Monthly Supplement of

THE PENNY MAGAZINE

OF THE

Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.

438.] December 31, 1838, to January 31, 1839.

THE MONTHLY ALMANAC FOR FEBRUARY, 1839.

THE ROOK.

[A Rookery.]

The spring is now drawing nigh, with its balmy airs and its fresh vegetation; the buds will soon appear on the branches, and the birds begin to sing; the snowdrop and the crocus will bring their glad tidings; all about us the stir of a new life will be heard to rustle; the great business of Nature—production—recommences.

And who enjoy the excitement of the season more than our old friends the rooks? what voices tell half so loudly the importance of the coming time? They now return from their winter habitation to the old quarters—the rookery, examine the old nests, repair or build them anew, whilst the instinct of providing for their future progeny animates and directs their exertions. After pairing has taken place, if there remain an odd bird, and Mr. Mudie says there is never more than one in a rookery, he flies off, it is supposed to find some bird of the opposite sex similarly circumstanced; and it is believed that from pairs thus formed new rookeries date their birth. The following anecdote, from 'Bracebridge Hall,' of the rook's method of obtaining materials for the nest, says much for their ingenuity and something for their cool impudence. "When the birds were building, a stately old rook would settle down upon the head of one of the ewes, who, seeming conscious of the condescension, would desist from grazing, and stand fixed in motionless reverence of her august burden; the rest of the rookery would then come wheeling down in imitation of their leader, until every ewe had two or three cawing and fluttering and battling upon her back;" anxious doubtless to obtain their wool at the cheapest market. It has been frequently noticed that some one unhappy or offending pair vainly attempts to build a nest, for no sooner have a few sticks been put together, than a detachment, probably of the rook police, comes and demolishes the whole. The nests being

finished, when the hens begin to lay, the cocks feed them; who, says Mr. White, "receive their bounty with a fondling tremulous voice and fluttering wings, and all the little blandishments that are expressed by the young while in a helpless state. This gallant deportment of the males is continued through the whole season of incubation." The nests are not very warmly lined, although in so exposed a situation, but the hens sit constantly to protect their young from the cold. In the roamings of the parent bird for food, should he fall beneath the "murderous gun," doubtless the other rooks attend with kindly solicitude to their wants. Though not eminent for its musical capabilities, Mr. White says, "rooks in the breeding season will sometimes in the gaiety of their hearts attempt to sing, but with indifferent success." The female lays four or five eggs. When the young are sufficiently strong, their education begins by the parents' flying repeatedly to and fro between the nest and some near branch, calling at the same time in a language we may easily translate, "See how easy it is!" Doubtfully, and with a kind of mental head-shake, we may imagine the young ones to look on; but at last the thing really appears so easy, they must, they will try. A preparatory flutter on the edge of the nest, and the branch is reached; the feat is accomplished: and before long round and round it goes, giddy with delight, at the new power it has obtained and is enjoying. They now begin to find their own food, and when they no longer need assistance from their parents, they are dismissed to shift for themselves. An old bird has been seen to buffet heartily a young one, who being perhaps too lazy to forage for itself, wished to impose on the parental good-nature. Yet is the love of the rook for its young a marked trait in its character. When seeking food for them, it will, if unsuccessful in the day, still persevere until it has obtained its object; though there are times when all its endeavours are in vain. "In the hot summer of 1825," says Mr. Knapp, "many of the young brood of the season perished from want; the mornings were without dew, and consequently few or no worms were to be obtained, and we found them dead under the trees, having expired on their roostings. It was particularly distressing—for no relief could be given—to hear the constant clamour and importunity of the young for food. The old birds seemed to suffer without complaint, but the wants of their offspring were expressed by the unceasing cry of hunger and pursuit of the parents for supply, and our fields were scenes of daily restlessness and lament." Mr. Jesse observes, that "at the time when the young ones are shot, according to the common annual custom, it is melancholy to watch the old birds sit apart on the neighbouring trees, waiting until the 'sport' is over, and they may return to their young, if there be any left for them to return to." After the young have fully taken wing, there is a general desertion of the rookery until October, when the rooks return for a short time, perhaps to examine their nests, and then again remove for the winter.

The character of this most clerical-looking of birds, with its glossiest of coats and its gravest of aspects, has stood generally but low, and particularly so in the estimation of one person at least, who, from his position, ought to have been qualified to judge more correctly. In Dr. Rees's 'Cyclopædia' it is said, "There are everywhere in many of the northern and other counties of the kingdom numbers of such *detestable nurseries of these mischievous and rapacious vermin*," &c. Again, "Though rooks fly from these *despicable abodes*," &c.; and the whole notice is written in the same spirit: the personal spite of the epithet applied to the poor bird's nest is so inexpressibly ludicrous, that one can scarcely speak of the ignorance and bad feeling of the writer in the terms they deserve. And what is it the rook does to merit such reckless denunciations? When the young wheat is germinating, if it can find no other food, it does what all of us would do, it takes some to keep off starvation. From Gesner to Linnæus it has been called corn-eater and corn-gatherer; the fact being, it will not touch grain unless compelled. Under such circumstances it will also dig up newly set potato-cuttings. In autumn it exhibits more epicureanism of taste. A ripe pear or cherry tree will fall under contribution, and an unlucky walnut-tree be nearly stripped of its fruit. To these charges the rooks, we fear, must plead guilty; but they may reasonably add, that their utility ought not altogether to be forgotten, and that frequently they are the most deserving thanks when the most abused.

In White's 'History of Selborne' we find the following passage:—"Anatomists say that rooks, by reason of two large nerves which run down between the eyes into the upper mandible, have a more delicate feeling in their beak than other round-billed birds, and can grope for their prey when out of sight." From this circumstance Mr. White thinks that the flocks of daws and starlings frequently following a flock of rooks do it from the same motive that the lion follows the jackal—the more certainly to find their prey. In frost, says Mr. Mudie (whose observations we abridge), the rook examines weirs, embankments, and dams, to see if insects are there doing any damage. When the compost is being spread over the field, he looks anxiously to see that no insects are among it to eat up the young plants. When the swollen stream leaves the meadow, he picks out the noxious germs it may have left behind. In autumn, by a curious instinct distinguishing the sickly plants, he delves down to the root for the caterpillar there at work. In short, so valuable are his services, that, Mr. Selby says, wherever he has been extirpated or banished the most serious injury to the corn and other crops has followed from the devastations of the gnat and the caterpillar. Then, doing all this, who is there will say the labourer is not worthy of his hire?

"Early to bed and early to rise" is the rooks' maxim, and they do their best to instil it into their neighbours. If the labourer is not forth with his plough in good time, their noise soon awakens him as they fly cawing and clamouring about the field for their breakfast of fresh worms he provides for them in the new-made furrow. The rook is decidedly social and unselfish. If they are pressed for room in the rookery, he will allow a pair to build in the same fork of a branch with himself. With dignified condescension he will also permit jackdaws and starlings to associate with him, and occasionally a sparrow to build under his august protection. In the winter, having been distressed for food, he has perhaps trespassed on the sea-gulls' shoreward domains; the gull now returns the visit in the fields, and both pick together very fraternally. Mr. Jesse mentions a circumstance that proves the rook to have a depth of feeling we should scarcely credit. He observes, the flock are much distressed when one of them is killed or wounded by a gun. Instead of being scared away, they hover over, uttering cries of distress. If wounded, the sufferer is animated in his exertions to escape by their flying to and fro gently before him, and by their cries and exhortations. "I have seen," he says, "one of my labourers pick up a rook so wounded, which he had shot at for the purpose of putting up as a scare-crow in a field of wheat, and while the poor wounded bird was fluttering in his hand, I have observed one of his companions make a wheel round in the air and suddenly dart past him so as almost to touch him, perhaps with a last hope that he might still afford assistance to his unfortunate mate or companion."

Their knowledge of the gun, or at least their idea of injury from an instrument of such appearance, is unquestionable; but that they also take the alarm at the smell of gunpowder is, we believe, now considered a popular error. When feeding, the rooks set a sentinel, who executes the duties of his post so well, that it is difficult to get within

shot. They have also a language, for by the sentinel's cry they understand not only the danger, but the quarter from whence it is to be apprehended, as they prove by flying in an opposite direction; unless we are to suppose their vision to be so accurate and instantaneous, that the moment their attention is arrested by the alarm being given, they see its cause.

In feeding on worms, they have been observed to beat and break them into pieces before devouring them. In hot summers they will look for grasshoppers in the hedge sides when pressed by hunger. In winter the same cause induces them to resort to the sea-shore, where the periwinkle is their favourite food. They break the shell by rising with it a sufficient height into the air, and then dropping it on the hardest place they can find. In one very severe winter Mr. White mentions their resorting to dunghills close by dwelling-houses.

According to Mr. Mudie, the full-grown rook weighs about nineteen ounces. It measures from tip to tip of the outspread wings about 38 inches, and is about 19 inches long. Its coat is of the most beautiful shade of glossy black, and a rich blue tint is perceptible on the sides of the neck. Its scientific name is Corvus Frugilegus.

In contrast to the quotation from Dr. Rees's work, we will conclude with a sweetly poetical passage from Mr. White's 'Selborne.' "The evening proceedings and manœuvres of the rooks are curious and amusing in the autumn. Just before dusk, they return in long strings from the foraging of the day, and rendezvous by thousands over Selborne-down, where they wheel round in the air, and sport and dive in a playful manner, all the while exerting their voices, and making a loud cawing, which, being blended and softened by the distance that we at the village are below them, becomes a confused noise or chiding; or rather, a pleasing murmur very engaging to the imagination, and not unlike the cry of a pack of hounds in hollow echoing woods, or the rushing of the wind in tall trees, or the tumbling of the tide upon a pebbly shore. When this ceremony is over, with the last gleam of day they retire for the night to the deep beechen woods of Tisted and Ropley. We remember a little girl who, as she was going to bed, used to remark on such an occurrence, in the true spirit of physico-theology, that the rooks were saying their prayers; and yet this child was much too young to be aware that the Scriptures have said of the Deity that "He feedeth the ravens who call upon him."

NOTICES OF THE MONTH.

FEBRUARY 2, Candlemas Day, so called from the ancient custom of carrying lights in procession in honour of the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, celebrated by the Romish Church on this day. On Candlemas Day, the rosemary, mistletoe, and other emblems of the merry Christmas times, were removed from the halls and windows of our ancestors, and the Christmas brand, to which allusion has been made in vol. vii., p. 439, having been lighted and allowed to burn until sunset, was then quenched and preserved for the succeeding year.

Shrove-tide was in olden times a season of much feasting and sportiveness, in which the people indulged in order to console them for the fasts and mortifications of the ensuing Lent. A kindred spirit to the author of the 'Anatomy of Almes' (Stubbs), seized with a sudden frenzy of alliteration, has personified Shrove Tuesday as "sole Monarch of the Mouth, high Stewarde to the Stomach, First Favourite to the Frying-pans, greatest Bashaw to the Batter-Bowles, Protector to the Pancakes, First Founder of the Fritters, Baron of Bacon-flitch, Earle of Egge-baskets, and (for a magnificent conclusion) the most Corpulent Commander of those Cholleriche things called Cookes."* The disgusting practice of beating and throwing at cocks, which was formerly a favourite pastime with the English at this time, is now, we are happy to say, totally abolished; and with it many other Shrove-tide customs more honoured in the breach than the observance. The old riotous proceeding in which school-boys indulged at this season, called "barring out," is still however connived at in some parts of the country; and the very ancient practice of tossing and eating pancakes on Shrove Tuesday is not yet quite fallen into desuetude. There have been several attempts to explain the derivation of the word pancake, but the best we have met with may be found set forth in a lively little work entitled 'Cambridge Crepuscular Diversions,' published in 1837. The author has also made several other whimsical but learned attempts to trace the derivation:—

" . . . . . Well then, the silent young gentleman, who sat at my left, at length spoke; he was a better sort of *gourmand*, and this accounted for his silence, for his fish had not till now been despatched; and the last *bonne-bouche* vanished almost simultaneously with his taciturnity. He gave it for his decided opinion, that pancake owed its title to the fact of its being a sort of *panacea*, a general remedy for the ill effects of fasting, a stock of solid nourishment laid in to prevent starvation during the days of abstinence that follow Shrove Tuesday; a *panacea*, in fact, as good food always is, against the unpleasant symptoms that follow the going without any at all. He quoted something from Pliny to prove this, and something, I think, from Lucan, but I forget what; at all events he thought that he had well proved his point; and in the height of his self-complacency rubbed his hand famously, and called to the waiter to bring 'a plate of pancakes, lemon, and brown sugar,' which feeding upon, he relapsed into his original silence. Of all the other conjectures that I can remember, there is but one other good one. A man, who did not set up for a classic, asserted that pancakes were bread seals, for he traced the derivation from the French, *pain*, bread, and *cachet*, a seal, being, as he asserted, merely bread which had taken the circular form of a seal from the shape of the machine in which it was cooked: a modern etymology which sounded quite tame after the ancient ones we had been treated with.

"While we were all wondering at the many derivations the word would bear, and quite undecided which to select; one of our party exclaimed with some vehemence, 'Who shall tell me why this is called a pancake?' When a rough jocund voice behind me humbly answered with a smile, 'Why my wife and I calls 'em pancakes 'cause they be *cakes* frizzed in a *pan*!' and turning round, I traced the sound to the lips of a waiter, generally the most forward among his fellows, and who, hearing this exclamation, with none of our previous discourse, simply set the matter at rest, and outwitted us and all our classic eruditions. You may imagine we looked at each other and wondered till we smiled, and smiled till we all joined in a general laugh at ourselves and each other."

February 13, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, was so called from the ancient ceremony of blessing ashes on that day, with which the priest afterwards signed the people on the forehead in the form of a cross, saying, "Remember that ye have come from dust, and unto dust shall ye return." Lent continues until Easter Eve. The name is derived from the Saxon *Lengten*, signifying spring, the time of the year in which it is observed.

February 14, St. Valentine's Day.—In the year 1821, there were 200,000 letters above the average quantity passed through the Twopenny Post-office alone, on this day. Before the interchange of the poetical epistles known as Valentines was introduced it was the practice for gentlemen to consider the first lady they saw on the morning of St. Valentine's Day as their sweetheart or Valentine, to whom they were expected to make a present. These Valentine gifts are often mentioned by old writers as a source of great expense; some are mentioned by

* 'Vox Graculi,' 4to., 1623, p. 55.