

“The Sparrow’s Nest” from *Sketches of Natural History* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1834).

During a visit to the Colored Orphan Asylum in January 1845, Alderson wrote, “one of the little girls repeated thy sparrow’s nest, adapting it to the hanging nest of the Baltimore Oriel & did it very well too” (Writing Home 211). With its celebration of the middle-class values of thrift and domesticity, the poem and this exchange between the sisters call attention to the power of a female-identified space of domestic economy in settler narratives such as Howitt’s.

Nay, only look what I have found!
A Sparrow’s nest upon the ground;
A Sparrow’s nest as you may see,
Blown out of yonder old elm tree.

And what a medley thing it is!
I never saw a nest like this,--
Not neatly wove with decent care,
Of silvery moss and shining hair;

But put together, odds and ends,
Picked up from enemies and friends:
See, bits of thread, and bits of rag,
Just like a little rubbish-bag!

Here is a scrap of red and brown,
Like the old washer-woman’s gown;
And here is muslin, pink and green,
And bits of calico between;

O never thinks the lady fair,
As she goes by with mincing air,
How the pert Sparrow over-head,
Has robbed her gown to make its bed!

See, hair of dog and fur of cat,

And rovings of a worsted mat,
And shreads of silks, and many a feather,
Compacted cunningly together.

Well, here has hoarding been and hiving,
And not a little good contriving,
Before a home of peace and ease
Was fashioned out of things like these!

Think, had these odds and ends been brought
To some wise man renowned for thought,
Some man, of men a very gem,
Pray what could he have done with them?

If we had said, “Here, sir, we bring
You many a worthless little thing,
Just bits and scraps, so very small,
That they have scarcely size at all;

“And out of these, you must contrive
A dwelling large enough for five;
Neat, warm, and snug; with comfort stored;
Where five small things may lodge and board.”

How would the man of learning vast,
Have been astonished and aghast;

And vowed that such a thing had been
Ne'er heard of, thought of, much less seen.

Ah! man of learning, you are wrong;
Instinct is, more than wisdom, strong;
And He who made the Sparrow, taught
This skill beyond your reach of thought.

And here, in this uncostly nest,
These little creatures have been blest;
Nor have kings known in palaces,
Half their contentedness in this--
Poor simple dwelling as it is!