

The CURIOUS Book
Of Birds



ABBIE FARWELL BROWN



Mr. Stork and Miss Heron (page 178)



Published October, 1903.

There are many books written nowadays which will tell you about birds as folk of the twentieth century see them. They describe carefully the singer's house, his habits, the number of his little wife's eggs, and the color of every tiny feather on her pretty wings. But these books tell you nothing at all about bird-history; about what birds have meant to all the generations of men, women, and children since the world began. You would think, to read the words of the bird-book men, that they were the very first folk to see any bird, and that what they think they have seen is the only matter worth the knowing.

Now the interesting facts about birds we have always with us. We can find them out for ourselves, which is a very pleasant thing to do, or we can take the word of others, of which there is no lack. But it is the quaint fancies about birds which are in danger of being lost. The long-time fancies which the world's children in all lands have been taught are quite as important as the every-day facts. They show what the little feathered brothers have been to the children of men; how we have come to like some and to dislike others as we do; why the poets have called them by certain nicknames which we ought to know; and why a great many strange things are so, in the minds of childlike people.

Facts are not what one looks for in a Curious Book. Yet it may be that some facts have crept in among the ancient fancies of this volume, just as bookworms will crawl into the nicest books; but they do not belong there, and it is for these that the Book apologizes to the children. It has no apology to offer those grown folks who insist that facts, never fancies, are what children need.

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Seven of these tales appeared originally in *The Churchman* and two in *The Congregationalist*. They are reprinted by the courteous permission of the publishers of those magazines.

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"Next you must lay a Feather"

Such a Gorgeous Coat!

"Bless me!" he exclaimed, "Whom have we here?"

Here are Some Nice Fat Wiggly Worms

He managed to flutter out of Reach

"O Brother, don't!"

Putri Balan began to laugh

The Curious Book of Birds

"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



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