

## HOW BIRDS ARE STUFFED.



**I**N these days, when ladies are so often in want of a new pursuit, one that shall combine great pleasure and attraction, inasmuch as it pleases the eye, and a sufficiency of knowledge to make it well worthy of the pains, I know of none more likely to afford enjoyment than taxidermy, as applied to stuffing birds.

Some ladies at this may give a slight shudder — think of having to meddle with bleeding, freshly

killed birds, or with others that lack the latter quality, and are consequently far less pleasant to the touch, while they are objectionable to the other senses. But while observing that there are many who forget the unpleasantness in the wonder and surprise they feel in seeing how curiously a bird is constructed, let me say at once that those who take up the pursuit here advocated will never have occasion to soil their fingers. Their dealings will be with dry aromatic skins covered with feathers, and the only drawback to the pursuit—a drawback that appertains to every attempt to preserve the organic remains of an animal after death, whether those remains be feather, fur, skin, or the delicate down of butterfly or moth—is that poison in some form or other is necessary, and hence must be used with care.

The preservative paste most convenient in form is a composition of soap and arsenic, and with the most ordinary care this may be used without the slightest danger, for a slight washing of the fingers after use removes it at once, the arsenic being a heavy mineral, and sinking to the bottom of the water in which the soap is dissolved.

*Arsenic!* There is something objectionable in the very sound, and it may be asked, why use such a deadly poison? For the simple reason that Nature in her laws has arranged that every organic object, as soon as it is dead, shall go back to dust, and if you wish to combat and arrest this law, so as to save in all their beauty the brilliantly-feathered birds you mount in shades, you must prevent those little workers of Nature's laws, the tiny insects, from attacking the skins; and this can only be done by impregnating the said skins with a deadly poison.

Corrosive sublimate is often used, but touch it not; while as to some bepraised mixtures and preservative powders that possess no poison within, do not trust them, but use the simple preparation above named, a small pot of which can be purchased for a trifle.

But, it may be argued, it is so dangerous to have poison in the house. Well, so it is; but all the same we have plenty of poisons in our houses, and are not much the worse. If you come to that, a large box of pills would poison you, or a bottle of calcined magnesia, as it did Queen Caroline, so we read, if you took either of them. Knives are dangerous, so is a flight of stairs, or an open window. But we take care, and do not cut ourselves, or tumble down-stairs, or out of the window. So with your useful pot of arsenical paste. All that is needed is a little care.

This point has been somewhat dwelt upon because it is the only drawback, in some persons' eyes, to a delightful pursuit; but really it would be just as wise to refrain from botanical excursions and entomological strolls for fear of getting a sun-stroke or catching cold, as to shrink from mounting foreign birds on account of the paste.

Let it be understood then, at once, that the dried skins of foreign birds are alluded to here—birds that ladies have worn in their hats for ornament, probably in supreme ignorance that they have been preserved by means of the mineral above named.

A moment's consideration will show the reader that, here at home, she or he, young or old, can plunge at once into the fascinating study of the *avi fauna* of tropical lands without toiling through jungle or over rock and sandy plain, tortured by insects, risking death by snake-bite, or the attack of some savage beast, running the gauntlet of fever, dysentery, fatigue, and exposure. For the natives of the various countries, having found it lucrative, energetically devote themselves to the collection of the brightest birds, which they skin, fill the skins with cotton wool, and sell them for shipment home.

Now, what shall we begin with? Shall it be the skin of a glorious trogon, the bird whose plumes were once regal, and used to deck the head-dress of the Incas of Peru? And no wonder, for this cuckoo of the rich scarlet breast is elsewhere one blaze of glistening metallic golden green, from his handsome cockscomb-like crest to the end of the yard-long dazzling feathers of his tail. No; as a skin of this bird may cost two or three pounds, and it is very difficult to manipulate, we will pass it over for something offering moderation and ease. By-and-by, when your fingers have attained some skill by practice, try those gems of nature, humming-birds, but let them too rest awhile.

Here is a bird-skin, not from Peru, but from the Old World—a tolerably tough one. Your interest commences the moment you have made the purchase at some naturalist's shop, unless you have friends abroad who will send you some specimens for a gift. This bird cost a couple of shillings, and it is in good smooth plumage, but lies before us stiff, straight, and squeezed up into half the size of the bird in life. It is good for our purpose because it has a tough skin, for uneducated fingers are liable to tear and destroy, and

mending is a tedious task. Here it lies then before us, and we mean to mount it to resemble as nearly as may be life. Bear this in mind then, that the process is exceedingly simple, and that it will be the same for the smallest humming-bird or the noblest pheasant that roams the mountains of Northern India.

Our pleasure thus begins with the bird we have selected, and on examining it we find it light, that it exhales a spicy aromatic odour, and its feathers are beautiful in the extreme. It is a halcyon or kingfisher, and its home was the jungle of the Malay Peninsula, where it flitted and darted like a line of blue light upon those little rounded wings that only reach to the end of its body, and beyond which its tail is considerably produced. What a bill! It is nearly as long as the bird's body, and is round and strong. It is now of a dull orange hue, but in life it must have been brilliant as the feathers which lie so close one upon another. Ah! don't attempt to spread that wing, nor open the tail, for the skin is now like brittle tissue paper, and will tear; and when it tears, out fall feathers never to be restored.

Now we are not going to mount our bird from the narrow desire to have something pretty and bright-coloured. Let us widen our ideas, and learn a little about his habits as well. We need not trouble ourselves unless we like about zoological distinctions, classes, and the like; but sitting here at our table, let us throw ourselves in spirit into the Malay Peninsula, with its vast forests, and see what sort of a life our little creature used to live. What is more, do the same with every bird you stuff, and you will increase your pleasure, and knowledge of the world and its inhabitants, in a startling degree.

To begin with: our bird's wings are short, and rounded or hollowed within. It is reasonable then to assume that he lived much beneath and amongst trees, and not in the open. His tail is rather long, but not inconveniently so. What does that indicate? That our bird was in the habit of making short sharp turns in flight. Very different this to our kingfisher, which is almost tail-less, and makes straight darting flights over the water. Now there is the bill; a tremendous weapon this, that must have been moved by powerful muscles for so small a bird. For holding fish, of course, you say. Stop a little; if it was for holding fish, what is the meaning of those stiff bristles on either side of the open gape? No, no; our kingfisher may have caught fish like our minnow killer at home, but he had other food; and see, too, his legs are longer, which tells that, in place of sitting perched solemnly like our kingfisher, he could hop readily from twig to twig. There is no doubt then that when in life this bird frequented forest glades, where his beautiful azure plumage varied with black glistened in the sunshine, wherein flitted brilliant butterflies and glistening metallic-armoured beetles, it was to help in capturing the former that the bristles caged in the gaping sides of the bill, and for the horny beetle that the bill was so big and strong, for your Old World kingfishers often exist on insects in place of fish.

Take the humming-birds when you come to them, and read in their long sabre-wings how they could poise themselves in the air, and in their long curved bills how they could seek honey or insects deep down in the cavity of a flower. Take a parrot or lory, or parroquet, from Africa, the Eastern Isles, or from that home of the parrot family, Australia, and with the beautiful creature laid before you, soft grey or yellow and cream, mauvy white, orange and dazzling green, purple and crimson, or like the Blue Mountain parrot of Australia, with a breast that reflects the gorgeous colours of the most brilliant sunrise, which the bird seems to have caught when laving its dew-wet plumage in the first bright rays: take any one of these in turn—you can buy the skins for a couple of shillings or so, according to their rarity—and learn from them their habits, and the country in which they dwell.

For instance, here is one, a black cockatoo from the Moluccas, with an awful beak—hard, hooked, powerful. Whatever for? That bird lived on the kernels out of a stone-fruit, and that levered pickaxe was necessary to extract the nut. This long-tailed, delicately-streaked lory, with its soft green mealy back and wings, and its scarlet-orange large hooked beak, evidently shelled out sweet kernels from husks, and sometimes ate fruit of a softer kind. Its wings, like those of its race, are moderate in size, and neatly shaped for short flights from tree to tree in park-like lands, while its feet—there! who has not seen the yoke-toed, soft-footed parrot, and its ways of climbing and turning that foot into a hand?

You have then, in stuffing or mounting a foreign skin, a host of thoughts opened out, and you constantly learn new things about your hobby before you consign it to a glass shade for a brilliant ornament to your room.

But to mount it, or make it resemble life, and sit firmly upon a perch! Here is the first step: to relax the skin. In all these instructions, simplicity and cheapness are observed; for I find that skill is more necessary here than tools. Let us take, then, some strips of old cotton rag, soak them in water, and wrap them tightly round the bird's dry claws and shanks; then roll the bird in a piece of old flannel, and this flannel in a cloth well soaked in water, and tightly wrung out. In fact, our bird is suffering from chronic stiffness, so we give it a hydropathic treatment—pack it tightly in the wet cloth, always minding not to bend the tail-feathers, and put it aside.

For how long? Who can say? That you must find out. Two days, three days, four days, always keeping the cloth moderately wet, while the flannel keeps the plumage as moderately dry. Patience here till the skin has grown gradually soft, the claws movable, and the wings and tail will open at your will; but guard against too much water, to make the specimen rot. It must be *damped*, not *wetted*.

If we stuff several birds, we have arranged so as not to have to wait, one getting soft as another is stuffed; but in this case, as beginners, all we can do is to get ready our tools. And they are—? Only a pair of

cutting pliers and a fine triangular file. A pair of scissors, and some pins, and a reel of cotton you have in the house, of course. But you must have some materials and birds' eyes. These last you buy at the naturalists' shops for a mere trifle, for they are only beads on wire. The arsenical paste has been named; the other materials are a few handfuls of common coarse tow and a few rings of soft iron wire, of sufficient fineness to pass up the back of the bird's leg without breaking the skin.

These being ready, we will suppose the bird is sufficiently moist, and we take it out of the rags and flannel, and unbind its legs. Yes, it is done to a turn. Lay it before you on its back, always trying to avoid ruffling the feathers, which are now somewhat damp and sticky; but they will soon dry. Part the feathers at the lower part of the breast, where the cotton wool peeps out, and draw out that cotton wool with your scissors, and with it the thin skewer of bamboo that goes from head to tail to keep the bird rigid. This may not be there. Every scrap of wool being removed, take a little of the soap or paste, mixed with water in a small ointment box or gallipot to the consistency of cream, and with a brush carefully anoint the inside of the skin—carefully, so as not to sully the feathers.

Leave it now for a time, while with your pliers you cut off a few inches of wire, a little longer than the bird. Make this wire very sharp at both ends with your file, and that is done. Now take your coarse tow and proceed to make your bird's body. This will puzzle you a bit at first, but do not be discouraged. You have to guess at the size, remembering that the bird's skin is much shrunken, and you want to make your specimen look natural and plump. Bear in mind that your object is to roll up the tow into the shape, as nearly as can be, of an egg—a nice oval—and do not be satisfied till you can do this neatly. When done, pinch it a little, so as to flatten it at the sides, and pass your sharp wire through exactly from end to end. Now with the reel of cotton bind the tow round and round from end to end and about the wire. This will enable you to shape the body much more neatly, till it grows harder and more egg-like than ever; and lay it aside.

Now there is the bird's neck to form; so beware of the fault of most bird-stuffers—never make your bird's neck long. Look at the first sparrow or canary. It seems to have no neck—only the head graduated into the body with some beautiful curves. Take a pinch, then, of tow, and placing it upon the end of a smooth blunt skewer or a penholder, thrust it up through the neck close to the bird's skull. Through this neck-tow push the sharp point of the wire, passing it out through the skull, and then tenderly draw the bird's skin over the egg-shaped body, and push the other end of the wire through the dried skin of the tail.

So far so good. If you have deftly accomplished this, you have a stuffed bird before you, of a bad shape; but it will not stand. Cut off, then, a couple of pieces of wire, six or eight inches long, sharpen one end, and pass it through the bird's foot and up the

skin at the back without breaking it, and into the tow body, passing it out at the chest. Do the same with the other leg, and then twist the sharp ends tightly together. Place the legs now in their proper position, and this will practically close the opening in the skin, which should next be drawn slightly together with a needle and thread. It will not nearly meet, but that does not matter, for the feathers will cover the opening.

Your bird is now stuffed, and a hideous deformity it looks. It now remains for you to shape it. First fix it by the leg-wires to a perch, twisting the wires round, and your bird will sit. Then with four long pins fix the wings in their natural position, nipping the body a little, so that the bones may lie easily. Then shorten the bird's neck by passing the head along the wire, and by slow degrees it will grow more bird-like. A pinch here, a little smoothing down there—in fact, a general modelling; till the specimen sits naturally and well.

Then comes the polishing, or final shaping. Stick a couple of pins in the back, and a couple more in the breast, and taking a reel of cotton, proceed to bind the bird's feathers down, round and round, and over and over, tightly or loosely, from pin to pin, and backwards and forwards, as you wish to shape some graceful curve. Remember the feathers are soft, and by clever manipulation you may shape the bird to a wonderfully natural extent; for when the bird is dry and the cotton is cut away not a feather will move.

The fixing of the eyes is a little tedious, perhaps; but they can easily be thrust into the orbits, and the lids drawn round them with a pin, when you have your bird complete. As to minor matters, such as expanding tails or wings, those can easily be done when you grow more skilful. Be content at first to set all your birds sitting, and recollect that no amount of teaching can make you stuff well. That must come from observation, and copying the attitudes of the birds you see; and though yours are foreign skins, for your advantage it may be stated that most of the foreign birds are but a repetition of our own in gayer coats—crows, finches, insect-eaters, thrushes, and the like—so that the shape of an English bird will do for that of a foreigner of gaudy plume.

One thing more remains to be noted, and that is the mounting of your bird under a glass shade—when you grow skilful it will be "birds." This is done by setting the specimen upon one of the beautiful lichen-covered twigs to be found in the hedge-rows, glueing it to the stand, and decorating the said stand to fancy with dried moss and grasses, such as can be collected at the next country ramble.

It will be seen, then, that the whole art of bird-stuffing is very simple, and that the greater part of the difficulty lies in studying the shapes of the birds themselves, and imparting them to your specimen with the cotton binding, which should never be so tight as to prevent your gazing upon a good, plain, handsome bird, the work of your own hands—hands that should be carefully washed when the task is done.