

THE HONEY-BIRD.



HERE is a small bird in South Africa whose instinct and peculiarity appear to be but little known in natural history; it is called the Honey-bird, and is about the size of an English water-wagtail.

When hunters approach any forest, wood, or ravine, this bird invariably makes its appearance, and commences chirping, or "talking," as the natives call it. The chirp is a *cher-r-r*, *cher-r*, repeated over and over again. The hunters answer by whistling and making a noise from the throat—a sort of *hoig*, *hoig*. The bird flutters, becomes excited, and flies on from tree to tree, sometimes fifty or a hundred yards at a time. If you are slow to follow, the bird will come back, meet you, and go on again; in this way it will take you any distance—it may be a hundred yards, a mile, or even more, but it leads you direct to the bees' nest, or wild beehive, which is generally found in the trunk of hollow trees.

As the bird approaches the "bees' nest" the chirp turns more and more into a cluck, like a hen giving a grub to her chicken. The bird at last will go as near as it can to the hive or hole in the tree, and then cluck and point with its little bill towards the small hole through which the bees pass in and out. After doing this the bird remains perfectly silent, to indicate that it has shown you the hive. When the bird sees that you have discovered the bees' nest it starts off again, chirping and clucking, and in that way shows you from one to six or seven nests of honey.

On one occasion (says Major Bisset), when I was *en route* with the troops overland to take possession of Natal, in 1843,

one bird during our morning halt showed me seven bees' nests one after the other. We took out more honey from them than the whole squadron of cavalry could consume; and quantities were carried on in the comb to the infantry, who had marched in advance.

The natives, both Kafirs and Hottentots, have an idea that there are "wicked" birds as well as "good" ones, and say that some birds will take you to a tiger, a buffalo, or a snake, etc. The bird always ceases to chatter after it has shown you a nest, and instinct takes it in a direct line to where the nest is. It thus very often happens that you stumble on one or other of the above-named animals or reptiles. The flurry frightens the bird, and it ceases to "talk"; hence the supposition in the native mind that it has been "wicked," and lured the hunter to danger.

Sometimes the bees make their hives in cavities under the surface of the ground or in hollow ant-hills, which are generally in the open, and not in the bush; and as there is then no tree on which the bird can settle, it will fly from the nearest tree or bush and make a swoop, flapping with its wings, down to the ground, to show where the bees' nest is. Very often these hives are difficult to find, even after the bird has shown the spot, as the orifice in the tree or ground is not larger than a gimlet-hole, or if larger the remaining space is filled up by a dark-coloured wax called "bees-work." Moreover, in cold or rainy weather the bees may not be working—that is, gathering honey—and you have then to apply your ear to any crevice or hole and listen for the "drone" which always proceeds from the swarm. On your striking the tree with anything hard the drone becomes a perfect buzz;

and it is well if you do not get a sting or even a dozen of them before you move away.

The mode of taking a nest is to chop a hole in the tree large enough to admit a man's hand and arm, and puff tobacco or other smoke into it; the bees then soon become stupefied, and swarm or cluster away, after which you take out the honeycomb.

All this time the honey-bird is watching you so closely that it is not a yard off; and if you place a small piece of the honeycomb on the branch of a tree the bird will at once commence making its repast. It will, however, rarely take you to a second bees' nest after it is once satisfied.

In connection with the foregoing, I must here recount the following particulars regarding the death's-head moth.

The death's-head moth, as found in South Africa, is about the size and length of a man's finger, and it has a most perfect death's-head-and-marrowbones painted by Nature with all her beauty on its back. The legend, both amongst the Dutch and the natives of the Cape of Good Hope, is, that this moth has a sting, and that a puncture from it causes instant death. This moth is generally found in beehives, particularly when they are in the ground or in decayed trees.

One of the seven nests which the honey-bird showed me when *en route* to Natal had two of these death's-head moths in it; and a most ludicrous scene took place while we were taking out the honey. There were some Cape Corps Hottentot soldiers standing about looking on. Charles Somerset, who cared so little for the sting of bees that he got the name of the "Rattle," or badger, was taking out the honeycomb from the hollow of a large barboon or bean-tree, which grew out parallel with the earth and a few feet above it.

All at once we heard a rumbling sound like distant thunder, with a "burr" in it, and the Hottentot soldiers exclaimed,

"Och, myn Got!" starting off as if Old Nick had kicked them. Somerset tumbled from the tree, and we seven brave British officers took to our heels as fast as our legs could carry us, following the Totties, each thinking that a lion or a tiger was going to catch the hindmost. We ran fully one hundred yards before we overtook the nimble Totties, which we did at last, and demanded what the cause of alarm was. "Och, myn Got, zeur, dat is de Dood moot!" ("It is the death moth!") they exclaimed, and we all burst out laughing to think that a British army had been put to flight by a moth. The Hottentots still appeared terrified, and each of them broke off the branch of a tree and looked about them, when a big moth certainly appeared and kept circling over our heads. One of the natives struck it down with the branch. It was a good deal bruised; but the "Doctor," one of our party, examined it, and declared there was a sting in the great insect's tail, and that it was not known in natural history that any moth had a sting.

We then started to return to the bees' nest, but nothing would induce the Totties to accompany us, as they declared that they had seen two moths come out of the hive. We, however, were not to be daunted, and, marching back in a body, proceeded to take out the rest of the honey.

The Hottentots, finding that we were not all killed, gradually came back and looked on. I was standing a little way off, with my hand on the branch of the tree, when all at once one of the natives standing behind seized me round the neck, and pulling me head over heels backwards, held me on the ground, pointing to the other moth, which was perfectly quiet, and not an inch from my hand.

Dr. Courtney took out his penknife, pinned the moth to the tree, and subsequently examined it also, declaring there *was* a sting.