

THE WOODS, THE BIRDS, AND A LITTLE QUAKERESS

A Sympathetic Study of the Personal and the Impersonal

By JEAN BLEWETT

WHILE we are debating as to whether or no we shall take Jane Welsh to the woods with us, she settles the question off-hand.

We are on the farmhouse verandah, just the two of us. Presently she opens a blue and gold book, and begins to read aloud by way of fulfilling her duties as temporary hostess. It is a story, of course. Jane Welsh is nine and not precocious. The way she skips the long words and descriptive paragraphs is very human. She has the characters introduced, and the interesting dialogue on in no time.

"The Wise Man knew all things," reads Jane, in the shrill sweet tone of childhood, "and to the Busy One who came to con-con-consult him he said: 'Thy blindness cometh from the city's glare, thy deafness from its din, the unrest from its turmoil. These things are symptoms of a pestilence which herbs cannot heal.' 'Is it as bad as that?' gasped the Busy One, 'I had hoped thy great skill——' 'There is one cure, only one,' resumed the Wise Man, 'get near to nature's heart.'"

"Jane," we ask of the round, brown little woman, "what does it mean to get near to nature's heart?"

"I cannot tell thee in words," flashing a smile at us, "but if thou wilt come with me to my father's great word, to-morrow's morn, thou shalt see for thyself."

Who could resist a plea so full of promise? "Very well," we say, "to-morrow's morn we fare forth hand-in-hand, and you shall show us many things, Jane Welsh—but first of all, who gave you that name?"

"Truly, my father did. He hath a near friend, one Thomas Carlyle, whose namesake I was to have been only that I was not a boy. Father would have had me Thomas even so, but mother said nay, it was not seemly that a maiden should bear a man's name. 'Then let her be Jane Welsh' in honour of the wife of Thomas," declared my father, and Jane Welsh it was."

"Thou wilt rise early, I trust," coming back to the matter of most interest to her little self, "before the dew drieth on the elderberry hedge which is on the way to the wood. May I knock upon thy door before five of the clock? My room is under the eaves, thou seest, and the robins call to me from the window sill. Nay, I will be early, never fear."

She is too early we think at first. But once out on the dew-draggled path we know better. Not one of these minutes should be squandered in sleep. The morning hymn which all the birds sing together ought to make the whole wide world believe in a gospel of joy. The first hour after sunrise is the gladdest part of the day, just as it is the freshest and fairest. Jane Welsh, who in her grey frock and little grey sun-bonnet is not unlike a hedge sparrow, has a song of her own.

Our path goes winding across field after field, along a creek which cuts the pasture land in two, and, by and by, there is nothing between us and the wood but a tall hedge of alders white with bloom.

"It mindeth me of cousin Drusilla's wedding which was in the church," says the child, turning and speaking in a whisper. "It hath so much whiteness and so sweet a breath."

What a dear little mortal she is! We take the hand she holds out, and the two of us crawl through the hedge and lose ourselves in a world which is big, and green, and cool.

There is a pool, but we do not come to it in a hurry on account of the path tangling itself among the new growth, and also because there is much to note and enjoy. It lies in a hollow at the foot of a tree-covered hill, the coolest, shadiest spot! It has a ledge of rock as a sort of doorstep, and topping the ledge a cedar hung with purple berries. Jane Welsh pushes me down on a green

hillock and sinks beside me. Half the birds in "father's great wood" must be gathered here, some drinking, some washing themselves with much splashing and little calls of pure joy, some gossiping, some singing. It is the inn of winged things this pool at the Sign of the Cedar.

The song thrush, wood robin, bell bird are singing madly, but the tawny veery with his olive brown coat and spotted vest teeters on a slender shrub and is mute. Jane Welsh knows why, she has spent more summers than one getting acquainted with this shy sweet community.

"He is too near his precious nest," she says.

world full of colour." She draws a deep breath. "Thinkest thou not the pewees, chickadees, and all the dear grey fellows feel envy of yonder yellow canary which is like a bit of sunshine with wings on it, or the blue bird, or the cardinal with his crimson coat? Verily, if I were a bird I would cry to be of the kind which maketh the eyes dazzle—like yonder tanager singing overhead."

She is delicious in her rebellion against the grey frock and the untrimmed bonnet, her desire for warmth and colour. Surely one of her grave Quaker ancestors must have wed some sweet faced worldly woman outside the faith.

"But you would be Lady Tanager," we remind her, "with a dull greenish dress and petticoat of faded yellow."

"It isn't fair, it isn't fair," declares Jane Welsh with a tremble in her voice.

"And you wouldn't sing, firstly because you couldn't, secondly because you'd be too busy. Your magnificent tanager does not wear himself out nest building or house-keeping. He lets his wife do it."

"Yes," concedes Jane, "but while his mate worketh he sendeth out the sweetest song of all. I have heard him."

Have your own way, little girl. Just so, I daresay, did your Quaker ancestor argue to himself and others about the beautiful bit of wordliness he—but one can't moralise and listen to Jane Welsh. She is telling the tragedy of the goldfinch and cow-bird.

"Thou wilt see cow-birds in the pasturefield as we go back. They go hopping about the cattle, in truth, other birds like them not because they companion with cows and heifers instead of their own kind, also because of other faults. They are not pretty or good. Nay, thou wilt not say 'Oh, the poor cow-bird' so gently when I tell thee what I know. They are too greedy to do aught but eat. They do not mate and build nests for themselves, oh, no. The hen bird skulketh about among the trees and shrubs till she findeth the nest of other birds in which to lay her eggs. If the owner is from home so much the better, if not, she crowdeth the small thing off like the coward she is. Oh, I like her not. To have a poor vireo, a warbler, or even a sparrow spend time hatching and feeding the coarse young cow-bird seemeth sinful. If it were a delight to the eye, a kinglet with the ruby tuft in his crown, a sapsucker, oriole or such, but a cow-bird wearing the poor foster mother out, never full, never thankful! I could find it in my heart to despise all such."

No need to say so, Jane Welsh, your eyes are quite shiny with wrath. And the cow-bird's conduct is bad, very bad. Still, as you say, if he had a ruby in his crown it would lighten the transgression a little.

"My father hath told me of this same bird," continues Jane, "and awhile ago we both saw a thing which did us good. In the orchard was a yellow bird's nest. Hast thou ever seen one? It is like a wee dainty cradle made of flax from the milkweed and lined with down. Here came the cow-bird and laid her egg, yes, in the softest, silkiest spot she laid it, and there it was when the yellow birds came home. They fluttered and cried for awhile, then hit upon a way out of the trouble. They built a new floor to their nest and shut that egg out for good. Oh, how pleased they were, and when the old cow-bird came back another day to see if she could lay another egg they flew at her and thrashed her well. My father hath seen a nest three storeys high from building extra floors over eggs the owners had no use for. What dost thou think of that?"

Having nothing to say in defence of such conduct we descend to generalities. "You love all birds but the cow-bird," we say.



Nest of the Chipping Sparrow, built of fine dried grass, and lined with hair. This bird remains in Canada from April to October, and has a keen idea of natural beauty, rearing his family amid spring leaves and blossoms.

Photograph by John Boyd, Sarnia.

"I think," with a smile, "his mate telleth him not to be foolish enough to sing love songs on his own doorstep. There he flyeth—ah, listen!"

It is a series of thrills, high, clear, yet tremulous. Whittier might have had him in mind when writing the lines:

"And here in spring the veeries sing
The song of long ago."

"Indeed, he hath a pretty voice, though not a pretty colour," comments the child. "I like not the brown or grey birds so well as the gay ones. If I were a bird I would rather be a flicker with scarlet head and golden wings than a homely hermit thrush with e'en so sweet a song as his in my throat."

"You are not a good Quaker, little Jane," we tell her, watching her face which is all alight with eagerness.

"Nay, in the wood I am just a little girl who tireth of plain things, and would fain have the