

CURIOSITIES OF NATURE.

THE SEXTON-BEETLE.

THE sexton-beetle is about an inch in length; it is of a black colour, and so fetid, that the hands smell for hours after handling it; and if it crawl on woollen clothes which are not washed, the smell continues for several days. The sexton-beetle lays its eggs in the bodies of putrifying animals, which, when practicable, it buries in the ground.

In Russia, where the poor people are buried but a few inches below the surface of the ground, the sexton-beetles avail themselves of the bodies for this purpose, and the graves are pierced with their holes in every direction; at evening, hundreds of these beetles may be seen in the churchyards, either buzzing over recent graves, or emerging from them. The sexton-beetle, in this country, seldom finds so convenient a provision for him, and he is under the necessity of taking much more trouble; he sometimes avails himself of dead hogs and horses, but these are too great rarities to be his constant resort; the usual objects of his search are dead mice, rats, birds, frogs, and moles; of these, a bird is most commonly obtained.

In the neighbourhood of towns, every kind of garbage that is thrown out attracts these beetles as soon as it begins to smell; and it is not unusual to see them settling in our streets, enticed by the grateful odour of such substances. The sexton-beetles hunt in couples, male and female; and where six or eight are found in a large animal, they are almost sure to be males and females in equal numbers; they hunt by scent only, the chase being mostly performed when no other sense would be very available, viz., in the night. When they have found a bird, great comfort is expressed by the male, who wheels round and round above it, like a vulture over the putrifying carcase of some giant of the forest. The female settles on it at once, without this testimonial of satisfaction. The male at last settles also, and a savory and ample meal is made before the great work is begun. After the beetles have appeased the calls of hunger, the bird is abandoned for a while; they both leave it to explore the earth in the neighborhood, and ascertain whether there is a place suitable for interment; if on a ploughed field there is no difficulty; but if on grass, or among stones, much labour is required to draw it to a more suitable place.

The operation of burying is performed almost entirely by the male beetle, the female mostly hiding herself in the body of the bird about to be buried, or sitting quietly upon it, and allowing herself to be buried with it: the male begins by digging a furrow all round the bird, at the distance

of about half an inch, turning the earth outside; his head is the only tool used in this operation; it is held sloping outwards, and is exceedingly powerful. After the first furrow is completed, another is made within it, and the earth is thrown into the first furrow; then a third furrow is made, and this is completely under the bird, so that the beetle, whilst working at it, is out of sight: now, the operation can only be traced by the heaving of the earth, which soon forms a little rampart round the bird; as the earth is moved from beneath, and the surrounding rampart increases in height, the bird sinks.

After incessant labor for about three hours, the beetle emerges, crawls upon the bird, and takes a survey of his work. If the female is on the bird, she is driven away by the male, who does not choose to be intruded upon during the important business. The male beetle then remains for about an hour perfectly still, and does not stir hand nor foot; he then dismounts, dives again into the grave, and pulls the bird down by the feathers.

At last, after two or three hours' more labour, the beetle comes up, again gets on the bird, and again takes a survey, and then drops down as though dead, or fallen suddenly fast asleep. When sufficiently rested he rouses himself, treads the bird firmly into its grave, pulls it by the feathers this way and that way, and having settled it to his mind, begins to shovel in the earth; this is done in a very short time, by means of his broad head. He goes behind the rampart of earth, and pushes it into the grave with amazing strength and dexterity: the head being bent directly downwards at first, and then the nose elevated with a kind of jerk, which sends the earth forwards. After the grave is thus filled up, the earth is trodden in, and undergoes another keen scrutiny all round, the bird being completely hidden; the beetle then makes a hole in the loose earth, and having buried the bird and his own bride, next buries himself.

The female having laid her eggs in the carcase of the bird, in number proportioned to its size, and the pair having eaten as much of the savory viand as they please, they make their way out, and fly away. The eggs are hatched in two days, and produce fat scaly grubs, which run about with great activity; these grubs grow excessively fast, and very soon consume all that their parents had left. As soon as they are full grown they cease eating, and burrowing further in the earth, become pupæ. The length of the time they remain in this state appears uncertain; but when arrived at the perfect state, they make round holes in the ground, from which they come forth.