

THE WONDERS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

From "Thoughts For All Times" by Mgr. J. Vaughan

Suppose, then, that some unknown person were to come to us from another world, and producing a small vessel should say: "Here is a small oval box or receptacle made out of lime, and filled with a thickish viscid or glutinous substance. Keep it carefully for a few weeks in a warm and even temperature, and I undertake to say that, without any further attention on your part, it will gradually transform itself into a superb gold chronometer, with dial, hands, main-spring and hair-spring, lever escapement, and everything complete. Every wheel will be in its place and in ceaseless motion. Each hinge, rivet, screw and other accessory part will be carefully formed and placed in position. The whole will constitute a watch, ticking merrily all the day, and registering the time at each succeeding moment." Such a supposition is enough to make one smile. One instinctively exclaims, "What nonsense! What a ludicrous idea! How extravagantly foolish; and, above all, how absolutely impossible." If, indeed, such a promise were really made, we should be inclined to think (1) either that the stranger was stark mad; or (2) that it was a piece of mere clever juggling; or, if the promised result did indeed take place, that (3) a miracle of a very extraordinary kind had been wrought.

Yet, strange though it may seem, what is happening continually in nature is very analogous to what I have supposed. What we may actually see taking place in the animal world is very similar indeed to what has been described, only immeasurably more extraordinary, immeasurably more mysterious, and—but for the fact that we can actually witness the whole process for ourselves—we should certainly say, immeasurably more impossible!

A watch is a beautiful thing; a complicated thing; a thing of many parts, admirably put together and most cunningly devised and adjusted. But a bird is immeasurably more beautiful, immeasurably more complicated, and a creature of a far greater number of most elaborate parts, far more exquisitely put together.

Take the egg of any bird you please, let us say a goldfinch. When first laid by the hen, what is it but (1) an oval receptacle or box formed of lime or other calcareous matter; or, in plain English, a shell; and (2) filled with a thickish viscid glutinous substance? This substance is structureless and shapeless, and, for the most part, almost colourless; yet, keep it in a suitable temperature for a few weeks and it will become gradually transformed by the power of God acting through natural laws; not, indeed,

into a watch, no; but into what is infinitely more admirable and estimable, *viz.*, into a living, breathing, sentient bird. Within the fragile shell, no thicker than your nail, changes and transformations are being gradually wrought, so singular and mysterious, that I know not to what I can compare them, unless it be to the changes that the earth went through during the six days of creation, when God brooded over the face of the deep, and drew order and symmetry out of chaos. A living being is being formed. The bones of leg and wing, the spinal column with all its articulations, the skull and pointed beak and sharp claws emerge, as if by magic, from out the liquid mass. Not only is each brittle bone beautifully fashioned, exquisitely finished, and polished as smooth as ivory—each different, yet all correlated—but they are knit together and adjusted with the utmost precision and harmony, and built up, *without hands*, not anyhow, not at haphazard, but according to a distinct and definite plan. Then without as much disturbance as would suffice to fracture the film of shell, flesh and skin clothe and envelop the entire skeleton; while throughout the whole there run innumerable channels and secret passages and ducts carrying arterial and venous blood from one extremity to the other. Invisible fingers are still moulding the beautiful form of the bird, and arranging its interior organs of nutrition and digestion, and forming that marvellous pneumatic pump, the heart, on the strictest scientific principles, which is to keep forcing the blood circulating throughout the whole organism year after year, without cessation, so long as life lasts.

Still the work proceeds. The original viscid glutinous liquid is all that the shell contains, or has ever contained. From it, therefore, and from naught else, is drawn the gorgeous plumage that is to be the glory of the bird. The wings are supplied with long, light, pointed feathers, suitable for flight, and the breast is coated with softest down of many brilliant colours.

All is daintily finished, delicately tinted, and Divinely made. *Digitus Dei est hic*. Yet, observe. The fragile shell is still intact. No fresh material has been introduced. All—bones, muscles, veins, blood, brain, skull, beak, claws, down, feathers, liver, heart, lungs, etc.—have been constructed out of the same simple structureless liquid albumen, mucus, cell-substance, or protoplasm—call it what you will.

Place your ear gently against the shell. Listen. Can you hear the great Artist at work? Can you detect any sound of implement or tool while the transformation is going on? Where but a short time ago there was nothing but a transparent liquid, we now find that the most wondrous and complex objects and organs have been manufactured. The eyes so bright, clear and penetrating of the imprisoned bird, though made *for light*, have been constructed *in darkness*, and from the simple protoplasm. And consider what this means. For though the eye is but one organ, and a comparatively insignificant one, yet what a complicated thing it is. It includes the pupil, the sclerotic, the cornea, the iris, the crystalline lens, the vitreous humour, the ciliary processes, choroid coat, the retina, with the various blood-vessels which feed it, and the muscles which move it and adjust it, etc. Yet all are there, and in their proper positions. So of all else, the wings so swift and true and light, the throat and lungs and vocal chords, all accurately attuned and prepared within the silent shell, await but its breaking, to emerge into the light of day, and to discourse soft sounds over hill and dale. All is being completed within that miniature universe. All is there. Nothing has been forgotten. Matter enough, but no more than enough, has been stored within the shell for the construction of every limb, organ and muscle, and all else down to the smallest fragment of down that goes to complete the perfection of the bird. At last the shell breaks. The viscid fluid has disappeared, and in its place a bird darts forth instinct with life; with glancing eyes, and flapping wings, and palpitating heart, and with a throat eloquent with song and softly warbled harmonies.

What a strange and wonderful history! What a stupendous miracle of Divine power and wisdom! Talk of mystery! Talk of the incomprehensible! Well, here in this familiar phenomenon we are confronted with a whole world of unsearchable mysteries. And so far from disappearing or diminishing as we inquire more searchingly and investigate more minutely, they rather become more insoluble and unfathomable. Nay, if we have not yet been startled at the sight of these and similar transformations, is it not just precisely *because we have not paused to consider* them attentively, but passed them heedlessly by? and because custom has dulled our minds, and because what is perpetually going on and repeating itself for ever and ever, fails to provoke attention or even to excite inquiry? For what is the fact? The undeniable fact is, that all creation is palpitating with mystery. Not a cubic inch of earth, air or water, but contains enough to bewilder and confound the most enlightened intelligence. We live and breathe in an atmosphere of mystery. Above and below and around us lie unexplored and inexorable depths—depths which defy all human soundings, and into whose dark and unexplored recesses man gazes fearfully and tremulously, but always in vain. What do I say? Around him? Below him? Why even *within* him mystery dwells. Man is to himself the most bewildering of enigmas. Whence come life, motion and sensation? What *is* life? What are thought and imagination? What is memory which binds the past with the present, and links together in one co-ordinate whole the experience of many eventful years?

What is sleep, that sometimes shuts up sorrow's eye, that steeps our senses in forgetfulness, and steals us awhile from our own company? Surely a strange and mysterious thing. And dreams—what are they, and whence do they arise? Whence come those strange and wondrous scenes, the phantasmagoria that pass and repass before the closed eyes of the sleeper, with all the vividness and speaking impressiveness of waking life; that call back the forms of the dead and the absent, and repeople earth with long-forgotten images of friends and foes! In the somniant state the sleeper sees clearly and basks in the sunshine, though all the time he may be really buried in an Egyptian darkness: he hears sounds and converses with his friends though he rests in truth in unbroken silence; and even though his limbs lie motionless in his bed, he may still be fighting battles, scaling mountains, or fording rivers. He is the sport of fancy, the plaything of hallucinations. In sleep he is, and he is not; at once all things and nothing. What is sleep? The echo answers, What? We are left to wonder and surmise.

Thus, question after question suggests itself to the inquiring mind, but for never a one is there an answer forthcoming. And, as it is with the mind, so it is with the body. Why does a child grow and develop till it reaches manhood, and then

stop, to grow no higher? Why is one pair of eyes brown and another blue? Why is one infant masculine and the other feminine? and how is the relative proportion of the sexes preserved throughout the world, and throughout the ages?

So, again, how is life maintained by food and drink? and by what marvellous process is the *same food* transformed into such *wholly different things* as blood and bone, artery and nerve, muscle and tendon, skin and hair, teeth and nails? And by what means is each portion of the organism (*qua* organism) built up, distributed and maintained in activity; and how is each instructed to discharge its own peculiar functions?

We need not to be told that scientific men have affixed learned names to every natural process, and have carefully labelled every phenomenon. For that means nothing. Anybody can give a thing a name. Yet many seem to forget, or at least fail to realise, that to *name* is not to *explain*. To label a mystery is not to solve it. A score of learned terms and definitions will not suffice to throw a bridge, even of gossamer, across an impassable gulf., If I refrain from suggesting further difficulties, it is by no means because I have exhausted my stock, but merely because space is limited.

We will conclude, then, with the remark that, to look out upon this material earth, and to fully realise how mysterious is every object in it (as soon as we probe the least degree beneath the surface), teaches us a profound lesson. It proves to us how singularly weak and puny a thing is the human mind itself; it shows us how straitened and confined is our knowledge of even the simplest things; and throws us into a disposition proper and fitting to receive with reverence and docility the incomprehensible truths of revelation. God is the infinitely Incomprehensible, dwelling in light inaccessible; and all His works have an element of the incomprehensible in them. But the higher we rise in the scale of creation the more profound do these mysteries become. Their high-water mark is reached when, transcending the natural altogether, we enter into the supernatural regions of grace and glory.

But of these we will deal another time.
