Walks Talks
Travels and Exploits
# of Two Schoolboys

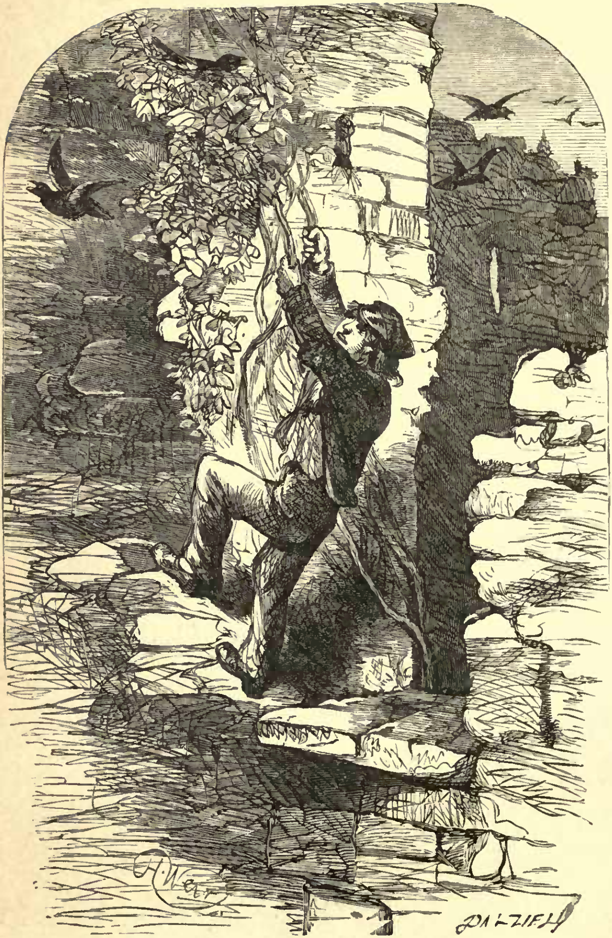
For the Boys.
Reg. Wilfr. Percy. & L Gordon
from their affte Father
14 April /92

WALKS, TALKS,

TRAVELS AND EXPLOITS

OF

TWO SCHOOLBOYS


H. Weir
DALZIEL

Jack after the Starling's Nest.—p. 103 *Frontispiece*

WALKS, TALKS
TRAVELS AND EXPLOITS
OF
TWO SCHOOLBOYS

A Book for Boys

BY

THE REV. J. C. ATKINSON

CANON OF YORK AND INCUMBENT OF DANBY
AUTHOR OF 'PLAYHOURS AND HALF-HOLIDAYS,' 'FORTY YEARS
IN A MOORLAND PARISH,' ETC.

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PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

THE author of the following pages feels that something in the shape of an explanation at least, if not an apology, may justly be expected from him for the apparent presumption of reproducing a book which was written for, and addressed to, the 'Schoolboy Public' of no less than thirty-three years ago. His apology must be, not that the book met with an even flattering reception from the beginning, but that now, for several years past, correspondents new and old, and from many parts of the kingdom, who were boys themselves when the book first appeared, and who now have boys of their own, have inquired of him once and again as to his willingness to reproduce both the present volume and its sequel (*Playhours and Half-Holidays*), and perhaps the most grateful response he could make is that which is offered by the re-issue of the volumes in question.

DANBY, 8*th February* 1892.

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CHAPTER I.

Elmdon School—Dr. Tickletail—Dr. Noble—Jack Edwards—Holiday Rambles—School Traditions—The Ghost—Cricket—Returning to Quarters.

What a nice old town Elmdon was! I was at school there: that was in old Dr. Tickletail's time. How well I remember the Doctor, with his rusty gown that had been black once, and his spectacles that would not sit straight across his nose, but rode like a butcher-boy, all down on one side; and his cane, which used to come flying across the school, and had to be carried back to its owner by the boy that was going to try its taste; and his finger jingling time with the key of his desk as he sang—for he didn't read—the odes of Horace. And I haven't forgotten the coaches, twelve "up" and twelve "down" every day; and how they were covered, as well as filled, inside and out, with turkeys and hares, and pheasants and partridges, just the last days before the Christmas holidays begun; and the huge flocks of geese which used to go cackling and waddling along the road about Michaelmas, with their gozzards (goose-herds) to drive them and take care of them in their slow, tiresome, tedious journey up to London to be eaten there. But all this is many years ago. It is more than twenty years since the good old Doctor flung his cane for the last time, and was laid in the quiet churchyard, near the little door through which he saw his boys pass into the church, Sunday after Sunday, for so long. The coaches are forgotten as well as the Doctor; the Christmas turkeys and game go up in the luggage van, and the geese in sheep trucks, tier above tier; and when the holidays come, the boys race down to the station, not far from the river at the bottom of the town, instead of being taken up at the school by the "Blue," or the "Wellington," or the "Telegraph."

I left long before the railway came, and how strange it seemed to me, when, having to go to Elmdon again after several years, on coming out from a cutting I found myself passing just below the dear old churchyard, and the great old elms that surrounded it to the south. How well I remembered them, and the scrape I got into when the parson's man caught me one morning cutting notches and driving nails in the huge twisting stalks of ivy that clothed those elm-tree trunks—for I was trying to get gum-ivy, which an old fishing book I had said was a famous thing to anoint the baits with and make the fish bite; only it never made any difference that I could find out.

The reason of my going back to Elmdon was this. I had been paying a visit to my old schoolfellow and friend, Harry Benson. We of course got talking about old school scenes, and exploits, and scrapes, and it made me very desirous to see the old place once more; and so when he went on to talk of his younger son, Bob, who was now at school there, and how well he was doing, and what a good master and worthy successor to our old Doctor the present head-master, Doctor Noble, was, I determined that on my way home from London—whither I had to go after leaving Harry Benson's—I would go round by Elmdon and make a visit to Bob, (who was my god-son, and whom I had not seen since he was promoted to jacket and trousers,) the excuse for doing so.

Well, the 2.30 train was not more than five minutes late, and almost before I had time to turn round on the platform, two lads came up to me, and the shorter of the two spoke to me at once, saying, "I am sure you must be Mr. Spencer."

I couldn't help smiling, and replied, "Why, what makes you think so?"

"Oh! because they told me——"

"They told you," interrupted I; "who told you?"

"Why, in a letter I got from home yesterday morning, they said I was to look for a gentleman that wanted shaving, and I am sure *you* want it, sir. And besides, I think——"

But here he paused, looking up into my face with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well," I said, after a moment or two waiting for him to go on, "and what do you think besides?"

"Why, that you look like a 'brick,' and papa always says you *are* a brick and no mistake."

As I happened to have a beard that would have been a small fortune to a sofa-stuffer, and did not feel inclined to disclaim looking like "a brick," whatever that might imply, I acknowledged that I was Mr. Spencer, and shook hands very heartily with Master Bob.

"And who is your friend?" I said to him, after having sent forward my luggage to the "Angel," where I was going to stop, and beginning to walk in the same direction myself.

"Oh! that's my cousin Jack, sir—Jack Edwards. We are in the same form, and sleep next beds to each other, and are great friends. He's a capital good fellow—ain't you, Jack?"

"Well, I'm not up to half as many things as you are, Bob; but still I don't want to be a muff."

As we walked on, after leaving the station, plenty of information was given me as to school politics, and parties, and progress. I soon knew that Gibson was first boy, and that Donaldson, who as second boy had pushed him hard, had been unlucky enough, in an unthinking moment, to construe *fœminis bobus* in his "Tacitus" by "female bulls," and was nicknamed accordingly on the instant, of course; how the feud between "the boys" and "Fuller's boys" was as fierce as ever; how the latter taunted the others with being "bone-pickers," from the alleged stinginess of the school dinners; how, the morning but one before, some fourteen or fifteen of Fuller's school had set on four or five of their opponents, when out for their morning run on the London road, and would have thrashed them terribly but for the opportune arrival of half a dozen of the fifth form, who had turned the tables; so that "the boys"—though still inferior in numbers—had succeeded in putting their assailants to flight, and drubbed three or four of them to their heart's content. All this and much more I listened to as we walked up the long street that terminated in the open space before the old schoolhouse.

Just as we turned off to the left to go to my inn, instead of advancing straight on to the great gate of the school-yard, we met a tall, dark, good-looking man, apparently about fifty years old, who was on the instant most respectfully "capped" by my two young companions. He nodded kindly to them, and said as he passed, "You've met with your friend then. You have till five o'clock. Don't be late."

This was Dr. Noble, and from the glance I had at his countenance, and the kindliness of his smile and manner to the lads, I was not surprised to hear how highly and warmly they spoke of him. "There wasn't anything he couldn't do. He had been the best bowler in his 'eleven' when he was a young man, and he would sometimes take up a bat now when the school side was practising, and even Pettit, who was five feet eleven in his stockings, and could throw a cricket-ball ninety-five yards, and hit harder 'swipes' than any other of the boys, couldn't play as the Doctor did. And then he could fish, and shoot, and ride, and row, and they knew he had caught five salmon one day the very last holidays, and they didn't know how many trout another day, when he was up in Scotland. And he was such a scholar too, and took such interest in the boys that tried to do well. And they believed there wasn't a bird or a beast, or hardly an insect, but he knew all about them; and he was so kind, if he saw any of the boys taking a pleasure in Natural History, he helped them all he could, and told them they might go and ask him any questions they liked, one particular day every week."

"Do *you* ever ask him anything?" I said.

"I should think we do, just," was Master Bob's reply. "Why, this was our day for being out, only you were coming, and so we went to the station instead. Almost every Thursday, if it's fine, we get such glorious rambles in the country. We have from twelve to five, and sometimes six, and all we have to do is, to ask Dr. Noble leave to go here or there, as we want. And then, when we come back, if he happens to see us, as he often does, he generally asks us where we have been, and what we have seen, and explains anything we ask him about, and perhaps lets us look at some of his books, which have got just what we want to know in them. Sometimes, too, he takes some of us out with him, when he goes out for anything in particular, such as a plant or an insect. And it's so jolly to go with him, over hedge and ditch, across the moors, over the brooks by narrow planks or a jump, and then to be set to look for what he wants, and told how to know it if we see it. 'Tisn't often though, he gets time to get out like that. I know I wish he could go twice as often; and I'm sure he likes it as much as we do, and chaffs us like fun if we lag behind, or are afraid of the thorns, or get into a bog, or jump into a ditch instead of over it; or anything like that."

I found that the Doctor's merits and qualifications were a subject of unfailing interest to my young companions, and I had many little instances of his goodness and wisdom, as well as skill in manly exercises, related to me. Indeed, the first half-hour of our walk, after I had seen about my room and dinner at the "Angel," was almost entirely taken up by the two lads in talking about their master; and it was not till I had asked two or three questions about other matters, that they began to talk freely of the things which are usually most interesting to schoolboys. I then heard that "the ghost" still paid its nocturnal visits, and it was clear enough to me that, though they affected to make light of it, they were much more awed than they liked to acknowledge. So I told them my own recollections. I, in my time—as they were doing now—slept in the "long attic," and, night after night, soon after we had got to bed, the mysterious and—as all the boys thought and felt—awful knocking began. One evening, I told them, old Dr. Tickletail left orders that he should be called the moment the noises began. One of the boys, therefore, who was, indeed, almost a man grown, did not undress. About nine o'clock, the first sounds—for which we were all listening so intently we could hear our hearts beat—were heard; the steady, low beat, beat, beat, as of something softer than one's fist against a door or wainscoting. Rice instantly crept noiselessly down to the Doctor, and in a few minutes up he came, with poker in his hand; behind him the second master, with a long pistol in his; then the English master, then the Doctor's man with a lantern, and last of all Rice himself. The procession went noiselessly through the long attic, and in through a small door at the further end of it, into a long, narrow, low passage, which ran down the whole length of the two rooms known as the "long attic" and the "short attic," just at our bed-heads. We heard their steps, tramp, tramp, along behind us, and were in agonies of expectation. Not a whisper, not a breath was heard among all the twenty boys there. But no pistol was fired; no scuffle was heard. The low beat we had heard every night for weeks, and which continued almost up to the moment they entered the dark passage, was stilled, and in a few minutes all returned.

They had searched everywhere, the Doctor said, but nothing was to be seen. No means of entry existed, save through the little door they had gone in at, and the corresponding one on to the leads, which was quite secure. There was not a brick loose, nor a hole in the plaster. The noise, therefore, we had heard so often, and which had frightened us so much, was probably made by rats, which, it was well known, often did contrive to make extraordinary noises. It could not be made by a human creature, and of course we were not so foolish as to suppose it could be made by anything of a supernatural character.

And so the Doctor left us;—of course, more uneasy and restless than before, particularly as he had scarcely been gone two minutes, before the strange, slow knocking began again. I hardly knew how we got to sleep that night; but I recollect well that we heard "the ghost"—as we all had now got to call it—every night, for weeks together, that year and other years after it. I told them I had been down the passage myself—for I didn't like feeling myself a coward about it—and alone, the year I left school; but could not find anything to add to, or take from the report which the Doctor made that memorable night. What it was, I could not say. It might be rats; but I did not believe so. I knew it was none of my schoolfellows; and, in one word, it was altogether unaccountable. They, too, were convinced that the sounds, which they described as exactly the same, and recurring at the same time, and with the same intermissions as were still so fresh in my recollection, did not proceed from any of the boys. All alike were much too uneasy for that; and, as for rats, how could they make such noises? The two lads, however, were not quite so confident as myself that there was some natural explanation for the sounds, if only it could be found out. It was to them clearly "the ghost."

From "the ghost" they got to cricket, and I had a full, true, and particular account of the match between the Elmdon-School Eleven and the Sunbury boys, and how the latter had had the great advantage of getting many a hint, and some teaching, from the old professional player, Samuel Balls, who now lived in Sunbury; how, notwithstanding that, our Eleven had beat the Sunbury Eleven with six wickets to go down; mainly through Pettit's slashing hits and Ned Hayward's slow bowling, which the Doctor had told him to try, from having seen Balls play years before, and thinking that, most likely, the Sunbury lads would be used to what everybody knew was his favourite style of bowling. So wrapped up were my companions in their account of the match, and the exciting incidents in it, that I had to remind them of the Doctor's caution "not to be late." It wanted but ten minutes to five, and they had a long half-mile to go. So, briefly settling with them that they were to come to me again in the evening, as soon as they were at liberty, if Dr. Noble would allow them, I walked on to the "Angel" at a more leisurely pace than that adopted by Bob and his cousin.

CHAPTER II.

At Elmdon still—Docwra's Mill—The Bridge—A Plucky Rat—Old Exploits—Bob's Narrative—Leaving Elmdon.

ABOUT half-past seven, I saw my young friends crossing the square from the school-gates to the inn, and a few seconds after, Bob's sharp rap at my door announced their readiness to obey my bidding to "Come in." Finding they had more than an hour good, we strolled off in the direction of the river. It was a calm, fair summer evening, with a few small light clouds hung in the sky, those in the west tinged with rose-colour and orange, deepening in hue as the sun neared the horizon. The old mill,—Docwra's mill,—still stood where it used. I almost expected to see the sturdy old Quaker miller cross from the house to the mill, as if the last twenty-five years had not been. There was the mill-tail, and there the back-water, and here the sluice-gates that the young eels used to surmount in so wonderful a way; the first climbers often drying up and remaining fixed to the wood by their own slime, and so making an easier pathway for their successors: there again, the favourite haunt of the gudgeon shoals; and there—where the back-water comes into the main stream again—the place where I had caught those four grand perch. We moved slowly on towards the bridge, and then, crossing over by it, we turned on to the Whaldon-road, simply, I believe, because it lay for some distance along the bank of the stream. The leap of some fish after a fly, the crossing of a water-rat, the croak of the water-hen a little lower down the river, the rapid flight and dip of the swallow, all were full of interest to the two boys as well as myself; and many times as they had noticed these things before, still both had as much quiet pleasure at their recurrence as if—nay more than as if—each had newly occurred for the first time. They seemed to invest each actor in this natural scene with a sort of quaint, familiar personality. "Look there," said Bob, "there's a big chub by that bush. I know him. He broke Watson's line one day, and he came and looked at a grasshopper I put on my hook the day before yesterday, and then gave a lazy wallop with his tail, which said as plain as talking, 'Wouldn't you like me to gobble it down?

But old chub aren't caught with hooks with an inch of shank to 'em showing.' And away he went. But he'll have that yellow moth as sure as a gun. There! I said so"—as the poor moth, fluttering out of the bush, just touched the water and was sucked in in an instant. "That's the water-rat," he whispered a minute or two after, "which old Beasley shot at six times with his pocket pistol; and he might have shot sixteen times, only the gamekeeper came up, hearing the shots, and frightened Mr. Rat by speaking. I know him by his black fur. Listen to that water-hen; she has lost two of the little black puff-balls that she calls young ones, and she's half calling them, and half screaming about it. Croak again, old lady. I saw the wicked old pike catch down one of them."

"Why," I said, "you seem to have a speaking acquaintance with half the fish, fowl, and four-footed beasts in the neighbourhood, Bob. Do they know you as well?"

"No," he replied, "I wish they did; specially that old chub and the pike. But I do like to take notice of fishes and birds and other living creatures; and I do so enjoy a walk like this by the river side, or a good ramble over the hills, and on to the moor, and through the woods. I always see something new every time, and the more I see, I think the more I like it, and the more I want to see and know."

"I am sure it is so with me," said Edwards, or Jack, as his cousin usually called him, and who did not talk half so readily and willingly as Bob did. "I had no idea what pleasure one might have in a walk till I came here, and Bob and I got to be 'thick,' and liked to be together as much as we could. I never knew anything about all these things till I saw Bob taking notice of everything, and making the notice he took useful to him in many ways, such as finding nests, and catching fish, and getting baits, and lots of other things. I used to be quite puzzled at first, to know how he knew things, or found them out. But now," he added, "I begin to know a little more than I used, and every new walk I get with Bob, or especially with the Doctor, I get hold of something fresh."

Much pleased with my young friends, I asked them several questions about the neighbouring country, and about many of the old scenes which had been familiar to me in my own school days, and which were deeply impressed on my memory in connexion with some schoolboy incident or exploit,—some birds-nesting, or nutting, or fishing expedition. In this way I had little narratives of what they had seen, one day, in a particular part of the moor; another day in Turley

Wood; a third day, at the confluence of the little Whitwater with the larger stream into which it poured itself a few miles below Elmdon. And I became so interested in their accounts, that at last, I fairly became boy enough to ask for an account of one of their expeditions—to which frequent reference had been made—beginning with their start off from the school, down to their return late in the afternoon. Bob straightway began—for he was the chief speaker throughout, and his cousin seldom did more than correct his inaccuracies, if he showed any, or confirm his recollection, when appealed to by him for that purpose. The little narrative I thus listened to as we returned towards the school, seemed to me so interesting, that after the lads left me for the night, I made notes of it, with the intention of writing it out at length, and as nearly in the words of my godson and his friend as I could, as soon as time and opportunity would permit me. During the next day and part of the third, I saw as much of my young friends as their school duties would permit, and more than one similar account of a walk did I listen to, all of which I took early opportunities of writing out fairly for the benefit of some young friends I was much interested in at home, and who seemed, a few days after, to listen with great delight as I proceeded to read to them what I had written. Before leaving Elmdon, I fixed that Bob and his cousin were to come over, if their several fathers would allow them, to my house, and spend at least a week of their holidays with me, and see what, in the way of novelty and interest, the country in which I lived, and to which they had never yet paid a visit, would be able to present to them. I then shook hands with them, and taking my place in the train, was soon hurried off, leaving them apparently as much pleased with their new acquaintance as I was with mine.

CHAPTER III.

Walk the First—Loach Hunt—Partridge's Nest—The Warren—Snipe's Nest—Pewits and Eggs—Hagley Beacon—The Mere—Ducks and Nest—Coots, Waterhens, and Dabchicks.

The first walk of which Bob gave me an account was described to me much in the following terms:

"We had had our monthly collections," said Bob, "and had worked hard to do the best we could, and were very glad to get out with a whole afternoon before us, and the day everything we could wish for a jolly long ramble. We knew we had done to the Doctor's satisfaction, for we had seen him nod and smile two or three times when we had given answers that pleased him, or construed a tough bit, and showed we remembered something he had told us when it came over in regular lessons. So we did not mind a bit going up to him as soon as he came out of the school, and asking him to give us leave to go off for the afternoon. He gave his permission almost before we had asked, with the inquiry, 'Where are you going?' We told him we were thinking of getting up as far as Hagley Common, and home round by the Fox-Spinney."

"A very nice walk," said he; "I wish I could take it myself."

So we got a good lunch of bread and cheese, and started off without delay. Well, you know, we were soon over the bridge, and turned off up Watery Lane. Jack had never seen a stone loach then, and so I thought I would show him one. "Jack," I said to him, "I'm going to catch a fish."

"Why, you've no rod, nor even a line or hook with you; what's the use of pretending you are going to fish?" was Jack's reply.

However, Bob just turned his sleeves up, and began to turn the stones over that lay in the shallow running water which gave its name to the lane they were going along. Four stones, five, six were turned up, but with no result. Jack thought Bob was losing time and shortening their walk for nothing. However, the next moment he saw something dart from under the stone Bob had just moved, and, making a little wake in the shallow water, swim straight to another stone, and wriggle itself underneath it. His curiosity was now excited, and he jumped eagerly from the dry bank he was standing on into the wet lane beside Bob, rather splashing him as he did so.

"Keep back, you clumsy Cockney," cried Bob, "and don't come and show you are as awkward with your hands as you are with your feet, and frighten my fish before I can catch it."

Jack, who knew Bob's rough, good-tempered way, only laughed at being called "a clumsy Cockney," and stood still as he was bid. Bob proceeded to examine the position of the fish under the fresh stone. He saw there was a little accumulation of sand at the side of the stone opposite to that at which the loach had gone under it, so that the little fish could not work its way out behind, unless he lifted the stone quite up; so he tried to turn it up as if he were opening a box lid, very slowly and gently. As he lifted it in front the fish tried to get more under it at the back, until at last Bob saw his time was come, and put his finger and thumb very cannily in and caught his loach. Jack was extremely interested at the capture, and at the manœuvres which had led to it, and examined the little fish closely.

"Why it has no scales," he said, "and its tail is much more like an eel's tail than the tail of a fish. And look at those things hanging down from its mouth; whatever are they for?"

Bob could not explain the use of that odd-looking appendage, but he told his companion several other fish had something of the same sort. He then put the little fish back into the water, before

Jack had "half satisfied his curiosity," he said. So Bob told him to try and catch one for himself, which, after two or three failures, and a very exciting chase from stone to stone, he at last succeeded in doing. The loach now caught was quite a large one, being nearly or quite four inches long; and Jack examined its pale brown sides and eel-like tail with much delight; soon, however, returning it to the water, and going on after Bob, who was already some distance in advance.

"I say, old fellow, did you ever see a stickleback?" was his salutation as Jack came up with him.

"No," said Jack, "I never did; what's it like?"

"Well, next time we go out I know a ditch that is half full of 'em; and aren't they beautiful fellows just now? at least some of 'em; their bellies all gold, and blue, and violet, and green."

He added several particulars as to their habits and history which Jack thought very strange, and he wasn't quite sure Bob wasn't "chaffing" him when he said that their bright colours left any of them that happened to get licked in a battle with a brother stickleback.

Having proceeded about half a mile along Watery Lane, which, however, had ceased to deserve its name from the time they turned a sharp corner in it, and began to ascend a slight hill, they turned off along a footpath across several fields. In one of these fields the path ran close along the hedge for some distance, the brushwood of which grew out of a thick bank. Bob's sharp eye detected the twinkle of a much smaller and darker eye than his own, behind a small decayed stub: a second glance told him it belonged to a partridge, though the plumage of the bird resembled the adjoining objects so much in colour, that it was by no means easy to detect her as she sat. Bob drew back a step or two to join Jack, who was a little behind him, and said,

"Here's a partridge on her nest, old fellow. Come and look at her. Gently now."

So Jack went on very gingerly, and with his eye followed the direction of Bob's finger, but saw nothing. In vain he looked, peering about, until at last, the partridge, disliking the continued loitering and peeping of the lads so near her, slipped off her nest, and, with a great whirr—making Jack's heart thump with its suddenness—flew off. Then the lads saw she was covering only five eggs.

"She has more to lay," said Bob; "that's what she was after now. She'll come back as soon as we have gone, lay her egg, cover her nest up, with those old oak leaves I dare say, and then be off to her business or pleasure with her mate all the rest of the day."

"Poor creature," said Jack, after a few seconds of silence, as they walked on; "it is a pity she should have so much trouble for nothing."

"For nothing?" cried Bob; "what do you mean?"

"Why, that her nest being so close to the footpath, it is sure to be found. If nobody else found it, the first dog that goes by when she's there will scent it out, and then good-bye to her eggs."

"Oh! never fear," was Bob's reply; "nineteen people out of twenty would never think of looking for a nest there, and *you* know if it would be easy for the twentieth to find it."

"Ah! yes," answered Jack, "but then the dogs."

"I tell you what, Jack, it is a very queer thing, and I don't know how to make it out; dogs never do find a sitting partridge. I have known pointers even, and setters go close by partridges sitting on their nests, every day almost, and never take any notice of them. Why, last year there was a nest on the bank just opposite our gate at home; and old Don and Sancho, as they ran out when my father took them out for exercise, almost poked their noses on to her sometimes, but she sat quite still, and they never suspected a partridge was near them. My father said he had known lots of such cases. It's very funny; I don't know, but he says it's because they don't give out any scent when they sit so still for a long time together."

They had now reached the fields which bordered on the common. The common was separated from the enclosures by a kind of turfen wall, nearly four feet high, and surmounted by furze bushes placed all along it, and kept in their place by the weight of sods laid firmly on, and also by long pegs. Bob went straight to a sort of stile, which resembled two short, broadish ladders, with their lower ends stuck into the ground on either side the wall, and their upper ends secured together above the wall, with a sort of projecting end to hold by when getting over.

"What an odd stile!" thought Jack; "why isn't there one like those in the fields? And where's the gate?" Questioning Bob about these matters, that young gentleman, for answer, bade him "use his eyes."

"Why, so I have, and I can't see a gate, though there must be a mile of this queer wall in sight. And I'm sure one of those other stiles is less trouble to make, and less awkward to get over."

"Use your eyes, I say," cried Bob; "what do you call that chap, and that, and that?"

"Why, they're hares. No, they are not big enough—"

"No, nor yet quite the right colour," interrupted Bob; "they're rabbits, and this part of the common has been inclosed—8000 or 9000 acres, I believe—for a warren, and common stiles and common fences won't do for such customers as rabbits; and so, the warreners make such walls as that, and stiles *over* them, if they are obliged to have a stile for a footpath at all; and they look well to see that bunny doesn't burrow through or under the wall, and the furze at top keeps him from jumping over—though I don't think he is much given to jumping, not half so much as a hare."

Jack was extremely pleased to see the rabbits hopping about, much tamer than he had ever seen them before, and asked his cousin a good many questions about them. While talking, they continued walking on over the warren, passing two or three ponds, much grown up with reeds and stunted willows, in their way.

"Do you hear that noise?" cried Bob, all at once, "something like the buzzing of a great bee?"

"Something like it," replied Jack. "Why, it *is* the buzzing of a bee."

"Where is it, then?" laughed Bob.

"Somewhere here, in this long grass. It's got entangled somehow, I should think. Ah! you may laugh; but I am sure it is a bee."

Jack began to search about very closely in the grass at the place he thought the sound came from, which continued to be heard at intervals of half a minute or so, and lasted several seconds. Only, somehow, when he stooped down and looked at the place where he thought he heard it the last time, it never seemed to be quite there, but a little further away. Bob stood by, chuckling, and casting a look up into the sky every minute or two. At last Jack gave it up in despair, but still persisted the bee was there, somewhere.

"No," said Bob, "it's up in the air."

"Up in the air! Nonsense! What do you mean?"

"Why, look there," Bob called out, pointing up into the sky. "What's that?"

"Why, a bird to be sure."

"I know: but what is it doing?"

"Why, flying round. But what a curious way of flying! Why, it's coming down, with its wings moving quite in a different way. Ah! now it's rising up again; and I declare, there's the buzzing noise, and it seems to me now to come from the bird."

"Ah! that's because you are looking in the right direction now. That's a snipe, and he doesn't like our intrusion on his quarters. His nest is not far from where we are standing; and so he flies in that way. Look! there he comes down again in his curve, and how fast his wings go! And now up, and we hear the buzzing—for the sound takes a few seconds to reach us at this distance—after he has got someway downwards. He's called 'heather-bleater' sometimes, from his making that sound, and some people call it 'drumming.' It sounds to me much more like buzzing."

Disturbed by the talking, and the rather loud tones of Master Bob, three more snipes started from the swampy ground near the lads, two of which immediately began, on reaching a sufficient height in the air, to emit the buzzing or bleating sound. The other flew a little distance, and dropped again to the ground. Bob was watching this one. As soon as he saw it alight, he said to his companion, "I'm certain there's a nest here, and it's not far from that stub."

"What makes you think so?" cried Jack, very eagerly, all excitement at the thought of finding an egg so rare as he considered the snipe's.

"Because I think one of those three that just got out about here is a hen, that was on her nest till we came up making so much noise, and I think she flew from close by that," pointing to the stub. A few moments' search proved he was right. About a yard from the stub, in a little hollow on a little spot of dry ground, lay four eggs, of a dusky or dark green, spotted and blotched with dark brown, almost black, their smaller ends very pointed, and all four symmetrically arranged with their smaller ends in the middle.

"Here we have 'em," exclaimed Bob.

Jack hastened to him, at the expense of a foot and leg dipped deep in the swamp, which he did not think about in his haste.

"Those, snipe's eggs?" he said, when he caught sight of them. "Why, they are too big! Such a little bird as a snipe could never lay such thumping big eggs as that! Why, they are as big as partridges' eggs, and I think bigger."

"However, snipe's eggs they are," replied Bob, "and two of them we must have for our collection. You are right enough about the size; they are, if anything, bigger than the partridge's egg, and that too, though the partridge is nearly five times as heavy as a snipe. I remember seeing my father weigh some partridges. Some of them were about 1¼ lb. each; and then I tried how many snipes would balance one partridge, and I found five made the scale the partridge was in go up."

As the boys passed on over the warren, Jack's regards were strongly aroused by seeing three or four rabbits totally black. He supposed some tame ones must have been turned down there. Bob said he thought not, but he could not be sure. While they were discussing the point, the warrener came in sight, who seemed to recognise Bob, and to be pleased to see him. To him the question was referred as to the origin of the black rabbits. He said that varieties in colour were by no means uncommon among wild rabbits; that black ones were often met with, and different shades of what he called "sandy," or dun. White ones, also, with red eyes, were not of very rare occurrence. Bob recollected having seen two of that description that had been shot one day near his home. He thought he heard them called an Albino variety. The warrener added that there was also another variety, which was carefully preserved on some warrens on account of the greater value of their skins. The boys understood him to call rabbits of this variety—which, he said, none but warreners would distinguish from the ordinary grey rabbit—by the name of "sprigs," or "silver-sprigs." Bidding the warrener good-day, they now left the warren, and struck across the open common or heath. Here the cries and wheelings and tumblings over in the air of several birds, which showed a good deal of white about their plumage, greatly amused the two walkers. As they approached a particular part of the common, the birds redoubled their cries and antics. Some of them approached within a few yards of the boys; others, flying at some little height, all at once seemed bent on striking against the earth, in such a headlong way did they precipitate themselves downwards, and all of them making a great noise with their wings. Jack knew these birds, though he had never seen them before in the earlier part of the year, nor, consequently, ever heard the strange cries they were now uttering. By their note and name of "pewit," or "peewit," he knew them well enough, and very keen he became to find their nests, as soon as he knew that all this uproar and uneasiness was occasioned by the intrusion of their two selves on the birds' breeding domains. Bob told him it was very doubtful if they would be lucky enough to find a nest, for he thought the lapwing was cunning enough to run to some distance from its nest before commencing all these violent outcries and flappings about. And he had often seen that the cries of one were presently the means of bringing ten or twenty others, (which, the moment before, were not seen or suspected to be near,) from different parts round the place where the intruder was, and that they would follow him to some distance: from which he inferred that it did not necessarily follow, that because the birds paid such persevering and noisy attention to the visitor, therefore he must be very near their nests, or perhaps, any of them. People who observed their habits closely, as those who made a temporary living by finding and selling their eggs would be sure to do, he added, could tell whereabouts the nests were. And he had heard that some were so expert in finding them, from mere observation of the conduct of the birds, that they could walk straight up to within a few feet even of the eggs they were seeking.

The boys had now nearly reached the point which Bob had proposed as the limit of their walk. This was the highest point of the common, and indeed in the whole district for many miles round. It was called Hagley Beacon, and they had often heard, not only that the materials for a great blaze had been carefully kept there in readiness to be set fire to, when people's thoughts were full of a French landing a good many years ago; but that one night it actually was set blazing, to the great discomfort of the good people of Elmdon and the neighbourhood. The Beacon watcher said it was a half idiot lad, a nephew of his, that he had with him for company, had done it while his back was turned; but many people, who knew he had been at the "Red Lion" almost all the afternoon, thought it was just as likely to have been himself. At all events, he was either asleep or drunk, and so he was not allowed to return to his post after the inquiry which took place next day; for half the country had been alarmed, and Elmdon, by midnight, had been crowded by the Militia and Yeomanry hurrying in from the whole country-side. But there was an object of greater interest than the mere site of a beacon, for all the summit of the hill was enclosed by a circular trench or mound. In fact, it was one of the most perfect British camps to be met with anywhere about; and the size of the stones, which had made the substratum of the earthwork, showed that it had been a place of great strength, and probably, importance. In many parts, little but the stones was now left, all utterly irregular in shape, and of every size, from mere pebbles to masses weighing some tons: the earth that had once covered them having been loosened and carried away by the frosts and storms of twenty centuries. But still, there lay the camp perfect in outline, and many other remains of earthworks or fortifications stretching off in two directions to a considerable distance. The cousins were just leaving that part of the common where the Pewits had so belabored them with noisy cries and wheelings, intending to pay a brief visit to the camp, when Bob caught Jack hastily by the arm, exclaiming at the same moment, "Stop, I say, stop;" and half pushing his friend over backwards, as he spoke. "Why, what's the matter?" inquired Edwards. "You were just going to squash those beauties with your great clumsy foot," he said, pointing to the ground at Jack's feet, where lay three of the unhoped, almost unlooked-for eggs of the pewit, all arranged points inwards, as was the case with the snipe's eggs. Much rejoicing in this treasure-trove they pressed onwards to the camp, which Jack surveyed with great interest and a vast desire to have unlimited explanation available. His cousin told him there were many other remains in the district, of its ancient British inhabitants; tumuli, earthwork circles, standing stones, a stone circle nearly perfect, and the site of a British settlement or village, all of which they might go to see as opportunity offered; and, besides which, in the museum, there was a tolerably perfect collection of British antiquities, some of them found near the camps or circles in the district, but not a few taken out of different tumuli or barrows which had been opened in two or three different parts of the very common they now were on. Hearing this, Jack was for nothing less than buying a couple of spades as soon as they got back, and coming their very next holiday to dig on their own account. He was sure they might find some curious and interesting things within the ring of the camp; and if not, those three barrows, about 200 yards east of it, he was sure, would well repay their labour. Bob said he thought Jack was proposing what would be work enough for half a dozen men for as many days; and besides, that leave must be asked, not only of the Doctor, but of the Lord of the Manor, before any digging or excavation could take place. Yielding his plans to necessity with some unwillingness, Edwards followed his companion's steps, which where now bent in the direction of Fox Spinney. In order to reach the wood so called, they had to pass partly along and partly through a sort of marsh, one part of which was a good deal grown up with alders and willows; another part was a complete morass; and bordering this was a large pond or mere, the water around more than half the circuit of which was completely grown up with reeds and flags and bulrushes. As they came fairly in sight of the open water—though still almost concealed themselves—Bob espied about a score of ducks swimming quietly about near the middle. He pointed them out to Jack, who had never seen wild ducks before, except on the wing occasionally in the winter time, or at the poulterers' shops. The lads were near enough, not simply to count up nineteen birds in all, but to make out that fourteen were mallards, two ducks, and three much smaller birds. Jack wondered to see so many drakes and so few ducks, and inquired what the smaller fellows were. He was informed that the missing ducks were sitting, somewhere among the reeds, no doubt; and that the small birds were teal. Bob then pointed out a number of other birds of different sorts, passing in and out among the flags and bulrushes, or swimming and diving at no great distance from them. The black birds about as big as pigeons, which kept flirting their tails as they swam, showing two or three white feathers in them as they did so, Jack recognised as water-hens. The much larger black birds with white oval marks on their foreheads, where the water-hen has similar shaped reddish marks, were unknown to him. Bob told him they were coots. And those little chaps more out in the open, who disappeared and reappeared in their incessant divings as if they had been hatched and equipped for nothing else, he said, were little grebes, or dabchicks. And very amusing little fellows they seemed to be. In his excitement at watching one of them in particular, which, in his repeated divings, had come much closer than the rest to the spot, Jack took a step forward, and uttered a hasty exclamation as his foot sunk in a soft place, and he himself staggered forward in the attempt to save a fall. Disturbed by the cry, the mallards all drew together with their heads up, the coots and moorhens went scudding along towards the covert of the flags, and Jack's heart gave a great thump as a sudden rustling and flapping ensued almost under his very nose. He had, in fact, nearly fallen into a duck's nest, and the old lady, who had sat very quietly as long as the two visitors kept themselves quiet, now thought it was time to get out of the way of so unceremonious an intruder, and hastily took flight. This was the signal for the mallards to do the same, for the dabchicks to dive, and for the other birds, with croaks and low cries, to conceal themselves among the water-plants. Jack's regret at putting an end to a scene which had delighted him so much, was a little lessened by the thought, that at least his awkwardness had given them the opportunity of adding a couple of wild duck's eggs to their stock. But to this appropriation Bob would by no means consent. He said he knew the gamekeeper would not like them to take these eggs, and that he thought it would be as wrong to take them, at least without leave, as it would eggs from a partridge's or pheasant's nest; and that therefore they certainly ought not to think of it. Jack was not quite convinced, but gave up the point without further contest. Bob, however, completed his conquest by adding, that he knew the gamekeeper trusted to his honour not to take any of the eggs he had named; and that even if it were not so, he should not like to do what he knew he, the gamekeeper, would not like; as he had been very kind to him often, in giving him several eggs that otherwise he might not have easily got.

Part of this conversation took place as they passed through a little thicket, just before they got to the stile that gave admission to the footpath through the wood. It so happened that the gamekeeper had been at the edge of the wood trying to get a magpie, which had nested in a tree just within the fence, when the flight of the ducks warned him there was some alarm in the marsh. He walked on, therefore, towards a corner from which he could see over part of the marsh, and had just got there as the boys came past. He immediately came forward and spoke very civilly and kindly to Bob, whom he knew well, and asked what eggs they were talking about. Bob told him of Jack's nearly floundering into a duck's nest, and how he had thought he might very well have a couple of the eggs, until he, Bob, had said they ought not. The keeper said they should not be disappointed, as there was never a year when he did not get a few wild ducks' eggs that were not hatched; and he would be sure and save them a couple during the present season; and then, adding a few words about "Master Robert always acting like a gentleman," he asked them to go on with him to the boat-house, and he would take them to seek some of the coots' nests and those of the other birds they had observed on the water; stating that they would have no difficulty in finding several of either sort. Edwards was in ecstasies at the thought; but Bob, thanking the keeper very heartily for his kind offer, asked him first to tell them what o'clock it was; for he was afraid they had taken so much time in the warren, and on the common, and in the marsh, that they would have little more than enough left to enable them to get home in good time, and make themselves clean and tidy for roll-call. It was even so; and with a feeling of no little disappointment the lads thanked the kind keeper once more, and prepared to return to the school.

As they turned to leave him, the keeper asked them when they would next be able to get up so far.

Bob thought for a minute, and then, with a sort of shout, exclaimed, "Why, Monday is Founder's Day, and we always have a holiday then. Will you be busy on Monday?" he added, looking up at the keeper.

"No," he answered; "what time can you be here?"

"Oh! by one o'clock, at all events; if that will suit you."

"Very well, then. I'll be at this stile about one o'clock; and it is very likely I shall be able to show you something in the woods, too, if you have time."

The two boys now wished him good afternoon with more thanks, and set off at a good pace homewards. They had plenty of time to remove all traces of water and bog, and presented themselves, perfectly clean and neat in hair and dress, when the bell summoned them to evening roll-call and their supper.

CHAPTER IV.

Walk the Second—Robert Banks—Dabchicks, Coots, Waterhens, Reed-warblers, their Nests and Eggs.

FRIDAY and Saturday passed, with their routine of school tasks and duties; Sunday, too, passed, with its sermon from Dr. Noble, which almost all the elder lads looked to with interest, and of which not a few among them tried to make a sort of sketch, to be looked at in after days. And then came Monday. The morning was dull, and our two young friends were quite disposed to feel assured that it would rain, and that their excursion—on which they were reckoning so much—would fall through. However, the clouds broke away before they were liberated from the two hours' work which was required of them on occasion of any such holiday as the present. The time that must elapse before they could set off to the appointed place was spent by them in neatly affixing the eggs they had obtained in their last walk to cards with strong gum-water, and adding a name-label to each card, written in a very neat and methodical manner by Bob. The eggs in question had been very carefully blown, and dried, at the first leisure time after being brought safely home; and now, when they were carefully adjusted to their proper places, they were set safely aside, for the gum to harden, until their owners' return, when they would be at once inducted into their proper place in the collection; which was now found to number nearly one hundred eggs, belonging to nearly sixty different species of birds: for they had no duplicate specimens of some seven or eight kinds of eggs.

In their eagerness to lose no time, when once they were at liberty to set out—for Dr. Noble made no scruple of giving them the required permission—they arrived at the stile fully a quarter of an hour before the gamekeeper. Bob filled up the interval by telling Jack something about that person. His name, he said, was Robert Banks. He was born at the place where Mr. Benson (Bob's father) lived, and he had spent his youth there; and, as a lad, he had often been made useful by Mr. Benson's gamekeeper in catching rabbits, tending the dogs and the ferrets, carrying the gamebag, and marking for the gentlemen who were out shooting, and so on. When about eighteen years old he had been induced by an uncle, who was master of a coasting vessel, to go to sea. He had spent nearly two years on board a coaster and then shipped in an Indiaman, in which he had made three or four voyages, conducting himself to the entire satisfaction of his officers, who had already taken care to advance him as far as his age would permit. And as he had taken pains to keep up what he had learnt at school, and to improve himself by reading, they had not only helped him by putting useful books in his way, but had promised him their interest to obtain him a higher position than that of a common seaman whenever an opportunity might offer.

"He was in the ship *Samarang*," Bob continued, "homeward bound, about fifteen years ago, and my uncle Thomas was a passenger in her that same voyage. A violent storm came on, and they were sadly tossed about for the greater part of two days. Just as they thought the worst of it was over, and that their good ship—which had behaved splendidly—had weathered it, a tremendous thunderstorm came on, and an awful flash of lightning struck her. Her mainmast was completely shivered and her foremast damaged, and she speedily became unmanageable. The storm, though much abated, was still violent enough to make their danger very great. The wreck still hampered them; they had lost several of the crew by the lightning and the fall of the mast; the sea was very high, and the wind violent. Robert Banks stood by his captain and the second officer (the others were lost,) nobly; and by his influence with the crew, and his exertions, brought most of the men, who, from the violence of the shock, believed nothing less than that the vessel was instantly about to founder, and were half helpless with consternation, to second him in obeying their officers' orders. They were thus enabled, at last, to cut away the hamper; and eventually—the storm continuing most providentially to subside—to get her before the wind; but not before she had so strained herself in her rollings as to have sprung at least one serious leak. It was not till the next day that the captain was able to ascertain his position, and he then found that, if he could succeed in keeping afloat, and could make his course a little more to the southward, he might have a fair chance of falling in with some home-bound ship or other, or possibly even reach a port. However, neither of these contingencies was to be realized: for that night, the watch being utterly exhausted by the fatigues of the storm and their subsequent spells of pumping, betrayed their charge and fell asleep; and it was only when Banks—unable to sleep from the pain of two ribs which he had got broken in his exertions the previous day, but had said nothing about—came on deck, that the alarm of "Breakers a-head!" was given; and that too late to save the ship. However, every effort was made to prepare for the inevitable shock, and by great good fortune the ship was made to take the reef, where there was a little break in the water, bows on, and there she remained firmly fixed; and it appeared that, if only it continued calm, she was not likely to be much damaged at present. The day was now eagerly looked for, and at length it came; but alas! at the same time came signs which all understood but too well. A dark bank was seen rising, as it were, out of the sea, to the northward; the swell rose longer and higher; and it was evident another gale was brewing. On the other side, at a distance of apparently two or three miles, lay what seemed to be an island of some extent; but how were they to get there? Only one of their remaining boats was undamaged, and that the smallest: two having been carried away bodily in the fall of the masts. They had very little time to prepare. Already the surf struck them harder blows, and made the poor ship quiver throughout. Banks tried to induce the sailors to help him in constructing a raft; but, worn out and despairing, they had got to the spirit hold, and would no longer listen to reason. Three or four endeavoured to lower the remaining boat, and the captain and his officer exerted themselves in making every preparation which could bethought of, and time would permit. Meanwhile, Banks and my uncle did what they could in lashing together some planks and spars, according to a plan Banks had often thought of in his leisure hours. He feared, if the gale came on as rapidly as he expected, the boat would not live, even if the half-dozen men who were still sober could succeed in getting her safely away from the ship; and, though the chance with the raft was not much better, he said, at all events, the boat would be less overloaded if one or two tried to stick by the raft. My uncle was determined he would stay with Banks, and the end came sooner than even he expected. The surf struck the ship with increasing violence; a few of these heavier blows laid her almost broadside on, and then she heeled over so far that it was impossible any longer to walk on the deck. The boat fortunately floated, as did the raft. Banks, who had expected something of the sort, was safe on it, when he saw my uncle struggling in the water near. To leap in and help him to reach the raft was a work of few seconds, and in a moment more he caught one of the ship's boys who was floating by senseless. The next thing he observed was that half a dozen of the crew, half-sobered by terror, flung themselves into the boat, where the captain, second officer, and five sober men already were, and it was swamped or upset in an instant. The same moment a terrific sea struck the ship, and fell over on the struggling men, appearing to overwhelm them instantaneously: for only one of them was ever seen again, and that only for a second. The same sea shook the raft and tried its lashings severely, but also gave it an impulse in a shoreward direction. Banks, after casting an anxious look round to see if he could rescue anybody else, seized the oars he had provided and lashed securely, and, with the help of the wind, which, though strong and waxing stronger, was in the right direction, and the protection which the reef afforded behind them by breaking the rollers, succeeded in guiding and impelling his frail vessel to within a short distance of the shore. Here, however, one of the lashings of the raft—sorely tried by the increasing agitation of the waters—gave way, and all of them, after a short and vain attempt to repair damages, were thrown amid the foaming waters. Banks and my uncle struck out, the former still taking charge of the boy, who had only partially recovered his consciousness, but whom he had succeeded in lashing to a spar; and after a short but terrible struggle found themselves safe on land. Once on the shore, Banks' strength failed him at once. Fatigue, and bodily injury and pain, together with the excitement of this hard struggle and escape, had proved too strong for even his spirit and strength, and he fell helpless before he had actually got beyond the reach of the waves; and my uncle, who, though much exhausted, had still some strength left, had to drag both him and the boy sufficiently high on the beach to be out of the way of the surging billows."

"But here he comes himself," exclaimed Bob, "and you must ask him to tell you all the rest of it himself, some day when he has nothing better to do; and then you will hear things that will make you like him even more than I see you are already inclined to do."

The gamekeeper now came up with the key of the boat-house in his hand, and after saying he hoped they had not been waiting long, took the path which led to the boat-house at the other side of the mere, where the water was deep. Once there, they were not long in embarking, and Bob showed it was not the first time he had been in a boat, by taking an oar and pulling in very fair style. There were about the same number of mallards and teal as there had been on their previous visit, and they very soon took flight; coming in sight again, however, once or twice, as if to reconnoitre, and then, as it seemed, flying away to a distance. There was also great commotion among the coots and moorhens, and in a minute or two not one was to be seen; though their notes were still heard from time to time from among the reeds. After rowing a short distance, Bob and the keeper, as if by mutual understanding, drew in their oars, and suffered the boat to advance by the impulse they had already given it. In this way, when the boat had passed on four or five times her own length, and was now moving very slowly and gently, they knew that if they kept themselves very motionless and silent they might approach within a very short distance of the dabchicks; and Jack was intensely interested in watching these little divers sinking themselves gradually in the water, as the boat came within a few yards of them, until at last the water almost covered their backs; and then, with a motion so quick as to baffle the eye, under they went; coming up again within a few yards, watchfully ready to repeat the evolution if it seemed necessary. As long as the party in the boat remained quite still, a dozen of these little birds might be seen within gunshot; the moment the oars were resumed all disappeared as if by magic. The keeper now directed the boat to a part of the mere where some waterplants showed themselves at the surface of the water. Here Jack, who was in the bows of the boat, saw several objects which seemed to him to be shapeless masses of weed. The keeper directed his course so as to come within reach of one of these, and told Bob to go forward and see what it contained. Master Bob was rather at a loss here, and said—

"Why, it's nothing but weeds, Robert."

Banks replied with a smile. "Lift off those weeds which lie at the top, Master Robert."

Master Robert did so, and to his surprise no less than six eggs,—rather long in proportion to their width, and as large at the "little," as at the "big" end,—greeted his eyes. But what infinitely perplexed him was that no two of them were exactly alike in colour. One was nearly white, and another was of a dirty red colour, something resembling the stain left by blood on white paper two or three days after its application, only dirtier and muddier. The other eggs were of shades intermediate between those of these two.

"Why, what are they?" he asked, in a doubting tone; "I thought they had been dabchicks; but dabchicks' eggs, I know are white."

"So were these, Master Robert, when the bird laid them. And one, you see, is still nearly white That is the egg last laid; and that darkest is the one she laid first. I suppose it's the weeds she lays on them, whenever she leaves the nest, that colour them. I don't know how else it is done. But I do know that I hardly ever saw a nest, out of all the hundreds I have seen here, with the eggs left uncovered. Why, look yonder"—pointing to two or three nests about fifty yards further on—"there is a bird now pecking away about her nest, as if her life depended on it. She's covering her eggs, and if we move on you'll see her dip into the water and dive away. Some folks say they sit a-top of weeds and all; but, I must say, I don't think they do. It is my belief they have the weeds laid ready just round the nest, and put them on when they want to go away for a bit."

Certainly, the lads thought they saw, not only the bird pointed out by the keeper, but several others, go through exactly the process he had described, previous to leaving their nests as the boat approached; and they were quite ready to think as he thought. Bob asked a great many questions about these curious little birds, and got the following information from the keeper:—They made their appearance usually about the middle of April. Sometimes a pair or two appeared first, and then, a few days after, the rest, to the number of twenty-five or thirty pairs. They were occasionally seen on the wing during a week or two after their arrival. Banks believed it was only the males. Sometimes while flying—their flight being always in circles over the water, very rapid, and at no great height above it—they uttered a note, which might be partly imitated by drawing a stick rapidly over wooden palings. Their departure in the autumn was as sudden and mysterious as their arrival in spring; and where they went to, and how they went, with their short wings, and apparent disinclination to use them, he really could not tell. He had heard folks say that a few might always be found in the marshes near the sea, in winter time; but how they got there he could not imagine.

Leaving this part of the mere, the boat was now directed to a quarter where the water was shallower, and where, every here and there, little grassy knolls stood out amid the water, and a few willow stubs were seen growing. Here, three or four water-hens' nests were discovered in as many minutes, containing from three up to half a score eggs. These nests were constructed of a large quantity of dry materials, and seemed very snug and warm, and quite secure from wet; very different from the dabchicks' nests, which were merely piles of wet weeds supported on the surface of the water, but so little raised above it that the eggs were wet, and the slightest pressure of a finger caused the water to rise rapidly in them;

so much so, that the lads wondered how eggs, so constantly kept wet, could ever contrive to get hatched.

After having satisfied their curiosity among these nests and taken the eggs they wanted, they proceeded to a part of the mere where the reeds and flags grew pretty close and made a thickish cover. Here they soon found a couple of coots' nests; large and strong structures built of withered flags and reeds, and one of them founded on a pile of similar materials reaching to the bottom, where the water was eighteen inches deep. The gamekeeper told them some of these nests were so strongly built as to support a man sitting down upon them. Here again they secured the eggs they wished to have, and were beginning to think they had got all the varieties they had any right to expect, when the keeper drew their attention to a little bird whose notes, in various places among the reeds, were almost literally incessant, and asked if they knew it and had got its eggs in their collection. Bob listened for a moment and asked if it were not the sedge bird.

"That may be the name of the bird, sir," answered the keeper, "but I have generally heard it called the reed-chat.* You may find many of their nests among these reeds, and very beautiful, and wonderful for contrivance they are."

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* The bird which Banks meant is called the reed-warbler.

So speaking, he pushed more in among the reeds, and in a few seconds, the boys had the delight of seeing a nest perfectly new to both of them. It was attached to the stems of five separate reeds—rather high up them—was composed of the flowering tops of the reeds, and was made very deep indeed for its size. Noticing this particular, the gamekeeper said he thought it might be to prevent the eggs or young ones tumbling out when the wind blew very strongly.

"For sometimes," he said, "the reeds bent down so much before the wind, it was wonderful how the eggs remained in at all."

Before they left the reed-bed they had found eight or ten of these nests, though at the expense of very wet feet and legs; for they found they could get about so much better on foot than in the boat. Nothing would content Bob but cutting the reeds supporting one of the nests in order to take it bodily home for Dr. Noble, who, he thought, would be pleased to see it.

They now returned to the boat-house, highly delighted with their expedition on the mere. Leaving the boat-house, the keeper asked them if they had time to go into the wood with him. Ascertaining from him what o'clock it was, they found they had time enough, if they did not loiter by the way. So off they started at a brisk pace.

Soon after they entered the wood, the keeper asked them if they wanted any jay's eggs, as he had shot a pair of jays which had built in a low tree not far from where they now were.

Bob replied he had some, which he had obtained last year. Jack, however, who from the delight and success of the last and the present walk, was keener than ever to add to his stores of country lore and natural-history knowledge, begged Banks to take him to see the nest just as it was. Accordingly, they turned out of the "ride" they were now walking rapidly along, and presently came under what Jack thought—in his cursory observation of it—was a random collection of loose sticks; till Bob and the keeper both assured him it was a genuine jay's nest.

"Why, I can see daylight through it," he exclaimed.

"Yes, and the eggs too, very likely," Bob added.

Nothing would content Jack but to see one or two of the eggs; in fact, he wanted to get a look into the nest from above as well as from below; but he had never yet tried to climb, and was rather shy of making the attempt. However, Bob, who had a pretty good idea of what was passing in his cousin's mind, told him the best way of seeing the eggs was by getting up to the nest himself, and showed him how it easily might be done, by getting up an adjoining tree, and walking along one of its branches, which extended horizontally very near the nest; and which, he said, was quite strong enough to bear Jack's weight without breaking, or even bending much.

"And there is another," he said, "about a yard higher, you can hold by."

Jack began his climb at once, and having good strong arms and hands, and a steady head, was soon upon the bough pointed out to him by his companion, and carefully sidling along it towards the nest. As it bent and wavered with his weight and movements, he did not feel quite so comfortable as when climbing up the stiff tree stem; but, determined not to be beat, after a moment's pause to steady himself, he went on again; and, in a second or two, had the pleasure of finding that by kneeling on the bough he had, so far, walked on, grasping the branch above very firmly with his right hand, he could not only reach the eggs, but see them as they laid not half a yard from his eyes. He was bent upon having a memorial of this, his first bird's-nest reached by climbing; but how to bring away the eggs,—that was the question.

To put them in his pockets he knew would ensure a disagreeable smash. His cap had fallen off in his ascent; and besides, if it had been still on his head, he thought it would be doubtful if the eggs would travel very safely on the top of his head as he scrambled down again. He was in utter perplexity. They would break if he dropped them: even if he asked Bob to catch them, their fate would probably be no better. How was he to contrive? Bob called to him to make haste and come down, as their time was short. In reply he mentioned his dilemma.

"Why, lad, what was your mouth made for?" was Bob's laughing solution of the difficulty.

And presently, with an egg safe in each cheek, Jack commenced, and in safety completed, his descent to the ground.

The three now pressed on rapidly in the direction they were pursuing before this episode of the jay's nest, and after about ten minutes' walk they stopped near an ash tree of no very great size. It appeared the keeper had been speaking to Bob on the subject of their present quest, for pointing to a place in the tree, about eight feet from the ground, whence a branch appeared to have fallen, he said,

"There's the hole, sir."

And a hole there was, certainly, nearly circular, and less than two inches in diameter.

"What's in it?" asked Jack, as soon as he perceived it.

"Oh! the nest of a very curious bird, and one moreover whose eggs, from a nasty habit the bird has of laying them in holes in trees, are not easy for boys to get. Don't you think you could get your hand in there, Jack? It's a bit smaller than mine; and Banks here will hold you up; wont you, Banks?"

"Certainly, sir, with all the pleasure in life," replied Banks; and accordingly Jack was hoisted up by the keeper, so effectually that his face was nearly on a level with the hole. Naturally enough he applied his eye to it to see if he could make out anything of the interior. He had scarcely done so, however, before he drew it back so suddenly, and with such a jerk, that if Banks had not been prepared for something of the sort, Jack would have thrown himself, and possibly his bearer as well, headlong down.

"Let me down, Mr. Banks, let me down," he cried; "there's a snake in the hole."

Bob enjoyed the success attending his trick (for on hearing from the keeper what he had got to show them in the wood, he had plotted this surprise for his cousin) to such a degree that he could hardly repress his roars of laughter. Jack felt his dignity affronted, and declared there *was* a snake.

It had hissed fearfully as he put his eye to the hole.

"Snake or no snake, let me get up, Banks," said Bob; and up he mounted, in his turn, on Banks's shoulder. The hissing was audible enough, and sounded formidable enough, certainly: but Bob was not deterred. As he had said, his hand was much too large to get into the hole; but the kind gamekeeper had foreseen this difficulty, and provided against it, by using a very fine saw and taking out a piece of the tree—indeed it was little more than bark, so much decayed was the trunk—at a little distance from the aperture; and so neatly that, when replaced, the tree appeared untouched. He had fixed a screw into this which served as a sort of handle. Taking hold of this screw, the severed piece of wood came out, and there was an irregular oval hole big enough for Bob to put his hand and arm in. No sooner did this kind of trap-door begin to open than a bird darted out of the original hole, and flew to a tree at some little distance. Jack was looking for the snake: the flight of the bird rather staggered him in his certainty that there was a snake; for a living snake and a living bird in the same hole were scarcely compatible. The next moment Bob exclaimed, "Six eggs—such beauties!—And no snake, Jack," he added the moment after.

Two of the eggs were in his mouth, the trapdoor replaced, and himself on the ground before his cousin had quite recovered himself. However, the sight of the eggs—two delicate, smooth, white shining eggs—speedily set him right.

"What beauties! What are they?" he cried.

"Snake's eggs, to be sure," Bob answered: "didn't you see the snake fly out?"

"Nonsense; but what are they?"

The keeper interposed:

"We country folk often call it 'snakebird,' Master Edwards, because of its hissing noise. It always makes that noise when disturbed on its nest; and it seems no ways ready to leave its nest either," he concluded.

"But what other name has it?" demanded Jack.

"Oh, two or three more," said Bob. Sometimes it's called cuckoo's mate, or cuckoo's companion; and sometimes long-tongue and sometimes emmet-hunter. But its book name, and ordinary name, is wryneck, from the peculiar plumage of its neck, which gives that part of its body a wry or twisted appearance."

"What's its nest like?" interposed Jack.

"Oh, only a little rotten wood, which it pecks down from the decayed inside of the tree."

"Why is it called by so many names?" was the next question.

"It is called cuckoo's mate, because it usually appears about the same time as the cuckoo, and makes its presence known, as the cuckoo does, by a very peculiar note. It is called long-tongue, because its tongue is immensely long, and seems to be used mainly in taking its food. It is called emmet-hunter, because ants or emmets form a considerable portion of its food;—and people who have had them in confinement, say it is a very curious sight to see them feeding, if supplied with a portion of an ant-hill and its teeming inhabitants. The tongue is thrust out and drawn back with wonderful quickness, and every time an ant, or one of the eggs, is drawn in and swallowed. The eye can't keep pace with the speed at which the tongue moves. Look, there she is again," added Bob. "There, climbing up that tree. Look, on the trunk, like walking up it. There, she has just twisted out of sight."

Jack, however, soon caught sight of her again, and observed that she did not climb nearly as well as the creeper, with which he was acquainted, and that, as she moved about the tree, she did not seem to make any use of her tail, as the creeper and woodpeckers do.

It was now time for our young friends to move off homewards with all speed. So, opening their egg-case, which Bob had with some ingenuity constructed out of an old botanical case, and seeing to the safe packing of all their new treasures, eking out their cotton wool with some fine moss, they wished the gamekeeper good afternoon, and started off at a good rapid trot; Bob taking especial care of his reed-warbler's nest for the Doctor, and Jack with the egg-box slung over his shoulder. They reached school in capital time, met the Doctor as they neared the great gate, stopped to touch their caps, and were passing on, when he asked, "What are your treasures?—where have you been?"

"Oh, sir, we have been to the mere, as we asked leave to do, and came home through the Fox Spinney; and we have got eggs of the water-hen, coot, dabchick, reed-warbler, and wryneck, besides two jay's eggs, that Edwards wanted. And this nest—it was the prettiest of all we saw—we have brought for you, sir, in case you might like to see it."

The Doctor thanked them very kindly, and took the nest with evident pleasure, not only because it was really curious and beautiful, but because he liked his pupils to feel and show good-will towards him. Bidding them make haste and get on dry things, he passed on to his house, and they to their quarters, and were quite ready in time for roll-call.

CHAPTER V.

Walk the Third—Eel-hooks—Setting-lines—Kingfisher's Nest—Dipper and Nest—Wilson's Filmy Fern—Eel, Perch, and Trout caught.

On the following Thursday, the two boys again applied for and obtained permission to take one of their lengthened rambles. Much of their playtime in the intervening days had been pleasantly filled up with careful preparation and mounting of the acquisitions of the last excursion; and another portion had been occupied with discussions as to the direction and objects of their next walk, which they fixed for Thursday afternoon, if the day were suitable.

Bob thought they might vary the interest by having an afternoon's fishing. Jack, however, was so much taken up with his new experiences as to the habits and haunts of birds, that he begged hard for another nesting expedition. It was at length settled that they would try and combine both pursuits. Bob said he had heard the gamekeeper say that dippers or water-ousels were common in the upper part of the streams feeding the Whitwater, as well as often to be seen along that stream itself; that they had no eggs of the bird in question, and that they could at least look for a nest: though he did not think, from what he knew of the birds' nesting places, that they were very likely to fall in with one, except by the merest accident. He proposed, therefore, that they should go up Watery-lane, and turn off up Turley-lane, as if going through Fox Spinney; but, instead of leaving the lane for the wood, to keep along it until they came to the bridge over the Whitwater. Arrived at this point, they were—according to his plan—to go a little way up the brook that ran out of the mere (through part of Fox Spinney) into the Whitwater near the bridge, until they could find a place to get across it. Once over the brook, they were to strike across to the river, and proceed to set some lines, baited with large worms and small fish, for the chance of catching some eels, and possibly a trout or two, or a large chub. This done, they would ascend the stream and take their chance of finding, either on it, or one of its feeders from the heights of Hagley Common and Turley Moor, the eggs they were in quest of. Jack thought the suggestion a capital one; and so, their spare time, before two o'clock school, was spent in looking out their hooks and setting-lines. Jack was arranging several hooks which he thought were what was required. They were ordinary eel-hooks, with eyes at the end of their shanks, and with a portion of finish copper or brass wire, so passed through the eye of the hook and arranged as to be about a finger's length, and four wires thick. These were not twisted together, but very neatly and firmly whipped over with waxed thread: they were, in fact, Bob's own contrivance. He had often lost hooks,—sold as eel-hooks at the shops, with two joints of twisted brass wire, eight or ten inches long in all, attached to them,—from the pertinacious twisting of the eels that had swallowed them. He saw that the length of wire gave the eel an advantage, by letting it have something stiff to push against—a sort of purchase, in other words, through which it was sure to lay hold ot some weed, or stick, or stone—and then a few turns more, and good-bye to the hook and the eel together. He saw also that the twisting of the wire helped the mischief; for if the eel twisted the same way with the twist of the arming of the hook, the wire could not bear it, and snapped off; if the other way, the wires opened as they untwisted, and were either bent or re-twisted so unevenly that they gave way on the application of only a slight force. So he devised an untwisted wire armature, of only sufficient length to pass just through a minnow or small gudgeon, with this view, that if an eel swallowed the bait he must swallow also the whole wire armature; that, at all events, if a part thereof did still project by any chance from the eel's mouth, it might be such as to give him the least possible chance of twisting it off. Bob had found these hooks answer so well in practice that where he used to lose ten, now he scarcely lost one. Well, Jack was laying out some of these, when Bob, who had been busy with other parts of the necessary tackle, observed what he was doing, and interrupted him.

"Those hooks wont do, Jack" he said; "they are only useful in dark nights. Look in the right-hand corner of that box, under that lid"—pointing to a flat box that had once done duty as his sister's work-box, and showed evident tokens of homely joiner's work in its present fittings;—"you'll find there some strong hooks on stout gut. Take out about two dozen of them, and about as many of those twisted horsehair links from the drawer. They are what we must have to-morrow. I hope that thunder-storm this morning will have made the water muddy; for then we shall do."

Jack did as he was bid, and soon everything was ready, except the baits. These could be got after five, or most of them.

Thursday, then, had arrived, and the cousins started on their expedition. The earlier part of their walk was quite without incident, except those ordinary ones which meet every tolerably observant person's eye in the country, and would, to very many, never seem to lose their homely interest. All of these, however simple and everyday and commonplace, were noticed, though possibly not the least dwelt upon; by Bob, with a dash of much the same sort of feeling as that with which we are conscious, rather than take special note, of the presence of a loved companion whose society has become habitual to us, and whose lengthened absence from our side is a source of restless though tacit uneasiness; by Jack, with much the same sort of pleasant eagerness as we welcome the companionship of a new acquaintance whom we have already found agreeable, and expect, on further intercourse, to find much more so. On reaching the corner of the Spinney, they saw a squirrel run up one of the trees in it, and were much amused at the quickness and ease with which it contrived to keep the trunk of the tree between itself and them; just giving a glance now and then, on one side or the other, as if to see they were not devising any mischief. They did not stay any time, however, to watch him, but moved briskly on. They soon reached the bridge over the Whitwater, and then struck into the meadow between it and the lower part of Fox Spinney. On reaching the brook which ran out of the Spinney, they turned up its bank, and proceeding about half a mile along it, they observed at one of its bends an old tree, which grew so far out horizontally from the nearer bank as to reach nearly half across the brook. On the other side, there was a piece of dry gravel thrown up by the deflection of the stream at the corner. To scramble along this tree, throw his traps over, and leap after them, was done in a very offhand sort of way by Bob. Poor Jack, whose early experiences had been of a very different kind from his cousin's, managed to get along the tree, though rather awkwardly; but "craned" a good deal as he surveyed the leap. And his inclination to take it was not much aided by looking down, as he stood hesitating, into the rather rapid current beneath him. However, his determination "not to be beat," in trying to do what he saw Bob do, came to his help, and he made his spring. One foot tarried rather too far behind him, and splashed the water well up on the hinder part of his legs. But that he little cared for. Once over, they lost no time in getting to the Whitwater. Jack was now employed in unwinding the lines one by one, and laying out the footlinks straight, while Bob proceeded to bait and affix the hooks; and that done, to "set" the lines. This he did in most cases by lying down on his breast, with his head and neck over the bank, and then—his jacket and shirt-sleeves being rolled up high on his arm—sticking the peg the line was made fast to well into the bank as far below the surface as he could reach; which done, he coiled the line carefully in his left hand, and then released it as he threw the baits with his right. He had already set five, and had got the sixth ready baited, when, on lying down and reaching over the bank to put in the peg, something darted out from just underneath where he lay, almost into his face, startling him so much by its suddenness that he nearly lost his balance and rolled in. Gathering himself up rather hastily, he cast a glance down the stream, and instantly recognised in the beautiful bird darting along a little above its surface with even flight, the cause of his discomfiture. In an instant he was down again on his breast. Jack almost thought he was going to work himself over the bank into the water head first, water-rat fashion, so eager was he in investigating the part of the bank he had disturbed the kingfisher from. The next instant he shouted out, with all the voice he was capable of in his then position, "Hooray! hooray! Here it is!" Then a call to Jack to hold his legs, sit down upon them—anything, so as to keep him from slipping over: and he began to fumble with his right hand, apparently at some object in the bank. A minute passed thus, with only "Poof! how it stinks!" uttered by Bob, when all at once he called out,

"I say, Jack, run and cut me a thin willow twig as long as your arm. Never mind me, I can hold."

Jack soon returned with a couple of twigs, and put them into his friend's hand.

"The very thing," he said, taking the longer and more flexible of them. "Now sit as heavy as you can, Jack."

He now proceeded to work this twig into a hole which he had managed already to grope into, some eight or ten inches, in the loose, sandy bank. He then called to Jack to help him up, and rising with a flushed face, he exclaimed—

"We are in luck, old fellow. Here's a kingfisher's nest, 'as sure as shooting,' as Brother Jonathan says."

"Where?" says Jack; "can I see it?"

"Oh, yes," Bob replies, "if you have eyes of the same make as Fine-ear's brother had—I forget what you call him; but you recollect, a three foot wall was as good as a double opera-glass to him. It would save a deal of trouble, though, if you had a gift of that sort; for then we should know just where the nest is. I think it is about there," pointing to a spot in the turf fully two feet from the extreme edge of the bank. "The hole certainly turns this way, at about half a foot from where I have grubbed to; and that's the mark I made on the stick when I had got it in as far as I could. I think we can get it. You couldn't fetch us one of those spades you were talking of at the Beacon, could you, old fellow?"

Talking thus, Bob was by no means idle. He had taken out a strong one-bladed sort of sailor's knife, which he generally carried with him on these expeditions, and had laid hold on a stake from a hedge about thirty yards distant, and proceeded to work its point into a sort of chisel shape. This done, he laid it on one side, and proceeded—making use of his knife for the purpose—to cut out the turf about a foot wide, in the direction he believed the hole to take. The hedge-stake was then seized, and applied vigorously at the bank end of the strip from which he had removed the turf. The soil was very loose, and gave way readily; and fortunately for the young labourer, no thick root crossed his course. The lesser ones he removed with his knife, now sadly blunted. With such a will did he work, that in a strangely short time he came upon the hole where it opened on the bank. This encouraged him to work on more energetically still, if anything; and, at the same time, very carefully, in order to keep the guidance which the opening passage afforded him. As he rounded the corner he had spoken of, he had the satisfaction of finding that the direction he had laid out as the probable one appeared to be correct to within a couple of inches. Sticking steadily to his work, at the end of twenty minutes —the odorous whiffs of putrid fish bones and other similar matter rising from the excavation during the whole process serving to convince him, more and more that he was right in believing it to be a nest hole—he had the delight of admitting a glimmer of daylight and his own fingers to a nest containing five eggs. This was a prize indeed, and very carefully were the precious but not sweet-smelling eggs transferred to their travelling berth in the tin box. Repairing damages as well as he could on the bank, by replacing the turf, &c. (as the bird would most likely return to the nest), Bob proceeded to finish the process, so long interrupted, of setting his sixth line. But the nesting spirit had come as strongly upon him now as upon Jack the days before, and he proposed that they should lose no more time in setting lines, but just giving a look first to those already set, start off up the Hagley Common brook or burn, and try their luck for a dipper's nest. Jack assented eagerly. So, going back to look at their lines, and finding nothing but a small eel on one of them, they replaced the bait and returned the line to the water; and then started upwards with all speed. They had not gone a mile before they saw two pairs of water ousels, but no place that, in Bob's judgment, appeared likely to invite them to build their nest. Jack was greatly delighted, on coming suddenly and quietly round a corner, to behold one of them unconcernedly floating on the water, and the next moment, on detecting the presence of the intruders on its privacy, dip or dive as quickly as the dabchicks had done at the mere. The river was rather too thick to permit him to watch the little bird's course under water; but he presently saw it emerge about twenty yards lower down, and sit for a few seconds on a stone, and then deliberately walk into the water again, and disappear under it. Bob soon hurried him on, however, and very willingly answered his questions about the dipper. He said he had often seen it walking or running on the bottom in shallow water, and that it used its wings as well as its legs in doing so; that it would sometimes walk out of the water as they themselves might after bathing; and at other times it would suddenly come to the surface in the midst of a pool, and take wing therefrom without any trouble. Its food he believed to be fishes' eggs, and the larvæ of water insects, and the like. He had read that the eggs of many fish took from 70 or 80 to 100 or 110 days after they were extruded to hatch, and these little birds were believed to destroy a great many of them in the meantime. As to their nests, they were big enough to be seen, he said, as the birds used plenty of materials, moss being the principal one; and the nest was very like the wren's in shape, with a lining of dry leaves. But the places they chose to build in were so odd. He had been told of one which was built in the pier of a bridge, in a hole in the masonry which had been left for the masons to insert part of the framework of their scaffolding in, and which had not been filled up when the spar was removed. His father, he said, had found it, having gone under the bridge for shelter when fishing one day, and overtaken by a very heavy shower. Another he had heard of was placed where the waste water from a mill-wheel formed a sort of cascade on falling into the bed of the main stream again. A fisherman's curiosity was excited by seeing the birds passing in and out behind the falling water, and he consequently went over the stream to examine into their motive. He was rewarded by finding a nest built amidst the stonework under the sort of aqueous arch formed by the falling water, and the young birds perfectly dry, but evidently very hungry. "So we are not very likely to find one, I doubt," he concluded, "for another such lucky accident as that of the kingfisher isn't likely to befal us to-day."

By this time they had reached a point where the descent was rather abrupt. Indeed, in places small waterfalls were seen on the little stream whose course they were following. And soon it grew so narrow they thought it was no use going up any higher. Bob proposed that they should cut across to Turley Brook, and go down by it; not that their chance would be better on it, but rather to vary the walk. Jack assented, and they had just leaped the little stream when a loud halloo greeted their ears. They looked round, and saw a man about two hundred yards up waving his hand to them.

Bob, after a moment's gaze, said,—"I think that's the warrener. I wonder what he has got."

He, seeing that they had caught sight of him and were turning up towards him, directed his course to meet them. As soon as they came up with him he said he had taken the liberty of calling to them, as he knew of a blue hawk's nest on the common, just above the warren, and he thought they might like to have the eggs. He meant to destroy the old birds if he could, but he would spare them for a day or two till there were two or three eggs—at present there was but one—in the nest, if the young gentlemen liked. They thanked him for thinking of them, and said they should like very much, but they were afraid they could not find time to get up so far for a week at least. Would he be so kind as save the eggs for them? He said he would be sure to do it, and then asked what they were seeking there. They told him, saying, moreover, that they had seen plenty of dippers, but had little hope of finding a nest.

"Well," he said, "I know where there used to be one. I lived over yonder, at Turley, when I was a lad, you see, and many a trout have I got out of Turley Brook. There's a broad pool just over yonder hill-edge that has a sort of heap of broken rocks in the middle of it, and that used to be a famous place for trout. One day I was trying to tickle one or two up there, and I was just against the biggest rock, where there's a hole in like a door; my foot slipped, and I made a deal of splashing and noise in trying to keep up, and out came a dipper right in my face. She had a nest as big as my hat in a hole on the right-hand side."

"How long ago was that?" asked Bob, eagerly.

"Nigh hand fifteen years," replied the warrener.

"Well," says Bob, "thank you for telling us of the hawk's nest, and thank you for telling us where you saw the dipper's nest. I have heard they often build in the same place for years. We were just going over to Turley Brook when you called. We'll go straight to the place you've told us of."

No sooner said than done. Scarcely half an hour had elapsed before they reached the place the warrener had described to them. The brook, which was about seven or eight feet wide, and fringed with trees on both of its rocky banks above, here widened out into a shallow pool of twenty-five or thirty yards broad and forty long, in the midst of which stood a confused, broken mass of rocks, overgrown with brushwood and a few small mountain ashes, forming a very beautiful and picturesque object. There was more water than usual for the time of year. However, Bob was not to be deterred by that. He had his shoes and stockings off, and his trousers rolled half-way up his thigh, in two minutes, while Jack was cutting him a stout stick to support him among the rough and loose stones. Armed with this he was at the door-like cavity among the rocks in a very short time, with no mishap further than getting his right leg into a hole so deep that the water reached above the naked part of his leg. That mattered little, though, as the trousers were so tightly rolled up they did not easily absorb the water. The doorway seemed to invite him to enter, and so he waded on about knee-deep in water, carefully feeling his way with his staff. On getting within he looked to his right hand, but the rock seemed all tolerably even, and to present not even the semblance of a hole, much less one big enough to admit a mass of the size of a man's hat. Disappointed, but not despairing, he thought it might be his own mistake, and that the warrener had said the left hand and not the right. However, the left side was less rugged even than the right. Giving it up now, he determined to push in as far as he could get. The cavity was about nine feet long by three or three and a-half wide, and about five feet high, reckoning from the bottom of the water, which was rather uneven. At the further end a little glimmering of light shot in from above, which was a good deal lessened, however, by the growth of some plant,—apparently a fern. He now turned to retrace his steps to the entrance. As he moved on, no longer with his back to the light, and so excluding some of it by acting as a sort of shutter, he observed several small ferns growing in the interstices or crevices in the rock. He gathered two or three, and saw they were merely small plants of common sorts. Nearer the entrance, however, he noticed one with which he was quite unacquainted. He took it for moss at first, but soon saw it could scarcely be that. So he set to work to gather some nice specimens, and in order to do so more conveniently, rested his stick against the rocky wall. While thus occupied he took a step forward to get a very inviting-looking tuft, and in setting his foot down placed it on a very sharp stone and hurt himself smartly. Extending his left hand suddenly towards the rock for support, to his surprise the part he touched gave way or yielded under the pressure. It flashed upon him at once that here was the warrener's hole, filled up, no doubt, with the materials of a former nest. The same moment he heard Jack shouting, and observed a moving object dart in at the opening, and out again, almost too quickly for him to ascertain what it was, except that it was a bird; he suspected, however, that it was a dipper; and now he distinctly heard Jack saying,—

"Did you see that water ousel, Bob? I am sure she has a nest in there somewhere."

With the help of the light, which was now unintercepted, as I have said, and from the fact that his eyes were more accustomed to the dim light of the cavern, Bob presently made out that the mosses on the old nest, as he thought it, were very fresh. Closer inspection showed him a hole, neat and not the least frayed, as would be the case with an old nest. He forgot all about the pain of his hurt foot, and quickly inserted his fingers. The next moment a joyous shout rolled out of the cave, and conveyed to Jack the glorious news of—"A nest! a nest! and five eggs in it." A couple of them were speedily transferred to his mouth, and, taking his stick again in one hand and retaining his ferns in the other, he made his best speed to rejoin his companion on the bank. It would be difficult to describe the boys' extreme delight at this successful termination of their—as they had really begun to think it—almost hopeless quest. By the broad daylight, too, the fern looked a very promising one; and they agreed it should have a special corner in the egg-case. Jack attended to this and to the stowage of the eggs, while Bob resumed his shoes and stockings; and then, setting off with light hearts, they started downwards to take up their lines and return to the school. About three-quarters of an hour brought them back—Jack charging the Hagley Burn valiantly on the way—to where the kingfisher's nest had been found. Here their attention was first caught by seeing both the birds close by the disturbed and dilapidated entrance to their domicile. But as at least a foot of the passage was left still intact, and they had replaced the turf above so as rather to overhang the unexcavated part, the lads were not without good hope the two birds would be content to re-occupy their nest, and, if need be, replace the three eggs of which it had been despoiled. They next proceeded to take up their line, and Jack now perceived the use of a wand, about five feet long and not very thick, which Bob had cut and trimmed a few minutes before they reached this point. He passed it along close to the bank slopingly, and so as to pass between the bank and the string, and of course below the peg to which the latter was fastened. Thus doing, he was able to raise the line without the trouble of stooping or lying down, as he had to do when setting it. The line was very slack, he observed, as he brought it up on his stick. "Nothing here, Jack," he said, and, dragging up the peg by a strong pull upwards on the line, he proceeded to wind it carefully up, securing both hooks—from which every particle of bait had been removed, however—as he completed his task. They proceeded to the next line now; Jack had forgotten whereabouts it was, and was not much better about the others. Not so with Bob. He seemed to recollect to a foot where each line was; and, stopping over the one which lay next, he exclaimed, as soon as he set eyes on the water,—

"My word, Jack, we've got one here; a thumper, I should say."

Jack saw the line stretched out quite tight in the water in the direction of a deep pool, just below where they stood. The line was soon caught, and Bob began pulling in, gently though, hand over hand. A wavering motion at the end of the line now began.

"An eel, Jack—it's an eel, and a two pounder, I'll answer for it."

Jack's excitement was intense, and Bob's, to say the truth, not much less. But he did not forget his caution; and in a second or two an eel, as thick as their wrists, and long as their arm, came in sight, waving slowly through its length like a streamer, as Bob pulled on steadily and firmly. Now it was within a yard of the bank, and Bob, altering the direction of his pull, lifted it cannily out, and laid it, writhing and struggling, on the grass. To place his foot firmly on its neck, so as to press it strongly against the turf sideways, and to pass his knife through the backbone at its junction with the bones of the head, was the work of a few seconds. The eel was thus deprived of life and sensation in a moment, and Bob was able to extract the hook without trouble to himself, or pain to the eel. For though it still moved when touched, and would move for hours if kept moist, he knew very well it was only by muscular contractions excited by the action of the nerves in connexion with the spine, which did not lose their irritability for long after life was extinct in such creatures as the eel. Depositing his line in the bag he carried for the purpose, and the eel in his pannier, they proceeded to the next in succession. This was drawn up blank. The fourth, again, was drawn tight, but not stationary, as where the eel was caught. The end near the bank kept moving from side to side, and it was evident that at the other end rapid motion was going on. The bank-end was soon in Bob's hand, and again a glad exclamation showed he felt he had got "a good 'un." The first pull was succeeded by a rush from the captive fish; the next by a plunge; then a dash to the surface of the water; then another dull plunge; and then a rush into the bank under Bob's very feet.

"Gently, my darling," said Bob, "you'll have enough of the bank in a minute."

And in less than a minute there he lay on the grass, a beautiful perch of nearly a pound and a-half, who had not been able to resist the appetizing looks of a delicate little gudgeon of three inches long. He was stunned with a sharp tap on his head, and consigned to the basket. The fifth line had a troublesome, twisting, slimy, small eel upon it, which was dealt with very summarily by Bob, and ignominiously cast back into the river. The sixth was rushing about in a strangely vehement way.

"Hallo!" says Bob, "what's the row here, I wonder! That chap doesn't think himself a little 'un, I should say. Very like a whale, and no mistake, is *his* ticket, no doubt. Now, old fellow, take it gently, will you?" as the violent movements of the fish made the line slip off his stick; "draw it mild, I say," as he was baffled a second time in the same way. "Here, Jack, put down the egg-case, and lay hold here as soon as I say 'now!'" Jack was at his side in a moment. "Now!" he sung out, sharp and quick. The rod was in Jack's hand as quickly as the word out of his cousin's mouth, and the next moment Bob was down on his breast, and with safe hold of the line. "Lay hold of my legs, or he'll have me in," he shouted. Jack caught hold firmly. The fish was still for a moment. "Pull me back, Jack," and giving a wriggle backwards at the same time by the help of one hand resting on the bank near the water edge, he got so far back as to be able to gather himself up on his knees. This was accompanied, of course, by a pull on the fish, and it was responded to in an instant by a leap from the water, another and another.

"Look out for squalls, I say, Jack," cried Bob, who waxed slangy in moments of excitement. "We haven't got this chap yet. I hope we haven't 'cotch a Tartar,' as they say in China. I thought we might get a trout here, just below that glorious stream; but I didn't bargain for such a young dolphin as this. My line's strong enough, and the gut too, I think. But the like o' yon, sirs, eh! it's just awfu',"—as the trout made such a desperate rush, he was obliged to let out the line, though resistingly, until he let go of it altogether.

"Well, that peg's a good one, and well stuck in, that's a comfort. Pull on, my hearty; you wont be quite so lively next time I get hold of you. Now, Jack," he cried, a moment after, "lay hold as you did before, when I raise the line, and then help me up again, quick."

Jack did so, and again Bob knelt, and then rose to his feet with the line in his hand. The struggles of the trout were not so vehement this time, though still strong enough to require a little circumspection on Master Bobby's part. But as soon as the trout began decidedly to yield, his captor began to act with proportionate decision in pulling him in, and in less than half a minute, trusting entirely to his strong tackle, lifted his gasping prey, and laid it upon the short grass. 'Twas a noble trout, of nearly four pounds weight.

"And he will have a noble fate," punned Bob, "if the Doctor will have him. At all events, we'll ask him, Jack. But how about the time? By Jove, I'd forgotten that! Come along, Jack, we must cut it like bricks!"

Jack, who had got his egg-box slung again, and the line-bag ready, while Bob was disposing of the trout and the line, was ready to start. And away they went schoolwards, as hard as they could get along with the weight they had to carry. However, before they had gone a mile, they heard the fine old clock at Elmdon striking four; after which they took it more gently. They reached the school in time, not only to be fully ready for the bell, but to have ten minutes besides to arrange their fern and their trout, before asking the Doctor to look at them. At seven o'clock the wished-for opportunity presented itself, and they asked the Doctor if he could spare them five minutes to look at something they had got.

"Willingly," was his answer. "Where is it? and what?"

"In our study, sir. It's a fern. I'll fetch it in a moment," said Bob, who knew the Doctor liked short and decided answers to his questions. He was but a few seconds gone before he returned, bringing with him from the little apartment which was the joint den of himself and his cousin, the fern in one hand and the trout in the other.

"Why, you don't call that a fern, Benson. Where did you get it? He's a splendid fellow, indeed. I have not often seen a finer anywhere."

"Please, sir, we caught it in the pool below Swallowfoot Streams. We'd set a line there while we went up Hagley Brook. Please, sir, would you mind taking it?"

The Doctor smiled, and said he wouldn't mind the least; but had they any right to fish there?

"Oh, yes, sir," said Bob. "The gamekeeper gave me leave two months ago to fish anywhere in Sir Cuthbert's part of the Whitwater. And he said, if I set a line or two sometimes I should not do any harm. And he showed me how himself, sir; I mean, so as to have a chance to catch a trout."

"Well, now for the fern—is that it? Why, Benson, you've been lucky to-day; I did not know this grew in the neighbourhood. It's Wilson's filmy fern. Where did you get it?"

Out came the history of the dipper's nest and the discovery of the fern.

"Upon my word, you are two lucky fellows; but to be sure you do what you can to deserve it by perseverance and labour. Any other luck to-day?"

"No, Sir. Only three kingfisher's eggs."

"*Only* three kingfisher's eggs! Why, what would you have? I have been inquiring for two kingfisher's eggs for my nephew's cabinet these two years and couldn't hear of any; and you say '*Only* three' of them."

"Please, Sir, will you take ours?" eagerly asked both boys. "We left two more in the nest, and the birds are almost sure to lay some more; we can easily get others for ourselves."

"No, no, my good lads," replied their master; "I will not take yours. If you don't want the third you have brought, I'll take that willingly, and you can go some day and fetch me another from the nest. It is probable the old hen will lay more. I knew twenty taken in succession out of one nest, one year."

So Doctor Noble had one of the eggs, very nicely blown and dried, handed to him the next day, together with the specimens of filmy fern; all but two or three which Bob had reserved to send to his sister, when he knew what it was. And three days after, having asked the Doctor's leave to go up to the kingfisher's nest and back, they had the gratification of bringing away a second egg for him, and leaving four others in the nest for the birds to hatch and rear.

CHAPTER VI.

Walk the Fourth—The Grove—The Hartstone—The Raven Tree —Wrilton Castle—Goldcrest's Nest—The Lake—Crow's Nest.

At the approach of the next opportunity for a long walk which presented itself, the boys hesitated for some time as to the direction they should take, and the objects they should propose to themselves. Bob was for settling both beforehand, "for," said he, "people who know what they are going to do, and what they are going to do it for, generally seem to do it best and to meet with most success in the end. And people who wait till the time comes when they ought to be doing, before they settle what they mean to do, I have often seen, muddle away half their time with making up their minds, and then making half beginnings."

Jack, who had often lost half of his playtime in this very way, and so knew very well the truth of what Bob was saying, did not feel at all inclined to dispute—or, as boys generally do when one of their companions ventures on a little philosophy—to laugh at his cousin's "short sermon for the young."

Should they go to the Common and see if the warrener had destroyed the blue hawk's nest? suggested Bob.

"What else could we do there, and what is a blue hawk?" inquired Jack. "I have looked in my bird-book, and I can't find any name like that."

"Oh! the blue hawk is the same as the merlin, I believe. The male merlin has a blue head and a blue back, and a beautiful fellow he is. I believe the colour of his back gives him that country name. As to what else we could do up there, we might find a golden plover's nest, and in those furze thickets we should have a chance of meeting with the whin-chats' and the twites' nests. The meadow pipit, too, is very common on some parts of the Common, and there are always plenty of nests, the keeper told me one day. Then, too, there is that brook which runs down Watery Lane; there is generally a nest or two of the summer snipe's near it, and I know there are two pairs of these birds there this year, for I have seen them."

"And suppose we don't go there, Bob, where else can we go?"

"Why, there is one place you and I have never been to yet;—I mean the old castle. You know Sir Cuthbert, who lives at Wrilton Park, is an old friend of my father's, and he generally asks me to go there for a couple of days every half year, and I have leave to go all over the pleasure-grounds, and to the lake and castle. And it was only the day before yesterday that I met him as I went down town after twelve, and he stopped and spoke to me, and said he hadn't seen me lately; wasn't I coming soon to see him? And then I asked him if I might take you next time I went to the castle, and if we might look for some starlings and jackdaws' eggs there. He asked who you were, and when I said my cousin, 'Ah! yes,' said he, 'I remember; my old friend Bessy Benson's boy. She married Mr. Edwards. It is a long, long time since I saw her. Well, you must come up to the Park next week, or the week after, and bring your cousin with you. I'll send my groom and the dogcart for you, and speak to Dr. Noble, and let you know as soon as I can fix a day.' I declare I quite forgot to tell you before, Jack."

Jack was so taken up with the idea of the pleasure-grounds and lake, and ruinous old castle, that he did not seem quite so much impressed with the importance of a visit to the Park as many of his schoolfellows would have been; and he was urgent with Bob to settle at once to go to Wrilton Castle on the coming Thursday. Bob, who had a hankering to go there himself, did not want much pressing; and so, when the time came, they took the road that ran past the church, and, about two miles further on, past the lodge gates of the Park. They did not remain on it very long, however; for on reaching the churchyard, they took the footpath which led through it past the rectory garden, through the meadow which the little Wrill ran through (and thence through the rectory pleasure-garden), and up the little hill the other side at the back of the rectory stables and other buildings. Then they crossed the railway and struck into the lane that led past the Pest-house. But before reaching that lonely building, the lane skirted "the Grove" for nearly half a mile, and through the Grove Bob meant to reach their destination, Wrilton Castle, which stood within what was now the pleasure-grounds—or, as it was generally called, the wilderness—of Wrilton Park. Bob told his cousin on reaching the Grove that there was a good deal of superstition among the country people about this wood; and not a few among their schoolfellows shared in it,—as perhaps was to be expected, since there were not a few day-boys in the school; some the sons of parents who had come to live at Elmdon for the sake of sending their lads to the school; others the sons of gentlemen or professional men belonging to the town.

He remembered, one day last autumn, he was there nutting with half-a-dozen others of "the boys," when sounds like hollow groans were heard, and every boy ran for his life, he said, and never stopped till they had placed two or three fields between them and the Grove. He added, he was as bad as they at first, and had run out of the Grove as fast as any of them; but then he felt so ashamed of himself he was determined he would run no further, and after a minute or two, and with a beating heart, he made up his mind that he would go into the wood again, and make out what the noise was; for it still continued to be heard at intervals, though not so loud as in the wood. "For I did not know," said the lad, "that it might not be somebody who had hurt himself. And once, too, I had seen a boy take a fit in the school, and he made noises very like those I now heard in the wood." So he went on, guiding himself by the sound, and had nearly reached the spot whence it appeared to come, when all at once his courage nearly gave way again at the loud whirring noise made by something rushing out of a thicket close to his side. Not a little ashamed was he of his momentary tremor the next instant, on recognising its cause in a magnificent cock pheasant, which coolly flew up into an oak tree close by, and crowed at the intruder. "I could not help a hearty laugh at this," he said, "and in that laugh all my fears escaped, and I pushed boldly through the thicket, and there in a bog, nearly suffocated, poor thing, lay a big calf; all black it looked, but that I soon saw was with the mire. It seemed to have been struggling a long time, and was all but exhausted, and those hollow groans, as we thought them, were the moaning lowings it had made in its distress. I soon ran off towards Farmer Langley's—for I knew it must belong to him—though I was almost beat to keep on running for laughing, when I saw some of the boys who had run away the fastest—that great lout Jeff Harvey the chief among them—and who on seeing me re-enter, had gathered up pluck enough to come back into the next field, start off again more helter-skelter than ever, when they saw me running as if for life—big Jeff Harvey running right over poor little 'Miss Boulton,' and never stopping to pick him up again, or indeed so much as to look behind him. As luck would have it, I met Mr. Langley himself on his pony, with one of his men, in the third field from the Grove. I could hardly speak, I was so out of breath; and he was half-inclined to be cross, for I had broken through one of his hedges before his very eyes with so little ceremony; and he had had a good deal of trouble that way with three or four of 'our fellows' more than once. But when he understood from me what was the reason I was so out of breath, he said—

"'I beg your pardon, young gentleman, for being rude to you. But I was vexed at the loss of this very calf, which has been missing ever since yesterday, and it is one I set a deal of store by; and I did not like to see my hedges broke before my very eyes. Will you please to go in at the Farm, and sit down and cool yourself, till I get back. I should take it kindly if you would.'

"No, thank you, sir, not now," I answered; "I'll go back with you, and see you get the calf out."

"'Why 'tisn't a calf rightly; it's a year-old. But you'll get more out of breath and hotter than ever; for, from what you say, Jem and I mustn't let the grass grow under our feet.'

"I can keep up with you," I said; "and besides, I know exactly where the calf is, and you do not."

"'Thank you, sir; that's right again.'

"Very few words more were said, and in ten minutes time the farmer, and Jem, and I were standing by the calf safe out of the mire, but quite unable to stand. And that's the end of as good a ghost story as many that I have heard. I think they all might be spoiled with just such another ending as my calf, if there wer'n't so many Jeff Harveys in the world."

Jack appeared quite absorbed with the attention he gave to the former part of this narrative; and to tell the truth, being of rather an imaginative temperament, felt very ready, on leaving the bright sunlight for the comparative gloom of the wood, to indulge a little superstitious fear on hearing it hinted that some people fancied it was "haunted," and was rather disappointed than otherwise, at being obliged to laugh at Jeff Harvey's discomfiture, and the *denouement* of the mired calf.

"What made folks think the place was 'uncanny?'"

"Oh!" said Bob, "I dare say it was the neighbourhood of the Pest-house, and the ruins of the Castle on the other side. I know many people would not go by the Pest-house, after dark, on any consideration; nor yet through the Churchyard. And there are several old tales about shocking things that happened in the Castle, hundreds of years ago. In a few minutes, we shall come to the Hart-stone. They say that was put up where a famous white hart, that had baffled everybody who had hunted it for years, was killed by the two sons of the then Lord; that the young men quarrelled about which of them had given the fatal wound; that the quarrel ran so high, they fought then and there, and so fiercely, that before the forester who was with them could interfere, one of them was dying, and the other so badly wounded, that though he lingered on for many months afterwards, yet he died of his hurts just within the year, and was buried a year, to a day, after his brother. And it was always said after that, that both those unhappy young men 'walked' at night round the scene of their death, when that day came round each year, with their bloody swords and gory wounds. And here we are, at the 'Hart-stone,'" he cried, as they came on to a sort of treeless level at the corner of the Grove, and saw the Castle turrets rising above the wooded banks of a ravine about a mile further on; but the prominent object in the foreground was a grey stone, about six feet high, rough and unhewn, and now covered, in places, with lichens, and showing evident tokens of great antiquity. "And there," he added, "is the Raven-tree. Tradition says a pair of ravens have built in a tree hereabouts for hundreds of years. That tree is known to have been occupied by them for more than thirty years. A large bough which had a pile of nests, one above another—if each year's repairs, rather than building, can be called a nest at all—nearly five feet thick, fell or was broken out, one stormy night about ten years ago; and since then they have built where you now see the nests. See what a heap it is, and I can see the old lady's tail sticking out. A boy once climbed up and had just got within reach of the nest—he had a sort of staff slung to his wrist to beat off the ravens with if they attacked him, and they did seem very much inclined to do so, the keeper told me—when Farmer Langley, knowing something was wrong by the outcries of the two birds, came up to yonder corner on his pony, and he wasn't long in finding his way under the trees, and letting the lad know that if he touched the nest, he, Farmer Langley, would give him such a dusting—and he cracked his horsewhip as he said so—as he would not forget for his life. Mr. Langley is almost as particular about them as Sir Cuthbert Graham; and *he* says he'd as soon have the old Castle pulled down as the raven's nest destroyed."

Jack was curious to know more about the raven, —how many eggs it laid, and other particulars of that kind. Bob told him four or five, and that usually they bred very early; that they always drove away their young as soon as they were able to shift for themselves; that they were believed to attain a great age, and were now most commonly met with in rocky and inaccessible places, having, like some other birds, been very much lessened by the destruction of their nests, and the war waged on them by the race of gamekeepers. He added, that he had heard they often had one or more eggs addle, and that, when the young were flown and the old ones had quitted the nest for the year, he should ask if he might get up the tree and examine the nest, in case there was one this year: a plan which we may add here, he, a few weeks afterwards, carried into execution, and was rewarded for it by the acquisition of an egg, none the worse as a specimen, but very disagreeable to blow. Leaving the Hart-stone and the Raven-tree, they issued from the Grove by climbing over a dry wall which had some long stones let through it so as to form a kind of steps to get over by, and then proceeded to scramble down the side of the ravine nearest to them, and cross the little brook which brattled along at the bottom, running into the lake which received the Wrill two or three hundred yards lower down. On the sort of promontory between this brook and the Wrill, and rising not less than one hundred to one hundred and twenty feet above those streams, stood the Castle. The bank facing the point at which they came in sight of the Castle and descended, was very steep and in places precipitous; but generally affording space and earth for not only brushwood to find root, but for many trees, and some of them very fine, to grow and thrive. They had no great difficulty therefore in climbing this. On the other side, above the Wrill, the case would have been very different. There, there was a sheer descent from the edge of the cliff to near the bottom, and the only approach to the Castle from the direction of the mansion was at a point where the other, that is, the southern bank—there as rocky and precipitous as that on the north-side —approached within four or five yards of it. Over this chasm a bridge had been thrown, connecting the Castle precincts with the wilderness. At all other points, however, the southern bank sloped away, not gently, but still gradually, down to the edge of the Wrill, leaving grassy glades here and there, and in other places showing thickets of indigenous shrubs and trees, occasionally alternating with clusters of foreign growth. Among others, Norwegian spruces and silver spruces were seen, reaching magnificent dimensions; and several American fir-trees grew grandly enough. But the boys had not much attention to give to such details as these on reaching the Castle, of which the keep was entire and the barbican and flanking towers little the worse for dilapidation. The principal parts of the main building, however, were utterly ruinous. Here they could make out the great hall, and there some smaller apartments. Beneath again, were vaulted rooms, which of course were supposed by the country antiquarians to have been dungeons.

The walls, too, where there had been need of fortification, on the only side unprotected by nature, were more or less perfect. There they had been very strong and thick; and the towers at either end were tolerably perfect, as were the winding staircases in each of them.

Bob left Jack to amuse himself here, while he himself ran on to the gardener's house, just at the garden extremity of the wilderness, to get the key of the thick door which gave admission to the keep. Jack climbed up one of the staircases, peeping out of the narrow slits, which did duty for windows, as he reached them in succession, and came to a floor which required very cautious treading,—so broken and treacherous was it,—and issued at a small vaulted doorway which had evidently communicated with the parapet of the external defence; but it was broken away a few feet from the tower. Then he tried to ascend a little higher, as the stairs still went winding up; though the floor above he saw had utterly given way. At the top of the stairs he found a sort of landing in a kind of semicircular recess, with loopholes opening in two directions. He had scarcely put his head above the last step, when a great fluttering and flapping ensued, as half a score birds hastily endeavoured to make their exit through the loopholes. He saw they were of three sorts, and in his haste, imagined the larger black ones were crows. Divers holes in the wall he saw, and pieces of stick and straw poking out of them; while sundry chirpings and squeakings assured him there were young birds not far off. Greatly stirred with the hope of securing some eggs before Bob's return, he proceeded to investigate the contents of all the holes—about five—within his reach. The first he put his hand into contained four callow nestlings. But of the other four, no less than three contained eggs. In two of them, the eggs, four or five in number, were of a pale blue, a lighter tint than the hedge-sparrow's eggs, and nearly as big as blackbird's eggs; the other two nests contained eggs which he recognised immediately, being no other than common sparrow's eggs. Two of the blue eggs he deposited carefully in a corner, and then looked about to see how he could contrive to reach more of the holes. He thought if he could get up into one of the openings, and were to reach up so as to catch hold of a projecting stone with one hand, with the other he might succeed in exploring at least two more of the nest-containing receptacles. After one or two efforts, and barking one of his knees, and the knuckles of one hand rather severely in the process, he at length succeeded; and just as he heard Bob's lusty "Jack, I say Jack, where are you?"

he was enabled to call out, "Here, old fellow, up at the top of the tower, with a handful of eggs."

Bob ran up the stone steps as quickly as their nature and the light permitted, just in time to see Jack getting down from his standing-place, and finishing the business rather more quickly than he intended, by taking a very abrupt seat on the stone landing-place, rather to the discomfiture of his stern-framings.

"Up again, old fellow; none the worse, I say?" was his greeting, as he helped his cousin up from his involuntary seat.

"No, not much," he rather hesitatingly said, as he rubbed himself rather feelingly; "and what's more, both the eggs are safe."

One he had held in his hand safely, spite of his bump, and the other was in his mouth.

"Well done, old fellow; why, you've got a couple of jackdaw's eggs, and—" seeing Jack stoop to take up the other two he had laid aside before beginning his clamber—"as many starling's eggs, I declare. You're coming it strong in my absence. But what's in there? That isn't a starling's nest, I know."

"No, it's not," replied Jack; "it's a sparrow's. I've had my hand in there; and there too," as Bob looked at another hole.

They now placed these eggs safely in the box and descended the staircase. Retracing their steps to the keep, Bob put the key in the door, and after a few efforts succeeded in opening it. To get to this door they had to go up an external flight of several stone steps, and on entering, a turn to the left brought them upon a winding staircase, which conducted downwards to the basement story, as well as upwards to the two floors above, and thence to the platform over all, which commanded a very wide prospect of the surrounding country. The entrance story was much loftier than the story below, and occupied the whole interior space of the building; and the vaulted and groined roofs, and stone floors, and elaborately carved circular arches, were regarded with great curiosity by Jack. The story next in succession seemed to have been the principal apartment of all. It was called the Armory, or sometimes, Bob said, the Hall of Audience. It was a noble apartment about forty feet by thirty-three, exclusive of the space occupied by a gallery which ran round it. And its height from the floor to the apex of the great arch which extended across and supported the upper part, was more than twenty feet, and five or six more to the ceiling. This part of the building was very much decorated, and the bases and capitals of the pillars showed most elaborate ornaments, no two of them being alike. There was a great quantity of armour at the Park, Bob said, and old weapons of many different sorts, which Sir Cuthbert had told him had once hung on the walls in this very room. But what struck Jack with the most surprise was the great thickness of the walls; nearly thirteen feet through at the bottom and more than nine feet at the top. And Bob bade him observe that the east wall, for some reason or other, was a foot thicker than the others. The whole height of the building, at least of the square turrets at the corners before they were so much damaged at the top, must have been nearly 120 feet. As it was, the main building with its battlements thrown down, was nearly 110 feet high, and no doubt the turrets rose higher than it.

The two boys lingered long about this interesting old tower, and then, reluctantly descending, Bob closed the door and both went over the bridge into the wilderness. Jack wandered down one of the slopes amid the trees and shrubs towards the Wrill, while his friend ran on to return the key; and here he was overtaken by him on his return. Passing on beneath some spruce firs, Bob suddenly uttered a cry of delight:

"Oh! Jack, only look—what a beautiful little nest."

And so it was, indeed. Neatly woven of fine moss and lichens on the exterior, interwoven with wool and spiders' webs, it hung suspended beneath one of the spreading fir branches, towards its end, being supported by having some of the lateral twigs as it were woven into its framework :—lined with soft small feathers, it contained no less than nine of the most delicate little eggs conceivable. Jack's delight was more than equal to Bob's, and it required the exertion of all his kindly feeling towards living creatures in general, and birds in particular, and of his power of self-denial, to refrain from cutting the branch, and taking it, with the nest attached just as they had found it, home with him. Bob's rhetoric and his own good feeling prevailed however, and, contenting themselves with the abstraction of the usual two eggs, they left the nest unhurt. They were rewarded by seeing the little gold-crest return to its temporary home, and resume her seat upon the remaining eggs before they left, after having most carefully packed their spoils in soft cotton wool.

Crossing the Wrill by some stepping-stones a short distance above the point at which it entered the lake, they skirted the foot of the precipice beneath the castle till they reached the shore of the lake. The walking here, for some distance, was very laborious, from the large masses of rock which had fallen down from above, and which had large quantities of tangled briars and brambles and brushwood growing upon and among them. However, they made their way on—though with some difficulty, and after a good deal of perseverance—till they passed over the 150 yards or so of shore which lay between the mouth of the Wrill and the other brook. Once there, their difficulties ceased. The sheet of water lay spread out before them in all its beauty; and Jack had time and leisure to notice not only that three varieties of the swallow tribe were busily taking their insect prey about the lakes, but that there seemed to be a good many waterfowl of various kinds upon it. Bob told him there were; that Sir Cuthbert took much interest in them, and was very careful not to allow them to be disturbed; so that besides several foreign species which he had turned down, many varieties of the British wildfowl either bred there—on those little islets they saw in three different parts of the lake—or paid visits at other times of the year. That very beautiful English bird, the shoveller, Bob had himself seen there, and there were several shieldrakes about it. He believed that a pair of them had once nested in a rabbit burrow on the further side of the lake and brought off eight young ones. But it had only happened once, to Sir Cuthbert's great disappointment. Bob added further, that among the other birds introduced the winter before last, were a great black-backed gull and a black goose. Sir Cuthbert had obtained both in the course of a week's wildfowl shooting afloat, on the Essex coast. Both were so slightly injured by the shot—no apparent hurt being discernible beyond the damage of the extreme end of the pinion, which disabled them from flying, and only just that—that their captor determined to save them alive, bring them home, and put them down on his lake. He did so, and though the goose was knocked about by the other fowl who were the old denizens of the lake, if he ventured near them, he soon became familiarized with the gardener and his wife, and would approach within a few feet of them for food, which they usually carried for the purpose of encouraging him. As for the gull, his boldness—degenerating almost into impudence—and his voracity were about equal. He soon learned the way up to the gardener's lodge, and paced or pattered along with quick, short steps when excited, on the short grass before the windows. Nothing came amiss to him in the eatable way; mice, young birds, frogs, large slugs, all were snatched up and deposited without effort or ceremony in what must have been a very capacious and accommodating stomach. One day the gardener had killed a rat, not a very large one, to be sure, but still an adult rat. This he threw to Jack Blackback, as the gull was called, without any thought that he, Jack, would proceed to extremities, but more out of idle curiosity to see what he would think of it. The rat was unceremoniously taken up in the formidable bill and swallowed, tail first. It did not seem to go down easily or comfortably; but go down it did. However, after a minute or two it seemed to strike Master Jack that he could arrange a better stowage for this large morsel, and so the rat was ejected, thrown on the grass, taken up again and swallowed a second time, *head* first, with as little ceremony as before; and, as the event showed, more compatibly with internal comfort.

Bob now drew his friend's attention more specially to the swallows, which were flying about in large numbers, and asked him if he knew them all. Jack said, he knew the forky-tail chimney-swallow very well, and the common martin also; and he supposed those smaller birds, which showed some lighter colour on the back and rump than either of the other species, were sand-martins.

"Just so," said Bob; "and what you cannot see everywhere you may here—I mean the swift, the swallow, the martin, and the sand-martin, all may be seen on the wing at the same glance, and all breeding within a quarter of a mile square. The swallow nests abundantly in the chimneys of the gardener's lodge and some outhouses at the end of the wilderness, and among the home farm buildings adjacent. The swifts—several pairs, three or four at least—build in the highest parts of the old keep. The martins have numerous nests on the ledges, or rather under them, among those precipitous rocks we came beneath a quarter of an hour ago; and the sand-martins have founded a very extensive and prosperous summer colony in the sandy soil, above an old quarry, the track to which—now almost entirely disused for several years—lies up here, above our heads."

"Oh, let us go and see them," cried Jack. "I have had such a curiosity to see a place where the sand-martin breeds, ever since I read 'Eyes and no Eyes.'"

"Well," said Bob, "if you are not tired of climbing, I am not; but arn't you a little stiff behind?" Bob looked rather malicious as he uttered this query. However, Jack, with a good-humoured twinkle in his eye, contented himself with replying:—

"Never you mind, Bob; I dare say, if the truth were known, you've sat down hard yourself some day or other."

"That I have, old fellow, and no later than last holidays: I was with my brother Ned out shooting, and we were crossing a brook. I jumped down, a couple of feet or so, on to what I took in my haste for a sloping bed of hard mud or clay, digging my heels well in—in intention at least—that I might not slip forwards into the water. What I took for clay was hard rock, and the nails of my boot-heels coming so fairly on to it, you may judge if I didn't come down with a run. My word, old fellow, I can feel it yet. I'd have given all I possessed to have had a good cry; but though Ned didn't see what was the row, there was a grinning lout of a watcher, carrying the bag and marking, close behind me, and didn't he snigger at my catastrophe? I guess he grinned the other side of his mouth though, half a minute after. He got gingerly down the bank, and came—half bursting with trying not to laugh—to 'help Master Robert out of the water,' he said; for, as I slid down the stone, my legs straight out, like a fellow that's been tripped up in a slide, of course they dabbed slick into the water, till I was brought up, all standing, by the bottom. I got out without his help, and in shaking my legs and stamping my feet—partly to get the water out of my trousers, and partly to dull the sense of my pain—I brought my heel down once (quite by accident, of course,) on his toes. He didn't laugh again for half an hour, by Myton town clock, I'm sure."

By this time Bob had led the way into a very rugged track, much grown up with weeds and brambles, which went obliquely up the hill. Following this in its windings and zigzags, they soon reached a rather extensive platform, with plentiful *débris* strewed about on all sides, originating partly in the effects of time and weather, and partly in the quarrying operations of old times. A smooth face of solid rock, divided by thin seams of softer material into three beds of stone, varying in thickness from five to ten feet, rose up before them; and above this was a further face, not quite so perpendicular as that of the rock beneath, of reddish soil or sand, about five feet thick. And in this were seen countless round holes of apparently some two or two and a-half inches in diameter, and numbers of the sand-martins flying in or out.

"Nests enough, there, my boy," exclaimed Bob, as they rested after their scramble up. "Wouldn't you like to put your hand into one of them?"

"Oh, yes!" answered Jack, "indeed I should. But can't we?"

"I'm afraid it's not to be done at the price," was the discouraging reply. "We could clamber up that corner—at least one of us—and then, if he came to grief, the other that stayed below might pick up the pieces, and report the fracture; and we might, in that way, get our feet on to yonder ledge, one hand on those projecting roots, and the other into those three or four holes that are within reach. But those holes reach in more than two or three inches. Some will be a foot, others nearer two, in depth; and I don't think, if we were sitting at ease in arm-chairs just before them, we should at that rate succeed in penetrating their interesting mysteries. No, Jack, we must leave them alone in their safety; but if we go up to the common again soon, I know a sand and gravel pit, not far out of our road, which contains some nests that are accessible from above, and though we have a couple of eggs, we'll see if we cannot open one up for you."

The two boys now descended from the quarry, crossed the brook at the bottom of the bank, climbed the one on the other side, and re-entered the grove, about a quarter of a mile below the point at which they had left it on their way to the castle. As they passed on through it, taking short tracks,—known familiarly to few besides the gamekeeper,—from drive to drive, so as to cross to the lower corner on the Elmdon side, Bob's sharp eye detected an unnatural protuberance on one side of a tree not very far from the edge of the grove.

"That's a nest," he said. "It is cunningly put within that broken limb, which makes it look less;

but it's a crow's nest for all that. At all events, I'll see." And accordingly, in less than a minute, he was sufficiently high in the tree to ascertain not only that it was a crow's nest, but contained four eggs. He took one, for they had one already, and as he put it in the case, he said, rather to himself than to his companion, "A crow's nest here—dainty fare for Mr. and Mrs. Blackneb; the young pheasants in the wood, and the ducks' eggs and small swimmers from the lake:—I must tell Banks. Let's see; how can I get him to know the tree? Ah! I see. He must come in by the end of the hedge between Longland's and Three-acres, and the third large tree on the right, 15 yards from the hedge"—stepping it as he spoke; "that'll do exactly."

They now left the wood, crossed the Wrill by an accommodation bridge, uniting the two parts into which it severed a meadow, and walked through a couple of other meadows to the road; trudging along which they reached the Church as the clock pointed to half-past four. In less than ten minutes they were in their study, and had put away their egg-box on its accustomed nail, and proceeded to prepare themselves to be present at roll-call, as soon as the bell should summon them.

CHAPTER VII.

School Examination—Merlin's Eggs—Golden Plover's Nest—Stonechat's, Whinchat's, Common and Mountain-Linnet's Nests—Corn Crake's, Whitethroat's, Longtailed Tomtit's, and Willow Wren's Nests.

THE occasion for their next walk presented itself much sooner than they had any reason to expect. When the school was next assembled, after their return from the excursion recorded in the last chapter,—in the course, that is, of the same evening,—Dr. Noble informed the boys publicly that he had that day received formal notice from the Visitors of Elmdon Grammar School—namely, the Bishop of the diocese and Dr. Healy, the master of St. Hilda's Hall—that they purposed to pay their annual visit of examination on the following Monday.

"We have but short notice this time, my boys," said the doctor in conclusion, "but I have no fear that you will not acquit yourselves well; and I don't believe that many of you would care to have much more time for special preparation."

As he passed Bob in the school-yard, a few minutes afterwards (the school having just been dismissed for the evening), Dr. Noble said to him—

"I think the bird's eggs haven't interfered with the Latin and Greek; have they, Benson?"

"I hope not, sir. I think I like my work very well, and I haven't lost any places in class."

"No, indeed you have not; and I think at the end of the half-year you will gain several steps. You have given me much satisfaction, Benson, by your general attention and good conduct, as well as by your progress." And then turning to our friend Jack, who had come up as he addressed these last words to Bob, he said—

"You have done very well too, on the whole, and your general conduct I am thoroughly pleased with. You can't do better than—what I am very glad to see you so well disposed to do—make a friend of your cousin."

Passing on, he left the two lads deeply gratified with his kind notice and commendation, and determining they would do their best to deserve it.

"I say, Jack," said Bob, after a few seconds, "we mustn't do the worst on Monday."

"No fear of that, Bob. I only wish I could do as well as you."

Well, the days passed on. Bob and Jack both spent the greater part of their playtime—and many others of their schoolfellows in the higher forms did the same—in rubbing up anything they thought had got rusty in their school work, and making themselves safe in what they considered doubtful places; and it was remarkable how much Bob, who, to the best of his ability, applied his principle of knowing "what he was going to do, and what he was going to do it for," to his work, had succeeded in getting done; for there were but few points in which he found necessity to begin, as if upon something still rather new and strange.

Monday came at last, and punctually at a quarter-past nine the Bishop and Dr. Healy were ushered into the school; and in a few minutes a real, honest examination commenced, the visitors confining their attention principally to the performances of the three upper classes, and giving comparatively casual observation to the examination of the lower ones, which went on under the immediate superintendence of the Rector of Elmdon—who was, in compliance with the statutes, always requested to be present on the occasion—and the head-master himself. Our friend Bob was specially noticed by the Visitors, not for his brilliancy or any shining scholarship, but for his general accuracy and the readiness with which he produced the results of his reading, or his recollections of what he had learnt in class. They inquired particularly of the Doctor who he was, after they had left the school, and what were his characteristics; was he not a very attentive and diligent scholar?

Dr. Noble, in his answer, said that Benson was a very promising boy. Attentive he was certainly, and diligent too in the hours allotted to study; but if the inquirer meant, as he rather supposed he did, out of hours—Dr. Healy here assented—certainly not. No boy in the school entered more heartily into all the games, particularly the athletic ones; or more seemed to enjoy them. And then he just glanced at Bob's predilection for natural history, and his rambles in pursuit of this or that object of interest. The secret of his success, he said, was in his energy, and perseverance, and method. Whatever he undertook he put his heart into it. What he did he "did it with his might," said the Doctor, making the allusion reverently. If it were cricket or football, or the acquisition of a new egg, or the capture of a basket of fish; the mastery of a new rule in arithmetic or algebra, or of a problem more difficult than usual; or the complete comprehension of the scope and intention of a passage in his Latin or Greek, the same method, and determination, and perseverance were always brought into play. "He will lead the school," concluded the Doctor, "if he remains here two or three years more. He is very popular already among his equals in age, and even among some of his seniors. And if God spares his life, he will make not only a rising—but much more than that—a useful man."

Jack came in for no especial notice; but before leaving the school, the Bishop, in a few plain but forcible words, told the boys that the Visitors were quite satisfied with the results of their examination; that in their opinion the school more than maintained its position; and while they, the Visitors, could not but give the scholars credit for their evident efforts to avail themselves heartily of the opportunities for improvement placed within their reach, they could not themselves shut their eyes upon the fact, and it was right that the scholars should know their opinion—the speaker said he did not doubt they all felt the same thing themselves—that in the careful and conscientious superintendence and instructions of their Head-master, the scholars of Elmdon school enjoyed an advantage not easily to be overrated. He had only further to say, that, with Dr. Noble's permission, there would be, in accordance with immemorial custom, a holiday for the remainder of the day. The hearty cheers which resounded from 180 young throats as he ceased speaking, and which had almost broken out when Dr. Noble's name was mentioned, were a sufficient proof that the orator had just said what found a response in every heart there.

Jack, on joining Bob as they came out of school, was rather apprehensive they would lose their walk; as the latter, of course, could not ask the Doctor's leave in school, though he had passed close behind him on leaving the room; and now he would be busy with the Visitors, and not to be interrupted.

"Oh! never fear," said Bob; "when the Doctor is too busy to be interrupted he tells the second master to give leave for him to those who are entitled to ask it, and wish to go out; and I saw him speak to Mr. Patten as he passed." And he soon had an opportunity of approaching that gentleman, when he immediately gained the permission he desired.

The two companions had settled on Saturday that they would go up to the Common, if the afternoon on Monday were suitable, and they were able to get off in good time; and Bob had seen the warrener, who had come into the Saturday's market with some young rabbits—the first of the season, and only just big enough for sale, although a very early litter—and had learned from him that he had the three eggs the blue hawk had laid, all safe for himself and his friend; and, further, that he knew where there was a golden plover's nest, with one egg in it, which he had accidentally walked over the day before. It was therefore arranged that he should meet the lads about one o'clock at the "Longstone:"—as an upright pillar of unhewn stone, believed to be British in its origin, was called. They made all speed to reach the appointed place by the appointed time, but were inevitably a little late, as they did not get out of school till rather after twelve, and then had some preparations to make before starting. The warrener had been on the Common about half an hour, he said, but had had one or two weak places in the wall of the warren to repair, not far from the trackway, so that he had not lost his time. He first produced the three merlin's eggs out of an old tobacco-box, and Bob lost no time in transferring them to his egg-box; and then a screw of blue paper, containing a fine sample of "birds'-eye" from it to the warrener's hand. The warrener, whose own consumption was usually "shag," thought he had much the best of the bargain; an opinion not shared in by Bob, and still less by Jack, who had an immense respect for hawks, and all that belonged to them. They now passed rapidly on to the part of the Common where the plover's nest was situated. Before they had got nearer to it than 300 or 400 yards, they heard the well-known plaintive single note of the golden plover, and in a minute more one of the birds took a short flight in their direction, and settled on the ground about 100 yards in advance of them, where he continued repeating his cry at very short intervals. This was the male bird, as they saw from the dark, indeed black colour of his breast, as he stood on a little eminence above the general level of the moor, piping plaintively. The hen sat still about 150 yards further on, piping, too, as if in answer to him, but not so incessantly.

"I thought we should not see either of them very near the nest," said the warrener. "The nest is here, rather to our left. Here is the cock on our right, and there is the hen on our right too; and, I'll be bound, a good hundred yards from the nest. And by this time, I'll lay, she has got her four eggs all laid."

As the three drew nearer to the nest, the uneasiness of the two plovers evidently increased. The male made several short flights, and at last came within half gunshot, where he alighted and ran restlessly about; and the hen sat about twenty yards further off. Their piping was now incessant. The warrener, who had marked the position of the nest by its bearings in relation to two thistles and a tuft of rushes, proved to be quite right in his surmise that there would be found to be four eggs in the nest; which was only a hollow in the ground, barely big enough to contain the eggs, and with the barest apology for a lining, of dry bents or grass. The eggs were fully as large as the pewit's—if anything, a very trifle larger;—not unlike them in general appearance, only perhaps the dark blotches were a little darker than in the pewit's egg. They were also symmetrically arranged, point to point in the centre. No time was lost in placing two of them—very beautiful in the eyes of both boys, as indeed these eggs really are—in the egg-case. And then Jack asked if "the warrener had never seen them on their nest?"

"Why, yes," said he, "I have. But it's when the eggs are very 'hard sat,' and the old one's within a day or two—or a few hours, maybe—of hatching. She'll almost let you tread upon her then; but when the eggs haven't been long laid, they are uncommon wary. They seem to keep watch, and to see you as soon as you come on to the level where their nests are; and I expect, the hen, as soon as her mate gives notice by his whistle, that anybody is nigh, runs quietly off her nest ever so far, and never takes wing from anywhere near it. And you'll see, that as you go away now, they'll follow you by flights of fifty yards at a time—bit by bit like—till you cannot see any longer where the nest is. And then, they'll pay no more heed to you."

It was just as the warrener said, and very interesting to his companions. He now wished them good-day, and turned to his own occupations. They prosecuted their walk to the furze thickets, and soon got their legs well pricked. Both whin-chats and stone-chats were there, and twice they had seen mountain-linnets as they crossed the common thither. Still, no nest rewarded their search.

"Hang it, Bob," cried Jack at last, his legs smarting, and his hands—unprotected by stout gloves such as his cousin, foreknowing his work, had brought with him—bleeding: "hang it, I say; it's no use; I have looked into twenty bushes, and I have got five times twenty pricks into me, and my hands are bleeding, and never a shadow of a nest have I seen. You might as well look in this old bush"—and as he spoke, he struck the bush near him with an old dead furze stem he had just picked up—"for a nightcap as a nest."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth, when a little bird flew out of the very bush he had struck, and alighting on the top twigs of another furzebush about twenty yards off, began to utter, somewhat quickly, a rather sharp, chattering note. The stick was out of Jack's hand in a moment, and forgetful of pricked legs and bleeding hands, he was deep in the search for the nest he felt so confident must be somewhere in the bush. But in vain did he seek, and his confidence was beginning to ooze out, when Bob, happening to look up, shouted to him—

"Look lower down, Jack; lower down. They don't build so high up in the bushes as that."

'Twas new spirit to him, this hint; and acting upon it instantly, the next moment a glad shout announced his success.

"I have found it. Here it is."

"That's right, old chap; and I've got another, with four eggs."

"And mine's got five in it," replied Jack, eagerly.

"Wait a bit, will you, till I can mark mine," responded Bob; "I want to see it."

Bob was soon at his cousin's side, having tied his pocket-handkerchief to the bush where his own nest was, and he almost danced with delight when he exclaimed—

"We are in luck, again, old fellow. Yours is a stone-chat's; mine's a whin-chat's, or furze-chat's, as some call it. Look here. Take a couple of these eggs and bring them along to my nest, and you'll see the difference in a minute. Mine are half as blue again as yours, and are scarcely speckled at all; while you can see lots of tiny little speckles on your eggs," reaching two eggs as he spoke out of the nest he had found, and close to which they were now standing. "Go it again, Jack," he cried the minute after, having duly secured the four eggs; "we'll have a mountain-linnet's nest yet. I'm sure there are some here; I have heard their call, again and again, the last few minutes. Your luck always comes double you know; starling's eggs first, and then a bump. Isn't that it?"

He jumped lightly out of the way as Jack aimed a blow at him for reminding him, quite unnecessarily, as he said, of his painful mishap the other day. The latter went to work again without delay, using a stick, however, instead of his hands, to push open the bushes; but, it must be confessed, without the slightest thought of really finding another nest; notwithstanding which, his luck really did seem to come double. For to his own vast surprise, having straggled on to a considerable distance from Bob—whose investigations were much more methodical and persevering, and rewarded with the discovery of two more of the stone-chats' nests in the ensuing quarter of an hour—he disturbed another bird from its nest, which proved to be, not really the twite, or mountain-linnet, as he supposed, but the common, or grey-linnet, or, as it is sometimes called by boys from the colour of its head, the red-linnet. He ran hastily to Bob with his prize; which Bob, after looking at them for a moment, assigned positively to their rightful origin, adding, they would be very useful, as their own specimens were only cast-offs from the museum collection, and imperfect to begin with.

"But a mountain-linnet's nest we must have," he added, "for all that; for I am convinced there are some here, and not far from us."

So saying, he took off his gloves, in order to stow away Jack's eggs; flinging the leathers carelessly down on a rough, benty bank of no great height, near to which he was standing at the moment. Disturbed by the action, or by the fall of the gloves, a small bird started from the side of the bank among a tuft of bents and stunted ling. Bob's eye was instantly fixed on the bird.

"The real Simon Pure," he cried, as it perched on the furze at no great distance—"the mountain linnet itself, at last. Where did it come from, Jack?"

Jack thought from somewhere near where the gloves lay, but he had not seen the bird the instant it rose, and could not say exactly. A few minutes' search, however, disclosed the nest, and two twite's eggs were speedily added to the rest.

Bob was quite as willing as his cousin now, to leave the furze brakes; and a moment's consultation ensued as to whether they should go on into the marsh, or return by the footpath and look into the partridge's nest they had found nearly three weeks since, or try and make a straight course to the brook, in the vicinity of which Bob thought they had a chance of finding the nest of the common sand-piper, or summer snipe. It was soon decided that they should take the footpath to the place where the partridge's nest was, and from thence strike across the fields to the brook. They therefore quickly crossed the warren, seeing a couple of snipes rise as they passed the pools—both of which began to bleat as they rose high enough in the air—and with no loss of time found themselves close to the partridge's nest. This time Jack, as well as Bob, succeeded in detecting the old bird on it.

"See, Jack," said Bob, as they passed on, "she's safe as yet, with, I dare say, fourteen or fifteen eggs under her. I wish you luck with your brood, my dear," he added, nodding back in the direction of the sitting bird.

They now crossed or skirted three or four fields, until they came to the upper streams which supplied the brook running along Watery Lane. Bob felt they were now engaged on rather a wildgoose chase; as he knew enough of the summer snipe's habits to be quite aware the nest might be some distance away from the waters the birds themselves mainly frequented. And as they walked down the stream for nearly half a mile, seeing first a single sand-piper, and then, a few minutes after, two together—but no sign of a nest—he inferred that the mate of the single bird they had seen was probably sitting, and if so, her nest was certainly not near the brook; while, as to the whereabouts of the nest belonging to the pair, they had not the slightest clue to it. They therefore gave up the quest as hopeless. They were now within one field of Watery Lane, and as they reached the gate opening into that last field, they saw, coming along the cart-track with the evident purpose of passing through the gate, a labouring man with a team of two horses in an empty cart. Stopping to hold the gate open for him, Bob and the carter recognised each other simultaneously as the latter came up to the gate,—

"Why, Jem, is that you?" was Bob's greeting; and,

"Young Measter, I's very glad to see yer," the carter's.

Jack soon comprehended from the interchange of question and answer which ensued, that this was the veritable Jem of the mired calf history:

that he had left Farmer Langley, and was now working for Farmer Raven. Hearing Jem ask if "young measter wor as keen arter buds' nests as he used to be?" Jack listened with increasing interest, which was not the least damped on hearing, in response to Bob's answer, "Yes, he was,"—"Well then, coom along a bit wi' me, and I can show yer one o' them craker's nests. I seed it yesterday as I was a-mowing o' clover hard by here; and I's going for anither load now; and I knows of a nettle-creeper's nest, and a bottle-tom's, nit far off. An' cow-boy, I heered him say yesterday, he'd found an oven-builder's in the pightle."

Much of this harangue was Greek to Jack, who only comprehended that these queer names were country names for birds; but what these birds were he couldn't even guess. However, they went on with civil Jem to the adjoining field, where he had to mow a load of the early clover for the farm-horses' provender; and, after he had cut an armful to put before his horses, to keep them "quite," as he said, they went about thirty yards farther up by the side of the unmown clover, and then were delighted to see what Bob recognised as a landrail or corncrake's nest, with eight speckled eggs in it. Jem said it would be no use leaving six of them, as the clover would be mowed the day after to-morrow, and then the nest *must* be destroyed. So as no object would be gained by leaving them, they took the rest as well. He then turned aside to the fence, which lay about fifty yards distant, and there, in a bed of nettles and other rank herbage, but not far above the ground, he showed them another nest with five eggs in it, and which he called a nettle-creeper's. The nest was made of dry grass loosely twisted together, lined with a little horse-hair, and some which apparently once grew in a cow's tail. Bob thought they were a whitethroat's nest and eggs, but did not feel at all sure. He took care to secure a couple.

"I fund it yesterday," said Jem, "when I come here to cut a stick, for I left my whip at whoam; and as I went along here I seed that," pointing to an oval mass in a thorn bush, tolerably well hid by the broad leaves of some brambles which thrust themselves up through the bush; "I reckon it's a bottle-tom's."

Bob knew the long-tailed tom-tit by that name, but if he had not, he would instantly have recognised the nest. A most beautiful oval structure, neatly and strongly compacted of mosses, and wool, and spiders' web, and with a feather to serve as a sort of door to the entrance at the upper part of one side. Jem was going to cut the bush, on which the nest was built, that they might have it just as it was; but the boys would not hear of that, and, rather to his discomfiture, contented themselves with taking two only of the eight delicate little pinky-spotted white eggs it contained.

"Now," said he, as they left him to go to his work, "you goo up to the farm, and you'll see the cow-'us jest facing yer as you goo into the farm-yard. Goo straight up to the door, and you'll see cow-boy cleaning it out, afore he drives the cows in; you ask him to show yer the oven-builder's neest."

Mr. Raven's farm was very little off Watery Lane, and so they bent their steps thither with all speed, after thanking Jem for his good-will and help. They found the cow-boy just going to drive the cows in, and he took them directly to the pightle: and on the upper part of the mossy bank of one of its surrounding fences, amid a few stubs (whence the brushwood had been cut years before), and a plentiful growth of long stems of grass, and not raised at all above the ground, they saw a grass and moss-made dome-covered nest, lined with feathers, and in it half a dozen beautiful little eggs, but much larger than the bottle-tom's, white, speckled—and most at the larger end—with pale red, which Bob pronounced to be the willow-wren's. Bob asked the cow-boy if he could spare them a couple of the eggs.

"Ees, to be sure," replied that worthy; "all on 'em, if yer like."

"No," said Bob, "two will do. But aren't you going to take the others?"

"Noa, I ain't," said the boy; "they're no use to I. She may hatch 'em if you don't want 'em."

Bob and Jack thanked the lad very warmly, and after a diligent rummage in their pockets, clubbed together the magnificent sum of twopence halfpenny, which they offered to him.

"Noa, noa," said he; I do'ent want nought." However, as they pressed it on him, he eventually took it, with a good pull at his forelock and a "Thank'ee kindly, measters."

Rejoicing greatly over this most successful—as to the number of eggs obtained—of all their excursions, they returned to the school, and met the Doctor at his own door, just returning from the station, whither he had been to see the Visitors off by the 4.15 train.

"Well, what luck to-day?" he cried as they came up.

The box was straightway lifted off the shoulder that bore it, and placed open before him.

"Upon my word, a goodly afternoon's spoils. But come into my study, and let's look at them more leisurely. You've nearly half an hour yet to roll-call. Well, what do you call them all?"

Bob proceeded to name them in the order they had got them, until he came to the last four, and then he very demurely said,—"And those eight are craker's, and these two nettle-creeper's, and these bottle-tom's, and these last oven-builder's."

The Doctor laughed. "I see," he said, "you didn't find these for yourselves,—some countryman told you of them; or did you know those names before?"

"I knew bottle-tom before, sir; but not the others. But is the nettle-creeper the same as the whitethroat, sir?"

"I think there is no doubt," replied the Doctor, "that the eggs you have there are whitethroat's eggs: but I believe the name nettle-creeper, like most provincial names, is very loosely applied, and that it includes the garden-warbler, the common and the lesser whitethroats, and perhaps one or two others of the same tribe, whose habits and nests more or less resemble those of the whitethroat. I dare say you know that bottle-tom has a variety of other names; that oven-builder, even, is sometimes applied to him, and that he shares another name with the willow-wren. Bum-barrel is one of his names, and another I have heard in Suffolk, and of which I can make out neither the orthography, nor the derivation, nor the meaning, is mum-ruffin. Only one English bird lays smaller eggs than these, and that is the gold-crest; unless indeed the fire-crest is taken to be another species, and not a mere variety of the gold-crest. You are not very likely, I doubt, to get those delicate little eggs in this part of the country."

"Oh! sir," chimed in both boys, "we got two of them the other day,—Thursday, I mean."

"Did you, indeed? Where? I did not know they bred anywhere near."

"We found the nest on one of the fir trees, in the wilderness, at Wrilton Park, sir, and my cousin wanted sadly to have nest and all. It was so beautiful."

Dr. Noble, on hearing they had been to Wrilton Castle, asked them several questions about their explorations, and told them several curious particulars about the castle, its architecture and history; and lending them the "County History," which contained, he said, "a meagre but correct account, as far as it went, of the Castle,"—dismissed them to prepare for the sound of the evening bell.

CHAPTER VIII.

Walk the Sixth—Sandpiper's and Magpie's Nests—Bush Magpie and Tree Magpie—Nests of the Nuthatch, Ringdove, Woodcock, Stockdove, and Spotted Woodpecker.

On the following Thursday afternoon, the two lads started from the school-gate about a quarter-past twelve. Their discussion, on the previous day, as to what should be the direction of their walk, and its objects, had been much shortened and abruptly settled by the receipt of a note, very neatly written and correctly spelt and expressed, from their friend the gamekeeper, in which he said, that if "Master Robert and his friend had nothing better to do the next day, and would come either to the end of the marsh nearest the common, to be there a little before two; or, to his house" (which lay close to a cross road running up from the Whaldon-road, at about three miles from Elmdon, over the Wassett, to Turley), "about one, he had several things he thought they would like .to see, besides a few eggs which he had fallen in with and had reserved for them." They decided, however, that they had not time to reach his house by one, as it was a good, hard hour's walk. They would therefore go to the marsh, and would spend the hour they would have to spare before the gamekeeper joined them at the rendezvous, in going about the lower part of Fox Spinney, and seeking for any of the wood-building birds' nests they might be fortunate enough to meet with. As they went along Watery-lane, Bob suggested, that instead of going on as usual till they turned off into the lane that led to the Turley-road, they should take up the cart-track they had seen Jem on on Monday, and endeavour to make their way through the fields in such a way as to cut off the corner and strike the Turley-lane, near where the foot-path led out of it to Fox Spinney. He said he thought they could do it without walking over the growing crops or breaking the farmer's hedges; for he knew the main stream of the little brook they had walked along when seeking the summer snipe's nest, ran nearly up to the point he named, and if they kept pretty close to it he was sure they could do no harm. They directed their steps accordingly, and as they were trudging briskly along, Jack asked if Banks were the principal gamekeeper on Sir Cuthbert Graham's estate, and if he were, why he did not live nearer the park.

"Why, I believe the reason is," answered Bob, "that the most important part of the estate for game is up here. There is another wood about two miles more Whaldon way, larger than Fox Spinney, and then there is Turley Moor, which has a great many grouse on it; and six or seven thousand acres of inclosed land besides, which is full of partridges. But the property does not go a yard beyond the park, in the Saxby direction, and the Grove is the only preserve that way; besides which, at the back of Elmdon, there is not much land belonging to Sir Cuthbert. The bulk of it lies much more this way. So there is a watcher, or under-keeper, who lives in one of those nice cottages, about half a mile beyond the Church. And the keeper lives up there, where I showed you; and besides, he has another under-keeper living somewhere about Turley, besides lots of watchers, in the game season."

While Bob was giving this explanation, they had arrived at a point a little higher than that at which they had struck the brook on the Monday. Bob interrupted himself rather suddenly as he uttered the last words, interjecting a rather sharp "Hallo!" —the next moment stooping a little, and appearing to be engaged in scrutinizing some object on the further bank of the little stream very closely.

"I saw something move in that hole, Jack. I am certain of it. But I don't think it was a water-rat. I'll see, though."

And jumping lightly across on to a bare place about a couple of yards below, he proceeded to make his way as gently as he could, to just above the suspicious hole. Here, however, he was saved the trouble of any further investigation by the darting forth from the hole in question of a smallish bird, which flitted rapidly down the stream. Both boys recognised it at the same moment, and both exclaimed, "A summer snipe." Bob was down on his knees in a moment, and in his eagerness, in some danger of toppling over head first into the water. But recovering himself, and looking over so as to be able to see into the hole, he cried to Jack,—

"All right, my lad. 'Tis the nest, and four eggs in it too. Just a little moss and dry leaves, that's all for 'em to lie on. It's lucky she moved, or I shouldn't have seen it, hid like that by that dockweed. Aren't they beauties?" he continued, as he drew out two of the peculiar shaped eggs laid by all that tribe of birds, very much pointed at the smaller end. "And what whoppers, too! Why the bird isn't much bigger than a lark, and look at these eggs, more than twice as big and as heavy as the lark's eggs."

"What's the reason, Bob, that all these eggs, such as the golden plover's, and snipe's and pewit's, and now these sandpiper's eggs, are so big in proportion to the bird that lays them?"

"Indeed, I can't tell," was Bob's answer to this inquiry. "I've read somewhere that it is because nature intends the young ones to have room for growth, so as to come forth in a much more helpful state than those of such birds as roost in hedges; that thus they are better able to get out of danger,—which is much greater on the ground than in among the branches of a tree or the twigs of a bush,—by being able to run quickly almost as soon as they are hatched. But I don't understand it, for all that"—Bob went on—"the young partridges run as soon as they are hatched, with the very egg-shell sticking to 'em sometimes, I've heard, and the eggs they come out of are only as big as snipes' eggs, as we noticed the other day; and yet the old partridge is four or five times as big—at least, as heavy—as the old snipe. And then again, the young waterfowl all swim nearly as soon as they are hatched; and little puff-balls of dabchicks, and water-hens, and coots, dive before they are many hours old, and so on. And the eggs of water birds in general are not at all large in proportion to the birds that lay them. In fact, the eggs of many of the swimmers, not to say all of them, are small in proportion. And those willock's eggs too, Jack, you know—what big ones they are—very near as big as a goose's egg; bigger than some of the varieties of wild-geese lay; and the willocks or guillemots themselves not one-sixth part of the size of the geese. According to the supposition, then, the young 'willys' ought to come out, when hatched, up to all sorts of dodges; 'to fend for themselves' like bricks, as Scotch Mary says. But instead of that, they sit motionless on the narrow ledge where they are hatched till their mother, some day getting tired of feeding her great lazy, voracious babby, takes it on her back, and, flying down to the sea, 'whummles' it in. No, no, Jack, that's not the reason why the eggs of the waders generally are so big: and I am sure I don't know what is."

Delivering himself thus, Bob stopped about twenty yards from a fence, or rather a hedge, the end of which abutted on the brook, and which was of considerable thickness, and had grown into bushes ten or twelve feet high in many places, and said to his companion,—

"There's a nest, and a big 'un, in yonder bush; but I doubt it's an old one."

"Let's go and see," cries Jack, and was crossing directly to it.

"Gently, Jack; don't tread the corn;" and, walking round the corner instead, they soon stood under the nest; which, however, was not an old one; as they saw immediately on being able to put the bushes a little on one side, and look in. "Thorns in our legs, scratched hands, and torn jackets will be the order of the day for us here, my boy, unless we look sharp and mind our eyes, or else give it up, which perhaps you would prefer, Jack. You know you don't like pricked legs and bleeding hands. I say, are your wounds healed yet, my poor boy?"—the last few words being uttered with intense compassion in his tones.

Jack's abrupt reply was—"You be hanged, Bob; you're always chaffing a fellow. I think you are afraid yourself."

"Well, perhaps I am. But I say, Jack, how *are* we to get at this nest?"

When Jack looked a little more closely at the task before him, he saw it was anything but an easy one. The magpie that built the nest—for he knew directly he saw it near enough that it was a magpie's nest, albeit built in a bush, while all he had seen before had been built in trees—had deserved to be called a crafty bird. The bush was a particularly thick whitethorn plant, of particularly spiteful growth; the thorns on it were not only long and sharp, but very numerous. It was no easy matter to get within reach of the main stems except by creeping in on hand and knee. The outer twigs of course would not bear the weight of a cat, much more of a stout boy; and the only entrance through the strong complicated dome or superstructure of the nest was on that side of the bush which presented the most, and the most difficult, obstacles to the would-be plunderer. Jack looked and looked, but could suggest nothing besides creeping underneath, and then rising in what he thought looked like a hollow in the bush near the stem. "Try it," said Bob, concisely. Jack did, and succeeded in raising himself on to his knees without much trouble; but his cap was caught by a meddlesome thorn just above his head, and he didn't find it easy to set it free. Still he thought he had succeeded, and so he had, though only to get it caught again as soon as he moved, as he presently found; for, on trying to raise himself to his feet, he found his cap scrubbing hard down one cheek and ear and a thorn insinuating itself very unpleasantly at the back part of his scalp, from which when he endeavoured to get himself free, he found he didn't mend matters much by pushing against another, which seemed desirous to try conclusions with his cheek-bone. Withdrawing himself with more desperation than caution, he brought back a piece of the latter in his cheek, and snatching down his cap, which hung suspended on the thorn that wooed it so winningly, rather impatiently, he tore a neat three-cornered slit in it. He emerged at last with a redder face and less confidence than he went in with. But he joined in Bob's laugh with great good humour, asking him to take the thorn out of his cheek as gently as he could ; which was easily done, there being a good handle to it outside the flesh.

"Well, Jack," said he, "we must leave it, I suppose. And yet it looks very much as if it had four or five eggs in it. What's it to be, old fellow ?"

"Why get it, Bob, to be sure, even if we have to go to Raven's farm for a ladder."

"Well, Jack, I think I can get it if you'll bear a hand, without going quite so far for a ladder. Did you notice the brook at the bottom of the hedge, where we left it just now, how shallow it was ? And did you notice that sort of frame that was hung there to prevent the cattle walking out of one field into the next through the shallows ? I don't know if we can get that. If we can, it will do for a ladder."

Jack jumped with delight, and ran off full speed to the brook. Bob came rather more leisurely ; and, looking carefully at the hinges by which the water-gate was hung, shook his head, saying,—

"I was afraid so. Don't you see, Jack, these crooks turn different ways. That one with the nut on it was put in after the gate was put in its place. That cock won't fight, unless we take this thick rail and all; and that won't be easy. See, it's fast at this end to this tree with three tenpenny nails."

Poor Jack despaired again now of anything nearer than Mr. Raven's ladder; but, looking at Bob's face, he saw a knowing smile there, which he interpreted into "I'm not beat yet;" and eagerly cried, "What is it, Bob? I'm sure you've another plan."

"Aye, Jack; but it will make us sweat."

"Never mind that; anything rather than be beat."

"Well, then, we must go back to the last hedge we came over. There was a hurdle there which looked strong enough. I think we can manage to bring it here, and take it back when we've done with it; and once on the top of it, we shall do."

Eagerly enough did they run to the hedge. Toilingly along they returned with their burden, and quite willing was Jack to lay his end on the ground at the foot of the bush previous to making the last effort of rearing it up lengthwise and placing it properly. But before doing this, Bob proceeded to cut a stout hazel stick about two feet long, and to tie it securely with twine, which he took from his pocket—he said he always took a coil with him, it was so often useful on these occasions—across the longitudinal bars of the hurdle, about half-way between the strong side-rail, and the transverse bar (applied to strengthen the hurdle) nearest to it. "For it won't be so easy," he explained, "when the hurdle is pressed against the yielding bush by my weight, to get from this bar to that at one step."

The hurdle was now reared and set against the bush. They saw directly that it would answer, though Bob would have to mount upon the side-rail, which was now uppermost. He found his stick of immense assistance. Indeed, it was doubtful if he could have managed the last step without it. Then, carefully separating the bush with his gloved left hand, and leaning on against it the while with all his weight—his jacket buttoned quite up to his chin to obviate thorns, and Jack holding the hurdle below very firmly, according to his instructions—he succeeded in inserting his right hand without much damage except a few scratches on his wrist, and bringing it out again with three out of the six eggs it contained;—taking three instead of two in case of accident amid the strong, sharp thorns. The labour was now achieved; to descend was easy, and the make-shift ladder was soon replaced, and the egg-box taken up and re-slung. They had spent more time than they had bargained for over this nest, but still Bob thought they had time to go on into the Fox-Spinney as they had planned; and they walked rapidly on in the direction of the footpath. As they were walking on, Jack asked his cousin if it was usual for magpies to build in such places as they had found this nest in.

"Oh yes," said Bob, "I have seen many a one in hedgerows where these bushes are allowed to grow high and thick. I think as many as in trees, in parts of the country where such hedges abound. The country folks will even tell you that there are two sorts of magpies, which they distinguish by the names of bush-mag and tree-mag; and they add that there is a true difference between them, independently of the difference of their nesting places. The bush-mag they say has a much shorter tail than the other. But my father laughs at that, and says the difference in the length of the tail in the alleged varieties is much the same as that in the measurements of Peter Simple's royal Bengal tiger, which measured sixteen feet from the nose to the tail, and seventeen from the tail to the nose. I suppose their instinct teaches them that a well-selected thick bush is quite as likely to be a safe place for their nest as a tall tree, and they act accordingly, on what is God's lesson to them. And we have had a proof to-day that they do not practise what they learn badly."

Thus talking, the boys reached the lane, but instead of leaving it immediately for the footpath, they continued to walk along it until they reached the corner of the wood. Entering here, they found themselves among a good many large beech trees, with very little undergrowth beneath them. Jack's ear caught a bird's note, rather a sweet one, and several times repeated. Bob's attention was arrested by it at the same moment.

"There's a nuthatch," he said; and after a very short pause, he continued, "there must be several of them here. Look—here are traces of last autumn's work," pointing out to Jack sundry husks of beechmast, and empty nutshells, which still remained fast in the seams and rifts of an old oak they were abreast of. Bob further laughingly desired Jack to keep his eyes skinned, and if he saw a hole in a tree with anything like clay about it, to let him know."

"What, anything like that?" said Jack, pointing to a hole in an ash tree, which they were passing in a glade a little distance from the beeches, and which—the hole, that is, and not the tree—appeared to have been reduced in dimensions, by the plentiful use of a kind of clay plaster.

"Why, Jack, you're a regular brick. One has but to ask you for a thing and he gets it. Why, that's the very thing I meant. I'll lay my best hat to your patent ventilator there"—pointing to Jack's tattered cap—"that there's a nuthatch's nest there, neither past nor future, but present. That clay's quite fresh."

"But how to get at it?" asked Jack. "It's seven or eight feet from the ground, and there is not a twig on the tree to hold by; and it's too big to swarm."

"Well, we must try another plan then. If that hole isn't deep we can reach the eggs, if any. The clay put there is quite enough to stop a hole big enough to get my hand in, and yours easily. Here, I'll stand stiff against the tree. You get up; I'll give you a hand. Thus, put your foot in it;—up. Now, on to my shoulder, and make yourself as light as you can, and be quick. Pull out the clay, and in with your hand."

Every instruction was followed as soon as given, and two nuthatch's eggs—white, with pale red spots—were added to the collection. Jack feared the old bird would desert the nest when she saw the dilapidations he had caused.

"Never fear," said Bob; "she'll repair damages before this time to-morrow; and every day for a week after that, perhaps, if it were required. The nuthatch is a great favourite of mine, and I could tell you an interesting account of a pair, if we had time. I will as we go home, if you like. Now, we must use our eyes more than our tongues."

Jack asked his companion what, in particular, they were to look for? The reply he obtained was to the effect that he (Bob) knew there were many wood-pigeons, or, more properly speaking, ring-doves—the cushats or queests of the northern districts of England—nesting about in the wood; that their nests were very easily found, for the most part; for that though oftentimes placed in the head of a pollard, or the top of an ivy-covered tree, yet very frequently also they were built in much such places as the jay's nest, which the keeper had shown them ten days or a fortnight since, and constructed after much the same manner; being little more than loose platforms of sticks and roots, through which daylight appeared in many places. It appeared that Bob was quite right in speaking of the ringdoves as numerous, and their nests as probably not scarce in the Spinney, for the next ten or fifteen minutes presented no less than three to the eyes of our two young friends. Two of these were, so to speak, suspended on branches extending horizontally, or nearly so, and did not, in the least degree, suggest the idea of a wish for concealment on the builder's part. The third was in an ivied tree-top, and was only discovered by the noisy flight from it of the pigeon, and the consequent ascent of Jack to investigate.

"The country boys will tell you," said Bob, "that if you touch, or even breathe upon their eggs, the ring-doves will desert their nest. I only know this about it, that the year before last, to try if it were so, I put the eggs from a ring-dove's nest into my mouth, and in due time they were hatched, notwithstanding; and I dare say are very thriving ring-doves at this day."

Jack was curious to know if no more than two eggs were ever laid by a ring-dove, and why only two were laid by the pigeons, and twelve to twenty by a partridge.

"I never saw nor heard of more than two in a nest; and, very rarely, only one. Why the pigeons should only rear two I cannot tell. I should think it is, because their habits are such, and their wariness so great, comparatively few of them are destroyed. Why, a covey of partridges in September will let you walk right in among 'em, and on to them, all but; and I've often heard of—and seen once or twice—a covey cut up by a shooter, so that not one bird in ten was left at half an hour's end. And then, too, suppose you see some partridges some fine morning feeding on a stubble, and a bit of turnips or potatoes a few yards off, instead of flying away as soon as they see you, if they move at all, it is to run under the turnip-tops; and once there, wait till you come up with your murdering gun. But catch a ring-dove at any such folly. There is but one time in the year when it will let you come near it if it sees you, and that's when the hen is sitting. You may walk right under her, and stare at her, and she'll hardly stir; and the cock will let you come within 20 or 30 yards, and then only fly 30 or 40 more, and wait till you approach again, perhaps. But at any other time of the year, if you want to get near a ring-dove, what you have got to take care of is, that it neither sees you nor smells you. I never knew one in an open stubble or turnip-field let any one get within three or four times the distance a gun will carry, provided only he is not concealed by any fence or wall. And once off, see if the woodpigeons are likely to pitch again anywhere within sight; and then, too, if you get a shot by coming upon them unawares, they are not very fond of acting so as to let you get a second. Suppose the gentlemen, who will come here to shoot pheasants as soon as the leaves are well off, were to save their shot for ring-doves instead, how many would they get? Why, if there were ten for every single pheasant in the wood when the first shot was fired, there would not be one left after the tenth; and every shot after that, the day through, would be but a chance one. Then, too, the pigeon is in little danger from the cat, the fox, the foulmart, the stoat, and the like, and even from the hawk, comparatively; while the partridge is all day and all night subject to surprises from all these, except the hawk by night. I have sometimes thought these were reasons why the ring-dove and other pigeons should lay only two eggs, and such birds as the partridge and grouse, from seven or eight up to twenty. At all events, it seems clear, from all I have heard, that the ring-doves do increase wonderfully, wherever new homes for them are created by the growth of young plantations to sufficient age and size to shelter them. I heard my father telling of two cases, one in Berwickshire and another in Norfolk, where thirty or forty years ago one could hardly see half-a-dozen ring-doves a day in certain parts of those counties, and now you may see almost as many hundreds in a single flock there; and all from the extensive plantings of fir-trees which had been made within the last thirty or forty years. But, I say, Jack," Bob suddenly broke out, "we're forgetting business sadly. It's all tongue, I doubt, and no eyes. Besides, we ought to be thinking about the gamekeeper."

Acting on this thought, they moved on steadily in the direction of that corner of the wood near to which they were to meet Banks. The occasional whirr of a pheasant, or hasty scud of a hare, or more deliberate motion of a rabbit, or possibly the rapid gallop up a tree of a squirrel disturbed by them in their passage through the wood, constituted all, in the shape of adventure, which met them for some time. Once or twice Bob had paused for a moment or two, and seemed to be listening intently, and then went on without comment. Now he stopped again, and presently said,—

"I am sure I hear a tapping. I thought I did before. There's a woodpecker at work not far from here."

It was no woodpecker, however, as they presently saw, on emerging into a part of the wood where there were only a few trees, but abundant undergrowth of hazels and other brushwood; for Bob's eye soon detected a nuthatch, with its slate-blue back and yellowish orange breast, and then its mate, tapping away vigorously every few seconds with their hammer-like action of their whole bodies. There they were, creeping rather than climbing about the trees; now head up, now down, now transversely of the tree-trunk, and all with the same apparent ease and convenience to themselves. Jack was not the least tired of watching them, when, after some five minutes so spent, Bob reminded him of their "meet" at two o'clock. They began to push through the brushwood again, though, and had nearly reached the angle they were making for, when they heard the sound of a gun, rather more to their left. Making hastily to the boundary fence of the wood, they saw the gamekeeper, at no great distance, reloading his gun; and a few minutes served to bring them up with Robert Banks, who was just picking up a small hawk he had shot, and which he said had baffled him again and again in his attempts to trap it; but which had now fallen a victim to its rashness in coming back to its prey. He had seen it strike a young rabbit, but had driven it away a moment or two afterwards, though not able to get near enough to get a shot at it.

"I thought," he said, "if I left the rabbit alone, and hid myself here, he'd be back in ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, so I waited, and there he is;—a very mischievous fellow among young game, and I'm glad I've got him. I got his mate a week ago, at her nest; but I never could get a crack at him, and he wouldn't look at a bait."

"It's a hobby, isn't it?" asked Bob.

"Yes," replied the keeper; "and I sent James Watt up a day or two ago to get the eggs;—they're down at my lodge, three of them, though rather sat upon, I fear."

He then proceeded to tell them what he had referred to in his note. He had found a woodcock's nest with three eggs, which he believed were deserted; at all events, they were welcome to them. They were close to a drive among a lot of dead leaves, about 200 yards from where they now stood:—" and then," he went on to say, "as I was watching for a jay, the day before yesterday, just at the edge of the wood down yonder, below the warren wall, I saw three wild pigeons light on the warren about thirty yards from the wood boundary. I didn't notice them particularly, but happening to cast my eye that way again after two or three minutes, I could see but one out of the three; and looking at that more noticingly, I saw it was a stock dove, not a wood pigeon. The next minute there were two, and then only one again, and then all three, who soon took wing and flew away; but not far or for long, it appeared, for within a quarter of an hour they came back again, but now there were four of them. Not long after this I got my jay, and the pigeons of course flew away at the report; but five went though only four came. I was now sure of what I only suspected before;—I mean, that these birds either had eggs or young in some of the old rabbit holes; and going out to see, I found two holes with young in, and one with eggs; and

I thought you'd like to see them just as they are."

"Indeed we should," said both boys; and in less than five minutes they had the pleasure of feeling the little birds, still quite featherless, in their nests, and securing the two eggs for their collection.

"Now," said the keeper, "let's go for the woodcock's eggs."

These too were taken, but before the boys proceeded to secure them, Banks recommended them to blow them; for he thought they were rotten, and if so, the agitation consequent on their being carried far might so act upon their contents as to cause them to burst. "I once carried home three or four grouse eggs that I took out of a deserted nest," he added, "and before they had been in the house twelve hours two of them burst, and another within two days."

Acting on his suggestion, they found he was quite right in his surmise. They were quite rotten, and had been so some time.

"Ah!" said he, "I thought the nest looked as if it hadn't had its owner near it lately to take care of it."

He had known of a few other cases of a woodcock laying eggs, but had only known of one instance in which the young were brought off;

though he believed young woodcocks bred in the country were not very rare in some preserves.

Banks next went on to say he had remarked a tree which, he was about sure, contained a woodpecker's nest. He hoped and believed it was the great spotted woodpecker, for he had seen a pair about the wood for some days; and besides, Watt had got them three or four eggs of the green woodpecker from a nest in Turley Wood. "He told me he had to take a chisel and mallet to get at them, and the old bird would hardly leave the nest till he had opened a hole big enough to get his hand and arm in, and then she flew out at another hole. The eggs, he said, lay on nothing but a few chips, and raspings like, of decayed wood; and the makeshift for a nest was the whole length of his arm down the trunk of the tree below the entrance hole. As for our nest," he continued, "I've got my little saw, and we'll soon have a look into it. You can easily tell by the size of the eggs, even if we don't see the bird herself, whether they are the black and white woodpecker's or not."

About twenty minutes of steady walking brought them to the tree he had named; about ten more sufficed to show the delighted boys four shining white eggs, lying on much such another nest as the keeper had just before described the green woodpecker's as being; and to complete it all, just after the segment the keeper had sawn out of the tree had been replaced, and he had just shouldered his gun previously to moving away, they had the pleasure of seeing the black and white woodpecker fly into an adjoining tree, and then almost to the very entrance to the hollow containing her nest, before she perceived her visitors. Acknowledging them only with a screech, "she cut her lucky rather unceremoniously," as Bob remarked.

The keeper now requested the boys to accompany him to his house, as he had the hobby's eggs, and the green woodpecker's also, there; besides which he had two wild duck's eggs, one teal's, three grouse's, and, if they liked, half a score, or a whole one, of pheasants' eggs, all warranted rotten. Bob and his cousin could hardly believe in the extent of their good fortune and the keeper's kindness, and they trudged on merrily by his side to his house. But we must defer to another chapter the account of what they saw there, and the conversation on their road home, merely adding here, that on finding what Banks had to show them, they were excessively glad that, owing to the lengthening of the days, they had now an additional hour before evening roll-call, it being fixed at six now until the end of the half year.

CHAPTER IX.

Walk the Sixth continued—Pheasant Breeding—The Badger —The White-tailed Eagle—Capture of another Badger.

THE first few minutes after their arrival at the keeper's house were taken up in stowing away the magnificent additions he enabled them to make to their egg-treasures. They took three of the pheasant's eggs, which, with those of the grouse, they blew first, an operation which even the sturdy Bob was excessively glad to get completed. These large-sized eggs took up so much room that their egg-box was inadequate to contain all they had to carry home. The keeper helped them out of their difficulty by bringing for their use an empty wadding-box, and two or three cap-boxes, the contents of which had been exploded in his service long since. Bob thought these latter, with the help of a little cotton wool, would be the very thing; and on trial, found that the nuthatch's eggs would travel together with the woodcock's in the snuggest way possible in one of them, while another would contain the stockdove's eggs. As they were packing these last, Jack inquired if wild pigeons of that species always made their nest in deserted rabbit burrows? Banks replied—

"Certainly not. I have known them build in the thick bushy heads of pollard trees, and sometimes even on the ground under a thick furze bush; and once I saw one in a hollow tree. I think they are on the increase, too. There are certainly more here than there used to be. I believe it is the same in Norfolk; and an old friend of mine, who is now gamekeeper on a nobleman's moors in Yorkshire, told me when I saw him a little while ago, that about eight years ago he shot one, and had to ask the parson—who knew a good deal about birds—what it was; while, last winter, he said he saw them ten or a dozen together. One evening in December he was going home after a day's shooting, and happening to go near a fir plantation, he saw a number of wild pigeons taking up their lodgings for the night in it. He went in to obtain a shot, and the first he fired brought down two stockdoves. And he afterwards had occasion to notice that a party of these birds usually arrived first in the plantation, about roosting time; the ringdoves not arriving till twenty minutes or half an hour later. He found, too, that though these two birds roosted together, and so indiscriminately that he more than once killed one of each sort at the same shot, yet they certainly had not been feeding together during the day; the crops of the ringdoves were full, even to bursting —one or two did burst with the force of the fall— of holly berries, while those of the stockdove were fairly supplied with the seeds of the wild mustard, two varieties of which grew with sad abundance in the fields of a slovenly-managed farm about two miles off. He noticed this in noticing that both birds were apt to disgorge part of the contents of their crops when not shot quite dead. He connected that—I don't know whether rightly or not —with their accustomed habit of feeding their young; *i.e.*, by disgorging food, already partly digested, from their own crops to the throats of the young birds. I should think, though, there *may* be a connexion between the two habits."

Jack's next question was, how he came to have so many pheasants' eggs.

"My answer to that question," said the gamekeeper, "will be best given out of doors. We have always reared a good many pheasants here under hens, but for that purpose we usually brought in eggs which had been laid in the woods, or hedge-rows, or copses about; as many of these outlying nests are in very insecure places, and there was very small likelihood the broods would be brought safely off, or, if brought off, reared. Thus we always had some few pheasants' eggs that were addle. But the last year or two I have been trying a new plan."

As he finished speaking, he got through a sort of stile inserted in a narrow opening in a very high and thick hedge. The boys on following him saw divers coops, with hens in them, scattered about in various parts of an enclosure, sheltered on three sides by like fences to the one they had come through, and on the fourth by an overhanging plantation, which clothed a sloping bank. Close on the verge of this plantation was an extensive but very light structure, closely paled in all round to about four or five feet high, but with spars rising every three or four feet, from and above the palings, to a total height of eight or nine feet; and where the palings ceased, there large nets with meshes two inches square commenced, covering the whole in on the sides and over the top very securely. This structure was probably fifty or sixty yards long at least, and, as the boys saw directly, divided into compartments, each of which seemed to be twenty-five or thirty feet square. But before proceeding nearer to these enclosures, the gamekeeper drew their attention to the hens and coops. To their great pleasure they saw numbers of young pheasants in or about several of these coops, some apparently only a few days old, others already as big as partridges, and beginning to show increasing length in the tail feathers; other hens again were sitting. The natural habits of the young bird were attended to, partly by the thick growth of brushwood and of coarse herbage in and near the foot of the tall hedges, partly by strewing quantities of brushwood in various places not far from the coops; and the young pheasants of larger growth showed their sense of the attention by betaking themselves to the shelter and concealment so afforded, immediately the keeper and the two lads showed themselves near them. Directing their steps now to the large net-inclosed structure, the gamekeeper, on reaching it, took a key from his pocket and gave admission to himself and his companions to the interior. Everything was quite still as they entered; but having closed the door, he gently stirred a heap of loose brushwood which lay in the centre with a stick he had in his hand. First one hen pheasant obeyed the intimation thus given, then a second, then a cock, and then a third hen. As long as the visitors remained quiet, the birds, too, either squatted in a corner or ran along the sides of the enclosure from one corner to another; but, if anybody stirred a step or two, they took wing, sometimes one or two, sometimes all four together, and, soaring in their usual manner, were arrested by the network above and fell back to the ground, or perhaps clung by their feet for ten or twenty seconds to the meshes. Beyond this enclosure were three similar ones, each tenanted in precisely the same way. The boys were eager to know the meaning of all this, for they could see no nests anywhere, and they could not divine what good could be got by confining the pheasants thus. The keeper explained that the pheasant hens were dealt with on exactly the same principle—as regarded their eggs, that is—as the domestic-poultry hens; that is to say, their eggs were taken as soon as laid.

"If they were in the woods," said Banks, "these pheasant hens, one with another, might lay ten or twelve eggs, half of which, under fortunate circumstances, might become young pheasants. How many eggs do you think they will lay here?"

Neither of the boys ventured a guess.

"Well," said the keeper, "I had twelve hens in here last year, as you see I have now, and I took upwards of 500 eggs out, more than 400 of which were hatched and reared; and this year, I think, if we go on as well as we have begun, we shall have an average of forty-five eggs for each pheasant hen."

The lads observed that two of the cocks had white rings—though that word was hardly correct as used to describe a band of white feathers, which did not quite encircle the throat—round the neck, a little below the head, while the other two had no such marks.

Banks said, "And if you observe, too, the hens with those cocks, as well as the cocks themselves, are rather smaller than these, and, to my eyes, the plumage of both sexes is rather paler than that of these here. Sir Cuthbert got those birds from Hertfordshire, hearing that this plan answered best with *them;* but I don't see any difference myself."

"You must have a deal of trouble with them," said Bob.

"No, not so very much, except in having hens enough ready to set. Feeding them is simple enough; and we contrive to keep them tolerably safe from vermin on the whole. We get a good lot of ants and ants' eggs for them out of the woods and off the moor. Did you ever see that great hill in the Turley end of Fox-Spinney? It would fill three large waggons, I believe; largish red ants they are, and can't they sting just?"

Neither of the boys had heard of this before, but determined they would see it before long. Smaller ones, the materials of some of which would have filled a wheelbarrow, of others a cart, they had often met with, but none even nearly so big as the one named by Banks. Leaving what Jack denominated the Pheasant Nursery, they turned their steps in the direction of the Kennels, where, however, Banks said he had something else to show them besides dogs. The kennel was a very complete one, and beautifully kept as well as arranged, and the present occupants were two brace of black setters, and five pointers, together with a couple of retrievers. In the yard of the kennel they were met by old Pepper, who usually accompanied Banks wherever he went; but who, since the arrival of a certain new inmate of one of the brick-walled, brick-paved compartments of the kennel, appeared to be under the impression that it would be a dereliction of duty if he left the precincts. The keeper told them several instances of this dog's sagacity and intelligence, and said that he seemed often to reason quite as readily and cleverly as many a country lad could do. Among other things he mentioned was this; that if Pepper, when out with his master, found a rabbit on its seat, he always waited for him to come up before rushing at it; and, if it so happened that the keeper came up on the same side with himself of the thicket or fence in which the rabbit lay, he always went round to the other side and rushed in from thence, as if with the express purpose of driving it out before the gun; a *ruse*, he said, which generally succeeded. He had never taught him this as a trick, or in any way. It was evidently the result of the dog's own observation and reasoning, and his judgment founded thereupon. He had seen the same thing only in one other dog, and that was an old and very steady pointer, which had been shot to seven or eight seasons before it took the practice up. Pepper acknowledged his master's approach and his own consequent delight, by constructing three quarters of a circle with (or of) himself; in which strange proceeding his stumpy tail and hinder quarters performed some rather inscrutable but decidedly queer evolutions; and then went with him in the direction of—but rather in advance, as if leading him to—the quarters occupied by the strange arrival.

"Aye, master," his demeanour seemed to intimate, "come on; you'll find that queer customer all right. *I've* seen to that."

On looking into the part of the kennel they were thus conducted to, the lads saw, what there was light enough to make out was a greyish mass, with a white stripe down the middle of it, flanked by a dark one on either side, squeezed up into one of the far corners.

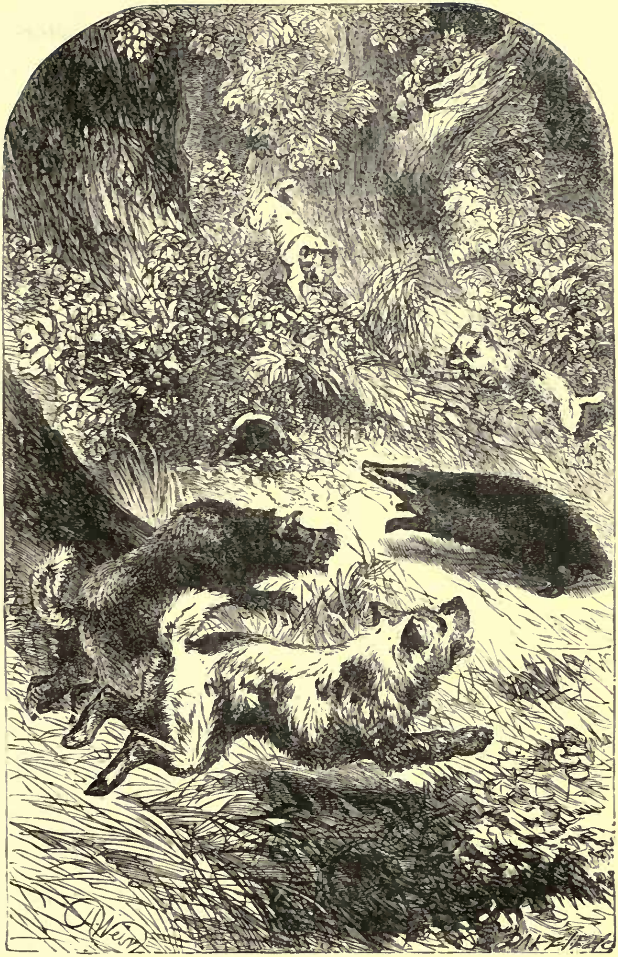
"Why, what is it, Robert?" asked Bob.

"Wait a minute, sir, till I dislodge him from his corner, and you'll soon see."

As he spoke, the keeper gave the creature a poke with his stick, which caused it to leave its position and shuffle off rather quickly into the other corner, where it was both nearer to the boys and under a better light for exhibiting itself.

"Why, it's a badger," cries Bob; "I'm sure it is, though I never saw a real one before—only pictures. Where did you get him?—and how?"

"Why, sir," said Banks, smiling at Bob's eagerness, and Jack's seeming inclination to give the wild beast a "good offing," "I found his hole in Turley Wood, the day before yesterday. It was a moonlight night, as luck would have it, that night; so I took old Pepper here, and Jem Watt's Madge, and Jem himself, and having fixed a good strong bag, with a running slide—there it hangs, sir, behind you—so that he should bolt into it, as well as into his hole, if he came home in a hurry, I got up, three or four feet high, into a bushy tree close by, but so that I could jump down in a moment. I had left Jem with the dogs, with orders to go very quietly till he got down to that part of the wood we call Highfield Thicks, and where I had seen, the same day, that a badger had been working lately, and I thought by that time I should have got my preparations complete. It was light enough to see that it wanted a quarter to nine when I got into the tree; and I hadn't been there five minutes, before I heard Jem begin to cheer on the dogs. In a minute more I heard Pepper's tongue, and I knew he was on some vermin by the note he gave. Almost in less time than it takes to tell, I heard a rushing through the bushes coming nearer and nearer, with the yelps of both dogs a little way behind. In half a minute more, a badger, followed close by another, cut across the glade in front of where I was perched, and the foremost bolted into the bag and tied himself up in it beautifully in half a second. The other was dumbfoundered for a moment or two at finding the way to her hole stopped so strangely, but started afresh in no time; and the dogs coming up ran her to earth in another hole among some rocks, where we couldn't dig her, about 200 yards distant. I soon swung the one I'd got over my shoulder, and there he is safe. I think he can't get out here; these hard, well-laid white bricks will baffle all his efforts; though I did know one once get out of a paved court-yard. He contrived to get a flag up somehow—it must have been a loose one, I should think—not far from the wall, and he precious soon had a hole burrowed out under it, and walked off. I think we shall get the other to-night. Jem came down this morning to say she was still about, and he thought she rested regularly in the earth she took to that night



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we got this one. And if we can get her, we shall take them up to the Park to-morrow, as Sir Cuthbert has, for some time, wanted a pair to send—sure I think it was to Liverpool or Birmingham, or some of these towns, where they have a grand zoological garden, but no badgers in, he said." Banks added further, "This chap isn't at all unwilling to eat, though, I dare say, he would soon pine to death if kept long here, and alone. He's rather like the hedgehog for his appetite. He has eaten three mice, half a rat, and two eggs, since he has been in here."

"What was that about the hedgehog, keeper?" asked Jack.

"Oh! sir, only that they will begin to eat as soon as they feel hungry, if you catch them and put them in confinement. One I kicked against in my rounds one night, I brought home with me instead of killing, as I suppose I ought. The very next night I let him out in the kitchen where I was sitting alone, and gave him a bit of raw mutton. He set to at it in a minute or two, and made a strange piggy champing as he ate. He would eat mice, and small birds, and small eggs; but a hen's egg puzzled him, except it were cracked: then he made short work of it. Beef or mutton, too, he liked, but not the fat; he never touched that. He was very fond of getting under the fire-place among the ashes, when the fire was gone out. And if I put him on the table, he would run off without hesitation, rolling himself up in an instant as he began to fall, and unrolling as quickly, and scuttling off after he had reached the floor. I kept him several weeks, for I had no heart to kill him, and at last I gave him to a gentleman to turn down in his garden, where I hope he is happy now. Do you know what my Yorkshire friend told me was the name for hedgehog in use in his part? It sounded queer to me—'pricky-backed otchen;' that is, urchin, I suppose."

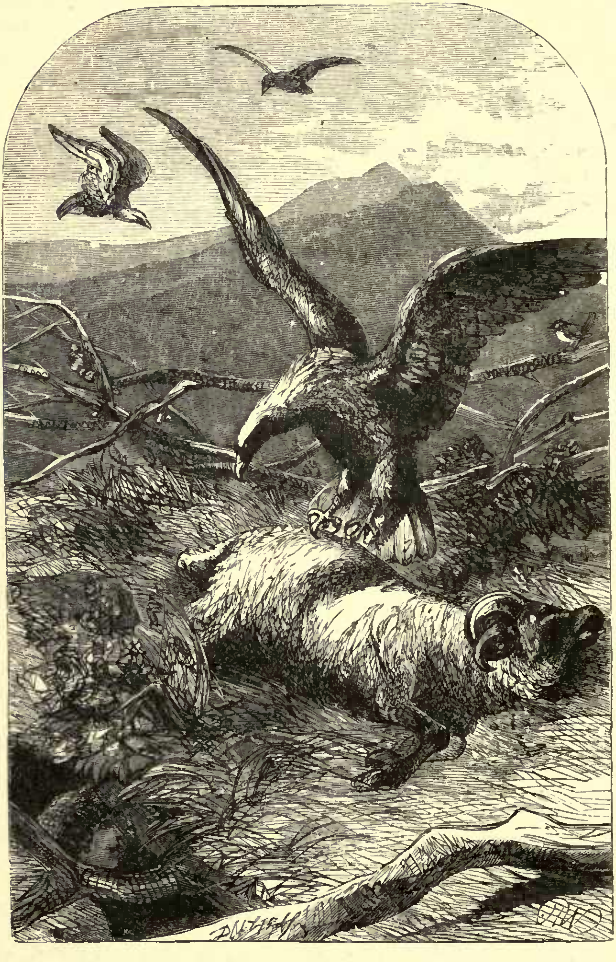
"Why should you think about killing him, Robert?" asked Bob.

"Why, sir, I'm gamekeeper, you see: and there's no doubt they destroy the eggs of game if they find them; and young rabbits and hares, young partridges and pheasants, also, would be anything but safe with them. I knew of one that killed several young turkeys: and another—it was a young lady's pet, that one—killed, and ate two young ringdoves, nearly fullgrown, which belonged to the same fair owner. The murder was brought quite home to Hedge-piggy, I suppose. He couldn't have pleaded an *alibi*—that was certain—for they were all three shut up in the same room; but I believe, not only was this so, and no possibility for any other creature to get in when the first dove was killed; but in the case of the second, he was caught "red-hand," as the Scots used to call it, when a man was taken in the very act almost of committing a murder. So you see, sir, it's my business to kill hedgehogs. But I don't like it. They seem so harmless like; —so different from those vicious looking stoats and foumarts, which look regular built for mischief and slaughter."

The boys now began to talk of going to the house for their egg-box, and beginning their journey homewards, but Banks said he had still something else to show them, which he thought they would be sorry to have missed seeing; and taking out his watch, assured them they had an hour and thirty-five minutes good yet. So they accompanied him to a sort of spare room or loft, over what might be called the kitchen of the kennel—for great cookings were necessary in preparing the food of so manyvaluable dogs—and there they were gratified indeed at seeing a very magnificent living specimen of the White-tailed eagle. He appeared to be tolerably tame, and partly reconciled to confinement. He allowed Banks to approach him, and even to caress him also, which he did not seem altogether to dislike. Banks gave his history as follows:—"I saw that fellow and another, apparently a little less than himself, about the warren and the

Common several times in the early part of the year. The warrener tried to destroy them. But he could not succeed in trapping either of them. He shot at them two or three times, however, and kept such a vigilant look-out for them they seemed to get shy of going there. I had tried my luck, too, but it was no go: they were so very vigilant. At last, as I was coming home over the Common, not far from the Marsh, one afternoon, about five or six weeks ago, I disturbed 'em at a feast on a dead sheep. I saw they weren't satisfied yet, they had got so little of the flesh. I knew, therefore, they would be back as soon as the coast was clear. I knew Watt was within half a mile of me, somewhere, as I had sent him to set two or three traps near Spinney Spill. So I put my fingers in my mouth, and gave him my signal to come to me quick—like this," putting his fingers in his mouth and producing a whistle which went through and through the boys' heads, but which the eagle seemed to take very little notice of.

"He was with me in less than ten minutes, and I told him to get up all the traps he could lay hands on in the course of half an hour. Well, he came back with seven. During his absence I had seen the eagles at a distance, evidently on the look-out to ascertain if they could safely return and gratify their appetite with the tempting mutton I had dislodged them from. No sooner had I the traps within reach than I began, with Jem's help, to set them under the turf—you know how I showed you one day not long since?" he said to Bob, who nodded assent, and only opened his mouth a moment after to say to Jack, who was evidently most anxious to ask how it was done, "Wait a bit. He'll show you after"—"under the turf in a sort of ring all round the carcase. We did it as neatly and with as little handling of the traps and turf as possible, and rubbing our hands on the sheep now and then to mislead the eagles' quick sense of smell. We were perhaps half an hour about it. All our traps were too small for the job; but I hoped if one did get caught, that before he could succeed in struggling out he might literally 'put his foot in it' a second time; and just so it happened. Jem and I went and laid up—we hid ourselves close I can tell you; a good deal closer than if we had been laying up for men poachers—and we hadn't been safely stowed away ten minutes before we heard a croak, and another, and then a third. Says I to Jem, 'that's a bad job, Jem; there's the ravens coming. I wouldn't like to catch one o' them. What's to be done?' Well, I got up just so as to be able to see a little further about, and sure enough the ravens were both there, and it was clear, too, they meant to have a bit of mutton for supper. I was just going to get up and frighten them away, when Jem, who had been looking out too, pulled me down, saying low in my ear, 'Lay quiet—it's all right.' And so it was. He had caught sight of the eagles in another direction, and he knew well enough the ravens would see them too in two seconds, and take themselves off pretty quick, to wait till their betters had served themselves. I was hardly down in my lair again, before, with a couple of remonstrance-sounding croaks, Ralph and his wife—who were by this time very near the carrion—soared up into the air again and sailed off. Well, to make a long story short, in I should think five minutes at the outside, both eagles were fast by the leg. Jem and I weren't long, you may guess, in getting up and cutting off as hard as we could to the place. My word, what a shindy there was. Well, the biggest of the two got its other foot fast, and then he we thought was quite safe. Jem couldn't help giving a loud halloo! when he saw this. It drew the lesser bird's notice on us rather sooner than it might have been otherwise, I thought; and making a desperate effort he broke the cord of the trap just as we got within five yards of him, and went off with the steel at his toes. He was



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shot though on Kerstham Common, about seven miles off, two days after, with the trap still on, and I have got it still. Well, the other bird made furious play with his wings, but his legs were held rather astraddle by the two traps, and he was almost helpless. So we threw away our sticks,—for we expected a fight, and should have had it too if we had caught both,—and weren't long in securing him. We tied his legs and his beak and his wings with our neckerchiefs and some cord. His legs were torn and bloody but very little hurt, as you can see for yourselves plainly enough. But we hadn't finished trapping yet; for while Jem was quite taken up with tying up his bill—rather critical work too, it was—reaching his hand down to pick up a piece of cord he had laid by his side as he knelt, he put it on the bridge of one of the other traps which hadn't been sprung, and the next thing I saw was that he was caught. Didn't he sing out just? As soon as ever I had got the wings fast tied back to back, I went to let him out;—for he durstn't let go the eagle's head, the bill not being quite secure, to loose himself; and it would not have been easy to do if he had tried. He was caught just over the knuckles and across the ball of his thumb. However he wasn't much the worse—though rather soured when I said we had caught an eagle and an owl same day—and we completed the bonds of our captive and got him safe home. And there he is. I fancy he'll go with the badgers to yonder place—whatever its name may be—if we are lucky enough to get Mrs. Bawsie to-night."

As he ceased speaking, the gamekeeper produced out of one of his capacious pockets a half-grown rabbit, which he offered to the eagle. It was seized without ceremony, and made eagle food of in an incredibly short time. Greatly interested with what they had to-day seen and heard, our two young friends went without further delay to the keeper's lodge; and, resuming their egg-box and pocketing the two cap-boxes and their contents, wished Banks good-evening with many hearty thanks, and set out on their trudge homewards. As they went along, they were so taken up with talks about the badger and the eagle, and with the expression of their wishes that they could have witnessed the captures of which the keeper had given such exciting accounts, and that they could only go with him to-night to see the other badger caught—if the hunt should turn out a successful one,—and also with many mutual congratulations on the extraordinary accessions made this afternoon to their stock of eggs—many of them such "good" ones too!—that neither of them had so much as a thought for the proposed history of Bob's favourite nuthatches. After a brisk walk of rather over the hour they reached the school, with fifteen minutes to spare. On entering the playing ground, they were told by two or three of their schoolfellows, and a moment after by an under-master, that Dr. Noble had been inquiring for them a quarter of an hour before, and had left orders that as soon as they came in they were to be sent to his study immediately. Rather wondering, but having no reason to make themselves uneasy at this unexpected summons, they hastened to the study. Their knock was immediately responded to by the Doctor's sharp "Come in."

Opening the door and entering, they were received with a smile, and with a "Well, what luck to-day?" Scarcely stopping to notice their "Very good indeed, sir," he went on to say, that Sir Cuthbert Graham had been with him in the course of the afternoon, and had asked him to give them leave to go up to the Park on Monday afternoon, to spend Tuesday, and return on Wednesday; that he had consented very willingly, as their good conduct merited the indulgence, and he thought that their visit would be agreeable to Sir Cuthbert, who didn't the least, he said, seem only intending to do a civil thing, but rather to expect to receive pleasure as well as give it. The Doctor went on to say further, that his visitor had asked if Robert Benson and his cousin were anywhere about; and that he (the Doctor) had said, "No—they were, he believed, with Robert Banks, either on the Common or in the wood." "Ah! that puts me in mind," rejoined Sir Cuthbert; "I am going up to Banks myself about eight o'clock. He caught a badger two or three nights since, and thinks, I understand, he may get its mate to-night. I should like to see the capture, and so I mean to be there. Would my young friends like to go, do you think? And would it break school rules very badly if you permitted them to go with me? I will bring them back not later than ten or half-past. They can go with me in the dog-cart." "So," continued Dr. Noble, "I told him I should not throw any objections in your way; and you must get your suppers and be ready for him when he calls at half-past seven. You must tell me of your egg successes to-day, at another time." He dismissed them with these words, and they lost no time in getting to their places in school at the first sound of the bell.

It need hardly be said they were quite ready when Sir Cuthbert drove to the door. They were quickly in their places—Bob beside the Baronet, and Jack behind with the groom—in obedience to the "Quick, up with you—you here, Robert," which followed hard on their kind friend's hearty "How are you, boys? All right, eh?" and quickly they rattled along the Whaldon road; then they turned up the cross road, and over the bridge spanning the Wassett. Jem Watts, on a stout pony, touched his cap as Sir Cuthbert drove up to the gamekeeper's lodge; and in answer to his master's inquiry, "Banks gone on to the wood, I suppose?" quickly replied, "Yes, sir; he'll be waiting for you at the Turley Wood gate." The old bay was stepping out again the next moment, and, in a few minutes more, on into the Turley road, which began to be hilly and less good than were those nearer to the town. However, it was only about twenty minutes past eight when they came up with Banks, at the point named by Watts.

"Well, Banks, will you get her, do you think?"

"Oh! yes, Sir Cuthbert; I make no doubt of it. She's shifted her feeding ground a little, but we shall be sure to get her. Here's Watt coming up with Pepper and Madge, and I've ordered Stevenson to go down to the Thicks, and, as soon as he hears Watt's whistle, to loose his terriers. Watt is to go down here more towards the Bottom, where she was rooting last night and the night before. And if you please, Sir Cuthbert, we ought to be moving too."

"Very well, then, let us be off. Walk him about, Thomas"—to the groom—"till I come back here."

At the gamekeeper's request, after the first ten minutes of their walk, they proceeded very silently and warily, and in such a direction as to come upon the earth, newly occupied by the badger, from behind. Stationing Sir Cuthbert and the two boys—to whom he had found an opportunity of whispering how he would have liked asking them to come, if he had thought it could be allowed—on a rock above the hole, but so that they could see the badger for a space of fifteen yards before it reached its den, if it came from the side he expected it, he proceeded to adjust the bag and its slide, and to ensconce himself on one side. He had barely time to finish doing so when the hunt was up, and in five minutes more the badger was captured,—the three visitors enjoying a capital sight of her rush, after a momentary pause at the edge of the open, into the earth. Their return was without incident, and effected before the time Sir Cuthbert had named.

CHAPTER X.

Visit to Sir Cuthbert — The Fowl on the Lake — Sollington Heronry and Abbey—The Buck-stone—Fly-rods—Crossbill's Nest—Return to Elmdon.

In due time, on Monday, the groom made his appearance with the dog-cart, and our two young friends were speedily conveyed to Wrilton Park. Sir Cuthbert had just ridden in from a round of visits among his tenantry, when the dog-cart drove up, and Bob and his cousin were at once taken in, through the gardens, to the morning room, where his mother was sitting, actively employed with some elaborate process in knitting. Sir Cuthbert was a bachelor of less than thirty years of age, and, as yet, report—after a few years of hesitation on the subject—had decided not to give him to any of the ladies in the county or out of it, of suitable or unsuitable age, position, and fortune. His mother, a lady of nearly sixty, and his only surviving sister, usually lived with him; but the latter was at present on a visit to a friend in Yorkshire. Lady Graham received the two lads with a simple kindness which had the effect of setting Edwards at ease in a few minutes. Bob, who was an old acquaintance of her Ladyship, and evidently a great favourite, was presently rattling on with some pet topic, in answer to an inquiry or two from the lady, much as if he had been with his own mother; and Jack, who had hitherto only spoken when he was spoken to, soon caught himself originating some remark, and almost wondering the next moment how he ventured to do it. He had seen at once that Lady Graham was what many people would call a very grand lady. She had been very beautiful, and time had dealt as gently with her as he could. What her figure —she was tall—and her manner had lost in grace was compensated by dignity; and yet Jack's conclusion, in less than the fifteen minutes, during which Sir Cuthbert was occupied with answering an open note given him (soon after his entrance) by his mother was, that she was much the nicest lady he had ever seen, next to his cousin Emily; and he could not make out how it was, but that it was much the same to him as if he had known her ever since he was quite a little fellow. When his note was finished, Sir Cuthbert said he was going down to the lake to feed his waterfowl, and the boys could either go with him, or, if they preferred it, spend the hour before dinner in the large hall, where was a large collection of well-stuffed birds, together with a nearly complete collection of British birds' eggs.

"Oh, live birds before dead ones, please, Sir Cuthbert," was Bob's instant reply, and Jack, evidently enough, was not a dissentient.

They set out accordingly, and a proper supply of corn and bread was laid in as they passed the gardener's lodge, together with four or five mice, which had paid the penalty of their lives for the attempted plunder of beds of peas, and which, from the nature of the trap they had been caught in, bore the same resemblance to field-mice as they usually appear, that the Norfolk biffins of the confectioner's shop do to the same apple while still ungathered from the tree. Proceeding to a part of the lake where the water gradually shallowed to the edge, and the tiny waves lipped over on to a narrow bed of fine gravel, Sir Cuthbert blew a small whistle of peculiar tone, and the next moment some dozens of waterfowl, of various sorts, came flapping or swimming along at as great a speed as they could severally command, to partake of the feast they had learned to associate with the sound of that whistle. Summer ducks, teal, wild ducks, Canada geese, China geese, Spanish geese, even the lone black goose, and a variety of others were there, who were soon gobbling away as fast and eagerly as possible, some in the water, some out on the sloping bank. Three swans swam about statelily in the background, hardly offering to approach the common throng; but, after a few minutes given to feeding and inspecting his feathered pets, Sir Cuthbert moved a few paces lower down the lake, to a point where the water was deeper, and the lads observed, that as he moved, the swans kept moving on as he did, until at last, as he paused on the bank, first one and then the other came close in, and took pieces of bread out of his hand, returning to him again and again, until his stock was exhausted. Bob and his cousin, however, were greatly amused at the bold familiarity, or rather impudence, of some of the smaller, quick-diving varieties of water-fowl. Each swan, on getting a piece of bread, if he found it too big, as was usually the case, to be swallowed at once, put it into the water to work at with his bill; as he did so, one of the small fellows who (when Sir Cuthbert moved onwards) seemed to know very well that the swans' turn was coming, and speedily followed in their wake, would dash in and secure a bit, perhaps diving the instant it did so, especially if the swan perceived and resented the act of depredation. Once, when the largest of the swans—perhaps teased by the toughness of a piece of crust, which baffled all his shakings and peckings, and, perhaps also rather irritated by the very close attention of one of the small fry, which watched his every motion, ready to dart in on the slightest chance—lost hold of his crust in endeavouring to put his troublesome satellite to flight, another who was close at hand seized the crust (as big as his own head) and made off with it, to be in his turn followed, and teased, and assaulted at every turn by half-a-dozen more as quick and active as himself. If he dived, one or more dived too; the moment he re-appeared above the surface, as many more were ready to pounce upon him, and continue their very pertinacious attentions. Then, perhaps, he would lose the great bit, and himself become one of the pursuers. And this continued, until at last even the tough crust, dived with, dabbled with, haggled at, became little more than soft pulp, and was finally disposed of. The boys were so taken up with the interest of more than one such chase as this, that they had forgotten there was another bird—known personally to one of them, and by description to the other—sure to be waiting at no great distance for his share of the dole and of their attention. They were reminded of it, however, by hearing Sir Cuthbert say, "What, Black Jack, are you there? I thought you wouldn't be far off." And there he was, taking great care to maintain a respectful distance between himself and his owner, and refusing all inducements to lessen that distance by even one of his own short, paddling footsteps. The flattened mouse, suspended by its tail from Sir Cuthbert's finger and thumb, was eyed with great appetency; but it was evidently, "I *won't* come for it—you must throw it to me." And, when thrown, it was disposed of with marvellous celerity, as were also the remaining ones; which done, Black Jack withdrew to the water, and completed the meal by sundry sips of water. Returning to the house, the lads had little more than time enough to prepare themselves before the dinner-bell sounded, and they found themselves sitting down at table just about the time they would have been answering their names had they been at the School. The evening was most luxuriously spent, with *Audubon's Birds* before them, or in listening to an occasional anecdote or illustration of some of the bird-portraits before them, from Sir Cuthbert, who kindly laid aside his book or his newspaper more than once, to direct their attention to some curious or interesting particular, or to answer some question which was referred to him by one or other of his youthful guests.

Nearly two hours, before breakfast the following morning, were given to an examination of the cabinet of eggs in the hall, and Jack's delight at seeing a suite of guillemot's eggs, comprising not less than thirty-five or forty specimens, no two of which but were more or less unlike, was very great. One or two eggs Bob pointed out as costing considerable sums, from the difficulty of meeting with them at all; others he said were very precious as having been actually laid in England, though the birds that produced them did not usually, or indeed otherwise than very rarely, nest in this country. After breakfast, Sir Cuthbert mounted the boys on a couple of ponies, which both of them declared were perfect, and rode with them to Sollington Abbey, which lay about eight miles from Wrilton Park, in the opposite direction to Elmdon. Bob had often heard of the abbey, and how beautiful and—for ruins—complete the remains were; but he did not know Sir Cuthbert's object in taking them there, and what a great pleasure he had devised for them. On reaching the lodge at the entrance to the park, Sir Cuthbert addressed a question to the woman who opened the gate, and, on receiving her reply, instead of following the drive to the mansion, now known as The Abbey, struck off to the left, and cantered across the turf in the direction of some buildings, glimpses of which soon began to appear between the tree trunks. Bob, whose acquaintance with a pony's back had begun at a very early age, and who was almost as much at home there as on his form at school, enjoyed this scamper immensely. Jack, whose riding was much more of the riding-school description, was not half so happy, or, rather, perhaps, comfortable; particularly when a herd of deer, suddenly disturbed by their rapid approach, galloped away, some of them leaping four or five feet from the ground as they did so: for his pony manifested a considerable inclination to have a gallop, too, and, if need were, a little jumping as well. However, Sir Cuthbert had his eye upon both steed and rider, and pulling up himself, Jack's pony also stopped without much reluctance, and they went more quietly on to the buildings they were approaching. Here a man was waiting to take their horses, and, as they pulled up, a second person came up whom Sir Cuthbert addressed as Mr. Dixon, and who, it soon appeared, was the steward. While he was talking to the baronet, the boys had time to take notice of the place they had reached; they saw that the buildings on either hand formed part of an extensive and very complete modern farmstead, and Jack's wonder was rather raised a few minutes after, on entering one of the principal structures—whence a considerable din had, from the time they came within hearing distance, continued to issue

—at finding out it was caused by a thrashing-machine, which took in sheaf after sheaf, almost as fast as they could be fed in at one end, and turned the dressed corn out at the other into sacks, weighing them as they filled, and ringing a bell to make it known as soon as it had done so; while from two or three other spouts the tailings or refuse corn was thrown out, the produce of one spout being almost utterly refuse, those of the others less and less so. Jack was quite astonished to see the exceeding rapidity with which sack after sack was filled and removed, and could hardly believe that he saw corn thrashed, dressed, and measured, at the rate of nearly forty bushels per hour. However, they did not stay long in the barn, and merely looking into the engine-house as they passed, they went on through a part of the park from which the ruins were visible, down a grassy slope to what looked almost like the curve of a broadish river as they saw it from a little distance. Turning round the corner of a large and thick clump of trees, they saw that on the right the water widened out into, apparently, an extensive lake. A few seconds after, Bob exclaimed—

"There's an old heron!—and another!—and another!"

The next moment he observed three or four more in motion among the trees on what he had taken at first to be the opposite bank of the stream, but which he now saw was an island. Then he saw two of the birds settle on the very topmost branches of a tree. All at once it occurred to him that these birds might breed here, as he saw so many of them, and he turned to Sir Cuthbert to ask.

"Yes," said he, smiling; "this is Sollington Heronry. I thought you had not heard of it from something you said over Audubon last night, and so I planned this surprise for you. Mr. Dixon, here, has the key of the boats, and we will go over and see if we can be lucky enough to meet with an egg or two. Here is one of the farm lads coming down the hill behind us, who will do the climbing part of the business. Your clothes would benefit but little by the process if you attempted it."

They were soon across, and great was the commotion among the herons at their visit. They made out that there were not less than from forty to fifty nests there, and they had plentiful evidence that there were young birds in some of the nests. The boy went up to three of the nests, and got an egg from each of two among the three, and Jack and Bob would have gladly remained for an hour or two watching the heavy but silent flight of the herons, their balancing efforts as they tried to perch on impossible tree-tops, and every now and then the arrival of a parent bird with the usual fish diet for its young. However, they had to withdraw at last, and taking leave of Mr. Dixon at the boat-house—who undertook to bring or forward the two eggs safely to Elmdon the next market-day—they went up to the ruins of the abbey. The greater part of the walls of the abbey church were still standing; the tower was nearly perfect. The Lady Chapel wanted its roof; but the tracery of its windows, and all its mouldings and quaint beautiful carvings were little injured. The abbot's house, the cloisters, the refectory, the dormitory, the scriptorium, the hospitium, all were pointed out by Sir Cuthbert, and explanations of the different purposes of different parts of the building, and the different styles of architecture betokening the different times at which the different parts of the edifice were erected, were given very clearly in answer to their repeated inquiries. So taken up were they with all they were seeing and hearing, that they quite forgot such ordinary modern matters as eating and drinking; nor was it till they went in, at the bailiff's house, on their return to the farm, and saw the bread and cheese, and a brown jug of foaming homebrewed set out on the wonderfully scoured table, that it occurred to them to feel that they were hungry. Another half hour saw them remounted, and on their return to Wrilton, but by a different road from that by which they had come. Turning off into a grassy lane, they cantered along till they came to a sort of three-cornered piece of common, bordered on two sides by wood; skirting this, they proceeded by a bridle-road across four or five fields into another lane. Along this, for about half a mile, and then they began to ascend rapidly. Soon they emerged from the lane upon a common, and altered their direction by going a short distance to the left along the fence of a wood. They then went through a gate into the wood, descending the hill a little by a very fair track. All at once, the boys were surprised to see a huge grey mass opening into view just before them. It was a large mass of rock, rising up from the surface of the soil in an open spot among the thick trees of the wood, and on it they saw a large irregular-shaped superincumbent mass, seemingly four or five feet high. Sir Cuthbert told the boys to get off, and give him their bridles, for a minute or two, while they went and touched this upper stone:—a very little push from Bob's hand set it in motion, and they found to their very great pleasure they were standing before a rocking-stone. Eager inquiries followed as to the origin of these stones, Sir Cuthbert seemed to think some of them might have been artificially adjusted, but he rather inclined to believe that in many cases nature was the artificer whose handiwork these rocking-stones were. But he seemed to have no doubt that they had some connexion with the worship of the original inhabitants of the land. Jack, whose ready imagination had, after a fashion, peopled for him the conventual ruins they had been wandering among an hour or two before, with their ancient black-robed inhabitants, now found himself fancying white-bearded Druids solemnizing their mysteries on that ancient time-hallowed base, and the savage, half-naked votaries, bending below in abject fear; and as figure after figure rose up in his dream, he continued for some minutes gently moving the stone from time to time, quite forgetful of Sir Cuthbert, his cousin, and his pony. Bob had returned as quickly as he could to relieve Sir Cuthbert from the trouble of holding his pony, and was going to call his cousin—feeling a little ashamed of his inconsiderateness—but Sir Cuthbert would not let him. Jack's reverie, however, did not continue long, and, looking round, he coloured deeply as he saw his kind friend still patiently holding his pony; and jumping down he hastened to him, frankly confessing his forgetfulness, and asking pardon for the trouble he had thus given. He coloured deeper still as Sir Cuthbert asked him, with a kind smile, if the Druid had a very long white beard, and the worshippers were painted very blue, and at once owned that such visions had passed across his thoughts, but that they were very dim and undefined.

"I know so little, sir," he concluded; "I used to read so carelessly, skipping all the parts of my book that were what I called stupid because they only contained explanations or descriptions. And now I begin to find out what a foolish fellow I was. I've skipped such lots about the religion of the Druids and their observances, and the condition of the British tribes then, that almost all I know about them comes from some pictures I have seen. Oh! how I wish I knew all about them. All would be so real to me then at such a place as that stone."

Sir Cuthbert only told him to try and remember what he felt now every time he began to read a book, and to determine to get all he could from that book. "Hundreds of men," he said, "would give years of their lives to have found out at Jack's age the importance of making as much as possible of all their opportunities of acquiring knowledge, of reading carefully and thoughtfully whatever it might be that they thought it worth while to read at all. But," he added, "you haven't noticed quite all I brought you here to see."

And riding down to an open place abreast of the rocky platform, he bade them observe the landscape.

"Landscape did you say, sir," broke out Bob; "why, wouldn't it be as well to call it a tree-scape? Why, there's nothing but wood in sight!"

"What a place for the Druids to celebrate their worship in," thought Jack, "if all this was oak forest and nothing else 2000 years ago." Feeling that Sir Cuthbert quite understood him, and was not at all disposed to make fun of him, he ventured the question, while Bob's eye was still roving over the expanse of woodland scenery.

"I think it is very likely," was his friend's answer. "Forests or woods which are known to have produced oak timber centuries since are still producing oak timber without any symptom of failure; and I should imagine that all we see now, and immense tracts besides to the west and north of us, were all one continuous forest at the time Julius Cæsar landed in England, and probably for unknown ages before that."

"Do you think there were red-deer and wild-boars here, sir," chimed in Bob, "in those days, and wolves and bears, and all the rest of it?"

"I make no doubt that in this part of the country there were plenty of red-deer, and probably a fair share of the other interesting animals you have named; a few wild cattle also, and very likely goats and sheep, that weren't exactly domestic."

Bob's sentiments appeared to be that it would be much "brickier" than shooting a couple of small rabbits sitting—as he did with his brother's gun one evening last summer holidays—to bag a brace of wild pigs; that is, if he had somebody else to carry them, and was quite sure the old boar, their papa, wouldn't take it ill of him. He thought he shouldn't like the least to have a shindy with an old fellow of that sort.

Sir Cuthbert laughed, and said he thought Bob was about right. A boar would be an awkward customer for a boy. He had once seen, in Germany, a horse so badly hurt with a rip from a boar's tusk, that it had to be shot out of hand as soon as the tussle was over, the rider having been dismounted, with his thigh laid open, and been in great danger of his life, if another gentleman of the party had not passed his spear through the infuriated brute in the very nick of time.

The party had now begun to ride steadily on in the direction of Wrilton Park. No incident occurred worth special note, except that Jack's pony capered rather more than its rider approved, when a hare got out of her seat right under its nose, as they rode over a part of the common after leaving the Buck-stone—as the Rocking-stone was called by the country people,—and in due time they reached home. As they rode up to dismount at the entrance to the stable-yard, they saw Banks waiting there, with a long thin parcel in his hand, done up in brown paper.

"Well, Banks, you've got them, I see," was Sir Cuthbert's salutation. "Let's see what they are like."

And taking the parcel, he cut the short ties which confined the paper envelopes in five or six places, and removing the paper, revealed two separate long thin packages, encased in a kind of neutral-tint coloured canvas bags. Undoing a ribbon tie at one end, four joints of a slender tapering fishing-rod were disclosed, each reposing in its own separate compartment in the bag. One was a spare top; the other three, when fitted together, made a very beautiful eleven foot fly-rod. The other case, on being opened, displayed similar contents. Sir Cuthbert took both in succession in his hand, and going through sundry evolutions with them, said he thought they would do well. Banks was now standing with another brown paper parcel in his hand, which being undone, out came two bright, broad check-reels, each with a tapering line on. These were soon affixed to the rods, and the line drawn through the multitude of small rings, and finally through the eye at the end of the top joint. The two boys were looking on in extreme admiration of such dainty fishing-rods, when Sir Cuthbert turned to them and said, "Now, boys, look here; if you don't catch me a good dish of trout with these rods within a fortnight, you don't deserve to have them. Go down now with Banks to the lake, and get him to show you a little how to use them, while I go and see about my letters." And not waiting for their thanks, which it must be confessed did not come very fluently, in their utter surprise at the—as it seemed in their eyes—magnificent present so unexpectedly made them, he passed on into the house, leaving them to go, as he had suggested, to the water-side with the keeper. There was very little wind, and placing them so as to have the advantage of that little behind them, Banks proceeded to show them how to throw the line. It *would* fall in curls just under the end of the rod at first; but in the course of half-an-hour's practice, Bob contrived to make a tolerably straight mark on the water when the line fell, having enough of it out to measure about one length and a-half of his rod. Jack did not succeed nearly so well;

but Banks knew that, if Bob learned, his cousin would not be long behind, and so gave most of his hints, and instructions, and example to him; and, before they left the lake, Bob could throw twice the length of his rod quite straight once in three times, *with* the wind, and not very badly across it; besides avoiding the fatal crack behind, which, if the tyro had a fly on, always means that said fly is not on any longer. Banks went up with the lads to the house, and it was arranged that he should meet them at a given point on the Whitwater, at one o'clock on Thursday afternoon. When they again met Sir Cuthbert, a little before dinner, their raptures and their thanks came out fluently enough. "Such beautiful rods; and as good as they looked. Banks said a pretty good hand might throw eleven or twelve yards of line with either of them, and he would warrant them to kill a 4lb. trout, if a body knew how: and how Bob had often thought there would be nothing he should like better than to be able to throw a fly well, but how he had never thought he could have a real, good rod of his own till he was a good deal older; and, then, to have such a real, beautiful rod given him so unexpectedly;"—and a good deal more to the same effect. Sir Cuthbert enjoyed their raptures, and told them they knew the conditions. They must catch him a good dish of trout with those very rods in a fortnight. He would have nothing to say to trout caught with a set-line; he should scorn such, he said:—and then, as to the thanks, at least half belonged to his mother, for she had suggested the gift in lieu of "the Tip" they would otherwise have had. He hoped they approved her suggestion: otherwise he could soon set it right, by giving them each a sovereign and keeping the rods himself. Would they have it so? "Oh! no, they would much rather have the rods than two sovereigns, or three either." And then they both went to Lady Graham, and told her how they held her kindness in suggesting that they would like something they could keep always; —oh! so much better than all the tips in the world.

After dinner was over, Sir Cuthbert asked them if they could spare half an hour from their "Audubon" to come and look over a book or two of his, that he usually kept pretty closely to himself. Leaving their birds instantly, they saw him take up one of two rather homely, stuffy-looking, thick pocket-book affairs, tied up with green ribbon that had lost a good deal of its original colour. Jack wondered what book it could be; but Bob, who had seen such books before, was at no loss, and at once said—"Are you going to show us your flies, Sir Cuthbert?"

The book was presently spread open before their admiring eyes—for the fly-rods had opened up in them a new sense of fitness and beauty—and March browns, and red spinners, and green-tails, and spider flies, and coch-y-bond-dhus, and peacock flies, and red and black ants, and red and black hackles, and smoky hackles, and governors, and coachmen, and hosts of others were displayed in all their very unaccountable enticingness. Sir Cuthbert was, meanwhile, as he turned over the leaves, selecting three or four flies here, and three or four there, till he had quite a heap of little coils at his side. At last, having looked through all the trout flies, and not a few salmon and sea-trout ditto, and answered a great many questions as to the uses of one, the season for another, the reason why some were so very tiny and others six times as big, he turned to his mother and asked if she thought Ferrers would have the books ready. In answer to a double ring of the bell, Lady Graham's maid, Ferrers, appeared with what seemed to be two rather large sized ordinary pocket-books in her hand. One of these was given to each of the boys, who on opening them found the paper had been taken out, and in its place alternate sheets of flannel and parchment inserted; the former neatly stitched round the edges and with a double loop of narrow parchment affixed across the middle. Sir Cuthbert took the book from Bob's hand, and placed a couple of the flies in so that the points entered the flannel at the top of the page, and the gut they were tied on was then passed in a loop under the strip of parchment. He then returned it to Bob, and pushed over the heap of flies which lay beside him, and told the boys to make a partition, and stow them away in their books; adding, as they hesitated, and seemed unable to comprehend all their good fortune and his kindness, "Mind you both bring me the first 2lb. trout you catch with those flies."

Before going to bed, they were obliged to have another peep at their beautiful rods, and either with the late dinner, or the excitement of the morning excursion, and the wonderful presents at the end of it, Bob dreamed of a trout a yard long, which kept taking his fly and never getting hooked, and woke at last with a desperate attempt to plunge in after it, which ended in finding himself wide awake on the floor. Jack's dreams were compounded of Druids, with blue beards and black gowns, sitting in the refectory gallery at the Abbey, and eventually resolving themselves into a number of herons holding a council round the rocking-stone. However, they were up in good time again, and had an hour's practice with rod and line at the lake before breakfast; at the end of which Bob found himself really beginning to have a little command over his own line, and able to give a hint or two to Jack. After breakfast, Sir Cuthbert showed them the old arms and armour, which once had hung in the Castle-hall, and explained several matters connected with both to them; after which, having yet an hour to the time fixed for their return to the school, they rambled into the wilderness and over to the Castle. As they returned, Bob observed two birds about one of the fir-trees, which he said he was sure were crossbills, and if so, they must be nesting in the neighbourhood. He went in, without delay, to ask if Sir Cuthbert knew there were crossbills about in the wilderness. Sir Cuthbert, who was in the hall, said, "No, indeed he did not; but was Bob sure they were crossbills?"

Bob's reply was to ask if Sir Cuthbert had time to go and see the birds in question. He put himself under the boy's guidance directly, and the birds were pronounced, after a good view of them had been obtained, to be genuine crossbills. Sir Cuthbert at once adopted his young visitor's theory, that, from the presence of the crossbills at that particular time of the year, they must have a nest at no great distance. He inquired particularly on which tree the birds had been first observed. Bob had noticed them first from their somewhat parrot-like movements among the branches of the tree, and he pointed out not only the tree but the particular branch on which he had first observed them; being able to identify the latter from a peculiar irregularity in formation, which he had observed while endeavouring to make out the concealment they had suddenly sought when his sudden exclamation of surprise at recognising them had caused them to take alarm. Sir Cuthbert at once began to scan that particular tree with very close attention, but appeared to scrutinize the branches much in the same portions of them as if he had been looking for a bullfinch's or chaffinch's nest. Bob said to him after a minute or two,—

"Sir Cuthbert, I read in one of your books yesterday, that the crossbill's nest was sometimes —generally, I think, it said—in a fork of the tree selected by the bird. Will you please look at that tree"—pointing to a pine of no very great size, which stood a short distance from the extremity of the branch he had just before specially pointed out to Sir Cuthbert; and the leading shoot of which, having been in some way destroyed several years before, had been replaced by three shoots of equal pretensions, now forming a decided "fork" in the tree. "I can't see the fork very distinctly, but I fancy there is something there that doesn't belong to the tree; though to be sure it may be only a heap of the old needles lodged there."

Sir Cuthbert followed the direction of Bob's finger, and was as much taken with the idea that a nest—very likely *the* nest—was there as Bob was. The latter wished to ascend at once and ascertain. He was overruled, however, by suggestions about the "state of turpentine" in which his clothes would be found on his descent, and by considerations for the integrity of the young pine. But he had the satisfaction which was next greatest to that of going up the tree himself, namely, that of going at the top of his speed to summon the gardener with one of his garden ladders. This was soon brought and set against the pine, and Bob mounted almost as nimbly as a cat in his eagerness, and speedily announced it *was* a nest; and not a nest that he had ever seen before. Loosely made, he said, of dry twigs and little else, but with four eggs in it, larger than the greenfinch's eggs—not very much unlike them in colour and markings. Two of them, at Sir Cuthbert's instance, were removed from the nest and most carefully brought down. Bob took it as a matter of course that they would at once be promoted to a place in Sir Cuthbert's grand collection in the hall cabinet. But Sir

Cuthbert himself thought his own undoubtedly English specimens would do quite as well, although these *had* been found in his own grounds; and succeeded at length in satisfying Bob's punctiliousness by assuring him that, interested as he (Sir Cuthbert) was at the fact that crossbills did nest at Wrilton, still he should not have desired the eggs to be taken if he, Bob, had not been himself an egg-collector. Returning to the house with this great addition to their collection of eggs, our two young friends found they had but just time to get their goods together, inclusive especially of the highly-prized fly-rods, and to take leave of Lady Graham, before the groom and dog-cart were announced as ready to convey them back to Elmdon. Sir Cuthbert, as he shook hands with them, reminded them once more that he should look for a dish of trout before that day fortnight, that had been fairly caught with those very rods used by their own hands. "Mind, no poached trout for me," he concluded, as the dog-cart speeded off.

CHAPTER XI.

Fly-Fishing Expedition—"Foxing the Fish"—Chasing the Poacher—Shrike's Nest—Wrinkles in Fly-Fishing—Capture of Fish.

Bob and his cousin found it rather difficult at first—after their two days' dissipation at Wrilton Park—to settle down to their school duties. However, a little quiet determination and self-discipline, which Jack had, to a good degree, succeeded in imitating from his companion, produced the result, after the first quarter of an hour, of close and successful application; for, as Bob said to Jack after school hours, they seemed to feel themselves so much fresher and better able to learn. The following morning when what they had prepared had to be produced in class, Bob had no difficulty in maintaining his former place, and Jack only lost one; which he succeeded, however, in regaining at the next opportunity.

Great were the watchings of the clouds, the speculations about the favourableness or the reverse of the wind, about the state of the water, and what "fly would be on," and such other topics as were supposed to consist with the possession of real fly-rods with spare tops to them; and it was rather amusing to witness the manner in which these anticipatory fly-fishers snubbed their own involuntary manifestations of boyish eagerness and impatience for the arrival of the afternoon, as quite beneath the dignity of gentlemen-anglers for trout with the fly. Rather a damp was cast upon their expectations—and the descent from the sublimity of trout already thrice caught in prospect, to the ignominiousness of feeling that no trout could even be fished for, was vexatiously induced by a sudden recollection of Bob's, that that most essential part of the fly-fisher's equipment, the gut casting line, had been utterly overlooked by everybody up to the present moment. Sir Cuthbert had forgotten it; the gamekeeper hadn't thought of it.

"Why, it wasn't likely he would," threw in Bob, as he went on:—"I myself had never given it a thought till this minute; and I haven't a bit of gut fit to make one even half a yard long."

Jack knew just about nothing of either the virtues of, or the necessity for, a casting-line, and took the discovery of the want rather coolly, somewhat to the further disturbance of Bob's already tasked equanimity:—"A fellow going out fly-fishing not to know what a casting-line was!"

However, Preparations and Class soon banished alike the thought of the expedition and the sense of disappointment, and Bob, when twelve o'clock came, had only just revived again to a due appreciation of the magnitude and irreparableness of the deficiency, when a shout of "Benson! Bob Benson, where are you?—you are wanted," rose from the other side of the school-yard. Bob, with the air of one suffering unmerited wrongs with sublime stoicism, marched slowly across the enclosure. Seeing through the open gate a pony, which he recognised on the instant—it was the one he had ridden only two days before—and a smart page with it, whose buttons he had equally small difficulty in recognising, he rather forgot his "immense sell," and consequent sorrows, and rushed in great haste to find out what was the matter. As soon as he came up, the page handed him a small note, "with Sir Cuthbert's compliments," and a much larger envelope as well, which did not seem to cover enclosures of paper merely; and then rode away at once. Hastily opening the note, Bob found just half-a-dozen lines, to say that Sir Cuthbert was very sorry he had forgotten the casting-lines in making out the fly-fishing equipment for his young friends; but he hoped he had remedied the oversight by sending half-a-dozen by the bearer. Bob almost danced across the yard to the study, where he found Jack contemplating his fly-rod with great earnestness. To hurry him in the necessary preparations; to push the precious casting-lines close under his unappreciating nose, and almost equally unintelligent eyes; to rush off to the Doctor for leave; to sling his egg-box over his own shoulder and the fish-pannier over Jack's; to deposit fly-book and envelope of gut-links in his safest pocket; to push Jack out of the study and tumble over him in his hot haste;—all these several acts were done, or in course of doing, almost at the same instant: and it was not until the two lads had got over the bridge, that it occurred to Bob that all this was inconsistent with the steady, sober demeanour which became the fellow who has expanded from the bud of worm-fishing into the flower of fly-fishing. In due time they reached a point on the stream, about a quarter of a mile below the appointed place. Bob pronounced the water to be in prime condition; the wind, too, he thought would do. Indeed, Jack began rather to wonder by what process his cousin had all at once been enabled to pronounce so decisively on matters connected with the science of angling, and he was enjoying a little quiet laugh at Bob's air of "I-know-all-about-it," when that young gentleman, turning to enunciate some other dictum, caught the look of fun in Jack's countenance in a moment, and perceiving all the absurdity of his assumption, burst into a good hearty roar of laughter, which had to be repeated more than once before he recovered himself. This process was hastened however in a very unforeseen way. Casting another look on the surface of the stream, he beheld a fish—apparently a stout chub of a pound weight—going through a performance of very extraordinary evolutions and gyrations, ending in a very decided deviation from all the ordinary rules of progression in practice among chub; namely, by turning on his back, and floating with his white belly uppermost, giving a kind of unmeant and unmeaning wag with his tail now and then, which produced only the effect of turning him broadside instead of end on to the current, that now fairly carried him along at its own sweet will. This apparition, which takes so long to describe, took no time at all to observe, and Bob's tongue almost kept pace with his eyes,—the latter in perceiving, the other in exclaiming at, the condition of the fish.

"Who's been foxing the fish?" was his instant outcry. The words were scarcely out of his mouth, when words spoken by another pair of lips sounded close behind him.

"I'll soon know, Master Robert. Can you run a bit? We'll have the sneaking fellow yet."

So speaking, Banks (for it was he) who had been at no great distance behind the two lads, though not in sight of them,—from a bend in the stream which was veiled by a screen of alders,—and had come rapidly up while they were pausing over Bob's laugh, ran off at speed up the stream. The boys followed, though much less speedily, Jack not yet fully comprehending "what was up," and Bob's breath too much required for his run to be applicable to the process of explanation. Banks was nearly 100 yards ahead of the lads very speedily, and almost immediately they saw him strike aside from his course by the river side, and bend his steps obliquely across the meadow he had just entered. Almost at the same moment they heard his shout, "Stop, young fellow; I want you." The "young fellow," though, did not seem to want the keeper with any degree of reciprocal feeling; for he charged a hedge and ditch which lay in his way, clearing it gallantly, and making for the Fox-Spinney, a part of which was at no great distance from the Whitwater, no doubt in the hope that, once in it, he might easily succeed in baffling his pursuer. However, the keeper's long legs, and strong muscles and sinews, aided by a power of breathing, wonderfully invigorated by years of constant and often laborious exercise on foot, prevailed, and just as the runaway was within five yards of the shelter, a strong hand was laid on his collar.

"Now you let me alone!" he exclaimed, defiantly, though pantingly, as the keeper twisted him round to have a look at his face, "I hain't adone anythink to you. You let me alone, I say: it'll be the best for yer."

The keeper's only reply was to look at him steadily, saying slowly, after a moment or two so spent—"One of James Howlet's lads, you are, I can see. I thought so as soon as I saw you run. He don't know, nor your mother neither, the game you're up to. If I gave you a good hiding now, it would only serve you right; but you'll catch one, I guess, sharper than I should like to lay on another man's lad, from your father, when he knows of your morning's work. So Jem shall take you straight home, with a few of the fish you've poisoned as a sample."

So saying, he gave a whistle, which was not answered; repeating it, however, a few minutes after at a different point, Jem's answering whistle was heard, and Banks then walked his unwilling captive to the river side, where Bob and Jack, after seeing the successful issue of the pursuit, had been for the last few minutes busying themselves with fishing out such of the victims of the "foxing" as came within their reach. At one particular place, where an eddy set in toward the bank, they were very successful; and by the time Banks reached them, they had nearly twenty dead or dying fish on the bank beside them, having seen besides nearly as many more pass out of reach. An eye cast over the stream, as he approached the boys from higher up its course, showed the keeper that the mischief was all below him; so he asked Bob to run down a bit and see whether many others were turned up below. Master Howlet by this time, having a lively recollection of a licking or two got from his father before, for somewhat similar exploits combined with truancy, was beginning to be very penitent and suppliant. "He never hadn't done it afore, and he never wouldn't no more, if only Measter Banks would let him off this time." In a few minutes Bob returned with the report that he had counted twenty-seven fish turned up, besides two or three smaller ones which had got sadly maimed by some of the larger inhabitants of the water, that had meanly taken advantage of their helpless condition. At the same time Jem Watt approached from the other side, and to his custody Howlet was entrusted, with strict injunctions not to let him out of his sight till he had delivered him safely into the hands of his father. The boy now began to blubber loudly, for which it seemed he had some occasion; for, when the name Howlet was mentioned, the watcher said—

"Ned Howlet, I'll answer for it!" And then speaking to the boy, he asked—"Isn't your name Ned, young chap?"

He sobbed out, "Ees."

"Then, where's that holler tree you've hid the rabbit and the little short gun in?—that rabbit you shot, nigh two hours ago, in Farmer Stoke's field agin the Spinney."

Poor Ned looked the picture of blank dismay at this unlooked-for accusation. It seemed Jem had heard a shot fired,—as he thought, very near the wood,—which he couldn't account for; and as he was making his way in the direction the sound had seemed to travel in, he came upon a lad in the wood with a pheasant's egg in his hand. Jem demanded rather sharply what he was doing there, and with that egg, and where he got it. He said "he was only looking for a few birds' nests, and he had just picked that egg up from the ground. There were two others lay near it, but both broken." The watcher did not believe the tale. However, the little boy said he could show him the place, and he did so; and then Jem at once perceived that the broken eggs had been sucked, apparently by a bird, and he had no doubt the third was brought for the same purpose. Looking at it, as he took it from the lad's hand, he saw that it was even so. The plunderer had stuck his beak into it and carried it off so impaled, and had probably been disturbed by the boy in the act. But Jem had noticed fresh blood upon the boy's hands, and some rabbit's fur about his jacket-sleeves; and abruptly asked him where the rabbit was "he and his mate had shot?"

It was a random question, but it brought out the fact, the merest suspicion of which had prompted the inquiry.

"Ned put it in the holler tree," the little chap blurted out, and then coloured up the instant he recollected himself, and began to cry lustily.

"And the gun's in the tree too, I dessay," continued Jem.

No answer.

"Dick Payne's short gun, I mean, which he lent to Ned Howlet last night, for his father to shoot a cat with, he said."

Ned's accomplice seeing so much was known, and very likely thinking more still was known, began to make a clean breast of it. "Ned had persuaded him to play truant, and go with him to shoot birds and catch fish. That they had shot a spink and a yellow-hammer in the road, and then didn't see anything else till Ned spied a little rabbit sitting by a hedge-side; that he had shot it; that both of them were a little bit frightened at having done so, and that Ned thought they had better hide up both rabbit and gun in a hollow tree close by; that having done this, Ned had said to him he was to go and look for birds' nests in the wood, while he (Ned) was catching fish. He wanted to go to the river too, but Ned wouldn't let him." Jem stated further, that the little boy said his name was Charley Summers, and that at his recommendation that he should go straight home from the wood, the poor boy seemed only too glad to do so, by setting off at full speed as soon as he found himself at liberty.

Ned Howlet owned to the rabbit and the gun, and disclosed the place of their concealment; which, indeed, was hardly necessary, as both Banks and Jem had a notion, as soon as a hollow tree was named, whereabouts the secreted articles were to be found.

Bob had listened to all this rather attentively, but Jack had got quite tired, and was now seen at a little distance from the principal actors in the scene, listlessly looking into a few bushes which grew by a little ditch separating one meadow from another. Just as Bob looked round for him, his apathy seemed to forsake him, and a shout of—

"Bob! I say, Bob, come here," vehemently uttered, and accompanied by energetic wavings and beckonings with his hand and arm, showed very significantly that something had occurred to waken his interest.

Bob hastened to him, leaving Banks to give his parting instructions to the watcher. On approaching the spot where Jack was standing, apparently quite occupied with intent observation of something in one of the bushes, Bob asked what it was that had caused Jack so much excitement.

"Look here, was the reply; "did you ever see anything like that? Here's a little frog, with one leg gone, and a hairy caterpillar, stuck through with a long spiky thorn, so as to hang from it;—there's another large hairy caterpillar on another thorn there, not far off; and here's a young, unfledged bird on another great thorn on this side—the thorn goes right through its head. What can be the meaning of it?"

"Why," says Bob, "it does look a little like a shambles; doesn't it? That's the handywork of a butcher-bird, I can see; and, by Jove, there's the cock bird there, not six yards off. Now, Jack, look alive; there's a nest not far."

Jack could not help pausing to cast a look of admiration at the very handsome bird Bob had drawn his observation to, but he soon began the search Bob had for himself instituted as well as proposed. Nor was it long before his eye fixed on rather a large nest-like looking mass, placed rather high in a strong bush, about fifteen yards higher up than where he had found the shrike's larder. He was soon enabled, by an active clamber, to announce to Bob that he had found a nest; "would he come and tell him whether it was the butcher-bird's?" Bob thought the eggs were very like that bird's; but Banks, coming up at the moment, settled the question at once. The eggs, with great mutual congratulation, were secured, and then time was found to think of the real business of the day once more. The rods were put together, the reels affixed, the line threaded, and a few preliminary casts made to see that the sleight had not left their arm and wrist. Succeeding very fairly after a few minutes of trial, the gut-links were produced and affixed. But, alas! they were dry, and would most perversely fall in circles, instead of neatly and duly extended into fine straight lines. Banks succeeded, after a patient manipulation of them between his finger and thumb, in making them capable of falling in a sort of serpentine form instead of a spiral curve, and then set the lads to lash the water with them till they became thoroughly softened and yielding, preparatory to affixing a fly. In ten minutes or so, Bob made such fair work on the surface of the smooth pool they were standing by, that Banks put him on a fly. Bob was very zealous not to make a crack with his line as he brought it round from behind: but avoiding Scylla, he fell into Charybdis; for the line not being kept in continuous motion found time to trail its lower lengths, with the fly at the end, on the ground. The hook, being of a prehensile nature, naturally caught the first stalk or stem strong enough to arrest it; and when Bob made the motion for sending the line fairly forward over the water, the stem or stalk objected to a severance of the intimate association just formed, and, in consequence, the hook had to be left behind.

"'Gone to grass,' Master Robert," was Banks' explanatory remark on witnessing the performance.

Master Robert, however, did not comprehend. He hadn't an idea what could be "gone to grass," for they hadn't being talking of even a donkey being sent out "abroad in the meadows," whether to eat grass or for any other purpose. So he proceeded to repeat the throw with the cheering confidence that he was all but a fly-fisher now he was actually "throwing the fly." Banks therefore quietly suggested to him to see if his fly-link was all right.

"All right? Of course it is," said Bob:

"I saw it out as straight as an arrow last throw."

"But you'll find it a good plan at first, Master Robert, to look to it every now and then."

Bob, to oblige the gamekeeper, did as he suggested. The gut hung beautifully limp now, and there wasn't a coil or a knot in it. Bob was going to throw again.

"But how is your fly, Master Robert?" the tiresome Banks insisted.

Bob, meaning nothing less than to confound him, raised the end of his link to show him the fly. But somehow, the confusion was not on Banks's countenance when it only too clearly appeared that fly there was none. Bob then permitted the gamekeeper to explain, with edifying clearness, that when a gentleman fly-fisher, new to his art, did not hit the happy medium between too fast and too slow in bringing his line round at its greatest extension behind him, but unhappily hit upon the too slow, the hook, surely dragging on the ground, as surely, almost, caught against some object strong enough to detain it; and then, if the gut did not give way, the top-joint of the rod sometimes did. Bob comprehended without much difficulty. His next move was rather a clever one.

"Banks," says he, "take my rod, and let me stand behind you; fix that wee feather on the end of the line, and throw, first too slow, and then the right way."

No sooner said than done. Bob saw the small white feather trail and once even slightly catch.

"Now throw your best;" and then he saw how the feather floated rapidly but equably round, without jerk and without faltering, five or six times in succession.

"I can do it now," he cried at last; and five times out of six the feather floated round, more slowly than when the rod was in the keeper's hand no doubt, but still correctly; and the sixth time, after only a very slight dalliance with the blades of grass.

"Bravo! Master Robert: you must have another fly on;" and selecting a rather large red hackle, Banks knotted it to the end of the casting-line.

Ten or a dozen throws were achieved with increasing success, and Bob was drawing his line in for another, the fly sweeping round as he did so into the very eye of a little ripple. To his immense surprise he felt a sharp little tug, to which he responded, by some spasmodic action of his muscles, with an equally sharp but by no means equally little jerk, and a small fish was seen to emerge from the water much as if shot out, and having passed through an involuntary leap of six or eight feet, to fall back again into the water.

"Did you see that, Banks?"

"Yes, sir; and if I might say so, I saw a very cockney trick. If that had been a good fish you'd have broken either line or rod. Don't you mean to pull that chap out because he's so little?"

"Pull him out! Why he fell in again."

"Yes, to be sure he did; but with the hook fast in his jaws, or I'm no judge."

Bob hereupon proceeded, with the utmost despatch, to tighten his slack line, and had the intense satisfaction of landing his first fish caught with the artificial fly. A small dace of two ounces weight was the voluntary victim in this case; for everybody's first fish is caught he does not know how, or indeed anything about it, except that he himself had no hand in it. Bob *was* a fly-fisher now, and Banks told him to go and try the tail of a stream a little further up, while he stopped and gave Jack a hint or two. Bob went to the stream and flogged the lower part of it zealously. Once he caught a little green weed from a stone at the bottom, and once a fish as long as his finger really rose to his fly. He was just going farther up when Banks joined him again, and gave him a hint or two how to fish the stream itself. He was first to try and let his fly light in the still water just beyond the current, then to bring it across the current and let it be borne by it into the still water on this side; to repeat this throw about a foot lower down the stream each time, half a dozen or more times; then to try the eddies lower down, and across the stream where it expanded itself more. Bob did as he was told. A throw in good water, badly managed, blank; a second throw, not much better; a third throw, the fly lighting not by wit, but by luck, just behind a large stone which lay nearly flush, but divided the current beautifully. Bob saw a glance in the little bit of still water, but fearful of conducting himself like a cockney again, he hesitated about striking at all. However, it wasn't necessary; for his line was taut enough, through the action of the current, to hook the fish by its own action; and a tug, a rush, and a leap, which seemed all contemporaneous to his astonished optics, announced to him that he had hooked a trout, and a good one. Hooked it, but not caught it; for the trout seemed to be the best man of the two: he swam into the stream, down the stream, up the stream, much as he pleased; and Bob's mission appeared to be to indulge his vagrant propensities. However, a hint or two from Banks about holding his rod up and getting a pull upon him, and keeping his rod in such a position that its elasticity might tell upon the trout—"keeping it always bent" was the keeper's phrase—enabled him to turn the tables on the "bumptious" trout; and, after two or three minutes, to lead him down to where the water shallowed over a gravel, and conduct him, almost unresisting, to a place where he had not water to cover him as he lay gasping on his side. A beautiful trout he was.

"Two pounds weight," cried Bob.

"Nay," says Banks, "not quite so much as that. I think one is nearer the mark; but he's a grand 'un for your first."

Shouts from Jack now claimed attention. He had been walking in his meditative way, trailing the fly Banks had put on for him when he had tarried behind a little before, along the surface of the water, when a very hungry chub seized it and was fast hooked before the angler knew anything about it. The chub didn't like the predicament, that was clear, and it was not clear that Jack liked it much better at first. But his resolution not to be beat, at least by a fish of that size, came to his aid, and after his first shout of half surprise and half dismay, he stood on the defensive. He had an idea that he ought to reel up his line, which happened to be right, as the chub had run in under the nearer bank. As the line was slack enough he had got his rod into a nearly perpendicular position, so that when the line began to shorten sufficiently for him to feel his fish, the captive was speedily brought to the surface nearly vertically under the top. Fortunately, rod, line, hook, gut, all were good, and held till the fish was exhausted, or sulked, as the chub often seems to do; and Banks's "Draw him along here, Master Edwards," was the beginning of the end; for, acting up to the injunction, Jack brought the fish within reach of Banks's hands, placed together and under him, so as to lift him fairly out of the water. Bob meantime was filled with the noble ambition of catching Sir Cuthbert's dish of fish then and there. Perplexingly enough, however, to one possessed with such an ambition, the trout refused to be caught. Our young friend raised more than one by no means despicable trout; but either he did not strike at all, or not till the fish had detected the cheat, and spit it out, and so they were missed. He did catch a few coarse fish, and one or two adventurous troutlings, but no other "pounder" graced his pannier. Jack's further exploits were confined to hooking his own cap, then trying the tenacity of the branch of a tree, and finally losing his fly, he neither knew where nor how. However, a look at the chub consoled him in all his troubles, and when at last the boys bade the goodnatured Banks good evening, and, with their rods duly packed, began their homeward course, it was with the conviction that there was no sport like fly-fishing. Their several conflicts with the trout and the chub were fought over again and again, and wise resolves, due to real experiences, were announced as intended to be carried into effect on occasion of "next time." As they passed a detached orchard on their way home, and perceived a missel-thrush's nest with its peculiar style of bands about it, in one of the apple-trees, even the acquisition of these eggs, which they had much coveted the whole spring, scarcely served to make, in their regards, a very noticeable episode in the day's history. But even their talk on exploits, past and to come, had to come to an end when they reached the school with only time to get ready for roll-call.

CHAPTER XII.

Another Fly-fishing Excursion—A Dish of Trout—Red Viper—A little Botany—Curlew's and Norfolk Plover's Eggs.

It is scarcely necessary to state that, whenever they could get away for an hour to the banks of the Wassett, thither they resorted; not so much in the hope, or with the expectation of taking fish, as with the purpose of practising the rudiments of their art; so far, that is, as those rudiments consist in neat and expert casting of the line. They certainly did, from time to time, catch a dace or small chub. There were few other fly-taking fish in the still deeps and slow currents of the Wassett, as it ran through the broad meadows which skirted the immediate precincts of Elmdon to the north. But these occasional captures gave them great encouragement, as so many proofs that they were gradually becoming more and more expert in the use of rods and flies; for, in the still water in which they were practising, very bungling throws, and very clumsy attempts—almost equally with no attempts at all—at striking, would almost inevitably and invariably result in raising almost no fish at all, and missing those—young-lady fish perhaps—which were weak and curious enough to rise at all at the sham-fly. All this practice had an object.

The next holiday was to be devoted to the capture of Sir Cuthbert's dish of trout. They *must* be caught that day: they would have no other day within the fortnight; and afterwards, there were rumours of a cricket match, almost arranged, with the Sunbury boys; and if that came on, though neither of our friends were in the school eleven, yet Bob was quite enough of a cricketer to be very useful in the continual practisings which went on when a match was in view; and so there would be an end of egg-hunting, and fly-fishing too. Tuesday came—rain, morning, noon and night; not heavy, but continuous. Wednesday came—dull, gloomy, foggy, damp.

"More rain," augured Bob, "and the water will be so thick, we shan't raise a fish."

However, on going out, he saw that the rain must have discontinued the previous evening, as most of the pools observable over night had now, for the most part, disappeared; which would not have been the case had the rain continued through the night, or the greater part of it. About ten the sun came out; by twelve, the day was beautiful. Bob now began to augur a first-rate day for their expedition. The rain of yesterday, he was sure, would have raised the water in the brooks, and so in the Whitwater; that still it would not have been a great flood, nor anything like it; that if it kept fine twenty-four hours more, the water would have sunk to its ordinary level, or nearly so, and only continue to be discoloured so much as to give the very best chance the fly-fisher can have; for the trout seem to enjoy a return to a fly-diet after two or three days enforced abstinence such as is caused by muddiness in the water, and at the same time, the degree of discoloration still left in the water seems better to conceal from them the deceptive nature of the bait the fly-fisher throws so perseveringly in their way. The barometer of the lads' hopes and anticipations began to fall again towards evening, when the clouds once more collected, and rain actually began to fall. But the shower—for it was nothing more—soon passed, and with it the clouds; and the evening was even more beautiful and promising than the afternoon had been.

Thursday morning came—everything the angler's heart could desire. The sun was shining, there was a gentle breeze blowing from the south; clouds, not threatening rain-foreboding clouds, but vapour-constructions of a very different class, that seemed to be intended for nothing else, at least to have nothing else to do, than to prevent the sun's rays from being troublesome to the fisher. The Doctor seemed to see an unusual degree of eagerness in Bob's manner of asking the customary permission for the afternoon, and enquired whether he had any special object in view in which he was greatly interested. Bob told him at once that he had such good hope of being able, as both the day was so favourable and most likely the water would prove in such first-rate condition, to catch the trout Sir Cuthbert had spoken of when he gave them the rods: a gift, the full particulars of which had been related to the Doctor, when he asked them if they had enjoyed their visit to Wrilton Park. Dr. Noble, in reply, stated that he had part of the afternoon at liberty, and had had some thoughts of taking them to Whitehow-head, to look for one or two plants he believed might be found there. Bob at once expressed his eagerness to accompany the Doctor, if he wished it.

"Oh! no, no:—I wouldn't take you from your fishing, under the circumstances, on any account. Any day for the next ten will do for my purpose."

So Bob and his cousin set out, duly equipped. They were not long in reaching a place at which they might commence operations. Their rods were soon together, the lines out, and the casting lines attached. Bob could not content himself without "a dropper" as well as "a stretcher;" and a red spinner for the latter or end fly was accordingly attached, while a red hackle, about a yard above it, hanging by a piece of gut some two and a-half inches in length, did duty as "dropper."

"I say, Jack," he broke out suddenly, as his earnest occupation with these preliminaries began to relax as they approached completeness, "I vote we go up a mile or two higher, and fish down. I'm sure we shall manage better."

Jack's inclination decidedly was to begin then and there, but he did not doubt that Bob was right in making the suggestion he had done. And so they walked further up with rapid step, and a tingling sort of nervous anxiety to be at work keeping them almost painfully excited. Wetting and stretching their casting lines by drawing them half-a-dozen times rapidly against a very sharp stream, they began, being about thirty or forty paces apart. Jack was the first to kill a fish: a trout of six inches long rewarded his second throw. Bob's luck was later in coming, but was greater when it did come. He had fished a likely-looking stream—and very fairly for so young a hand—without any success, and had made his last throw, and was now bringing in his line previous to moving lower down, in which process the flies were drawn along near the bank, where, as it happened, there was a favourite seat for a trout. Its occupant was at home, and as the red hackle came just dipping past his nose, he could not resist the temptation, and rose, hooking himself as he dropped back to his former position. And now a short but sharp struggle commenced, which terminated in the transfer of the trout—about nine inches from eye to fork—to the pannier. We scarcely need to describe all the proceedings of the next hour and half. Suffice it to say, that at the end of about that time, Bob reeled in his line and retraced his steps, to go and seek Jack, whom he had left considerably higher up the stream. He had another trout nearly as good as the one he had taken first, and three smaller ones; and had lost one other, and, as he thought, large fish, which had decamped with his fly in its mouth. Besides he had taken seven "coarse fish." They had risen greedily, and a good fisherman would have quintupled Bob's captures easily. He saw Jack some little time before he reached him, and perceived directly he had come to grief. In fact, he had lodged his fly in the branches of an overhanging tree, and liberate it he could not:—break it off he would not. When

Bob came up, after a moment's pause to make out exactly where the detainer was lodged, he proceeded to divest himself of basket and to lay aside his rod. In half a minute more he was in the tree; and in less than two minutes, the whole branch, cut through by Bob's sailor-knife where it was nearly as thick as his wrist, lay at Jack's feet. The fly was soon disentangled, and with admiring thanks for his friend's ready help, he was proceeding to renew his fishing.

"Stop a bit," cried Bob; "look here. Isn't that a beauty—and that? If only we can catch two more each. One would almost do; but two would be prime. But haven't you caught anything, Jack?" he continued, as he saw no traces of that young gentleman's success anywhere; "*I've* had such lots of rises."

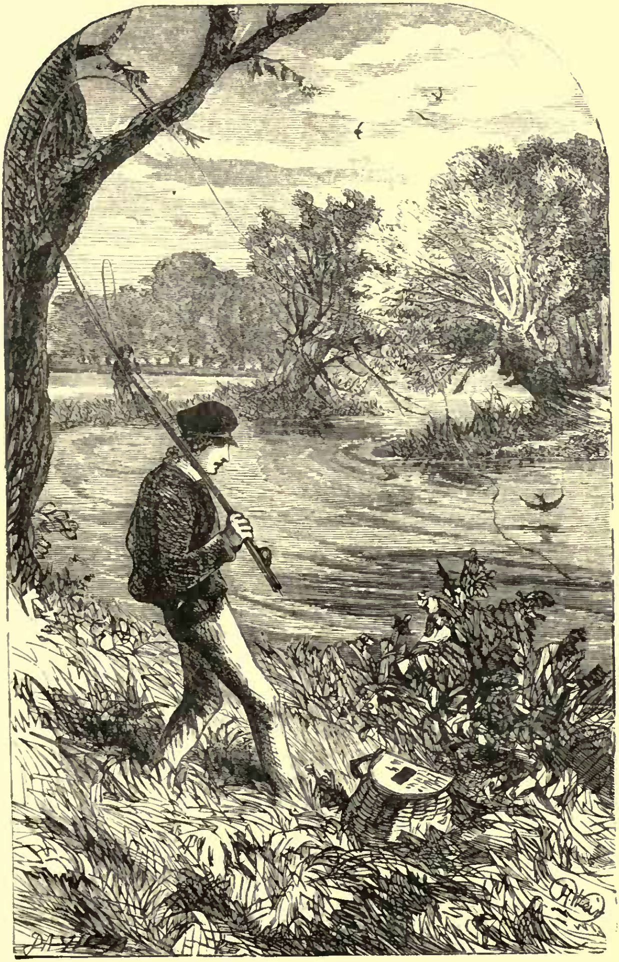
"Oh! yes," answered Jack, rather quietly; "I've caught one or two little ones. I'll show you, if you like."

"Why, where are they? you haven't put them in your pocket, have you?"

"Oh! no; I laid them near a tree root, with grass over them to keep them nice and moist"

"Why what's the use of that, for such little things? But let's have a look at them."

So the lads went up about 200 yards further, and there, at the foot of a tree, Bob saw a heap of



Jack and Bob Fly-fishing.—p. 236

grass that he thought showed Jack's care rather than his wisdom in gathering so much to cover a couple of small trout. Moving some of it away rather scornfully with his foot, a tail lay disclosed that in less than no time—as he said afterwards in speaking of it—had him down on his knees, and his hands employed where his toe had been a moment before. 'Twas a glorious trout of nearly two pounds weight, and beside it another bigger than either of his own; four smallish chub completed the tale.

"Why, Jack, wherever did you get these, and how, man alive?"

"Why," responded Jack, "I got that big one when I wasn't thinking anything about it. I was rather playing with my line in the stream I was at, when you shouted you were going on. All at once I saw a yellow gleam in the water, and the next moment felt such a tug! And then didn't he leap and plunge! Well, I let him pull the line out of the reel at first:—I think I didn't know what else to do. Then I began to wind some of it up again; but I think he would have beat me, only I happened to pull a little once as he leaped, and he dropped into a place where there wasn't water enough, for two or three yards together, for him to swim. I flung my rod down, and rushed in after him, and half kicked him, and half threw him on to the bank; but I broke my casting line about it. I soon got it mended again though, and went to work again; I wasn't disposed to play any longer, and I could hardly believe my luck, when, not ten steps off, I hooked that other. I managed him better. But I haven't had half so many rises as you say, Bob. I can't manage it right at all; and I'm sure I have caught the bank and the bushes ten times."

"Throw or not throw—manage it right or not—you've managed to get the trout. And an't they real beauties? Just think of being able to send Sir Cuthbert a dish of real good trout! I don't think, though, he supposed we should; though he said we were to. I think he thought we couldn't catch them."

"Who dares say I said what I didn't mean?" broke in Sir Cuthbert's own voice, making both lads start and turn round as if electrified. To their surprise they saw not only Sir Cuthbert, but Dr. Noble close to them—no difficulty having been experienced by the two gentlemen in coming up to the boys, pre-occupied as they were with their fish, and the account of their capture.

"So you have caught my trout, have you? Let us see what they are like."

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Sir Cuthbert, when all four were duly displayed, "I shall have to give Banks strict orders to look after you, at this rate. But are you quite sure? No set-lines, Robert?"

Bob disclaimed the insinuation with a species of indignation; as if a "fellow" who could "kill" trout with the fly could ever condescend to the set lines to catch them!

"Now, lads, which are you for?—continuing your afternoon's fishing, or going on with Sir Cuthbert and myself to some of those large open fields beyond the warren, and thence to Whitehow head?"

Their selection was made in an instant, and Sir Cuthbert settled the little difficulty which arose about carting the fish about so far, by calling to the son of one of his tenants who was passing along the road (which lay about a hundred yards distant), and requesting him to take the rods and fish to the gamekeeper's house, with orders that the fish should go to the Park and the rods to the school; "for," said he, turning to the boys, "I suppose you mean me to have the trout."

"Indeed we do, Sir Cuthbert, if you would be so kind;" while the Doctor also testified to their evident eagerness to get them, if they could, for that purpose.

The sudden appearance of the two gentlemen was accounted for as follows:—Sir Cuthbert had heard from some of his tenants that a good many stone-curlews, or great plovers, had, for some three or four years past, always been seen about the wide, open fields he had named a little while before; that a message had been sent up to the hall that morning, that the plover were there again this year; that he had accordingly left home earlier than he would otherwise have done, to go to Elmdon, with the intention of putting his two young friends on the scent; that, meeting a person who was coming to him on business, he was unavoidably detained until the boys had been an hour gone. He had, however, met with Dr. Noble, and was about to charge him with the information for them on their return; but the Doctor had said that he had been thinking of going much in the same direction himself, and that he would go by way of the stream, and let the lads know at once. Sir Cuthbert then proposed to accompany him, and hence the surprise to our heroes.

A little discussion arose, on their entering the road, as to the best line to be taken in order to reach their destination most easily. Sir Cuthbert thought that, by taking the lower boundary fence of the Spinney as their clue, until they reached the warren, and then striking diagonally across it, in the direction of the fields haunted by the stone-curlews, they should waste least time and fewest steps. Dr. Noble was more disposed—rather, perhaps, because the woodland walk would have had greater freshness and delight to him—to suggest striking straight across the Spinney from the point at which they had just arrived. Bob and his cousin said nothing, but Sir Cuthbert seemed to think he *could* say something if he were asked, and so shortly said to him, "What's your notion, Robert? You know as well as either the Doctor or I, I dare answer for it."

Bob rather coloured at being thus spoken to, for what he had to say on the subject (if he said it), might seem to be dictated by a little inclination to assume, if not to presume. But he, without hesitation, admitted that a plan had occurred to him—adding, however, that he had not intended, or even wished to say anything about it.

"What is it, my boy?—neither I nor Sir Cuthbert are likely to misinterpret you."

Bob's reluctance to speak disappeared at this, and he said, "I thought if we went across from yonder gate into the wood, to the footpath which leads through the marsh to the Beacon, we might get almost direct to Whitehow-head; and thence, equally well, to the open fields named by Sir Cuthbert. From these fields home, the path would be plain and straightforward enough." He thought, he added, they "might thus save nearly three-quarters of an hour of walking."

"Capital, Robert. You have a map of the country in your head. I see exactly; if we go my way, we shall go thus," bending a light flexible cane he had in his hand into an oval, with the two extremities, after crossing each other, projecting eight or ten inches in different directions, "and your way, we go on a course which does not intersect itself, and is as direct as it is possible to be."

Bob's suggestion was therefore adopted by acclamation, and the Spinney was soon traversed, the marsh passed through, and the Beacon reached. Turning now a little more to the westward, about twenty minutes' brisk walking brought them to Whitehow-head. Here there was a remarkable depression in one of the highest swellings of the moorland, somewhat resembling what might be looked on as an incomplete natural amphitheatre, whose sloping walls rose to a height of seventy or eighty feet above the level of the bottom, that is, the part where the enclosure was incomplete. The open part faced to the south-east, and the bottom in many places was very boggy. The Doctor, on arriving at this place, stated that he wanted specimens of the *Trientalis Europæa*, of the dwarf honeysuckle (*Cornus Suecica*), of the whortleberry (*Vaccinium vitis idæa*), and of the cranberry (*Vaccinium oxycoccus*), all of which grew within a few yards of each other in this remarkable spot. He set the boys to look for the whortleberry, as Bob knew it when he saw it. He himself searched the swamp for the cranberry, while Sir Cuthbert set himself to look up the *Cornus*. The two lads soon found the plant they were looking for, and lit upon the Trientalis as well, together with the *Listera cordata;* though neither of these plants were flowering, or likely to do so, for several weeks. Jack's eye, as they descended towards the Doctor, fell upon a, to him, unfamiliar object; and pausing for a moment to look more closely, Bob, who was close behind him, perceived the same object, and caught his arm, saying very quietly—"Stop a bit, Jack: I'll be back in a moment," he rushed off to Sir Cuthbert and begged him to lend him the cane, giving as his reason, "There's a large red viper just before my cousin. I never saw such a coloured one before."

Sir Cuthbert hardly liked to let him assail the creature, for fear of mischance if his blow failed. Still, he was so confident, that the cane was given up to him, his friend merely following close behind to be at hand in case of emergency. However, Bob's attack was too cautious and well considered to leave any room for failure, and a single smart, well directed blow reduced the still writhing reptile to a state of helplessness, and apparently unconsciousness. It was a splendid creature. The lozenge-shaped markings on the back were of a jet or almost velvety black, while all the rest of the back and sides were of a rather dull chocolate red; and he measured two feet ten inches in length. Bob said he had once seen a small one in the road as he was walking up the hill behind the carriage, in which a party were returning from a sort of pic-nic, and that he had eventually, by holding an empty wine bottle before its nose and administering sundry well-timed and judicious pinches to its tail, persuaded it to creep into the bottle, when he had corked it up and carried it home. It seemed quite tipsy, he said, on turning it out of its temporary place of confinement; but soon recovered its sobriety, and lived for several days in a large botanical case. But this was five times as great as that. It was soon arranged that the viper was to be carried home and consigned to the curator of the museum for preservation. In the meantime, the Doctor had got two or three good specimens of the cranberry, and was beginning to climb the bank when his pupils met him with their plants and the viper.

Some little time now was occupied in the safe stowage of the plants, and in arrangements for the conveyance of the snake. While thus engaged, all three were aroused by an exclamation from Sir Cuthbert.

"Hallo! what have we here? Will you be so good as to come up here, Doctor?"

The two boys found it was not easy to keep pace with him in his ascent to the place where Sir Cuthbert was standing. On reaching him, the latter pointing with his cane—which he had resumed after the slaughter of the viper—said,

"Those must be curlews' eggs; at least I think so. Though I have not heard of curlews nesting here for many years."

Doctor Noble had no sort of doubt that they were the eggs of the bird named, and the two boys looked with no little admiration at the four beautifully shaped and marked eggs as they lay, point to point, in that negligent apology for a nest. Two were speedily packed up for a journey to the school, and all the party now set themselves to look for the dwarf honeysuckle, and they did not look long in vain.

Their steps were now directed rather to the southward of west; and, in less than half-an-hour, they left the Common near the point at which the boundary wall between it and the warren terminated. They had scarcely shown themselves in the large sterile fields, all spotted over with whitish stones, varying in size between a cricket-ball and a flat Dutch cheese, than the shrill cries of the stone-plovers were heard. Sir Cuthbert had received tolerably precise directions as to where the nests of the birds in question might be expected to be found; and, on reaching the designated neighbourhood, gave instructions to the lads what to look for, and in what sort of places to look. Bob was the successful searcher in this case. He marked out a space of about twenty yards square by placing stones at each corner, and then traversed it again and again till not a square foot remained unexplored by his watchful eye. A second similar space was similarly dealt with, and then a third. After passing over about one-half of this, his exultant "Hooray!—here they are," summoned all three of his companions to his side. Only two eggs were there, and they laid in a slight hollow in the sandy soil, and so like, in general hue, to the stones that lay all around, that nothing but mere accident or systematic search—such as Bob's had been—seemed likely to discover their position to human eyes. Taking both—for no one thought of prosecuting the search further—and turning their steps homewards, accident did what system had done before.

This time it was the Doctor who discovered them; and nothing but his peremptory "Halt!"—which on the instant brought Sir Cuthbert to a standstill, as well as the two lads—saved them from being walked over, and probably trod upon. One step more would have brought the lads, who were walking very close together, right over them. However, his device saved them, and gave rise as well to a little merry talk and laughing, the Doctor telling Sir Cuthbert he was "glad to find he could obey orders so promptly. As he had been out of practice so long, it would hardly have been thought likely if it had not been tried." Bob was again desired to act as guide. The easiest way, and what a Yorkshire lad at the school would call the "soonest way," he said, would be to get back to the warren enclosure, and cross the warren itself till they came to the pathway. He thought there would be nothing in that part of the warren which intervened between them and the path to impede their progress. The Doctor felt inclined to go by a longer route, which Bob mentioned; but being apprehensive Sir Cuthbert might be beginning to be anxious to get home, he did not mention his inclination, and they therefore took the "soonest way." They reached Elmdon after a good brisk walk, but not until nearly three-quarters of an hour after evening bell. Sir Cuthbert told the Doctor he was sorry to see him set his pupils such a lesson of unpunctuality; and asked what punishment he intended to inflict on Noble, sen , for being absent at roll-call and an hour late on entering school, when the case should be in due course brought before him to-morrow. The Doctor gravely said he should visit the offence lightly this time, as he believed it would be proved to have originated in the solicitations and unfair influence of a certain idle fellow, who had nothing particular to do, and did it, named Cuthbert Graham. He then sent the lads to wash themselves and get into a tidy condition, instructing them as soon as they had done that to come to his rooms for their supper, for which he also tried to induce Sir Cuthbert to remain. The Baronet, however, said his mother might be anxious, as he had fixed to be home by seven; and that, therefore, much as he would like to stay, he must at once say good-bye, get his horse as soon as possible, and ride home with all speed; and he did so accordingly. The lads soon returned to Dr. Noble's apartment, and did thorough justice to the ham, and bread and butter, and tea; and then worked hard to make up the time for preparation lost by their unintended absence from evening "hours."

CHAPTER XIII.

The Cricket Match.

NEARLY the first news our young friends heard on rejoining their schoolfellows was that the Sunbury match was arranged; that the school eleven had won the choice of place for first match, and had elected their own ground; and that the match was to come off on Monday fortnight. Bob, who might be taken into the eleven the next half year, if any of the present members left and his place was not supplied by some boy who chanced to be a good cricketer, was in great request during the intervening fortnight; and, indeed, deservedly so, for he was very stout and active, though not tall, for his fourteen years, and could really bowl a very fair ball for a lad, while at fielding generally, throwing and catching, there was no boy of his own age at all equal to him. He did not appear to do so well in his batting, but the reason really was, that he, from his capabilities in other respects, just named, generally stood up to the best bowling of the school, and seldom made a score in consequence; though it was beginning to be very generally admitted that it was not so easy to get Benson's wicket; and some such address from a bowler, half as big again as himself, as this, "Hang you, Benson, what did you block that for?" or, "I say, you Benson, you've been in long enough; you ought to have been out three times already," was not a very unusual thing. However, Bob went on in his steady, systematic way, and blocked, or tried to block, every suspicious looking ball; now and then only he made a vicious cut to leg, or slipped a ball between point and slip, with a queer look in his eye which showed it was not altogether accidental. Pettit evidently thought much of him, and every now and then gave him a hint. And one day after he had kept Bob well exercised for an hour, in fagging out for the balls he was hitting away in his practice, that would have been good for fours and fives in a match, he called to Bob, "Benson, I say, come here, and bowl me half a dozen balls. Hordern, here, won't have the fagging you've had, I lay." Hordern, who belonged to the eleven, and was a tall, rather lanky, tallow-faced lad, with straight black hair, very bilious looking, and of clearly cantankerous capabilities, gave up the ball with a very ill grace, and a look which said plainly enough, "I owe you one for this, young fellow." Bob's first ball was rather wide, and Pettit swiped it into the middle of next week.

"Two or three like that will make tallow-chops smoke," he said, as he sat on his bat, waiting till the ball was shied up; "turn him upside down, he'll have oil to his hair, free gratis for nothing."

The second ball had to be blocked. The third produced a neat catch for point.

"Mind your eye, young fellow, and don't bowl your captain out—for shame!" sung out the batsman, good temperedly.

It appeared as if Bob yielded due attention to the injunction, for the fourth was sent away to leg, and good for three at least. The next ball, however, brought Bob his revenge for Pettit's—"I thought you couldn't come it again;" for just grazing the shoulder of his bat, as he thought to block it, it took the top of the middle wicket, shying both bails well up into the air. "Well done, Benson, a capital ball. I'm blest if I don't give you an innings. Now, look out for your pins."

Bob blocked every straight ball in the first dozen delivered; then Pettit said,—

"I mean to have your wicket three times in the next half dozen;" and he got it twice. But he proceeded to show Bob what his fault was, and with so much effect, that before they left off, the lad was able to stop his instructor's best-intentioned twisters of that particular sort.

It was quite evident that Hordern was in great dudgeon at the kind of slight which had been put upon him; indeed, he was not only very angry at being set to fag while Bob was preferred to bowl, but he was exceedingly jealous of Bob's success in bowling out a fellow who had stopped or hit all his own straight balls for most of an hour; and not a little so, that Pettit should have taken pains to show a chap, who was not even in the eleven, a dodge or two. As he walked sulkily away, Pettit just said to Bob—

"That chap means mischief, if he can. Well, he can't hurt you; and I dare say he won't meddle with me."

It certainly did not seem likely: as the speaker was big enough and strong enough to tie poor Hordern into a knot if he had chosen; besides being known to have pluck enough to face a bull.

Well, the day fixed for the match drew on. Great were the speculations as to the play of the Sunbury eleven. It was rumoured that they had one very crack player, and it was generally believed that the Elmdon boys would have to do their very best not to be heavily beaten. The practice became very close; and it was observed that Hordern, who was the next best bat to Pettit and first-rate at point, was more sedulous at practice than he had ever been on any former occasion, though he never worked with Pettit if he could help it.

The morning of the great day broke at last: a fair day, with not too much sun. The nine o'clock train brought the Sunbury lads and their friends; and when they stood in groups on the playing field, it was evident that the Sunbury boys were on the whole larger and heavier. Pettit, however, looked over his side with undiminished confidence. He singled out two or three among his opponents who looked anything but fit for work, and unless more appeared afterwards than he could see on the surface, he thought eight of his own would do nearly as much as the whole Sunbury eleven. A moment or two after the toss-up had given the choice of innings to Sunbury, and they had decided to go in themselves, it was observed there was a little commotion among the Elmdon lads. Pettit walked up to the group, and heard the words from one of the elder boys, who however did not play at all,—

"I don't think he'll be able to play."

"Not able to play—who won't?" cried Pettit.

"Why, Hordern. I saw him five minutes ago go into his study with his right hand all covered with blood. He said he had been trying to prise open a box with his knife, and the blade slipped and had run precious deep into his hand, and sliced it besides."

"By Jove, I expected something of the sort," exclaimed Pettit.

"How the deuce did he contrive to run the knife into his right hand? He's not left-handed that ever I saw," cried Gregory.

Further talk was discontinued; for Hordern himself appeared on the scene, sallower than ever, which might be from pain. His hand was muffled up, and the bandages were bloody enough.

"How did it happen?" "Is it very bad?" "Are you much hurt?" and hosts of similar queries were hurled at him.

"I'm very sorry," was his reply, looking at Pettit, who was about the only one there who had not questioned him; "but I've hurt myself so much it is impossible for me to play. I must go to the doctor's at once. I'm bleeding so much I think I've cut a blood-vessel. I hope my absence won't make much difference."

There was a distinct twinkle of malice in his eye as he said the last words, still looking at Pettit, which the latter understood well enough.

But all he said was, "Never mind, we'll do the best we can without you;" and turning on his heel, he saw our friend Bob approaching, with a green-baize bag under his arm.

"The very chap I wanted," he said; "come along here, Benson."

"Oh! Pettit, please I want to speak to you, very much."

"Can't help it; come along."

"Oh! just a minute: something so very particular."

"All in good time; come along, now."

Seeing he could get no hearing, Bob followed Pettit very close. It was directly obvious why Pettit had called him; for entering the group of Elmdon lads, who were talking low and anxiously among themselves about this awkward *contretemps* of Hordern's hurt, he said, "We want another to make up the eleven; here's the best I know; I'll answer for him he does his best, and I think it won't be so bad. What do you say?"

There was no dissentient voice, and more than one or two of the big fellows clapped Bob on the back, in a rough but good-humoured way, seeing he was a bit startled at the thought of playing in the match.

"Only stand up as well to their bowling as I saw you to Pettit's a day or two ago," said

Donaldson, "and they won't get much out of you, whatever you get out of them."

"Nonsense, he'll be all right in five minutes; and the coolest among us, you'll see, when it gets to be work. I'll bet five to one that Benson makes the third best score to-day."

His leader's confidence put Bob into better heart, and after a message had been sent to the Sunbury lads to explain the little delay which had taken place, Pettit found time to attend to Bob's earnest solicitations to let him speak to him. Going a little on one side, Bob said in a very low tone, "I'm afraid your bat is sprung."

"Sprung! why, what have you been doing to it?"

"I!—nothing. But when I went to your study to get it, it wasn't in the same corner as I had seen it after breakfast, and the bag was tied different; and I was sure you hadn't meddled with it, for you have not been there. And besides ——" Here Bob paused. "And besides —what?" shouted Pettit, impatiently.

"I saw a drop or two of blood about."

"The deuce you did! Here, give us the bat. How do you know it is sprung?"

"I tried it. I suspected something."

"By Jove! it *is* sprung. Why, it would break in my hand with just blocking a ball. Suspected something! What do you suspect?"

"Oh! you know, Pettit. I don't want to say it out."

"The sneaking rascal!" cried the big fellow, jumping to the conclusion; "and he's hurt himself on purpose, or shammed it—'twould be just like him—and then gone and sprung my bat. If I could prove it, I'd break every bone in his confounded body. However, it's no use talking like that now. There isn't a bat belonging to us I care to play with."

"Oh! yes, there is," cried Bob; "there's my new one that Sir Cuthbert Graham gave me the other day; and you tried it, you know, and said you thought you would like it better than your own, if you played a bit with it."

"But I should very likely break it. You may depend I won't spare the balls, if I can get a hit or two."

"Oh! never mind that. Only you play with it. I would rather it were broken twice over, than we should lose the match." And so it was settled.

The Sunbury side went in, and so confident were they in their crack man, that he was put in first with another of their best to face him. He seemed likely to justify their confidence, for he scored a two and then a one from Pettit's two first balls; then another one having been scored by his compeer, he stopped a straight, beautifully bowled ball; then scored two to leg, and then hit a ball to field for three. The next "over" produced scarcely any addition to the score. The other player had most of the balls, and batted very cautiously to Donaldson's bowling. The third over, Pettit stopped Bob as they crossed, and said in a low tone, "You look out; that chap will put a ball into your hands this over, and if you miss that—but you mustn't, and you wont, I know—you'll have another before the over is out. I see his play. Stand as you did before."

Bob believed in Pettit, and his heart went very thumpy as he stood point. He recovered in a moment, though, on seeing what he thought a rather contemptuous look cast on him by the batsman; he was the least in the eleven, and more than guessed at by Sunbury as the stop-gap. The first ball was blocked; the second, as Pettit had foretold, went to point, but rather wide of Bob. With a spring like a cat, the moment the ball left the bat, the boy leaped to the left, and with outstretched arm caught the ball with his left hand. Shouts of approbation reached his ears, but he heeded them much less than Pettit's quiet "Well done, old fellow. I knew you could. Steady now."

The match went on. The Sunbury lads made runs very slowly; six wickets had fallen for thirty-five runs; they seemed discouraged by the fall of their champion, and played without spirit. The Elmdon fellows worked very quietly, but with entire concert; and it was evident to a discerning observer, that they had been well drilled, and knew and depended on each other thoroughly. Bob had worked in his post beautifully, and not a ball had passed him that he ought to have stopped. One of the original batters was still in, but his score was only low, his style of playing seeming to consist in blocking every ball which looked straight, and making secure hits for ones or twos. Pettit had tried him two or three ways, but the same caution foiled every attempt. At last it occurred to him to try a ball which, if it failed, would give his opponents a four at least, but which he thought might, if played in the batsman's usual style, hop lightly into the hands of point, who was instructed to go four or five paces further back on purpose. However, the player changed his tactics, and striking the ball with great force, partly turning as he did so, drove it straight for Bob's face. It appeared impossible for a boy to stop such a ball, and Pettit quite trembled as he saw the stroke and the direction the ball took. Luckily, Bob was quite cool as well as very quick eyed, and the ball was stopped; and more, held; though the lad was evidently staggered by it. 'Twas the best catch of the day, and a very hard one; and Bob's satisfaction was not lessened at seeing the Doctor among the bystanders, and joining in the applause. The total score of Sunbury was only fifty-nine, including byes and wides, and then Elmdon went in. Donaldson and Graves went in first; the latter laid down his bat for three runs, Donaldson had made five, and was evidently in play. Pettit went in now, and dealt gently enough with his opponent's balls at first, certainly not in that imitating Donaldson. But in his third over, having only got a couple of twos and a one so far, a ball which was pitched just a few inches too far was fairly caught low on the end of Bob's new bat, and sent far out beyond long-field. This added five to the score; two more hits succeeded, each good for two, when Donaldson went out, leg before wicket, with nineteen against his name. Bloxam now took the bat and stood long enough to make eleven; Pettit's score continuing to run up gallantly, and one or two of the puffy bodied, pasty-faced Sunbury lads, whom Pettit's discriminating eye had fixed upon as not likely to last if there was work to do, rather showing signs of distress. As Bloxam's wicket fell, somebody in the Elmdon tent said, "Send Benson in: old Pettit would like it. You don't mind it, do you, Hickson and Gregory?"

"Not I," said Gregory; "the small chap's a brick. I know I should have come to grief with that ball he stopped. Go in, old fellow, and show 'em how to win."

Bob was compelled to go, much against both his inclination and expectation, and Hickson lent him his bat, which, in fact, was much nearer his size than his own. One ball only remained before over was called; and a good ball it was; but Bob blocked it capitally, and then he began to breathe a little more freely. The next ball in succession Pettit caught fairly again, and drove it far over off-field's head, making another five.

As they ran the last, Pettit said as they were passing, "Cool's the word."

"Cool it is," rapped out Bob.

It was now his turn. Two dangerous balls he dealt with carefully; the third he cut to leg, and made three. The Sunbury bowling was now much inferior to what it had been earlier in the match, and was certainly inferior to what Bob had often stood against before; and when at last his wicket was lowered, it was with two threes, five twos, and as many single runs placed in a line with his name. Pettit held his bat, and did not break it, though he certainly tried it with some of his swipes, until there remained but one wicket to go down, and then was run out. His score amounted to 68, and when at length the last Elmdon wicket fell, the total runs in the innings reached no less a figure than 195, to which were to be added, for byes and wides, 13 more. When the second innings commenced, it was soon apparent that Sunbury was already beaten. The crack batsman went out for three runs only. The best score was made by a wiry fellow called North, a little taller than, but not so stout as Bob. He managed to get seventeen against Pettit's steadiest bowling; and if the others had done half as well as he did, the game might yet have been much more stiffly contested; but three bats were carried out with three round 0's to their bearers' names; and the innings only produced in all 67 runs, leaving as the grand result of the day's play that Elmdon had won in a single innings, with 52 runs to spare.

Several of the bigger lads went down with their opponents to the station in the evening; Pettit among them, and with him Bob and his friend Jack, who was immensely delighted at his cousin's exploits. Bob was very modest over it all, and at once acknowledged that it was only determination to stop the ball, at whatever cost, if he could, more than seconded by luck, which had enabled him to achieve the catch. He did not expect it a bit. As to the score, Jack himself might have made it against such bowling. On their return from the station, after the departure of their late antagonists, they met Mr. Kearsley, the surgeon, who was always called in at the school. He congratulated Pettit on the issue of the match, "which he supposed," he said, "had been contested under disadvantage. Had not the Elmdon side to go to work with one of its best players short?"

"Yes," replied Pettit, "we had; and I was bothered at first; but this youngster here, whom we draughted in, made our loss a very light one. Pray, is Hordern's hand much injured?"

"Not that I know of. Why do you ask me?"

"Why, he came to you with it, didn't he? He surely said he was coming, as he left us before the match began."

"Well, he has not been to the surgery to-day; nor have I heard anything of or from him."

Pettit and his young companions walked on, the former rather gruffly stopping a remark Bob ventured about the contradiction between the surgeon's statement of facts, and Hordern's statement of purpose. On returning to the school-yard, Hordern was seen crossing it with his hand in a sling.

"I'm sorry to see you so much hurt, Hordern," said Pettit; "are you likely to be lame long?"

"I'm afraid so. It is very painful, and I was told at Kearsley's I must take care of it."

"Why!" exclaimed Bob, "Mr. Kearsley said he hadn't seen you, just now, when we met him in the street, and Pettit asked if you were badly hurt."

"Did I say Kearsley's? I ought to have said old Coleman's," stammered Hordern, and moved away from the group.

"Benson, I say," said a voice close to Bob's elbow, "that isn't true. I was at the back of my uncle's shop when Hordern went in, and I heard my uncle ask him what was the matter with his hand, and he said he had cut it badly, and was going to Mr. Kearsley's—or else that he had been—I forget which."

"Pettit, did you hear that?" asked Bob, in a low voice.

"Yes," said he, "who was it spoke to you?"

"One of the day-boys. Old Coleman the chemist's nephew, son of Mr. Coleman the lawyer. He's in our class."

"Does he know Hordern well?"

"He had need.—I saw Hordern lick him last week hard enough to make him know him again the next time."

"Well, say no more about it. Hordern's lying, that's clear. It will all come out some day."

The next day Pettit took Bob into his study, and proceeded to examine his bat handle, taking off the whipping for the purpose. The cracked part of the handle presented in one place a rather unusual appearance—it appeared to have been cut, rather than merely cracked, but the cut was very narrow. He could not make it out. The mystery was solved, however, when he broke the fractured part quite off; for there, embedded in the wood of the handle, was the upper end of a sharp pen-knife, which had been so ground, or otherwise dealt with, that the back was as sharp as the edge; being very like a lancet-point in fact. The knife had penetrated fully half an inch deep, in two places nearly close to each other, and had broken off in the second. That some malicious person had done it was at once evident. Who that person was, was quite another matter. Pettit saw clearly enough that the pen-blade had been introduced between the plies of the whipping, and very cautiously forced in. It seemed probable that in making the second incision less caution had been used, and that a break had taken place in consequence; very likely—indeed almost certainly—wounding the hand of the operator. He carefully secured the bit of broken steel, and at the cost of some trouble and time, removed the whole of the inserted handle; then sending his bat, without any comment on his discovery, by an ordinary messenger to the usual quarter for repairs.

It might be almost a week after the match, and when the return match at Sunbury was drawing very near, that a stump was broken when Pettit, our friend Bob, Gregory, and another, were playing in anticipation of the second conflict; and Pettit, taking a bit of string from his pocket, bound together the splintered parts; but having, as he found, left his own knife in his study, he asked for the loan of one to cut off the ends of string. Bob's sailor-knife was not forthcoming in the cricket-field, but Gregory produced his. Pettit observed that the pen-blade was broken short off across the nail-groove. He merely remarked, "Your pen-blade is broken."

"Yes," said Gregory, "Tallowface had it the day of the match; and broke it, he said, in trying to lift the top lid of his desk."

The playing-time came to an end shortly after this, and Pettit asked Gregory just to go with him to his study, as he had something there to show him. "Benson, you come too," he added.

The three therefore entered the "den" together. Pettit took out the broken piece of knife he had taken from his bat-handle, and asked Gregory to fit it to his broken blade. It corresponded precisely.

"Now, Benson, just you tell Gregory where I found that, and how."

Bob gave a very concise account, Pettit producing the splintered bat-handle as he did so. Pettit then added, that they knew that Hordern had prevaricated and lied about his hurt hand, and they believed that the whole history of the hurt was a sham, and a part of the plan to get the Elmdon side beaten if possible. Gregory saw it immediately; but when Pettit declared he would go and knock the lying sneak's head off, he at once dissented strongly from any such proceeding, alleging that all the eleven were concerned, and suggesting that that very day they should hold a sort of court-martial upon him, and act accordingly.

After school hours in the afternoon, therefore, the members of the eleven, Hordern included, together with Bob as *de facto* one of them, were assembled. Gregory speedily introduced the real business of the meeting, which all but himself, Pettit, and Bob had supposed to be something in connexion with the return match, to be played so shortly at Sunbury. Bob spoke to having observed that the bat had been removed from its place, and the bag retied, and to his discovery that it was sprung; also to the traces of blood in the study. Pettit described the finding of the broken blade in the bat-handle, which Bob corroborated, and then produced the bat-handle and broken blade. Gregory produced the knife itself, accounted for its being sharpened on both edges at the point, spoke of his lending it to Hordern whole on the morning of the match, and receiving it back broken the next day when he asked for it; and related the account given him by the borrower of the way in which it had been broken. Hordern, against whom the case certainly appeared utterly conclusive, still protested his innocence. Gregory was furious, and repeated the history of Hordern's shuffling and lying about going to the surgeon's, concluding with—"In two words, I don't believe his hand was hurt at all, beyond an ordinary cut across the knuckles from the stump of the blade shutting down on them when it broke, as he was piercing the bat-handle to make it crack easy."

"By Jove, we'll see," cried Donaldson, throwing himself upon Hordern, and mastering both arms, one of which was still in the sling.

"Here, Gregory, strip those muffles off his hand. Be careful not to hurt him, where he told us the stab and cut were."

No sooner said than done; but tenderness was altogether unnecessary. There had been a cut, evidently rather deep, across the side and outside of his forefinger, just reaching to the next finger. The latter was quite healed, the other nearly so; and the verdict of the self-constituted jury was unanimous.

"No, no, Pettit; no private thrashing here. Kick him out; aye, with your feet too, if you like; and never speak to the mean hound again."

Three or four kicks reached him as he made his hasty escape from the room, and it is hardly needful to add that his departure from the school was not long delayed.

The return match was played in due time. Bob was now regularly installed as one of the eleven, and did good service, both with the bat and in the place in the field which he had before occupied. Indeed, after the match, Pettit was heard to say that he would make a good wicket keeper with another year's practice. The match was certainly a better contested one than the former had been; but still the result had hardly been doubtful at any period of the game. Sunbury scored eighty-seven the first innings, and seventy-eight the second. Elmdon made 121 the first score, and had five wickets to go down the second innings. Bob and Pettit carried out their bats at the close of the game, having contributed no less than seventy-seven runs in all to the day's score. Soon after this the school broke up for the half-year, and after a kind leave-taking of the Doctor, Bob and Jack found themselves *en route* for Mr. Spencer's, in acceptance of the invitation he had given them on the occasion of his visit to Elmdon.

CHAPTER XIV.

Beginning of the Holidays—Dunchester and its Castle—Roman Bank—Hareborough—Cuckoo's Eggs—Nuthatches.

The two boys in due time reached Dunchester Station. Here they found Mr. Spencer waiting for them, and very little time elapsed before they and their carpet-bags were rattling along behind that gentleman's pretty grey ponies towards the old town. Steep North-street soon brought the ponies to a walk, and then, on turning into High-street, the old Collegiate Church met their view; passing which they came in sight of Dunchester Castle, an ancient fortress, and wearing a rather extraordinary appearance, from its construction, in great part, of old Roman materials, under the guidance of Norman art. Mr. Spencer told the lads to get out here and take a look round the old building, which, he said, was worth their attention.

Jack—who, if anything, had got to be rather more "up" in antiquities than Bob, by the help of the books Dr. Noble had lent him, and from the interest which they powerfully exercised over his imagination—at once observed a very unusual appearance.

"Here is a trench," said he, "almost close to the Castle, which I am sure is only the keep of the original fortress, and there never could have been a moat here then."

Mr. Spencer, pleased with the lad's intelligence, explained that there was no uncertainty as to the origin of the seeming moat. The place had been occupied by the Royalists in the Great Rebellion, and was a position of great importance to them, as commanding much of the surrounding district; and, consequently, additional fortifications had been thrown up round the old Castle, which process, among other similar results, had led to the seeming moat which lay before them. Other traces of the entrenchments were very noticeable in the adjoining gardens, though now separated from the Castle yard by the garden wall. The place had been so strong, and of such importance, that at last Cromwell himself had come to try and effect its reduction; and eventually he had succeeded, but not until starvation and the utter impossibility of succour from without had rendered it equally impossible and foolish to attempt to continue the defence. Mr. Spencer went on to tell the boys of Roman remains in and about Dunchester, mentioning especially a tesselated pavement of great beauty, and nearly perfect, which had been dug upon, in the outskirts of the town, on the site of what subsequent researches had supplied good reason for believing to have been a Prætorial residence. The name of this place—by which it had been known long before the discovery of these remains; indeed, time out of mind—justified the impression that it had been a place of importance in the Roman history of the island. It was called Roman Bank.

"We shall pass it," said Mr. Spencer, "as we drive home."

By this time they were in the carriage again; and, turning out of the main street, he pointed out to the lads remains of another description, themselves testifying—as the Castle did—to the remains of a still earlier period, through the Roman bricks plentifully wrought into the interlacing arches of a large fragment of a Norman conventual building, of great and elaborate beauty. "St. Beowulph's Priory," Mr. Spencer called it.

Jack immediately began to cross-question him as to the extent of the original building, its magnitude, date, what part of it the existing remains were supposed to have been, and so on;

which the gentleman replied to as well as he could, and promised to call in the aid of the county history, on their arrival at his house, to answer better.

Roman Bank, as they passed it, appeared to both boys to justify the judgment of the Roman Governor of the district in selecting it as the site of his residence; but the sight of the sea, as they reached the highest point of the little elevation so called—where a modern house and gardens, abutting on the road, occupied the very site of the Roman villa—turned their thoughts and inquiries in another direction. Mr. Spencer told them not to expect such a coast as they told him they had seen, more to the north, their last summer holidays. There was no beach at all, he said, and no sands. The sea was only kept from encroaching on some of the land at present under cultivation by a system of sea-walling; in other words, by large earthen dykes or walls, eight or ten feet high, and half as much again in thickness at their base, but sloping rapidly up on each side, so as not to be more than four or five feet broad at top. These, he said, had to be well looked to and kept in thorough repair, and in places protected against the dash of the waves, by rows of piles gradually rising behind each other, and by large quantities of blocks of chalk brought thither in barges from the adjoining county. If suffered to grow weak through neglect, the sea—at some spring tide, and aided and abetted by a strong wind—might break through, and lay a large space of the land within the wall under water. In some places cultivation was pushed almost or quite to the very foot of the sea-wall; in others, large tracts lay still in much the same condition as when it was first reclaimed from the sea by the construction of the wall; except that now all the water in all the channels, and ditches, and fleets was fresh, and the herbage was a coarsish kind of grass.

Being asked to explain what "fleets" were, he said that in many parts of the marshes there were long pieces of water of considerable breadth, and which, perhaps, had once been the main channels of the sea-water; that these were now, as he had said, filled with fresh water, and tenanted by coots, and dabchicks, and wild-ducks during the spring and summer; that the ditches, or "marsh-ditches" as usually called, were partly the divisions between different properties or different parts of the same marsh, and served in some degree to facilitate the natural and most imperfect drainage of the marshes. The lads were extremely interested by these descriptions, but found so much that was new to them in the prospect before their eyes, that they soon turned to question Mr.

Spencer on some new topic. "What a quantity of boats there are there," began Bob:

"Yes," broke in Jack. "I've counted more than a hundred, twice; but I can't get them quite exactly:—they move so much, or we do."

"What are they after?" continued Bob. "How different they look from the herring-boats I saw last July at Cliffborough—they have only one mast, and those boats had two; and the sails are different. What sort of boats are they, Mr. Spencer, and what are they doing?"

"Almost all of them are dredgers," was the reply. "They are dredging for oysters—young oysters, that is; or, as the fishermen would call it, 'Spat.' A few of them are sailing, if you observe; but most of them have only the mainsail set, and that brailed up more or less. All those are dredgers; the others are probably trawl-boats, going out to their fishing, or, perhaps, returning, as I think I see some distinctly making for Longsea-roads, and not simply tacking to get an offing."

"Oh, Mr. Spencer, what are dredgers? what are trawl-boats? and what is tacking to get an offing?" cried Bob, half-laughing at his ignorance of these new terms.

"You must see with your own eyes," said Mr. Spencer, smiling. "You will understand better and remember better too, after seeing, than by any description I can give you. Tacking to get an offing I can perhaps explain to you. Do you notice which way the wind is?—right in our faces. Now notice the direction of that strip of sea which runs up into the land and loses itself there, just this side of those trees. The wind must be blowing nearly up that. Now Longsea-roads are there —not roads like this we are driving over, but an open anchorage—and you know a ship or boat cannot sail against the wind with only the wind to help it. So they make cuts backwards and forwards across the direction of the wind, trying to sail as much against the wind as their sails and the good properties of their boats will permit, making thus indirect gains in the way of the desired progress."

"Oh, yes," said Bob, "I know that process is called tacking:—but 'tacking to get an offing?'"

"Oh, that's simple enough, if you know what tacking is. They continue making tacks until they have made good so much distance in an opposite direction to that of the wind, as to be enabled to lay their course;—*i.e.*, to sail straight away to the point they desire to reach. All these boats, you see, are fore-and-aft, or sloop-rigged, and they can sail much closer to the wind than square-rigged craft. Those herring-boats you spoke of just now were yawl-rigged, I take it, with two masts—at least most of them—or even three, an occasional one; each fitted with a lugsail; but I think they seldom set a foresail. These set both foresail and jib, as you see—I mean those long, three-cornered sails in the forward part of the boat, and projecting beyond it—and by taking care to have those and the large four-cornered sail on the after side of the mast properly set, they can sail within a certain number of points of the wind; that is to say, suppose the wind blows from the south—as it does now nearly—they can not only sail to the west or the east, as they choose, but more or less to the northward of the west or east, according to the weatherly property of the boat."

During part of this explanation, they had descended a little hill, and had to ascend a corresponding one on the further side of a little brook which crossed the road in the valley. On reaching the summit, they looked over a part of the sea which had not been in sight before.

"Oh, what is that large black vessel, which is lying there, without masts or funnel either, so that she can't be a steamer? Has she lost her masts in a storm?"

"No, no," laughed Mr. Spencer, "no such bad luck as that. That's the 'Rattlesnake,' an old sloop of war. We call her the guard-ship. Her object in being there—and she has been there several years now—is in connexion with the Preventive Service. In fact, besides being so placed that nothing can pass in or out of Longsea-roads unnoticed by her, she is a sort of barrack for the officer and his crew, who form our Coastguard."

"Oh! Mr. Spencer, do you mean that you have any real smugglers here?" cried Jack almost breathlessly; "and are there fights between them and the Preventive men?"

"Well, not exactly that; and not much smuggling even. But I remember, about ten years ago, a rather exciting chase of a smuggling vessel by the long row-boat belonging to the 'Rattlesnake,' which ended in the capture of the boat and part of its contents, and the escape of the crew, who met with lots of sympathy and assistance from the Ringsbury people over yonder. For they helped them off with fifty or sixty kegs of hollands and brandy, which they concealed in a straw-stack, about a mile from the place at which the spirits had been landed. Unluckily for the smugglers, one thirsty old woman, who was in the secret and had gone to fetch a keg, could not wait till she got home to tap it, but did so close by, and was found fearfully drunk by one of the coastguard men. He took the hint, and a famous haul he made of it. I made a haul once myself. I was out spruling——"

"Please, what's spruling?" cried both boys at once.

"Oh! hook-fishing in the salt water with a peculiar apparatus for the hooks to hang from. I'll show you to-morrow. Well, as I was saying, I was out spruling, and I observed a flat bit of cork dancing in the sea not far from me. I thought nothing of it, supposing it lost from some net, and took no more notice of it. Sometime after, casting my eye in the same direction, I saw the same piece of cork in the same place. Now, as the tide was making strongly, it ought, if floating free, to have advanced a considerable distance;—a mile or more, perhaps. My curiosity was of course excited, and I told my man to lift the anchor while I took the oars and pulled a stroke or two in the direction of the cork. Laying them in directly I had way enough on her, I reached over the gunwale as we passed, and found the cork fast to a bit of sea-line. Hauling on this, a rope end followed. Pursuing the discovery, the rope, which had something moveable, and not light, at its other end—as we soon found—brought up as we dragged it in hand over hand, a string of kegs, which had been weighted with old ballast to keep them down, and then their position marked by the old cork float; the bearings of which no doubt were accurately known. Further investigations, with a grappling iron we had on board, revealed another string of kegs, and, I think, I soon had more than a dozen in. I made my man throw in a bit of ballast at the place with the cork attached as before, and then we pulled with our cargo straight to the Rattlesnake, and, hailing the man on duty, asked for Lieut. Bainbridge. I had thrown a rough coat over the kegs, so that he could not see them; and when he came to the side, I told him I had information of a cargo of hollands which it was proposed to run under his very nose. He rather laughed at the idea that *I* should have information of such a thing. However, he said—

"When? and by whom?"

"My answer was, 'To-day; and by Thomas Spencer, of the True Blue.' "

"Ah! I see," he replied. "That pea-jacket doesn't quite cover the end of that keg."

"Amused to find my secret thus discovered, I told him all about our capture, and made the kegs over to him, telling him there might be more, and offering to go back at once with him and show him where we had found these we had just given him. He had a couple of men in his gig in a minute, and in less than half-an-hour, was hard at work with drags; Tom Ling, my man, having taken very accurate bearings of the position of the float by Longsea Church tower, and a post on Sunk Island. I did not wait to see the result, but the lieutenant told me a day or two after at Dunchester, where I happened to meet him, that they had found seven more kegs there, and another float with twelve more connected with it, a little further out. He added, he believed he knew all about them. A suspected boat had sailed in the night before; the look-out had hailed her, and hearing her name, communicated with him immediately. He went on board, and searched her, but nothing turned up. He had pretty sure information, and had suspected something was wrong when she sailed in so boldly. So he had moved about for three or four hours afterwards with the cutter; and no doubt, had baffled the smuggler, whose purpose had probably been to slip out in small boats during the night, and run the spirits in small lots. No doubt, either, he added, they would have had it the next night, but for you. Such 'luck to my fishing' often, he wished me. And so did old Tom, for he got a tip of a sovereign for his part in the capture, and had no squeamishness about taking it. But here we are, at Hareborough," he suddenly said, turning up a short lane which terminated at a gate leading into a sort of half paddock, half park, divided by a straight gravel drive, with young limes on each side of it, which again led into a rectangular gravelled courtyard, extending along the back of the house, and flanked on one of the shorter sides by certain offices, on the other long side by tall palings, which shut in a small farmyard, with barn and farming stables. The riding-stables were at the other end of the barn, and did not open into the farm-yard at all. The offices reached to within a few feet of the corner, and in the corner was a wicket-gate, which admitted to a footpath that ran for some distance along the edge of a considerable sheet of water, one side of which extended along and beyond the farm-yard, the yard being separated from the water by a tall and thick haulm wall. The footpath led through another wicket into the churchyard, one side of which was bounded by the water, with a long row of elms that had been pollarded, but seemed to have almost outgrown the operation, between. The boys had just time to observe all this, when Mr. Spencer led them into the house through a door which stood open, but was, so to speak, protected by a half-door with a sort of magnified ruler, as Bob called it, set full of projecting wooden spikes, revolving above it at the slightest touch.

"What's it for?" he enquired.

"Oh! only to keep my dogs out. They are great pets, and think they have a right to go where I go; but we don't want them indoors, and we like to have this door open for the sake of the air. So this contrivance is put up to keep the dogs from leaping over."

Entering by this door, they proceeded through a passage of some length, opening on either side to the kitchens and servants' offices; and then through a heavy folding-door into a large open hall, with a handsome polished oak staircase rising from it to a sort of corridor, which looked almost like a gallery to the hall, and served to give admission to the principal apartments upstairs. But our young friends' eyes did not dwell upon these features of the hall; but rather upon the view which greeted them through the large front-door, which stood wide open, and the porch by which it was approached. The sea lay there in all its beauty, and a creek ran up to within less than half a mile of the house, which stood at the summit of a gentle rise. This little hill having been ascended from the opposite side, had shut out from the visitors all prospect in the direction in which the open sea lay, and the surprise was proportionably greater at finding it so near them. The village and church of Longsea were seen across another channel at no very great distance;

but the cousins were chiefly interested with the information that the tapering mast they saw below the garden and over some low trees, with a blue pendant streaming from it, belonged to the True Blue; a vessel they were to be more particularly introduced to on the morrow, as Mr. Spencer had promised them on their journey.

On entering the drawing-room, they found three ladies there,—Mrs. Spencer and her two daughters. Between the birthdays of the two young ladies several years had intervened, the younger being only just Bob's age. Bob was no stranger to Mrs. Spencer, having seen her twice on different occasions within the last three years, and on one of them, her eldest daughter had been with her. The younger lady he had not seen before; but he was on terms of close alliance with her almost immediately, for she had Hewitson's "Eggs of British Birds" before her, as her father and his young guests entered the room, and a few moments after the introductions were over, she said to him, as he bent over her, "I can't make it out at all, papa."

"Oh!" said he in reply, "ask my friend Bob here; he knows the egg of every bird that flies. Don't you, Bob?"

"No, indeed, sir; I wish I did. But I will try and help Miss Spencer, if I can."

She showed him four eggs when he went up to her that the gardener's lad had brought in. The account that he gave of them was, that as he was passing along to the farm stable with some message to the horseman, he saw the cat leap up against the side of the haulm wall and seize a bird, with which she made off quite hastily when she saw him approaching: that on looking at the place she had sprung at, he saw a nest hanging partly out of the wall, which he had taken out as carefully as he could, together with the eggs it contained, and had brought to her in the garden, as he knew she had rather a fancy that way. He told her they were sparrow's eggs, but she didn't think so. The nest wasn't a sparrow's nest she was sure, and though the eggs were not unlike sparrow's eggs in some respects, yet there was a sort of general dissimilarity which forbad her to think that any sparrow had ever laid them. Bob agreed with her they were not sparrow's eggs. He asked to see the nest: it lay just outside on the window-sill, and, as he saw, was made of roots and dry grasses, with a lining of hair and very fine roots. Coming back to her he said,—

"I think I know the eggs now; the nest I am almost sure is a water wagtail's."

"Oh! I looked at that egg in Hewitson, but it wasn't at all like;" and she turned to it again to convince Bob of the alleged fact.

Bob took the book, and looking at the description facing the plate, showed her the last paragraph.

"Oh! thank you," she cried delightedly; "how stupid I was not to look there. Do just come here and look at all my eggs;" moving to an old-fashioned ebony cabinet which stood a little on one side of her.

The next half hour was taken up in writing labels, and naming eggs, and setting them on their cards; while Jack—he did not know how it came about—was holding silk for Miss Spencer to wind, and talking away with her and Mrs. Spencer as if he had known them half his life, much to Bob's surprise when he had time to look up from his own occupation to see what Jack was up to; and no less to Jack's own when he thought of it afterwards. The fact was, Miss Spencer knew how to deal with a rather shy lad, and set him to work with her silk, thus giving him something besides his own uncomfortable feelings to think about, in the occupation of his hands;—and then two or three questions, judiciously put, set his tongue in motion. When Bob had quite done all he could for the little girl's small egg collection, he said to her with the quaint sort of half brusque kindness and politeness a healthy-minded boy instinctively adopts in speaking to a girl not older than himself,—

"Is there anything else I can help you with, Miss Spencer?"

"Oh, yes; I daresay I shall find plenty for you to do, if you are always as kind as you are now. Only you mustn't call me Miss Spencer; it is so tiresome and grand: everybody calls me Tay."

"But your name *isn't* Tay?"

"Oh, no," she said, laughing; "my name is Sarah, but they all call me Tay."

Presently, after carefully putting away her newly-arranged eggs and closing the cabinet, she resumed,—

"Did you ever find a cuckoo's eggs?"

"Oh, yes," said the lad; "but why do you ask?"

"Oh! there are two now in different nests in the garden; one in a greenfinch's nest, built in a row of peas, and the other in a chaffinch's nest in the clipped hedge between the kitchen-garden and this one in front. Last year we had one in a hedgesparrow's nest in one of those thick shrubs. Will you come into the garden and see them?"

Bob willingly assented, and as they went on their visits of inspection, detailed to her his own experiences in finding cuckoo's eggs. One he had taken from a house sparrow's nest, built in a hole in the eaves of a barn. He was quite sure it was a cuckoo's egg, for he kept it together with the other eggs obtained from the same nest; and their difference in shape and size, and markings and general colour, was most apparent to anybody. In fact, the undoubted sparrow's eggs were unusually light coloured, and five in number: the egg he described as the cuckoo's egg was a dark coloured one for such an egg, and perceptibly larger than the others. Another he had found on the moor, in a titlark's nest. The nest in question was found in the side of a cavity left in the surface of the moor by the extraction of a large block of stone, and was so placed that a tuft of moor grass and short ling overhung it so closely and completely, that barely room was left for the little owner to pass in and out. "This nest," continued Bob, "quite settled all my doubts as to whether or no the cuckoo laid her egg in the nest in the orthodox way, or as nearly so as she can contrive; or laid it first—on the ground most likely—and put it in, with her foot or bill, afterwards. The woodcock is known to carry its young and sometimes an egg, with its feet; but I certainly think myself the cuckoo uses its bill for the purpose of dropping its egg into the nest it has selected for the deposit. I don't think it could have put the egg into the titlark's nest I mentioned just now with its foot; with its bill the feat would have been easy enough."

Bob added further that he believed the cuckoo deposited its eggs in the nests of fourteen or fifteen different birds; those of the hedgesparrow, water wagtail, and titlark being more frequently selected, and that of the blackbird least often. Some people said they did not pair: but he was talking to a Yorkshire gentleman last holidays, who said there were a great many in his district, and he continually saw them in pairs. They sat on the espaliers in his garden within gunshot of his study window, and he had them under his observation ten times a day. Only one of the two seemed to sing, and if one came or flew away, the other always followed it without much delay.

Jack was now seen approaching them. He said Miss Spencer was gone to put her bonnet on, and would join them in ten minutes, to walk down to the water-edge before dinner. Almost before he had concluded this announcement, he cried,—

"Surely that is a nuthatch's note, Bob! Didn't you think so?"

"Yes, indeed I did; and more, I can see him. See, there he is walking across that tree.

Have you them often in the garden, Miss Spencer?"

She held up her finger at him, laughing.

"Well then, Tay," he said with a sort of effort.

"Yes, we see them every now and then; they are such pretty birds. I like them so much, and to see them creeping up and down, and sideways, and all ways, and hear them hammering away so cheerfully and workingly."

"Why don't you tame them, Miss—— Tay, I mean."

"Tame them! How can I?" asked Tay. "I couldn't catch them, and I wouldn't if I could: what do you mean?"

"Oh!" said Jack, "he's got a history about nuthatches which he promised to tell me one day, and he never did; tell us it now, Bob."

"Oh! do tell us; I should like to hear it so much," entreated Tay.

"Well, I don't mind," he said; "but I think you ought to call me 'Bob' if I call you 'Tay.'"

"No, that I won't; but I'll call you Robert—sometimes."

Bob, who was only too glad to do or tell anything by which he could give pleasure, began at once.

"When I had the measles, I was obliged to leave school for some weeks, and I went to stop at my Uncle Charles'. The very first day I was there I saw a bird, with a slate blue back and an orange breast, come on to a low tree—a mulberry tree it was—that stood near the window of the breakfast-room; and there it walked about in a very quaint sort of way. You may be sure I wasn't long in getting down old Bewick, and I soon made out my bird was a nuthatch. I thought to myself what capital fun it would be, if I could make that fellow come for his breakfast every morning when we got ours. So I went out and got a lot of nuts at a little shop in the village, and stuck a lot about the tree in cracks and crannies. By the third morning they had all been removed. Well, I put some more; and they soon went too. In about a week the nuthatches—for there were two of them, it appeared—began to frequent the tree ten times a day. I thought now I would put the nuts there just before we sat down to breakfast. I did so, and I was scarcely in my place at the breakfast-table, before Mr. and Mrs. Nuthatch were at theirs. But they got the nuts out too quickly, and flew off with them to some tall trees near, never staying to crack them where they found them. I wanted more fun out of my nuts than just to see them found and carried off; so I hit upon the plan of cracking them first, and then fastening them, with good strong pins, to a place where a large branch that had threatened to grow through the window had been sawn off. It was a sort of table with its face turned sideways, as you do sometimes see tables when they are put out of the way against the wall, or in a corner. My nuthatches came us usual, and thought to cut off with the nuts as heretofore; but the pins effectually prevented that. Foiled in his first effort, the bird tried another plan; he fixed himself with his grasping feet, as if upon a pivot, and giving three or four hearty blows—he didn't 'peck' the nuts; it was a hammer-like action of the whole body—with his bill, the nut flew into two or three pieces. One was seized and carried off; and then the other bird—the hen, no doubt, which always waited till her mate was out of the way before she began to provide for herself, and always retreated from the feast as soon as she was aware of his return; and with the favour of a good hard peck, moreover, if he did ever catch her at work—slipped down from some higher part of the tree and began to partake of what he had left, or to operate in a similar way, on her own account, on some other nut. I kept on with this plan all the time I was there, and at last they got so tame they would sit on the tree, not half a yard from me, while I was putting up the nuts. And if I wanted them any other time in the day, a few taps on the feeding tree with my hammer—I used an old bullet-mould, I remember, for that purpose—would generally bring them. They would even follow me to different trees about the garden; and before I left, I used to throw nuts up in the air to them, which they flew after, and almost always caught, with their bills, before they fell back to the ground. Another pair, at another house, I enticed in the same way to come and feed on the window-sill of the library; but I was not so much there, and they soon discontinued the practice. One dodge I tried, used to make the whole party at breakfast laugh heartily. Other birds soon began to come besides the nuthatches, particularly two or three sorts of titmice; the cole-mouse, the blue tit, and the ox-eye, especially the first and last. Robins and hedge-sparrows, too, often came. The nuthatches pitched into all these, and not even the plucky robins dared show fight; although they succeeded in putting all the rest to flight. The tomtits nibbled at the nuts—they couldn't be said to peck at them—and it took them a long time to get as much as half a nut. So they hadn't much more chance to get a fair share than the stork at the fox's house in the fable. So I tried what threading a few nuts on strong glover's thread, stretched between the tree and the window, would do. The nuthatches, of course, tried to get them; but they soon gave up the effort in disgust, for they couldn't hold comfortably by the thread, and they couldn't work at the nuts without some purchase for their feet. The tits—especially the blue ones—on the other hand, clung by their fine claws, and hanging with their back downwards, worked away at the nuts untiringly. To be sure, when those placed specially for the nuthatches were all removed, those birds sometimes attacked the little nun that was hanging nearest the tree. Whereupon the nun would cut to the tree, pursued by the nuthatch, round boughs, over them, under them, round the tree, till at last the persecutor finding his chase quite futile, gave it up, and the small nun returned quietly to her feast. The two nuthatches," he concluded, "remained about the garden for months afterwards; and the very next time I went there, I saw and heard them nearly the first thing in the morning. And didn't they get a feast of nuts for the few days I was there?"

Just as Bob concluded his history, Miss Spencer came up, and the walk was accomplished to the water-edge; and there, with the ebbing tide lip-lipping against her cutwater and bows, lay the pretty "True Blue," with her jaunty air and clean sides and decks, and snow-white sails tightly lashed to the proper spars. The young people were all on capital terms by this time, and lengthening out their walk in the interest of their new acquaintanceship, found on their return, that they had but just time sufficient to prepare for a becoming appearance at the dinner-table.

CHAPTER XV.

Egg-Hunting and Sea-Fishing — Redshank's, Common Tern's, Oyster-Catcher's, Gull's, Ring-Dotterel's, and Reeve's Eggs—Codlings, Skate, and Grey Mullet caught.

WHEN the party were once more assembled in the dining-room, Mr. Spencer informed the two boys that, among the other letters with which he had been busy when they went out into the garden, was one with the contents of which they were in some degree interested. It was from Bob's elder brother. Mr. Spencer had asked him to come over at the same time with Bob and Jack, for the purpose of joining in an expedition which he (Mr. Spencer) thought all would equally enjoy, and which he had proposed to commence after two or three days spent at Hareborough. This expedition was nothing less than a voyage to the north, possibly as far as to Leith; the object being to visit Flamborough Head, St. Abb's Head, and the Bass Rock, all of which places he knew would be exceedingly interesting to Bob and Jack, as the nesting-places of so many sea-birds; while the excitement of the sea-voyage, he thought, would be pleasurable to the elder Benson, as well as to the two boys. However, Edward Benson had been unluckily engaged, and Mr. Spencer very reluctantly had given up his plan; and therefore had not said anything at all about it to his young guests, so that they might be saved the disappointment they might otherwise have felt. Most unexpectedly, Edward Benson had written to say, his engagement had been postponed for a month, and he was at liberty to accept Mr. Spencer's invitation, and most glad to do so, if it were not too late. In the hope that it would not be so, he should put himself into the train which reached Dunchester at 6·30, and hoped to be at Hareborough by an hour later.

"So," said Mr. Spencer, "James has gone with bay Bessy and the dog-cart to meet him, and soon after we have finished dinner he will be here; ready, I dare say, for anything we shall have spared him."

"But, Mr. Spencer," cried Bob, hardly believing his ears, "do you really mean that we are all going in the 'True Blue' to St. Abb's Head, and the Bass Rock? Oh, Jack, won't it be jolly?"

"Well," replied Mr. Spencer, "that was my plan. We shall see when your brother comes what modifications, if any, my proposed arrangements will sustain. You know, we might go by rail to Bridlington, *viâ* Hull, and send Tom Ling and his boy, with an extra hand, in the 'Blue' to meet us there, and then by sea the rest of the distance. It might be a more agreeable mode of procedure to the landlubbers, you know, Bob."

Bob laughingly resented this imputation on his seamanship, and told Jack it was only his (Jack's) inexperience of salt water, which encouraged Mr. Spencer to sneer at them so. As for himself, to be sure he didn't make any claim to be regarded as a "regular old salt," but, if the sea was rather rough, and the wind cross, he should be very happy to act as steward, if Mr. Spencer felt himself at all uncomfortable.

After dinner Mr. Spencer asked the lads whether they had thought of any desirable plan for the morrow; for, if they had not laid any plots with the girls before dinner, he thought he could suggest something which they would be sorry as egg-hunters to miss.

Bob, Jack, and Tay all looked and listened intently as he said this.

"Poor Tay," he went on, amused at her evident eagerness, "it's a pity you are not a boy, for then you might have made one. As it is, I fear your flowing robes might be rather in the way of the mud, if you went to Sunken Island and expatiated there among the oyster-catchers and redshanks."

"Papa," said Tay, very quietly and demurely, "do you remember what once happened, when a man—a great grown-up man with whiskers—went with a sailor as big as himself, to shoot teukes?"

"Hold your tongue, will you, you impertinent little baggage."

"Well, but papa; I was only going to say, this great, grown-up, bearded man and his tobacco-mouthed sailor went to Sunken Island, and they forgot to fasten their boat, and it was drifting away, when the gentleman—how old was he, Annie? Wasn't it forty?—happening luckily to cast his eye that way—papa, be quiet, will you." She here interrupted herself, laughing heartily, for her father was becoming violently demonstrative with his wineglass and a couple of small biscuits.

Mr. Spencer now took up the tale, saying, "It's quite true, our boat did go adrift. The painter had worn through at the ring in the bows, and we should have had a nice bath of it, if I had not happened to see the boat before it had got far. I threw my gun down, you may be sure, and swam in after it, and so Tom and I got off safe, and the teukes too; for I was rather too wet to stay, even if my powder and shot hadn't been in the same condition."

"If you please, papa, may I speak now, without having a wine-glass or two thrown at me?"

"Well, say on; what wise thing is it, Tay?"

"Only this, papa, that, as you are only a year or two older now, Annie and I think it would be a good thing if we went to take care of the boat for you to-morrow. *We* could see that the painter was all right, couldn't we, Annie?"

So, with a good deal of playful threatening on Mr. Spencer's part, it was soon settled that the young ladies should join the party, to the exclusion of Tom Ling. They were to sail over to Sunken Island and land there; then across to Ringsbury Saltings and Shingle Hill; and then, if the explorers were not too wet and dirty to consist with comfort, to sail out into the Swin, and run back home in time for a six o'clock dinner.

The arrangement had not long been made, when the sound of steps and voices in the hall announced an arrival, and Edward Benson was presently announced,—a good-looking young man, with dark moustache and whiskers, made his appearance, and was heartily welcomed. He had dined, he said, at Wastford, where the train had stopped twenty minutes, and would have nothing before tea. After the other mutual inquiries, consequent on an arrival, had been made and answered, Edward asked if the projected excursion to St. Abb's still held good.

"Oh, yes," replied Mr. Spencer, "if you have no valid objections to urge, either on your own part or your father's. I have free permission from your uncle and aunt Edwards to drown your cousin, if expedient; and I suppose my sister wishes to make no exception to the usual fate of youthful supernumeraries, of a certain species, in favour of Master Bob, here."

Edward assured him he had no special injunctions which savoured of hydrophobia in connexion with his brother, and then, being informed of the morrow's project, most willingly agreed to make one of the party.

The morning rose fair, and everything looked promising. Breakfast was soon despatched, and the party proceeded to the beach; a goodly hamper on a wheelbarrow bringing up the rear, in charge of James, the groom. The ladies' dresses were of a character which showed their acquaintance with the chances of a voyage in a pleasure-boat, and made Edward Benson considerably happier than he had been, when he had thought of the lots of ooze which would probably be brought back by the gentlemen of the party on their boots. Mr. Spencer himself was equipped in laced boots and close-fitting leather gaiters, and he had fitted

Edward with a similar pair, which enclosed his trousers from the knee downwards. The lads, too, had a very similar garniture, except that in their case the leathers ascended much above the knee:—James had succeeded in getting two pairs of buskins for them at the neighbouring farm. The "True Blue" was soon under canvas, and in less than half-an-hour brought to off Sunken Island, when the boat, which had been towing astern, was brought to the side, and the whole party, exclusive of Tom Ling and the sailor lad, rowed to the shore. Even Annie and Tay managed to effect a landing without any great difficulty, the latter having ostentatiously examined the condition of the painter and seen to the proper security of the anchor, which Mr. Spencer carried out with his own hands.

Sunken Island was a patch of land of several acres in extent, which at spring-tides was laid under water, except at a few points somewhat higher than the general level of the rest. At the time our party visited it, the tide being on the ebb, and almost at its lowest, it stood eight or ten feet above the water. The surface of the island was intersected by a great number of seeming rifts or small channels, from three to five feet deep, their sides all mud from top to bottom. Here and there, these channels, which were irregular enough in direction and shape, deepened until their bottoms were low enough to allow a little water to remain in them even at dead low water. These were necessarily broader than the rest, and the ooze at the bottom was very soft and slimy. The advance of the sisters into the interior was soon stopped by such obstacles as these, of course. Not so that of the gentlemen, the younger of whom were filled with eagerness by the proceedings of the feathered occupants of the island. The redshanks, or, as they were called by Mr. Spencer, after their local nomenclature, "teukes," came almost close up to the party immediately they landed, and as they advanced a little, came and sat down within a few paces, piping most plaintively all the time. Others kept on the wing, flying slowly and with—so to speak—very measured beats of the wing, round and round, and sometimes so close it seemed they might almost have been touched by a suddenly outstretched arm. Their cries were incessant; and before many seconds had elapsed several pairs of black-headed and common gulls, attracted by the notes of the redshanks, joined in the turmoil, adding unmusical screeches to the concert, and making rapid swoops from the air almost upon the very heads of the intruders. Half-a-minute more, and fresh notes were heard; a peculiar, rattling sort of whistle—not of continuous, even tone like the redshank's notes, but vibrating something in the way of the note produced by a dog-whistle with a pea in it, but anything but discordant or unmelodious. These cries were contributed by two or three pair of oyster-catchers, which made their appearance on the scene, and greatly delighted the two boys by their graceful figures, variegated plumage, and red legs and bill. Mr. Spencer had brought a double opera-glass with him, and as these birds settled on the hard mud every now and then, the visitors were enabled to inspect them as conveniently and accurately as if set down close before their eyes. Four or five ring-dotterel also were seen flitting up and down the channel between Sunken Island and the nearest saltings, and at least one pair of terns were sailing about in the air overhead, not taking any very special notice of the birds' uproar below.

The real business of the visit to the island soon commenced. Mr. Spencer instructed the lads where to look for the nests he thought they might find here. He had no doubt that the redshanks, the gulls, the oyster-catchers, and probably the ring-dotterel—possibly also a pair or two of greenshanks, and not impossibly the terns—had nests either on the island or on the other places they proposed to visit in the course of the morning.

They might be sure of finding redshanks', gulls', and oyster-catchers' eggs—probably several of either—within a hundred yards or so of where they were. Let them look for the higher parts of the island, and search there among the stunted marine herbage; and towards the other end of the island, where there was an approach to a collection of shingle, was perhaps the most likely place of all, except for the redshanks. Thus instructed, the younger people began to search very diligently. Bob soon found a redshank's nest close beside a low tuft of some sea-plant, and with a little coarse, short grass growing round the other side of the slight cavity or depression, which was rendered slightly nest-like by having a few blades of dry grass laid in it. The next moment a shout from Jack proclaimed similar success on his part; and as Bob was going across to see his discovery, marking his own by a stick stuck in against it, he stumbled upon a third. Eventually no less than seven redshanks' nests were found, and half-a-dozen eggs stowed away safely in the egg-box, which was again on duty.

The next new discovery was made by Edward Benson, and that, too, with complete absence of intention on his part. He had been half-lying, half-sitting, on what seemed to be the highest part of the island, for the last quarter of an hour, solacing himself with a cigar; when all at once, almost within reach of his elbow—the wonder indeed was that his elbow had not been placed in the exact place—he perceived three oval objects, which a second glance showed him were eggs of some sort, reposing in what certainly served as, but was no apology for, a nest. The eggs in question were laid upon the bare grass, there being scarcely a depression even sufficient to keep them in their places. He hailed his brother, who was at no great distance—

"Here, you small boy; come here and see if these things are at all in your way."

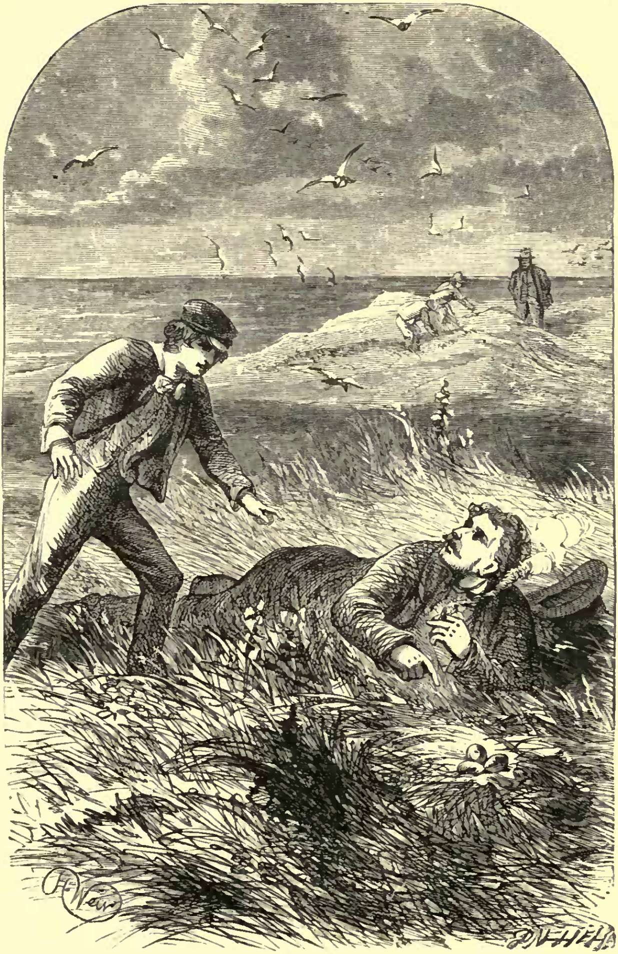
Bob seeing that it could be only himself thus hailed, crossed over to where Edward lay, and was greatly delighted to find that the eggs he had found were very different in shape and markings from those himself and Jack had met with in such abundance, and had identified as redshanks' eggs. In almost every case, there had been found four in each nest. Here, there were but three. Bob was inclined at once to put them down as the common tern's, but reserved the point for decision until he could appeal to Tay's "Hewitson," after their return to Hareboro'. While still contemplating the new acquisition, he was roused by hearing a shout from quite the other end of the island. Looking up, he exclaimed, "How could they have got there?"

"How could who have got where?" lazily ejaculated the young man, as he lay on his back, watching the curls of smoke as they ascended from his cigar.

"Why, Mr. Spencer and the girls," said Bob.

The fact was, Mr. Spencer seeing his three companions all apparently engaged in quest of eggs, had gone back to the boat, and re-embarking with his daughters, had rowed them round to the other extremity of the island, where they had landed; and, judging by their actions, had met with something which wonderfully excited their interest. For Mr. Spencer was shouting, Tay was dancing and whirling her parasol in the air, and even Miss Spencer was waving her hand. The two boys speedily rushed off full speed in the direction of the trio who were summoning them, Edward following them much more leisurely. Their course was soon stopped by a wider channel or creek than usual; and they had to diverge considerably from the direct line before they could succeed in finding a place at which it was possible to cross. Succeeding, at last, they were not long in reaching Mr. Spencer and his daughters. The younger of the two ladies called out as they came within convenient speaking distance,—

"Oh! Robert, do look here. Such good fortune. Annie has found an oyster-catcher's nest



Ned finding the Red-shank's Nest.—p. 308

already, with three eggs in it, of a warm cream-coloured ground, and dark blotches and streaks, all lying with a sort of garnish of whitish pebbles and pieces of shells under and around them;—the smaller shingle surrounding the whole."

There could be little doubt what they were, especially as the oyster-catchers themselves were seen flying around the party with such evident solicitude. Their shrill whistle was now quite noisy, and as four or five continued their circuits, sometimes passing very near and then settling on the mud at no great distance for a few seconds, or until a sudden movement of one or other of the visitors set them in motion again with a repetition of their piercing note, Bob felt sure there was at least one more nest very near them. Very brief search showed that he was right, for another nest was discovered, and within two paces of that a third, one of them with three eggs—the customary number—the other with two, in it. Further researches disclosed nothing more, though the pertinacious swooping of two gulls gave good ground for believing that they had a nest at no great distance.

The whole party now returned to the boat, and Edward Benson seemed desirous to atone in a measure for his previous indolence by taking an oar and pulling steadily and in very good style, Mr. Spencer having the other, until they reached the "True Blue." Once more aboard, they sailed before the wind until they fetched Shingle Point. Rounding this, they proceeded about half a mile up the estuary, and lay to off "a hard" which gave access to the Ringsbury saltings and marshes. The saltings were, as to surface, much what Sunken Island had proved, except that the rills or lesser channels formed a more extensive but irregular reticulation; and every here and there, a sort of creek or larger channel, like an artery in the body, served to convey the sea-water from the main channel into the interior of the saltings. Some of these creeks were too deep in water and mud to be crossed at all, except at some distance from their departure from the main creek; and others again were considerably less. The boys, under Mr. Spencer's guidance, spent half an hour or more on these saltings, and found three or four more redshanks' nests, and one oyster-catcher's. Availing themselves of the boat once more, they returned to the "Blue," to see if the remainder of the party were inclined to join them in the exploration of Shingle Hill. All seemed willing, and Tay delighted, to do so; and putting off again they rowed across the mouth of the Ringsbury creek, and were speedily landed on the hill. Here for a space of 600 or 700 yards a tapering point of land ran out into the sea between Ringsbury creek on one side and the Hareboro' and Freshcot creeks (which were united a little above) on the other. At the further extremity, this spit presented nothing to the eye —it was visible only at low water—but hard mud. Higher up, however, a very considerable accumulation of shingle, chiefly consisting of shells and chalk in a state of fine comminution, was to be seen. Larger fragments of shells and lumps of chalk were observable about in considerable quantity, though relatively to the whole deposit it was small enough. Not being very easy of access from the land side, and presenting no great attractions to any one except a lover of birds, it was not often visited; and in consequence, considerable numbers of such of the shore birds of the district as usually resorted to such places for nesting purposes, were now to be met with about it. Three or four oyster-catchers' nests were speedily discovered. Then Mr. Spencer hit upon a gull's nest, and a moment after Jack upon another, each with three eggs in. But the crowning find of the day fell to the lot of Tay and Bob. They had rambled off to a little distance from their companions, when, in a little hole on the surface of the highest part of the accumulation of small shingle, Bob's quick eye detected four beautiful black-spotted cream-coloured eggs, which from their size and general appearance, he believed could be none other than the ring-dotterel's; and while Tay, who had just seated herself on a small green hillock, like an ant-hill in shape and size, a few paces above the termination of the shingle deposit, was leisurely admiring them, he turned away to see if he could not find another nest or two of the same eggs; as several of the dotterel were flying in circuits around him, uttering their sweet plaintive note of alarm the while. A sudden exclamation of delighted surprise from Tay recalled him speedily to her side.

"Oh! Robert, do look," she cried as he came up. "I was putting your eggs away so carefully, till you had time to pack them, on that little hillock; and see what I had almost put my hand upon before I noticed them! Whatever can they be?"

Bob's surprise and delight were quite equal to her own, when he saw, amidst some coarse grass, in a hollow lined with pieces of the same, four eggs of an olive colour, blotched and spotted with what on a dog would have been called liver colour. It was apparent to Tay's eye even, that they were quite different from all they had seen before in the course of the morning; and the two companions were still deep in conjecture and admiration, when Jack strolled up to them, and asking them what they were so confidential about, the moment after abruptly stopped Bob's account of their luck, and their conjectures and doubts, by a low but very emphatic—

"Bob! Bob! I say, look! What can that queer bird be?"

Bob thus adjured, turned round, and looking in the direction of Jack's extended finger, recognised the bird at once, by the extraordinary feather appendage of its neck, as a ruff. His shout of pleasure at the recognition alike of the bird and the probable origin of the eggs he held in his hand, instantly warned the ruff to decamp; which indeed he lost no time in doing, having a few words at parting addressed to him by Bob, as follows:

"Ah! old fellow, I should like to be down here to-morrow morning at daybreak, and see you pitch into your neighbours if you have any. Tay, did you ever hear your papa say that ruffs and reeves were found here?"

After a moment's recollection she replied,—

"I think I do recollect, two or three years ago, papa came here in consequence of a message he got from an old fisherman, and came back with several ruffs and reeves. But I never heard of their laying eggs here before."

The three young people now directed their steps to where Mr. Spencer and his daughter were seen talking with Edward Benson, and on reaching them proceeded in a sort of chorus to describe to Mr. Spencer their last great discovery. He wouldn't believe it possible; though he confessed his recollection of getting five or six out of a flock of birds, some of which had, as his informant had told him, "muffs of feathers round their necks," and which he recognised as ruffs from the description. Bob's description of the bird Jack had espied rather shook his unbelief, but it was not until he had gone himself to the place where the nest had been found, and seen for himself the veritable ruff—which had again re-ascended his hill by this time—that he was willing to admit that after all there might be a reeve's nest there.

Their spoils all safely stowed away, they now lost no time in returning to the "True Blue," and getting under way once more, on a wind. The wind had rather freshened, and there was a nice working breeze, but no sea at all. In three words, it was the very day for the most purely fresh-water sailor to have selected on purpose to enjoy a sail. The ripple dancing and glancing in the sun, the white foam from the cutwater tailing off on each side the wake like streams of small pearls glowing with light, the rapid but steady motion of the vessel, the freshness of the wind and the waves—all combined to make the sensations of the whole party purely, deliciously pleasurable. Four out of the six were quite silent from the depth of their enjoyment; and it was not until Mr. Spencer and Edward—Ned, as Bob irreverently called him, in spite of his moustache—had proceeded to the unpacking of the hamper, that the juniors of the party found time to recollect that the fresh sea air, and the exercise and the excitement of the morning, had given them gigantic appetites. Pigeon-pie, and cold roast fowl and tongue, and cool salad, and foaming perry rapidly disappeared, and Ned obtained permission to light another cigar on condition that he placed himself on the leeward side of the boat, and remained there as long as he continued to smoke. Handing over the *debris* of the repast to Tom Ling and the lad, it was resolved to go about as soon as those worthies had finished their repast, and to work up to the edge of the Gunfleet flats; and, lying-to there, to take to the small boat again and spend an hour or two with the sprule; Ling having by Mr. Spencer's orders taken the precaution to provide, before starting, a sufficient supply of "log," or the worms found in the sea-sand, for the purpose. In a quarter of an hour, the active craft was rattling along on the return voyage, making, as Mr. Spencer estimated, about eight knots.

The Gunfleet was reached in good time, and as nearly as might be at about half-flood, the small boat was anchored, and the lines put in a state of readiness for use. Bob and Tay were in the stern, Jack and Miss Spencer one on each side, and Mr. Spencer in the bows; the boy making himself useful, wherever required, with the baits and hooks. Edward Benson preferred remaining on board the "Blue" to smoke another "weed." The fish which Mr. Spencer expected to take were codling—at all events, principally codling—running from five or six to nine or ten inches long. At first, no one had even a bite. Bob soon appropriated the new idea, on which this (to him) new style of fishing depended; and, after one or two haulings in of his sprule on false alarms, at last actually brought a crab, with a body as big as the palm of his hand, to the surface. A quarter of an hour passed, and no fish was caught. Mr. Spencer thought it would be expedient to shift their ground a little, and was actually beginning to haul in upon the painter to raise the anchor, when a quick "I've got one," from Tay, followed on the instant by a "So have I," from Bob, caused him to let go again. Tay's fish was a very good one; and she had just lifted it on board, when Bob followed suit by hauling in a couple, one on each hook of his sprule. The sprule, it should be said, was a conical weight formed with about 2lbs. of lead, with two pieces of whalebone, a foot long, inserted near its base or thicker end, at right angles to each other; and from the extremities of these hung foot-lines fifteen or eighteen inches long terminating in a strong tinned hook. To release the struggling captives, and chuck them into a basket brought for the purpose, and re-bait Tay's hooks and his own did not take Bob long; nor was it long before he had again to repeat the process; three more codlings being thrown into the basket, namely, two from Tay's line, and one from his own. And now the remaining members of the party began to be successful, and in the course of the next fifteen or twenty minutes, a score and half of beautiful fish were taken. Ned having been a silent witness for some minutes of the activity and success which characterized the proceedings of the boat's crew, now hailed them with a request to be allowed to join them: a request which was replied to by Bob with the Freemason's sign, and "Don't you wish you may get it?"—by Tay, with a low-toned inquiry to Bob as to whether sea fish would be likely to take "a weed," as well as a bait: to which he replied he supposed the pipe fish probably would, but not codling. The first variation in the performances was by Jack, who succeeded in catching a very nice eel of about half a pound; and presently after, Annie hauled up a red gurnard, and Tay a small flounder. After this, codlings again became the order of the day, and by the end of an hour the basket was half filled. A considerable commotion in the bow of the boat presently arrested the attention of all the crew.

"Oh! papa, what is the matter?" exclaimed Annie, as she saw him bending over the bows, with his knees set firmly against the bow-board, and employing vastly more effort than if hauling up the anchor.

"Oh! nothing very particular," he replied; "I have only got hold of an infant Levi-āthan, as John Balls says on Sunday; or some such innocent. Stand by, Tim, and hold the line: belay it on that thole, if you can't hold it without, as soon as I get this chap to the top."

The creature, whatever it was, made great efforts, but still such as not to betoken the possession of much activity, and after a short struggle at the surface of the water, Mr. Spencer succeeded in lifting into the boat a great, irregular shaped flat fish, with a white belly, a dusky brown back, and a long slender tail unevenly lobed near the end. It was a skate, and was estimated by its captor as weighing not less than 50lb. So great was the general interest in this monster, that fishing was suspended, except by Tim the sailor lad, who had re-baited Mr. Spencer's hooks, and returned them to the sea. A shout from him diverted attention from the skate to the difficulty with which it was apparent he held his own against the struggles of some other marine monster, which he had succeeded in hooking. After similar efforts, and with similar precautions to those in the former case, Mr. Spencer lifted a second skate into the boat scarcely inferior to the one first taken, an event which Bob and Jack celebrated by giving three good hearty cheers, in which they were greatly assisted by Tim, who evidently thought he was not the least hero of the day. Satisfied with their success—on counting, it turned out that their basket contained sixty-seven codling, besides a few gurnards and two or three flounders—they returned to the "Blue," and getting under way again, steered direct for Hareboro' Hard, not without a sly joke or two at the lazy smoker's expense, who had vainly longed to share in the sport he had affected to despise. They landed soon after four, and were walking slowly up to Mr. Spencer's house, when Tim was observed by Jack to be coming after them with all the speed allowed by the heavy fisherman's boots he was wearing.

"What's the matter, Tim?" cried Mr. Spencer, as he came within speaking distance.

"Please, sir, Mussett's just told father, that Longsea West Sand was half alive with mullet last night, and he thinks if you could find time to run down there in the 'Blue,' about seven or eight o'clock, with the big net, you might, mayhap, get a score or two. He'd be glad to lend a hand, and would pull over in his own boat, which, he says, suits better for shooting the net than ours."

"What say you, lads, and you, Ned—A hasty dinner, and a rush after the mullets? or, a comfortable meal, and resting content with the codlings we've caught?"

Without a dissentient vote, the decision was for mullet-fishing. Bob didn't "want any dinner at all," he said: to the truth of which assertion his brother said he did not the least demur; he thought—after the lunch he had seen Bob dispose of—the fact must be indisputable. The latter was too much interested in the decision to heed the insinuation; and it was arranged that Annie and her sister should go on and have dinner made ready as soon as possible, while the gentlemen returned to the Hard and settled with Tom Ling and Mussett the order of proceedings for the evening.

A quarter-past five saw the party seated at the dinner-table, and—it must be confessed—Bob doing as much justice to the viands as if he had not lunched tolerably well; a fact he accounted for, when his brother told him he wondered what he did with so much food, by saying that he didn't make himself poorly by drying his salad, calling it "a weed," and smoking it, and all to look like a man. At half-past six, they were all —the ladies excepted—aboard the "Blue," and by seven had sailed round to the West Sand. At some little distance from the part in which the mullet were seen to be,—they appeared to be rising much as a trout or salmon does, though it was very doubtful indeed if they "rose to a fly,"—lay Mussett's boat with himself and Tim in it. The net was soon transferred to its stern sheets and properly arranged for shooting. Mussett attended to the important work of letting it out into the water or "shooting" it, while Tom Ling pulled very steadily, in such a way that the corks on the "top line" of the net described a regular curve with the concavity towards the shore, and at no great distance from it. As great stillness and gentleness was observed during this process, as consisted with giving the boat the requisite motion. When it was completed, the boat was pulled rapidly within the net and as much splashing made with the oars, boat-hook, &c., as could very well be contrived; and the bobbing floats, in half a score different places, showed that fish had struck the net in no scanty numbers. Some leaped right over the net, but not a few remained securely entangled in its meshes. The next step was to work it into the boat again, which was not done without the expenditure of both skill and painstaking; and the result was no less than seventeen grey mullet, of from one and a half to four or five pounds weight each. A second shot of the net, about a quarter of a mile further on, produced eleven more; and contented with this great success, and tolerably well tired with the exertions and the excitements of the day, the whole party returned to the "Blue," and home, without any unnecessary delay.

CHAPTER XVI.

Afloat — Bridlington Bay — Flamborough — Rockbirds and their Eggs — Berwick Bay — Eyemouth — The Fort — Asplenium Marinum — The Gunsgreen Rocks.

The next day was employed by Tom Ling and the lad in making every preparation for the somewhat lengthened voyage in contemplation. Every part of the rigging was overhauled, and everything looked to and stowed away in its proper place. Mr. Spencer himself superintended in chief, and appeared to enjoy the anticipations of the trip almost as much as our younger friends. They, with Mr. Ned, had no finger in this pie of preparation, for the event of the day was a much talked-of cricket match, to come off at Alechurch Park, between the Dunchester and Long Fenton elevens; and Mr. Spencer had placed his ponies at their disposal, if they chose to drive over and witness it. Accordingly between ten and eleven Ned had assumed the reins, and in due time they reached the village inn, from which they walked on into the Park. As they came in sight of the ground marked off for the players, they saw a considerable number of people assembled already. Making their way among the groups they soon obtained a good position for seeing the play. They had just ascertained from one of the bystanders that Dunchester was in, and making a heavy innings, when one of the players with a slashing hit drove the ball quite beyond the line of spectators, very near themselves, making all give way to let it and the fielder have free passage.

"By Jove! Jack," cried Bob, intently regarding the striker, "that's old Pettit. I thought to myself as I saw him swipe that ball, it was as like him as ever it could be; and now he's sitting on his bat that way, I'm sure it's nobody else."

Pettit it was, sure enough; for when he carried his bat out at the close of the innings, with a score of over fifty, both lads hurried up to him, and a hearty salutation from the big fellow greeted his young cricket *protégé*, and a kindly nod and grasp of the hand was accorded to Jack. He was staying at old Gregory's, he said, who lived five miles the other side of Dunchester; and one of Gregory's cousins was in the Dunchester eleven and had got lamed, and as he and Gregory had both joined the Dunchester club the holidays before last, he had been put in to fill Tom Gregory's place. "And I think I've done none so worser," he concluded, "and old Elmdon needn't be ashamed of us so far; eh, Bob?"

"Why you've got the old bat in play again," said Bob, after taking it out of Pettit's hand.

"Oh, yes; and isn't it a sender? I couldn't help thinking of you and old Tallowchops, when I made that six out yonder. D'ye know what's happened to him, Bob?"

Bob didn't; he had neither heard of him or thought of him since his departure from Elmdon.

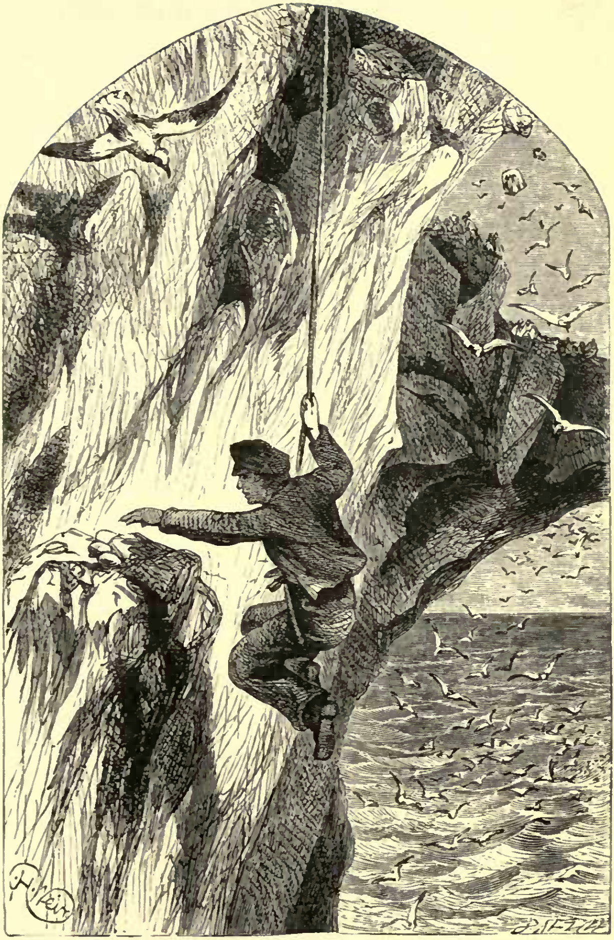
"Well," said Pettit, "his uncle was so disgusted when he heard of that bit of business, that he wouldn't take him into his office as he had intended; and the night after he had told him so, Tallowface's bed wasn't slept in, and the next morning Tallowface wasn't to be found. But two days after, a letter came with the London postmark on it, to say by the time his uncle got that, he should be two days' sail on his voyage to Australia. He had plenty of tin, always, you know; and you recollect he boasted he could show us a fifty-pound note one day—a legacy his aunt had left him. 'Once in Australia, he would try and make his own way,' he said; and in the postscript, 'If you hear of me again, it shall not be to be ashamed of me.' Well, I wasn't quite just to him; for I didn't think he had goodness enough to be ashamed of himself, or manliness enough to make up his mind and try the honest dodge; for I suppose his P.S. means that. But I must go: I wish I could depend on some of these big 'uns as I can upon you, little 'un."

And so saying he shook hands with Bob again, and went to take his place in the field.

The trio stayed to see the result of the innings of the Long Fenton people, which was such that Dunchester resolved to put them in again, thinking their own score sufficient to warrant the expectation that they might win in one innings:—as indeed it happened. They did not see anything more of Pettit, though Ned rather wished to see him and make his acquaintance, and thank him for the interest he showed in Bob. On their return to Hareborough, they found all preparations nearly complete, and nothing for them to do except wish for a fair wind in the morning. The evening was given to blowing and drying, and otherwise caring for, yesterday's acquisitions in eggs; besides mounting such of them as were required for Tay's cabinet. That young lady was quite inconsolable at not being able to join the expedition, and hoped that an express might come from Tim's doctor, to say that that young gentleman was in such a delicate state of health, as to render a sea-voyage entirely unadvisable; in which case, she said, she should at once go to Skipper Spencer and ship for the voyage; and she would bribe the doctor, if she could only find him. However, either Tim's health or his doctor's integrity was unimpeachable, and at six o'clock the following morning the True Blue got under way with a flowing sheet, and soon rounding Longsea Ness, was at once out of sight of Hareborough. Walton, the mouth of the Orwell, Aldborough, Yarmouth Roads, were all passed in succession. The numerous coasters of all sorts, with occasional flotillas of fishing-boats; then a couple of coal-steamers, or a Scotch boat, with her three masts and long trail of smoke; kept up an unflagging interest in the minds of both boys. Sometimes, too, they sailed in upon a convoy of porpoises, disturbing their unwieldy gambols for the time. Gulls, with an occasional pair or two of terns, and, now and then, when nearer the coast than usual, a few shore birds flitting over the waves, added to the objects of interest for Bob and his cousin. Ned took an occasional shot at some careless gull, and smoked several "weeds," and at last fairly laid down to sleep. Mr. Spencer read, or talked to the boys, pointing out to them the various places they passed, adding any interesting particulars he happened to know about them. Thus, and with the agreeable variations of lunch, and dinner, and coffee, the day passed; and when the evening grew dusk they were well up on the Lincolnshire coast. No one was poorly in the least, though Jack looked a little pale once, about an hour after dinner. They turned in about ten, and the lads never woke till nearly six the next morning, when they found themselves safely at anchor in Bridlington Bay, where they had arrived two or three hours before. Breakfasting on board about eight, they landed soon after, and looked at Burlington Quay, and thence went to Old Bridlington, paying a visit to the noble remains of the old priory church. Mr. Spencer, in passing through the town, made some inquiries about rockbirds' eggs, and was directed to a person living in a side street, who would be sure to have a stock on hand, and would be as likely as any one to show him where and how they were taken. On reaching this person's house, Bob and his cousin were in ecstasies at the scores of eggs spread before them: guillemots, or willocks—as they are locally called—had contributed an endless variety of beautifully shaped and marked eggs, totally dissimilar in colour and markings; puffins' and razorbills' eggs, also, were very numerous, the latter in almost as many varieties of markings and shades as the willocks', only lacking the bright blue which characterized so many of those; and smaller and shorter in proportion to their length, and more rounded at the smaller end. Besides these, were cormorants' and shags' eggs, not a few; kittiwakes' eggs in numbers, while besides, in a private case, were seen a few jackdaws', rock-pigeons', and starlings' eggs, with two peregrine falcon's, all taken from some part or other of the rocks between Filey and Flamborough. By the advice of Mr. Spencer, Bob and Jack selected some sixty or seventy willocks' eggs, two and two of like colours and markings; a smaller number of razor-bills', proceeding on the same principle; besides cormorants', shags', puffins', and kittiwakes' eggs, four of each; in other words, sufficient for Tay's collection, as well as their own. Arrangements were then made to proceed at once to the rocks, that the boys might see the birds themselves, and the mode of taking their eggs practised by the climbers.

No difficulty was experienced in obtaining conveyance to Flamborough, and by the time our party had arrived at the appointed place, some distance beyond the lighthouse, a party of three men had made their preparations for descending the face of the cliff and plundering the eggs laid since their last visit. It was late in the season, they said, but still there were enough eggs to reward a descent. An iron bar was driven into the ground, and to this a strong rope was fixed.

Another rope was provided, and made fast to a sort of hempen waistband, with loops depending, through which the thighs were passed, so as to take the whole weight of the climber's body. This rope was held by the men above, while the climber as he descended retained hold of that which was made fast to the iron bar; and in this way he was enabled to pass along from rock to rock, or from one ledge to another, picking up the eggs as he passed, and depositing them in bags slung from his shoulders for the purpose. The kittiwakes' eggs were usually found on the lower ledges, and those of some of the puffins in holes and recesses nearer the top; the guillemots, and razor-bills, and other puffins occupying the intermediate spaces in common. Bob obtained, with some difficulty, Mr. Spencer's consent to his making a trial for himself, and was lowered down at a point rather further on, and where the birds had not yet been disturbed. He seemed to feel no uneasiness at all at the prospect of hanging over the cliff; his concern was how to stow any eggs he might reach without breaking them. Jack, with a broad grin on his face, and remembering Bob's unceremonious "What's the use of your mouth?" to himself at the jay's nest, quietly suggested that he should put them in that natural cavity, offering him a willock's egg just put into



Bob over the Cliff after the Sea birds' Eggs.—p. 330

his hand by the climber "to take measure by," as he said; which civility Bob returned by asking for the loan of his friend's braincase, which he had some reason to suppose might be empty, or at all events not in use at present. Bob's delight, as the unpleasantness of the new sensation of hanging over the dashing sea at the foot of the deep precipice wore off, was very great; particularly when he found himself within reach of seven or eight eggs, which he managed to deposit in his inverted cap, suspended within his handkerchief from his neck. Before he returned to the top he managed to take nine willocks' eggs, five kittiwakes', and four puffins', which he thought were all that were within reach without being lowered down a good deal further. The climber smiled, and going down to just the same level as Bob had been, returned with some fifty eggs, which he had obtained by shifting from side to side and reaching into clefts which Bob had either not seen, or not thought it possible to reach.

Leaving the climbers, Mr. Spencer and the youths walked on further, and were not a little disgusted at the cruelty—disguised with the lying name of "Sport"—which they saw practised by several parties of shooters. Scores of birds were shot for no purpose whatever from each of the boats containing a party; not one in fifty was picked up, and numbers of wounded and mutilated birds were left to perish in agony, perhaps in protracted agony. Rook-shooting, as usually conducted, is bad enough; but the wholesale and unmitigated cruelty of rockbird shooting is simply inhuman and detestable. Vast quantities of kittiwakes seemed to have colonized some parts of the rocks, virtually to the exclusion of other birds; and in other places the willocks, and puffins, and razor-bills predominated. Mr. Spencer had ascertained that the cormorants and shags principally frequented the rocks about Buckton and Bempton, and walked on thither to see the birds, though they could not hope to see the nests and eggs. In doing this they rather diverged to see more of the northern extremity of the Danes' Dyke. Mr. Spencer was quite unable to satisfy Jack's curiosity about this very remarkable feature of antiquity. He could only say it was believed to be a fortification thrown up by the Danes, to render their occupation of the promontory of Flamborough more secure; but that it was also not the least impossible that, if the truth could be reached, it might prove to be more ancient than the Danes themselves. He added that several interesting fossils were met with in the chalk along the line of the dyke, but he feared, if they wished to proceed to Buckton Cliff, they must not waste time in either antiquarian or palæontological researches. Arrived at Buckton, as luck would have it, a distinguished naturalist was there with a party of rock-climbers, on purpose to ascertain whether the cormorants had, or had not, as yet proceeded to commence the labours of nidification. It was ascertained that there were eggs, though not one-fifth of what there would be two or three weeks later, the climber said. Pleased with Bob's intelligence and enthusiasm in his own pursuits, and liking his fearlessness, the naturalist, who had been down himself for some time, permitted him to descend and look into a nest so situated that he could not miss it. Poor Bob's nose came to grief sadly; for the nest—in fact the face of the cliff also, but particularly the nesting ledges—stank like 500 kingfishers' nests all conglomerated in one. However he got a couple of cormorant's eggs of his own taking, and was inconceivably delighted with the new experiences of the day. Turning their faces homewards, after a brisk walk they reached the point at which they had left their conveyance, and in due time found themselves at the Quay, and doing full justice to a very satisfactory dinner, which Mr. Spencer had ordered in the morning at the hotel. At nine o'clock they returned on board, and soon turned in and slept soundly till five the following morning.

Soon after that hour, they were once more under weigh, with the wind still as favourable as possible, and their craft slipping along at the rate of nine knots in the hour. There was a little swell, but no sea, and nobody seemed to be any the worse. The beautiful bay of Filey was reached, and then defiant Filey Brig, with a little surf at its extremity, was passed, and they came full in sight of Scarborough. Ned was very well disposed for landing at this watering-place, and staying a day or two there; but not so the lads, nor Mr. Spencer, who wished to have all the fine weather for sailing. So Scarborough Castle was left behind them, and Whitby Abbey soon after rose into view. Whitby was passed, and the high rocky coast about Runswick and Boulby; the Tees' mouth crossed; Hartlepool sighted; and, before dinner was over, Coquet Island was in sight. There was just light enough to see Bamborough Castle and the Farne Islands as they passed; but all were asleep, except Mr. Spencer and Tom Ling, as they sailed along by Holy Island; and they too turned in, less than two hours later, when all was made snug after reaching Berwick harbour. They had put in here because Mr. Spencer had some idea that their best plan might be to go on by rail to Ayton or Reston, and thence across the country to Coldingham and St. Abb's Head; taking a boat from Coldingham harbour to wait upon them at the Head, and give them the opportunity of passing under the stupendous rocks which form the promontory called after that Saxon saint. Oddly enough, the first person Mr. Spencer stumbled against as he passed through the old sallyport, which admits from the harbour into the town at Berwick, was a Capt. St. John, whom he had long known, and often sailed with in his former yachting days. By his recommendation, after a cursory inspection of the old town, more interesting in its historical associations than in any other way, he decided to up anchor and sail on to the little harbour of Eyemouth, which was actually in sight of St. Abb's Head; and make that their head-quarters until they had seen all they wanted to see in the neighbourhood; and then to take the "Blue" on to the Bass, and either sail to Leith, or back, as might be most expedient at the time.

Accordingly, about eleven, the "Blue" dropped down with the tide, and, with all her canvas spread, crept slowly on with the breeze, which had now become very light indeed. Once or twice it almost entirely failed them; but about half-past one, when tide was beginning to make, a breeze, still light, but steady, made itself felt, and Burnmouth was reached and passed; and half an hour or so later Guns-green Point was rounded, and the "Blue" dropped her anchor in the little sheltered bay of Eyemouth. The lads had been in ecstasies with the rock scenery opening from time to time before them, and when the majestic coast from a little north of Eyemouth to St. Abb's, lay fairly within view, and no part of it more than three miles distant, great was their admiration and eagerly expressed their anticipations of the morrow's explorings and discoveries. It was agreed by all, that if they could succeed in obtaining comfortable lodgings, they would prefer bed-rooms and beds to a cabin and lockers; and so the first thing to be done, was to go and search for rooms. Fortunately enough, a tolerably commodious house near the west side of the bay, which could boast of three bed-rooms and a comfortable sitting-room available as lodgings, was at present without a single inmate, except those belonging to the tenant's family; and an arrangement was soon come to, in virtue of which Tom Ling and Tim were speedily engaged in transferring a boatload of carpet-bags and other similar indispensables, from the cabin of the "True Blue" to Mrs. Alexander's bed-chambers. Mutton and whiting were procurable, the latter in any quantity. No herrings had yet been caught, though preparations for the fishery were evident in more than one direction. Having provided against hunger, by ordering sundry whitings and a sufficiency of mutton to be ready by six o'clock, all went out to explore. Their landlady would fain have sent them to look at a suspension-bridge over the Eye, which gave admission to the grounds of a mansion close by the little town; but our travellers seemed to think that if it had been 'a grandfather' of Tension bridges, they could exist without seeing it. Jack rather inclined, on hearing there were divers cellars and vaults under Guns-green House, devised and formerly used for smuggling purposes, to go and examine them. Mr. Spencer, however, suggested a look at a rock, said to contain nodules of green copper ore, and then to look at "the Protector's fort," on the top of it; after which, a ramble of a little more than half a mile along the shore would bring them—if he might trust the "Statistical Account of Berwickshire," which his friend at Berwick had lent him—to a cavern, interesting as a residence of rock pigeons and a habitat of the sea-spleenwort. The same authority, he said, stated there were caves in the rocks in the other direction also—that is, in those rocks they had passed in their voyage from Berwick; that tradition reported one of these to be of very considerable length, and indeed, to communicate with a hamlet lying a considerable distance inland; but the exploration of any of these was a matter of difficulty and some danger, and could only be attempted at a particular time of tide, and in the most settled weather. A sudden swell rising might cause the destruction of the whole party of explorers, from the loss or damage of their boat. So the mineralogical, antiquarian and botanical quests were resolved on; and four or five nodules of earthy copper-ore were picked out of a friable rock of no great extent, and scarcely 150 yards from their lodgings; and then the mounds and embankments called the fort, were visited. Tradition was clear on the subject, and certainly more trustworthy than that which originated the name of Oliver's Mount for the high ground overlooking Scarbro', which Mr. Spencer had pointed out as they sailed by that place; for beyond all doubt, Eyemouth Fort did take its origin from the Protector, Somerset. A pleasant walk along the sea braes brought them to a steep road leading down to the beach, and after a little investigation, in both directions, along the narrow strip of sand and shingle between the foot of the rocks and the sea, they succeeded in finding the veritable cavern spoken of in the "Statistical Account." It was, perhaps, eighteen or twenty feet deep, and appeared to have a connexion with an interior one; though it was impossible to do more than suspect the existence of such a continuation. The Fern they expected to find, grew there conspicuously enough, but at a height of fully ten feet from the sandy floor of the cave. How to get at it was the question, which Bob solved by asking Mr. Spencer to lend him his stick—a sort of light alpenstock, usually carried by him on such occasions as the present; and producing his old sailor's knife, he lashed it with all a sailor's dexterity, to the end of the staff; and then, with open blade, proceeded to sever five or six of the largest and best fronds he could select. The pigeons were a myth, that was immediately clear; but they cared little for that, as they knew there would be no lack of them to-morrow, in the caves at the foot of St. Abb's. Lengthening their walk a little further in the same direction, they came to a small bay which looked so sequestered, and showed such deliciously clean sands with flat rocks lying about, and spread out an expanse of such marvellously clear and inviting-looking water beneath their eyes, that the desire of bathing instantly came upon three out of four of the party; and the two lads, regardless of the lack of towels, were soon enjoying all the pleasures and luxuries of a thorough good bathe. A scamper over the soft smooth sand dried their bodies; and carrying their caps in their hands, their short hair dried quite satisfactorily in the pleasant afternoon sunshine, as they returned homewards. The whitings were just caught, the mutton-cutlets undeniable, the whiskey excellent, the Scotch ale unmistakeable, and the gooseberry tart a stunner. After most ample justice had been done to the banquet, Bob proposed that they should get Tom Ling to put them across the Eye in the boat, and that they should ramble along the Guns-green rocks. Ned himself seemed to think the suggestion a good one; and in ten minutes they were proceeding along the verge of the graywacke rocks, which go on ascending in height from a little above the level of the water at Eyemouth, to 300 or 400 feet high, a mile or two to the south. Wonderful chasms and minute bays, almost holes, presented themselves from time to time; and standing on a sort of mimic promontory, they caught the outlines of a cavity opening in at the foot of the cliff, at one place a little distance beyond them. The irregular archway looked twenty or twenty-five feet high, by as much broad, and as they stood nearly over it a few minutes afterwards, the little swell there was, as it broke on the rocks and dashed into the cavern, seemed to be the cause of a vague melodious sound, which struck on their ears from time to time. Meeting a countryman not far from the place, they learned from him that it was the mouth of the cave which was reputed to penetrate so far inland; and he added, that about sixteen or eighteen years ago, two gentlemen, staying at Eyemouth, had attempted to penetrate its mysteries; that they had gone with their own boat, and a seaman or two, taking care to be well supplied with wax candles; that they had succeeded in reaching a point at some distance from the mouth, finding it a black awful cavern of great height; but that the increasing agitation of the water warned them to retire with all speed, lest some mischance should befal them.

"And indeed, sirs, they wer' not oot a moment ower sune: for a graat swell was settin' in, whilk wad sure ha' dinged their wee boatie agin the wa's of the cavern."

Being questioned about the mysterious sounds, as of far off or underground melody, he said he had often heard it loud after a storm, when the wind was down, but the waves were still heavy, "and dree and weirdlike it soonded." One or two of the baby bays they had passed, he said he had sometimes seen almost filled with piles of foam driven in and heaped up after a great storm, and a strange, wonderful look such beds of white air-bubbles had. Other local information, of the same class, he gave them willingly and intelligently; and they did not part with him until he had gone to Mrs. Alexander's with them, and had a glass of whiskey; the attention evidently giving him much more pleasure than the "drappie." And so ended their first day at Eyemouth.

CHAPTER XVII.

St. Abb's Head—Breakfast—Rock-doves—Overhanging Cliffs—Coldingham Loch and Church—Storm—Sailing in Quest—Rescue—Return to Eyemouth.

The morning broke beautifully fine and calm. A few flakes of cloud stayed long enough to bedeck themselves gorgeously in the glories which the sun flung upon them out of his inexhaustible bounty,—"giving liberally," like Him who made him,—and then retired before his unveiled face. Kippered salmon, and rolled bacon, and broiled mutton, and large crabs, and raspberry jam, and currant jam, and bilberry jam, and flaky cakes hot from the girdle, and oat-cake thin and crisp, and excellent new bread, sat thick on the breakfast-table, when the party appeared round it before eight o'clock. Their hostess pleaded hard to be allowed to try and tempt them with a mess of porridge, but could not prevail. All seemed to think it would be—judged by their south-country tastes and palates—really "a mess," and therefore better to keep out of it. But justice was dealt, and with no grudging hand, among the other dainty viands before them, and Mr. Spencer was even heard to say that, in consideration of such a sample of a Scotch breakfast, he could almost bring himself to try the renowned porridge. Luckless man! Scarcely had his mouth closed on the words, when Mrs. Alexander came in with a basin of porridge she had made for (among others) her eldest lad. Solid, brown, parting from the containing basin all round, it was placed before Mr. Spencer, and he was invited to try it. Instructed to add milk in plentiful proportion, and having beer offered, if he preferred that diluent, he ventured on the suspicious-looking morsel. The lads looked on with evident gleeful malice; but he swallowed the spoonful, and made no sign; then a second, and, strange to say, a third.

"Very good, indeed, Mrs. Alexander. I had no idea before, how good. But if you only look at the havoc we have made on the feast you set out for us, you will, I am sure, be quite convinced that I really cannot eat any more. That gentleman, no doubt," pointing to Ned, "will be disappointed at not having a taste. Just take it to him."

Imagine Ned's horror at the dreadful-looking mess, placed beneath his moustaches. A lucky thought prevented the self-immolation he was forced to contemplate—with many a secret threat of paying old Spencer out for the trick, it must be confessed—for, happening to cast his eye to the door, he saw a bare-footed, flaxen-headed laddie, of some ten years old, looking with a wistful eye at the porridge-basin.

"Poor fellow!" he exclaimed, with a tone of pity, that by itself almost proved his capacity to shine in private theatricals, "it was your breakfast that that greedy man has been eating, and I was going to be as bad. I wont rob you of a mouthful; no, nor half a one. Here, take it, and keep it safe; and don't let your mammie have it again."

The harangue, and delivered too by so distinguished looking a person to a shoeless Scotch bairn, whose existence he would have ignored at any other time, was too much for Bob's risible muscles, and a laugh he tried in vain to suppress, broke out only too short a time after the door had been closed upon the hostess' retreat with her "wee Willie," as she called him. Ned was about proceeding to execute his threat of pitching Bob out of the window, or making him laugh the other side of his face, if he didn't stop laughing, when Tom Ling's knock at the door for orders put a stop to active hostilities. The orders were soon given, and Tom proceeded to execute them, by trudging off, along "the braes," to Coldingham Harbour, to secure a coble and a couple of rowers; to wait upon them at the nearer end of the Head, where alone was a decently practicable access to the water-edge near the promontory. They themselves soon after started, taking the same route they had pursued the previous day, when in search of the fern-producing cave. The greater part of their track lay above the rocks, which in places plunge down into deep, never-ebbing water. Here and there they descended to the beach (where there was one), and were astonished at the air of grandeur worn by the rocks, which seemed due to little else but colour and magnitude. Red they were, rugged, precipitous, scarred, riven, and 300 to 400 feet high. They did not go to the village at Coldingham Harbour, but following a footpath which led between it and Northfield Farm, left the houses on their right. The voices of the rock-birds had been audible every now and then, falling upon the startled ear like the sudden crash of a pack of hounds breaking into full cry at some little distance. Looking forward in the direction whence the sound seemed to come, Jack exclaimed—

"Why, there is an old ruin of some sort standing right on the very edge of the precipice."

And, indeed, what he took for a ruin, did look very like one. Nor was he the first who has thought, at first sight, that tall mass of rock, so like a shattered gable, and that thin wall-like lamina near it, must be due to man's art. Arrived at a point from which these seeming ruins might be reached by one possessing a steady head, quick eye, and firm foot, they had abundant proof whence the notes they had heard a few minutes since proceeded. Scores of sea-birds were seen sitting on the ledges beneath, or flying to and from them; while on the rocks at the base of the cliff, lying almost a-wash, they saw half-a-dozen cormorants seated, statue-like, rigid and motionless. Ned had brought a rifle with him, and must needs try his skill at one of these ungainly looking birds. The ball pinged on the rock about five inches beyond the cormorant. The shooter had not considered that, though the bird was perhaps eighty or ninety yards from him, still its point-blank distance was not half that; and, in consequence, he had given too much elevation. Mr. Spencer had brought his gun, as he wished to procure a few specimens of rock pigeons and some rock-birds for stuffing purposes. Startled by the crack of the rifle, forty or fifty of the willocks left the rocks with downward flight; but one that had been rising towards the egg-containing ledges continued its flight so as to pass over *terra firma,* and within shot of Mr. Spencer. A rapid aim and quick report, and the poor willock fell headlong to the ground. Securing it by placing it in a conical paper bag, with some cotton wool in its bill and about its nostrils, and then depositing all in a suitable receptacle, the party proceeded onwards to the Head.

They had seen their coble,—with Tom Ling in her, enjoying the sort of *otium cum dignitate* which consists in being rowed by others—preceding them, and it was decided that, on reaching the little landing-place (the inevitable locality of which was now fully apparent to them, even if they had not seen the coble heading in for it), they would go aboard, and examine the foot of the stupendous mountain mass they saw rising before them, first; and then proceed, after debarking, to climb the three hills, of which the entire Head appeared to be made up. Accordingly, embarking as soon as they reached the little bay, the Coldingham men proceeded to row them along the base of the almost awful precipices they saw towering up hundreds of feet above them, and actually overhanging them. Flamboro' they had thought wonderful, inexpressibly grand, as they had stood on a somewhat projecting point near the highest part of the cliff, and had been able thence to scan its whole face, on either hand, for some little distance; taking note the while of the many tokens of the sea's wearing, irresistible power, presented in the gigantic and grotesque island fragments scattered all along the line of coast, many of which they found were distinguished with quaint designations. But from the very nature of rock, the cliff rather receded, or sloped back there; and this, together with the uniform dull white hue of the rocks, very sensibly detracted from the general effect of the whole. Here, on the contrary, was variety of colour, from dark red to sombre brown, almost black, and the most imposing aspect the precipice ever wears; especially when seen from below, and appearing as if from some glamour cast over the eye, to assume a sort of commencing toppling movement; due, no doubt, to the fact that the summit actually overhangs the base by several feet, and so seems ready to overwhelm one who looks at it from below. All of the four visitors were of one mind, that there was a sublimity about the rock masses of St. Abb's which could never be found, —nor indeed even looked for, when one came to think,—about Flamborough. They did not, however, suffer either their recollections or their comparisons to interfere with the object of their expedition; and a ladder in the boat, which rather interfered with their comfortable sitting, would have reminded them of it, if they had shown any disposition to forget it. They soon arrived at a cave which the fishermen knew was much frequented by the pigeons. They had seen them, they said, flying in and out in large flocks, almost the year round; and often, when there was so much surf that they had to dash right through a cloud of it to get either in or out. The flight of eight or ten pigeons the moment their boat grazed against the rocks at the entrance of the cave, showed their anticipations were correct; and two fell to the two reports of Mr. Spencer's gun. His discontent may be imagined when the first, on being picked up, proved to be only a parti-coloured domestic pigeon. The other, however, *was* a genuine wild rockier. The men said, that in flocks of several scores which they had seen about St. Abb's for years past, often half would seem to be nothing but dovecot pigeons, which, it seemed, preferred the wild life and ways and habitations of the rock dove to their own tamer mode of living and dwelling.

Proceeding to another cave only wild pigeons issued from it, one of which Mr. Spencer obtained. Applying the ladder with some difficulty, they succeeded in reaching half a dozen eggs. They now proceeded to complete the entire circuit of the rock, and were sensible of deep, almost profound awe as they rounded the foot of the highest part of the Head. Proceeding onwards, they came at last to the base of the peninsular rock which had been the site of Ebba's nunnery. On a little patch of sand at the further side, the lads leaped on shore; but the climbing was too steep and hazardous for them to proceed far. They returned therefore to the coble, and pulling further out from the Head, allowed themselves to attend more to the countless birds which were wheeling and careering above and around them. Kittiwakes, willocks, razorbills, jackdaws, herring-gulls, lesser black-backed gulls, were there in thousands. The concerts of the rockbirds, harsh, dissonant, and yet with a rude sort of harmony in them as heard from a distance; the short repeated cries of the kittiwakes; the laughs and barks of the larger gulls; combined with the bewildering flight of such incredible numbers, fairly filled our adventurers with admiring interest and astonishment. Mr. Spencer obtained without difficulty the few birds he wanted as specimens; and then —somewhat to the surprise of the boatmen, who were not accustomed to such forbearance on the part of the visitors to the Head with guns in their possession—put aside his gun. The stately flight of a peregrine falcon rather made him wish for a nearer intercourse with him; but to that the falcon decidedly objected. The fishermen stated that a pair had built for a vast many years on a particular part of the rock, which was thence called Eagle's Crag. Hearing Bob's exclamation, "How I wish I could get hold of their eggs," they rejoined, that if he wanted any other eggs, they thought they could help him to get some: if only there was time for them to go and seek the necessary appliances. Bob did want both the herring gull's eggs and the black-backed gull's, very much; and so, as Mr. Spencer said they should probably be about the Head for an hour or two longer, the men decamped with all speed to obtain what was wanted.

Mr. Spencer and the cousins now set themselves to climb the Head, a process which the shortness and slipperiness of the grass, and the steepness of the bank, did not tend particularly to facilitate. However, perseverance was crowned with success once and again. The site of the chapel was visited; the pool was examined; a fragment of rock, as large as a small carriage wheel, was rolled down one of the steepest parts of the land side, and making a gigantic leap as it reached the bank below struck a stone wall as it rushed onwards (dashing a gap into it in an instant big enough to let a waggon pass through easily), bounded on and on, until at last its energy was absorbed by the soft soil of a newly ploughed field. The site of the nunnery was then visited; with the foundation of its partition wall on the land side—a line of partition between it and the whole world outside—still existing, and massive in its resisting durability. The outlines of the interior building were also quite discernible; and as the party shudderingly looked over the sheer precipices which enclosed it on four sides out of five, they wondered what the effect of such scenery and such a life must have been on the minds of the little-taught women who lived there. After a few minutes spent here, and a little practice at willocks with the rifle—which was not particularly fatal to the individuals selected as marks—they saw their friends, the boatmen, with ropes and a bar and a third person, proceeding to a different part of the Head, and waving and shouting to them to come also. On coming up, it was found that all preparations had been already made, and that the new addition was the person who was to act as climber. The Flamborough men had seemed much more skilful and expert in the procedure. However, Bob and Jack were not disposed to be critical, since the result was the addition of fifteen or sixteen eggs, laid by two different species of gulls, besides a few "St. Abb's" specimens of the same varieties of eggs they had obtained at Flamborough.

Another personage now appeared on the scene; or, as Jack said, to Bob's great amusement, "another craft hove in sight," the nature of whose freight caused the latter to set up a lusty "Hip, hip, hip, hurrah!"

"What, hungry again, Bob?" said Mr. Spencer, on recognising the cause of the lad's enthusiasm in Tom Ling, who was coming along with a heavyish basket, rather "pitching and sending," as Jack said, in his frequent slips upon the smooth steep surface of the hill-side.

"Yes, sir, rather," was the reply. "It wasn't I who ate half a poor little barefooted boy's porridge, after finishing no end of a breakfast. Even Ned thought it was shame; didn't you, my pet?"

This renewal of his laugh caused "my pet"—who was reclining on the short sward very much at his ease—to make a sweep back with his arm, evidently meant to cut Bob off his legs; which manœuvre the youth baffled by a sudden leap and a laughing recommendation to his brother "to eat a little more porridge before he tried that again." Tom Ling now came up, and as he cast a glance at the retreating forms of the boatmen, (whose claims Mr. Spencer had more than satisfied a few minutes since,) he let out a quaint remark or two as to their lingo, and their outlandish oars, and way of managing them. The oars had "neither shape nor make with'em: but what would a good oar be good for in the hands of a parcel o' chaps who was obliged to make it fast by a ring to a thole pin, 'stead o' pulling wi't like Christian seamen atween two? Call that a harbour!"—speaking of Coldingham harbour—"and this here a coast. Why, it was like sailing in an oudacious great iron pot, with a crack in one side of it for a shelter. Give him the old Long-sea roads and the Swin; there was some comfort and safety there. And he wasn't more than half happy about the 'Blue.' He was no judge of weather if there wasn't something nasty breeding, for all it was so fine and calm now. It was too fine and calm. He'd heard one o' they chaps say, 'Its ower caulm, it bodes a blaw;'" and his attempt at the Scotch intonation made Bob roar again. Mr. Spencer had been struck too with a gradual increase of the swell, though the surface of the ocean beyond the immediate vicinity of the rocks was still as smooth as a looking-glass, and showed but little of the undulations of the swell yet.

"Tom," said he, "I think you're right; it feels like a storm to me, strange as it may seem to say so. Get you away to Eyemouth as soon as you've got your grub; for though the bay's snug enough for most winds, I should think a north-easter would play the devil there. And get her into the harbour, and make her snug as soon as you can; there'll be no harm in that."

Finding a hearty appetite for the prog, they soon lightened the basket considerably; particularly in its liquid contents; and then lay quietly enjoying the rest, and the glory of the day and of the view, with glad hearts. After a few minutes of profound silence, Jack suddenly exclaimed,—

"What was that?"

It was rather sudden and somewhat mysterious, the sound which had broken the silence and produced Jack's question. It was like a deep, deep sigh, almost sob; such as a man draws in the intensity of distress or pain. A moment after, another and another. Where could they proceed from? Bob gave Jack a wicked poke with his elbow,—

"The ghosts of the nuns, Jack, or else some of Ossian's chaps that ain't comfortable at the loss of their damp cloud seats and porridgy mists this grand sunny day."

"Hold your tongue, do, Bob. What can it be?"—For the sounds were repeated; and, as usual, when the eye cannot assist the ear, it was really most difficult to decide where they came from. They grew deeper and deeper, and more mysterious; when in a moment Bob burst into a great shout of amusement and interest, pointing with his hand and outstretched arm to the ocean about half or three-quarters of a mile from the Head. There, disporting in the smooth, rippleless clear waters, were seen the unwieldy forms of a huge host of porpoises; and the utter calm of the day permitted the forcible expiration of air, made by them as they rolled rather than leaped, out and forwards in their career, causing the sounds which had given so much perplexity, to be heard with strange distinctness. It added a strange interest to the scene, did this unlooked-for incident; and for several minutes did the party continue to watch the passing shoal. The coast of Fife and the distant hills of Stirling and Perthshire were distinctly visible in front of them; while to their left they saw Fast Castle not three miles distant, the Bass, North Berwick Law, and the Lothians. On the other side, looking down beyond Berwick, were Holy Island and Bamborough Castle in view; while, when turned completely round, the beautiful Merse, the background of the Cheviots, Home Castle, and the Eildon Hills above Melrose, struck on the delighted eye. The day was clear to a degree: and such a panorama had never before been beheld by, at all events, three of the four who were now looking on.

It was with unfeigned reluctance that they proceeded to descend the hill. But they wanted to see Coldingham Loch, which lay 100 yards above the level of the sea. They wanted also to look for the remains of a British camp, with four distinct lines of circumvallation; and a Roman camp; both of which lay at no great distance from St. Abb's. And then, above all, they wanted to pay a visit to the remains of Coldingham Priory Church. The camps and the loch were found without trouble; and, as they were proceeding thitherwards, Mr. Spencer stumbled on a nest with three or four eggs, which struck him as in a sort familiar to him, and yet left him in no doubt that he had not seen them before. Calling Bob to him, he asked him what they were. Bob, thus appealed to, pronounced them to be the common bunting's. They must be a bunting's of some sort, from their markings; and they were too big to belong to a yellow-hammer or reed-sparrow. They were, of course, most carefully disposed of in the egg-case. Trudging away towards Coldingham, as they rounded a peculiar-looking hill, one of the last spurs of the Lammermuirs, they came suddenly on a pair of ravens, and had a nearer view of them than those wary birds usually accord even to their warmest admirers. Arrived in Coldingham, they found little difficulty in hunting up the key of the church. Remnants of the old tower faced them as they entered the kirkyard from the street, and other fragments of walls, and foundations, and columns, which Mr. Spencer, and Jack also, found it very difficult to account for, or to make harmonize one with another. The difficulty was explained by the key-bearer, who said he was the precentor; and what that might be both Jack and Bob wondered not a little, and Ned was not much wiser. His statement was, that part of these foundations belonged to a much earlier building that had been built on this site; and that the pavement of the later building had been laid above these remains of the foundations of the former one; that, in fact, therefore, they were looking upon the traces of two entirely distinct and unconnected edifices. All that remained of the later erection were the north and east walls of what had once been the choir of the church. These now formed the north and east sides of the building which served as Parish Church. The remaining sides were of modern masonry, not simply of the plainest, but of the meanest description; and the three ugly, awkward, misshapen windows on the south side were covered, on the week day, with equally ugly, misshapen, ill-fitting black shutters! But how beautiful, nay, how glorious, once had been—even still was—the architecture of the ancient parts! Norman or circular arches on the outside, and on the inside the same, intersecting, with intercolumniations; the windows themselves slightly pointed; the clerestory; the elaborate capitals all unlike; the perfect workmanship; and the beautiful character of the material—a warm, red sandstone. But sad to say, mutilation and whitewash had been the order of the day inside, and the most ruthless barbarities had been practised to get in pews and galleries.* On the outside, Bob found wall-rue and black spleenwort growing profusely, and secured some specimens of both.

Leaving the Church, with a sort of saddened feeling at seeing so much beauty in so great neglect, they turned their steps in the direction of Eyemouth; learning from Mr. Spencer, as they walked, the little he knew about the history of the Priory. Founded about the year 1098 by Edgar, King of Scotland, and receiving continued marks of favour and consideration from successive monarchs, it rapidly grew in wealth, importance, and influence, until at last—after many struggles and conflicts for its possession—the Priory itself was burnt by the Earl of Hertford, in 1545. The magnificent Church, however, and the buildings which immediately surrounded it still stood; and it was part of Oliver Cromwell's work to destroy it. It was seized and occupied by some of the inhabitants of the country, as he passed through to attack the Scots army, and its defenders were strong enough to repulse a detachment he sent against it. In consequence, he proceeded to attack it in person, and in two days, with the help of two cannon, so battered and shook it that they were obliged to capitulate. Once master of it, he determined it should be no further a hindrance to him; and therefore had it blown up with gunpowder, nothing being saved from the ruin but the fragments they had just been examining.

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* It is necessary to say that all this is much altered now. The ancient parts of the edifice have been judiciously restored; the mutilations made good, the galleries and pews that occasioned them having given place to neat sittings. The west and south walls, however, grievously detract still from the effect of the whole. They are of plain masonry; of course, therefore, utterly incongruous, contrasted, as they so strikingly are, with the elaborate architecture of the opposite walls. And besides there is a sort of sham about them, due to the fact that what colour they have is put on above a facing of plaster.

The aspect of the day was now altering. A sort of moaning sound, or soughing, was faintly heard from time to time; and a dark bank had begun to form over the ocean to the north. But still all was perfectly calm. Mr. Spencer walked on rapidly and uneasily, until they came in sight of Eyemouth Bay. The appearance of the "True Blue," with a boat ahead towing her in the direction of the harbour, allayed his rising anxiety. A little whirling gust came upon them just now, catching up leaves, and grass, and dust; and then all was still again: and this recurred once or twice. Soon, however, they reached Eyemouth; and after giving an eye to the new berth taken up by the "Blue," they retraced their steps to their lodgings and to dinner.

Sufficiently tired with their morning's rambles, they felt no inclination, after dinner was over, to go beyond the limits of the little garden which lay behind the house, and from which they looked over the bay. All was still as calm and still as possible—almost unnaturally so, in fact; and the dark bank to the north was still what it was, in appearance, two hours before. Ned puffed out, between the whiffs of smoke, something about "a false alarm." Mr. Spencer shook his head, and said he feared many a poor fellow, before daybreak, might have fatal cause to wish it were a false alarm. Between eight and nine they returned to their sitting-room, and still had the tea-things on the table, when the rushing of a strong wind was suddenly audible. Ten minutes later, they could hardly hear themselves speak, unless they used a louder tone than ordinary. In an hour, sheets of foam and spray were flung over the back-windows of the house, and the roar of the tempest was appalling. All faces were pale with awe; not that they thought of, or feared danger; but they felt themselves in the presence of a mighty Power indeed—One who holds the seas in the hollow of His hand—and their spirits within them owned it. They tried to look out, but the incessant dashings of the spray blinded them, and they were glad to retire to the shelter of the house again.

Early in the morning—in fact, as soon as it was light enough to see anything—after an almost sleepless night, Bob looked out of his window, and saw the little bay before him one wild turmoil of tumultuous waters. Wave pursued wave, falling over in rapid succession on the beach, from a height of twelve or fifteen feet; while beyond, looking to St. Abb's Head, the spectacle was sublime indeed. The huge mountain walls of the cliffs were white with incessant foam, one-half to two-thirds of their total height. Bob went and called Mr. Spencer, who slept on the other side of the house, and he with the two lads stood entranced by the stern, fearful magnificence of the scene. Towards sunrise the gale moderated, and it subsided then almost as rapidly as it had risen. Not so the troubled ocean. Its irresistible might, once roused, was not to be so easily laid again; and the great, dark, monster waves still rolled, and broke, and thundered on. When Bob and his cousin went out about seven o'clock, they saw large masses of foam still lying a long distance from the sea; though now and for some time past, as it were, melting away. Such a look down, when they reached a high part of the cliff, on such a sea, they had never before contemplated even in their dreams;—and to stand behind the waves, as they rolled up on the beach near the lodgings, almost made their hearts quake, as each in its turn crested, turned over and rushed down in watery ruin. A rapid walk after breakfast, in the Gun's-green direction, soon brought them to the Baby-bays, as they had called them, a day or two before, and which the countryman had told them he had seen almost full and piled up with foam. The same sight greeted their eyes; and a strange sort of impulse to fling themselves forward into that treacherous, mysteriously-inviting bed, made both of them involuntarily draw back.

Returning soon, they were in full time to accompany Mr. Spencer and Ned to the church; and then they learned what a "precentor" was, and felt it strange indeed, as English Churchmen well may, to see the congregation sit to sing and stand to pray. The psalmody, joined in by the entire congregation, was impressive. But the sermon seemed sadly long, though good and sensible in its way. In the afternoon they went again, and were rather impressed with the solemnity of the public baptism of a child, presented for that purpose by its "answering parent." They could not help—at least, the seniors of the party—contrasting the solemn, serious, thoughtful demeanour and manner of that country person, with the flippancy, and inattention, and evident entire ignorance of the service, and their own position and responsibility, to be witnessed in English parish churches on the part of the village godfathers and godmothers.

Towards noon, reports of losses at sea began to flow in. A steamer was reported to have gone down off St. Abb's Head; a timber ship, from the north, had gone to pieces on the rocks, near Burnmouth, and the shore was fringed with timber; a vessel, in a foundering state, was visible beyond the Head, but its crew would be or had been already rescued: and it was feared more mischief still would be heard of further south.

Mr. Spencer, on leaving the church in the afternoon, had gone up on to the fort, and had spent some minutes looking over the sea with a very excellent glass, which was part of the equipment of the "Blue." He came down with an air of pre-occupation, and inquired for Tom

Ling. He soon succeeded in finding Tom; and the result of his communication was to start him in the direction of the harbour, and on board, with unusual haste. Mr. Spencer joined him without loss of time; and the two lads, who had seen most of what had taken place, followed close behind him. They found Tom, and the boy, and their master, busily employed in getting the "Blue" away from her moorings, and in a very short space she was free, and they proceeded to urge her outwards towards the mouth of the harbour, by the help of the herring-boats or the pier, as she passed near one or the other. Bob and Jack were on deck, but out of the way, and not worrying Mr. Spencer with questions, which they knew he disliked when much occupied with anything. Two or three seamen were standing near the end of the pier, and they asked what induced Mr. Spencer to act thus. He replied, in few but civil terms, "that, with his glass, he had made out an object, which he thought looked like a waterlogged boat: it might be nothing but a bit of timber, and it was very difficult, with such a sea still on, to make it out at all; but still, he once thought he saw part of a human figure in or on it. He might be quite wrong, and so did not say anything about it publicly; but still he could not rest without going to see."

The men at once volunteered to go with him, and gave him every help in working the boat clear. She was just rounding into the bay, when Mr. Spencer recommended the lads to get on to the breakwater they were passing, as the voyage would be rough and disagreeable. They would not hear of it, however, if he would allow them to remain on board; and rough and disagreeable it was, as they found, even before they got fairly out of the harbour. The sea was still high, and the wind strong enough to require a reef or two in the canvas; but, on getting a little offing, and being able to lay her course, the "Blue" stood to her work gallantly, drawing out repeated and hearty commendation from the Eyemouth boatmen for her admirable qualities. Still, many a buffet did she meet with; and with many a forward send, plunging through a curling wave, she threw up showers of spray, which made the lads very thankful for the oilskins Mr. Spencer's providence had prepared for them before leaving home, and which they had got into (by Tom's advice) as soon as they could after she was put under canvas. Jack was soon seen retreating to the leeward gunwale, and was, to all appearance, occupied there in looking intently into the sea. Bob held up manfully. Meanwhile, Mr. Spencer was describing to the Eyemouth men the direction in which he had seen the supposed boat, the bearings he had taken, and the distance at which he had estimated it lay from the shore. His marks he soon succeeded in enabling them to comprehend, and one of them—a very intelligent fellow, who seemed to know every rock on the coast for miles—went aft to Tom, who was steering, and suggested to him a little alteration in the course. Another of them, a young fellow, active and with the eye of a hawk, went up into the weather-rigging, where he kept up a vigilant out-look.

Having reached the supposed place—which Mr. Spencer was satisfied was really in the right direction, when he looked back to the fort, over a peculiar projection of rock from the main mass of the cliff—they proceeded to tack and tack again, making short courses on each tack, so as to "beat" the ocean face as thoroughly as a well-trained pointer does a stubble. Sad work this was for poor Jack. He bore his miseries valiantly, though, and uttered no sound of complaint. Bob was cut out for a sailor—that was "as clear as mud," Tom said: neither rolling, nor pitching, nor sending, made any difference to his imperturbable stomach. They had been now nearly half-an-hour at this uneasy work, and it was observed by Bob that two or three yawls were putting off from Eyemouth; the news of Mr. Spencer's expedition having, as it afterwards appeared, got wind among the fishermen. All eyes but Tom's and Sandy Turnbull, the look-out's, were on these boats, when a sudden, sharp shout from Sandy caused all to be forgotten in an instant but the object of their search.

"Here it is," he sung out, "on the starboard bow! Luff—luff—hold her there."

"How far away?" cried Mr. Spencer.

"I've lost it, noo; but I'd reckon aboot 250 fadom. I see it the noo. It's a boat."

Mr. Spencer and Andrew Haswell both ran forward. Presently, they too, caught sight of the object; and, in a minute more, as it topped a wave, a human arm was seen raised, and waved, as if with difficulty, and then to drop again. The excitement was intense:—Jack's sea-sickness was forgotten. In what was really only a short period, but which seemed to the expectant, excited crew of the "True Blue" only too long, Mr. Spencer's voice was heard directing Tom how to steer.

"Stand by with that boat-hook," he said to Andrew.

A minute more, and his last orders came—"Luff, Tom, a little. Now, steady." And passing—almost grazing—a boat, full to the thwarts with water, it was secured with marvellous rapidity, during the few seconds the "Blue's" way was partly suspended. A woman and a babe were lifted into the sloop, and the boat itself eased aft, and, fastened by its own painter—which had been trailing in the water—to the stern of the "Blue." Her sails were now allowed to fill again, she wore round, and began to beat her way back towards Eyemouth. The poor woman was in the last stage of exhaustion from suffering and exposure. One of her arms was broken, and she was sadly bruised besides. The child, a fair little lassie of about a year old, seemed dead. Bob begged to have her put into his charge, and while the poor mother was laid on one of the locker beds, he stripped the child at the other, rubbed it dry, and tried, by chafing its limbs with flannel and endeavouring to communicate warmth from his own body, to restore what he hoped was only suspended animation. A gasp or two of the infant's encouraged him to redouble his efforts. Mr. Spencer, in the mean time, had been busy in introducing a teaspoonful or two of wine into the woman's mouth, which she had, though with evident effort, succeeded in swallowing. She seemed too weak to speak; but her eyes, filling with grateful tears, acknowledged the kindness shown her. After a little more wine had been administered, she endeavoured, though feebly, to raise herself,—forgetting, it seemed, her broken limb. The sudden pain produced by the effort caused her to sink back fainting; and it was only after several minutes of assiduous attention that she was restored to consciousness. Just as this was effected, Bob's labours were rewarded by seeing the child open its eyes and gaze into his face. A few seconds after, it uttered a low wailing cry. The sound roused the woman effectually:—

"My bairn, my bairn," she cried; "give me my bairn."

The baby, carefully wrapped in a worsted jersey, was taken across the cabin, and put within her sound arm; Mr. Spencer gently holding her, that she might not again hurt the injured one. By this time, they were within hail of the Eyemouth boats, to whom Sandy and Andrew announced their success. The "Blue" pressed on, making all the sail she could, in order to get the poor woman and her baby properly attended to as soon as possible. But before they reached the harbour, the mother was sufficiently restored and collected to say she was the wife of the master of the brig "Sally," which had foundered about six o'clock in the morning; that her husband had lashed an empty cask into the boat (which they had on deck), and had put her and the babe into it not five minutes before the fatal sea struck the brig; that he was not two yards from her when the shock came; that she thought she had been insensible for a minute or two, and when she came to herself, she was lying on her back on the thwarts, drenched, with her arm broken and her child pressed with the other to her bosom; that how the boat had lived in such a sea, she could not think; that once, as the boat slid down a wave, she thought she had seen a sail, and had tried to wave her arm; and that she could recollect no more. Half Eyemouth was collected on the pier as the "Blue," with lowered sails, moved in. Twenty hands were stretched to help bear the rescued woman; twenty houses offered for her reception; as many women pressed round Bob, to get the baby from him: but he would not relinquish it. Keeping close to the poor woman, who was carried along in an arm-chair by two stout sailors, he entered with her into the house selected to be her temporary home; and only when she was laid in the homely bed, did he give up the charge he had tended so kindly and unweariedly. Leaving the house, Mr. Spencer and the lads bent their steps towards their lodgings. As they left the door, they were met by a large party of fisher people; and one tall, fine, weather-beaten fellow, taking off his woollen cap, stepped up to Mr. Spencer, and, grasping his hand, said, "God bless you, sir, for a kind-hearted gentleman. There's ne'er a fisher lad or lass in Eyemouth, but will remember your name, and your deed this day."

Mr. Spencer simply said he thought there wasn't a man there but would have done as he had, in the same circumstances; and that he was much indebted to their three companions for the valuable assistance they had given him.

Before night, Bob had the delight of hearing not only that the poor woman's arm had been set with little difficulty, and that she was now sleeping quietly, but that his little *protégée* was sleeping too, after having taken a little food, and was even looking almost rosy in her sleep. With these tidings Bob returned to Mr. Spencer; and half an hour after, the whole party were themselves in bed and asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Trip to the Bass—Dunbar—Phosphorescent Sea—Fishing in the Whitadder—Fast Castle—Dunglass and Pease Deans—Farne Islands—Home again.

BEFORE breakfast the following morning both lads were at the door of the cottage in which the rescued woman and her child had been placed over-night, and were pleased to find, that though she had been feverish and restless in the earlier morning with the pain of her arm, yet later on she had fallen asleep again, and had not yet stirred in her slumber. The child, a dear little playful thing, seemed quite restored this morning, and after at first turning away from the lads as they stood by the woman who held her, presently permitted Bob to take her in his arms and began to play with his hair, and to make divers little inarticulate sounds, clearly expressive of pleasure. She was even a little unwilling to leave him when he turned with Jack to leave the cottage and go home to breakfast. As he went out of the door, a fine specimen of a sailor-lad was just approaching as if to enter. Seeing the lads come out, after a moment's earnest gaze, he asked if they belonged to the gentleman who had saved his poor sister yesterday. They replied they had been with Mr. Spencer when he picked up the poor woman in the boat. Was she his sister?

"Yes," he said; "and she had been like a mother to him, when his own mother died. *He* couldn't thank them and the gentleman. Might he come in an hour's time, and speak to the gentleman?"

They told him certainly he might, and asked how he came to be there. He replied, the small brig he belonged to, fearing dirty weather, had put into Eyemouth about half an hour before the "Blue" was taken in; and two or three other vessels had done the same.

The lads now walked on, and told Mr. Spencer of the sailor-lad they had encountered and his request. They had only just done breakfast when Mrs. Alexander came in to say the young sailor was asking if he could see Mr. Spencer.

"Send him in," said that gentleman.

He presently entered, bearing in his hand a light deal case of some dimensions. His voice faltered as he said,—

"God bless you, sir, for what you did for my puir sister. I can'na thank you as I ought;

I wus I could. But 'deed, sir, I sall not forget."

Mr. Spencer told him to say no more about it.

The lad still seemed anxious to say something, but hesitated, almost painfully.

"What is it, my good boy? Is there anything I can do for you, or your sister, besides taking care of her till she can get back to her friends?"

"'Deed no, sir; ye're ower gude, as it is. But might I speir a question at the young gentlemen?"

"Oh! yes," cries Bob, with a good-humoured laugh, "a dozen if you like. Fire away."

A smile lighted up the lad's good-looking face, as he said,—

"I wad na be ower bauld, but Sawney Trumbull tell't me ye were gey keen for bird's eggs?"

Bob confessed the truth of the impeachment.

"Wad ye ease a puir fallow's thankfu' heart, and tak' these?" opening his light box.

There must have been sixty or seventy eggs displayed as the box-lid stood open, scarcely any of which were familiar to Bob and his cousin. Each was in a neatly constructed cell, with its name (real or supposed) written in a bold, legible boy's hand on a piece of paper beneath it, and secured against shaking loose by a packing of cotton wool and fine oakum. There were three trays in the box, which lifted out by loops of cord at the ends, so that in all there were nearly 200 eggs. The lads looked with delight and admiration on the frail treasures displayed before their eyes; and eager inquiries ensued as to how and where he had got so many. He replied, dashing a tear away with the back of his hand, and with a sort of indignant action at his own weakness:—

"My puir brither-in-law brought me mony a score frae Norroway; an' my ain brither got me mair frae Iceland, where he sailed onst; and I've been to Shetland and Orkney mysel', and fand mony there."

He added, that he had formed a smaller collection once before, which had been sold for him by a friend in London; and that, encouraged by the success of that venture, he had tried it on a larger scale, and this box was the result of his efforts. But if they would only take them, it would be "siccan a comfort till him; he could na' find aught else he could dee for them."

Bob could not think of that, even if he had wanted them all; which he certainly did not, as of some sorts there were from six, to ten or twelve. He said so, and proposed to take what he did want, and pay fairly for them. The poor sailor-boy's concern and discomfiture were evident. That his thank-offering should not be accepted, and his poor full heart not relieved! Mr. Spencer came to his aid:—

"Bob," said he, "at least take one of each you want. And, hark ye, my boy (to the sailor), I have a daughter at home who likes eggs; I shall ask you for one each of the rarer ones for her, and two of each of those that you have plenty of. What say you?"

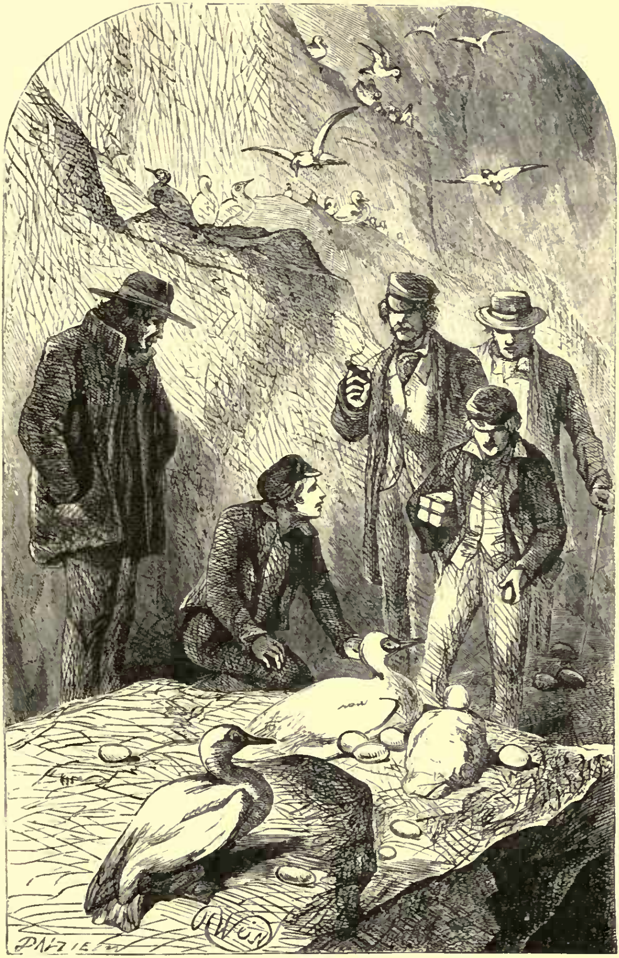
Seizing Mr. Spencer's hand, and dropping it again in a moment, as if fearing he had taken a liberty in his eager gladness, he cried, "God bless yer honour, and I wuss there were twice as mony. But winna the young gentlemen tak' two where I have siccan wales?"

Bob agreed without further demur, and the work of selection began. The young owner certainly could not have been more keen in collecting his eggs, than he was now in giving them away; and it was hard to convince him that, where he had but four of a sort, he had not such "wales" that they ought to have all four. The shearwater, and the stormy petrel, the skua-gull, and the Arctic gull, the great black-backed gull, the great northern diver, the black-throated and the red-throated diver, the red-necked grebe and the red-breasted merganser, the wild swan and the grey goose, the red-necked phalarope, the scoter and the scaup-duck, the wigeon, the purple sandpiper, and the dunlin, all contributed either two or four eggs to Bob and Jack's collection and to Tay's; and a total of nearly sixty eggs was subtracted from Jamie Grant's deal box. His delight seemed excessive at finding his gift most thoroughly appreciated; and when Bob gave him his own sailor's knife—one he had bought new at Hareborough, in anticipation of this trip—and Mr. Spencer added to that a plain but good sea-glass, telling him to remember them sometimes when he used it, his heart grew too full, and he just managed to say, "'Deed he suld remember them by ither things nor that," and then made a hasty escape from the room with his remaining eggs.

While the egg-selection had been proceeding, Mr. Spencer had gone to see the poor woman, who was very earnest in her short expressions of gratitude. She belonged to decent folk, she said, and had a brother a master mariner, and her husband had saved a little money. She should not be in want; and God, who had saved her in the bitter storm, "wad na leave her nor forsake her, the noo." The Doctor, who came in while Mr. Spencer was there, gave a good account of his patient, and added, that in no house in Eyemouth could she be better taken care of than by widow Dickson and her daughter Willison. Mr.

Spencer had then returned to the lodgings in time to be present at the departure of Jamie, as already noticed.

The question, What was to be done with so much of the day as was still before them? was now discussed. A trip to the Bass; an excursion to Dunglass Dean and Pease Dean, with a look at Fast Castle as they passed; or a fishing excursion up the Eye, were severally proposed and discussed. Mr. Spencer thought they could manage the Bass Rock very well; and if they were bent upon a day's fishing—and Ned he knew was a great angler—why not go to the Whiteadder, in which, he believed, they might get as good a day's fly-fishing as in almost any unpreserved stream in the kingdom? It would take a day, no doubt; but they would be repaid by commensurate success, probably, and if not, still by an interesting excursion; while the fly-fishing in the Eye, he believed, was but limited, and what there was, not first-rate. Mr. Spencer's suggestion was adopted by acclamation. It was decided to start for the Bass Rock, in the "Blue," without delay, and to give the following day to the Whiteadder expedition. Jack, for whom some consideration was manifested, refused to be a hindrance to the plan, for which, indeed, he was as keen as any of the party; notwithstanding the probable consequences to him; for there was still some "sea on." Half-an-hour saw them sailing out of the harbour, and another half-hour saw them rounding St. Abb's Head, and opening that part of the ocean which narrows into the Frith of Forth. Fast Castle was seen on its precarious-looking stance, domineered by the rocky masses behind it. Dunbar, with its ancient castle, dipping its foot in the sea, was passed. The Bass and North Berwick Law loomed higher and larger, until at last, in about three hours from the time of departure from Eyemouth, they lay-to off the Bass, and under shelter of its massy bulk. Some little delay occurred in obtaining permission from the keeper of the Bass to land; but during these few minutes of inactivity the boys were sufficiently occupied, as they had indeed been for the last mile or two of the run, by watching the numberless gannets as they sailed along on their buoyant pinions to and from their home. Soon, leaving the "Blue" and ascending the not very accessible approach to the summit of the Bass, they had the pleasure of witnessing the novel spectacle of countless wild birds sitting still while human intruders were walking amid their nests. The lads were even allowed to stroke some of the matrons on whom they were calling; whose response to the civility was calculated to suggest the advisability of a visit from a temperance advocate, rather than any great degree of annoyance or impatience on their part; for it was a sort of muttered "Grog, grog." One lady was pointed out as a mature specimen, having been a frequenter of the rock now for more than thirty years. Others were mentioned, whose identity had been so long recognised as to render it certain that they could not be less than thirty-five to forty years old. A remarkable statement was made by the keeper, to the effect that the gannet does not reach maturity until four years old, and certainly does not begin to breed until it reaches that age. The changes in colour, too, described by their attendant, as experienced by the gannet, from the time of their exclusion from the egg up to that of putting on the full dress of maturity,—Bob wondered what *toga virilis* was in Solan-goose cackle,—were sufficiently curious and interesting. When first hatched, their skin is featherless and downless, and of a bluish black. In a few days they are covered with a white down, which grows rapidly enough, and gives them the appearance of large powder puffs. Over this downy substitute for a flannel waistcoat the feathers grow by degrees, and this first crop of plumage is black. At about eight or nine weeks old they are able to fly, and from that time till they come of age, the general hue of their feathers is black, with more



The visit to the Bass Rock.—p. 382

or fewer white streaks and spots about them. The plumage of the matron bird is white, all but the large wing feathers, which are black; and the short close feathers of the head and neck, which are of a creamy buff colour. Obtaining the eggs they desired from the keeper, they returned to their vessel, and were soon racing along merrily on their return to Eyemouth.

On sighting Dunbar again, it was decided to land there, and to visit the field of Dunbar Fight. A look at the castle as they passed; and then up on to the hill at the back of the town, where the form of the bit of land between Belhaven Bay and another—the next indentation in the rocky coast—towards St. Abb's, on which bit of land the town stands, was displayed at one glance. It forms a kind of peninsula, the base of which, from the inmost point of one to that of the other of the two bays, is about a mile and a-half. Along this line they knew Oliver's army was ranged. On that hill beyond, looking from the town—called the Doon Hill—lay the Scots army. The left of Oliver's position lay on Brocksmouth House, and there, between the rival armies runs the Brocksburn. At that point, where the high road is seen crossing the course of the burn, the great and decisive struggle of the great and decisive battle took place. There, on either side the road, some three thousand Scots lay dead that squally, showery Autumn morning; and eleven thousand more were prisoners to an army scarcely mustering a like number of actual combatants. Mr. Spencer had visited this famous field once before, and with pains and difficulty had made out the principal posts, and scenes of the principal events. Jack's interest was extreme; and question upon question showed alike the avidity and the intelligence with which he fixed on the details Mr. Spencer was able to afford him. Ned, too, came out strong with historical recollections of what had taken place before and after the battle, and how Cromwell was fairly hemmed in by his foe before their own incaution had given him the opportunity of delivering one of his fatal attacks. Time passed pleasantly enough; and, as they returned towards the sea, Mr. Spencer, as if thinking of a matter which had hitherto escaped his recollection—which indeed was the case with the others as well as himself—exclaimed,—

"How about dinner? Are we to go without, to-day?"

The word was no sooner uttered than every one felt himself reminded that he really was very hungry; and so, by mutual consent, they turned into the first respectable-looking hotel they could find, and were speedily discussing sea-trout collops, and beefsteaks, to everybody's entire gratification. Tom Ling and Tim had already been cared for; for Mr. Spencer had directed Tim to carry back some prog for himself and his father when he had been left in charge of the boat after landing his master. So they did not hurry matters much, and it was past six o'clock before they got under way again on their return to Eyemouth.

The wind still served them, though lighter than in the morning, and they slipped along through the water, making about five or six knots. As they reached St. Abb's the wind failed almost altogether, and it was as much as they could do to keep any way on her at all. But none of the voyagers were discontented at that or wished themselves anywhere else. It was a glorious summer evening, and as the light failed more and more, and the bright heavenly hues left by the departing sun faded away, the sea seemed striving to compensate for the loss by its own beautiful phosphorescence. The wake of the "Blue" was a path of living fire, widening and paling from her stern beyond. A rope trailing from her quarter created an undulating fiery serpent. The deck pail, thrown overboard with a splash, raised a fountain of liquid fire drops, rising from a bright ring of molten fire, and falling into paler rings, but striking out glowing gems in each as they fell, the brighter as the rings grew fainter. The little ripple at the cutwater, too, was of liquid flame; and the wavelets, as they danced against the side and fell back rebuked for their presumption, blushed and paled in ceaseless alternation. Once, twice an "isle of light" was passed, small but glorious. 'Twas a fragment of wreck, maybe, caressed as if in pity by that which so short a time before, in its stormy might, had wrought the ruin of the gallant ship it belonged to; but now dropped warm glowing tears over the havoc it had made. Often a dull sullen plunge or two, showing, both to sight and ear, the track of some monster of the deep, caused bright though evanescent illuminations of the dusky deep at some distance from their course. It was an evening of enchantment. Neither of the young people had seen anything like it before, and they were not soon weary of dipping their hand—amid the other startlings forth of the phosphorescent light we have told of—and seeing it clearly illuminated with the lambent, innocuous flame; trying meanwhile to catch some brighter gem of light as it seemed to pass across their fingers. Presently, when Tom and the lad went ahead in the boat and began to tow, exclamations of delight burst from both the boys at the gleams and flashes and sparkles and rings and sheets of light struck out by the oars; and they were—late as it was beginning to be—almost sorry when the sluggish sails flapped and slowly filled with a cat's-paw of wind, which returned once and again, and at last carried them safely within the Harkers at the outer edge of Eyemouth Bay; and the dull plunge of the anchor told them that they had seen almost all they were to see of Nature's marvellous fireworks.

It was nearly twelve when they landed, and they were to be *en route* for the Whitadder by seven the next morning. A horse and light cart had been secured for them by Mrs. Alexander during the day, and they had nothing to do now, but get to sleep as soon as they could, and sleep hard enough to make up by quality for what it wanted in quantity. Bob and Jack did this effectually; and it must be confessed that Ned was not much behind them. The latter, moreover, had volunteered to call the whole party at six, and did it; to the especial admiration of his brother, who paid him some neat compliments on his improving alertness, and was repaid by a blow on the muscle of his twisted arm, which made him sing out, and ask Jack to help him punch the big chap's head. However, breakfast passed without further hostilities, except upon the provisions, the plenty and variety and excellence of which almost outdid all the former breakfasts Mrs. Alexander had set before them.

Having well eaten, and in so far prepared for the fatigues of the day, they left Eyemouth punctually at seven, with a sharp lad as driver, and soon were passing Netherbyres and Ayton House and Church, and leaving Ayton on the right, turned into the Dunse-road, which they purposed following until they came to Edington Toll. Here they turned off in a southerly direction, leaving the cart at Edington Hill, with instructions to go on to Foulden, and to meet them at Edrington Castle at five in the afternoon. Their direction now lay due south, and brought them in less than two miles to the banks of the Whitadder. There was a ford, but no bridge; but Ned's waterproofs and good nature enabled him to transfer both boys to the further bank, whither Mr. Spencer soon followed them, having obtained a dry passage in the foremost of two country carts, passing, as usual, in the charge of one carter. The immediate object in crossing was to pay a visit to Hutton Hall, an old Peelhouse, or strong country fort, which stood in the steep wooded bank of the river, a little to their right, as they stood on the verge of the ford near the mill. Making their way by climbing the bank, some paths (evidently devised as if a part of some pleasure-ground, but now as evidently subject to neglect for years past) helped them much, leading past a cavern in the bank, which seemed once to have been a pet resort, perhaps of ladies. The strong Peel-tower, with the ill-according additions made to it in later and safer times, pleased them much, though not presenting much that was either fair or picturesque to look upon; and the place of concealment, opening out of the wide-gaping chimney, seized upon Jack's ready imagination with a force proportioned to its novelty, and the idea it gave of the times in which it was devised. He succeeded in penetrating to it by the help of an old settle, which was found in what had been a kitchen when the house was last inhabited; but however much his fancy revelled in the images suggested by its purpose and its painful darkness, his sense of comfort convinced him, without danger of controversy, that quieter times, and hands less hard and ready to strike, rendered life certainly as pleasant and not less easy.

The next thing to be done was to return to the river. Ned's practised eye had discovered its capabilities at once, and he and Bob had been congratulating themselves on the most favourable condition of the water, which was probably due to rain that had fallen during Sunday's storm on the high grounds in which the river took its rise.

They determined to proceed farther up the stream before commencing their sport, while Mr. Spencer, who had been a scientific angler in the days of his bachelorhood, accompanied Jack to the streams below the ford at which they had passed. Proceeding some three-quarters of a mile or more, till they passed beyond Whitehall, and came in sight of the Allanton bridge, they commenced fishing, and it was soon apparent that their panniers would not return as empty as they had come.

Ned's first throw in a likely stream—after wetting and straightening his line a little above—raised two trout and hooked one. Bob was successful in landing a trout within the first ten minutes, and by the time they reached the foot of the bank, at the summit of which stood Hutton Hall, Ned had fifteen trout, and Bob five, in their several baskets. Making their way downwards, with some difficulty, until they reached the ford by Edington mill, they soon came in sight of Mr. Spencer and Jack, about a quarter of a mile ahead of them, but evidently not fishing. In fact, their backs were to the water. Walking on, with only an occasional cast or two in the "glorious streams," as Ned justly called them, which greeted the fisherman's eye wherever he looked on the river, they reached their companions, and found them busy mineralogising in a small way. They had been struck with the veins of a substance of deep salmon-red colour, inclosing masses of a needly white material, which abounded in the rocks abutting on the river. Mr. Spencer pronounced it to be gypsum, and curious specimens of the same; and, laying down rod and line, proceeded, in the best way he could, with the spud from the bottom of the rod and a stone from the bank, to extract some pieces. It was not from want of success with the angler's apparatus, though, that this diversion had taken place. Bob saw this clearly enough, for out of one side of his cousin's fishing-basket stuck a fish's tail, betokening a body, if it answered thereto, of alarming dimensions.

Exclamations, questions, explanations ensued. Jack had caught a trout or two, but possessing little skill, had missed many, and was quite unable to reach several most promising-looking casts. He had therefore induced Mr. Spencer to take his rod. He had done so, and had landed six or seven nice trout; when, throwing across a sort of eddy caused by a submerged mass of rock, a slight break of the water, followed by a resistance as if he had hooked a log of wood, convinced him he had got a big one to deal with. The little rod he held quivered and sprung in his hand, as the entangled fish leaped and rushed and spun round here and there; but rod, line, and steel were all true, and after a short but sharp struggle—managed with all Mr. Spencer's former skill—a noble sea-trout, of six pounds' weight, was towed into a little mimic bay, and, under Mr. Spencer's directions, baled out, as it were, by Jack's two hands placed beneath him. Mr. Spencer had then raised another, which had jogged off with the fly; and he had then succeeded, after landing a good trout in workmanlike way, in catching another, but much smaller, sea-trout, in the stream terminating in the pool, which lay about one hundred yards further on. They were returning from this pool, which, with the steep rock plunging down into its depths, barred all further advance in that direction, intending to climb the bank and proceeding above the pool, descend again beyond it, when Jack's eye was arrested by the gypsum veins, which appeared here and there among the more solid constituents of the bank.

"Well, you've got your work cut out," said Ned, glancing up at the rocks and steep bank above, which rose 120 or 130 feet above their heads; "and I can't help thinking you will find it the best plan to go back to yonder trees, and get up among them. I can't carry you over, or that would simplify matters; but I'll manage for Bob."

Mr. Spencer accordingly retraced his steps for about a quarter of a mile, and climbed the bank —and a steep climb it proved too, even where the growing trees showed a continued acclivity—while Ned conveyed Bob over on his back, Bob having charge of both fishing-rods. The steep bank ceased on Mr. Spencer's side just beyond the pool which had turned him back, and alternated to Ned's side. There was, however, good fishing ground a little below the pool; but what pleased Bob quite as much was to see a numerous colony of martins' nests along the ledges of the rocks above his head. Passing on a little further, Bob found himself straying from the river-side into a little clump of trees, which clothed a part of the bank just opposite a mill, in which clump he was delighted to find a species of everlasting pea growing, one or two flowers of which were just beginning to disclose their rose-coloured petals. Mr. Spencer, to whom he showed his specimens when next they met, told him it was an undoubtedly rare plant, and asked him to take great care of it. The angling proceeded with varying success. From Hutton Mill they went on and on, passing beneath the pleasure-grounds of Broadmeadows, and reaching another mill near a lately erected bridge, below which they had some beautiful fishing for nearly a quarter of a mile. Mr. Spencer's course was again interrupted much in the same way as before, by a deep pool with rocks dipping down perpendicularly into it; and out of the stream rushing into this pool he succeeded in extracting what, beyond dispute, was the trout of the day. Ned and his brother next had a turn at climbing, not very far below the point at which Jack and Mr. Spencer had last ascended the bank. Working onwards, they reached Clarabad Mill, when Mr. Spencer and Jack crossed over to the same side with Ned and his brother, and still descending the course of the stream, came to a weir, the water from which turned a mill-wheel, which worked a very long spindle passing up and partly through the steep bank; and a little below this, on rounding a corner, they saw a ruin on the summit of the hill above them. This, they had little doubt, was Edrington Castle, as indeed it proved to be. It was found now to be past four o'clock. Their lunch had been taken where and when the appetite of each prompted him to take his store from his pocket, and they were beginning to be quite sensible that there was no discomfort in having to look forward to a more substantial meal after their return to Eyemouth should have been accomplished. So they decided to ascertain the extent of their piscatory success, and then giving a few minutes to the examination of the ruins—

if, on nearer approach, they seemed sufficiently interesting—to go forward to meet their conveyance, if it should not as yet have arrived at the appointed "meet." Ned's pannier, on being emptied, gave up fifty-three trout, little and big, some of them being fish of nearly a pound each. Bob's turned out no less than seventeen, his skill having sustained great improvement in the latter part of the day; while Jack's, with the help of Mr. Spencer's two big ones, exhibited the noblest appearance of all, having in all, besides the sea-trout, eight trout caught by Mr. Spencer, and seven caught by himself. A bare-headed, bare-legged, white-haired, dirty-faced lassie of ten, with a small brother of five, stood by, superintending the counting; and to her they handed over all but about a score of the best trout and the sea-trout, and laden with these they commenced the ascent to the Castle ruins. There was but little to detain them. War and time, and the exigencies of comparatively modern builders ot houses and barns, had left but little of what was once a strong place, sufficiently important to be named in treaties between the potentates of the rival kingdoms; and passing on from what seemed only capable of disappointing antiquarian interest, they took the road to Edrington Toll. Passing a short distance beyond this on the road from which they had diverged in the morning, they met their cart near a point, by turning northwards at which they could pass by a cross country road—bad enough, too, they found it—into the Edinburgh road, about a mile and a-half south-east of Ayton; from which point their journey to Eyemouth was easily accomplished, and without much loss of time. In due time, the largest sea-trout, boiled in collops in sea-water, was smoking on the table *vis-à-vis* with half-a-dozen of the burn trout, beautifully cooked. After their meal, Bob, though sufficiently tired, could not rest happy without a visit to the patient and her baby, and found all going on well there.

The next day, about nine o'clock, the whole party might have been seen sailing out of the harbour in the best coble belonging to Eyemouth, while Tom and his son were left in charge with the preparations for a start southwards the day after. Their boatman landed them at a point at no great distance from Fast Castle, and from which, by a scrambling climb, they could succeed in reaching the ruins without going a great way about. The site of the castle seemed to them even more dreary and almost more isolated from the world—the foundations actually overhanging the sea in one part—than that of St. Abb's Nunnery. What a gulf to cross, originally cut down in the living rock nearly to the water-edge, before the entrance to the fortalice could be won! What an awe-inspiring sight when the wild waves rioted tumultuously in a fierce storm! What warder would be hardy enough, when the spirits of the storm, careering forth, held wild revel round those tremendous rocks and precipices! Having sufficiently wondered over these wild remains of rude masonry and ruder times—invested with a strange fascination since Scottish genius had repeopled those gloomy halls—the travellers returned to their boat, and sailed pleasantly on until they reached the point at which Dunglass Dean debouched on the shore. The boatman was to await their return at the coast commencement of the Pease Dean, where, after exploring Dunglass Dean up to, or a little beyond the bridge, and thence passing to Pease Dean, and descending it to the sea, they would meet him at a given time. The romantic beauty of the Dunglass Dean filled them with admiring delight, and to such treasures as several pieces of cornelian—one an oval mass as big as a large common fowl's egg—they added, in the Dean itself, two or three varieties of ferns by no means common—if, indeed, found at all in their own neighbourhood—among others, *Grammitis ceterach* and a cloven specimen of hart's-tongue. They looked in upon Cockburnspath Tower, recollected how it had formed one of the difficulties which beset Oliver Cromwell before the Battle of Dunbar, and how historical associations for six centuries before that connected themselves with this now little noticed, unimportant ruin. Proceeding onwards, they soon reached the Pease Bridge, with its one arch, and the stupendous elevation at which its crown rises above the bottom of the dean or gully beneath: a sheer descent of 150 feet! But how to describe the wonderful scenery of the Dean! With steep banks, rising to this height or greater, and clothed with trees from the top to the bottom, totally intercepting all sight of the stream below! They rambled up the Dean; and, wearied as they were with yesterday's walk and the difficulties and laborious nature of their present scrambling expedition, it was with unfeigned reluctance they turned their steps shorewards when Mr. Spencer at length declared they had barely time left to keep their tryst. Jack and Bob were so thoroughly tired, that, on reaching the coble and getting her under sail, they fairly fell asleep, and awoke, not a little refreshed, as they passed the Harkers and hailed Tom Ling in the "Blue," which was now at anchor in the harbour, ready for starting the following morning.

It was decided to leave Eyemouth for the south next morning, setting sail about nine o'clock; to go as far as the Farne Islands, and landing there, to get such eggs as were known to abound in that locality; and afterwards to sail on through the night, wind and weather permitting. Nor was it in the intention of Mr. Spencer to put in again anywhere, if the voyage could be continued without unforeseen let and hindrance. The morning was perfectly favourable in every way—a good working breeze from the north-west was blowing—and Tom was earnest in his auguries of a prosperous voyage. Before sailing, however, Mr. Spencer with the lads paid their final visit to the widow and her child, both of whom were prospering under the kind care of Mistress Dickson and her daughter. She repeated her expressions of thankfulness, as much for the kindness shown her subsequently to the rescue, as for the rescue itself; and was urgent with him to name a means by which what he had advanced to her, or laid out on her account, might be repaid to him. This he did by naming the Seamen's Hospital at her native place. She was to let him know how things went with her as soon as she was well enough to return thither; and, having taken a kindly leave of her, and Bob a thoroughly affectionate one of the child, they returned to the lodgings for the last time, and went through the miseries of a—on Mrs. Alexander's part certainly—somewhat sorrowful parting.

Not a few of the fishermen were waiting to have a farewell shake of the hand of the English gentleman and his laddies; and with many a hearty good wish they left the beach and went on board the "Blue," whose sails—half-an-hour since idly flapping in the wind—were speedily set, and herself directly after stretching out to obtain sufficient offing to have the full advantage of the wind. The run to the Farne Islands was pleasantly and rapidly accomplished. With very little loss of time, a sort of seaman-guide was in attendance on them with a companion, and instructed by him they first landed on the House Island. The chapels and the tower were inspected, and the legends connected with them listened to with very reverent attention by Jack. The Churn also was visited, and the boys expressed their wish to see it in operation—a wish the owner of the "True Blue" did not feel the least disposed to indorse. It might be a very interesting sight to a mainlander to see a column of water, which had been forced through a long fissure partly arched over, driven out of an orifice at its end to a height of eighty or ninety feet; but, for his own part, before the storm with sufficient energy to accomplish this took place, he, Mr. Spencer, would prefer being at a safe distance from these ugly looking shores. Indeed, they were ugly looking to one who was forced to contemplate the possibility of rasping a hole in his ship's side or bottom, or, worse still, going to utter smash against them; albeit, to others beautiful, or at least curious and interesting enough, with their columnar-basalt formation and separate pillar-like monoliths.

Bob, who had "got up" a little "cram" on the subject of the Farnes and their former inhabitants, cowled and demoniacal, asked Jack if the picture of imps "clad in cowls and riding upon goats, black in complexion, short in stature, countenances hideous, heads long, with brandished lances;" little incommoded by the sign of the cross, but sadly "put about" by a fortification of "straws signed with the cross, and fixed in the sands," did not come very home to his fancy?

Jack, as usual, bade him hold his tongue; and added—"And look for your eggs, which is about as much as your fancy is good for."

Bob took the advice; and as they went from island to island to see all, succeeded in obtaining eggs of the eider duck, the Arctic tern, the roseate tern, and the Sandwich tern. The eggs of the guillemot, razor-bill, puffin, lesser black-backed and herring gulls, with the kittiwake, cormorant, and shag, might have been obtained in any quantity. Hundreds on hundreds of these birds were seen in all directions, and a most disagreeable smell greeted their nostrils on approaching the peculiar territory of the cormorants, an island, namely, distinguished by the euphonious cognomen of North Wamses. The eider ducks were as tame as the gannets on the Bass, and our friends walked among them without seeming to occasion them any great disquiet.

Returning to the "Blue," after a most interesting visit—and which certainly was most thoroughly enjoyed by all the party—sail was once more made, and the sloop's course directed homewards. It almost appeared as if she had home instincts like some bird of passage; for she bounded along over the waves, dashing up little columns of spray every minute or two, in some of which fragments of miniature rainbows were fancifully painted. On and on they sped. Eight knots, often exchanged for ten for an hour or two together—and once, for a spell of nearly five hours, her speed was estimated at eleven knots in the hour—hurried her happily on toward her goal. Flamborough was passed; and when at last they retired to their locker beds for the night, they were well down on the Lincolnshire coast. The whole voyage was equally fortunate, and in something less than forty-two hours from the time at which they had left Eyemouth—including the three or four hours they had spent at the Farnes

—the anchor was dropped once more in Hareborough Roads, and all hands, without exception, fast asleep, though still on board.

At nine o'clock, or forty-eight hours after they departed from Eyemouth, they were seated at Mr. Spencer's breakfast-table, and Bob hastily imparting to the eager Tay what they had seen, and done, and enjoyed. After breakfast, the eggs were displayed; and Mrs. Spencer called for a full, true, and particular account of the rescue, which terminated with an inquiry from Tay—whose wet eyelashes, though, rather contradicted her seeming levity—whether Bob thought of taking a situation as nursemaid. "He might get such a high character from his last place."

CHAPTER XIX.

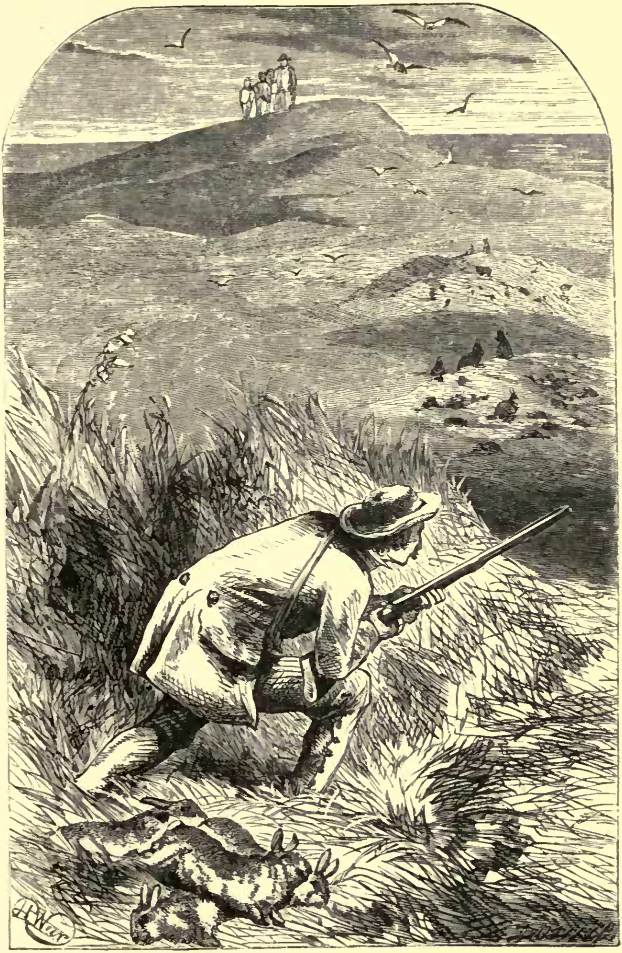
At Hareborough—A Walk on the Marshes—The Owlets—A Trawling Voyage—Shrimps—Wildfowl Shooting Afloat.

ALL the travellers were quite sufficiently wearied with the exertions and excitements of the time which had elapsed since they left Hareborough, to be well content to appropriate the remainder of the day of their return to resting themselves; or, at least, to such pursuit as required very little, if any effort, bodily or mental. Tay and the lads worked—if work it could be called—at the eggs for the former's collection, and at identifying, and, in one or two instances, by Hewitson's help, correcting the nomenclature of the eggs obtained from Jamie Grant. It was some pleasure too to them, to make out which of them, in all probability at least, had come from Norway, and which from Iceland, or the Orkneys. This occupation, which was carried on near a large window, opening down to the ground into a verandah, and looking over the fair garden in front and the beautiful calm sea beyond, was often suspended for a time by the deep interest both listener and narrator took in the account of some part of the recent adventures and experiences of the latter. Now it was the breathless anxiety with which the overhauling of the boat with the poor woman in it was accompanied in both the boys; how they were breathless with apprehension, lest some mischance or accident might occur in what seemed to them so ticklish a piece of business in that rough sea. How wonderfully those seamen, who, to look at them, didn't seem to promise such readiness and dexterity, had managed it all; and with such quickness, that everything seemed to be done at once, instead of in orderly succession. Then it was about the porpoises, and how their blowing was not so very, very different in tone from the sort of sigh which burst from Ned's relieved bosom, when he heard how the poor woman and her child were got safe on board the "Blue;" a comparison Mr. Ned might have acknowledged in a very unceremonious way, but that he was safely out of hearing distance, lying on a garden-seat, under the shadow of some noble evergreens, with a cigar in his mouth, and deep in the interest of *Two Years Ago*. Again, it was how they felt when rowing beneath St. Abb's Head; how, still more painfully—even in body—they were at first affected by looking over the precipices; what an awful sight the ocean presented the morning of the storm, with columns of spray dashed up over the Harkers a hundred feet high; the wonderful beauty of the Deans, and the most enjoyable trip to the Whitadder, with its picturesque banks and glorious streams for the fisherman.

At last the eggs were all properly cleaned, prepared, and secured on their cards, with labels affixed; and the girl's delight was intense on looking at the magnificent, unimagined addition made to her cabinet. Her mother and sister both came and participated in her pleasure. For really, the suite of willocks' and razor-bills' eggs alone were so beautiful in shape, colours, and markings, as to claim and receive as their right, a great deal of admiration. And besides these, there were many others of the additions singularly beautiful in their tints and proportions. It was almost dinner-time before the task of arrangement and labelling was accomplished. After dinner, a walk was proposed to the Little Hareborough Marshes; Ned to take either his rifle or Mr. Spencer's gun, and try for a few rabbits; while the young ladies, with one or both the lads, walked on along the sea-wall which skirted a part of Longsea-roads. The proposal was accepted by acclamation, and Ned, on hearing the rabbit-shooting would be at sitting rabbits, and many of them, if he managed well, not thirty yards from him, decided to take his rifle.

Passing by the quaint old church of Little Hareborough, separated but by a field's length from the marshes, they soon reached a point from which the scene of Ned's exploits (to be) lay clearly displayed. Two irregular-shaped mounds, neither curvilinear nor straight-lined in outline, about five feet above the general level of the marshes, and from forty to fifty yards in diameter, showed—even at the distance the walkers still were from them—in their broken surfaces and banks, just such a locality as rabbits love to colonize. Ned proceeded to avail himself of the concealment afforded by a lane to make his approaches, and then, the remaining distance of 150 yards between himself and the rabbit-hills he set to work to get over on the deer-stalker's principles; the meandering depressions of what had been the channels of the sea-water before the marshes were reclaimed, assisting him very materially in his enterprise. While the rest of the party were passing at a distance of 300 or 400 yards above, they heard the first crack of his rifle, and, by his proceeding rapidly in the direction of the hill, they saw his shot had been successful. Reloading, and concealing himself in such a way as to allow him to command the openings of several burrows from twenty to fifty yards distant from him, he waited patiently to shoot again. Nor had he to wait long. A young rabbit—and he purposed to kill no others—presented itself, after a few minutes spent by him in watching, and fell dead without a struggle, with a ball through the back of its neck. In ten minutes more, four or five were seen about, or a foot or two from, their burrows. Again the rifle cracked, and another rabbit leaped up and fell again, and, after a few convulsive kicks was still.

Leaving Ned, to follow his brother and cousin and their companions, we find them at a point on the sea-wall at which it was crossed by a tall sort of stile-erection, looking intently down a broad "fleet," which reached up broad and straight for a distance of a quarter of a mile or more to this very point. Annie was armed with her father's double-glass, and her suppressed exclamation, "What dear little creatures!—I hope that rifle-shooting brother of yours, Bob, wont come this way and disturb them," convinces us that she is looking at some sort of living creatures. Indeed, it was a fleet of young wild ducks, with the old one at their head, which, just as the walkers had reached the marsh-bars, had emerged from the tall reeds and flags which lined each side of the fleet several feet deep, and were now scudding



Ned Rabbit Shooting.—p. 408

about in every direction around their mother, not a hundred yards distant from the spectators. While the party were looking at these, seven young coots appeared, nearer still, with both old ones; and, at a much greater distance, another family of the same birds were seen. All of the young people in turn had brought the glass to bear upon this interesting scene, when suddenly the old duck, with a single loud, sharp quack, and a sudden rush along the surface of the water, half flying, half swimming, broke the stillness which before prevailed; and, in an instant, her young ones dived or—such of them as were near enough—made for the covert of reeds. The coots, too, as if understanding the old lady's warning, disappeared to a bird, as if by magic; the performance ending by the submergence of the duck herself. All took place so instantaneously, that there was no time for anything more than Bob's sharp "Halloa!" before the cause was apparent to their eyes, in a large bird, which, with rather slow, smooth flight, passed over the water only a few yards above it, and was instantly recognised by Bob as the moor buzzard, or bald-headed buzzard. The bird flew steadily on, as watched by Bob, into an old decoy, about a quarter of a mile distant, and perched upon a low, rather spreading tree, at some little distance from the enclosure. Bob continued watching him for some few seconds, and was rather startled than otherwise to see a second bird of the same species rise, as if from the ground about ten yards to the right of the tree, and join its mate therein. Bob's conclusion was, that there was a nest there; and, communicating it to the two girls and his cousin, mentioned his inclination to go and look. They agreed to accompany him; and leading him to the entrance of the enclosure, he soon managed for himself to reach, and then to guide the party to the tree he had marked.

Two minutes' search revealed the existence of a nest, not a yard distant from the bush from the direction of which the other marsh-harrier had seemed to Bob to rise. It was in the midst of a clump of short reeds and other coarse herbage, and contained four eggs, all of which were straightway appropriated. The party now returned; and as they left the bars, from which they had watched the ducks and coots, they saw Ned leaving the Rabbit Hills, and coming towards them. Meeting him after about ten minutes' walking, they heard he had succeeded in shooting no less than eight young rabbits, from half to three-quarters grown, having missed only one shot. Retracing his steps to where he had left his game, all of them had an opportunity of remarking on the anomalous nature of the mounds which afforded dwellings to the rabbits. The soil all round was of a most tenacious clayey nature, of a sort of dirty bluish hue. The soil of the hills was red and friable, like burnt earth, or badly made bricks fallen to pieces. How came it there? It must be due to some human original; but what was that original? No one there present could even guess.

Bob called upon Jack, as the acknowledged archæologist of the party, for an explanation. Did he think the phenomenon under discussion was of British origin or Roman?—or was it later still?

Jack laughed, and said, "Oh! it was only a place where the Britons offered their wicker idols full of human victims."

When the question was referred to Mr. Spencer, on their return, he said he was utterly unable to account for the "Red-hills," as they were locally called. He had no doubt that fire had been the agent employed in producing the material they were composed of; but the purpose of the fire he could not surmise, nor had he ever heard a reasonable explanation offered.

The next day, Sunday, passed quietly and pleasantly over. A Mr. Earnshaw served both Hareborough and Little Hareborough Churches; and the afternoon walk to the quaint little church on the marshes was pleasant enough to all parties. As they were returning, Bob, who with Tay was walking side by side with Mr. Spencer, said—

"As I was getting up this morning I saw a white owl flying as composedly as could be, though the sun was shining as brightly as possible. I thought they never came out in the sunshine?"

Mr. Spencer told him that when they had a family to maintain, they—both father and mother—had to work both late and early. "They have," he continued, "a family to support just now. While you were on the marshes last evening, I sauntered on to the owl-tree in the churchyard, and made my acquaintance with three quaint young owlets, who constitute this year's family. And very promising owlets, in the way of sapient looks and wise faces, they appear to be."

What could Mr. Spencer mean, was Bob's mental inquiry. "Had he climbed the tree, or set a ladder to it and looked into the nest?"

"Oh! no," his host replied; "nothing of the sort. I only stood close underneath the tree for twenty minutes or half-an-hour, during which time the old owls made five visits to the tree, with some prey or other in their claws for their young ones; and the owlets had as often presented themselves at the verge of the hollow which contained the nest, and eyed him with the peculiar wise-like, deliberative manner belonging to them, rolling their heads and winking their eyes like supernaturally sapient creatures."

Bob made an earnest entreaty that he might have the tree pointed out to him.

"It was the second," said Mr. Spencer, "from the wicket gate at the corner of the piece of water by the churchyard."

Bob took the first opportunity that presented itself after, to station himself in the evening beneath the tree, and remaining there for nearly an hour and a-half, returned with his curiosity greatly gratified. The hissings and snorings in the tree he described as something wonderful, particularly when the young owls, in some way he was utterly at a loss to account for, had become aware of the near approach of their father or mother. Their rollings of the head, and winkings of their goggle eyes—to judge by his hearty laugh as he recalled them—were intensely funny; and their sudden start backwards and out of sight, if he made an unguarded motion, had something almost theatrical in it. He thought the old birds returned on the average once in about five to seven minutes. Almost every time, the prey—which seemed principally to be mice, or some smaller objects still—was brought in their claws, not in their bill. Their flight on these occasions was directed to the church, about twenty yards distant, and there, on its roof, transferred from the claw to the bill, and so brought to the expectant brood. They seemed to get it in turn, he thought; for he fancied, after he had been watching them for some time, he could distinguish between the three young ones by a difference in their size. The parent bird took little or no heed of him, and went in and out much as if he had not been there. The duration of these visits to the tree seemed to be from half a minute to a minute. Once one of them came with what looked like a mole in its claw, and on going in to the nest with this stayed a much longer time than usual, a great deal of snoring and hissing being the accompaniment of the prolonged stay. This, he thought, might all be accounted for on the supposition that the time of the old bird was occupied in tearing up the larger specimen of prey for the greater convenience of her young.

Mr. Spencer added to this, that he had often seen the old birds begin at six in the evening their accustomed huntings; that they seemed to "beat" the fields and hedgerows round; and that it was nothing strange to see them still at work the following morning as late as seven or eight o'clock; sometimes even later. To his knowledge they had bred in that tree a great number of years.

The stay of the two lads was only to be prolonged until the Wednesday, and Monday was to be given to a sail in the "Blue," with an interlude of trawling. Tay was to be of the party; for she was an exemplary sailor. Miss Spencer, who had tried trawling before, and found its effects unpleasant, declined. Jack was warned, that with the wind there was, it would be quite as bad as beating up for the boat off Eyemouth; together with the addition of "strange, fishy smells," every time the trawl was hauled in. He would not be dissuaded from the expedition notwithstanding. So they started. The sail to the fishing ground was pleasant enough; but when the mainsail was brailed up, and the boat began to drag along, pitching and checked by the strain of the tow-line of the trawl, a most uneasy motion ensued; and Jack soon had to shut his eyes in self-defence. This preservative against sea-sickness was not very valid, however, and just as they were about to haul in the net the first time, Jack was about to make his corresponding trip to the leeward gunwale. However, interest in the approaching operation relieved him for the time, and he saw the bag of fine meshed, but very strong network, which terminated the long tapering trawl, untied, and the contents emptied upon the decks: several soles, some plaice or flounders, a few gurnards, two or three dog-fish, and a variety of small crabs, with shells old and new, and rubbish of various sorts. Bob was immensely pleased to see a soldier-crab, or as Tom called him "a farmer," occupying a large whelk, from which its original constructor and inmate had been by some means or other ousted. On looking over the heap more closely, he saw several creatures of this species. Jack in the interest of the haul, had drawn near, but the unlucky smell of the mass completely upset him, and he was obliged, with remarkable abruptness, to retreat to the side to indulge his woes there. Another haul was made: and it proved even more successful than the first in soles. Moreover, as the net was brought up to the side, the meshes were observed to be covered with countless almost transparent creatures, which skipped off in hundreds as the network was drawn above the surface of the water. Numbers of them, however, were so far entangled as not to get themselves liberated before the net was hauled on board, and their skips then only landed them on the deck. And when the contents of the end bag were again thrown out, the deck was perfectly alive with these transparent skippers. All hands, except Jack, who was past it, were called to capture these creatures—shrimps, in short; and nearly a quarter of a peck were put aside in a basket. The trawl was lowered again, and suffered to remain down only a short time, as the object only was to add to the number of shrimps already taken. And this was repeated twice again. The result was, that nearly half a bushel of remarkably fine shrimps were taken, and not a few of them boiled in the cabin pot with sea-water before the "Blue" returned to her anchorage. It was really a beautiful sight; the shrimps sparkled and looked so fairy-like in the bright beams of the sun as they leaped and dropped again to the water or the deck; and even Jack himself, at last, was engaged in the mirthful, almost uproarious, capture of these small crustaceans.

But a rising wind, and a short chopping sea, warned Mr. Spencer to give orders to "'bout ship," and before they reached Hareborough Hard, the sky was quite overcast, rain beginning to fall, and a strong wind blowing. However, they reached snug quarters before the rain became at all bad, and they sat down to dinner in the hope that it would be better weather before to-morrow—their last day at Hareborough—when it had been proposed to sail round to Wythernhoe, and look at a very beautiful yacht in process of construction there; and thence to St. Oswald, where large and well preserved conventual buildings would well repay the time and trouble expended in visiting them, alike by their own architectural and archæological recommendations, and the beauty of the coast and adjacent country. But it refused to clear up in the evening. The wind had gone down to be sure; but the rain poured on in a very persevering sort of way indeed. And when morning broke, the prospect was little, if at all, amended. The party were consequently constrained perforce to give up the idea of going to any distance from home.

Divers occupations were proposed, and all seemed to settle down very well but Ned, who strolled uneasily to the window, and back to his seat, and then to the window again; that is, after the first hour of *Two Years Ago*. A hit or two of backgammon with Annie Spencer beguiled another hour away; but there was the great bit of the day before dinner still to be got over somehow. Luckily, Mr. Spencer came to the rescue before very long, and asked Ned if he would like to pay a visit to his arsenal. Ned jumped at the idea, and the lads, too, were very eager to go, though very happily occupied in working out some ingenious contrivance for Tay's cotton-reels and tapes. Accompanying Mr. Spencer into his study, they saw him open a door at one corner which conducted into an apartment that could hardly be said to be furnished, in the ordinary sense. There were nets in it though, and guns; and a variety of articles, evidently belonging to the equipment of the "True Blue," even down to a new set of canvas for her. But what arrested all eyes was a huge monster of a gun. The barrel only was a foot taller than Ned, and he claimed to be six feet all but an inch: her stock, a half-shapeless lump of massive painted wood; her bore, big enough, as Bob found by experiment, to admit one of the old-fashioned penny pieces. And near this gun lay rammers and rods of proportionate length and thickness, in orderly confusion. Other guns there were of unusual dimensions, four feet six inches in length from breech to muzzle, and weighing ten to twelve, and one of them even fifteen pounds. The other monster they ascertained weighed 120 pounds, complete: while an ordinary double-barrel only weighed seven and a a half or eight pounds. Mr. Spencer explained that the monster was his gun for shooting wild fowl under sail. The others were flight guns, used for shooting the same sort of birds as they went out to feed by night, or returned in the early morning to their places of daily resort. The charge of the large gun was just one pound of shot, generally of the largest description, and an equal quantity, by measure, of coarse powder. "But how did he manage to shoot with it?" In reply, he bade them observe that there was an iron appendage, with a bolt passing through the stock, allowing very free play in a vertical direction, if the gun were supported in the ordinary position for firing; that the lower part of this iron was a cylinder of nearly an inch in diameter, which if it were inserted into a fixed socket of corresponding size, would allow horizontal motion to any extent; and that a socket of this description, or rather four of them, did actually exist in a rather curved beam of wood he pointed out, fully seven inches square at each end, and about five feet long. This beam, he explained, was placed across the half-deck of the "Seafowl," the boat, namely, which he had shown them yesterday, lying in ordinary, a little above the "Blue;" its two ends were very strongly lashed to the foot of the mast, but at such a distance aft, that the gun, when mounted, had free play on either side, and was within convenient distance of the shooter who stood behind the small enclosed cabin. So mounted, he said, the big gun was almost as easily directed and aimed with as a heavyish shoulder gun. The whole party, he added, must pay him a visit next winter and try the sensations of a cruise after wildfowl. Bob wished it was winter at once; but did not find a very ready echo from Jack, when Mr. Spencer said they often had a little sea to encounter, and had to go through every possible sailing evolution, in order to work up so as to get a shot at a lot of fowl. Ned now asked some questions about flight-shooting. Mr. Spencer said it used to be much better than it was now, since the decoy ponds had almost all fallen into disuse. He had often seen from one hundred to five hundred couple of fowl—ducks, widgeon, dunbird principally—on the wing in the course of one evening, or early morning's shooting; and had sometimes, with the help of his old black retriever "Nep," secured from three to seven couple of those birds. Sometimes three or four or five would fall to a shot. The bars, at which they had observed the young wild ducks the other evening, was a favourite post of his; and once he had been at the Point with only his heaviest double-barrel gun, and had bagged a double shot at white-fronted geese. Often he had "walked the saltings," by which he meant crossing them, rills and creeks as they came, in such directions as to be able to come upon favourite feeding places of wildfowl or shore-birds, without being too soon seen by them. He then enumerated the different kinds of birds he had shot from the shore, either at flight or when walking the saltings: curlews, herons, whimbrel, redshanks, greenshanks, bar-tailed godwit, dunlin, ringed plover, grey plover, black goose (once or twice only, and those probably wounded birds), grey goose, white-fronted goose, wild duck, widgeon, dunbird, teal, pintail, golden eye, scaup duck, goosander, two of the grebes, snipe, jack-snipe and wild swan; these last, and the geese, always as they happened to be passing over. More than once, he had had a fight with a wing'd heron or curlew:—one of the latter birds had, with apparent intention, scooped mud up and thrown it at him with its sound wing; while a heron was really a dangerous assailant to one who was not aware that it would strike at the eye, if it had the opportunity; and a dig with its sharp bill, even on the cheek, would not be exactly a joke. Afloat, he said, he had killed several other varieties of birds besides those named;—such as scoters, coots, some rarer grebes, several of the divers, and two or three additional species of ducks.

Ned, seconded by Bob, as the rain still continued falling quite hopelessly, begged Mr. Spencer to give them an account of his proceedings in a wildfowl-shooting cruise, if he had no occupation calling for his time and thought.

Mr. Spencer complied, but instead of repeating what he described to them, we prefer giving an account of such a cruise, actually taken by Ned and his brother the next winter, as the latter described it to his cousin when they next met.

"It was the morning after Christmas Day," he began, "and a sharpish frost I can tell you. We were up and got our breakfast by candlelight; and then cut down to the 'Seafowl' as quick as we could. We found Tom Ling had got everything ready for us, and it was, 'All hands up anchor, and make sail,' as soon as ever we got aboard. We were away, and out beyond the guard-ship, before it was light enough to see to shoot. Ned took a longish shot though, at a long line of curlews, which crossed us when about a mile out, and got one; which we picked up as we passed, scarcely altering the boat's course for it. Young Tim was up a little bit in the rigging, and about ten minutes after Ned's shot, when we could now see pretty clearly to a good distance, and the sun was just rising over the broad sea—oh! so beautifully, Jack—he called out he could see a lot of geese on the starboard bow. He thought there might be about a score of them. Tom thought we could 'fetch' them as we were then; and so, we 'went at' them. We had to sail so near the wind that we only got along slowly, but at last I got a good look at them, along the side of the companion; though both Ned and I were told to keep ourselves as still as possible, and not let even our heads be seen if we could help it. But we were not to have a shot at them; for they got up while we were still a long way off, and flew so scatteredly Mr. Spencer would not fire at them. We then let her fall off until she was almost before the wind, and our look-out presently warned us of a great flock about half a mile ahead of us, but on our right hand: 'rather wide on our starboard bow,' he said. His father and Mr. Spencer both made them out, and it was agreed that the best plan would be to gibe at once and sail straight at them. Ned was armed with a flight-gun, and his own double-barrel; and there was a single gun of Mr. Spencer's, which he said I might use when he had time to attend to me himself." Jack here interrupted his friend, saying he had supposed Mr. Spencer was the person to shoot with the great gun that he had seen; what had Ned to do with guns then? Bob answered that the big gun was there and Mr. Spencer at it; the only trouble with it, being to shift it from one side to the other according to the tack they were on; it being always used—indeed it was not possible to use it otherwise than—on the side of the boat on which the wind blew; but the use of the other guns was, that, at almost every shot, one or more birds would only be winged; and sometimes there were four or five such birds, swimming and diving in as many different directions: these had to be shot with the common guns. "Well," continued Bob, after this explanation, "we could all of us see the great flock some time before we got near them. Their white rumps showed very distinctly in the clear light over the sea, and presently we could make out their heads. We came within 200 yards, sailing steadily and rather fast; within 150. Then they began to draw together, which we knew meant that they were preparing for flight. Guess how my heart went pit-a-pat; and Ned's was no better, he said afterwards. We saw them face round against the wind; and then opening their wings, after flapping along three or four yards on the surface of the water, fairly get into flight. The next moment the roar of the big gun fell on the ears. Up we jumped to see what effect the shot produced. We saw a lot of pellets skipping along the water before they reached the geese; and then down came four or five geese, we could not see how many. Fifty or sixty yards further on, down tumbled another, and then another.

"'Look out, Tim,' sung out Mr. Spencer, 'there'll be some more turn out yet.'

"And sure enough, after flying nearly 200 yards, I saw another turn out of the rout, and turn regularly over and drop down; dead, it seemed. And Tim presently marked another. By this time we were drawing close to the dead and wounded birds. Two we saw making off in one direction, apparently not much the worse—except their broken wings—and a third in another; besides three which did not move at all, or only just.

"'Here Bob,' cried Mr. Spencer, handing me a large silk landing-net affair on a brass ring, socketed into a short handle, 'lay hold, and scoop up those two dead birds as we pass; and the third too, if you can reach it. You will be in time for a shot still.'

"'Ned,' he said, 'give that far chap the charge out of the flight gun as soon as you are within reach; I can manage the other.'

"Just as I got all three of the birds I had charge to secure safe, I heard the two reports; and then Mr. Spencer ordering Tom to luff.

"'Now Bob,' said he, putting the little gun into my hand, 'it is your turn; don't be in a hurry—take a steady aim at its head and neck, and let go any time.'

"I did as I was bid, and just fancy how pleased I was as the old goose turned right over when I shot, and kicked his legs out of water for an instant or two. Next, after picking these up, we had to go about to fetch the two that had fallen together a little after the rest. One of these was dead; the other had swum out a long way. We soon had the dead one, and were after the living chap. Ned quieted him with a charge from the double.

"Then said Mr. Spencer, 'Now for the other two. Where are they, Tim?'

"We had been twisting and turning all ways for the last ten minutes, and I didn't know the least where our head was, or our tail either; but Tim seemed to know by instinct, for he said in a moment,—

"'There's one hereaway, and the other out more to the west.'

"So we worked up in time, and without much difficulty found both. Ten geese to pay for one discharge of the big gun; pretty well, eh, Jack? We were now ready to start off on another hunt. Every now and then we heard geese at a distance, making something such a noise, as they flew, as a pack of hounds in full cry. I was watching a small string of 'em, which were flying along some way off us, when I heard Mr. Spencer say sharply, but not shouting, to Ned,—

"'Look out! here come seven ducks. Keep your head still, and it may be they'll come within shot of us. Keep her steady, Tom.'

"'Ay ay, sir,' he replied.

"Sure enough they did come within shot, and close enough for Mr. Spencer to work both barrels of his double upon them, bringing down one with each. Ned took his opportunity, as the remaining ones rather doubled on one another in their fright, and floored two more. I shot one of these in the water, after missing it twice in consequence of its diving so quick. We were scarcely ready for work again, when Tom Ling pointed out a lot of birds on the water, no distance off hardly.

"'Why, Tom, they're widgeon,' said Mr. Spencer.

"'No, sir, I think they're dunbird. Why, we are in shot of 'em now.'

"'Well,' says Mr. Spencer, 'I can't draw my charge, and put in smaller shot. I'll let go at them as they rise.'

"And rise they did, nearly thirty of them, and five fell again too; and a precious piece of work we had with one of them; I think we fired ten shots before we got him. After this we did not see a lot anywhere for some little while; but Tim, after a few minutes, said to his father—

"'There's a dead 'un out there, I lay.'

"Looking in the direction he indicated, we saw several gulls evidently all busy about some object on the water.

"'We'll go and have a look,' said Mr. Spencer;

and so Tom steered for the assemblage. Almost all of them flew off as we came near; but one noble fellow—a great black-backed gull—kept on, working away until we came within about sixty yards. Says Ned, as this fellow, too, seemed to think it was getting time to make himself scarce, 'I'll give you my cartridge, old fellow.'

"Down he tumbled, but it was clear he wasn't much hurt; for he began to work away with his feet at a great rate. However, the 'Seafowl' was swifter than he, and we soon overhauled him. Ned was going to seize him with his naked hand.

"'Hold hard, sir,' cried Tom, energetically, 'or he'll have a bit of your hand off, as sure as a gun. Give him a tap on his head with that rod, and then pick him up.'

"No sooner said than done. Just as we had got him in and stowed him away carefully for stuffing, up popped a little auk right under our stern, and there it sat, as impudent as could be, looking at us. Mr. Spencer wouldn't let us shoot it, it looked so tame. Our look-out's voice was now again heard, and we laid our course for the new lot of geese he had discovered. But we were not to get a shot at them either; for, after working half-way up to them, Tom—who was as steady at the helm as if built in there—touched Mr. Spencer with a loading rod that lay handy, and pointed in a different direction from that in which all eyes were gazing.

"'By Jove, Tom, they'll cross our forefoot. Let her fall off three points, and keep her so.'

"Ned and I saw now what it was that occasioned this change in tactics. We saw five huge white birds coming, steadily and rapidly along, at no great height from the water. We knew at once they could be nothing else but swans. Their course and ours were, it was plain even to me, converging; and it was soon evident that, if they kept on a little longer, they would cross in front of us, not more than 150 yards away. They kept on, and so did we.

"'Steady, Tom; luff a little,' said the skipper, just so as to be heard by Tom; and the moment these words were out of his mouth, Mr. Spencer—who had had his cheek on the stock, following every motion of the swans with the gun for the last minute—saw his time was come. The leading bird, finding himself nearer to the boat than he had calculated on or liked, swerved from his course, and partly from this cause, and partly from the slight alteration in the boat's course produced by Tom's obedience to his master's instructions to luff, the second bird was almost in a line with him as Mr. Spencer took his sight and fired. One fell on the instant; the other flew about a hundred yards, then threw his long head and neck up vertically into the air, soared up perpendicularly about twenty yards, and turning over backwards, fell perfectly dead into the sea. We had no trouble in picking these up; and just as we had done so, Tom said to Ned—

"'Look yonder, sir. There's a great northern diver. Nay, sir; don't shoot yet. He'll fly, maybe; and it'll be a deal easier to shoot him flying.'

"Sure enough he did fly, and Ned precious soon tumbled him over. But it was half-an-hour before we got him. I never saw such a chap to dive. He kept under a minute at a time, and just came up and was down again, almost before you could fix your eye on him. Ned fired five shots at him, all in vain.

"Mr. Spencer said at last, 'I think I must help you,' and by firing at him at random every time and the very instant he showed himself above the water, at last he was obliged by exhaustion to remain above rather longer, and it was I who finished him off. He came up nearer to the boat than he meant; but I was lucky enough to kill him before he could dive again. Such a beauty, in full plumage; and he weighed full twelve pounds, we found afterwards. Next we had a bit of a chase after a seal; but he was quite too wide awake for us, diving so quickly that Mr. Spencer never could succeed in getting the big gun to bear upon him. The next shot we had was at a precious lot of geese, but a long way off. Only four fell; but two of the others doubled back out of the flock, and Ned got one, and Mr. Spencer the other with their small guns. We had another jolly cripple chase now, and, after all, lost one of our cripples; but Mr. Spencer let me shoot the other.

"The speckled divers, and two or three sorts of grebes were all round us. Tom called the former spratborers. I shot one of them, Jack; flying too: and wasn't I proud of it? I think I never had such a jolly day in my life—and such a 'bag' we had. I wonder what Banks or Jem Watt would say if he had to carry such a one! Two swans, twenty-seven black geese, seven ducks, four dunbird, a widgeon, two teal, and two curlews, besides the divers and gull. And to end all, just before we sailed in in the afternoon, Mr. Spencer fired the big gun into a lot of scoters and killed three: and Ned got a crack at some redshanks, and got two; and I let fly into a large lot of ox-birds, as Tom called them, that rose off a mud bank as we passed it. And how many do you think I peppered? No less than seventeen. There were only Mr. Spencer's double-gun and the two flight guns loaded now, and it was getting quite dusk; but the very minute Tom had let down the anchor, about a dozen ducks flew right over our heads from the sea. I heard them coming, and told Mr. Spencer, and so he and Ned were ready; and they got three of them, one of which fell on the mud, and was waddling down into the water, when Mr. Spencer told me to shoot it with his left barrel, which I did; and so ended the cruise."

We must now take leave of our friends Bob and Jack—at least for the present. On the day following the rainy one last mentioned, they left Mr. Spencer's, and travelling together as far as London, parted there, not to meet again till nearly a month later at Elmdon. Bob and his brother returned home; and Bob often said afterwards, that these were the pleasantest holidays he had ever known. Whether we ever hear any more of the experiences and proceedings of Masters Bob and Jack must depend on you, our school-boy readers, to whom now we wish a hearty farewell, and good speed in all such undertakings as Bob's and Jack's.

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