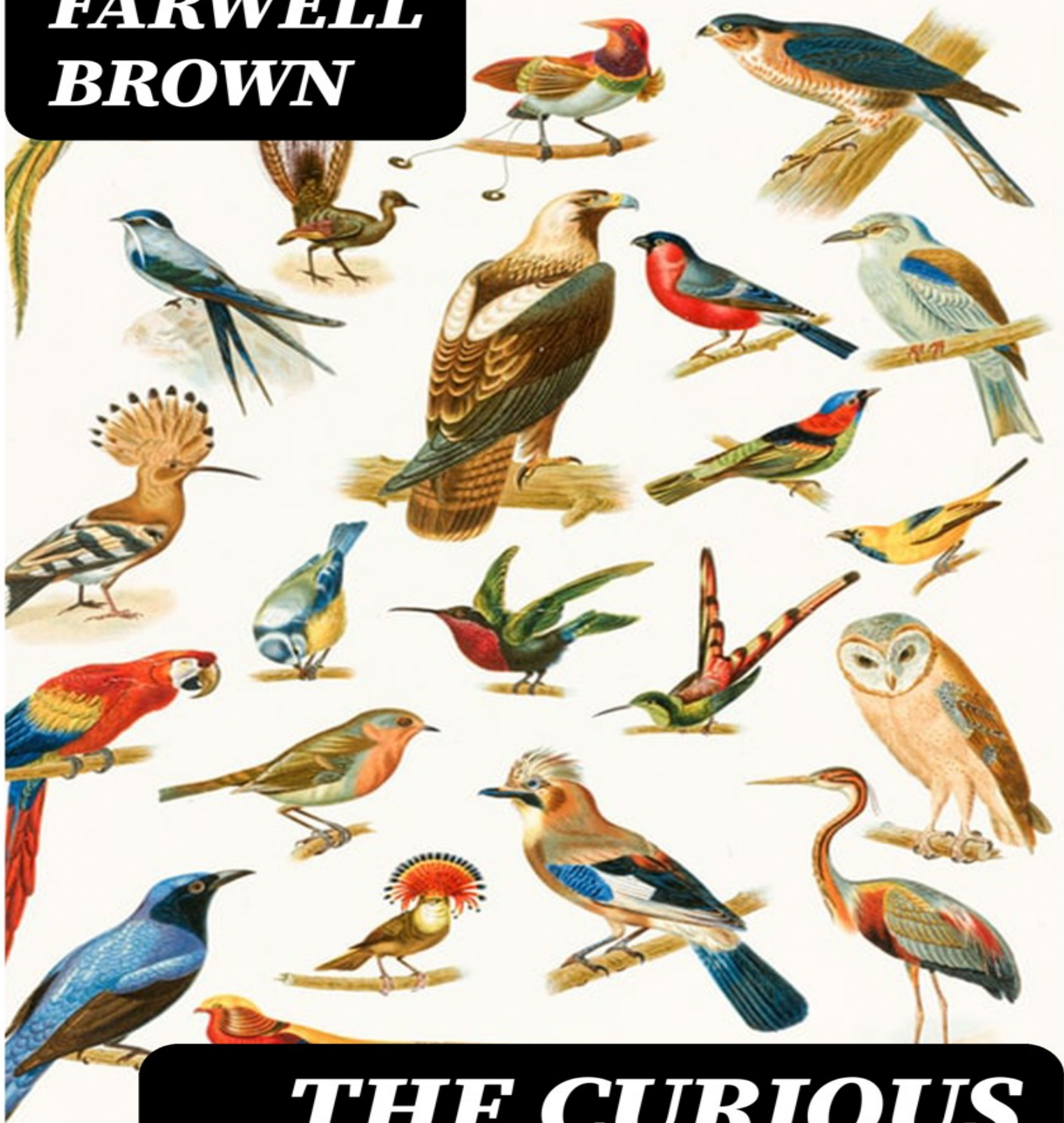


***ABBIE
FARWELL
BROWN***



***THE CURIOUS
BOOK OF BIRDS***

Abbie Farwell Brown

The Curious Book of Birds

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"Not you alone, proud truths of the world,
Not you alone, ye facts of modern science,
But myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables."

Whitman.

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THE DISOBEDIENT WOODPECKER

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LONG, long ago, at the beginning of things, they say that the Lord made the world smooth and round like an apple. There were no hills nor mountains: nor were there any hollows or valleys to hold the seas and rivers, fountains and pools, which the world of men would need. It must, indeed, have been a stupid and ugly earth in those days, with no chance for swimming or sailing, rowing or fishing. But as yet there was no one to think anything about it, no one who would long to swim, sail, row, and fish. For this was long before men were created.

The Lord looked about Him at the flocks of newly made birds, who were preening their wings and wondering at their own bright feathers, and said to Himself—

"I will make these pretty creatures useful, from the very beginning, so that in after time men shall love them dearly. Come, my birds," He cried, "come hither to me, and with the beaks which I have given you hollow me out *here*, and *here*, and *here*, basins for the lakes and pools which I intend to fill with water for men and for you, their friends. Come, little brothers, busy yourselves as you would wish to be happy hereafter."

Then there was a twittering and fluttering as the good birds set to work with a will, singing happily over the work which their dear Lord had given them to do. They pecked and they pecked with their sharp little bills; they scratched and they scratched with their sharp little claws, till in the proper

places they had hollowed out great basins and valleys and long river beds, and little holes in the ground.

Then the Lord sent great rains upon the earth until the hollows which the birds had made were filled with water, and so became rivers and lakes, little brooks and fountains, just as we see them to-day. Now it was a beautiful, beautiful world, and the good birds sang happily and rejoiced in the work which they had helped, and in the sparkling water which was sweet to their taste.

All were happy except one. The Woodpecker had taken no part with the other busy birds. She was a lazy, disobedient creature, and when she heard the Lord's commands she had only said, "Tut tut!" and sat still on the branch where she had perched, preening her pretty feathers and admiring her silver stockings. "You can toil if you want to," she said to the other birds who wondered at her, "but I shall do no such dirty work. My clothes are too fine."

Now when the world was quite finished and the beautiful water sparkled and glinted here and there, cool and refreshing, the Lord called the birds to Him and thanked them for their help, praising them for their industry and zeal. But to the Woodpecker He said—

"As for you, O Woodpecker, I observe that your feathers are unruffled by work and that there is no spot of soil upon your beak and claws. How did you manage to keep so neat?"

The Woodpecker looked sulky and stood upon one leg.

"It is a good thing to be neat," said the Lord, "but not if it comes from shirking a duty. It is good to be dainty, but not from laziness. Have you not worked with your brothers as I commanded you?"

"It was such very dirty work," piped the Woodpecker crossly; "I was afraid of spoiling my pretty bright coat and my silver shining hose."

"Oh, vain and lazy bird!" said the Lord sadly. "Have you nothing to do but show off your fine clothes and give yourself airs? You are no more beautiful than many of your brothers, yet they all obeyed me willingly. Look at the snow-white Dove, and the gorgeous Bird of Paradise, and the pretty Grosbeak. They have worked nobly, yet their plumage is not injured. I fear that you must be punished for your disobedience, little Woodpecker. Henceforth you shall wear stockings of sooty black instead of the shining silver ones of which you are so proud. You who were too fine to dig in the earth shall ever be pecking at dusty wood. And as you declined to help in building the water-basins of the world, so you shall never sip from them when you are thirsty. Never shall you thrust beak into lake or river, little rippling brook or cool, sweet fountain. Raindrops falling scantily from the leaves shall be your drink, and your voice shall be heard only when other creatures are hiding themselves from the approaching storm."

It was a sad punishment for the Woodpecker, but she certainly deserved it. Ever since that time, whenever we hear a little tap-tapping in the tree city, we know that it is the poor Woodpecker digging at the dusty wood, as the Lord said she should do. And when we spy her, a dusty little body with black stockings, clinging upright to the tree trunk, we see that she is creeping, climbing, looking up eagerly toward the sky, longing for the rain to fall into her thirsty beak. She is always hoping for the storm to come, and plaintively pipes, "*Plui-plui!* Rain, O Rain!" until the drops begin to patter on the leaves.



MOTHER MAGPIE'S KINDERGARTEN

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Did you ever notice how different are the nests which the birds build in springtime, in tree or bush or sandy bank or hidden in the grass? Some are wonderfully wrought, pretty little homes for birdikins. But others are clumsy, and carelessly fastened to the bough, most unsafe cradles for the feathered baby on the treetop. Sometimes after a heavy wind you find on the ground under the nest poor little broken eggs which rolled out and lost their chance of turning into birds with safe, safe wings of their own. Now such sad things as this happen because in their youth the lazy father and mother birds did not learn their lesson when Mother Magpie had her class in nest-making. The clumsiest nest of all is that which the Wood-Pigeon tries to build. Indeed, it is not a nest at all, only the beginning of one. And there is an old story about this, which I shall tell you.

In the early springtime of the world, when birds were first made, none of them—except Mother Magpie—knew how to build a nest. In that lovely garden where they lived the birds went fluttering about trying their new wings, so interested in this wonderful game of flying that they forgot all about preparing a home for the baby birds who were to come. When the time came to lay their eggs the parents knew not what to do. There was no place safe from the four-legged creatures who cannot fly, and they began to twitter helplessly: "Oh, how I wish I had a nice warm nest for my eggs!" "Oh, what shall we do for a home?" "Dear me! I don't know anything about housekeeping." And the poor silly

things ruffled up their feathers and looked miserable as only a little bird can look when it is unhappy.

All except Mother Magpie! She was not the best—oh, no!—but she was the cleverest and wisest of all the birds; it seemed as if she knew everything that a bird could know. Already she had found out a way, and was busily building a famous nest for herself. She was indeed a clever bird! She gathered turf and sticks, and with clay bound them firmly together in a stout elm tree. About her house she built a fence of thorns to keep away the burglar birds who had already begun mischief among their peaceful neighbors. Thus she had a snug and cosy dwelling finished before the others even suspected what she was doing. She popped into her new house and sat there comfortably, peering out through the window-slits with her sharp little eyes. And she saw the other birds hopping about and twittering helplessly.

"What silly birds they are!" she croaked. "Ha, ha! What would they not give for a nest like mine!"

But presently a sharp-eyed Sparrow spied Mother Magpie sitting in her nest.

"Oho! Look there!" he cried. "Mother Magpie has found a way. Let us ask her to teach us."

Then all the other birds chirped eagerly, "Yes, yes! Let us ask her to teach us!"

So, in a great company, they came fluttering, hopping, twittering up to the elm tree where Mother Magpie nestled comfortably in her new house.

"O wise Mother Magpie, dear Mother Magpie," they cried, "teach us how to build our nests like yours, for it is growing night, and we are tired and sleepy."

The Magpie said she would teach them if they would be a patient, diligent, obedient class of little birds. And they all promised that they would.

She made them perch about her in a great circle, some on the lower branches of the trees, some on the bushes, and some on the ground among the grass and flowers. And where each bird perched, there it was to build its nest. Then Mother Magpie found clay and bits of twigs and moss and grass—everything a bird could need to build a nest; and there is scarcely anything you can think of which some bird would not find very useful. When these things were all piled up before her she told every bird to do just as she did. It was like a great big kindergarten of birds playing at a new building game, with Mother Magpie for the teacher.

She began to show them how to weave the bits of things together into nests, as they should be made. And some of the birds, who were attentive and careful, soon saw how it was done, and started nice homes for themselves. You have seen what wonderful swinging baskets the Oriole makes for his baby-cradle? Well, it was the Magpie who taught him how, and he was the prize pupil, to be sure. But some of the birds were not like him, nor like the patient little Wren. Some of them were lazy and stupid and envious of Mother Magpie's cosy nest, which was already finished, while theirs was yet to do.

As Mother Magpie worked, showing them how, it seemed so very simple that they were ashamed not to have discovered it for themselves. So, as she went on bit by bit, the silly things pretended that they had known all about it from the first—which was very unpleasant for their teacher.

Mother Magpie took two sticks in her beak and began like this: "First of all, my friends, you must lay two sticks

crosswise for a foundation, thus," and she placed them carefully on the branch before her.

"Oh yes, oh yes!" croaked old Daddy Crow, interrupting her rudely. "I thought that was the way to begin."

Mother Magpie snapped her eyes at him and went on, "Next you must lay a feather on a bit of moss, to start the walls."

"Certainly, of course," screamed the Jackdaw. "I knew that came next. That is what I told the Parrot but a moment since."

Mother Magpie looked at him impatiently, but she did not say anything. "Then, my friends, you must place on your foundation moss, hair, feathers, sticks, and grass—whatever you choose for your house. You must place them like *this*."

"Yes, yes," cried the Starling, "sticks and grass, every one knows how to do that! Of course, of course! Tell us something new."



"Next you must lay a feather"

Now Mother Magpie was very angry, but she kept on with her lesson in spite of these rude and silly interruptions. She turned toward the Wood-Pigeon, who was a rattle-pated young thing, and who was not having any success with the sticks which she was trying to place.

"Here, Wood-Pigeon," said Mother Magpie, "you must place those sticks through and across, criss-cross, criss-cross, *so*."

"Criss-cross, criss-cross, *so*," interrupted the Wood-Pigeon. "I know. That will do-o-o, that will do-o-o!"

Mother Magpie hopped up and down on one leg, so angry she could hardly croak.

"You silly Pigeon," she sputtered, "not *so*. You are spoiling your nest. Place the sticks *so*!"