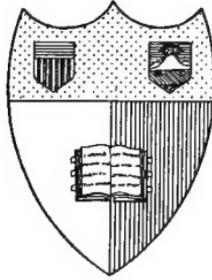


**SNAP.
SHOTS
OF THE
WILD**





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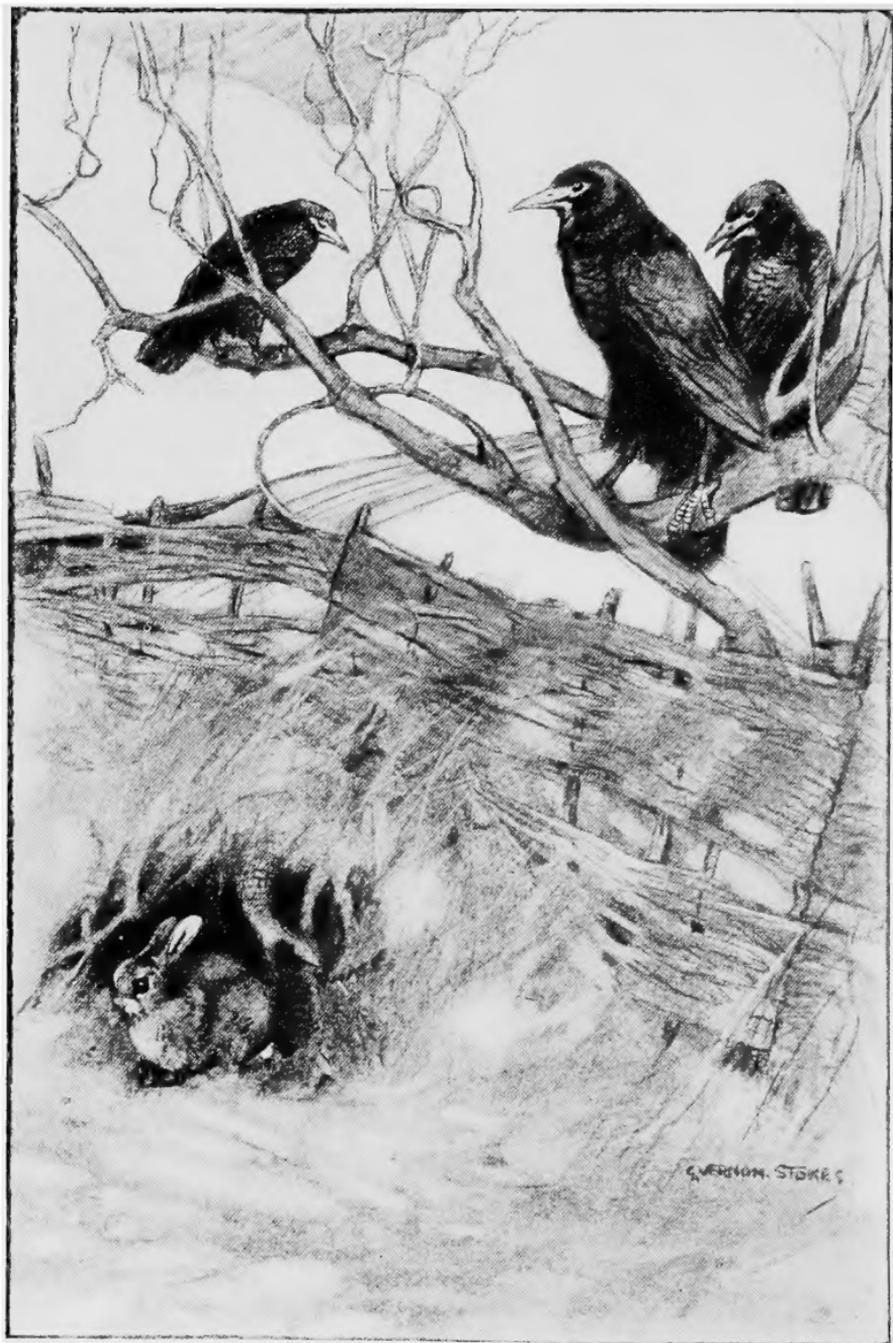
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Snapshots of the Wild





Our rook cocked his head sideways and slowly closed one eye.
s.w. — *Front.*

Snapshots of the Wild

BY

F. ST MARS

Author of

'Pinion and Paw,' 'On Nature's Trail,' 'The Prowlers,'
'Feuds of the Furtive Folk,' &c.

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LONDON: 38 Soho Square, W.

W. & R. CHAMBERS, LIMITED

EDINBURGH: 339 High Street

Philadelphia: J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

1919

Edinburgh:
Printed by W. & R. Chambers, Limited.

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SNAPSHOTS OF THE WILD.

JANUARY.

OUR FEATHERED FRIENDS.

THERE was undoubtedly trouble in the garden. I mean, there was trouble beyond the snow—which was bad enough—the last snow of the winter, the birds hoped, cold as the hand of death, terrifying in its grim silence.

The fact of the matter was, the balance of things in the garden had been upset. As usual, the robin had fought the sparrows for the bread-crumbs, and won; as usual, he had given place, after a wordy combat, to Black Prince, the cock-blackbird, when his highness was hungry enough to venture near the window; and, as usual, too, the starlings had nipped in and ‘wolfed’ the lot during the argument.

Then had come the continental thrush.

You could tell him from our ordinary thrush because he was more blotchy in colour, and had a lean, snaky look; and he cleared the bread-crumbs every morning as quietly as a ghost before every one had finished quarrelling.

Nobody knew that he had come one recent night over leagues of fields, over more leagues of desolate water the night before that, and over yet further leagues of snow-covered wastes the night before *that*, from the lands where the bear and the elk roam, and reindeer have their homes. Nobody cared where he had come from, either, or what he had suffered by the way.

They all regarded him as an interloper, and they were all short of food as it was. The blackbird chased him into the shrubbery; and there he stood, his keen eye—something frog-like, too—watching the blue tits hanging upside-down on the lump of suet suspended on a piece of string specially for their benefit.

Then he picked up a dead leaf, and flinging it over his shoulder in a care-for-nothing style, peered underneath with a keen and searching eye. A crumb rewarded him. Followed two low, long hops, four seconds of motionless watchfulness, and another leaf flew over his shoulder.

Another followed, and others to the number

of eighteen, and his total bag from these consisted of one tiny, pretty, round snail-shell, one numbed spider, and one fly as large as a flea.

The tail of a cat, slipping soundlessly behind an ivy-clump, broke off further investigations here, and he removed, always hopping low and crouchingly, under cover, back to the summer-house on the lawn, where—to our amazement, not his—his odd-looking but wonderful eyes spotted a brownish-gray flake dancing merrily along with the white snowflakes.

It vanished under an evergreen tree, and the bird, marking it, arrived a minute later to find that it was a little, dainty moth, quite at home, apparently, in the fiendish weather till the bird's sharp beak switched off its life.

Some time later it was that the snow ceased to fall, and the sun came out—a watery apology for a sun, truly, but still life and light. The thrush was just about to venture boldly out to glean yet more crumbs, when something moved on the summer-house wall, where it was sheltered by evergreens, and he stopped dead 'twixt hop and hop to look.

It flew up, that thing, that tiny atom of gauzy life in the dread cold, till it reached the sunlight in a sheltered spot, and therein danced like a pinch of golden fluff. But it

was no fluff; the thrush knew that. It was a gnat, and in a few seconds it was joined by other gnats, all dancing together in a mazy column just as if it was a hot summer's day, and not the worst end of winter at all.

Wherefore did the thrush make a meal, for, hopping to the place, he found gnats settled motionless all about on the evergreen leaves where the sun filtered in, gleaming like a hundred shavings of mother-of-pearl as the light caught their wings.

And close by, in a hole of the summer-house, the mouse showed him inadvertently a hoard of snails—all lumped in together they were—which he spent the remainder of the short day in hammering to pieces on a handy brick, and in eating.

That night he slept soundly with two other thrushes in the laurels beside the south wall of the house, oblivious to snow and cold, and quite warm, because full-fed. But the other two were not warm or satisfied.

Fate had shown them neither gnats nor snails, and when our thrush awoke next morning he found beside him two 'sleeping partners,' rigid and snow-covered and stiff.

They had gone to their last roost, those others; and he—went to feed the cat!

WHEN 'WOLF!' WAS CRIED.

IT was a shadowland, but not a shadowland of dreams. One could not dream in that place, because to go to sleep was never to wake up again.

The scene was flat and bare and white, and there was an odd, elusive, tenuous mist over all. Perhaps the mist was frost floating in the air; I don't know. Anyway, it was cold enough for any magic.

A hare limped out of a tussock that should not have hidden anything larger than a mouse, ran a hundred yards, and—dissolved into the snow. A patch of snow broke off upwards, and became a gigantic, muffled white owl, which evaporated, making strange noises, into the tenuous haze. A fox's head appeared, or, rather, the eyes of it did, floating, halo-like, above another foot-large tussock, and disappeared—goodness knows how or where. This was not in England, though it was in Europe.

Then the sleigh passed, singing along in a finely powdered flurry of snow, the off-side horse galloping 'free,' the silver music of the bells laughing merrily at the gloom they could not dispel. And suddenly men whispered,

'Wolves!' and each grabbed a rifle on the word.

Three long, low shadows were gliding swiftly along out there over the plain. A glance only they afforded, a guess, a suggestion, a hint, a tightening of the heart-strings at the instinctive knowledge of something sinister, and they were gone.

The sleigh swept on, and the shadows—now that we are privileged to follow them—held their swift way—three lean, gaunt, slouching, adult Russian dog-wolves, loping in silence over that unutterable desolation, mile upon melancholy mile, the tireless, terrible wolf gallop.

Their actions were purpose-fraught. They had 'refused' the sleigh. The shadow-hares delayed them not.

Silent as gray ghosts, the three beasts slid on across the snow till they came to a pine-wood. Here, just inside, they checked. One sat down, dog-fashion, with lolling red tongue, gleaming fangs, pricked ears, and bright, alert eyes.

Then in the treble silence there sounded, long-drawn and dismal beyond description, the single howl of a lone wolf hunting. It was the largest of the three who had spoken, and, as if the howl had summoned them—

which it had—the wood became peopled with green-eyed, flitting ghosts—more wolves, a pack forty strong.

Two minutes later the three were out upon the plain again, going back the way they had come, the three big brutes a little ahead, the leader in front, his two satellites close on either flank—the leader of the pack and the two next strongest—with the main pack flung like a cloud behind.

Back along the miles the three led the pack—back across the trail of the sleigh, back to another wood, into which they vanished.

A long pause followed, then a single echoing bay. Another bay answered; a third; and then, clear and loud upon the dead stillness, there burst out a ringing, full-throated, rousing music, as of a pack of English foxhounds in 'full cry.'

Out of the deep gloom of the wood on to the moonlit, lonely snow swept the pack again—wolves, not foxhounds—baying beautifully. On they raced, close together, swift, unanimous, checking, swerving, sweeping on, driving the trail like fury—a grand sight. Nature's hounds at work.

And the trail? The taint of the entrails of a deer and the hoof-prints of a horse ridden swiftly.

Ten minutes later the wolf-pack swept, still in 'full cry,' through another wood and across a glade. There was a low log-hut in the glade, usually deserted. The blood trail passed within forty yards of it, and thither had gone the sleigh trail.

On the wild hounds tore, heads down, baying, at great speed, and in the instant it seemed as if the windows of the hut were framed in sudden, jagged fire, and the wood reverberated to a volley of rifles.

The pack swept on, splaying out and silent; but the leader, his two rivals, and three others lay dead or kicking on the snow. The blood trail had been merely a 'drag' laid early that day to entice the wolves near enough to the cabin for the noble sportsmen to shoot them.



Green-eyed, flitting ghosts—more wolves.

ONE WINTER'S NIGHT.

THE old buck-rabbit stopped just within the entrance to his hole and stared out at the scene—at the white world of snow, at the still trees, at the gathering dusk. He kept there like that for about fifteen minutes. That was because he was a really old buck-rabbit; a young one would not have had the experience that taught him patience and caution.

There were many rabbits already out on the white snow, adding their peculiar quadruple tracks—with the marks of the hindfeet in front of those of the forefeet, so that their owners appear to be going backwards—to the intricate lacework of tracks already there.

They were vainly looking for food; but they had eaten it all up—even the bark of trees—near the warren, and would have to journey far if they meant to find it that night.

This the old buck knew. He also knew the risk.

Suddenly he turned to stone.

Thud! thud! went his paws on the ground—a noise you could plainly hear in the silence all across the woodland glade.

Instantly every other rabbit turned to stone also—motionless, listening, smelling.

Then was commotion. The ground was alive with running rabbits; a bigger red form streaked across the clearing; there was a pathetic, child-like squeal on the frozen silence, a thudding of paws, and—nothing.

The glade was empty. Not a living thing showed upon it. But the old rabbit knew that he had just seen a young rabbit snapped up by a fox, and his patience had not been wasted.

An hour later, last of all to leave the burrows, the old buck-rabbit stole cautiously forth into the pale, cold moonlight. He took a few quick hops and sat up. You could see his cleft nose 'working,' his bulging eyes ashine, his long ears twisting this way and that.

Then he took another few hops, and again sat up, dropped again, and disappeared into the shadows under the leafless nut-bushes. And once there, he travelled straight away, for he was going to find food. He had to, or starve.

Silent as a little brown fairy mannikin, he hopped along the still woodland aisles, fairly fast, but always careful. Here he would stop to analyse the air; there he skirted a bush; a dozen times he paused to sniff a twig.

Suddenly he spun about in his tracks and

'froze.' Something was coming up behind him, was running his trail. Only the white plush carpet of snow had allowed it to get so close.

It was a weasel.

For a moment the two stood staring at each other—the old rabbit all of a heap; the neat, long, low, little weasel with head up. Presently the weasel skirmished around. The old rabbit pivoted to face him, but he did not bolt.

Then the little slayer came to the conclusion that he had made a mistake, and that between a fat and foolish young bunny and this crusty old buck there might be a lot of difference when it came to a fight.

Wherefore the weasel went, and the buck warily continued his way.

After a time our rabbit came to a kitchen-garden behind a cottage in the woods. I suppose he knew he would—had the place in his mind's eye. There were all manner of good things in this place—swedes and turnips, cabbages, stored potatoes, and so forth. This was better any night than barking trees or digging through snow for old grass-blades.

He was not alone in his knowledge, however. As he looked through the hedge he saw that many dim shadows slid about over

the snow of the garden. Hares and other rabbits formed the larger shadows; water-rats, squirrels, and various field-mice the smaller.

He passed in beneath the meshed-wire fence, which the owner of this garden always most thoughtfully left with about a foot of the lower portion raised. He sat on the cabbage-bed, and——

‘That’s about enough, I think. Quick!’

He sprang like a flash at the hedge, as he heard the spoken words of some hidden man, and—dashed smack into the wire-netting. It had been dropped, as it could be by a single pull of the master wire from either end.

And the rest? Oh, the rest was mere butchery—that’s all!

THE LAST FORAY.

SNOW is very pretty in pictures, and beautiful to write about—in a warm study; but the real thing has its limits. And the scene was one of the limits—a flat, wind-bitten coast-line in northern Europe, a shallow, cold sea, fretted by an interminable wind that had kissed the Arctic ice and the everlasting driving snow.

There was also sky—but you couldn't see it—like the leaden wrapping of a pound of tea.

It was a time of great flitting on the wings of the wind and the snow.

All day the birds had been passing south—now a wedge of duck 'hugging' the waves; now a V of great swinging wild geese; now a majestic white escort of huge wild swans; now a dozen or two skylarks, buoyant and almost as fragile as the snowflakes; and, again, a 'trip' of white buntings, gay as children, and scarcely distinguishable from the wild flakes.

Some there were who stopped, exhausted, to rest; a few who fell—for ever—by the way; and some, like the Norsemen of old, who landed there because their business was rapine. And all the time the land beasts, the wingless ones, prowled hungrily to and fro, or crouched,

gaunt, watching shapes, in the most sheltered lairs, awaiting the night.

Night came, and a shiver ran throughout the land ; then all was still.

I don't know exactly when the Spirit of the Blizzard came. It must have been in that specially unfaceable gust of passion the wind had just before dark.

At least, that was the time when most of the half-dozen species of wild duck, who somehow accomplish that miracle of hardiness, roosting—roosting, mark you—out on the perishing cold sea all day, usually do what men call 'the flight' inland to feed during the night.

And it was undoubtedly a painted blue-gray cock-wigeon, with buff cap atop and all, leading in his flock, whose trebly sharp 'weather' eye first saw the shape.

His view was short. A flash of a white body leaping out of the ever-shifting, on-hurrying curtain of white ; wings sharp as tulwars, that 'spoke' as swords 'speak ;' eyes stabbing, implacable, haughty with the hauteur of kings of the East ; and—ay, 'twixt wing-beat and wing-beat it happened—the stab of a dagger right through to the bird's heart, two daggers, three !

The flock scattered and 'flared' aloft ; the

evening flight continued—because it must, I suppose ; the gay cock-wigeon, more than half-naked, wholly dead, crumpled beyond belief, already marked by a ghoul of a carrion crow for its own when he stranded, was floating in the sullen, muttering surf.

It was a wanton act, the act of a prince, or a pirate, or—both.

The Spirit of the Blizzard was a gerfalcon, white as the driven snow, except for a few dark pepperings, nearly two and a half feet long, enormous in wing-span, the king of all the tribe of falcons, the living rapier of the clouds, the shrouded 'chooser of the slain,' the terror of the black north.

I know not where that falcon spent his lordly night ; somewhere on the shore, doubtless, erect, unsheltered, implacable as ever. But at dawn he appeared, whirling down along the line of high tide, and in the white, shadowy waste below a gun spoke, with a jagged spit of flame to mark where it was waiting.

Another and another, another and yet others, shattered the snowed-up silence. The falcon leapt in mid-air, he shot aloft, he hurtled, he dived, he tore, he swept, he glanced, he swerved, he swooped, all at lightning speed, and—he was gone.

He had flown right down a line of wild-fowlers in wait to ambush the morning 'flight' of the wild duck back to the sea.

A week later a man, while tramping along the shore a hundred miles south, picked up the spotless and still warm corpse of a magnificent gerfalcon.

Blowing back the beautiful soft feathers, he discovered in the breast one tiny shot-hole, just one little puncture—that was all. And the bird itself was mere skin and bone.

The wild-fowlers never knew, of course.

FEBRUARY.

LITTLE INNOCENTS.

VERY beautiful were the blue titmice.

They were hanging upside-down from the lump of suet tied on the end of a piece of string suspended from a branch, which the kind old gentleman had put out for them, and they were all faint blue above and pale yellow below, and had white cheeks, and whizzed and hovered about the food like two gaily-coloured bees, while the bitter north wind roared round the other side of the house, and the frost still clung on the north side of the hedges.

Not being able to crawl all over a thing upside-down like a mouse, or sidle gaily down a thin string on their heads, or any other end, or whirl off and on to a lump of suet wildly cavorting in the breeze, the other birds—the robins, the thrushes, the wrens, the hedge-sparrows—could do no more than revile the acrobats from afar.

But one hen-sparrow—blessed, or cursed, with the ingenious imitative faculties of her race—did make shift to get a hold somehow

and peck off several pieces; whereupon the tits turned into the likeness of very big, angry wasps, swooping and whirring about the sparrow's head to such good purpose that she retired.

Nobody saw the great tits. They were hanging about in the shadows, climbing—more mouse-like than ever—in the depths of the box-hedge under the evergreen trees. But they saw everybody else. They were larger than the blue tits by one and a half inches, and had black and silver where the others were blue. They were starving.

As darkness fell the blue tits vanished to some secret roosting-place of their own; and in the haze of dusk, just in the last glimmer of day, a great tit showed faintly, hanging upside-down from the bottom of the suet. Nobody saw it there.

Dawn was slow in coming on a chill day. There were sleety squalls driving from the north-west, and even the Spartan mistlethrushes had suspended nest-building operations in the fork of the leafless apple-tree. Wherefore the blue tits were late in appearing. But when they did, they nearly went mad.

A great tit—his black gorget plainly visible—was glued to the suet upside-down, feeding

ravenously; and another was picking up dropped pieces below.

Contrary to popular belief, the great tits did not at once fall upon and drive away their blue cousins. Far from it. The blue cousins, in fact, fell upon and drove them away, though whether this was because the said blue cousins thought they had not much chance of living if they lost their suet, or not, I cannot say. Anyway, the blue tits were acrobatting round the swinging suet when the old gentleman came down to his breakfast an hour later, and the great tits were nowhere to be seen.

The day passed slowly and darkly, and the other birds hunted pessimistically for hibernating insects in the shelter of the shrubbery. The blue tits gaily gorged on suet the hour long, and the great tits watched them in dangerous silence from the shadows, starving as they watched.

Then, about an hour before dusk, when all was very quiet, and when nobody was about, one of the great tits appeared, hovering near the suet; and one of the blue tits, spotting him, and over-confident with previous victory, chased him up into the dark covert of a coniferous evergreen. It was very dark indeed, and gloomy too! Nobody had seen

the other great tit slip from the box-hedge up into the evergreen a moment before.

Instantly a single, long-drawn, chirruping shriek of fear and pain sounded on the dank silence, and all was still.

The blue tit did not come out again, but instead one of the great tits came out, and hovered near the suet as before. The other blue tit, however—the hen—did not attack. She had heard that little bird-shriek, and she fled incontinently into the westering sun as if fiends pursued her—which they did.

And in the gathering mist two great tits could be seen hanging from the suet ; and the old gentleman's dear cat, prospecting, tiger-like, under the evergreen an hour or so later, found the cock blue tit lying on the ground there with his skull hammered in and his brains pecked out.

ON THE FLOOD.

AFTER the snow the rain, and after the rain the flood.

Yesterday there had been fields spotted with cattle, hedges dotted with birds, a railway, roads, a scene of quiet civilisation.

To-day there was a lake, an inland sea, a vast, gleaming, glistening shimmer in the dull eye of a watery sun, far as the gaze of mortal man could reach.

Came then an uprooted willow, in progress slow and uncertain. Mostly it was broadside on, and if it didn't hit anything it did not turn over. This was important, because it bore fruit, this tree—animate fruit; and a strange assortment they were.

There was the weasel, immaculate in the sweet brown and the white shirt-front; there were the bank-vole and his sister, who each clung to an uncertain branch, and devoutly hoped the weasel's hunger would not lead him to venture too far along it.

There was also the red and bristly squirrel, aloof and beady-eyed, on a main bough; there was the water-rat astride the main trunk, cleaning his whiskers, and ready to dive at the weasel's slightest move; and there was the

big, gaunt, scarred, leering, fiendish old buck-rat, holding brutally the large root-end against all comers so far.

From time to time a bird swooped down, seeking a rest on the limbs of the old tree, flung up like arms; but after viewing its silent, joyless freight, it fluttered for a space, and went away again.

Now, too, the bloated corpse of a sheep or a bullock came by and challenged them to an unlovely race; and once they fouled a telegraph-wire and a railway-signal, nearly jarring a horrified cat who held the top of it off into a watery death, and all but foundering themselves hopelessly in the stress of waters.

At noon the weasel essayed to creep along the narrow bough to one of the bank-voles; but the little red vole dropped cleverly to a lower twig, and the released bough shot the murderous one incontinently into the air, so that he was given a bath, and a desperate two minutes before he could return to his place again.

Half-an-hour later the squirrel cantered along the main stem, driving the fat, nervous water-rat before him, till both were stopped by the apparition of the old buck-rat, thrown into his most approved fighting position.

Then, at about two o'clock, to them came the hedgehog.

Came he, swimming grandly, a bristly something bobbing on the little waves, and he hit the root-end first.

He was met by a view—from the underside—of the vile, yellow, wedge-shaped teeth of the old buck-rat, and would soon have felt, as well as seen, them, had he not promptly dropped off and been wise enough to offer his spiny back to the tusks of the enemy.

For a minute or so there was a pause, whilst all that crew, listening, could plainly hear the spikes on the hedgehog's back scraping persistently along the side.

Then suddenly his insolent, upturned snout appeared over the side, almost on top of the squirrel and the water-vole.

The squirrel bit at him with extraordinary quickness, because he had nowhere to leap to get out of the way, and the water-vole took to the flood with a splash that apparently caused the hedgehog to think that he was going to be attacked in the rear, for he dropped back again.

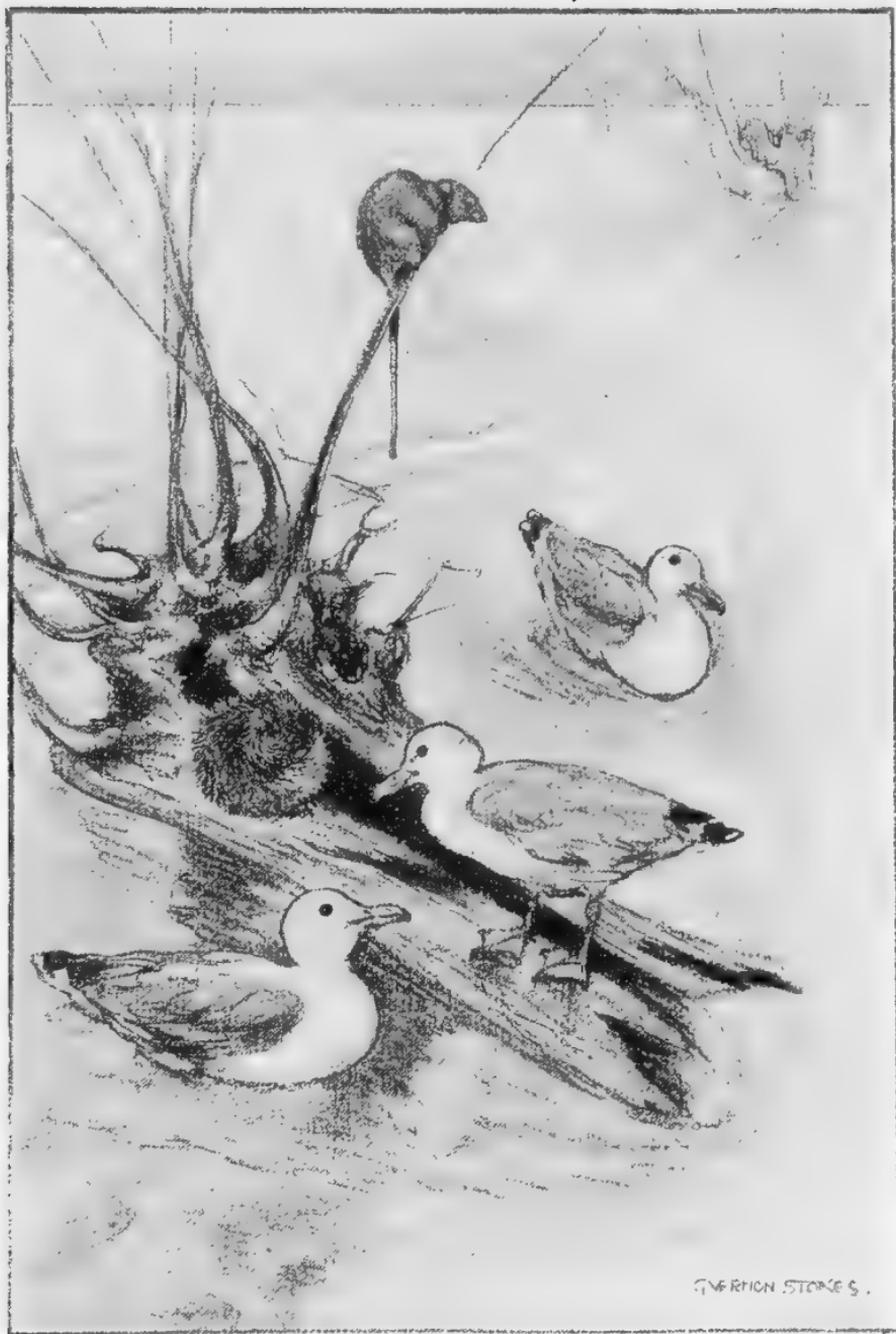
The old tree softly rammed into a floating bit of thatch, smashed it to many pieces, turned round, and swung away again, root first this time. For a moment the tree's furry

crew were alarmed for their foothold, and when next they had time to look they realised that two things had happened.

One was that the hedgehog was curled up like a ball—and therefore quite impregnable—beside the weasel, who was swearing shockingly; and the other was that three birds had settled on the water beside the tree, and were steadily keeping pace with it.

They were sea-gulls, and of that large and rascally kind called herring-gulls.

When last seen that old tree had only the rat and the hedgehog left alive upon it. The gulls had 'rescued' the rest—in their own strange way.



That old tree had only the rat and hedgehog left alive upon it.

HOW KESTRELS LIVE.

THE interminable washy clouds of the gray sou'-wester streamed by overhead, the rain streamed down in heavy rushes, and the ground streamed, too, wherever a slight incline gave it a chance to do so.

Everything had been wet through long ago. The little kestrel falcon, with his long tail and his sickle wings, his brown back and bluish blunt head, his very opposite to blunt, hooked beak, and his sheathed, aeronautical glance, sailed and sailed in circles over the drenched land, and hovered and sailed again in silence.

He had been doing that for hours, ever since dawn; but he might as well have saved himself the trouble by the look of it, for nothing had he killed.

Ordinarily, he would have lunched off field-voles, after a breakfast of, say, rat. He was now, however, too hungry to be fastidious; he was ravenous, and in no mood to pick and choose.

Suddenly, from among some dejected cattle, five dark, foreign-looking starlings got up, and whizzed downwind with their usual 'Gh-ee-e!' of alarm; and the kestrel did some whizzing on his own account, too.

The starlings, however, pelted into a flock of rooks engaged in ruining somebody's next summer's wheat-crop; and the rooks, sounding the 'assembly,' turned out in force and hunted the kestrel across the sky.

Later, the little graceful hunter sat on a gate and tried to look happy and keep quite still, with his tail blowing over his back every fifteen seconds, and the rain dripping off his beak-tip.

Wherefore the lark, which nobody expected to be there, rising from his grass-tuft in the furrow to insist, aloft in song, on the ultimate joy of all things, became aware of a brown line drawn from the gate to above him before he knew what had happened.

The lark deferred that song and shut his wings. He came down pretty quickly. So did the kestrel. But the grass-tuft swallowed the lark, with half an inch to spare, and the kestrel went back to his gate.

The ditch that had been was a tearing stream now, and a voyaging water-vole, sailing up it, landed to investigate the commissariat possibilities of a mangel-wurzel 'cave' near the gate.

The kestrel saw his chubby head and sticking-out whiskers, and slid down as if he were hung to a wheel running on a tight wire. He said nothing as he did it, and I feel sure that the water-vole had no time to look.

It was the little falcon's shadow on the water that did it, I fancy, or the sudden shriek of a tiny tilt-tailed wren higher up. Anyway, all that the kestrel got was a splash in the face as the 'meal' dived into the water.

Evidently this was not the kestrel's day.

Morning passed to afternoon. The kestrel still continued to wheel and sweep, and hover—foodless.

Then the long-drawn-out twilight began—a thing of hours—when the wind and the rain seemed to beget more power than ever. Just about then he came to a corn-stack near a barn, and a cart-shed planted, or dropped, or lost away out in the fields.

And the stack was literally alive with mice, and the mice had some grievance, so that they could not refrain from rustling, and squeaking, and scampering, and trekking in companies over to the barn. As a fact, some one had been ferreting rabbits hard by, and had lost a ferret, and the lost one had gone nearly mad with slaughter in the stack.

The kestrel falcon got five mice and one young rat—that I know of—before the day shut in, and he roosted on a beam in the cart-shed adjoining; and goodness knows how many more he got next dawn.

SPLASHES OF COLOUR.

IT seemed to have nothing to do with anything at all; a place apart, a cavern of grays and browns, supported by vast, towering, iron-hard columns; a haunt of silence and decay. Thus were the sombre, still aisles of the wood desolate in the chill of late winter.

Then, upon the carpet of dead twigs, dead pine-needles, dead leaves, dead everything, faint splashes of colour showed. Because they moved they were visible.

Nothing else moved, and that made them noticeable. There were flecks of white first—those were on dark wings; there was wine-red—that was a breast; there was blue next, the cap on a small head; and, least noticeable of all, a beautiful moss-green back; and the whole was a chaffinch cock.

He was getting over the ground with the little, unpretentious hop-walk gait of all chaffinches, sampling acorns. As it was the end of winter, he was hard run for food, and had dared to enter the sacred, secret silences of the wood as a last hope. The acorns had been scratched up and investigated by the little red bank-voles the night before. They knew how to gnaw in at the soft end, but not

how to avoid being frightened by every sound and dropping the prize. Thus the chaffinch found many half-eaten acorns.

Of course, he was all alone. Outside there in the world he could not have found the quarter of an acorn even without instantly being the centre of a crowd of fighting, starving finches. All alone he was, and nothing alive except the bank-voles and himself had ever come here, and——

A peculiar steady note sounded somewhere, and in a flash, before the smug little chaffinch knew what had happened, a splash of orange and black and brickish red and white fell from nowhere special, and fairly knocked him over. He was up again in less time than some girls can wink, and found himself looking into the biggest thing in heavy, thick, wedge-shaped beaks he had ever seen.

Then he went quickly, lest this stumpy, sturdy apparition should eat him. But it did nothing of the kind. It ate acorns instead, cracking them in its wonderful bill as if they had been green peas instead of hard acorns.

The bird was a hawfinch.

Very vivid did he look in his orange-and-black livery, moving about on the floor of the drab wood. Besides acorns, he found a few strange, hard fruit-stones of the woods, things

that would smash your, or my, teeth all to pieces ; and these he cracked as easily as with nut-crackers.

A scraping of claws on bark, a waving red line, as if a piece of the autumn colours had been hiding here and suddenly taken life again, and——

Now, how on earth did that happen ?

A ruddy and bright-eyed squirrel, his great fiery-red tail curved over his back, was sitting up eating an acorn exactly on the spot where the hawfinch had been a second before.

Goodness knows if the squirrel meant to eat the hawfinch or the acorns first. Goodness knows if he knew himself, being a squirrel.

Anyway, there he was, a flaming picture of dainty, irresponsible, starry-eyed, untrustworthy—from a bird's point of view—but sportive life. He seemed to hold his acorns in his hands as a man would, and he knew as much as the red bank-voles about starting at the soft end ; but he, too, like both the birds and the voles, was horribly wasteful, throwing away quite three out of every four acorns he started to gnaw.

‘ Me-e-uw ! ’

Confound that jay ! Who on earth would have thought that he was going to fly up

silently as a ghost, and mew like a cat behind one's ear in that fashion?

The jay stood on the spot vacated by the squirrel and shrieked his harsh, grating shriek, he did—he, the rogue of the woods, the jester of the sombre places.

And, as he stood there, the bitter north-west wind roaring overhead, but around all still as in a cavern, a sudden red bar of the setting sun stabbed down like a sword, illuminating his brilliant person in a circle of vivid light. Then all shut down again in drab shadow, the jay was gone, and the wood was deserted and silent as at the start.

MARCH.

IN THE ORCHARD.

THERE was a new voice in the orchard since yesterday, and an old one had gone from the woods.

A harsh and querulous screech, which throughout autumn and winter had rung through coppice and woodland, reviling every one impartially, and as impartially reviled, had upon an evening vanished; and upon the next morning, above the howling of the wind, rang a wild, defiant song.

No one in his senses would have connected the shy and recluse screecher with the bold, blithe optimist of the orchard song. But so it was; the screech and the song came from the same bird—the same individual bird, I mean.

On the top of the highest of the row of poplars which sheltered the orchard, clinging on like a sailor to a 'cross-tree' in a gale, clung a big, grayish-brown bird with a black-spotted breast, singing.

The wonder of his being there at all was overshadowed by the greater wonder of his

singing in such a place. But the greatest wonder of all was reserved till he flew down to a pear-tree, and there, plainly visible for all the world to see, discovered a nest.

Our big, bold bird, the biggest of all British songsters, in fact—our mistle-thrush, to give him his quaint, Christmas-like name—with his wife, had put some work into that nest.

The outer wall was a basket-work of thickly plaited lichen, twigs, and roots; then came a 'damp course,' to use the builders' term; and within all a lining of grass, &c. Not, you will concede, the sort of edifice easily or quickly built.

His mate sat on the nest, hiding five greenish-white eggs, spotted with rust; and although she appeared to have no life in her, or interest in life, it was noticeable that successively an exploring mouse, a not altogether innocent jackdaw, and a bold, jet blackbird, who perched there and nearly ran into her, gave one glance, and went away, as it were, on tiptoe.

Our friend gave one long look at his wife to make sure she was there, and departed again, flying silently his odd, drooping flight, high over the orchard, to a neighbouring pasture, where it is on record that a small, or young, hawk, 'stooping' at him in mistake,

perhaps, for an ordinary common or garden song-thrush, did get so pecked about the head that it fled.

Be this as it may, we see our champion ten minutes later, stationed boldly bang in the middle of the meadow, upright as a soldier, and as conspicuous, worm-hunting. Worm-hunting consists of a few hops, then a few seconds of statuesque listening, another few hops, and another 'freeze,' and so on.

Try it, but you won't see or hear, or whatever the mistle-thrush did, any worms. Our friend, however, must have had a sixth sense, for he found two—two glorious tugs-of-war, ending in two sitting-backs on tail, and two halves of worms captured in triumph. But there's one blessing; I don't think the other halves can possibly have minded very much.

And then suddenly came the commotion. It seemed as if some one, or some one else, had at that moment started in to murder half-a-dozen birds, at least, over the hedge yonder.

The mistle-thrush rose, and, with a cry like running your teeth along a comb, flew instantly to the spot. He found a young cat in a hurry, and enveloped in a perfect halo of robins, hedge-sparrows, and chaffinches. One naked hedge-sparrow baby hung from the

cat's mouth, but I don't know where the rest were ; perhaps the cat did.

And then our mistle-thrush sailed in. He was a born fighter, and he didn't forget it. Nor did the cat. After fifty seconds she dropped the nestling hedge-sparrow and fled, the small birds still after her, though the mistle-thrush stopped.

Now, it could only have been twenty seconds before the hedge-sparrow's parents came back to look for their young one, but they could not find it.

They never found it, for it was not there, though the mistle-thrush was singing defiantly at the gale once more from the topmost bough of a tree overhead.

KING OF THE GARDEN.

A SODDEN lawn, a straining oak, a fretting bank of laurels, a wet wall shining in the gray glare—that was Rusty's outlook.

And you could see Rusty himself, too. He was the brightest part of the scene, the only speck of life—a tiny drop, as it were, of unquestionable spirit, of unquestioning hope. Across the lawn he showed like a patch of raw, red rust against the ever-fresh laurels. Nearer, he was a robin, with an unquenchable, bright, black eye, a brilliant waistcoat, and a brown back.

As the autumn came he, knowing what winter famine meant, bade his children go; and they, rising in mutiny, fought him—*him* who had never said 'No' to a fight yet. As the winter days crept on, continental robins came drifting across the land from the eastward. He fought them, too, one by one, as they came—he who had hitherto never once missed a fight.

And he was still there; and they, his children, and the others, were not there—were, in fact, in Cornwall, or Spain, or dead belike.

For ten seconds, between the father of all

wind-gusts and its successor, he lilted a song of liquid hope—half-a-dozen notes only of perfect, cheerful, confident, yet withal melancholy, hope. Then the eldest son of the father of all the wind-gusts came howling across the lawn, taking, as it seemed, almost a solid sheet of rain along with it.

This blew back the lower branches of the rhododendron about thirty feet away. It was only for an instant, but long enough to show the pointed, shark-like, cruel head of a brown rat crouching. Then the spray swished back again, and all was as it had been.

The robin hopped down to the ground between the laurel-stems. It was comparatively dry here; you could hear the rustle he made as he hopped about on the crisp dead leaves.

He was not alone in this place. The boldly blotched breast of a thrush showed for a moment; a blackbird's beak flashed orange for a second in the centre of a ray of light filtering down from some gap in the foliage above; a worm came up—a very tiny rustling this—took hold of a leaf, and began to sink again, tail first.

In a flash the robin was upon the worm, had seized it, and, leaning back upon his tail, tugged with all his strength.

I don't know how he avoided toppling backwards when the worm came away with a jerk, or how he managed to swallow it; but he did.

Then all at once he nicked his head round, and seemed literally to hop up to a branch four feet above, so quickly did he execute the flight. And there he stayed, all tight-feathered and upright—a sure sign of alarm among birds.

For a space there was silence. Then—oh, horrors!—two things happened at one and the same time. First, Mrs Rusty came dodging down in and out among the branches, and, alighting, seized a dead leaf which had mysteriously begun to walk about, and got the worm beneath. Second, two round, large, luminous balls of green-yellow light appeared in the shadow behind the rat, floating in space, it seemed—drifting aimlessly.

The rat came through the grass-tuft straight at Mrs Rusty. And behind the rat, and unknown to it, came the owner of the floating, luminous eyes—a cat.

It was a strange collision. Mrs Rusty, tumbling backwards; Rusty himself, his beak driven with fine precision at the corner of the rat's right eye; the cat, her nose knocking Rusty spinning as she grabbed at the rat;

and the rat, taken unawares, biting savagely upwards at the cat's throat.

Then the two robins went away to a window-sill, to feed on raisins placed there for them, and so to bed in the ivy. And I swear that you would never have known by their demeanour—or the cat's, when she came in innocently later—that anything out of the way had happened.

THE BULL-O'-THE-MARSHES.

THIS was a place where nobody ever seemed to go to sleep properly, where everybody hid unseen, and where the marsh wind and the water, getting lost together among the miles upon miles of reeds, wandered about aimlessly, whispering to themselves and seeking a way out.

The chorus which had lasted all the evening was beginning to die down, but the slightest noise during the coming night would make it break out afresh. The ceaseless reeling of the first newly arrived grasshopper-warblers, the intermittent 'Churr! churr!' of the few new reed-warblers, the splash of fish, the flap and the grunting cry of the bald, bold, black coots, the little 'Twee! twee!' of the jewelled kingfishers, and the drumming of madly flying snipe were giving place to the tiny squeak of bats, the 'slap-slop' of diving water-rats, and the soft inward remarks of the ghostly short-eared owls.

A star came out.

And then *he* came—came from somewhere out over the dim south-east, where the drone of the sea and the 'thud-thud-thud' of a distant steamer's propeller laboured together.



Flapped so close above the upthrust beak.

He was big—monstrous in that half-light. He was burly. His great rounded wings flapped slowly with a gentle ‘frou-frou.’ Yet they seemed to float him along. It was as if, for all his size, weight had gone from him, and he carried a balloon for inside.

At last the shadowing pinions ceased their measured, leisurely beat—they had kept it up without intermission for a few hundred miles at least—and, extending and bending in the shape of a parachute, let him down slowly, let him down infinitely gently—his long, ungainly legs dropped ready—into the reed bank.

The tall, ranked, and marshalled sedges acknowledged receipt of his big, fawn, black-slashed body with a dry sound like the tearing of satin; the water gave a faint slap as his feet took it; the large wings flapped two half-strokes by way of backing air, and folded. Then—and then—well, he just vanished.

It was rather a weird arrangement in that eerie, wet spot, the air heavy with the smell of decaying vegetation. One moment he was; the next he wasn't. The reeds would have rustled if he had run away. The water was too shallow for him to go under. How, then, this miracle?

See now, and understand. Fawnish and light were the stems of the tall reeds, and the shadows between them made long black slashes. Just so, and that was how nature had painted him. Needs only to shut wings tight, to stand bolt-upright, with head and lance-like beak pointing straight to heaven, and to stay there motionless as a post, and—there you are, just reeds among other reeds. Of course, if you had looked very close, you might have seen the glitter of his lizard-like green eyes; but, remembering always that fiendish long beak, the possibility was that you might lose one of your own eyes in doing so.

A man in a boat came rowing quietly past, the reeds parting in front of the bows, one long oar nearly touching the motionless bird. An otter, lithe and graceful, slid by, paddling down what stream there was. A short-eared owl, soundless as a ghost, flapped so close above the upthrust beak that the very wind from its wings ruffled two black feathers on the bird's poll. Then night shut down, and the frogs had the auditorium to themselves.

At last the bird moved, and, wading out in the shallows, began to hunt for 'little fishes.' Suddenly he stopped. A shadow passed overhead, big almost as himself. There

was a soft 'wough, wough' of wings and a rustle of parting reeds as it came down.

Then green, reptilian eyes stared at him out of the darkness where it had alighted. It was another bird like himself—his prospective mate.

The big bird ruffled his feathers, stood erect; his throat, his very body, seemed to swell; and suddenly, over that wet waste of reeds and water, dank mist, and danker mystery, there reverberated the deep, bull-like booming of the bittern. There was no mistaking it; none could doubt it. Even though for forty years that sound, once so common, had not been heard in the fens by mortal ear, there could be no question of it.

The bitterns had returned to the home of their ancestors at last.

You behold, deep in the seclusion of the largest of the reed-beds, an island of decayed and floating reeds; all about the great rush-shafts are broken as by the weight of some huge birds settling continually upon them. On the island of dead reeds are fish-scales and the quills of brown feathers. The air is heavy with the stench of fish and corruption. The heat is stifling.

Suddenly, out of the gloom overhead, a

big bird-shape sails down, and stands erect upon the island; and instantly two forms, larger than fowls, who so exactly harmonised with all around that they had till then been invisible, stood up beside her. It was the bittern and her brood.

A CRUISE WITH A CROW.

IT was purely and solely a question of opinion and of wind. He personally thought that one wounded teal—you know the beautiful little teal duck, with gold-and-green spectacles and a breast fit for a king's lunch—more or less could not matter to the gentleman of the boat and the gun, especially as the gentleman had failed to see it.

The gentleman, however, disagreed, and, after five minutes of marvellous language—during which our friend made short work of the breast of that teal—added a charge of shot to help the language, and our friend retired hastily in a halo of spattered-up water.

Being a bird, he flew, and the wind being S., he flew northward. Besides, there was something in him that said, 'Fly north.' Monsieur of the gun and the boat and the wounded teal had cast him out from France—whither, by the way, he had wandered during the winter—and he would have no more of her—*La belle France*.

He shook out his sable plumes and soared away heavily across the low, sullen, snappy waves, away and away, till he became a black speck, and, finally, nothing.

You would have said he was a crow. So he was, in a way, but not *our* crow. Looking at him closely, you would have exclaimed that he was a 'sport,' or very old, and had turned gray on the back.

He was undoubtedly a 'sport,' but not old, and had not turned gray on the back, instead of black; it was his natural colour. He was a gray crow, *alias* Royston crow, *alias* hoodie-crow, *alias* Danish crow, &c., &c.

The night shut down on his loneliness, and rain added itself to the night, hiding him utterly. But the rising sun of the fine next morn, bathing a fair south of England beach, found him sitting there on the golden sand, a ruffled-up blob of evil.

He appeared to be staring straight out at the invisible France whence he had come. He was waiting for the receding tide to uncover a shining mussel, really, and when it had done so, he rose with the mussel in his beak and dropped it. Three times he did this, and at the third attempt the mussel cracked, and he fed.

Later he loafed inland—after having quarrelled with some gulls over the right to bury a stranded haddock—along the shores of the estuary, and watched a shore shooter stalking peewits from afar.

‘You ca-ant! You ca-ant!’ croaked the old crow from afar, and apparently the man couldn’t. He fired one shot, and got nothing; but one of the peewits of the flock flew away with an odd little shiver, and him the gray crow watched with his telescope eyes.

Later he found the peewit sitting all alone by a marsh-pool, acting as if he had a bone in his throat. The old crow knew better, though. The ‘bone’ was of lead, and when the peewit lay down he put the poor bird out of its misery in his own strange way, and attended the funeral, keeping off three hungry jackdaws in the process.

Three mornings later we find our lonely old Norseman on the sandhills that march with the shore ’twixt Deal and Sandwich. He was just finishing the task of neatly turning a baby rabbit’s skin inside-out like a glove. There had been a live baby rabbit inside that skin when he found it—not after.

And that afternoon, on a high S.W. wind, all alone, and without reason given, he calmly flew out to sea, straight into the east, and, dwindling from a bird to a speck, and a speck to nothing, was seen no more.

Many, many hundreds of miles away, in far, far northern Russia, there is a great river,

where, though spring has come to our land and the birds are nesting, the water is still a solid, frozen highway.

And on the bank of that river, just outside a sludgy little town, sitting all huddled up with a mate he picked up by the way, sits our old gray crow, pessimistically waiting for the ice to break up and allow him to begin nesting operations.

APRIL.

PIONEERS OF SPRING.

THE air was very warm, and very still, and very wonderful. It ought to have been summer, but, being in England, it wasn't, of course. It was just very early spring. To-morrow, who knew ?

A gauzy, old-gold fly of summer sat on the dust of the hot road, gnats danced in the air, and a little fly with heart-shaped wings danced too.

The thrushes were going mad trying to sing each other down ; robins were everywhere ; dandy chaffinches with wine-red waistcoats gleamed on lawns ; and starlings in pairs stared down the chimneys on the house-tops—especially the kitchen chimneys.

But no one knew about the real harbinger of spring—not the cuckoo bird, but another, much more humble and early.

That night there was a frost—naturally—and in the pale dawn-haze that followed, a flock of tiny, mouse-coloured birds, mostly wing, and with short, slightly forked tails, flew swift and low over the cold, choppy waters of the busy English Channel.

They flew in silence, and all alone—nine little birds out of the south and the night—over the cold, restless sea towards England. Sand-martin was their name, and Africa was where they had come from, all alone, and by night, for fear of the gulls and the hawks.

An hour later the old-gold fly, rising from the road ten miles inland, was suddenly aware of a hurtling shadow, a, to him, cave-like beak, and of nothing else. He had been caught by one of the sand-martins. And almost in the same instant a column of winter gnats, dancing by the side of the road above the ditch, was decimated by the sand-martins darting through it, backwards and forwards, with lightning, jerky flight, and with wide-open beaks whose insides were sticky—scooping them up, in fact.

That day the sand-quarry was invaded by the little party of spring's pioneers, who all the afternoon darted and glanced this way and that above the pool in the bottom of the quarry, or clung to the sheer face of the sand-cliff, digging.

Next morning, in the cold wind and the rain, however, workmen came and dug out the face of the sand-cliff, carrying away several fair-sized holes the tiny, weak little birds had already made to nest in. And the flock vanished.

That night, I fancy, it was back in France, or, it may be, the Channel Islands, sheltering somewhere against a bitter east wind, and seeking insects on wing as best it could. But a week later, in a mild south wind, it again appeared, this time about an old, crumbling wall, where the poor little birds, apparently knowing no better, were trying to drive tunnels in the mortar between the stones. Heaven knows how their tiny beaks contrived to make even the shallow saucers which they did in the hard stuff!

Followed then two weeks of cold, and the brave little flock again vanished; but this time they were not gone. Nobody, however, noticed the mouse-like, silent little birds which hawked up and down a certain warm stream, roosting at night in the willow-beds.

Then, on a bright and blustering morning, the 10.45 A.M. London 'up,' rushing through a cutting at fifty miles an hour, disturbed a flock of seven sand-martins burrowing in the sandy bank. They had made three tunnels, slanting upwards, some six inches long, and the sparrows from the neighbouring farm watched those tunnels with envious eyes.

Thus, therefore, it happened that when the flock returned from their fright of the train, a sparrow's beak stuck out of each hole, and

there was trouble, which ended not till one sand-martin had been slain, one sparrow half-plucked, and the flock had departed northwards.

Far away in the warm heart of the fir wood, facing south, and basking in all the warm sunshine that there is, lies a soft sand-cliff, where in summer the sand-wasps love to drive their shafts. Here you may find, if you look, three neat, round tunnels, each about thirty-six inches long, and each with a tiny nest of feathers and grass at the end, wherein, in due time, if you do not disturb them, will rest five tiny, pure-white eggs of the brave, persevering, little sand-martins.

CHILDREN OF THE SUN.

YESTERDAY, somehow, in spite of all that the gay and gaudy, though somewhat plebeian, chaffinch could do, the roadside hedge had seemed very empty and desolate.

Over there, across the daisy-spangled meadow; over there, among the golden-leaved haze of tree-twigs, the spring birds were rushing in night and day almost. Swallows and house-martins weaved shooting, dizzy mazes in the air; tiny, insect-like chiff-chaffs and willow-warblers sang aloud as they crawled acrobat-wise aloft, ridding the twigs of tiny insect pests that would else have destroyed the leaves. The deep 'Cuck-coo!' of a cuckoo near at hand filled the intervals; and out in the field, as it were fairies with tiny torches and gay lances, the redstarts flashed their fiery tails against the long, flirting tails of the yellow and blue-gray wagtails in the very faces of the cattle.

No one had seen them come, these wonderful children of the sun, who a month or so ago had heard the thunder of the mighty Assouan Dam across old Mother Nile, and watched the big storks gather for, and start upon, their great journey to the land

of Andersen's *Fairy Tales*. But the wind-bitten, sickle-hacked, dusty old roadside hedge had remained out of it all.

This morning, however, the old hedge was full of song, a funny, little, tumbled, confused, gabbling medley of notes—here! there! over there! no, just round the corner! Everywhere! Where on earth was it, then? It was uncanny—as if fairies really *did* people the hedge, and were intoning a chant to spring in an undertone.

Came then a movement of a leaf—only that—and eyes, bright as ever were stars on a frosty night, shone out. A shark-like head followed, then a dainty brown back, tiny as you please, and light beneath. Thus the long-tailed field-mouse.

He moved forward, as mice do move forward in a hedge, practically unseen while you look at them, and in a minute the singing seemed all round him.

Then something was there among the twigs, creeping about, sidling along, running, climbing, creeping, ceaselessly on the move, approaching—singing always to itself ever so softly.

The mouse crouched. He thought for a moment it was that undesirable thing in his eyes—another mouse. But there came, as

the climber turned, belly up, the flash of a throat whiter than was ever throat of mouse. It was a bird, little and wonderful, and full of restless, quiet life—a whitethroat, the ‘nettle-creeper’ of the country-people. And yesterday, last evening, it had been—oh, somewhere on the other side of the English Channel, journeying through wind and storm.

But the mouse was here, too, and, as the bird climbed slowly to the top of the hedge, the mouse followed, stealth incarnate. Heaven knows whether he meant murder! He was very, very hungry.

On the top of the hedge the whitethroat thrust up his head into the open, and the snowy gleam of his throat flashed to big eyes watching a dozen yards away.

Take a brown owl—all round and wise and large-eyed—and reduce him to little more than the size of a thrush, but perfectly round. The result is a miniature owl; the result is quaint; the result is laughable. It is also *the* little owl which the owner of the eyes was.

He darted along the top of the hedge. He aimed with his claws for the unsuspecting whitethroat.

Then he was over the spot, hurtling on, and he held a struggling mouse in his claws. He perhaps wondered how on earth it got there.

But the fact was, the whitethroat had at that very moment sprung straight up into the air, singing, and returned again, still singing, falling like a spent rocket into the hedge. This was his custom, but it was unfortunate for the mouse, who, a second after the bird rose, had thrust out his head at the same spot.



Wondered how on earth it got there.

IN BLACK AND ORANGE.

HE owned the gardener's rubbish-heap behind the greenhouse. She was born of the lawn where the old gentleman of the house threw out bread for the birds. And their hunting-grounds ran side by side.

Whether they had ever met before one cannot tell, but it seems unlikely, for he was a young bird, though quite mature, and she was a giant of her kind. Also, there was another she, rather smaller, who owned the kitchen-garden.

Standing on the gardener's rubbish-heap now, velvet black, with palest orange beak, he looked really very handsome indeed, and both the shes admired him from afar.

Then one saw why it was that hen-blackbirds are so much more numerous than cocks, and why, in some districts, though very cunning, cock-blackbirds seem to be getting quite scarce.

The motionless—except for the fanned and flirted tail—jet image, with its orange dagger, flashed to the human eye even at once; whilst the two dingy, nut-brown females remained nearly unnoticed.

And so it was with the eye of the hawk just

topping the trees that flanked the next field, and not thinking for one single instant of taking a bird from the garden. Although so far away, the hawk simply could not help seeing it, and to see was to be tempted.

Still going like the wind, he turned beyond the trees. He hurtled down on the far side. He canted at forty miles per hour, and shooting like a blue-gray meteor through a gap, came down on the cock-blackbird like a whirlwind.

Mind, the cock-blackbird had no warning, no time—nothing. But he had his tail. Remember that the next time you see ‘Blackie’ on the lawn. He has his tail, and it isn’t there just to fan.

The hawk did not have everything his own way.

The cock-blackbird suddenly appeared, phoenix-like, from what seemed to be the very grip of the deadly hawk claws, and skated for the holly-hedge pretty quick.

Before you could draw breath they were at the holly, going like feathered furies. Another hunted bird would have had to cant upwards, and throw back to check flight before entering in, or dash itself to pieces. The sparrow-hawk checked, and waited for the blackbird to do so. But friend Blackie was up to that. He

didn't check. He went straight on at full tilt, and then, just as a branch ought to have brained him, down and under he looped, and up inside the shelter, where he was safe.

Ten minutes later the intense blue-green of the meadow beside the garden was beautified by a black statue with his orange stiletto. Boldly he hopped along parallel with the hedge, bowing and fanning his tail at each pause. But he never went any farther from the hedge, or any nearer—he, so apparently careless and so gay. And there was a reason for that—two reasons. The precise length of the spring of the old gentleman's dear pet cat was a very good reason why he should not go nearer the hedge, and the possibility of the hawk's return was a reason why he did not go farther from the hedge.

And worms were the reason why he kept there at all? No, they weren't, though. The big lady blackbird in rusty brown was there, too. He hopped up to her. She admired the sky. He bowed, and fanned his tail. She saw beauty in the grass. He flashed his orange beak. She fell into a trance over the distant woods. Then he—— Oh, my stars!

Look here, have you ever seen a male pigeon 'show off,' as it is called—make love, if you like?

Well, our cock-blackbird acted just like that. He crouched ; he swelled out his throat ; he held his beak wide open ; he dropped his wings and his tail, spread and fanned and stiff, to the ground ; and he ran round his lady-love, with tail and wings rustling harshly on the grass. He looked as though he was choking, to the human eye, but I suppose he looked all right to the feminine blackbird's gaze.

Anyway, I've just found their nest, with four bluish-green, brown-speckled eggs in it, and that is what has made me sit down right here and tell you all about it.

IN THE SEALED TIN.

SSOME, we are told, come into the world with silver spoons in their mouths. It must, however, be rare for any one to make his first bow in this life in the inside of a patent-food tin. Nevertheless, that is what happened to the bluebottle fly.

Now, there are flies and flies; some large, some small, some green, some blue—‘bottle,’ they call them—some coloured like a draught-board. These last are the most horrible of all.

Our precise friend was a bluebottle, and I suppose his mother, being hard up for a place wherein to deposit her eggs near food for her babies, had, in a fit of desperation, chosen the patent food in the making.

Our fly’s first appearance was in the dark of the sealed tin. This was a good job, for she was a tiny, white, and entirely horrible fat grub, all body and a mouth. With the former she burrowed about among the patent food; with the latter she ate it.

Moreover, it is to be feared she was not a good advertisement for the patent food, for when the busy housewife who bought the tin from the grocer’s opened it, she gave a little shriek, clapped on the lid, and put the tin

back upon a shelf, intending to return it to the grocer. Then she—promptly forgot all about it.

The grub cared not. She pupated calmly, as if nothing had happened; that is, she became, not a grub any longer, but a chrysalis, a thing like a husky grain of brownish corn, apparently quite lifeless, headless, and limbless. But she had plenty of life really.

Now, the tin was near a hot-water pipe, and I fancy that accounted for her breaking her bonds of discipline all of a sudden one day, quite a month before she ought to have done, and, thinking summer had come, splitting open the husky shell of herself, as it were, and walking out as a full-blown, if at first rather limp and clammy, bluebottle fly.

The tin, however, was now a prison. Gifted with eyes—very many eyes—legs, wings, and all the panoply of open-air free life, and only a big tongue to eat liquid, or semi-liquid, with, she chafed to be out and away.

Then came fate, in the shape of a naughty, hungry, thieving little boy, who, climbing upon a chair, lifted the lid of the tin, and—bz-z-z-zp!

The naughty little boy dropped the tin with a yell, and fell off the chair with louder yells, and our bluebottle was free. You can

take my word for it, she did not wait longer than one-third of a second in that tin once the lid lifted.

She just quitted straight and fast, whirring like an aeroplane, clear for the strongest light she could see, and that was the window, to which she introduced herself with a clean smack that gave her brain-fever for one minute ten seconds. She spun on the floor, buzzing like a top. Then she tried again at another window, and, as fate would have it, that was open. She whirred on out, humming like a rocket.

.

The world was mad outside, quite mad, and the bluebottle had no more than cleared the window-sill when she knew it. I don't know quite what the meteorological reports said the gale was blowing at—anything fast as an express train or more—and our bluebottle, without pause, as without intention, went up and away over the garden hedge, like a rifle-bullet.

She got all the fresh air she wanted, but not complete joy; for a sparrow, seeing her helpless, delightedly gave chase, but was caught by the wind in turn. A starling took up the pursuit, but was driven a hundred yards farther than he calculated on, and the blue-

bottle hit a fence with a bang that ought to have dislocated all her internal economy for ever.

Instead, she glued to the fence in the hot sun like a limpet, till the night came and froze her stiff, so that she fell, and a long-tailed field-mouse, coming out of his hole later, found her there, a month too early, and gobbled her up.

THE WILD AVENGERS.

THE deadly mamba lay on the sandy ground in the scorching sun, all silent and still. It looked like a whip of plaited green grass, or a vine torn down by some passing elephant. It was nothing so innocent as any whip, though. It was a snake—the most venomous snake I know.

It appeared to be wide awake, staring—staring in that glassy, hateful, soulless way snakes have—at everything or just nothing at all. As a matter of fact, though, I think it must have been asleep—only, having no eyelids, it could not very well shut its eyes—else why should it, the quickest of all the snake people to rush to cover, have been surprised and trodden upon by the black-backed jackal who was racing along with two other reprobates on the track of a wounded antelope fawn?

There was a streak, as if some one had cracked a whip between the low-built animal's legs; the jackal jumped exactly one yard, and said, 'Ki! ya-ya!' and the mamba was half-way to the nearest tree, and before you could more than gasp, the foliage had swallowed it.

The jackal ran fifty yards, coughed, and sat

down, eating grass as though he were eating against time for a wager. Then his mouth frothed. Then he was sick. Then he rolled over. Then he died.

And up in the tree, scarcely seventy yards away, practically invisible, with its green tunic among the green foliage, the mamba lay coolly coiled, staring vacantly at nothing.

When the sun rose in purple splendour again next dawn, and the guinea-fowls began to fly down from the trees, and the great big bats began to take their places, the dead jackal was gone.

It was not the snake, however, which had eaten him, for that was beyond it. Moreover, the mamba is an aristocrat, and no eater of carrion.

As the sun grew hot it came down, moving with wonderful ease and absence of effort; down to the spot where it had lain the day before, and there, stretched at length, it basked, silent, deadly, and inscrutable as ever.

It must have gone to sleep again, for it never saw the negro, spear in hand, who came trotting along the open game-path an hour later. Nor did the native see it.

Again there was the whip-lash stroke, followed by a yell from the savage, the gleam of the spear through the air, the rush of the

snake heading fast as a horse could go for its tree, and the spear quivering in the ground half a yard behind the thin, whirling tail.

Eleven minutes later the mamba was hidden, coiled as before, in the heart of the dim green mystery of the tree's foliage. And the native? Oh, he was lying quite dead in the long grass not a hundred yards away, and—the vultures were coming down out of nowhere!

It was sometime about high noon on the day following that the mamba awoke to a strange sound close at hand. 'Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!' came the deep, resounding, hollow cry, and the mamba jumped and headed straight for its tree.

But it was too late! Bang in front of it was a great big caricature of a bird insolently barring its way. This marvel of impudence was about as big as an ungainly black turkey, but it could fly, and its beak was like a very thick rhinoceros-horn turned down.

'Hoo-hoo-hoo!' said the bird, and spread out its stiff wings in front of it like a tent.

'Z-z-p!' went the mamba's terrible head, darting at the bird quicker than you could see. But the deadly poison-fangs struck, and wasted their poison on, only stiff quill-feathers. And in that instant the serpent felt a nip of

agony that made it turn on itself and strike at a second animated black feathered tent, only again to waste its poison on wing-feathers held like a shield, and to be nipped from in front.

‘Hoo - hoo - hoo! Hoo - hoo - hoo!’ In a moment the birds, which were ground horn-bills, had surrounded it with a ring of arched wings held out as shields—pecking, pecking, pecking always with their terrible beaks at its writhing body, till its back was broken, and, still fighting, it died.

MAY.

WILD DENTISTRY.

THE orchard was very still in the moonlight. The gnarled boles of the apple-trees stood out gaunt and silver-gray, the grass was dull-gray plush, the hedge a smudged line of blue-black ink, and the high wall of the cow-shed, which flanked the orchard, another pool of ink.

The chicken-coop among the apple-trees stood out very plainly. The front of it was covered by a board, against which a brick had been placed. It was quite alone, that coop, for it contained the first brood of chickens of the year and their mother—early chickens they were.

There was nothing else alive in that orchard, it seemed, or in all that still, frosty, moonlit world—nothing.

Then what had appeared to be the upright stump of the bough of a cherry-tree suddenly fell without sound, miraculously sprouted wings, and sailed away in the shape of a disgusted owl.

And at the same moment the gnome-like,

squat form of a doe-rat showed, coming through the orchard.

Because she had far longer hindlegs than front ones, she hopped; and partly for that reason, and partly because of her cruel eyes, she did not look nice in the moonlight as she moved straight to the chicken-coop. And as she lifted her head to sniff round the coop you could see her wedge-shaped, yellow teeth gleam.

Then she discovered that she could squeeze in between board and coop, and promptly vanished inside. Followed the sounds of a rudely awakened mother-hen protesting volubly; there were taps as of a violently hurled beak hitting the wood, flutterings, and little peepings.

Twenty minutes later the rat came out, and the hen gradually settled down. Behind the rat, under the hen, nestled eight fine little yellow chicks. They looked just the same as before the rat called to see them, but they were not; they were all dead—dead, and with their blood sucked dry.

The rat turned to go away, and stopped suddenly to spin half-round and fling up her head—sniffing. She had seen something glint in the moonlight behind an apple-tree. There was a sharpish thud, and an odd little sound like ‘phtt!’ from the rat.

The rat reared straight up, came down, crept round in a circle in a stricken, dazed sort of way, and before the farmer's young son—who, hearing the hen's protests, had crept up and fired at the intruder with his air-rifle—could get another shot, she scuttled away, the bullet having hit her smack in the middle of the two centre front-teeth of her lower jaw.

The orchard lay very still under the moonlight, and very beautiful. It was just such another night as when, months before, the old doe-rat came and slew the chickens. But the scene had changed. There were deep shadows under the trees now, and many foamed to whiteness with blossom, or stood on a creamy carpet of flowers; the grass was longer; and instead of one chicken-coop, there were twenty-one.

Then across the orchard came the hunched, cruel, gnome-like shape of the old rat. She reeled as she came. Something was wrong with her.

Anon she stopped at a chicken-coop, and she squeezed her way in. There was a great cackling as before, and in due time the old rat came out again.

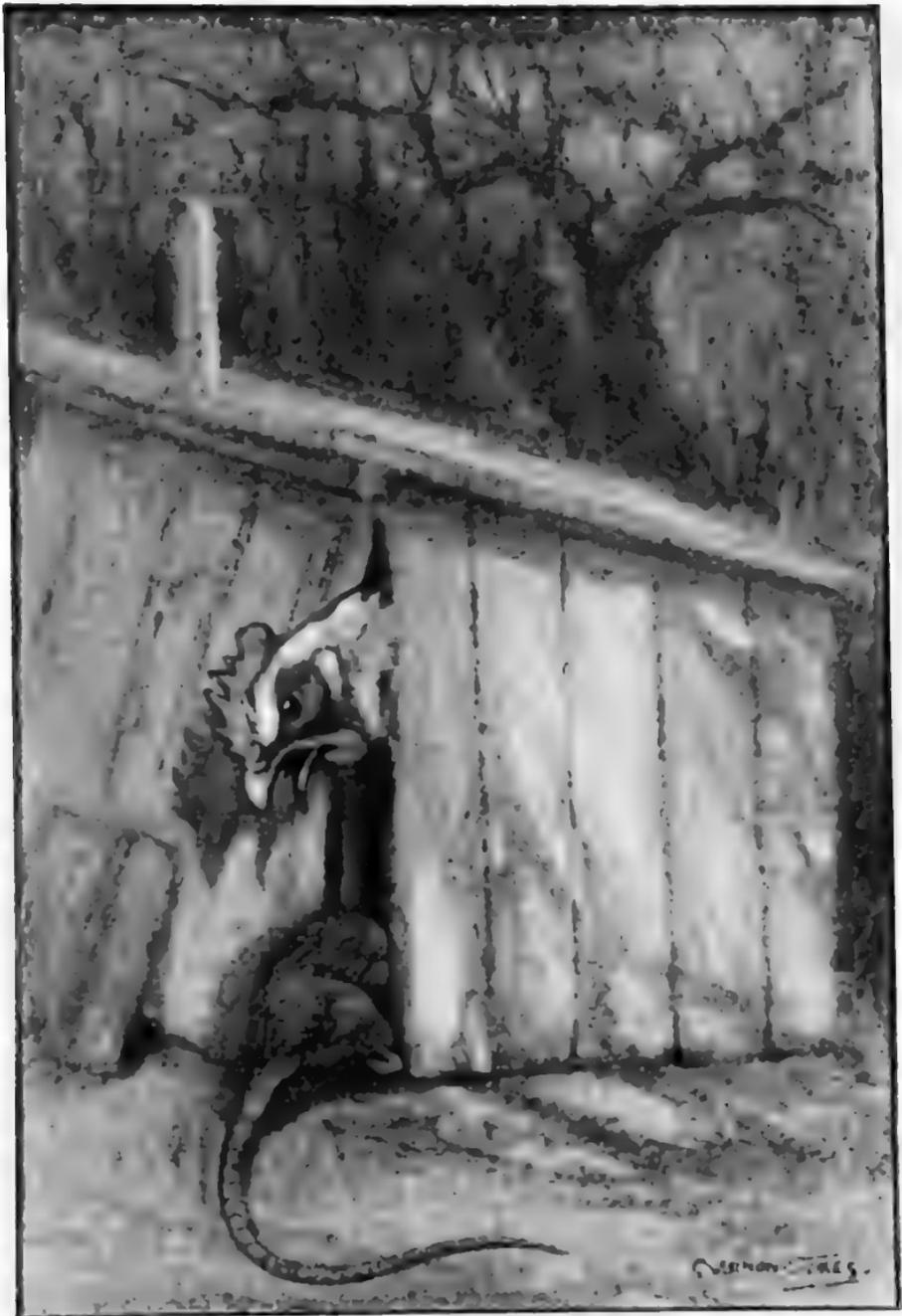
The farmer's son, hearing the commotion, was ready waiting this time. He raised his

air-rifle. But the shot was never fired, for, without warning, the old rat fell over, gave three feeble kicks, and was still.

When the boy picked her up he gasped. There was nothing of her ; she was a skeleton—nothing more. He hurried to the chicken-coop she had entered, and there, to his surprise, found all the chicks alive.

What had happened? This: The front-teeth of a rat grow at a terrific rate, to keep up with the constant wear of gnawing and grinding against each other. The bullet which had hit and displaced the lower two teeth inwards had made the grinding impossible, and so the upper teeth had grown unchecked, until, forming almost a complete circle in front of the head, they had come up again to the skull, like huge tusks.

The rat was starved to death.



She discovered that she could squeeze in between board and coop.

A SEAL AND AN EEL.

A RAVING sea, streaming rocks, and the savage 'huis-ssh' of the wind over all.

It was no place for man or beast, this cold, wet abode of the wind and the waters.

Yet there was a beast there with a head smooth, big, dog-like, and savage. It showed only for a moment, and vanished again in foam.

Then a big conger, following, with that hateful, slow patience, the trail of some wounded fish, became aware of it.

Down there, in the green, foggy depths, lit only by a twelve-foot circle of white-gold light from above, it was almost dead-still, and, of course, ten times more silent than the tomb.

Wherefore the apparition of the head in front of a great body, going at the speed of a twenty-one-inch torpedo, appearing suddenly, was startling.

The conger had come up with the wounded fish, and hung on like a bulldog. Then, seeing the head, it flashed into black-and-white lightning. But, though wonderful for so sluggish a creature, the transformation was not quite quick enough by one second. Came

a snap, which you couldn't hear, of course, and, without a pause in its headlong speed, the shape shot upwards, and vanished. So did the eel.

A moment later the fiercest-looking, biggest seal that you ever clapped eyes upon cleaved the jade-green waves, and remained bobbing on end like some huge, fat bottle.

Full eight feet long, he was grizzly, and so bloated that his head and tail seemed to have been tied with a string round them to keep them from being as fat as the rest. Nor was there any gentleness in those eyes, or in the big, dog-fanged jaws.

He was a great, gray seal, one of a species nowhere numerous, which will vanish for ever, so that 'all the king's horses and all the king's men' will not be able to bring it back again, unless some effort be made to save it.

Have you ever tried to handle even a small conger eel? If not—don't! This one was big, and the seal had no hands, only flippers and a mouth. None the less, he managed that conger with consummate ease, just as if it wasn't barking and snapping, and lashing and winding, and writhing and squirming, with almost the power of a boa-constrictor.

Ponderous and bloated as he was, the seal looked almost beautiful there in that setting—

a very merman of the ancients—'twixt sea and racing cloud and flashing sun, as he surrendered himself to the elements, effortless and unafraid.

Then he was gone, and a father among waves, hoisting up to a mighty, flat slab of rock, retired again with a roar and a burst of spray, leaving the seal stranded there as if by magic. Quick ears had our seal, and a quicker nose; but his eyes were not so good, and although he had come ashore on the 'lee' side, it was really against his rule to land at all in wind.

Still, he never had been disturbed here. Nevertheless, he had barely touched solid rock when he whipped round to face the sea with extraordinary agility—in case. A horrible, half-healed bullet-scar on his back made him careful.

Then, before you could wink, came a lick of flame up among the rocks, a report, and the 'phtt!' of a bullet almost by his side, followed instantly by a rush, a report like that of a gun, and a burst of spray, as the great seal dived, and he was gone.

And the 'sportsman' who would have shot him—what are we to say of *him*? He could have done nothing with the great carcass, supposing he had not missed.

THE KEEPER'S VISION.

‘COO-ROO-ROO-OO-OO! Coo-roo-roo-oo-oo! Coo-roo-roo-oo-oo! Oo!’

The lazy, sensuous murmur of the wood-pigeon filtered down through the hazy, green tracery of young leaves with the hot sun, and the two together were like a sleeping-draught. The pungent silence of the wood added to it, and the droning dirge of a thousand gauzy fly things completed all. The gamekeeper succumbed, sat down, and his eyelids drooped. Perhaps, like Joseph, he dreamed a dream.

There seemed to have been no interval, when he all at once discovered that nothing in that wood was drowsy save himself.

‘Gr-r-r-r!’ remarked something suddenly at his feet—so suddenly that he had difficulty in checking a start. He shifted his eyes, but not his head, and regarded a small bird which had not been there before. He was only a brownish little bird, with a grayish-white breast.

That was all. Yes; but—well, there was no getting over the erect pose, the flirting carriage of the long tail, the long, feather-light hops, the dashing boldness of every pose, the absolute thoroughbred air that stamped

the bird at a glance as a great one. It was a cock-nightingale.

'Tut-tut!' said the bird; 'tut-tut! tut!' then sang as he stood on the ground. And it was as if the voice of a famous tenor had pealed forth through the chanting of a choir at St Paul's.

Came suddenly a clap of wings and a shadow. Next second the pigeon responsible for the cooing was seated, facing the keeper, on a low bough.

Followed then a whisper as of last year's dead leaves. The sound became a cock-pheasant, resplendent in the garb of a bronze, green-headed image with a collar, like the pigeon's, of white enamel.

'Chucka! Chuck—chucka!' said he to himself, and stayed.

Came then a flip, as if a piece of old, decayed branch had been broken off and had fallen to the ground, but never branch fell so lightly. It was a fat, mottled, skewer-beaked woodcock who stood before them, regarding them with his big, moth-like eyes. And all the time the soft 'Thrup—thru-up!' behind his ears told the keeper that a cock-robin was catching flies as they settled in the sun on the broad human back.

The company was complete. All these

birds were cock-birds, there because they had nothing special to do except make pretty music and strut about, incidentally guarding their respective hidden mates, 'sitting' on their secret nests of treasured eggs.

Suddenly down went the pigeon's head, so that you could see only one eye peering over one shoulder. In that position, with his sole conspicuous spot—the white ring—hidden, he was practically invisible. Down also went the pheasant's head, dark head-feathers covering white neck plumage. The woodcock flopped in his tracks, and became a bunch of leaves. Robin and nightingale seemed transformed into birds carven from wood.

And the next moment—well, and the next moment they were gone. It was as if a magician's cloth had covered them for a second and enchanted them away. They were, and they were not. Only a whisper spoke of their going.

A blot, a speck, a blur, as it were, was moving in the extreme right corner of the motionless keeper's right eye. The keeper did not move at all; only strained his eyes round, and tried to think what creature this might be who miraculously drifted towards him like smoke, making no sound on dead leaves.

His motionlessness deceived the intruder.

She never saw him till—he found himself staring blankly down into the unspeakably cruel, half-insolent, wholly inscrutable, green-yellow eyes of a poaching cat. After sitting pheasants she was.

The pivoting of that cat on herself, the instantaneous leap, and the jerk of the well-oiled gun to square shoulder were simultaneous. But the keeper fired at the spot in the bushes where the cat would vanish—not at herself; there was no time for that.

The heavy report seemed to rip the silent mystery of the wood hopelessly for ever, and bring all back to everyday life. But—she was a beautiful cat. You may see her skin one day, if you visit the right house!

TRAGEDY IN THE NEST.

‘**C**UCKOO! Cuck - cuckoo! Cuck - oo!
Cuck-oo!’

For hundreds of miles it rang, that cry, all along the white south shore of Old England, from Devon to Dover—‘Cuck-oo!’—as those strange, big, mysterious birds, which we hear so much of for a short time, and then nothing at all, poured into the country from the south.

Yesterday there had been no cuckoos in that particular district. To-day it was as if there had never been anything else.

One came flying swiftly, with shallow strokes of the narrow wings, something pigeon-, something hawk-like—an odd bird, gray above, white-and-black-banded below. The long tail fanned out like unto the tail of a blackbird, and, after the manner of a blackbird, too—about which I have told you elsewhere—she looped under the overhanging bough of a tree, and perched in its heart.

She was not alone. Several admirers accompanied her, yet that wonderful stealth of the cuckoos never deserted them. They were quite hard to detect.

Then she flew down among the short grass, and—no natural-history book seems to tell us what she fed on. Seeds, perhaps. Caterpillars, they say—hairy ones, possibly drinker-moth caterpillars. At that time not three trees in ten had leaves out; and no moths had appeared except one small wonder who had been dipped in flowers of sulphur; whilst but a few cabbage-white butterflies were born in the noon, to die that self-same night.

Never mind, though. She did feed, and because of it, and because Nature had use for her, she lived to be sitting upon the bough of an oak-tree, some time later, just—well, picking her teeth.

Anon she flew down among the grass—which, by the way, was longer than when she had arrived first. Then she flew up—a small bird, two small birds, assisting her with energy. Then she flew down the hedge. Then she—vanished.

Suddenly she appeared, coming back again at full speed, and in business-like silence. She was in a hurry. She had an egg in her beak, and very gingerly was she carrying it, too, since not for anything in the world would she have smashed that egg. It was the cuckoo's own egg. If you had not had me to swear to you that it was the cuckoo's egg, you

would have said it was the egg of a meadow-pipit, perhaps.

And indeed at that moment one of the two meadow-pipits who had been there just before attacking her ought to have been there then, for she slid on quick wings down to their nest, she placed therein her egg, which she had been carrying in her beak, among the meadow-pipit's eggs, and—she fled, quick, silent, secret, and sinful, as she had come.

The cuckoo passed, a bad and silent memory—except that she bubbled like a water-bottle—accompanied by her husband, her latest one, the one of the moment, with his eternal 'Cuckoo! cuck-cuckoo! cuckoo!' and the cloud of small birds who always mob a cuckoo because it's like a hawk—which is no reason that I can see—followed him.

Two hours later the everlasting drowsy hum of the insects was broken by a distant discordant 'Cuckoo! cuckoo!' coming closer from the direction the cuckoos had not gone. Other cuckoos were coming, and they came, stealthy, shifting, shiftless gray shapes as ever—different cuckoos, though.

The play was repeated. The hen-cuckoo flew wildly about with her egg in her beak. It became a case of 'any port in a storm,' and spying the meadow-pipit's nest, she

dropped her egg therein and fled. She fled because a man, and not her conscience, made her; but she did not detect the other cuckoo's egg.

The sun began to sink, and 'all the air a solemn stillness' held, and drowsy beetles wheeled their 'droning flight,' when the last cuckoo came, and—repeated the manœuvre of the first two.

Then finally appeared the meadow-pipit, who seemed to have been somehow decoyed away by each cuckoo, but—ah, no! 'Twas too much. Even a meadow-pipit can feel when she has more eggs under her than she can cover, even if she cannot count.

She got up, stared round at the brimming nest of eggs, and—fled. She never came back. I know, because I found the eggs next day, and they were cold.

JUNE.

BEYOND ALL SUCCOUR.

TH**ERE** was a vicious report as he fired, but too late; a shout; a coughing grunt. The man was down. No; he was up somehow. There was another report close by; a crash of splintered, parted reeds; a whirling, yellow, black-tuft-tipped tail; and—silence.

The lion went on through the high reeds, smashing his way without seeking a path, galloping a wonderful, long, leaping gallop, in which all four feet nearly touched in the middle of each bound.

He had certainly intended to kill the man who fired at him—had, in fact, got him over, knocked him down like a ninepin; but the other man had fired in his face, and—missed. And the beast would revile him for—missing.

Far, far better had he not bungled the job, and let the heavy .476 Express bullet finish the work the first man's .275 bullet had begun.

As it was, he hung on his stride, and dropped to a trot—a heavy, loose, dog-like trot. But this trot fell to a walk, and the walk stopped.

He looked round, growling horribly to himself in hollow rumblings. He stared back at the bent and broken reeds, and for a moment it looked as if he was going back to finish the fight he had not commenced. Then he moved on again, and a host of flies swarmed, buzzing, on to the pool of blood that had collected where he stood.

The heat was intense, and the air thick with a thousand swarming insect plagues. A single vulture thing hung as if suspended by a string from the brazen-copper dome of the heavens, and some antelope beast crashed away, unseen, to one side of him.

The lion took no notice of anything. He was limping now, and the flies followed him like a halo.

He stopped by the river and drank in the shallows feverishly, till the water reddened about him, and his quick eyes detected a swirl made by a crocodile following up the blood-scent. Thereafter he retired into the bushes and lay down. He was still growling a little, and his eyes, burning deep in his great head, were awful to look upon.

Night came down swiftly, as it does in those sinister lands; the flies gave way to the steady song of mosquitoes, and the beasts came to drink—zebra, antelope, gazelle, jackal, hyena,

giraffe, elephant, rhinoceros—and the lion, with his burning eyes, watched them.

Sometimes the nervous ones—the zebra, the antelope, the gazelle, and the giraffe—‘winded’ him, and fled, stampeding in a confused thunder of hoofs and clouds of dust; but the king of beasts never moved.

His wound was stiffening. A great pool of blood marked where he lay. His coat was sopping.

Just before dawn he went down to drink again. He was very thirsty, even for a lion. A single hyena was at the edge when he appeared, and, though well out of reach, it bolted, as the hyena always does, at nothing. But it came back; it hung round; it sniffed; and the lion saw it, and knew.

The long, stifling day, with its maddening, black swarm of flies around the wounded beast, dragged brazenly on, and, except for his snaps at the tormenting winged fiends, one might have thought the lion was dead there in his bush.

Then a tiny, graceful gazelle came by, and the lion sprang out; but he fell short, and nearly pitched over on to his nose. Things had got so bad as that.

Night again came striding westward over the trees, and the vultures that sat on them

all around croaked their disappointment. The guinea-fowls called one to the other as they flew up to roost, and a jackal howled somewhere.

Then the hyena appeared, with glowing eyes, lurking in the shadows. But it was not alone this time; there were dozens of other cruel eyes glowing too, and suddenly a most infernal chorus of cackling laughter burst forth.

The lion was still now, lying on his side, groaning a little.

Then, about three hours before dawn, the hyenas rushed him from all sides, and he died, fighting feebly, the death of nearly all lions—a prey to the loathsome hyenas.

'TWIXT WALL AND BUSH.

NO man had ever gone so far as to call her a beauty, and only one mere male had dared to endeavour to capture her affections.

But he died suddenly. She killed him, and rumour hath it that she ate him afterwards ; but of that there is no proof.

The apple-trees were standing in the pale wonder of their own cast-off bridal veils of blossom, and the young leaves were just ceasing to be sticky and yellowy, wonderfully beautiful, when she appeared.

It was no small wonder that she had so far got through life, dodging her brothers and sisters, and eating those who would have eaten her.

She had avoided being food for an ichneumon fly grub ; escaped her own mother's jaws ; failed to perish by deluge, bird, thirst, or cold when launching out from a railing-top on her own home-made *avion* ; and now, having selected a corner of the world for herself, had successfully moulted her skin and struggled free.

But she was soft, and weak, and helpless, and surrounded by foes on every hand, and she must go into retirement swiftly for a day or two till her new coat hardened.



The lion was still now, lying on his side.

Forthwith, then, she crawled into the crack in the old wall, and was no more seen for a day or two, fasting the while from necessity.

When at last she came out, you beheld her as a fine, fat, female garden spider, grayish, rotund, and forbidding, bearing upon her back the caste-mark of her species—a small white cross, that all might know (and many take warning from the knowledge) who she was.

Then she began to work, and—ceased to be commonplace.

From her spinnerets—where her tail should have been—she spun out a thread of silk, anchored it to the wall, and—fell like a dropped shot to the ground on it.

Still carrying and paying out her silken line, she crawled to the bottom of a handy bush, meeting on her way an ant, whom she ran into, because apparently she was almost blind, or pretended to be, and nearly abolished.

Next she climbed up the bush, ran into a greenfly on the way, slew it calmly, and having finished with the corpse, passed on to the end of a twig. Here she pulled in the slack of her line and made all fast. Thus she had a taut cable 'twixt wall and bush.

A bird interviewed her, and would have gobbled her up had she not dropped like a dead thing on another line half-way to the

ground, and climbed back again only when the danger was past.

Her next move was to walk backwards and forwards over her tight-rope half-a-dozen times, paying out line all the while, and making the strand six thick.

Then from the twig to another higher up she repeated the process, and from that twig back to the wall, and from thence down to her original standing-place. Thus she had formed a rough square of many-times-thick, very strong lines.

She then very quickly spun straight lines from various points of the square to the centre, as it were a wheel, and, just where the hub would be, she connected these 'spokes' together with little separate lines. None of these lines so far spun was sticky.

At this juncture a brilliant, metallic-hued sand-wasp shot up from nowhere, and, seizing her, tried to jerk her off her line to the ground, to sting and carry her away to its own horrible larder. But the surprise attack failed; the spider hung on and bit, and the wasp skipped buzzing away to try elsewhere.

Five minutes our spider took to get over that fright, and then, starting at her web a little way outside the 'hub,' she began to spin a spiral line, round and round from spoke to

spoke, till she reached the outer edge. And this spiral line was sticky—so sticky that it would catch her if she wasn't careful.

Then, taking a line down as 'telephone-line,' she spun herself a retreat on the wall, and waited for something to fly into her net.

The web was complete.

Three minutes later a passing cow had brushed it all away, and—the spider was curled up lifeless in the beak of a tom-tit.

That's Fate.

AN AFTERNOON OFF.

THE flock was arranged in a long, irregular group in the middle of the field, each bird lying down, or, as it is termed, 'sitting' down; each bird with its head tucked back under one wing; each bird asleep, except two or three who were on their feet and alert, acting as sentinels in a very thorough manner.

They were sea-gulls off duty from their nests, beautiful birds in the snow-white and gray livery of the sea, with chocolate-brown 'night-caps.'

Suddenly the whole flock launched forward, shook out narrow, long wings, and were in the air beating upwind. Certainly the sentinels had warned the rest, but how, seeing that none had uttered a sound, I cannot imagine. But the field knew them no more.

Away behind them the dwindling field was bare. Nothing moved on its surface, or above the green grass, or along the hedges hazy with green—nothing, except one thing.

Right in the field, just exactly where the flock of gulls had been resting, a fleck of white—truly, it might have been no more than a wind-captured scrap of paper—danced about. It was the white shirt-front of a weasel, who

had, like a demon from a trap, bobbed up out of a mole-run almost into the sleeping flock ; and, knowing the reputation of weasels, the sentinels had given the alarm.

Followed an interval of about ten minutes as the flock, led by one very fine old male, beat steadily seawards.

Now, a sea-gull's eyes are like our eyes plus a pair of good binoculars. Therefore there was nothing wonderful in the leader spotting a pleasure-steamer just leaving the pier two miles away.

The wonder came in when he and his friends arrived above her a minute or two later, and proceeded to hang themselves up just as nearly over her stern flagstaff as possible, and, on absolutely still wings, keep there.

Anon some one cast overboard a piece of bread. It was only a little piece, and in the boiling white wake of the vessel would have needed looking for on your hands and knees, so to speak. And the leader of the gulls was well up in the air—slightly higher than the funnel—but he saw it. He stood on his head and dropped some feet, recovered, dipped fractionally in the boil, and was up again, hurrying fast to catch up the steamer—but he had the piece of bread.

Half-an-hour later saw the flock returning,

lying low and close together over the water like wild duck. All of them were the richer by many scraps. But they did not stop at the ragged surf; the golden sand did not delay them; but inland they flickered—inland, past fields, over woods; inland, above hills, along dales, till the brown and lonely marsh grew out to meet them—the marsh with its foot or two of water, its smelly, rotting islands covered with black-headed gulls a-nesting.

The flock swerved and broke into silver fragments, each fragment going down to its nest. And the leader was one of those fragments.

How he knew his nest—you could scarce walk on an island without treading on young gulls or eggs—was his own secret. And he wanted to know it, too, for he had left three newly hatched 'young leaders' here, and on his return found but two.

His wife looked very sheepish. What she said with her noisy cries and her brown head abob cannot have been of much good, for she went away to feed, now her lord had come back, and he settled down to guard her charge none the wiser.

She had been gone about nine minutes, when there came among the rustling rushes, threading its way in and out among the sere

and knife-blade rushes, a black, jerking, swimming form—a moorhen. Coral was his nose-cap, and coral too were his garters, but his tail was stuck up in the air, and his eye was sinister.

The old gull rose to argue with a fellow-gull. The moorhen came straight on towards the nest—came to the nest—seized a youngster, and hammered it. He would have drowned it, perhaps, if the old gull had not at that moment arrived like ten furies.

But there was no moorhen—only a broadening ring on the water where he had dived.

LABOUR IN VAIN.

THE man, in passing, carelessly swished his cane against the wallflower, and she went off from it as though she were a rocket and the cane a match.

She was a bee—not very big, being only about half an inch in length; but she was black, with tawny-yellow legs, and she was very hairy, and somehow that made her look larger than she was.

Also, her hum made her seem more dangerous than she really was, for there is some doubt as to whether her sting could have pierced anybody's skin.

At that moment she was gathering honey and pollen, and, to judge by appearances, she was about full up, for the pollen covered her like gold-dust, and she seemed literally to ooze honey at every joint—which, after all, is only another way of making beeswax.

Then, all of a sudden, and without a fraction of a second's warning, a strange thing happened. The bottom of the floor she was standing upon—that is, the leaf on to which she had backed—fell out.

I don't mean fell off—leaves generally do

fall off sooner or later—but fell out; that is, a circular piece of leaf, about 0·7 inch across, fell bodily out, and there was an amazed and angry buzz on the far side.

Our bee fell, too, with this part of the leaf for a space, till she could collect herself. Then an odd face, with huge eyes, looked over from the other side and said ‘Bzz!’ very angrily, and she fled.

She had been sitting on a part of a leaf which was being cut through from the other side by a leaf-cutter bee—who lines her nests with neat pieces cut from leaves—and—well, the piece had come out.

Our bee went booming away through the hot sunshine, whirring like an aeroplane, and in a direct line. She was not alone. The air was full of insects, busy passing upon their ‘lawful occasions.’

But it seemed at first as if our bee—who evidently knew where she was going—was alone, all the same. In a moment, however, it was evident that one flew with her, as if guarding her and guiding her through the dangerous avenues of the aerial ways.

He was like her, but bright brown, and was her husband, if our insect may be said to have a husband, and there were men who said that he had never been known to settle. He cer-

tainly was always on the wing whenever I saw him.

Presently, after being once chased by a tom-tit, once nearly caught by a greenfinch, and once attacked by some big wasp thing, they let themselves down to a clay bank.

The face of the bank was alive with females of our bee's own kind, each rushing in or out of her own tiny burrow; and the air was alive, too, with males, dancing the maddest dizzy, humming dance that ever you saw.

Our bee hurried straight to her own burrow, only to bump into another bee who was coming out. This bee was more slim, and black, with white spots on her body. She hurried away, and our bee, instead of killing her, as she ought to have done, rushed in and placed her store of honey and pollen beside the egg she had already laid.

Then she cemented the walls up, and came away happy. But she might have saved herself the trouble, for the other bee was a 'cuckoo,' who had already laid an egg in there herself, the grub from which would eat up all the honey and the pollen intended for our bee's own grub.

JULY.

WILD BOGY-MEN.

HIS beautiful mother, with her big, soft eyes and long, delicate ears, pressed him down softly into his 'form' in the long grass, and, striding like a goddess on air, left him—him of the lovely eyes, the soft coat, and the legs like hazel-wands.

He was not a leveret, and this was no innocent, half-choked English wild. He was a baby impala antelope, and this was Africa.

The thicket of acacia wherein he hid was silent as the grave, but *not* empty. He knew *that*, or acted as if he did, without asking; else why, at the pressure of his mother's soft, wet muzzle, should he have crouched and 'frozen' in silence? A domestic calf or lamb would have followed its dam, bleating.

The grass closed up after his mother's passage, and the antelope fawn was alone.

Outside, in the great world of the open 'veldt,' where the reddening sun glared brazenly, there was life enough. He could hear it—the shrill, barking neigh of zebras; the steady shuffle of string upon string of passing antelope—among any of which his

mother might be; the sudden snort of an alarmed bull gnu; the whistling of the wings of a flock of sand-grouse whirring overhead; the high-pitched, mournful wailing of a prowling jackal; and then, with startling suddenness, the hollow, reverberating, thunderous, coughing grunts of a lion.

A swish. Another swish closer in. A pause. The least hint at a rustle, and—silence.

The impala fawn lay as still as the very earth, head and body flat. He might have been dead. Only his eyes lived. Those beautiful, clear pools of gentleness were wide open, watching, and the big ears cocked forward, listening.

A pause followed; then a yellowish, black-spotted form slid forward, stopped, and sat down. It was only a serval kitten, a beast like a leggy, thin wild-cat.

But the fawn never saw the serval kitten's mother. She, silent as a smoke-puff, a yellow something, mostly eyes, was drifting up behind, following upwind the smell of the impala fawn that lay too still for her to see.

Then she did see him. She saw his ears, rather, as they flicked nervously to catch the sounds before and behind, and that was enough for her.

She crouched. The long hindlegs drew up like tense springs. The cruel cat's eyes narrowed, focused on the ears.

And in that instant the serval kitten screamed.

No one could mistake the meaning of that scream. I think even the fawn knew its meaning, but instinct held him fixed as in a vice. It was not *his* scream, anyway.

The mother-serval moved from the spot where she had crouched to a spot beside her kitten, without appearing to have done so, in about the duration of one wink. Then she rebounded with equal economy of time into the 'bush,' spitting. Her kitten had received one crunch in the jaws of a spotted hyena. Two crunches are rarely necessary from a spotted hyena. Even in the case of the thigh-bone of an ox, a second crunch would be quite superfluous.

Time passed, as time does in the wild, without count. It was dark soon, lit by a yellow moon.

Things rustled strangely in the dark, and once a twig snapped. Shadows appeared once or twice like phantoms, and were silently withdrawn. Once the fawn, still 'freezing,' heard something sniff audibly within a yard.

Then the little beast's blood nearly dried up

within him. Without a sound, or a hint, or a warning, a great, gaunt, slouching, shaggy lion appeared full in the moon-bars, walking straight towards him. The brute was within a dozen feet, and——

Suddenly the whole air seemed to fill with a long, wicked, steam-like hiss, which emanated, as much as anywhere, from the ground 'twixt lion and fawn. The lion did not pause in his stride. He went clean up in the air *sideways*, and landed four yards to the right. Then he passed on hurriedly. A snake, it seemed—a cobra—had barred his path.

And ten minutes later the doe-impala arrived, and led her offspring away to the herd. He had, she judged, reached the age when, though still so young, he could follow her at a gallop.

DUTY IN FEATHERS.

BIRDS are strange creatures. They do everything their own way, which is not the way of any other creature, and even the most familiar of them really remain mysterious to us.

The starlings had their nest in the hole under the eaves where the roof rose to a point. Goodness knows how they found the place, for you couldn't see it a yard away!

Equally strange was it how they managed to get into it when found, for it appeared far too small, and even wriggling in with shut wings seemed to bring them within measurable danger of being skinned.

During the long, dreary days of incubation neither the starling nor his wife was much in evidence. But it was his custom to take the air of evenings on the chimney-top, preening himself, and going through his odd, 'fizzling' song—most birds seem to combine song with cleaning, by the way—which was as much a dance as a song, or, at least, an exhibition of gesticulation.

He shivered in his voice, he shivered in his body, he shivered in his half-open wings, and, to judge by the quite indescribable sounds he

managed to tumble forth, one on top of the other, he shivered in his brain also.

Then one morning came a change to their lives. The pale, watery-blue eggs had hatched out, and the appalling-looking results—seven of them—demanded food, not at once, but before; and then food, and more food till further orders.

Mr Starling fled on little, sharp, whirring wings straight to the nearest meadow. Here, all among the cloth of gold and green plush—the carpet of buttercups and new grass—he hunted with the feverish haste of his kind, but alone.

He dug at the roots of the grass with open, sharp beak. He dug at the rate of several digs per minute, running hither and thither as though mad, and—getting nothing, you would have said when you saw him stop every now and then to straighten up and stare around.

In the wild, it may be mentioned, nearly all creatures have to stop and look round at intervals; they might be suddenly slain else.

When he rose and hurried back to the nest he had only three big grubs—‘leather-jackets,’ men call them, but they turn into daddy-long-legs in due course—in his pointed yellow beak.



The long hindlegs drew up like tense springs.

From that moment till dark, and from dawn to dark every day—Sundays and early-closing days included—the starling and his wife kept up without rest, or so it really seemed, that ceaseless routine of nest to meadow, hunt, to nest, and back again.

Once a sparrow-hawk, swift and grim, chased Mrs Starling, screaming, all across the field. Once a grass-snake, all glistening coils, erupted in hissing terribleness at Mr Starling's very feet; and once a cow, out of whose slow, ponderous way he was too impudent to hop fast enough, actually trod on his tail, and he was lucky to escape with the loss of some feathers.

Then at last the day came when the young starlings went forth. Ask me not how their mother enacted the miracle of getting them all alive on to the roof-ridge by 10 A.M.—all but the coward who would not venture at first, and did not for another hour, when he calmly flew from the nest, if you please.

Once they were there, the work began.

Mrs Starling flew up and round in a circle, taking one panting youngster along with her.

You never heard such a racket of coaxing and refusing in all your life. Then she repeated the evolution with the next, and so on all through the family.

Then—— Hi! With a squawking, and a fluttering, a blundering, a shooting, sliding, grabbing, dodging, despairing' commotion, away they all went to the meadow. And the coward straight from the nest raced them, and got there first.

That evening, Mr Starling sat on the chimney and 'fizzled' again for the first time in many weeks.

THE WINGED SNAKE.

THE old shed looked very picturesque in the red light of the setting sun—the disused old shed beside the deserted old house in the deserted old garden. There were holes in the shed where spiders caught the gnats as they flew in and out like bits of golden fluff; and under the floors were holes, too, of mice and rats.

The light faded, glimmered, and was just flickering out, when a bird, barely discernible, flying much like a turtle-dove and looking like one, flew in from the sea across the line of light. It was a cuckoo. There had been no cuckoo seen or heard there yet that spring.

Then, when the light had faded and the moon came out, a shadowy, smallish form slipped in from the sea towards the old shed, vanishing, a pale wraith of the air, as soon as seen.

But instantly there was a shrill, loud, wonderfully arresting, far-sounding cry. ‘Tui-tui-tui-tui!’ it rang, and was still, leaving the old shed and the old garden to silence, broken only by the ghostly patter of a rat or two, or the pin-point squeak of a bat.

Next morning the vicinity of the old shed and the whole overgrown, rampant garden resounded with an incessant 'Tui-tui-tui-tui!' from bridal-decked fruit-tree to shimmering, daisy-carpeted lawn, from sombre laurel-hedge to the clumps of 'pansy faces' that peeped out beside the tottering gate.

Then one old black rat—not a common brown vermin, such as we have learnt to call rat—climbing late home by way of an old apple-tree that leant against the shed, stopped suddenly by a hole in the decaying tree.

He could not see inside, and there was no sound for his round elfin ears to hear, but he knew something was in there, all the same.

He poked in his sharp, shark-like nose, and—was met by a point. So dark was it inside that it was difficult to say who owned the sharp point, unless—oh, whiskers! Clear, unmistakable, distinct, and venomous, sounded the hiss of a snake, and the rat went away so quickly that one had really no time to notice that he had fallen over backwards and picked himself up again in the interval.

Followed the rat a head, and the head was the head of a bird. The bird was lark-like in size, but nothing else. Its uniform was of reddish-gray, embroidered and lined and pencilled and 'ticked' in amazing fashion

with black, and it writhed and wreathed its head about at the form of the retreating rat so precisely after the manner of a snake that, till its body showed, any one might have mistaken it for a snake, after all.

The bird was a wryneck, which is a 'cuckoo's mate,' which is a 'snake-bird,' according to choice.

It came out of the hole. It flew down to the ground, where the little red ants were already hard at work around their city, and there, writhing its head about always in the same strange, snake-like way, it shot out a long, gummy tongue and fed upon ants, wiping them up as fast as they rushed from the main gate of their city.

A few weeks later a bird-nesting urchin crept into the deserted garden and hunted through it in his own gentle way. It seemed to him that he saw something dart into the hole in the old apple-tree, and he climbed up to investigate.

Whatever it had been, however, it had now gone, and his hand, feeling in the hole, encountered seven white eggs, which he took.

A few days later he was again in the garden, and again that elusive vision vanished from the hole, and again he found seven white eggs, and took them.

Days passed, and yet once more the boy visited the hole. He could not see far in, but he could detect a pointed something that had not been there before. He put in his hand.

And then, suddenly, came a hiss, prolonged and venomous—the hiss of a snake—from the hole, and—the boy fled, holding his hand, and wondering if the snake had bitten him.

But it was only the poor wryneck sitting on her third clutch of eggs, and the point had been her beak, and the hiss hers, too.

A DAY BY THE SEA.

THEY were both big, they were both black, they were both untidy; but, though certainly neither of them could be regarded exactly as an angel of light, they were not all bad. There was just a little humorous twinkling in their eyes that saved them.

Though both were alike in their unrelieved blackness, with purple reflections, they were different in that his feathers ran up to his suggestive, gouge-like beak, whereas hers stopped at a bare, whitish patch round the base of the beak.

Thus could you know them for mother and son; and they were both flying from the dried-up, parched inland, where the heat-fog screened the view, and dust-banks hid the motor-swarmed roads, down to the airy, cool roominess of the muddy estuary.

When you have spent the whole of one par-boiled day hammering hopelessly at ground which jars you from beak-tip to tail at every stroke for grubs you 'll never get, and as a last chance have passed a stifling evening watching in vain for a hen to show you where she keeps her stolen nest in the hay-field, and all the time have seen your only child starving, you

will be able to understand how the old rook felt at sight of the soft, oozy mud-flats as they spread themselves before her.

The peewit—off duty from home on the distant downs—was by no means pleased to see the two rooks volplane down close beside him. He knew rooks, was their neighbour in winter, and—— There, now! Who ever saw anything like that old bird's impudence?

The peewit had un-mudded a nasty, fat, watery-looking worm thing, and, before he could open a wing, in hopped old lady rook and snatched it away.

The peewit went elsewhere, and the rooks waddled abroad, and the first person they encountered was a crab, heading sideways from a drying-up tide-pool to the open water.

They stopped him, or tried to; but he showed fight, and marched on. Then the son pecked at him, and—nearly went mad, with friend crab firmly locked by one useful pincer to the tip of his beak. The war-dance he executed was edifying, before the crab dropped off, and, facing them with fists up—always facing them—slid, before they spotted his game, calmly backwards into the beautifully clear, deep water.

After this for two hours they sedulously hunted sandhoppers among the glutinous sea-

weed, which they knew very well how to fling aside; and then something moving, a mere glisten, it may be, by a tiny pool, sent the mother-rook hopping ungainly hops in that direction, and before she well knew what she was doing, she had pulled an eighteen-inch eel up on the mud.

The sight of the wriggling thing sent her scuttling out of reach for dear life when she realised its size, and then they sat down to besiege it by a series of tweaks, lacking pluck to hop in and actually kill.

An eel, however, can squirm like—well, like an eel. This one got round the young rook's neck, and the bird 'towered,' so that the amazed parent beheld her son go up like a slow rocket to a speck, and the eel come down again like the stick thereof when it finally untwined.

This almost finished friend eel, and all but did for young rook as well; and mamma was just about to sidle in and feast, when wings, like the wings of Azrael, hanging over her, made her look up, and, falling sideways, flee for her life from the presence of a great black-backed gull, whose pinions appeared to be about six feet across.

He scientifically bashed out what life the eel may have had left as a man uses a rope-

end, while the rooks called him low names from afar, but desisted at sight of a prawner—himself more than half mud—emptying his net of an assortment of living things that he did not want.

Him they followed for the rest of that day, much as they were used to follow the plough.

And when the sun began to turn red in the face, and the peewits rose one by one and beat ‘down’-wards, and the tide came up and covered the flats with little, jade-green, lispings waves, it was two very full rooks that soared slowly homewards above the still elms, to discuss, and to bed.

IN NIGHTMARE'S GRIP.

THE high tide of the day was at hand. In another few minutes it would turn. And the sun possessed the land.

All across the big grass field where the parties of young starlings dropped to feed, and vanished like diving birds into a green sea, it played in shimmering heat-haze.

It flashed from the chestnut-and-white cattle quietly feeding; it flashed from the white rumps and breasts of the sweeping, swerving house-martins; it danced in a hundred sparks of every rainbow hue off the wings of the glancing, darting flies.

All the field was drowsy, it seemed; and even though pestered by a swarm of flies, the slow, contented cattle merely swished their long tails or flapped their mobile ears.

Then, quite suddenly, one old cow—she who carried some nasty tumours on her back—flung up her head. She stood motionless, erect, 'frozen' in her place—at gaze.

A pause followed; then every head went up, each beast steadfast in its place.

The old cow who had first given the alarm—and, seemingly, passed it to the others through her body—turned her head, and

slowly, here and there, there and here, her big, bulging eyes, full now of terror, followed the movements of something invisible.

It was an uncanny sight to watch—that old beast first, then the others, erect, still all but their heads, big ears thrown forward listening to, and big eyes watching, a thing you couldn't see.

That it was moving rapidly, that thing, you could tell by watching the eyes of the cattle. That it—— Ah! Above the hum of the insects that formed a background of sound, as it were, there came another hum, a peculiarly insistent, penetrating hum, that arrested attention at once. You could not mistake it. Nor could the cattle.

And then, in an instant, whirring, whirling, the hum was amongst them.

Certainly it was only a hum, though a peculiar one; but if it had been the report of an eighteen-pounder quickly fired in their midst, it could have had no more startling effect.

Instantly every cow curled her tail above her back in a peculiar and unmistakable manner, which I never remember seeing adopted in any other circumstances, and fled to all points of the compass; they scattered at full gallop through the heat-haze and the hot sun like things possessed.

One fine brown young cow in particular seemed as though ridden by a fiend. She was not; but a big, brownish, hornet-like fly was chasing her, and doing its best, apparently, to ride her. And from that fly's wings came the peculiar hum that spread terror beyond expression in words.

But the cow was such a racer that the fly gave up the chase. It swerved. It whirred away across the field, where the cattle stood dotted everywhere. The young cow pulled up.

You behold the intruder, a portent of evil, as it were, dancing in the sun, approaching another cow. She gave one glare of horror, spun with amazing agility, curled her tail in that same odd way, and jumped into full gallop at once.

Away they went, fly and cow, sweeping over the luscious, long grass with a rush that put up the young starlings in squawking, amazed companies, and set even the sedate rooks on wing.

Past the old cow with the tumours they shot. She, wise thing, 'froze' motionless in her tracks where she stood, hoping against hope to avoid discovery—and then, in a flash, the fly was on the other cow's back.

It did not stay there long. It did not bite.

It did not sting. It did not hurt. It did not do anything to harm her *then*.

Only, when it was gone, when it rose and flew away, and peace settled once again upon the field, you would have seen, if the cow had let you use a magnifying-glass, that the fly had laid its eggs upon the beast's back, and they would hatch into maggots, and the maggots would ultimately be found under the skin, and——

Well, ask the old cow with the tumours. She had those lifelong mementoes to show that she had for a few seconds once been the steed of the nightmare gadfly at high noon, had for some months been the unwilling host of the ox-bot's or warble-fly's pestilential offspring.

AUGUST.

A PIRATE RAID.

THE field at the middle of the slope stood clear and brilliant in the hot afternoon sun. The contrast between pale-gold 'stubble and rich chocolate plough-ground was a delight to the eye.

Green plovers, trim and gay in green-black jackets and cravats and white waistcoats, drew bold little moving patches on the ploughed earth; unpretentious partridges crept in their deprecating way in Indian file up the furrows; a cock-pheasant, with 'winged helmet' of green and livery of bronze, flashed back the sun's rays at every turn.

Then came the scout, and every head shot up—all that company was still. Came he sailing down, down, out of the sky, without a word, all pearly-gray above the white below, except for his head, and that was the colour of the plough-land, and his feet, his dainty webbed feet, which he dropped as he settled, and they were pure coral.

Every head was still up; every bird was still motionless, watching the scout, who was a black-headed gull, as he ran about, a

conspicuous blob of white on the dark, up-turned loam. And suddenly the air was full of these dainty gulls, floating, drifting, beating, veering, sweeping.

Once they were down, though, movement and sound ceased. They might have been a scattered group of chalk lumps—they were quite as still.

And after a bit, after a period of strained watching, the other birds began to move, began to pursue their 'lawful vocations.' Nothing happened thereafter for a long time, until a peewit caught a worm. Instantly then, and with no warning, two of the nearest gulls flung themselves upon the hapless lap-wing. There was a moment of frantic rush, a whistle of wings, a second or two of fine wing-play, and the peewit was beating to another part of the field, leaving half-a-dozen of these sea imps to fight over the worm he had been forced to drop.

Again and again this happened, till the disgusted peewits fled the place, and the gulls took to drifting about or settling and picking up what they could without them.

The cock-pheasant crowed and flapped his wings vaingloriously; but he, too, removed at last, slowly and with dignity. The hen-pheasant frankly got her chicks to cover

without hiding her mistrust. The thrushes followed—one, with a snail in his beak, being intercepted and made to ‘stand and deliver’ by the sea rovers. The partridges rose with a cackle and a whir.

Soon the field was empty, save for the gulls, who continued, restless and eager and without peace, to search its length. One found and slew a dainty harvest mouse, and was instantly set upon by a crowd of his fellows; another, the scout, discovered a short-tailed field-vole, who fought gallantly, only to have his head split open by a dig from that red beak with hooked ‘nail’ at the top; others found worms; others, again, grubs. All was fish which came to their net, it seemed.

So they fed till evening came, and the sun, sinking, shot copper and blood-red lines athwart the field, turned the woods to port-wine, and the meadows to starred wonders.

Then you behold them, these gulls of ours, standing all motionless, all facing one way, in a compact circle in the middle of the red field, looking just like a patch of snow, full fed. They had the air of people who, having finished work, are waiting for something. They were.

At last, and quite suddenly, they rose, lifted like a sheet of white, all together, and all flying steadily and quickly, and more quickly, up

and up, heading straight away into the sky, due south. And eight miles away the tide had at that moment turned. That was what they had been waiting for, but you must get some one else to explain how they knew.

Far-flung, lone and dreary, dank, damp, and desolate, pale pearl and ruby like a sheet of smoked glass, the estuary lay in the last glowing light of the late-summer day. Suddenly, from directly overhead, burst out a single laugh, and instantly a chorus of wild screams and wilder laughter followed. Looking up, one could see them, high, high up, flying compactly, a group of black-headed gulls coming from inland, and as one watched they sank—sank to an island all alone in the very middle of the estuary, floated down, cried aloud discordantly, and were still. The pirates had come home to sleep.

CHIRPY, THE RUFFIAN.

‘CHEERP! Cheerp! Cheerp!’

The sound came from the rain-gutter above the invalid’s window—from, in fact, the bull-head of Chirpy, just showing over the edge. Somewhere up there he had his nest—he and his mate—and somehow, by the working of a magic unknown to me, he had managed to keep it from being many times washed overboard by the heavy thunderstorms of the summer.

Chirpy’s business seemed to be to guard his nest. He was always miraculously on hand—he with his thick, strong beak. Just now, for instance, he flew down to the garden and perched on the old plum-tree. Being a sparrow, he had carefully reconnoitred things beforehand, marked every sleeping cat, noted who lurked behind the open windows, and searched with his keen eye for anything unusual.

There were some crumbs in the garden among the raspberry-canes, and to loot these he went. This was a risky business, because, once down in the raspberry-canes, you could not see what was happening in the world without. Stealth, therefore, was necessary

here, and it was noticeable how quiet he became. Creeping about as silently as a mouse, he gave no other indication of his presence than the spring back of a cane after being released of his weight. No sound made he. And very hard he fed, too, stopping always at every peck to peer, in his own peculiar, jerky way, towards exactly all points of the compass each time.

This, however, was only part of his game. The radish-patch adjoined the raspberry-canes, and after a bit one became suddenly conscious of Chirpy's brown form, harmonising nicely with the ground, hopping about in the shadows here, as quiet as quiet could be. Of course, he was just 'wolfing' up the seeds.

Somebody opened a window; there was the sound of a human footfall, and—there was no Chirpy. He had evaporated into the shadow of the canes, and had just captured there a nice, fat, green grub creature, when two things happened at once. Firstly, a gust of hot summer wind came and bent the canes, blowing them aside momentarily only, but long enough to give Chirpy a flashlight vision, as it were, of a shadowy, low something, scarcely discernible in the chequered shade, and of eyes, green-yellow and sinister, floating towards him. Secondly, his wife, from the

entrance of that wonderful bundle of miscellaneous rubbish which they called their nest, said 'Cheep! cheep-cheep!' very quickly. Her voice was different from his, by the way. All sparrows' voices differ, in fact, just as men's voices do.

Next moment Chirpy was back at the nest, leaving a cat softly swearing to his address among the raspberry-canes, and finding another sparrow seated modestly on the edge of the spouting.

This sparrow said 'Chirp! chirp!' slowly and softly, and rather deep down in his throat. I don't know what he wanted there, but Chirpy seemed to. Chirpy swore long and wickedly in his ear, and the two went away like brown streaks drawn athwart the hot sunlight.

Half-an-hour later we find Chirpy on sentry as usual—and making remarks, as usual. Across the road was another fine cock-sparrow, with a nest. He was rather a jolly chap, and would persist in saying 'Cheer-up! cheer-up!' the day long. The two were at it now, one against the other, when a fight started down the road. It was no end of a racket.

Instantly, as if the fight had called them—which it had—dark bullet-heads appeared at intervals along the spouting on both sides of

the street, and began to shout instructions, or advice, or imprecation, or warning, or all four, at the fighters. They were owners of nests, but goodness knows where they had all come from so suddenly! Chirpy bobbed from side to side, and yelled till he seemed in danger of having an epileptic fit, and old Cheer-up fairly danced with excitement. All up and down the street others were doing the same.

The fight passed in a whirl of screaming brown fiends, and subsided as quickly as it had begun, leaving a scattered cloud of sparrows, all very much excited, in its train, and two sparrows on the ground. These were not excited at all, because they were dead, and lay there in the sun, silent and pathetic proofs that the fight had not been, as it appeared, all noise.

Then Chirpy turned, and discovered that his wife had vanished in the confusion. Now, sparrows have their own ideas about their wives leaving their nest while eggs are in the course of hatching—possibly with good reason—and their own way, which is not ours, of ordering them back again. Chirpy's wings fairly whirred as he set off in pursuit. He must have known more or less where to find her, for he streaked into and out of every tree, all up and down the garden, over to the stables,

and back again, saying nothing the whole time, but going like the wind.

Finally he found her at the foot of an old elm. She was not actually with anybody, but there was another fellow who might have been there by accident, or might not. Instantly Chirpy attacked her with the most astounding fury, making the feathers fairly fly as she dodged under a perfect rain of his vicious pecks, and for a moment or two there seemed some likelihood of his killing her out of hand. She made, apparently, absolutely no attempt to defend herself, *but* she did not go home.

The other fellow, who was a fine young cock-bird, arrived without warning, and at speed, knocking Chirpy fairly and squarely on to his back; but our friend was too old a hand to stay there longer than you could wink. He was up in a flash, and at the other like a little brown fury; and almost before you could say, 'Oh, my!' they were the centre of a raging, struggling whirlwind of fighting sparrows.

The whole thing appeared to be an absolute chaos, in which everybody fought everybody else; but I like to think not, else how was it that, when all was over, and Chirpy—with an angry gash on his back—returned to his nest, furiously driving his wife before him, he should have been accompanied in silence by those

precise cock-birds—among which old Cheer-up was conspicuous—who were his nearest neighbours?

And what of the other fellow? Was he accompanied home by his friends?

He was not; for his journey home was a long one, the longest of all, and we call it Death.

A TELLING TAIL.

SOMETHING was moving among the grass. What it was were hard to say, for numerous somethings had been moving among the grass all night, and now, even long after sun-up, were not still. They were field-mice, many and little—so many that the ground all about was honeycombed and spongy with their burrows, and so little that you never, unless you set a trap, saw one at all.

This something, however, was different. You could see *it*. And as it moved into the full sun, you would have cried, 'Oh! A snake! Keep your eye on it while I get a stick to kill it.' Nevertheless you would have been wrong. It was no snake. Long—about fifteen and three-quarter inches—narrow, legless, like reddish metal atop, and dirty white below, it was so perfect an imitation of a snake that few would have known the difference.

Then it flicked out a tongue and whipped up a tiny tin-green insect from a leaf, and one saw that the tongue was notched only, and not forked as in real snakes. And then it shut its eyelids and went to sleep, and one knew instantly that it really could not be what it seemed, for snakes have no eyelids to shut,

and Heaven alone knows whether their conscience ever lets them sleep !

An hour later the creature, which was a blindworm (though not blind), which is a glass-snake (though neither glass nor snake), which is a slow-worm, which is a lizard of the skink fraternity, and has only aborted legs under the skin, awoke suddenly, and seeming to recollect an urgent appointment with some evil genius of the lower regions, forthwith vanished down a field-mouse tunnel at speed.

There was a pause of exactly seventy-one seconds, while five silvery sea-gulls flew over to the sea, which could be heard growling at the land barely four hundred yards away ; and a partridge—prospecting for ants' eggs, presumably—came and pecked at the very mouth of the tunnel. The partridge passed chuckling ; and a goldfinch, all blazing red and gold and black and white and fawn, came and balanced on a thistle-head so exactly above the hole that its swaying shadow fell directly upon it.

At last—on the seventy-first second—came a dainty, little, brown figure, garbed in soft fur, and bolted down that hole. It was one of the thousands of field-mice who really owned the place. She had her young down that hole—horrible little creatures to look at, but

dearer than life to her. At least, she had them down there when she went out for a walk, before the coming of the legless one. They were not there now, however. I don't know where they had gone, but perhaps the glass-snake did. He seemed to have scattered and lost them in his writhings. They were incapable at that age of independent locomotion. The mouse met him coming out.

It was pitch-black in there, and stuffy to asphyxiation, for the day was hot. The mouse, therefore, may not have known what he was, but probably her whiskers, which are as good as eyes almost, told her. Anyway, she fought—fought well, too. And so did the glass-snake. He had to, seeing that he was not tired of life. The mouse, however, had the advantage of larger teeth as compared with those of the enemy, which were scarce big enough to pierce your finger. But the reptile made up for this in fury. The fire and ferocity of his attack was amazing. It appalled the mouse even, so that, bitten in a minute way from head to foot almost before she could move, she turned and bolted. Possibly she did not know that he was not a real snake, after all.

Out of the mouth of the hole she tumbled, and out of the mouth of the hole, too, almost on top of her, tumbled the reptile. Then—

well, then he just seemed to flicker into nowhere, as a waiting, watching shadow with a hooked beak dropped, as a stone may drop, upon the mouse, and bore her, kicking, aloft. That was a kestrel falcon, who had been hovering over the hole, motionless save for quivering wings—just as if he were hanging by an invisible string from the dome of heaven—ever since his quick eyes had spotted the mouse go in. But the point was, if the mouse had not happened to come out first, he might have fallen upon the unarmed glass-snake instead, and the escape of the latter was simply a matter of half-an-inch, more or less.

Nothing more appeared of that legless one for a space, till we find him, towards evening, along the hedge, hunting for snails. Great care and stealth were needed for this, because he had no teeth worth speaking of to crush the snail's house with. He had to nab the wily prey when out of its house, or not at all.

Then, slowly and quietly, looming large in the dusk, came the rotund, rolling, spiked form of a hedgehog, looking—as hedgehogs generally are in a phlegmatic way—for trouble. His quick, little, pig-like eyes spotted the glass-snake lying like a metal bar in the red rays of the setting sun, and instantly his slow crawl was cast from him. With a swift

run and a quite unexpected agility he had rushed at the reptile, and—oh, horrors!—*chopped it in half.*

At any rate, there were some five or six inches of the after-end of the glass-snake twisting and bobbing about among the grass, and there was the hedgehog worrying it. He continued to worry it for a space, and then sat back to stare. And the half of the reptile continued to wriggle for nine minutes, and then lay still.

Then the hedgehog touched it, and, lo! instantly it jumped clean up in the air, and the contortions began, in a fresh set, all over again. For twenty-eight minutes this game continued thus: dance of part of reptile for a bit, then curl up and stillness, touch of hedgehog and fresh dance. Finally and suddenly, the hedgehog seemed to have gone mad. He rushed around, nosing in the grass, hunting everywhere, looking into every cranny. It had just dawned upon his slow brain that, while he was fooling with this one portion of his prey, the other portion had vanished. In fact, that other portion had got clean away, for it was a lizard without legs, as I have told you, and it had but cast its tail, as many lizards can quite easily do. Later it would grow another.

FEATHERED RATS.

VERY hot it was down by the pool. The very ground seemed literally to radiate heat. The view over the dazzling estuary danced with heat. And for once the tall, harsh, sword-like rushes were silent. If there is the least breeze they simply must speak.

Even the birds were quiet, and for the most part hidden; one could imagine them as gasping in the shade. Only the pigeons and the gentle turtle-doves were on the move. They came dropping down to the pond every few minutes, as if they found that seeds were thirsty food this weather. A single dragon-fly, green as new grass, with wings like mother-of-pearl shavings and ruby eyes, gadded about up and down over the water, hunting the innumerable gauzy, brilliant, metallic-hued flies that filled the air with a ceaseless, tired hum.

Then all at once it was as if a rat had crept out of the rushes and stood still. So quietly had it sneaked out there that one was at a loss to say exactly when it had come. It might have been there some time. It turned and moved away from the longer grass into the open, and, lo! there was no rat there

at all, but a bird. Long legs he had, and a coral beak, a cloak of beautiful shaded browns, a waistcoat of exquisite gray, and on each flank a delicately barred patch of black and white.

He was no ordinary bird. One does not behold his like every day, though his kind are common enough. No bird, indeed, is such a past-master in the art of hiding as is the water-rail, which this bird was. He may live near you for years and never be suspected, in fact.

‘There goes a rat!’ you will exclaim. And the bird will be gone.

If skulking may be called a fine art, then the water-rail has made it so.

‘Cro-o-o-an!’

It was an amazing sound—as if some one had uttered a low groan. It seemed literally to fill that stagnant, hot, silent depression where the pool lay. It was hard to say where it came from—earth or sky, or still, black water.

‘Cro-o-o-an!’ again, and this time there could be no doubt it had emanated from somewhere near the bird. One expected to see him bolt for cover at the first alarm. He did not move, for the very simple reason that he had made the noise himself. It was an

amazing and lugubrious sound to come out of so small a throat.

Then all at once he jerked his head out and back again, just like a snake, and crouched. A pause followed. Then, quick and silent, he ran for cover. He ran easily, not with his head down, as frequently portrayed, but with it up, and there was that peculiar ungainliness in his gait, a sort of rolling from side to side, which you will often see in a long-legged fowl—an odd motion, and one conducive to mirth. This lack of grace in running was all the more odd because in every other movement he was the embodiment of gracefulness, enhanced, perhaps, by the beautiful velvety manner in which his plumage was laid on.

Came then, silent as a smoke-puff, literally drifting along, a striped form, green-yellow eyes that stared, and a round head—the poaching farm cat. She had not seen the water-rail—goodness knows how he knew of her presence either—but she seemed able to scent him. Very slowly, with an enormous amount of careful sniffing, she followed him into the mazy labyrinths of his beloved reed jungle. It was a well-worn path he had taken, one made and used by his acquaintances, the water-hens.

There was no sign of the water-rail any-



She stole to the nest.

where. He appeared to have evaporated into the heat-haze. And the cat never saw the silent form that glided from a nest of flags about a yard to one side of his path—glided and vanished into the green jungle like a rat. This was the water-rail's mate, a little duller perhaps, a bit smaller, but like him in all else.

That cat found the nest, however, and was standing over it, gloating, it seemed, at the full meal she beheld therein spread before her, when the heavy report of a gun near at hand sent her gliding away quickly, like one with an evil conscience. It was safe to say she had gone only for a time, though—an hour, a day, two days, it may be. Cats have a knack of returning to the scene of an unsuccessful stalk.

Five minutes passed—ten minutes. And then, very quietly, most self-effacingly, thrusting her head out and in, this way and that, in her odd, snaky manner, came back the hen water-rail. Straight to the nest she went, and stood on it motionless for a space—so motionless that one lost sight of her in that abode of shadows into which she had merged.

Then, bending forward, she picked up one of her young ones in the nest by the neck, much as a cat carries a kitten, and departed with it the way she had come. It had not

been hatched ten minutes, but—no matter! After a time back she came again, and took away a second chick, then a third, a fourth, and a fifth, and then two eggs.

Deep in the silent watches of the hot summer night the cat returned, sliding through the delicate tracery of the moonlight, sinister and quiet as a wicked thought. Crouched and cautious, belly flat, she stole to the nest. She peered in—her right paw uplifted, ready to strike. Then her upper lip curled back, and an evil snarl escaped her. The nest was quite empty.

SEPTEMBER.

A PROBLEM IN BLACK.

FOR days and weeks the wind had blown over the land steadily, and there was no rain, and—what was a poor rook to do? He was a digger by trade, a digger after worms, after fat grubs that spoil farmers' crops, after the dreaded wireworm, and such-like plagues; but—what would you do? One must live somehow.

Heavily he flew to the field where the mangel-wurzels grew—he and half-a-dozen fellows. The ground in the mangel-wurzel field was as hard as iron, and the rook's hammering beak flew back from it with a jar that ran painfully throughout his frame.

The leaves of the root-crop were limp and sapless, seared and bitten by innumerable flies. True, the wagtails were making great capital out of the state of affairs, darting about and catching the flies, and packing them into pellets like currants to feed their young, who, though all as big as themselves, followed them about hungrily. But he was no acrobatic wagtail, and the number of flies he contrived

to catch in half-an-hour would not have kept a healthy spider, let alone a big old rook, alive.

Then—mark ‘how oft the sight of means to do ill deeds makes ill deeds done’—there came the cackling of the hen. It came from a neighbouring field, and it was the cackle of a foolish hen who, having laid an egg, cannot refrain from letting all the world know about it. Now, in the wild it is better to hold your tongue about everything, especially eggs.

Even our rook could have told the hen that, but he didn't care to. Heaven has sent fools into the world that smart ones, like the rook, may live.

You see him lift and fly heavily with his rounded wings to a neighbouring tree. You see him seated in that tree surveying, with an eye trained to the job from infancy, the next field, and all that therein lay.

Then you see him gliding down on rigid wings to the fowl-house—gliding down, settling, and hopping inside. It was stuffy, smelly, hot, and none too clean in there, and the old rook was mightily afraid, but hunger drove him. In the space of one wink he had consumed the newly-laid hen's egg; in the space of another wink he had driven his beak

through a second, and in little more than the space of a third wink he was back at the tree again.

After that our rook—still with his gang—loafed to the meadows. No bill could be driven into the ground there. Then a sheep bleated; and winnowing, innocently of course, to the spot, the rook gang found a ewe foolishly anchored on her back in a hollow, and—well, the shepherd arrived only just in time to save the eyes of that sheep.

A couple of hours later we find our rook, still with his reprobate brethren, sitting about at the top of the big, hilly field where the rabbit-warren was.

There were plenty of rabbits about there—old ones who knew how to take care of themselves—enjoying the dry sun. Then there was a baby rabbit who came quietly out of a hole apart from the rest. All fat and furry and innocent he was.

Our rook cocked his head sideways and slowly closed one eye. I swear he did. Another rook about twenty yards off did the same thing. A third stared down his long beak most innocently.

Then, before you could cry out, that baby rabbit was aware of a black whirlwind of three rooks hurling themselves upon him.

The rooks fed, and attended his funeral solemnly.

Next dawn came with driving torrents of rain and a howling half-gale from the southwest.

You behold our rook and his chosen gang beating upwind, straight to the nearest ploughed field. There, throughout the morning, they revelled in a banquet of worms and noxious grubs.

In the afternoon the farmer, gun in hand, looking for the stealers of his eggs and the slayers of his rabbits, discovered them in the meadows, peacefully scattered among the sheep, digging up those fearful pests, the 'leather-jackets,' or grubs of the daddy-long-legs. And then that farmer scratched his head.

'Now what,' said he, 'ought I to do with birds like that?'

SOUTHWARD HO!

DOWN by the marshes a biggish brown bird, not unlike a hawk, is seated on some old and tottering rails. The sun at midday is still almost intolerably hot, and the bird's odd, wooden cry beats through the heat-haze with strange persistency.

He is a young cuckoo, who yesterday, or the day before, or last week, left, somewhere far inland, his poor, confiding little foster-parents, and began to work his way southwards.

This is probably the last dry land he will touch before reaching France, and that meal of caterpillars—of the drinker-moth probably—which he has now flown down to the grass at the foot of the rails to find, is the last food his crop may know for many a long and weary mile.

Over the coarse, marsh-land grass, in and out among the feathery tamarisks, a swallow darts and circles silently. Once it passes so close that we think we could nearly have knocked it over with a stick, and can plainly notice the patch of dull rust on its breast. Another swallow appears in a second or two from nowhere, to be followed by a third, and

a fourth. In a few minutes the air is alive with them. They, too, have come to say good-bye.

A few house-martins are with them, easily distinguishable by their smaller size and pure-white rumps; and there may be a sand-martin or two, smaller even and more dingy than the swallows. On some days you will see groups all swallows, or all house-martins, or all sand-martins; on others only one species will pay the estuary a last call before leaving on the long journey to Africa. It is all according to wind and weather.

I have known the estuary so swarming with house-martins on a still, warm, hazy late-summer dawn that one could not count them, and wondered wherever in Britain they could all have come from; and yet within a few hours they had vanished, and were, as like as not, many miles across the English Channel, or perhaps well over France, by then.

Listen! What was that?

'Tyoo! tyoo! tyoo!' rings out in a clear, piercing whistle.

It is a greenshank wishing us farewell. He always calls like that, in a treble whistle; otherwise one would not know his cry from that of the far commoner redshank.

Ah! there are some redshanks now, an-

swering him. Their whistle appears to us, at any rate, to be just the same as the green-shank's, except that it is not always repeated three times, as his is.

Here they come, a flock of about twenty, beating along with their erratic, wavering flight, which is so deceiving to the gunner. They, too, are mud birds and great travellers; but they were probably bred in Britain, whereas it is ten to one if the greenshank first saw light nearer than Arctic Europe. These early red-shanks will pass on south, I fancy, with the rest, but many that come later will stay their departure till nearly Christmas.

You notice how they turn and swoop and dive in the air at our retriever over yonder. They nearly always do that to a dog in the early part of the season, when they have not been shot at enough to learn wisdom. You notice, too, their peculiar screaming note as they do so. Apparently their intention is to mob him, though why I cannot say.

We know no other bird who is cursed with this peculiar habit, except, perhaps, the big, sickle-billed curlew to a lesser extent.

See that little winking splash, as it were, of white paper on the old pebbly road that leads round to yonder ruined oyster-sheds. That is the white rump of a migrating wheat-

ear. Look through my telescope and you will see well the dapper little chap, no longer than a sparrow, but far more dainty, with his cream breast, brown back, and black 'points.' In spring, when he comes back from the hot climes, his back will be pearl-gray. He, too, has come to say good-bye.

THE SPIDER'S STRONGHOLD.

THE bird was very quick. With a quite unexpected and almost lightning dart she was in among the branches of the willow, and had snapped at the little, dark spider crawling, crawling, crawling on the end of a slender twig. But the little, dark spider wasn't going to feed tom-tits.

No ; he let go, and fell through the sunshine with the shower of falling leaves displaced by the passage of the bird, and—oh, spider !—the glassy, dark, sinister surface of the pond below acknowledged receipt of the whole lot with a display of dappled tiny ripples. It was almost as if the pond had smiled at the thought of a spider who had been so foolish as to drop into water. But it must have been the spider who smiled really, because when the bird had flirted round and fluttered down to the surface to pick up at her leisure the spider that had dodged her at first, she—well, she looked foolish.

There, indeed, were the leaves ; there were the tiny ripples broadening their smile ; and there was, squirming about, the very young and innocent caterpillar whom the spider was interviewing on his own account when the

bird came up and upset things ; but there was no spider, nor any signs of one.

It was as if he had, without hesitation, calmly sauntered into spookland—or had been sucked under by a fish.

Possibly the bird thought the latter. Then, as the pond smoothed her face, one saw that there was a movement among the water-plants beneath the surface ; some aquatic haunter of the shadows was crawling there—calmly, coolly, quite naturally crawling there.

Then it let go. It swam. Its eight legs paddled vigorously. It rose strongly, quickly, as one who is to the manner born. It came to the surface, and once on the surface, it revealed itself—the spider.

For a moment he paused, hanging head down, his abdomen above the surface, and a passing late swallow, flying low, made shift to dip at him. Then he went down, paddling quickly, looking just like a silver bead, for his abdomen was enveloped in an air-bubble, which he kept in place with his hindlegs, and was taking down, apparently, for wonderful purposes of his own.

Beneath the shadow of the water-lily stem he turned and swam up to a cluster of weeds, and here stopped at a web. Bell-shaped it was, and finely spun, with the mouth of the

bell pointing downwards. And up into the mouth of the bell swam the spider, and stopped. Quickly he detached the air-bubble from him with his hindlegs, and it floated to the top of the web-bell, and stayed there, held firm by the web roof. In almost less than no time the spider was away again, paddling swiftly to the surface, his legs going like the legs of a shrimp.

A fish shot up out of the depths open-mouthed, missed him by a fraction of an inch, and passed; but he did not seem to care. In a few seconds he was down again with another bubble, which was released into the web in the same way, and in a few seconds with another, and yet others, till the whole structure was full of air—was, in fact, a perfect miniature diving-bell.

Then our spider calmly crawled inside his bell and waited for what might befall.

Anon some tiny crawling larva of a gnat came wriggling along, and instantly, taking on his abdomen a supply of air, the spider was after it, had seized it, and carried it back to his strange lair.

Anon, too, a little midge, falling upon the light above which marked the surface, was seized by the spider from below and carried down.

Then, at last, came the chance of a lifetime. A small water-snail, climbing slowly up the stem of the water-lily, failed by just the twenty-fifth of a second to see the spider creeping stealthily upon him.

There was a rush, a squirm, and in a moment it was all over. The snail was dead.

To-day, if you look for the spider in his open web, you will not find him. He lives now in a castle of stone cement, a fortress of his own conquest, where he is safe even from the fish. He keeps it full of air brought down fresh from the surface, and he spreads his snare outside.

That spider's fortress, by the way, is the empty shell of the snail.

THE LITTLE 'FIGHTER FROM FIGHTERSVILLE.'

HE was black, he was long, he was ugly—ugly as original sin; ugly, as one would have expected him to be, knowing his name to be what it was. His jaws were large, curved inwards, like pointed, curved shears, and they worked horizontally. His eyes were horrible, and without expression at all—like glazed glass—and his wings were folded on his back beneath a black armour-shield.

He raced over the garden at an enormous pace, darting this way and that over the rough ground, hunting, it seemed, for something which he couldn't find. Then suddenly he was still, still as a stone, his six legs braced, his jaws open and ready, and the back portion of his body cocked straight up in the air on end, like some uncouth tail enormously out of proportion.

Then one saw that he was a beetle—strictly speaking, a rove-beetle; but the country-folk have called him the 'devil's coach-horse,' and the name has stuck.

Something was in front of him. That was why he had stopped dead. He did not know for an instant or two what it was. That was

why he tried to make out he was a bit broken off a dead twig while he made investigations. He knew, however, that it was a good many times larger than himself—he being less than an inch long—and that was why he had, as it were, cocked his tail, opened his jaws, and generally made himself look as ferocious a swashbuckler as possible, in case the other thing, whatever it was, did not take him for a bit of dead twig, after all.

Next instant he recognised the thing in front of him as a common or garden slug, or two slugs, rather, one of which had added to its already manifold sins by turning cannibal.

It might be imagined that a slug is not capable of expressing anything very much, and yet that slug, for all its size in comparison with the rove-beetle, had fear written all over it. Moreover, there was good reason. The beetle's swashbuckling attitude was not all braggadocio. He rushed at the slug like a fury, rushed at it so quickly that the eye could scarcely follow the lightning-like manoeuvre, any more than it could distinguish what followed. There was a mix up, that is all. The rove-beetle seemed literally to spring like a cat. Followed an interval of rolling, squirming muddle, which ended, as suddenly as it had begun, in the beetle, still cocking his tail defiantly, standing clear

two inches away, and the slug being evidently at its last gasp. From which it will be surmised either that the coach-horse of Satan was the owner of poisoned jaws, or that he possessed a very shrewd knowledge of anatomy, or both. Here we leave him, because beetles have different tastes from men as regards what they eat and how they eat it. They are not polite at the table, you know.

Later that day we discover our beetle seated on a dock-leaf, enjoying the rays of the reddening sun. Something must have turned him out of his hiding-place in the first instance, perhaps, for I don't think he was a lover of light much. Be that as it may, as he sat there he suddenly 'froze.' A shadow crossed the sun, wings filled the air with a rushing sound, and a beak—it was longer than himself—came down at him out of the sky.

Any one watching would have said that that beetle had better say what few prayers he knew, if he had time to, for the bird who owned that beak looked as big as St Paul's Cathedral beside him. But the 'horse' knew better. He was neither fool nor coward. He ran sideways. He cocked his tail. He clashed his jaws. Every line of him spoke of defiant fury. And—holloa! The bird went—drew back its head and went, it did. It had recog-

nised our friend as being precisely and particularly a rove-beetle the instant he cocked his tail, that being his tribe's special eccentricity, and, to judge by the instant retreat of the feathered behemoth, his tribe's particular passport also. Perhaps the beetle was nasty to eat—very nasty, it may be—and perhaps the bird knew it; and the beetle knew that the bird knew it, and that is why he had calmly advertised himself so insolently in the face of apparently certain annihilation.

The beetle, though, had in the meanwhile been upset by the rush of the bird's wings, and had slid incontinently to the ground. He had just time to feel one of his legs catch, pull, and drag away bodily a sticky, silken line, when he hit the earth, head first, and was instantly pounced upon by an eight-legged creature with jaws. This was a spider, and, like most spiders—who resemble lions in trusting almost wholly to the element of surprise in their method of attack—this spider was very quick indeed. Moreover, she had real poison-fangs, charged, I think, with formic acid. But what are we to say of the beetle in that instant? He was a marvel!

As this diminutive fighter of ours reached the ground, he must have seen the shadow leaping upon him out of the dark. He was

already doubled up like a bow; needs, therefore, but to straighten—snap!—like a spring, and he jumped almost an inch. The spider landed upon a beetle that wasn't there, so to speak; but next fraction of a second he was there—on her back—his jaws buried in the base of her head—and she was dead. It had lasted only two seconds, that fight—that's all—but it was pretty crowded while it did last.

Later that evening, when the bats were flickering about the sky, and the moon bathed all things in white light, the beetle might have been seen droning away down the garden, his wing-shields stretched out like 'flying-jibs,' his wings unfurled and vibrating like a miniature Gnome engine, his legs gathered together under him.

He hit a man in the face, cannoned off to a wall, ran into a moth—which he slew—whirring along in the opposite direction, narrowly missed being slain in his turn by a swooping bat, and rising clear, his wings whirring louder and louder, beat away up into the summer night sky, away, away to the dim, black, brooding mystery of the woods, his home.

THE SPOOK.

HE came from no one knew where, and he arrived no one knew when, but it is more than probable that it was under cover of night; and what he did, or where he was precisely, whether he was alone, or one of many, and, more especially, what he was, no one knew, and less than nobody cared. To sum up, the first and the last that any one knew, or guessed, or heard about him was when one evening, in the big hay-field that rolled away from the ha-ha wall or sunk fence round the old churchyard, there began somewhere, anywhere—oh! just everywhere—a sound.

It was not a loud sound. It was not a pretty sound. It was here! No, it was there! Where the dickens was it, now? Certainly it was somewhere. It was a veritable will-o'-the-wisp of a sound, and you couldn't swear where it was. You only knew that it *really* was, and never where *you* were, but always somewhere else—one sound, two sounds, or ten, nobody could tell which. In fact, nobody could be certain of anything, except that the rising sun found it, and the setting sun left it, each day, as the hot, long days wore on; and sometimes

the radiant summer moon heard it, and the ghostly white owl paused to listen to it echoing on the still, heated air as he went abroad. It was just as if the ghost of some old farm-labourer, some bent and gnarled smock-frocked harvester of long ago, were haunting the vicinity of the hoary churchyard, and everlastingly sharpening a scythe—perhaps the very scythe of Time—with a whetstone. None could mistake it, no man could deny it; steadily, persistently—morning and evening—elusive, delusive, here, there, everywhere, anywhere, and never far from the old ha-ha wall round the cedar-sheltered churchyard—the steady, unmistakable ‘Wheep-wheep! wheep - wheep! wheep - wheep!’ of some person, or persons, unseen, sharpening a scythe, or scythes, on a whetstone, or whetstones, and—never staying in the same place.

‘It was uncanny. It was weird. It was creepy. And it was the more uncanny, and weird, and creepy, because one realised that, except for the sound, no living persons would have even guessed that the maker of it had ever been there, had ever come from out the night, without explanation at all, to live in their midst. It set one thinking. Goodness knows what other odd creatures might be living unsuspected in the soft sunny fields all

about—creatures who did not give away their unsuspected presence by sharpening ventriloquial scythes at unearthly hours of night and day.

Then, on a sudden, the sound ceased as mysteriously as it had begun, and with as little explanation. Some might argue that the maker of it had gone, some that he had not. As a matter of fact, he was still there, hiding, skulking about.

Summer, with its long, hot days and quiet, bat-haunted nights, passed as summers do—almost before one knows it. The hay was cut and carried, the corn ripened and was carted in golden loads on the heels of the hay; and men said that if there had ever been anything there of this world to sharpen a scythe, anything tangible, it could not be there now, for the fields were as bare as the palm of your hand, and not even a spook could hide therein. And so the sharpener of the scythe was forgotten.

Nobody thought of the old clover-field, though, which was on the other side of the churchyard and the ha-ha wall.

Autumn came, with its wet days, flaming colours, and vain regrets, and with it a party of sportsmen to shoot the comfy, fat, brown partridges. They shot over the hay-field that

had been, the corn-stubble, and entered the old clover-field.

Suddenly one of the dogs—an old retriever—seemed to be on the trail of something. He tracked it, now here, now there, and at such a furious speed that the sportsmen said it must be an animal, since no bird could have put up with that hustling without rising. Then the dog made a grab, and lifting his head, galloped back to his master, at whose feet he put down a mottled brown bird 10.5 inches long, with long legs and a short beak. There it lay, dead apparently, on the ground, though the old retriever was so tender-mouthed that he could not have harmed it.

Next moment a covey of partridges rose. The man turned to fire, the dog leaped forward to retrieve, and when the man turned again, the bird was gone. It had jumped up and slunk off, with head held low, and running hard. Arrived at the next field, it rose and flew half a mile. This bird had been shamming death.

He was a corncrake, which is a landrail, which was the maker of the scythe-sharpening, ventriloquial noise of the hay-field. He had come in the spring, reared his young with his mate, and that very night he departed, flying high and strongly across the sky—south, south to the land of the sun five thousand miles away.

OCTOBER.

A MINOR CHAMELEON.

SOMETHING was moving about the leaves of the currant-bushes as though it were in trouble, examining every twig, never for one instant keeping still.

The something was a caterpillar—not quite an ordinary one in some ways. To begin with, it was not wholly horrible to look upon. It was creamy, banded with brown, and this, one would think, would be an unhealthy conspicuous dress where caterpillars were concerned.

But see now! A passing titmouse—all blue-and-yellow daintiness—spotted the movement among the currant-leaves, and flew to the spot, hovered a space, then flew away again, disappointed.

Even the tit's eyes—which are not bad substitutes for microscopes—had failed to make out that caterpillar, stretched instantly straight and rigid along a twig as soon as the bird's shadow crossed the sun. It wanted the tit to believe that it was a twig; and he did.

Presently the caterpillar began madly to

rush about again, with the air of one who is given five minutes in which to find something that he cannot. It was looking for a place in which to change into a chrysalis. The chrysalis was already perfectly formed inside its skin, in fact.

Then came the cuckoo. The shaking of the branch as the bird alighted was the first warning that the caterpillar had. But was it nonplussed? Not at all. It just attached a thread to the twig, and on a thin line of its own making dropped to the ground.

When the cuckoo had gone it came up again, found a snug place in a corner against the wall, and began. First, as it hung, there was a convulsive wriggle, and then a split; and, looking closely, one would have seen that the hard skin of the caterpillar had slit across the shoulders. Came then more wriggle—of the head this time—and slowly out of the slit squeezed the head and shoulders of the chrysalis.

So far, so good; the chrysalis was half out. Now came the final. Began again the wriggles. My, how that thing wriggled!—wriggled till at length, with one final spasm of monumental struggles, it kicked the last of the caterpillar-skin from off its tail, and swung clear and free—a mahogany-brown-and-yellow

chrysalis; that is to say, a life in abeyance—a creature, as the chemists would say, in ‘solution,’ waiting to be ‘precipitated.’

Many months went by, and the very existence of the chrysalis had been forgotten; but it was still there, biding its time.

Then, one hot summer day, a robin, prospecting behind the currant-bushes against the wall, came suddenly upon what looked like a flat chip of bark caught up on the rough wall. It was of a creamy white, with dark spots and marks—a shaving of bark, without a doubt.

The robin eyed it, and passed on. But before he passed on he went and inspected an empty, and evidently but just recently evacuated, mahogany-and-yellow chrysalis-case that hung close beside the bark-shaving. The little fool!

Four minutes after the robin had gone the bark-shaving moved. It moved—yes; and it walked. Up the wall it strolled. Then—merciful happenings!—it flew. Straight across the garden it flapped gaily, down the paths, all lit with the ruby light of the setting sun—a moth, a magpie-moth, the final form of our chrysalis and our caterpillar. Its metamorphosis was now complete.

But fate was not kind to it in that hour, for the dainty flicker of the pretty wings

flashed to the eyes of a last, lingering, sleepy chaffinch. There was a whir and a flap of wings, a dart in the air, and the chaffinch returned to his perch with the moth in his beak.

Now, it may have been that the chaffinch was not hungry, or that the moth had an unnice smell.

Anyway, he laid friend moth on the bough between his legs—preparatory to killing it, I suppose. The moth lay on its left side, wings closed above its back like a butterfly's, legs curled up like the legs of a dead insect.

But it was not dead. It was only shamming death. Fraction by fraction it moved, one wing first, and then its fellow, while still the body lay motionless, with the legs curled up as in death, flattened—and was still. The moth was now in a position ready to fly.

Then the chaffinch put down his beak to finish the job, and—our magpie-moth had gone!

Insects don't think—the learned books say so!

THE DEBACLE.

FAT, fussy, covered with a blackish fur coat all over, except for her reddish tail, she flew down the 'lee' side of the bank with an anxious buzz, the feathery tamarisks whipping the gray sky above her, and the wind singing on the other side straight in from the Channel.

Any one could see she was not happy. Even in spite of her fur coat, she was not comfy, for she was very susceptible to the cold. In fact, she was a bumble-bee, which is a humble-bee, which is a *Bombus*, according to the learned ones.

The weather was cold to her, and there were winds; the autumn had come, and things were not as they had been. It had taken her half the morning to gather as much honey as a few weeks ago she would have gathered in half-an-hour. And the air was full of birds, too, mostly tits—cheeky little tom-tits—whom she hated like sisters. You can never, if you are a bee, trust a tit, you know.

Along the bank she flew slowly, pausing from time to time at the dainty blossom of a sea-pink, or fussing round the sweet, gauzy film of sea-lavender, till finally she rose high, and headed straight away for another part of

the bank. But the wind took her, and carried her far out of her course ; and a glossy, shining, speckled starling nearly did likewise ; and by the time she reached the unobtrusive-looking hole—it had once belonged to a field-mouse, long since executed by an owl—under the tamarisk-roots, she was tired and angry.

Here she ran in.

It was dark and stuffy inside, but she needed no eyes to tell *her* all about it. Her feelers did all that, and more—they were eyes and everything else to her.

The hole widened as she got in, and became a chamber, roofed with a bundle of moss, walled with moss, and almost cosy. In the chamber were cells—honey-cells, brood-cells, all kinds of cells, made of wax ; but they were not, as we know, honey-cells. Brown they were, misshapen, and just tacked on anywhere. In fact, there was no order about them. They were distinctly opposite to the mathematical tidiness of the humble-bee's relations, the honey-bees.

Our little friend met one or two bees as she crawled in, but the place was not full. It bore an air of approaching ruin about it. Time had been when four hundred bumble-bees had worked there from 4 A.M. to nearly any time P.M. Now she met but a few.

Huge, misshapen cells she passed, filled with half-a-dozen larvæ, or young, apparently untended; others she squeezed by which had been used as nurseries, then as honey-pots, and now were being drained by one or two fat, lazy drones, or male bees. In one spot an earwig had got in and slain a bee baby; in another a field-mouse had consumed a whole row of honey-pots; and in a far corner she came upon her queen, a bloated, pathetic figure, who had practically lost the power of flight, was half-numbed, and wholly worn-out. Any one could see that she had done her work, that queen, and 'had leave to die.' The new young queens who were to carry the species on had left the nest on their marriage flights a week ago, and by now, it was to be hoped, were safely hibernating against coming winter.

Our bee stopped a moment to give the queen a little of her honey. The royal head scarcely moved in response to the delicate caresses of her feelers. She cleaned her, and left her there—alone, neglected, dying.

A little farther on she came upon four half-asleep workers, vainly struggling to eject a fat bee, just like themselves, except that he had clouded wings, whereas theirs were clear, who had broken open a cell, and was calmly

lapping up the hard-won honey they had given to a baby. He was a 'cuckoo' bee, and had no right there really, though he had been born there, and went about the place just like its real owners. But he didn't care, nor did the workers much, it seemed, for they soon went away. Nobody cared.

A shower of cold rain pattered on the ground outside, and passed. A bumble-bee staggered in, rolled on her back, curled up her legs, and died. A lean, soldierly, armoured tiger-beetle worked his way up out of a worm-tunnel, and skipped darkly in and out among the cells, looting. The pincers of another murderous earwig disappeared into a side-cell. There came a roll of thunder, and half the roof fell in with the giant—to them—form of a field-mouse, dimly seen in the midst of the landslip, and the mouse was greedily eating up honey and grubs.

Nobody took any notice. Nobody cared. Half-a-dozen bees passed our friend, making for the entrance. Two were already drunk on ivy nectar. Word went round that the queen was dead, slain by the mouse. In half-an-hour there would be no more bumble-bee city.

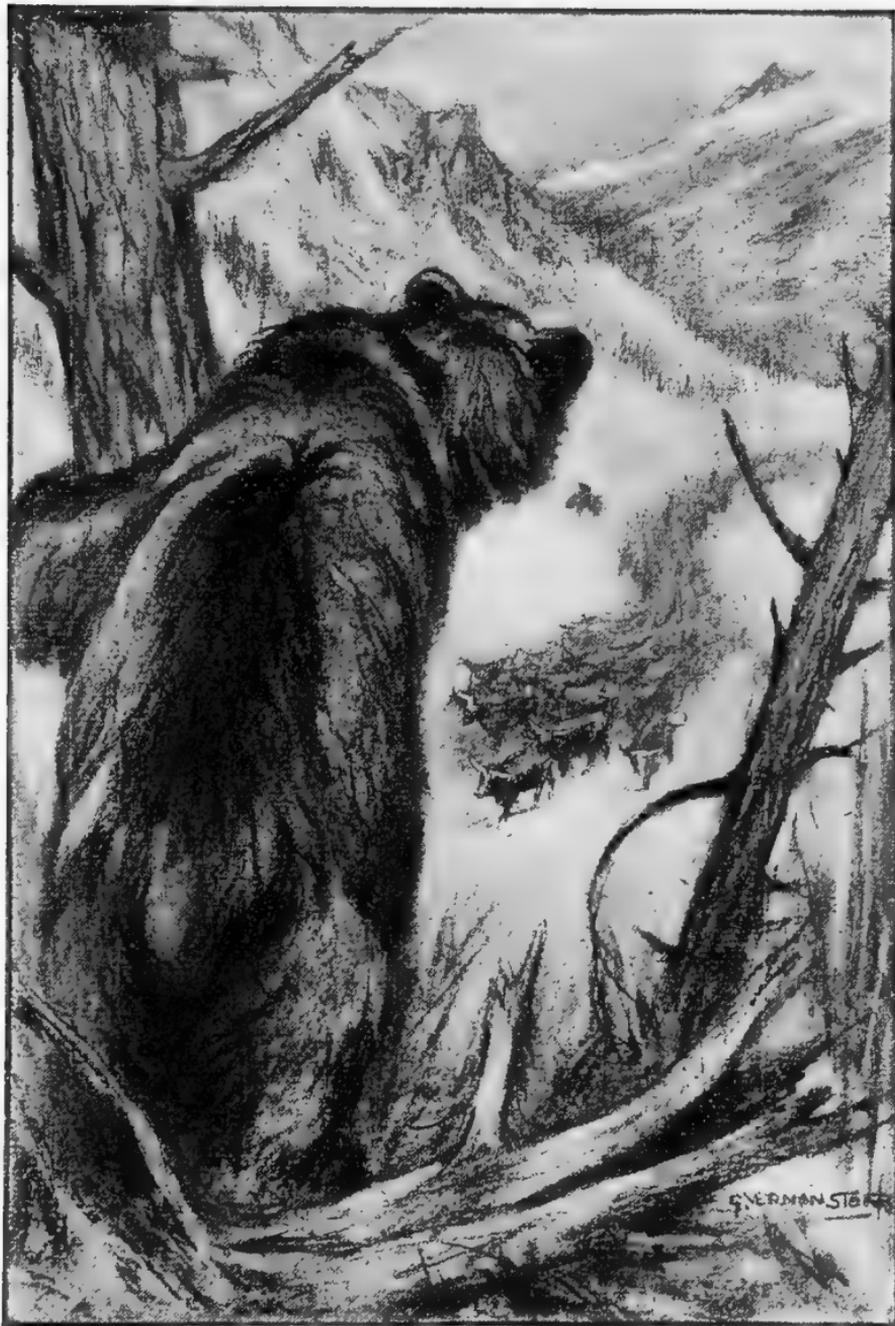
Then our bumble-bee struggled clear of the falling earth, rose high, and headed straight

away to where the smoke of chimneys showed among trees. There was a garden here, and ivy-bushes, and to these she lowered herself.

It was a grim gathering of bumble-bees and wasps and gay butterflies, taking their last meal on this earth.

Dusk came on, and with it the cold. The last rays of the setting sun touched and turned our bee to gold, as she reeled, dead-drunk, among the traitor ivy. Then she lost hold, and fell in a stupor.

Next morning her frozen corpse lay under the ivy-bush as the sun came back to find her.



Hundreds of cattle going down from some remote mountain ranch.

THE STRUGGLE.

IT was a struggle. There is no denying that it was a struggle, and that things began to look bad.

To begin with, the copses and the coverts were painting themselves red and russet, amber, brown, and pink; to go on with, the young cuckoos had gone long since, the nightingales had followed them, and the peewits and the starlings were gathered into flocks in the fields, as those who await the winter; whilst, finally, there was something new and white and dangerous on the grass in the mornings, which you and I know was frost, but the pretty little black-and-white house-martins only knew was not mist.

No wonder they worked, those little house-martins, to and from the mud-cup nest under the eaves of the old farm-house—the nest which in itself was a miracle, in that its builders had solved the problem of affixing a domed cup of mud, lined with feathers and straw, to a smooth wall. In another way, also, it was wonderful, inasmuch as its owners and builders had succeeded in rearing therein, and launching upon the world, no less than

two broods—one of five, and one of four—since May, and were actually now engaged in rearing a third of four.

Thirty-eight days ago the little mother had started in to lay every day the four eggs of the last clutch. Twenty-four days ago, about, the eggs had hatched out. And now, to-day, mother and father, assisted by some of the young of the second brood, certainly, if not by one or more of the first, were working against time to feed the new brood, and rear them as quickly as possible, that they might be ready for the great journey to the tropics that all of them must make—before winter came—*must*, you understand, or die.

Gnats and midges, upon which the martins feed, were not so plentiful as they had been. Indeed, the father was at his wits' end to find them. To leeward of the house, out of the bitter north-easter, up and down by the wall where a little sun struck, he hawked, taking the flies that came there to bask. In quiet corners under the old apple-trees, or above the cattle-pond, where the sun filtered through the reddening foliage in bars, a few gnats danced in columns, and—were caught in dozens in his little gaping beak, as he darted and flickered and twisted and shot. But even at the hottest hour of the day his returns to

the nest were none too frequent, and towards dusk less frequent still.

All day long, however, you could see these martins, who were cousins of the swallows, flying about, always in the air, for ever on the wing. You could note the white of their rumps flashing against the background of blazing copses, or darting up to the nest past the now deserted homes of their friends, who had already gone south. And they were always cheerful, even though risking their lives by staying. They had always a cheery 'Prtt! prtt!' greeting for their young, as they darted up with food.

In the afternoon a new little falcon, a merlin—on passage to the south also, as likely as not—pursued the father, and all but caught him. In the evening a cat sprang up out of the long grass of the meadow-side, what time the mother skimmed along the ground there for low-flying midges, and missed her by an inch only. But it made no difference; the cheery 'Prtt! prtt!' rang out at intervals, as the little birds returned to the nest with food. Nothing seemed to daunt them, and their optimism was immense, seeing that when they returned to roost all together in a heap that night—putting up with the swarms of parasites that now infested the old nest,

rather than face the cold—they knew that to-morrow must be their last day there. After to-morrow they must go, must obey the imperious summons of instinct, and leave their last brood to starve.

The day broke chill and wet, with a moaning wind from the south-east. The young birds of the previous broods, who had so loyally remained, dropped out, took a few turns about along some sheltered trees, snatched a hasty breakfast, and then, rising high, with a chorus of 'Prtt! prtt! prtt!' went straight into the southern sky.

The two parents were alone with their third brood.

All day, in spite of the rain, the little birds hawked about in the air doggedly, cheating a few meals from the damp landscape, juggling a few cropfuls of tiny insects from odd and sheltered corners.

The afternoon drew on, dull, wet, hopeless. The wind moaned among the oaks, and a lonely redwing, sure harbinger of winter, went, squeaking in melancholy fashion, across the sky.

Then at last the pair of house-martins gave up. They met along the edge of a wood with no more than half-a-beakful each of food—little spots of white in the slow-gathering

dusk—and turning, almost sadly it seemed, headed straight back together to the farm for one last look at the brood they must desert.

And then, suddenly, as the farm hove in sight, glimmering white through the mist and the wet, the rain cleared, an autumn sun peered out, and—they discovered they were not alone. Four other house-martins flew to meet them, darted round them, greeted them. It was their third brood, on wing, and fully ready for the journey at last.

Next morning the old nest was empty. The six martins had gone in the night.

'MIDST THE LITTLE STREAMS.

SUMMER was dead in the Valley of the Little Streams, and fallen in her cloak of burning sumach, her maples and her dog-woods kindling her funeral pyre in flashing gold and purple and flame-red about her.

There was nothing left to live in the Valley of the Little Streams, it seemed, till suddenly, upreared beneath the frowning pines, erect, poised, like some ancient heroic bronze statue of a giant, towering and tremendous in rugged, rough-carved, uncouth strength—old Ephraim.

No man ever weighed or measured him, but well-nigh ten feet long, and in weight about a thousand pounds, with claws of six inches to argue with, was old Ephraim, the grizzly bear, and he made just as much noise as the average mouse, or, rather, less.

Old Ephraim, however, was listening, and it must have been to something far away. The little streams and the robber-birds he had always with him.

Suddenly the little gray squirrel, who had come down to hang from a low bough in impossible positions and call old Ephraim names, checked and clung, listening. For far,

far away up the Valley of the Little Streams came a sound, and the sound was a strange, unearthly roar, like unto no other sound you ever heard in all your life, and it was coming steadily nearer.

'Wuff!' said old Ephraim, deep in his cavernous chest, and coming down on all fours, slouched across the trail as silently as any cat, and faded into the landscape quick as you could wink. He always did that; it was one of the little tricks he kept up his great furry sleeve.

Two hundred yards away he stopped, and lay down in a thicket of flaming maple. He could see up the trail from here, and, of course, he had the wind the right way.

And the roaring grew steadily nearer and nearer, filling the valley from gray peak to gray peak with a storm of sound.

Then a-riding down the trail came a man on a black horse, and it was as if the ground behind him crawled with cattle, hundreds and hundreds of cattle, going down from some remote mountain ranch to the railway—tinned beef to be. They were the roaring noise.

On they came, and old Ephraim watched them come, till the black horse struck the spot where he himself had crossed the trail, and, without warning, horse and leading cattle

halted together. Then the horse stood on end, and the cattle, turning about as one beast, went, and the noise of their going was like the voice of the thunder-gods among the hills. Heaven knows if they stopped before they reached their ranch again! I doubt it. And all because they had scented that old, silent grizzly bear, if you please.

Day left old Ephraim grubbing for willow-berries, which he took by way of medicine, as dogs eat grass, I think; but the next day did not find him there. In fact, the first gray haze of dawn discovered him nowhere, because he was most carefully hidden from all discovery by anything at all, he trusted, in the depths of a thicket on the edge of a balsam-wood five miles away. But he seemed to be doing quite a lot of hard thinking.

Apparently he was waiting for something, and it came. On the first carpet of snow, which had fallen overnight, there were tracks leading past his thicket, and about an hour after dawn, following these tracks, came a mighty form. It was a young bull-moose following the herd; and the moose, be it said, is the giant of all deer, rivalling even old Ephraim in weight.

When he was just opposite the thicket the young bull stopped short, and stood rigid,

Roman nose up, great form towering above the bushes. He had got a suspicion.

Then he jumped, but it was too late, for in that instant old Ephraim made his rush.

It was a great battle, and it lasted a full hour, for even a *young* bull-moose is not every beast's prey. Old Ephraim needed all his astonishing unexpected agility to keep from being in the way of the slashing horns and the razor hoofs.

In the end, however, when evening came, bringing the robber-birds and two ghoullike ravens to make inquiries, they found old Ephraim interring the moose among the balsams. Then the birds retired, disappointed.

NOVEMBER.

THE TALE OF A TEAL.

SOMEWHERE, months ago, in a land beyond the North Sea, when he was only a little chap, and had swum among his brothers and sisters in a nice reedy pool, he had been caught by two old gentlemen, and had been adorned with a silvery-looking ring placed on one leg. Then he had been set at liberty again.

He did not know that the ring had letters—an address, in fact—and a number upon it, and that it was hoped that whoever found him again, dead or alive, in any part of the world, would report his number to the address on the ring. Nor did he know that the gentlemen were learned professors engaged in probing the great mystery as to where the birds go. They had marked hundreds of birds in this way.

He was really only a little fellow yet, a veritable miniature wild-duck, a pocket wild-duck—a teal, in fact—no more than fourteen inches long, but he was, in a way, wonderful. The wonder lay in the markings of his chestnut

head, just as if he wore green spectacles tied with gold ribbon, and in the patch of colour he carried on each wing, which not even the glow of the finest sunset could rival. Also, he was wonderful in another way—when he rose and flew.

He sprang from the water like a rocket, just in time to cheat some scaly denizen of the lake of its expected supper upon him, and, once in the air, he fairly made you blink.

I dare not guess his speed, but if you suggest eighty miles an hour as being possible, no man could say that you were wrong.

He was not alone. There were thousands of wild-fowl on that portion of the lake which was 'open,' or standing, disconsolate, on the ice. But none was flying; not one was on the wing. And, of course, he ought to have seen that, and taken the hint; but he did not.

The hint came when he was about three hundred feet up over the water. It looked like a white line falling out of the leaden sky above him. He knew it, however, for a ger-falcon, largest and most dreaded of all the birds of prey of the north; and it wanted him.

He fell, and he helped his descent with his wings. You could hear the pair of them from afar, fairly hissing through the air. Then the teal hit the water with a report like a pistol-

shot, and the falcon shot aloft again—to look elsewhere.

That night the wind shifted to the E.N.E.—straight from the frozen plains of Russia. It was awful. The lake froze over in no time, and the little teal, who had joined a select flock of five of his fellows, had nowhere left to feed, and knew that there was no suitable spot within hundreds of miles.

Now, a little difficulty like this would have troubled some birds, but not so our teal and his friends. They flew. They rose and flew steadily, with their little flat beaks pointing westward into the gloom. Below them the frozen, silent, white land slid by steadily and rapidly.

On, on, on they whirred, till the white land gave place to a black void, which some hours later, when the moon came out, was turned into a silvery, dancing, cold wonder—the sea.

Still on and on they beat, hour after hour, till at last a light, gray, cold, and cheerless, began to chase them from the east, overtook them, and then swept on.

It was the dawn at last.

Beneath them, gleaming like steel in the pale light, the muddy reaches of an estuary opened out ahead. There were green hills beyond, and to the S.W. the huddled mass of

a great city, and three huge warships creeping out to sea.

Down, down the birds came to the estuary, falling like cannon-balls, checked when only twenty yards from the surface, and swung over a belt of tamarisks to a cosy-looking marsh pond.

And in that instant the tamarisks were pierced by a stab of flame, a clapping, butting roar shattered the silence of the dawn, and our teal, crumpling up in mid-air, fell, turning over and over, with a sickening thud, to earth.

Two days later one of the professors in a town in northern Europe received by post a little metal ring, with the number 7158R stamped upon it, accompanied by a polite note to say that the ringed bird, a teal, had been shot by a sportsman in the south of England on the 12th inst.

Such is life !

THE SPIRIT OF THE WOOD.

THE wood stood stiff and stark in the cold. Farther up the valley the oaks were straining and creaking in chorus as the wind went romping through them. But down in the spruce-wood there was no wind; the curved hunch of the opposite hill, flung up like a careless knee, acted as a break-wind, so that you could hear the breeze racing overhead, but could not feel it.

A spatter of hail drummed over the valley, and passed. A jay spoke suddenly in the depths, and, dipping away among the gray columns a moment later, gave one glimpse of pinkish-fawn and black-and-white slashed doublet. A woodpecker, hidden somewhere in the cathedral gloom, began tapping all at once in the silence that followed, and something—truly, it may have been no more than a shadow, a mist-wreath, or the spirit of the place—was standing in an open glade.

Whether it had come there on animate legs, whether it had been there all the time, or had been evolved out of the blue haze that hung between the trees, were hard to say.

It was there, anyhow, a mouse-coloured form on legs as slender, and as strong, as steel

rapiers. An incarnation of grace and the beauty of harmony. Of large, soft eyes, like very lakes of tenderness; of silken, damp nostrils; of sleek sides and polished velvet coat, more glossed than was ever coat of valuable racehorse—surely the very spirit of the woods.

And so he was—a full-grown roebuck, prince of the shades.

Then a bound, light and effortless as the flight of thistledown, and he was gone. And all the time there had not been a single sound, not a rustle of a leaf; only the tap-tapping of the woodpecker.

Came then a pattering, echoing in that lake of stillness, and approaching rapidly, and a dog appeared. On the littered floor of the wood the dog, unlike the roe, could not move soundlessly.

In the middle of the glade the dog stopped dead, flung up her tail, and lowered her head. She had scented the roe; found where he had stood.

But the scent did not 'lead' away, as do most scents. The buck had bounded, you remember. It was necessary to 'cast' around to pick up the trail. The dog did so cleverly, and picking up the true trail at last, hunted it away into the dim, blue silence of the wood.

The pattering of the feet died out, and,

after a soundless pause, the woodpecker took up its task of tapping again. Far away the jay suddenly screeched to tell of the passage of the dog that way. There was the bursting whir of a disturbed blackcock's wings to prove the jay right; and just across the glade, in the deep-blue gloom between the buttressed tree-boles, two stars were shining.

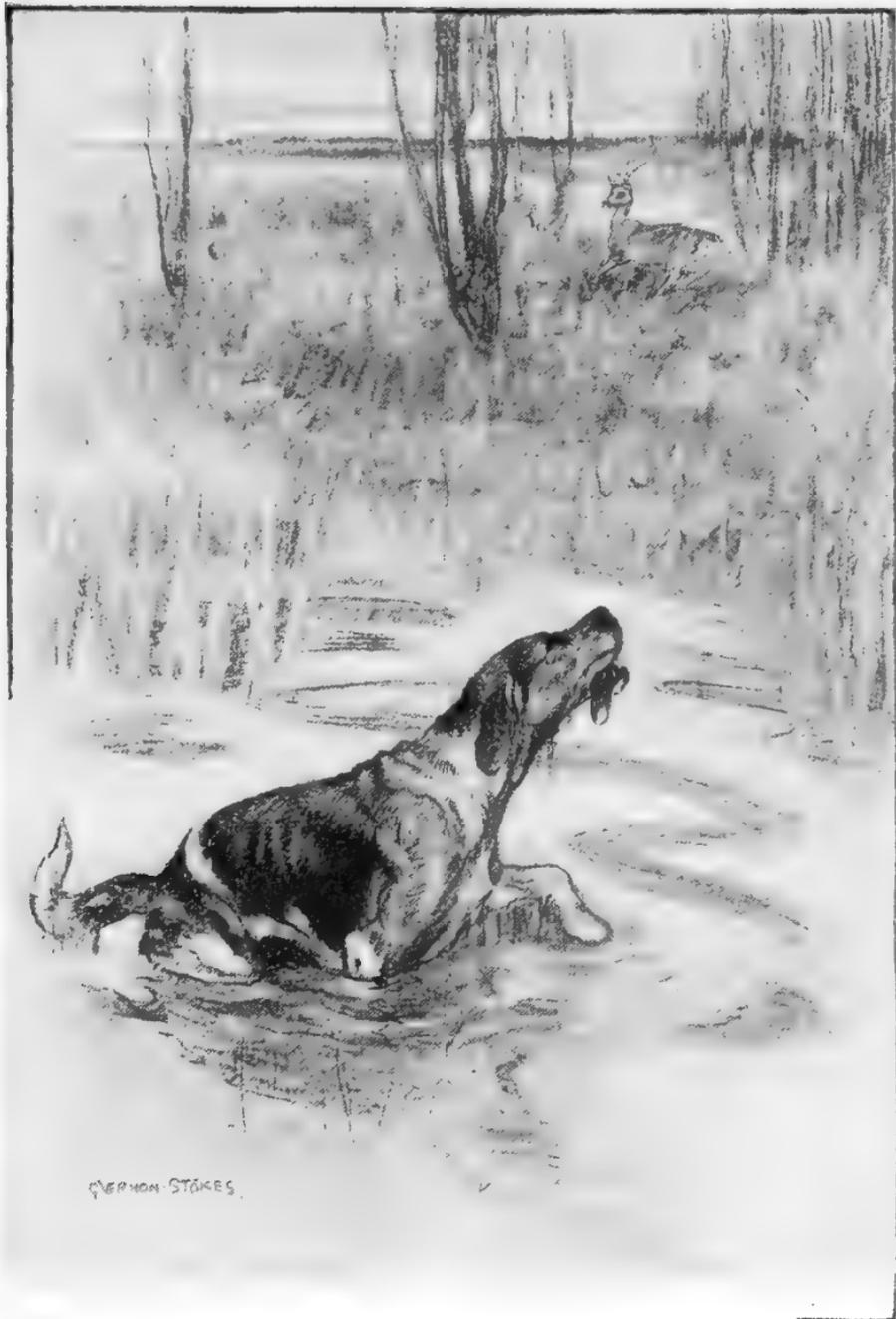
Then the stars bounded out, and faded to wondrous eyes. It was the roebuck again.

Surely he had been there all the time, and had been playing with the dog. He seemed unbreathed. There was no labouring of the satiny sides. But though it was true that he had been playing with the dog, he had not been there all the time. He had taken an easy canter, and, describing a loop, returned.

A wood-pigeon slid over the tops of the trees, and settled; another followed, and yet others, till the trees all about were quickly peopled with them—all silent. Each bird clapped its wings loudly. That meant danger. The dog was returning, and instantly the dainty little buck sprang back into cover, and vanished.

An hour later we find this exquisite buck of ours, still apparently quite unhurried, skipping across a bog on the open moor.

A hundred yards behind, smothered in fat



At every foundering stride the dog had stopped, fairly beaten.

ooze and slime, half-buried at every floundering stride, the dog had stopped, fairly beaten. She stood watching the little buck till he faded out in the gathering winter evening mists; then she turned, and struggled away home.

FROM ACROSS THE SEAS.

VERY cold it was, and very blustering. The short, snappy waves followed one another with endless racing persistence, going off from time to time in spurts of spray-like smoke, where the wind took them. Even above the trampling roar of the surf, you could hear the shriek of the nor'-easter as it hustled out to sea over the cliff-tops, straight from Arctic Russia.

Then something else shot over the cliffs, and hustled out to sea too. This was not wind, but a bird; a gray bird—it looked black against the sky—with a fawny, pinky breast. Nor was it alone. Others followed it—first one, then three, then twenty, then a hundred, then a thousand, then a—how do I know? Certainly there were very many birds, and the passing of them took a long time—all flying one way, all going out to sea, to sea.

Yet they were not sea-birds, and if they persisted in their course, they would not put land beneath them again till they made the shores of Scotland, hundreds of miles due west across the lone North Sea. Moreover, they were all of the same kind—like as peas, one

might say ; all coloured identically with that first bird, now a speck, 'hull down,' if I may so put it, on the watery horizon—pigeons, wood-pigeons, or ring-doves, if you care for correctness. I don't know where, precisely, they had come from, where was their home. Those silent, locked lands of northern Europe keep their secrets too well for me to be sure of that.

The first bird of the flock was very big for a wood-pigeon, and that may, or may not, have been why he was the vanguard of that feathered army. He flew with an absolutely unaltering, regular, quick beat of his strong wings, like a machine, reeling off his forty miles an hour with a steady persistency. You see, he knew that those endless, jade-green, snarling, following waters must continue to slide beneath him for many hours ; knew, too, that if fatigue seized him in the middle—if the wind changed and blew in his face—there could be no help ; he must drown. Yet he flung the shore into the seascape behind him and travelled hard, and goodness knows how many miles he had already come ! He knew, of course, where he was going ; but, being a bird, he quite forgot to explain by what miracle he found his trackless way.

Then night added itself to the desolation,

and the pigeons, by then a hundred miles from land, went from sight.

The long dawn wind stirred the leaves, so that they whispered among themselves. The light grew, strangely uncanny, and the gnarled and scarred trunks of the trees on the edge of the wood stood out clearly. The mists drew off with the wind, and a red sun peeped over the top of beyond, to discover a belated fox trotting to his lair. The birds began to call the roll.

On one tree, pressed close against the trunk, on a big bough, sat a wood-pigeon. You would not have seen him. In fact, the home-ward-bound poacher who passed directly beneath did not see him, because his head was drawn close in to his breast, thus covering the white half-collar which alone would have revealed him. As it was, he merged into his surroundings beautifully.

He was not asleep, this pigeon of ours, or, at least, his head was not tucked under his wing; but he did not move. He was, in fact, the same pigeon we last left, days ago, flying over the North Sea; and after arrival, he had flown right down to the south of England.

Nor did he move for a long time. He just sat there in a sun-patch, whilst the silence of

the beech-wood around him gave way to the noises of the busy day. A gamekeeper passed on silent foot; a jay came and 'warked' and hunted for acorns; a lithe stoat started to run up the tree, smelt something of the keeper, and vanished. Still the pigeon sat on.

Presently a far-away town clock struck ten, and the pigeon flapped away between the boughs, and up, up till he saw a field of swedes in which three more wood-pigeons fed.

On still, extended wings he slanted down to join them. They did not move; but, just when he was within thirty yards of them, something else did behind a screen of heaped branches. The pigeon twisted upwards like a flash, but it was too late.

Bang!

The heavy report echoed across the fields, and the pigeon came down in a lifeless heap. He was quite dead.

Then a man with a gun got up from behind the screen of boughs, and slipping out, picked him up.

Still the other three pigeons did not move, and good reason had they to remain motionless. They were dead pigeons, like himself, set up in life-like attitudes with twigs, to decoy him and other hungry travellers.

WILD FIDELITY.

THERE was a heath, blasted by wind, brown, stubbly, forlorn, whereon nothing grew more than a foot or two high. There was nothing alive on the heath, save one man, with a gun and a sour face, who squelched slowly through black-green and mother-of-pearl-scummed puddles, and tripped over tough branchlets crawling about the wet ground like snakes; and there was the shrieking, jeering, taunting, tearing wind over all.

Then a bird, a big bird, got up from the ground in front of the man, and flapped away in wavering silence, like some gigantic brown moth.

Bang!

The crashing, heavy report of the single-barrel gun butted into the wind and was lost. The bird, with a sudden, odd little shivering, turned from butting into the wind, and was lost sight of to leeward. The voice of the man, cursing his luck, was cut by the gale from his lips, and lost instantly, too.

The man trudged on—an unhappy silhouette against a sky of gray wash.

A hundred yards farther on a rabbit de-

tached itself from a shrivelled tussock ahead, and bolted from before the footsteps of the 'lord of creation,' splashing and surprised, its white tail winking the while.

Bang!

The thunderous, sudden concussion of the gun hammered into the wind and was extinguished. The rabbit winced peculiarly in its stride, and vanished over the waste. The almost yelling imprecations from the man were whisked off by the gale like foam.

The man passed, and became of the past.

The wind blew on.

Nothing alive moved in sight on the wind-blasted heath.

Five hundred yards away, on the ground, among the writhing roots, the brown bird was standing, body held horizontally, head stuck out, coughing—blood. The cough was like the cough of a very small baby—horrible!

Four hundred yards away, on the ground, among the twisting branchlets and roots, the rabbit was sitting, crouched, astare, ears flat, motionless, panting in great gasps—blood. Once it screamed, a scream like the pathetic, thin, heart-stabbing scream of a very small child—ghastly!

Then, as if scream and cough had summoned them, low and silent, three big birds came

flapping together over the waste, with an odd, uneven, wavering, erratic flight that was ghostly. Nor did their unanimous silence, even of wing-beat, detract from the eeriness of them.

They were short-eared owls, the lost souls of the heath, travellers, nomads, wanderers o'er the face of the globe. Though this was England, yesterday, or the day before, they had probably been in Norway, or Russia, or goodness knows where. But to-day, this evening, they were here, on this heath, passing on their uncertain course above the wounded bird. Her they saw. They checked. They hovered about her, flapping, fluttering their big wings, looking more uncannily like weird leviathan moths than ever.

The wounded bird was a short-eared owl too. One of the three above was her mate.

Anon, with one accord, they left her, flying a low, flapping, uncertain way over the stunted growth, in lines, spreading out as they went. Neither bird spoke then.

The rabbit was still there, panting on the carmine-speckled grass. The phantom form of the wounded owl's mate flipped hither and yon, hither and yon, and—hovered suddenly.

He was above the rabbit. The others joined him, hovering together, flapping, rising

and falling on the wind in the eye of the red sun.

One fell and rose. Another fell and rose. There was a demoniacal yell. Another. A thin, tenuous scream. Scream on scream.

They were away now, flapping, unstable, in close company, one or other dropping and rising continuously. And it was the rabbit which ran beneath them, falteringly, dazed, blood-smeared.

An hour later the wounded owl was no longer coughing, but motionless, big-eyed, melancholy-visaged, though alive. Her brown mate stood beside her, and under *her* beak lay the heart and other portions of the rabbit.

Next morning the wounded owl yet breathed, and the rabbit's heart (untouched) had been joined by three dead short-tailed field-mice and a mole.

Next night she was not dead, that owl. The field-mice beside her numbered eight, and a rat had been added to the mole.

But in the watch before the dawn her life went from her, her eyes glazed, she fell over, and her mate, with a rat in his hooked bill, watched beside the corpse.

DECEMBER.

'MID ICY SEAWEED.

ON the one hand, far as the eye could see, rose a white tablecloth of speckless snow; on the other a bottle-green sea, cold, and crisped with the froth of 'white horses;' and over all hung a low canopy of leaden-hued sky.

The waves bounded up the pebbly beach with a roar and a rush, and fell back, leaving the stones glistening in the freezing air. They were the only things which made any sound. All else was still as death, as though petrified.

Then upon the silence there fell a harsh, little noise, rather as if one pebble had been dropped on another. An especially big wave floundered up the beach, and it was as if it had tossed into the air a particularly big, brown leaf, which was blown away by the knife-edged nor'-east wind, only to fall again on the tide-line.

It is strange, though, how Nature manages to hide her children in such bleak times.

Looking closely, one would have seen that something was moving where the leaf had

fallen—very hard indeed to see among the pebbles. In fact, the leaf was a bird. He ran anon, nimbly dodging out of the plucking reach of a wave, and as quickly and shrewdly running back again over the wet to see if the wave had cast up anything eatable.

He was a quiet little chap, brown atop, with a blotchy, spotted breast; smaller, a trifle, than a lark.

So very frail he looked that one wondered what chance he had there at all, dodging the sledge-hammer breakers and laughing at the wind.

Yet he was born to the scene, that fragile one; had lived therein all his life; and, for all I know, and for all his actions seemed to show, revelled in it. He was a rock-pipit, cousin to that other, the common meadow-pipit, the 'titlark' of our fields.

Cold it was as charity, but not too cold for him to poke about among the icy seaweed, and, leaping in the air, literally catch the elusive sandhopper 'on the hop.'

Bitter it was, but not too bitter for him to race down in water after the receding wave, and literally snatch some tiny shrimplet up under the jaws of Father Neptune's thundering death.

Famine was abroad in the land. Legions

and phalanxes of birds had come to the shore to feed there, because the ground was frozen and like iron inland.

You could see them—starlings, chaffinches, thrushes, blackbirds, larks, and a dozen others—moping in corners; but none seemed to know where to look for food, or how.

It was the little rock-pipit and his party who showed them, and you could behold them timidly venturing down to the long, sinuous tide-line, fluttering away, terror-stricken, at each 'wave-burst.'

The terrible day drew on slowly. The starving, moping, half-numbed visitors to the shore grew more and more numerous, and melted away almost as fast as they came, driven back terrified by the appalling cold of the wind.

But the rock-pipits kept gaily on. The rougher the sea, the more the food it flung up, and plenty of food meant a warm body to resist the cold.

Strange, too, were these visitors, and our little rock-pipit and his pals needed to keep their sharpest of sharp eyes open.

Now a company of great, wild geese would go clanging and bugling south overhead; now a robber-band of gray crows would come loafing by, and stop to murder some half-dead bird,

and *try* to murder the pipits, only to discover their mistake very quickly.

Now a bunch of wild-duck would beat by on whistling wings ; and, again, a vast band, like some huge, parti-coloured cloud, of peewits would go drifting past ; whilst ever and anon a big gull, cruel-eyed, white, and dangerous, would come floating along.

Then night came down, and all the world shuddered and was still. The pipits roosted, half-buried in sand and snow, under an old boat. They were quite warm, because they were well fed and used to it.

Not so the others near them. In the low brier-bushes, in the feathery tamarisks, and in the cold, marshy fields were foodless birds, freezing stiff in death where they slept—thrushes, redwings, blackbirds, larks, and the like, who would never wake again.

AFTER DARK.

SNOW there was, and a silver moon, and delicate tracery of the shadows of branches, and a frozen pond, and dead leaves all brown, and the roof of the old farm-house nestling, all white, among the grand, tall trees, and no end of a racket in the rickyard.

Some creatures were whirling about among the snow and the straw there. There were several of them tumbling about and grumbling like fiends in a continuous, wicked gibber.

Then they separated—flew apart, literally—and, dashing away into the shadows, left only two behind. One of these two lay motionless on the ground, quite dead; and he was the smaller. The other hopped slowly towards the gate; and he was the larger. And they were all rats.

The big fellow went slowly, to the accompaniment of a big chorus of low, intense grumbles that followed him from every shadow, from every scrap of cover, wherein could be seen little, gleaming eyes in pairs.

Once or twice this big chap turned sharply, as a sudden rustling of straw here and there in the dark places seemed to herald a concerted rush upon him; but it never came to anything,

and in the end he passed out slowly from the warm rickyard into the bare, open field, and into the night.

For a moment he paused in the gateway to pivot on his haunches, and glare savagely at the inky blots of shadow; then he faded away.

He was a 'rogue' rat, who had been driven out by his kind for such trifling little offences as murder, baby-rat slaughter, and cannibalism.

Very far away a church clock in some country town struck midnight, and a fox barked once—a guttural, mournful yap—from somewhere out among the fields. But the old rat took no notice. He kept straight on to the nearest hedge, and proceeded to lick his wounds.

Half-an-hour later we find the old, scarred ruffian moving slowly down along the hedge. He was very alert; every stride or two he paused to listen and look round. And that, I suppose, was why the movement of some bird, asleep in the branches overhead, attracted him.

He stopped, and he climbed upwards. There was a pause, then a squawk, a flutter, a silence. After a bit the old rat came down again, and hopped away as if nothing had happened. But something had happened, for if you had looked

there next morning, you would have found, perched on a slender bough, still upright, but stark, shrivelled, and stiff, the corpse of a bloodless thrush.

A few minutes later out from the hedge on to the bare, white snow hopped the grim shadow of the rat. He was following a trail. The trail was of blood, and it ended, ten yards farther on out in the field, in a fieldfare, which had been wounded by another rat.

You know fieldfares? They laugh, 'Chack, chack! chackle-chack!' across the winter sky. They can put up a fight, though, at the worst. This one did. He threw himself on his back, ready with beak and claw.

Now for it!

The rat was no coward. He threw himself on the bird with a careless rush—too careless. There was a peck, a flutter, a squawk, and it was over.

The bird was dead, but—— The rat was slowly turning round and round like a dazed thing, the blood streaming from his right eye.

Then he rushed for the hedge, leaving the fieldfare untouched where it lay. In three seconds he was at a gateway, in another entering the hedge.

There was a glint of something lying in his path on his right side. It looked like metal.



With the mink's fangs buried in the back of its neck.

The rat failed to see it.

There was a metallic clash. The rat stopped dead, straightened out, and yelled aloud. He was caught in a trap.

Next morning the farmer, going round his traps, found and killed the rat. He weighed one pound twelve ounces, and he was blind in the right eye.

A BRUSH WITH FATE.

THE frost-king had come to the world in a night, and the grass on the 'rides' in the bristling covert was flashing and dancing as if covered with a carpet of a thousand gems. But the frost-king had also brought his grim prime minister—cruel famine. Many of the denizens of the covert, therefore, were returning to their lairs hungry that morning.

First and earliest came the badger—and that was late for him—a low, gray shadow, grumbling to himself because, coaxed from his lair by the mild weather of yesterday, he had ventured out, and the ground had been almost too hard for even his strong claws to dig for his favourite roots and bulbs.

Next came a disconsolate owl, flapping along low and silent, hungry because his night's work had produced only three mice and a shrew instead of twice as many.

Last of all came the fox—red, rascally, and reckless. Not alone was he, for a fine fat rabbit came with him—in his jaws. He only, it seemed, knew how to profit by the frost.

Master Reynard made straight for his 'earth,' and, arrived thereat, stopped so utterly dead

that he might have been caught in a trap. But he was not.

The 'earth' had been stopped up in the night by some man fool, and a hasty search revealed the only other 'earth' in like condition, and foxy had to seek a bed of bracken for the day. He could not risk moving across the open to the next covert before night came.

He awoke to find himself staring straight at the heavy jaw and the deep eyes of a foxhound one yard away. Then the fox wasn't there. He had just rolled over and gone off like smoke, and by the time the hounds got to the open on his trail, rending the silent morning with the crash of their maddening 'music,' the fox was fairly kicking the miles behind him two fields away.

A hunted fox does not have to let the ground grow mouldy under him or forget to use his brains—if he wants to save his 'brush'—when a pack of modern foxhounds are wanting him.

He raced for seven miles at the speed of some trains; he rolled in a road where scent might *not* cling; he ran along a wall for the same reason; he wound his trail round village gardens, went through a flock of sheep, galloped back on his trail, and took three clean leaps to

one side, drew mazes of his scent in a quarry, fell in with other foxes, and ran with them.

Presently he found himself racing along a railway track—nearly getting run over by the 1.40 P.M. ‘up’ for his pains. So he jumped on to one end of a cottage roof, and down the other, and after that worked for a mile up a stream, coming out first on one side, then on the other.

But the rousing, rollicking clamour of the hunting pack was for ever in his ears; and when, black with sweat, with tongue out, and brush hung low, he dragged himself into the oak hanging-wood late in the afternoon, with hounds only a field or two behind him, things looked very black indeed for the red rover.

And yet—well, it certainly seemed as if even then there was more than the likeness to a grin on his cunning ‘mask.’

In the centre of the oak ‘hanger’ was a brick shanty, with a low brick chimney and a locked door, used by the gamekeepers as a watch-house, and to this cantered friend fox. Arrived at the spot, he sat down to regain breath, while the hounds fairly made the ‘hanger’ rock with the volume of their ‘music.’

Then, mustering all his remaining strength, Reynard leapt to the low, sloping roof, ran

lightly up it, jumped again, straight and high, and—vanished.

On came the hounds. Up on to the roof of the shanty they streamed, over it, down again, all round about, and were dumb. They had lost their fox utterly. He seemed to have simply faded into thin air, and gone out; and, the dusk already approaching, the huntsman called the dogs off and took them home.

That night a gamekeeper, going to the shanty for a lantern, was almost startled out of his senses, on unlocking the door, by the apparition of a fox within, who charged out between his legs as soon as the door was opened, and evaporated into the night.

INTO THE TRAP.

THERE was a trail on the snow running up from the frozen river. At a first glance it looked merely a line, but closer inspection showed it to be the trail of some beast, who must have progressed almost solely by cantering, for the hindfeet landed practically where the forefeet had been.

The forest was still, as only a pine-wood can be in winter-time, and so cold that you could see the frost floating on the air.

Then suddenly the maker of the trail in the snow returned, silent, snaky, and deadly—a mink, the same as ladies use for their muffs. He was very low on the leg and long in the body, and carried the cruel, wedge-shaped, smart head of all the weasels, but more so.

Suddenly, between stride and stride, the beast became motionless, and in that position—one paw uplifted, head out, eyes fixed—remained, till it seemed as if he must have frozen stiff with the cold. Nothing appeared to the keenest eye in front of the mink, nothing above, nothing around—just snow, snow, snow everywhere.

Then the beast rushed forward—not sprang, but charged—low and sure, and with an in-

describable swiftness, and instantly there was commotion. It was as if the very snow itself had come to life and fled, making noise enough in the stillness to wake the very bears and the beavers in their winter lairs.

Three fat birds, white as driven snow, burst upwards and whirred away like miniature aeroplanes, and they were ptarmigan.

One beast, white as carded wool, streaked off almost invisibly over the snow; and one remained, squealing, with the mink's fangs buried in the back of its neck; and they were hares.

Another beast, white as the purest china, stood, after one jump, with arched back and bristling fur, reviling the mink in a high-pitched, fiendish key, and he was a weasel.

None of them from the first had been visible to the mink, because they were motionless white objects on motionless white snow—for which purpose, indeed, Nature took the trouble to change the colour of their coats each year. But that made no odds to him, a mink's nose being as good as a human pair of eyes any day, and some days a bit better.

The mink hunted the weasel up a tree for his insolence, and this took him some time. Then he returned to his hare—and, to his surprise, there was no hare.

There were only the tracks of big snowshoes, which had come and gone, and said no word—taking the hare with them.

But no! What was this?

The mink dropped his white nose to the ground. He could have sworn he had killed that hare. And who ever heard of a dead hare running away?

Yet it had—or, at least, there was its scent leading away, true and strong, on the same route as the snowshoes had taken; but never before had he known a hare leave a track like this—a deep, regular groove, instead of the quadruple tracks, with the imprint of the hind-feet in front of that of the forefeet, as everybody knows.

However, there was the scent. And there was the mink, ravenous, starving for want of food. At no ordinary time would he have risked the madness, but now hunger had made him mad enough to risk anything.

Two hours later, in the ghostly darkness of the wood, the mink came up with his hare. It was lying at the foot of a tree, inside a little palisade of saplings, to the narrow entrance of which led, in a diminishing vista, a sort of passage of twigs stuck in the snow. The trail of the snowshoes, he ascertained, went on alone.

Very nervous was the mink, but nearly crazy with hunger. The hare had been opened, and smelt maddeningly. Moreover, there was no way in, except by that narrow entrance, across which lay a low log; at least, ten minutes' prowling round the place found none. Then at last he risked it, ran up the lane of twigs, and jumped the low log.

There was a sharp, metallic clash, such as can only be made by a trap; the mink stopped, writhed, stiffened, and was still in death.

Another muff!

IN WET COMPANY.

THE day was run down. The wet mud of the estuary turned, for a moment or two, to a sheet of molten glass, died down to purple and port-wine, and went out in steely gleams. Save for a glaze of green sky in the west, all became dark.

A sudden chill shiver ran over the scene.

The last gull had laughed himself into scornful silence, when there was the swish of wings. The 'flight,' that mysterious movement on the winter estuary, had begun. It would last perhaps five minutes, perhaps ten, and then would be over till the next night.

Once, as the wings whistled past, a duck quacked suddenly in quite homely fashion; once a snipe said 'S-c-a-a-p-e!' back in the black marshes; once one dunlin out of an invisible passing flock 'p-u-r-r-e-d;' and once the sword-like song of great wings told of travelling swans.

Suddenly dark figures in silhouette streaked across the last glimmer of western light. There were nine of them, moving at express speed in a perfect V. A soft, clear whistle swelled over the dank air. 'Wheu-u, wheu-u, wheu-u!' it called three times, and, swinging

as if on the end of a wire, the flock checked, swerved, showing a gleam of white and silver as each bird canted, swung round, and came down as silently as falling smoke.

It was a flock of wigeon, probably the commonest wild-duck of our coasts. They had come straight in from the sea, on whose cold bosom they had slept during the light hours.

Not a bird moved, after settling, for quite a minute. Then the leader—all gray-blue and chestnut, set off with a pure buff cap—dropped his head, and began to pluck at the fronds of the trailing wrack grass. All heads went down in unison.

If you had been very near, indeed, you would have heard that the birds were not silent, as appeared; they were all talking in soft undertones. From time to time one would straighten up and flap its wings, just as farmyard ducks do.

Now, this last was a bad habit. It could be heard quite far away, for sound travels wonderfully over shallow water.

On the water something floated. It might have been a strip of mud, only it moved. The rising tide slowly drifted it along. It was gray; it was squat. In the gloom it was scarcely noticeable.

Suddenly the cock-wigeon who led that flock put up his head. He remained quite motionless for perhaps twenty seconds, his beak pointed straight towards the squat, mud-like, half-guessed, half-seen shape that moved so almost imperceptibly.

And next instant he was climbing swiftly up to the stars on whistling pinions, his flock following in faithful imitation of his every action. In a few seconds their soft 'Wheu-wheu!' died into the upper dark.

Then, from the middle of that apparent low mud-hummock arose the seated form of a man, and one realised, as much by his language as anything else, that he was a wildfowler in his gunning-punt. A few yards nearer, and he would have wiped out that wigeon flock with a single discharge of his gun.

That lean, long wind that foretells the day whispered and sighed over the marshes, and purfled the shallows. A faint suggestion of the darkness being a little less dark stole upon the scene.

The old cock-wigeon, feeding with his flock, put up his round, buff head, and stretched one wing. He scented the day. Suddenly his head nicked round, and in a flash he had sprung upwards, his flock moving with him as

if the whole were moved by a single lever. There was a rush and a swirl in the water beneath them, and the sleek head of an otter shot up, whistled his chagrin at being beaten, and dived again.

‘Wheu-wheu!’ cried the wigeon as they whirled out to sea. They are there now—
asleep on the lap of the ocean. Go and see.

THE MIGHTY DREAD.

IT promised to be a sickening Christmas. The tenants had moved out of the house two days ago, leaving it as empty, dark, and hollowly echoing as a cave, and as cold as the snow, that covered the world without, could make it. There is no place so unspeakably desolate as the deserted habitation of man.

There was one tenant, however, who had not left, and he was utterly miserable. As dusk drew a curtain of blue haze across the spotless white garden, and the last cold robin sang his last bar of music outside the window for the crumbs that would never come, he, that tenant, awoke—singing. It was a funny, little, high-pitched, crooning sort of song, bound within one octave only, and ending on an ascending scale with a distinct effort at a trill.

The last thin rays of light from a bitter, pale-green sky proved that he was just an ordinary little house mouse; but nothing could show how hungry he was. He was hungry in two ways, for the yearning had arisen within him to add to his already heaped-up troubles by taking a wife, and that

yearning was worse than the pain in the roof of his inside.

There was no wife there, however; there was not a creature—his sharp nose and beautiful sweeping whiskers said so—except one half-asleep spider in a window-corner. The spider was not so frozen as to prevent it from biting him on that same nose when he went to eat it, and the formic acid which the spider kept in reserve for hectic moments like this made him jump quite six inches, and squeak so loudly in the echoing silence that he was terrified at the magnitude of his own voice, and streaked to his hole again quicker than one could snap a finger.

There followed a pause, and then he was out in the room again, surveying the wainscot, till the door intervened, and he arrived at the larder. The larder, however, was only an empty space, full of faint smells of food that had been; and, almost desperate, he peeped out under the back-door.

It did not fit well, that back-door, and there was a draught like several knives coming in under it; but any death, he felt, was preferable to starvation, and at his sixth attempt he reached the laurels.

A blackbird was warning all the world of feather to beware of the dark from his holly

fortress here; and a thrush, half-drunk with the cold, was kicking among the dead leaves for spiders and things that hoped to survive till the spring.

The mouse watched him, bright-eyed, when suddenly a steady tap-tap-tapping broke out in the stillness, coming from somewhere in the direction of the empty lawn, and, drawn as by ropes by his innate inquisitiveness, he crept farther, and peeped out.

About ten yards away, from a dank corner by the summer-house, on the top of a rough table, with its one leg stuck in the ground, the sound came steadily—tap, tap, tap, tap-tap! It was too dark even to see the tapper—like some tiny fairy of the snow hammering a coffin for the poor starving robin. All he could make out was the regular jerk, jerk, jerk of a little white disc on the top of the table. But the mouse deemed that further investigation might pay.

He could climb beautifully, of course, like all his people, and by way of the privet-hedge he climbed, till he came to twigs that brushed against the top of the 'table.' His bright eyes must have reflected the last faint, cold gleam of day, as his sharp muzzle poked out, for the tapping suddenly stopped.

For a moment the mouse stared. He found

himself looking at a little bird, blue-gray above, and pale yellow below water-line, so to speak, with a black satin skull-cap atop, and spotless, I had almost said bright, white cheeks. It was one of those cheeks the mouse had seen jerking, as its owner hammered out one of the last of the seeds which the late tenants used to put out on the 'bird table' every day. The bird was a great tit—great only among a family of dwarfs—officially, *Parus major*.

Now there was nothing about that gray little bird to suggest that he was less easily frightened than any other little bird—nothing, that is, in his size, but his black satin skull-cap did certainly give him a warning suggestion of a scowl.

The mouse did not think this, however. He hopped out. He appropriated the five remaining 'canary - seeds.' He insolently showed his teeth to the great tit, shark fashion, as the mouse and rat tribe have to do. There followed a flash of silver as the bird opened his wings, and the mouse was alone, cracking seeds.

Ten seconds later the mouse was not alone, not by any means, and he felt as if it was his head that was being cracked, and not the seeds at all. He spun like a top, and looked up in time to see a silver streak of the tit's

under-wings—the only part that showed in that gloom—vanish into the hedge. In an instant came another silver line drawn straight as a ruler, and he only just had time to dodge—and it was a lightning dodge, too—as the great tit struck at his eye.

Then that mouse got busy. Indeed, he had never before shifted from place to place so rapidly and continuously as he did—as he had to—during the next long minute, while the great tit, his mask off, and full of rage, swooped and darted above him, hammering at his skull, till the mouse felt it would crack, and that this astonishing little ruffian of a light-weight feathered champion would make a supper of his brains. And who shall say that Mr *Parus major*, the great tit, would have shirked doing that either?

And all the time the mouse was conscious of bells ringing in his head somewhere across the snowed-up landscape, and of laughter—human laughter—somewhere along a road. But his head rang, anyway, and he was not interested in the church-bells, however beautiful they might, and did, sound.

Then something terrible happened. It generally does in the wild, if you are small, and so foolish as to attract attention. The mouse was aware of being, with great sudden-

ness, quite alone, and, in the half of an instant, of being not alone. Indeed, it seemed as if a tent had suddenly collapsed, and he was inside it. That was the impression. Only this tent was of feathers—warm feathers; soft, downy, white feathers—and it smelt rather sickeningly musky.

I think that mouse's heart took one big leap up into his throat, and stayed there. He became amazingly anxious to get out from under the pitch-dark, smothering cover. But how?

Then, I fancy, instinct, handed down from a thousand ancestors, must have come to his aid, or perhaps he was too much pressed down. Anyway, he did not move at all at first; and when he did, it was only to back very, very gently and carefully, and as flat to the snow on the 'table' as ever he had condensed himself in all his life. Perhaps it was the snow that saved him, allowing him almost to burrow into it.

Soon he became aware that the apparent collapsed tent of feathers had developed either a claw, or a claw-like beak, which was feeling for him quietly and purposefully underneath itself, so to speak. It was a horrible time, and the mouse, to judge by appearance, seemed likely to die of palpitation on the

spot ; but he kept his head somehow, though he seemed half-hypnotised, and still backing slowly—oh, so carefully and slowly—at last felt—ah, the joy of it!—icy-cold air on his body. Next instant his head was out, all of him was out, and he found himself at the back of a white or barn owl, spread-eagled on the ‘table,’ with wings stretched wide and flattened—feeling for *him* underneath. If he had not been a house mouse, but a field mouse, he would have known at the first touch that that was one of the barn owl’s patented hunting tricks. He did not, however, and fell backwards off the ‘table,’ and darted into the hedge.

He spent fifteen minutes under a root of the hedge, apparently listening for the owl to go—as if owls did not fly without sound—and then, by moonlight now, continued on his way in the snow.

The world was strangely quiet, that ghostly quiet which comes with snow, except for the church-bells, and the mouse did not know what they meant. But there was no lack of business in the wild-world. All the hunters of the night, the prowlers of the fields, the searchers of the hedges, the things you never see by day, and most of us never even guess at, were awake and on the warpath. Also,

because the snow had driven them through famine, they were here—in the gardens, on the spot.

But, with little diversions, he kept to his course—any course, so long as it led to an inhabited house. We, who are privileged, can see him always hugging the shadows, always near cover, for he was not quite a fool.

He came to the rick-yard, and two beautiful, purplish, electric-bluish, round, little lamps. At least, that was all he saw ; not all he smelt. Those lamps represented the eyes of a cat, waiting for such as he, and he sat and shivered, not solely with cold, for half-an-hour, while the lazy, drifting snow-flakes nearly hid him. He was too afraid of making the half of a noise in the straw, which should flash to that cat's listening ears, to move.

At last the cat got peevish with fate, or remembered a better—and warmer—spot to find a meal in, and went ; and the mouse came out from under the bramble-patch, and crouched, a tiny, tiny little figure, in the lee of the rick. It was a treat to be out of the wind, which cut like a Sheffield knife, and the warm straw felt homely all round him.

And then a strange thing happened.

In the great farm-yard of the Manor House

close at hand, a chorus struck up—a chorus of human voices :

‘ Mark my footsteps well, my page,
Tread thou in them boldly.
Thou shalt feel the winter’s rage
Freeze thy blood less coldly.’

Waits !

The young, clear voices, lifted up in song, cut the still air with extraordinary distinctness.

The singing did not frighten him—the mouse. Indeed, it attracted him, fascinated him, hypnotised him, drawing him round the rick, as if by strings, to stand and quake, and listen, with all his little elfin ears. And then he sat up on his hindlegs, and *he sang*—his funny, little, crooning, mooning song, that seemed always meant only for himself, all alone there in the snow and the moonlight—it had come again now, a cascade of silver to turn the world into a white fairyland—forgetting, it seemed, the world and its deaths around him.

Finally, the singing ceased, and the mouse came to earth again, doubly. He listened, but could hear no sound but the rustling of the rats inside the rick, towering like a cliff above him. For some moments he seemed to debate within himself whether he should go into that rick or not. In fact, there are worse

homes for a mouse on a cold winter's night than a good wheat-rick of a thousand bushels—food and shelter from cold and foes, and all. But the rats—very many brown rats, by the sound of it! Books—natural history books—have said that mice and rats live in corn-ricks in perfect harmony. Just so; but, all the same, our little friend *Mus musculus* hesitated. He seemed to be thinking. *You* know what the books say, and *I* know what the books say, but did the rats know it? At any rate, we all know the villain rat, and very little of what we know is good. And so it was with this, our mouse. He passed on. In his generation he was wise.

He passed on in the direction of the singing, not entirely by chance, I like to think. This meant some risk: the crossing of open spaces; the surrendering one's self to moonlight; the negotiating of the perpendicular rick-yard wall—it looked like a bit of magic, that—the circling of the farm-yard, among sleeping fat stock, that blew and snorted hot, steamy blasts like whales; and, finally, the arrival at the ivy-smothered wall of the house.

Love, even love in 'the air,' and an empty 'tummy' have done some great things, made some great men, and some heroes, too. They drew, between them, that mouse, climbing

rather acrobatically, up that wall, disturbing many sparrows, even up to the roof; then through the hole by which those giddy air conquerors, the swifts, entered to their nests in summer, and so, down the wall again, inside this time, to the wall of the dining-room in the end, by a route explored, and here and there gnawed, by probably many generations of mice.

It was good to be in an inhabited house once again, to smell hot air, to sniff—oh!

Something scuttled in front of him, two somethings, and were still, with that stillness that marks a rodent disturbed. So was our mouse still, all but his little pointed nose, and that was 'working' continuously, like a little pulsating motor. And it told him plainly all that he wanted to know. It said that he had in front of him a young female mouse—a 'flapper' mouse, that is, and—for mice, like men, are precocious creatures—her lover.

Now, it is not a sound military maxim, as a rule, to fight on an empty stomach. I don't know if the mouse knew that, but he knew that it was the one time when he felt most savage. Anyway, the mouse, sounding his pet top note as a trumpet-call, charged.

It was a long, long fight, partly because the prize seemed to be more frightened of the

fighters than of anything else, and persisted in running away, and they, suspicious of unknown rivals, were perforce obliged to break off the battle each time and follow her. When they had cornered her, they went at it hammer and tongs again. Judging by appearances, she seemed to fear that the conqueror might be so enraged, or see so red, that he would set to and slay her. Yet appearances, in the wild, are unsafe to judge by, for there were times when she ignored, or seemed to ignore, the duellists altogether. Also, it was a long fight, because they had to bite upwards, more or less like sharks; because, too, they always wonderfully managed to meet the foe's chisel teeth with their own; and because they were so amazingly nimble—never there, but somewhere else. Sometimes they lost each other and the 'flapper' too, and then the little pulsating motor noses worked overtime, I can tell you.

Finally, our little friend, after getting his side branded red with a cross like unto that of a hot-cross bun, got in a lucky side-slash at his rival's throat. It was a nasty, sliding cut with the razor-sharp incisors, and it drew blood in a spurt, like sticking a miniature pig.

I do not know precisely where it landed, or if it cut the necessary jugular vein or not;

neither did our mouse, nor did he care. It sent the enemy off, staggering, in the darkness, anyway, like a drunken thing, and our mouse was left to lick his wounds and forget them, with the little female mouse.

He did, but he could not forget the pangs of hunger in the roof of his inside, and presently he led her off along a hole that showed at its end a little circle of golden light, like a sovereign, that foretold a room with the lamps alight.

It was a room—indeed, the dining-room—and as he poked his sharp nose out, he was brought up all standing by—music. It always affected him like that, music, and so strangely. It came floating in from the drawing-room, the doors of both rooms being open for the moment, and it was a chorus of human voices :

“Fear not,” said he (for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind) ;
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind.”

A man was walking up and down the dining-room, backwards and forwards, eternally smoking a cigarette and thinking. He was a tolerant man, and was fond of animals. Perhaps this was why he did not stop his per-

ambulations, or make any nasty, disconcerting, sudden noise, when our mouse, sitting on his hindlegs, began to sing—began to sing his funny little, quaint little, prattling, chortling song.

The mouse felt bolder after that, and crept in. The man's stride was so regular and soft that it hardly alarmed the mouse; was, in fact, almost soothing. It did not prevent the mouse from spotting instantly the saucer, half-full of the kitten's milk, on the floor.

Up and down, down and up, walked the man, and then suddenly started and peered forward, but he did not for an instant check his stride. He merely thought what a strangely dark shadow a chair-knob, or something, threw upon the white saucer; and then, as he turned, he saw that there was no chair-knob or anything to throw that shadow.

Wherefore, he swerved a little from his course and bent forward, and slowly he smiled, for he saw, most certainly did he see. It was our friend the mouse, calmly—at least, to all appearances—drinking from the saucer; and when he had finished, quite finished, he perkily ran about in the milk, as if to bathe his little feet, holding his tail most quaintly the while high up, and with a kink in the middle, like a broken twig, to keep it from getting wet.

The man approached very quietly, and stood within eighteen inches, looking smilingly down. He was very much surprised, for, mind you, this was no tame mouse, but an unadulterated mouse of the wild, or, rather, the walls.

‘ Well, I ’m ’—— muttered he.

But on the first word, as if he had broken an enchanted spell, as well as the silence, the mouse was gone, and the last word stuck on the man’s lips.

“ Fear not,” said he (for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind),’

came the beautiful words, in the full-throated, rich, clipped accent of educated English.

Some one had opened and shut the drawing-room door, letting out just those words, almost as it were a message. And the man, turning, dropped, with a yawn, into an arm-chair, and went to sleep.

Ten minutes later the servant, coming into the dining-room to clear away the Christmas dinner, disturbed two mice on the table, feasting from a plate beneath the shade of the mistletoe.

THE BIG BLOW.

SO far as he could see when he woke up, things did not look promising. He would scarcely have backed himself to see the next dawn, in fact. Although in reality the president of the elder rooks, he might have been the last-born nestling for all the chance he could perceive for himself.

The sky was like the lid of a lead box ; the ground resembled nickel-steel ; and the cold was enough to freeze the very grease that he used for preening his feathers with. There was no wind—it only breathed ; and it had been like this for days and days.

The rook flock showed as black blobs huddled on the trees about him. Below, in the understuff of the wood, thousands of starlings and redwings and thrushes were awaking to go out into the fields, food-hunting, so called, for another perishing day. Those who thought they had strength were getting ready for a long journey westward and by south, on the very off-chance of getting beyond the frost-king's grip.

The old president of the elders, who knew that if you don't keep a move on in such

weather you may go out by the process of freezing, began to preen busily.

Later, the rook elders gathered together for a council of war. From the point of view of human councils of war, it was a disgraceful proceeding, conducted without rule, but with much heat, and a most scandalous amount of talking, loud shouting, strong language, and, apparently, complete lack of self-control. But this was a council which was always at war, and always had been at war. The problem it had to solve was how to skirmish enough food where seemingly no food existed; to fill the crops of the flock, and so prevent them from freezing where they roosted the next night.

As suddenly as it had begun, the president, our old particular rook, appeared to break off the whole palaver by flying away heavily and slowly over the wood and the fields, which looked positively black under the frost. The air was still, and the old rook didn't like it. So he moved, with the flock trailing out after him, at his second-best speed.

Not, mark you, that the flight was quite in a straight line. He was going to the shore, where perhaps everything hadn't frozen as it had inland, but there were diversions by the way.

It was his eye that spotted the pigeon alongside a hedge, sitting suspiciously still ; and it was his beak which—well, seeking enlightenment—disclosed the fact that that pigeon was unwell. In less time than you would believe, that pigeon was dead, and half-a-dozen rooks were partaking of the first meal of the day.

Also, there was the cat with a partridge which had surrendered to the cold. Usually that old rook might have forgotten to see a cat, but this time he saw her all right. She saw him, too, and wished she had never been such a fool as to venture into that low, thin hedge. Yet it saved her life, or, at least, her eyes, from our friend and his flock. It did not save her the partridge, though ; that went down a dozen or so rook throats, simultaneously and in sections.

Thus it came about that by the time the shore of the estuary hove in sight the president of the elders and about two out of every ten of his friends were not quite so empty as they had been. But what is that to a rook ?

Somehow the old rook was a little uneasy about the estuary, although he had led the flock to it. The company rooks are likely to meet on an estuary at any time is liable to be cosmopolitan, to say the best of it ; at freezing-

time it might be anything. Therefore, when he saw before and below him, stretched far and wide upon the shining miles of mud ooze—it was low tide—what looked like sheets of glistening snow, he knew what he was in for. That dazzling whiteness was not snow, of course; it was gulls, hundreds upon hundreds of them, driven in from the open sea to take shelter here.

The rook flock let themselves down on still wings, led by the elders, to a special mussel-bed that they knew of. Not less than two hundred gulls sucked up in a wonderful white column to circle and scream around them, but the rooks made out they took no notice of that.

The mussel-bed was not sweet walking for land birds, being mainly half-frozen slush, but they stuck to the job.

There was one mussel, dead, which our friend found; and one shut, and alive, which he reduced to capitulation by simply dropping it from a height. There was a crab, too, which needed a lot of hammering to get at inside. Then there was a dead eel, that our rook, one big herring-gull, three common gulls, and a reprobate gray crow seemed to sight all in the same instant. The resulting collision of forces—a little maelstrom of wings

and bad language—was exciting to watch. The old rook, in the centre, simply sat on the prize, and waved his beak upwards in the air. When they had all done looking for the eel they couldn't see, his little game was spotted by his own flock, and before you could cry out, that eel, seized by black beaks from all parts of the compass, parted, if I may so put it, several ways at once, and was seen no more.

This little episode, however, was too much for the gulls—the herring-gulls, the common gulls, and the black-headed gulls. After all, the estuary was their domain, and not the rooks'. They rose like a white mist, and hung up above the rook flock—almost a solid, and a threatening, pall of beating wings and cries of execration.

The old rook looked up, and then at the rest of the elders, who were looking at him and each other. Till then they had all gone about their jobs with a fine—if perhaps assumed—indifference; but there was no disdain that crowd above them now. Our old rook decided that it was about time the immediate landscape became empty of rook. So the chief of the elders rose with his black crew, and soared slowly away over the flats—a long, straggling chain of untidy, clumsy-

looking figures—till he arrived at a stretch of marine grass.

There were green-necked wild-duck here, and prettily pencilled wigeon, teal with green spectacles tied with gold ribbon, spidery curlew with beaks like inverted scythes, and little white-waistcoated ringed plover dotted all over the scenery.

One rook dived down suddenly, and began to hammer at something that flapped among the grass; another party of four rooks discovered something else, which also flopped and quacked, in a deep gully; and our old friend himself was just in time to spot a red-shank vanishing under some hung-up seaweed, and to haul him out again. They were wounded birds, all of them. Some one had been shooting in those parts, and these luckless ones, that flapped so helplessly when they were caught slinking shyly into hiding-places, were what one might term the 'missing.'

After our old rook had dealt with his capture, he rose once more, and was volplaning down to settle upon another part of the mud, when two things happened at once. One was a bitter wind from the north, which caught him that moment sideways, and canted him half-over. The other was a hissing noise close in the air above him.

He did not wait to look ; at least, he only blinked one eye. He fell, quick as ever he knew how, sideways and for his life, thanking that puff of wind for throwing him into a falling position that permitted a zigzag and not a straight dive. And it was the zigzag that did it—just like a falling bit of paper—for it let the great, white, ferocious gerfalcon, swooping at the rate of a falling bullet, go by his tail, brushing it even, instead of smashing his spirit into the next world.

He had scarcely looked round from a panting, trembling gaze at the white apparition of the giant of the falcons, vanishing now into the horizon, when it struck him that it had really begun to blow, and, almost in the next instant, that it had really begun to snow. Then, being still a little off his balance at his remarkable escape, before he knew what had happened the whole estuary, mud, and sky, and watery channels, and all, had gone out in a white whirlpool, and the air was one wild, mysterious confusion of howling wind, all inextricably mixed up with the sudden confused rallying-calls of surprised birds.

For a moment he stood with wide legs, cawing lustily the rallying-cry for the flock to unite. Everywhere the elders were doing the same thing, gradually drawing in towards

each other, till at length black forms began to merge in upon him out of the whirling white snow-fog.

There was urgent need to quit. The tide was rising, and to stay out on the estuary in that inferno was to risk many sorts of unpleasant death; but it was no fool's game even to get the flock together to begin with.

At last, however, the company was complete, or sounded to be—anything like accurate seeing was out of the question; and they started—in the teeth of that father of all the winds.

When our old rook let go of the mud, he hung in the air, facing the wind, with wings flapping at full power, and he never made headway an inch. Then, after a bit, he came down again. This was awful. We may put the wind at, say, about forty miles an hour, at least, not to mention the blinding snow. It was a blizzard, no less, as cold as could be, and he and the flock were by no means well fed; indeed, they were still hungry. Their chances of seeing next dawn had, like the thermometer, gone down to zero.

There was silence and stillness for a moment or two after that false start, while the wind nearly blew them over where they stood, and even the mud began to turn white. Then our

old friend and half-a-dozen more of *his* old friends launched themselves again, this time edging sideways, backwards and forwards, like kites. Others followed, one after the other; and so, rising and falling, hanging and giving back, drifting, and tacking, and edging off and on, they began the battle to the shore.

You could scarcely see them in the white mist of whirling snow; most of them could not see many of the others. They knew the direction, however, and, for the rest, were held together more or less by an occasional throaty call let out by an elder whenever he had a second to spare to think about it. A large part of the flock reached the shore at last, half-alive; and sank—blown like great pieces of burnt paper—here and there upon the snow, already piled high among the sandhills.

Rest—absolute, prostrate, panting rest—was essential before they could get anywhere farther. They were thankful to have got off the estuary at all, over which they could already hear the tide rising with an angry mutter. Moreover, none of them seemed quite to know where they wanted to go. It was dry land here, and the sandhills kept the wind off—that was enough for some minutes, anyway. Some of them, the younger generation, panting like strained motors, seemed to

think it would have been enough for all time, and were almost ready to go to sleep on the spot, and freeze, and have finished with it. The rest, however, were not fools, or they wouldn't have been rooks, and were not likely to surrender thus.

It was about this time that the president of the elders, squatted craftily beneath a wind-bowed bush, and behind a hummock—he looked like a great sooty hen—opened both his eyes wide, and fairly jumped inside himself. He began to realise slowly that he was staring at what one might term, if not a miracle, at any rate a special 'sending,' and he nearly danced with excitement and joy as the fact hit him.

All the time, without a stop, and apparently without an end, there were going past him in the blizzard, as a steady stream from east to west, a continuous procession of small birds. Singly, in pairs, in bunches of from three to eight, and in flocks, they fluttered past—the air was full of them. He could, even as he lay, see blackbirds and thrushes, fieldfares and redwings, skylarks, meadow and rock pipits, and goodness knows what besides.

By this time several of the flock were not only down, but almost out, from exhaustion and famine. Even the old president himself

—and he had scooped the lion's share of most things—was feeling weak and giddy. Food was what they wanted; food was what they must have, or quit living. And here it was before their eyes, banquets of it, and they couldn't take it because they were too weak, or so they all thought, apparently, for not one rook made any attempt to 'hold up' a small bird.

And then it was that a little bunch of feathers flopped down into the piling snow a yard from the old rook. He cocked one eye upon it, and flopped to the spot. Then he dug it out. It was a skylark; at least, it had been. It was now some feathers tied to a bone or two. It could not rightly be said to be alive, and it was not dead. But our rook made short work of it.

Soon after, three meadow pipits settled. He walked up to them, and in three hops caught one. A child could have done the same. They would have fed out of your hand, if you had been there. And the ground was covered with these little birds settling to rest a few minutes, or hunt vainly for food that did not exist, and then struggle on.

Now, it was our old friend looking for his bird in, and hauling it out of, the snow that put the rest of the flock in the way of a feed,

when they would have starved else. Rooks are amongst the most intelligent of birds—they have to be—and they were one and all quick enough to note their leader's discovery, and to go and do likewise. Directly the small birds settled on the soft snow, many of them sank and burrowed into it. Their instinct was to hide their weakness from enemy eyes. Moreover, under the snow meant shelter and warmth compared to the wind above.

Those that did not go under the snow when they settled were no good to the rooks; they were too lively and too strong yet to be worth attention. Nevertheless, the old rook president had, in his way, by example, saved the flock, for the little birds, once under the snow, were invisible, and the rooks seemed not to have had the initiative to look for what they could not see, until their leader stumbled upon the lucky discovery.

And so the rook flock fed, feasted, banqueted enormously. There was never any need to rise and battle with the wind, never any need to do anything but just hop about and pick up half-dead birds as they were wanted.

Sheltered well from the wind, on the south side of a sandhill, the old rook sat preening himself as the day drew to an end. He de-

served well of the flock, whom he had led out at dawn, a company of starving scarecrows, with death already flying at their shoulders. He would take them back now at dusk, a squadron of full-fed, full-blooded, lusty birds, full of energy, fight, and go. And to-morrow the weather would change; he could feel it in his body. The sou'-wester would blow, there would be rain, and famine would be gone—gone for another year, and——!

It was a shrewd, cruel blow, delivered without warning, and from the back. The old rook half-turned, quick as quick, even as he pitched forward, fanning out his tail, and throwing up his wings, shield fashion. He had a vision of a thick, black head, a gray-and-black body, wings that hung over him, and a beak like a gouge aimed at his eye. Then he ducked—fought.

There was no need to ask the style and title of the attacker; only the gray or hoodie crow, the corsair Viking invader from northern Europe, carried such a grim and dreaded mantle; and woe betide any that fell into his power! That pied form, that harsh, mocking croak, was the terror of the winter shore, and scarce a bird that flew did not hate or fear him.

Out of the corner of his eye the old presi-

dent could see other gray crows, trailing after one another, like ghouls, out of the surging snow-fog; and he heard the cawings of his own flock, rising all about him; heard the clash of beaks and beat of feathers as other rooks engaged in combat.

Then followed an interval of awful, desperate struggle, during which he had no time to do anything but save his neck. By savage and brutal rushes the gray crow tried to beat him down. Although carrying only half-an-inch more in length, and two inches to the good in wing-span, the crow seemed to have the best of the weight, as he had, too, in murderousness of beak and stocky build. Moreover, the rook was a killer only by force of hard times; the gray crow killed without the inducement of any hard times.

But it was a close and grim fight nevertheless. Once the gray crow had the president by the neck, but with a wonderful upward spring he got clear again. In doing so the rook just missed losing one eye, and, blinded by the blood from the gash that opened up beside it, he struck wildly, receiving a dig on the back that made him feel sick and giddy, only to turn and send in a low lunge that prevented his gray cousin gaining any advantage from the blow.

Then the crow stood off, and pondered. This rook, because of his exceptional size, was not to be broken down by direct frontal attack, evidently. How now, then?

The old rook, swaying a little, watched his enemy with one eye, and let the other rove around, and then—then his heart sank. There were plenty of crow-like forms about, but not one of them *all* black. He was alone. The flock had deserted him, fearing the crows more than they troubled about him as a brother. And, upon my word, I don't wonder. There was not one of them that he had not bullied and robbed at one time or another—bullied and robbed, as the leaders of all bandit gangs do.

'Curra! curra! curra!' shouted the gray crow, hoarsely and loudly, into the raging wind; and instantly half-a-dozen of his gang lifted on heavy wings, and came flapping low, through the drifting snow, towards him.

The old president of the elder rooks knew what was coming. For a moment he stared down at his legs, buried in snow, where a little bright-red stain was slowly gathering upon the spotless white. Then he looked up into the blizzard, tearing by like some live fiend overhead. It, at least, would show him more mercy than these outlaw cousins of his.

He knew the reputation of the breed, and had no wish to face it.

Then, quick as thought, before any could move, he flung himself up into the gale, and surrendered himself to it. In an instant half-a-dozen of the crows were up too, after him, but not for long, or far. To do what he had done was to commit suicide. They knew it, and had no intention of following suit, so dropped again quickly. There seems no reason to presume that he did not know it also.

In a breath the howling inferno of the wind caught him, and before he could even so much as turn, he was out over the seething, chopping estuary. And there we may leave him. He never came back. I don't know what happened to him in the end, but there is more than a suspicion that the gulls—who rarely miss much—were not ignorant.

THE END.



