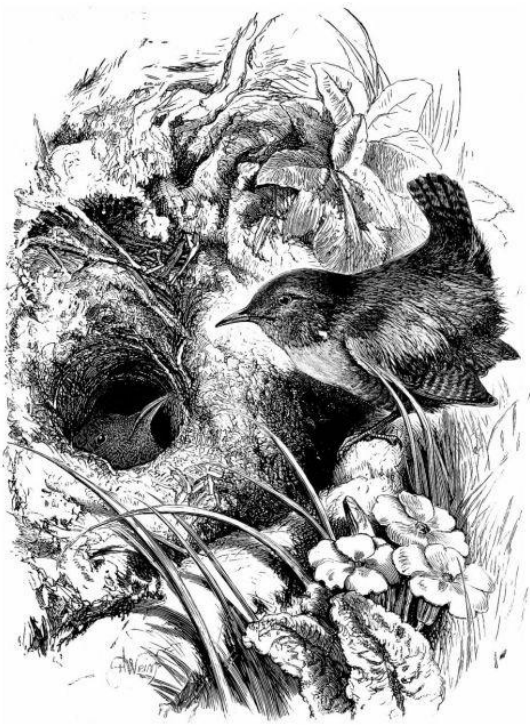
CHAPTER I.

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.”



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WRENS AND NEST.

“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 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 out-buildings, 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.