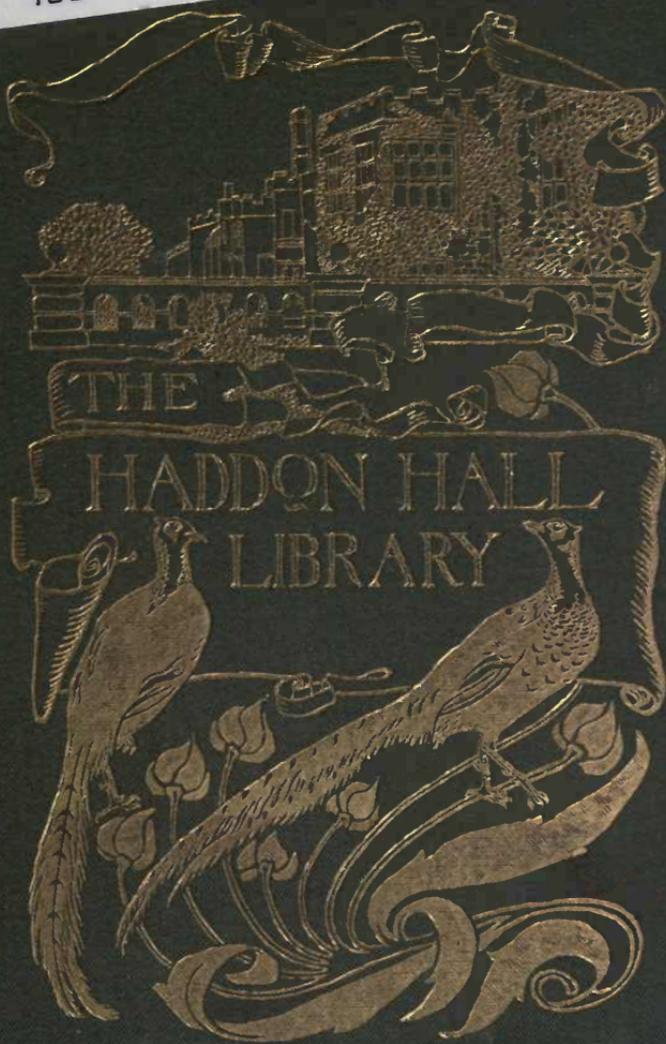


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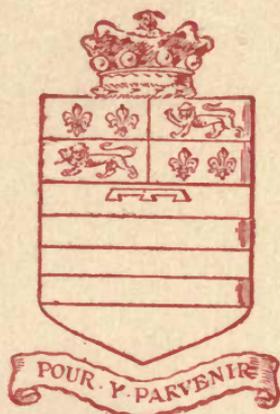
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Where the black cap builds.

WILD LIFE
IN
HAMPSHIRE HIGHLANDS

BY
GEORGE A. B. DEWAR

AUTHOR OF
'THE BOOK OF THE DRY FLY,' ETC.



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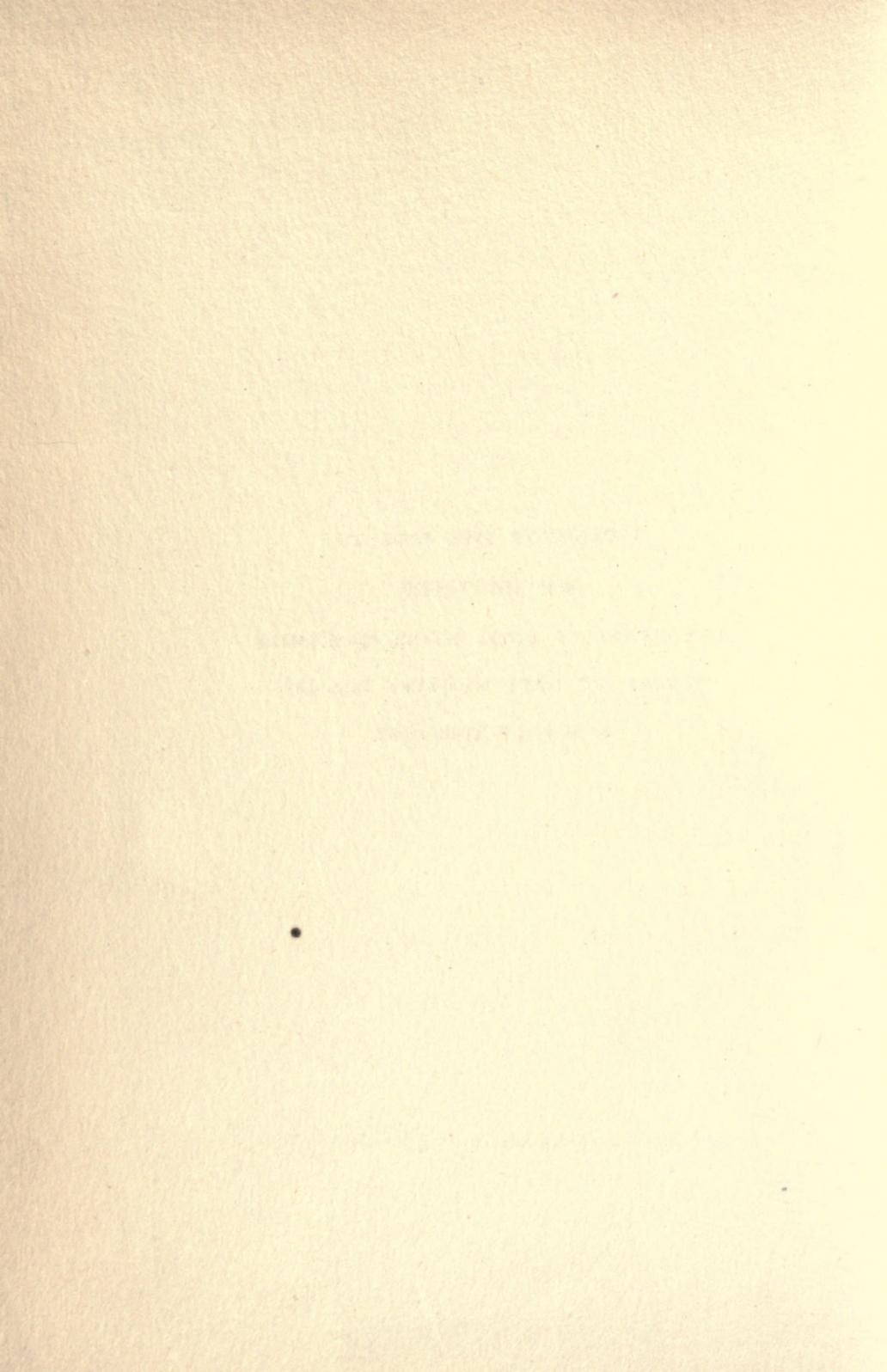
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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO
MY BROTHER
THE OWNER OF DOLES WOOD, HAMPSHIRE
WHERE WE HAVE SO OFTEN ROAMED
AND SHOT TOGETHER

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WILD LIFE IN
HAMPSHIRE HIGHLANDS

‘These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky, with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows—such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of childhood left behind them.’

GEORGE ELIOT.



CHAPTER I

In Hampshire Highlands

THE house stands in a small park or clearing in the midst of the great oak and hazel woods which climb steadily up one of those rounded chalk-hills that, alternating with broad and sweeping valleys, form such familiar features of our North Hampshire scenery. A home built in the centre of dense and secluded woodlands miles from a town, almost miles from a village—should it not be a paradise for the lover of the wild life and sports which have such a hold on the affections of English country people? It is one of the objects of this volume to try and show that in a home like this, one out of very many in southern shires not less

happily placed, no portion of the year can be without its delights for the field naturalist, or for the sportsman who is content with a small and perhaps mixed bag, and sets much store by charming south-country scenes and the pleasures of observing a great variety of wild life.

The woods lie in the north-west corner of the county, not far from where the hills or downs of chalk reach their highest point. This north-west is the least known corner of the county, rather perhaps through the difficulty of reaching it than through its lack of interest. In the south-west of the county there is the region of the New Forest, so widely known and appreciated; in the north-east Strathfieldsaye, Silchester, and Eversley, a village bound up for ever with the name of Charles Kingsley, are all far-famed places; whilst in the south-east of Hampshire the districts around Petersfield and Havant are well visited by pleasure-seekers and holiday-makers from the large and growing centre round England's naval capital. But the north-west corner of Hampshire is not one which the compilers of guide-books and the promoters of excursions have taken much into account.

Perhaps for the tourist in a hurry and the sightseer it has no very striking feature. It has no Silchester teeming with remains of Roman greatness; no private residence of such superb Jacobean beauty as Bramshill House, in the eastern corner of the county; no great naval centre like Portsmouth or military centre like Aldershot; nor, finally, is it so well pierced by the iron roads, which bring the tourist and the sightseers, as are other parts of the county. And yet this north-west corner, bordering on Wiltshire on the west and Berkshire on the north, is both an interesting and a beautiful district. There must have been a day when the tide of battle swept over nearly the whole country hereabouts. You need not go to the highest point in the woods to see standing out clear-cut from the surrounding country the marks of many a fierce struggle. Danebury and Quarley are among the hills with summits now covered only with a few clumps of trees, that had at one time great entrenchments, and were the heights, no doubt, round which the combat often deepened. These entrenchments were probably British, but elsewhere traces of the Roman rule are not wanting. There are

portions of roads leading from and to such places as Winchester, Silchester, and Cirencester, of an unmistakably Roman origin; whilst in Egbury Hill by Whitchurch, on the Test, some believe they see the famous Vindomis. They who live much in the past, indeed, might find still greater interest in the strange remnants of a race compared with which the Roman seems but of yesterday, unearthed years ago at the village of St. Mary Bourne, close to this same Egbury, the stone implements of what is called, I believe, the newer flint or neolithic age.

This land of chalk was once, and compared with many parts of the country is still, a land of woods. The whole of north-west Hampshire was covered with woods some centuries since, though no doubt the New Forest in the south even then was by far the greatest in size and importance within the county. The wood with which this book will deal was formerly part and parcel of Chute Forest, that must have covered a large portion of these Hampshire Highlands as well as the north-east corner of the adjoining county of Wiltshire. Even to-day, as I have said, Hampshire is well furnished with woods.

There is Harewood Forest, not far short of two thousand acres in extent, lying within our district ; and there are portions of the large wood of Bentley in the west, and Alice Holt—a Royal forest, with some fine timber and beautiful scenery, in the east ; besides which there are many lesser woods with unnumbered oak and hazel copses all over the county. Woolmer I do not include in my list ; its forest trees do not exist, whilst Waltham Chase is somewhat a forest of the past, and the best days, too, of Bere have long since passed. Speed, in the quaint and no doubt laborious map of Hampshire—or ‘Hantshire,’ as he calls the county—apparently does not mark any of the woods except the great historic ones, such as the New Forest, used for the shipbuilding needs of England. Nevertheless, Hampshire in his day—his map of Hampshire in my possession was printed about the beginning of the seventeenth century—must have been a finely wooded county. Chute was then one of the Royal Forests, extending from Savernake in Wiltshire far into North Hampshire. Only portions of it are now to be seen, such as the wood described in this book and one or two others in the east

6 IN HAMPSHIRE HIGHLANDS

part of Wiltshire. Michael Drayton, in his *Polyolbion*, speaks of 'the sprightly Test arising up in Chute,' thereby meaning, no doubt, what is now called the Bourne, a pretty and all too short tributary of the queen of Hampshire chalk streams, that now has its perennial source some miles from any trace of the once great forest where a Stuart king had one of his hunting boxes. It is at least conceivable, though I care to do no more than suggest it as a possibility, that the Bourne was in Drayton's time a more considerable stream than it is now, with a source higher up the valley. Anyhow, it is surely not unreasonable to suppose that there was a greater rainfall in Hampshire in those days of great woods than there is now. I read only recently in a State Report of New York that, by reason of the felling of woods and the growing of thirsty crops, a Wyoming stream, formerly quite sufficient for the miller's purposes, had become useless; and other cases can be quoted where deforestation has led to a lessening in the supply of water.

The woods climb up to some six hundred and forty feet above sea-level, and at about their highest point they command a view of the sur-

rounding country in a northerly direction, which cannot but be a surprise and delight to the stranger who, coming from the south, has for many miles enjoyed nothing like scenery on a large scale. He has come probably by small and well-tilled valleys bounded by the most gently sloping hills, perhaps up the valley of the Anton, chief tributary of the Test, or down that of the idyllic trout-brook Anna or Pilhill; in any case, through villages and hamlets not built on steep hillsides or nestled far away in the depths of wild coombs, such as we expect to find in the bolder or more broken land of the west of England, but scattered here and there among the towering elms, the oak and hazel coppices, and the familiar fields of corn, root crops, and clover, which chiefly make up a North Hampshire farm. He has seen nothing but landscape of a quiet, peaceful character, the reverse of bold or grand. But at this point he stops to look down into a real valley, seeming deep indeed and well-defined compared with those he has lately passed through—namely, the valley of the river Bourne, which, when the springs are high, takes its rise by the secluded village of Upton and flows eastward through Hurstbourne

Tarrant, Stoke, St. Mary Bourne, and beautifully undulating Hurstbourne Park to join the Test by the last-named spot. North of the valley, here, perhaps, seen at its best until Hurstbourne Park is reached, lie the rolling chalk-hills which crown themselves at Combe, Inkpen Beacon, and Sidown. Combe and Sidown are in Hampshire, but Inkpen, the giant of the chalk-hills of Great Britain, lies across the border in Berkshire, at a point where the three counties of Hampshire, Wiltshire, and Berkshire dovetail in with one another. Sidown, which is immediately to the south of Highclere Park, is well wooded; but the hills of Combe and Inkpen, bleak and treeless, give to the country a suggestion of wildness which must prevent even the most widely travelled man from describing the scenery here as tame. Standing one summer evening by Tangley Clump, another high point near by, I was struck by the fineness of these hills. The 'feel of June' was in the air beneath this lonely spot; but up here there was little sign of the abundant life and brimful overflowing joy one associates with the long day of that month of all months. A flame-bird or two—as I have heard the redstart called

much farther west—and the yellowhammer's monotonous note, were the sole signs of all June's bird-life, and occasionally the note of the latter alone broke the deep silence which brooded over all things as I reached the point where, in a perfectly clear air, you can without field-glasses see the aërial pinnacle of Salisbury Cathedral. It was one of those alluring evenings when the winds, high during morning and afternoon, are 'up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,' whilst the sun, hid through much of the day, reappears to sink in the west a globe of fire. To the south there lay stretched out a long line of purple hills, some of which would overlook the rich valley of the Wiltshire and Hampshire Avon—a river having, next to the Thames, the largest watershed of any of our south-country streams; and the valley, too, of Avon's tributary, the little Winterbourne or Porton Water, the 'pretty Bourne' of Michael Drayton. Other hills would overlook the charming Anton and her Anna, and some few the Test, a name to conjure with among anglers in all parts of the country. There are not many spots in the south of England where with a single glance of the eye one can even dimly take in a

country which is enriched by so many pure and sweet trout-streams as these. Softness was the feature of this landscape to the south: a medley it looked of oak and hazel coppice, farms, and great thatched barns among dark elms, with here a few cottages clustered together, and there the ornamental timber of some considerable county seat, such as Amport, that recalls the fine old Hampshire name of Paulett. But to the north I enjoyed a much rarer, if less extensive, view of southern scenery. Bare and severe lay the hills above Combe, as desolate in aspect as those irreclaimable hills of Exmoor Forest, one of Nature's last remaining fastnesses in the tilled and tamed south. Green on the convex, and by reason of the light grey on the concave, how fine those hills looked that still, clear June evening! There is a glamour about such barren and severe spots in the midst of a country the features of which are softness and plenty. Green waving woods of oak and underwood, valleys watered by pellucid and never-failing chalk springs, trim cottages, their gardens ablaze through the summer with the flowers of our forefathers, lanes having great straggling hedges, laden in many parts with

heavy masses of wild clematis, might save even a decidedly flat country from the charge of tameness; but a bit of wild, open moorland, a bleak hill without a green thing save its grass upon it, or with, at the most, a few stunted bushes and deformed trees, will always be a welcome change to the lover of landscape. Towards a bare windswept hill the eye will always be drawn. When I turned homewards that evening Combe was all grey; the yellowhammer, a bird that seems quite indifferent whether he lives and nests by bright homestead, in grass-grown woodland glade, or on a high and solitary spot like this, had ceased; and round the oaks beneath, the nightjar, the 'sombre gigantic swallow' of the twilight, was gliding and glancing like a bird-ghost.

This range of high chalk-hills viewed from a distance invites close inspection. It may be reached from the south by Netherton valley, and will well repay a visit. On each side of Netherton valley there is a broad and smooth expanse of turf with woods above on both hillsides, and the whole wears somewhat the look of a road through a park. Netherton rectory—its garden was once a rare place, I remember, for lilies of the valley—

is passed, and soon one enters upon a wild and remote corner of the county. Here again the beautiful redstart is quite at home, flying in and out of the thin old hedge in front of the intruder, more inquisitive, it would seem, than alarmed. On the left-hand side of the road the land is more or less cultivated, but on the right the great rolling downs have their way, forming in at least one instance something like an immense natural amphitheatre within the valley. Alternately waves of sun and shadow swept over this land when I last saw it one day in late summer, and between Hurstbourne Tarrant, the Uphusband of the earlier part of the century, and the remote and well-named village of Combe, I met but one small party of labourers who were bringing home the last loads of the bountiful harvest of 1898: from Hurstbourne to the foot of the hill that leads up to Combe Church and the old dismantled manor-house—a distance of some four miles and a half—not another soul. Combe Church and churchyard, which lie a little apart from the village in the hollow, are worth visiting. The two aged yews in the churchyard, in their ‘stubborn hardihood,’ are fine specimens of a tree

which evidently flourishes in the chalk, as does the graceful ash. Most old Hampshire churches have their fine yew or two. St. Mary Bourne has one with a girth of twenty-one feet, or some six feet less than the vast tree in the churchyard of Gilbert White's *Selborne*, which I measured some years ago and found to be nearly twenty-seven feet in girth. In some spots, notably about the Roman or British remains close to Bransbury and by Bullington in the same district, yews grow in some numbers in the hedgerows, and here and there at random like oak and ash. Nor are the quaintly-cut yews of the cottage garden wanting in various villages and hamlets hereabouts. Tennyson knew his Hampshire yews, and has described the tree in the second canto of *In Memoriam*—

‘Old Yew which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.’

At Combe village one may well leave the road and follow a track leading to the top of the towering masses which divide the counties of Hampshire and Berkshire. From the breezy top at Combe Gibbet—the grim mark of a rough-