GRANT ALLEN

MOORLAND IDYLLS

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“For dear Father

with Grant’s love.”

I.
THE NIGHT-JAR

We sat late on the verandah last night, listening to the low trilling croon of the night-jar. It was a balmy evening, one of the few this summer; the sunset was lingering over the heather-clad moors, and the lonely bird sat perched on one bough of the wind-swept pine-tree by Martin's Corner, calling pathetically to his mate with that deep passionate cry of his. I know not why, but the voice of the night-jar seems to me fuller of unspoken poetry than that of any more musical and articulate songster. Away down in the valley a nightingale was pouring his full throat among the oak-brush; but we hardly heeded him. Up on the open moorland, in the twilight solitude, that grey bird of dusk sat keening and sobbing his monotonous love-plaint; and it moved us more than all the nightingale's gamut. I think it must be because we feel instinctively he is in terrible earnest. Those profound catches in the throat are the very note of true love; they have in them something of high human passion. And we could see the bird himself, too, on his half-leafless perch, craning his neck as he crooned, and looking eagerly for his lady-love. It was a delicious moment. We murmured as we sat George Meredith's lines —

"Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping

Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.
Lone on the fir-branch, his rattle-note unvaried,
Brooding o'er the gloom, spins the brown eve-jar."

We were fortunate indeed in our *mise-en-scène*; for the poet's picture had realized itself before us. And, as usual, art had reacted upon nature. The cry, that was so beautiful and romantic in itself, gained an added touch of beauty and romance from the great word-painter's exquisite images.

Perhaps, too, some part of the charm in the night-jar and his kind may be due to the sense that here at least we stand face to face with a genuine relic of the older, the wilder, and the freer England. He is a bird of the night, of the heather and the bracken, of the unbroken waste, of the unpeopled solitude. When man invades his high home, he moves afield before the intruder. Here on the great moors we hear him nightly in summer; but only when no other sound assails the ear, save the boom of the cockchafer, and the myriad hum of the flies and moths of dusk among the heather. He belongs, in fact, to that elder fauna which inhabited England before the whirr of wheels and the snort of steam drove the wild things far from us. The perky sparrow can accommodate himself without an effort to the bustle of towns, and can dispute for grains of corn under the horses' hoofs in Cheapside; the rook can follow close the ploughman's heels, in search of worms turned up by the share in the furrows; but the night-jar lives aloof among the solitary fern-wastes, and flies

amain before the intrusion of our boisterous humanity.

"Fern-owls" the country people hereabouts call them; and very owl-like indeed they are in outer appearance, with their soft mottled plumage, all brown and grey and melting white, as is the wont of nocturnal or crepuscular creatures. But they are not owls at all by descent, for all that, being in reality big fly-hunting cousins of the swifts and the humming-birds. All birds that hawk after insects on the wing have a wide gaping mouth; the house martins have it, and the swallows, and the swifts; but in the night-jar this width of gape is pushed to a singular and almost grotesque extreme, though not of course beyond the limit laid by the needs and habits of the animal. It is the enormous mouth, fringed with its strange line of coarse bristles along the beak, that has gained for our night-jar its common European name of goatsucker. And indeed, if you watch close on southern upland farms, among the Apennines or the Atlas, you will see the night-jars at twilight hovering close by the udders of the goats and cattle as they lie stretched in the meadows. But they are not milking them, as the Italian peasant firmly believes; it is as friends and allies that they come, not as enemies. Peer hard through the gloom, on a moonlit evening, and you can make out at last that nocturnal flies are annoying the beasts, and that as fast as they gather the night-jar snaps them up, while the cattle seem to recognize this friendly office by never whisking their tails so long as the bird attends to them. It is a mutual convenience, an early form of that consorting for purposes of common advantage

which reaches at last its highest development in the nest of ants, with their associated beetles and their cow-like aphides.

Here in England, our night-jar is but a summer migrant, a visitor to the moors while insects abound; and we listen for him eagerly in warm May weather. He comes to us from South Africa, where he winters among the Zulus, or, rather, escapes the chill of winter altogether in the opposite hemisphere. For he must have insects, flying insects on the wing, and plenty of them. We welcome his first churring among the pines and bracken as a sign of summer; for he is a prudent bird, and seldom makes a mistake, knowing the marks of the weather well, like Mr. Robert Scott, and delaying his arrival till insects have hatched out in sufficient numbers from the cocoons over the heather-clad uplands. You see him but rarely, for he loves the dusk, and, though far from a timid bird, he usually alights on the ground, hardly perching on a tree, I think, except to utter his love-call. When he does perch, it is always lengthwise to the bough, not crosswise, as is the fashion with most other birds; he seems afraid of falling; and then, this position also assorts better with his passionate attitude of craning expectancy as he leans forward on the branch to summon his helpmate. If you disturb him from the ground, he rises with flapping wings in an awkward and noisy way, bringing his pinions together above his body, somewhat after the lapwing's fashion; but when he hawks on the open after flies, with his big mouth agape, his long arcs of flight are equable, swift, and graceful. Night-jars are fearless beasts; they rear their young in

the open, without pretence or concealment. The two veined and marbled eggs are laid boldly in some hard patch among the brake and gorse, on the bare ground, without a nest of any sort; and though they are beautifully coloured when you come to examine them in detail, they so closely imitate the soil and the dry heath around in general effect, that you may easily pass them by, even when you have marked their approximate place by disturbing the sitting mother. Few British birds, indeed, show higher and closer adaptation to special conditions than our dreamy night-jars, essential insect-hawkers of the dusk on open and treeless uplands. Their large and mysterious eyes, their gaping mouths, their straining fringe of bristles, their delicate owl-like plumage, their swift and silent flight, their agile movements, their eerie cry, their curious love-sick nature – all mark them out as marvellously modified nocturnal variants on the general type of the swifts and trogons. They are, in fact, specialized descendants of the same primitive ancestral form, whose bodies and souls have undergone weird and beautiful changes in adaptation to a wild and poetical life in the shades of dusk on the unpeopled moorlands. For birds of twilight have always passionate cries and passionate natures; not accident alone has given us the whip-poor-will and the nightingale.

II.
PROPHETIC AUTUMN

The year used once to begin in March. That was simple and natural – to let it start on its course with the first warmer breath of returning spring. It begins now in January – which has nothing to recommend it. I am not sure that Nature does not show us it really begins on the first of October.

"October!" you cry, "when all is changing and dying! when trees shed their leaves, when creepers crimson, when summer singers desert our woods, when flowers grow scanty in field or hedgerow! What promise then of spring? What glad signs of a beginning?"

Even so things look at a superficial glance. Autumn, you would think, is the season of decay, of death, of dissolution, the end of all things, without hope or symbol of rejuvenescence. Yet look a little closer as you walk along the lanes, between the golden bracken, more glorious as it fades, and you will soon see that the cycle of the year's life begins much more truly in October than at any other date in the shifting twelvemonth you can easily fix for it. Then the round of one year's history draws to a beautiful close, while the round of another's is well on the way to its newest avatar.

Gaze hard at the alders by the side of this little brook in

the valley, for example, or at the silvery-barked birches here on the wind-swept moorland. They have dropped their shivering leaves, all wan yellow on the ground, and the naked twigs now stand silhouetted delicately in Nature's etching against the pale grey-blue background. But what are those dainty little pendulous cylinders, brown and beaded with the mist, that hang in tiny clusters half-unnoticed on the branches? Those? Why, can't you guess? They are next April's catkins. Pick them off, and open one, and you will find inside it the wee yellowish-green stamens, already distinctly formed, and rich with the raw material of future golden pollen. The birch and the alder toiled, like La Fontaine's ant, through all the sunny summer, and laid by in their tissues the living stuff from which to produce next spring's fluffy catkins. But that they may lose no time when April comes round again, and may take advantage of the first sunshiny day with a fine breeze blowing for the dispersal of their pollen, they just form the hanging masses of tiny flowers beforehand, in the previous autumn, keep them waiting in stock, so to speak, through the depth of winter, and unfold them at once with the earliest hint of genial April weather. Observe, though, how tightly the flowerets are wrapped in the close-fitting scales, overlapping like Italian tiles, to protect their tender tissues from the frost and snow; and how cleverly they are rolled up in their snug small cradles. As soon as spring breathes warm on them, however, the close valves will unfold, the short stamens will lengthen into hanging tassels, and the pollen will shake itself free on the friendly breezes, to

be wafted on their wings to the sensitive surface of the female flowers.

Look, again, at the knobs which line the wand-like stems and boughs of the willows. Do you know what they are? Buds, you say. Yes, leaves for next spring, ready-made in advance, and curled up in embryo, awaiting the summer. If you unfold them carefully with a needle and pocket-lens, you will find each miniature leaf is fully formed beforehand: the spring has even now begun by anticipation; it only waits for the sun to unfold and realize itself. Or see, once more, the big sticky buds on the twigs of the horse-chestnut, how tightly and well they protect the new leaves; and notice at the same time the quaint horseshoe scar, with marks as of nails, left where the old leaves have just now fallen off, the nails being, in point of fact, the relics of the vascular bundles. Death, says the old proverb, is the gate of life. "Le roi est mort; vive le roi!" No sooner is one summer fairly over than another summer begins to be, under the eyes of the observer.

To those among us who shrink with dread from the Stygian gloom of English winter, there is something most consoling in this cheerful idea of Prophetic Autumn – this sense that winter is but a temporary sleep, during which the life already formed and well on its way to flower and foliage just holds its breath awhile in expectation of warmer weather. Nay, more, the fresh young life of the new year has even begun in part to show itself already. Autumn, not spring, is the real season of seedlings. Cast

your eyes on the bank by the roadside yonder, and what do you see? The ground is green with tiny baby plants of prickly cleavers and ivy-leaved veronica. The seeds fall from the mother-plant on the soil in August, sprout and germinate with the September rains, and have formed a thick carpet of spring-like verdure by the middle of October. That is the common way with most of our wild annuals. Unlike so many pampered garden flowers, but like "fall" wheat in cold climates, they sow themselves in autumn, come up boldly at once, straggle somehow through the winter, of course with enormous losses, and are ready by spring to welcome the first rays of returning sunshine.

Even the animals in like manner are busy with their domestic preparations for next summer. The foundress wasps, already fertilized by the autumn brood of drones, are retiring with their internal store of eggs to warm winter quarters, ready to lay and rear them in the earliest May weather. The dormouse is on the look-out for a snug hiding-place in the hazels. The caterpillars are spinning cocoons or encasing themselves in iridescent chrysalis shells, from which to emerge in April as full-fledged moths or gay cabbage butterflies. Everything is preparing for next summer's idyll. Winter is but a sleep, if even that; thank Heaven, I see in autumn the "promise and potency" of all that makes June sweet or April vocal.

III.
OUR WINGED HOUSE-FELLOWS

We have been sitting this afternoon in the Big Drawing-room, enjoying the view from its extensive windows. It is a spacious apartment for so small a house – about three acres large, with windows that open all round over miles of moorland. The carpet has a groundwork of fallen pine-needles and green grass and bracken, irregularly threaded with a tiny pattern of brocaded flowers – yellow tormentil, white bedstraw, golden stonecrop, red sheep-sorrel; while by way of roof the room is covered by a fretted ceiling of interlacing fir-branches, through which one can catch at frequent intervals deep glimpses of a high and bright blue dome that overarches with its vast curve the entire Big Drawing-room. No finer throne-hall has any earthly king; it is quite good enough for ourselves and our visitors.

But as we leaned back in our easy-chairs – spring seats of brake, backed with a bole of red pine-bark – we gazed upward overhead through the gaps in the boughs, and saw our winged house-fellows, the black-and-white martins, sweeping round in long curves after flies in the sunshine. It was immensely picturesque for the martins and ourselves; how the flies regard the question I forbear to inquire at the present juncture. We had lamb chops for lunch; let him that is without sin amongst us –

for example, the editor of the *Vegetarian Times* – cast the first stone at the house-martins. For myself, I am too conscious of carnivorous and other sinful tastes to cast stones at anybody. We are all human, say I, or at any rate vertebrate; let us agree to take things with vertebrate toleration.

The house-martins abide under the same roof with ourselves; literally under the same roof, for their tiny mud nests cling close beneath the eaves of our two spare bedrooms, familiarly known as the Maiden's Bower and the Prophet's Chamber – the last because it is most often inhabited by our friend the curate, and furnished, after the scriptural precedent, with "a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick" – "Every luxury that wealth can afford," said the Shunammite lady. "Under *our* roof," we say, when we speak of it; but the house-martins think otherwise. "Goodness gracious," I heard one of them twitter amazed to his wife the day we moved in for the first time to our newly-built cottage, "how terribly inconvenient! Here are some of those great nasty creatures, that walk so awkwardly erect, come to live in *our* house without so much as asking us. How they'll frighten the children!" For to tell you the truth, they were here before us. They came while the builders were still occupied in giving those "finishing touches" which are never finished; and they regarded our arrival as an unwarrantable intrusion. I could tell it from the aggrieved tone in which they chirped and chattered: "Gross infringement of the liberty of the subject;" "In England, every martin's nest is called his castle;" "Was it for this

our fathers fought and bled at Agincourt against the intrusive sparrows?" – and so forth *ad infinitum*. But after a day or two, they cooled down and established a *modus vivendi*, the terms of the concordat being that we mutually agreed to live and let live, they under the eaves, and we in the interior. Since then, this arrangement has been so honourably carried out on both sides by the high contracting parties, that the martins allow us to stand close under them on the garden terrace, and watch while they bring flies in their mouths to their callow young, which poke out their gaping mouths at the nest door to receive them. They know us individually, and return with punctuality and despatch to their accustomed home each summer. But when strangers stand by, I notice that, though the parent birds dart back to the nest with a mouthful of flies, they do not dare to enter it or to feed their young; they turn hurriedly on the wing, three inches from the door, with a disappointed twitter, a sharp cheep of disgust, and won't return to their crying chicks, which strain their wide mouths and crane their necks to be fed, till the foreign element has been eliminated from the party.

For myself, I will admit, I just love the house-martins. They may be given to eating flies; but what of that? The skylark himself – Shelley's skylark, Meredith's skylark – affects a diet of worms, and nobody thinks one penny the worse of him. Even Juliet, I don't doubt, ate lamb chops like the rest of us. Indeed, it happened to me a few mornings since, during some very hot weather, to be positively grateful for these insectivorous tastes on

the part of our feathered fellow-citizens. We were sitting on the verandah, much tried by a plague of flies; it was clear that "the blood of an Englishman" attracted whole swarms of midges and other unwelcome visitors. As soon as the house-martins became aware of this fact, they drew nearer and nearer to us in their long curves of flight, swooping down upon the insects attracted by our presence before they had time to arrive at the verandah. We sat quite still, taking no notice of the friendly birds' manœuvres; till after a while they mustered up courage to come close to our faces, flying so low and approaching us so boldly, that we might almost have put out our hands and caught them. I am aware, of course, that the martins merely regarded us from the selfish point of view, as fine bait for midges; while we in return were glad to accept their services as vicarious flycatchers. But on what else are most human societies founded save such mutual advantage? And do we not often feel real friendship for those who serve us for hire well and faithfully? In the midst of so much general distrust of man, I accept with gratitude the confidence of the house-martins.

All members of the British swallow-kind are amply represented in and about our three acres. The common swallows breed under the thatched eaves of the ruined shed in the Frying Pan, and hawk all day over the shallow trout-stream that bickers down its middle. You can tell them on the wing by their very forked tail. It is, I think, in part a distinguishing mark by which they recognize their own kind, and discriminate it from the

martins; for the outer-tail feathers are particularly long and noticeable in the male birds, whence I take them to be of the nature of attractive ornaments. At the beginning of the breeding season, too, the males assume a beautiful pinky blush on the lighter parts of the plumage, which may specially be observed as they turn flashing for a moment in bright April sunshine. The sand-martins, again, the engineers of their race, have excavated their long tunnelled nests in the crumbling yellow cliff that flanks the cutting on the high road opposite; I love to see them fly in with unerring aim at the narrow mouth as they return all agog from their aërial hunting expeditions on cool summer evenings. They are the smallest and dingiest of our swallows; they have no sheeny blue-black plumage like their handsome cousins, but are pale brown above, and dirty white below. The house-martin, last of all, can be recognized at once upon the wing by his conspicuous belt of pure white plumage, almost dazzling in its brilliancy, which stretches in a band across the lower half of his back; as he pirouettes on the wing, this badge of his kind gleams for a moment against the sky, and then fades as if by magic. His shorter tail scarcely shows forked at a distance, but when you watch him at close quarters, it is delightful to observe how he broadens or narrows it as he flies, to steady and steer himself. In order fully to appreciate this point, however, you must have the quick keen eye of the born observer. As for the pure black swifts – those canonical birds that haunt the village steeple – they are not swallows at all, but dark and long-winged northern

representatives of the humming-birds and trogons. All these alike are summer migrants in England, for they can but come to us when insects on the wing are cheap and plentiful.

IV.
A NEIGHBOURLY GOSSIP

I love gossip. For my own part, I can never see the point of the objections which some people raise against talking over the concerns of your neighbours' families. They are always so interesting. I like to know all about them. I like to pry into their most intimate secrets. I like to find out what they do with themselves all day long; and what they have to eat for dinner; and how they make their living; and where or in whose company they spend their evenings. I like to watch where they build their homes, and how many eggs they lay, and how they hatch them out, and what becomes of the fledgelings. I like to spy out where others hibernate in the woods, and what store of nuts and fruits they have laid by to provide against the Christmas scarcity. *You* may think this sort of Paul Pry interest in the affairs of your fellow-creatures is undignified and unphilosophic; but I confess, to me it appears only neighbourly.

For example, there are my friends the missel-thrushes, who have just lately returned for the winter months to their commodious quarters in the hanger below me. A week or two since I noticed them flying home to the woods and parks in their thousands. They have been spending the summer months as usual on their moors in Norway; but food having lately begun to fail

them on the fjelds, they are coming back now in great straggling flocks to their English residences. For, unlike the song-thrush, who is one of their closest and most distinguished relations, they stay with us in the winter only, and move north again betimes in late spring, as soon as their broods are reared and whortleberries are getting plentiful in the northern moorlands.

Questions of commissariat, indeed, have most to do with the migrations of birds; it is not weather, as weather, but the condition of the food-supply that mainly regulates their periodical movements. Now, the missel-thrush is almost entirely vegetarian in his habits; whereas his cousin, the song-thrush, subsists for the most part on a regimen of worms and other miscellaneous unsavoury animals. Hence it follows, of course, that the missel-thrush must needs go where berries are in season; he follows them closely across the face of Europe, from province to province. He cannot stand great cold, however, and often freezes to death in severe winters; which is another reason why he comes south for warmth when Norwegian hills rise white with snow, and fjords are blocked with ice, and crystal-frosted pine-trees glisten in the sun with innumerable diamonds. Family parties of missel-thrushes may be seen in our fields the whole winter through; but they are timid and wary, and fly off in a body at the faintest suspicion of coming danger. You can tell them as they rise on the wing by the conspicuous white patch under the pinions, which seems, like the rabbit's tail, to act as a danger-signal to the rest of the household. No sooner does one

of them scent a stranger afar off than he rises silently, and the others, alarmed by his contagious fear, rise after him one by one in a picturesque line, somewhat as one often sees in the case of wild-fowl. In February and March your missel-thrush begins to build in the hawthorns and apple-trees; and the moment his nestlings are strong enough of wing to buffet the strong winds of the German Ocean, the whole family flits north again to its Norwegian estate for the cloudberry season. The nests, however, though built somewhat overtly on bare and leafless boughs, are most difficult to find; for the cunning little architects, knowing well they will get no protection from a canopy of foliage, conceal their homes adroitly with an outer coat of woven moss and lichen, which so harmonizes with the grey and lichen-covered branches around them as to make them almost indistinguishable. The eggs are stone-grey, daintily spotted and blotched with round blobs of brown ochre.

But by far the most interesting point about the missel-thrush is that curious connection between the bird and the mistletoe which was observed so long since even by our prehistoric ancestors as to have given the species its vernacular name in all European languages. *Turdus viscivorus* – the mistletoe-eating thrush – is Linnæus's scientific Latin title for the creature, and he well deserves it. He is almost or altogether the only bird that will eat the mistletoe berries, and on him accordingly the mistletoe depends for the dispersal of its seeds and the propagation of its mystic parasitic seedlings. The berries themselves are very

“viscid,” as we say – the word itself being derived from the Latin name of mistletoe – and the seeds cling close, as if gummed or glued, to the bird’s beak and feet in a disagreeable fashion. So, to get rid of them, he alights on an apple-tree or a poplar, which are his favourite perches, betakes him at once to an angle of a bough, and rubs off the annoying and sticky objects in the fork of the branches. There they fasten themselves and germinate. Now, this arrangement exactly suits the mistletoe, for apple and poplar are just the two trees best adapted for its depredations, while a fork in a bough is the one likely place where it has a chance of rooting itself. A great many unobservant people imagine to-day that mistletoe grows chiefly on oaks, because they have heard about the sanctity of oak-grown mistletoes in the eyes of the Druids. The real fact is, as you may learn for yourself if you will *look* at nature instead of merely reading about it at second or third hand, that mistletoe on an oak-tree is extremely rare; the Druids prized it because they thought it the life or soul of the oak, which was the sacred tree of Celtic mythology. I notice, indeed, that missel-thrushes very seldom perch on oaks; and even when they do by chance dislodge a stray seed of mistletoe on one, it has difficulty in fixing its young suckers on the alien bark, and draining the tree’s nutritious juices. The truth is, the mistletoe and the missel-thrush are developed for one another; they have struck up an alliance from time immemorial on terms of mutual service and accommodation.

V.
A RABBIT OF THE WORLD

A Literary Lady, sentimental as was the wont of literary ladies before the incarnation of the New Woman, went once to call on a Great Poet, who pervaded these regions. But the Great Poet was coy, says the legend, and listened not to the voice of the Literary Lady, charmed she never so wisely. He refused to be drawn by her cunning blandishments, but smoked on in peace, glaring gruffly from his chimney corner. So at last the Great Poet's wife, feeling that the situation grew slightly strained, endeavoured to create a diversion by saying, "My dear, won't you take Mrs. Gusherville to see the garden?" The Great Poet, thus checkmated, rose unwillingly from his seat, and strode three paces ahead through the shrubbery paths, followed, *longo intervallo*, by the panting Mrs. Gusherville. Never a word did he say as he paced the lawn with his heavy tread; but at last, as he approached one garden border, he turned towards his visitor. Speech trembled on his lips; Mrs. Gusherville leant forward to catch the immortal accents. The Poet spoke. "D – mn those rabbits!" he said; and then relapsed into silence. That was all Mrs. Gusherville got out of her interview.

I am reminded of this episode, which if not true to fact is at any rate true to human nature, by the short sharp barking

of Fan, my neighbour's spaniel, resounding from the heather in the direction of the Frying Pan. Each bark is an eager impatient snap, and its burden is – "Rabbits!" Now, I sympathize with every living thing that breathes; yet if it were not for a constitutional objection to unnecessary vigour of language, I could almost back Fan, and echo the Great Poet's indignant exclamation. For whatever we try to plant among the heather, by way of beautifying our small patch of moorland (as who should paint the lily or gild refined gold), those unscrupulous rodents immediately proceed to treat as their private property. Not one of our white brooms has survived their attacks; and the way they have devoured our periwinkles and our St. John's wort is a credit to their appetites, and a testimonial to the magnificent air of this healthy neighbourhood. The lad who attends to my garden (we call it a garden by courtesy, not to hurt its feelings) is always saying to me, "Let me set a trap for 'em, sir." But grave as their misdemeanours are, I can't bear to trap them. I remember that after all they were the earliest inhabitants. They dwelt here before me; and when I plumped down my cottage in the midst of their moor, I seriously interfered with their domestic economy. "There's a horrid house built," said the mother rabbit: "I suspect a dog will follow, and perhaps a gun too." "Never mind," said the father, who was a rabbit of the world; "they'll more than make it up to us, I predict, by planting green-stuff, which is a deal juicier, after all, than gorse or bracken."

And, indeed, I feel I owe a duty to these earlier inhabitants;

I love their fellowship, and do what I can to encourage their uninterrupted residence. The night-jar still perches nightly on one accustomed branch of the big lone fir-tree; the cuckoo comes and calls to us from the clump of stunted pines by the dining-room window; the merry brown hares dart obliquely across the ill-grown green patch of tennis-lawn; and the baby bunnies themselves, all unconscious of their misdemeanours against the growing shrubs, brush their faces before our eyes with their tiny grey paws as we sit upon the terrace. My neighbour has a shot at them with gun and dog; and even as I write, I can hear the *ping, ping* of his murderous cartridges and the quick cries of Fan in the adjoining plot of moor; but for myself I refrain. I would rather have the gambolling of such innocent fellow-creatures on my patch of grass in the dusk of evening than all the rhododendrons and azaleas and cypresses the florist can palm upon me.

And how pretty they are, those harmless little malefactors! How they frolic across the sward with tiny irregular jumps, like a sportive kitten, only ten times more guileless – no tinge of bloodthirstiness in their liquid eye, no stealthy cruelty in their honest grey faces! Your rabbit is a decent and inoffensive vegetarian. Besides, its mode of life sorts well with the uplands; it never disfigures nature, but accommodates itself to the environment like a good working evolutionist. When we first thought of building here, a clever Girton girl, whom we met at the little inn, held up her hands in horror. "Why *build* on Hartmoor at all? Why not simply burrow?" And the rabbits burrow. The

hilltop is just honey-combed with their underground palaces. There they lurk for the most part during the heat of the day, and come out at night to feed on the furze-bushes that protect and conceal the mouths of their burrows. Indeed, the very shape of the furze-bush, as we ordinarily know it, depends on the constant activity of the hungry and greedy bunnies. Naturally, gorse, if left to itself, would grow feathery from the soil upward, without any gaunt stretch of naked stem at its base; but the rabbits eat off the growing shoots just as high as they can reach by standing tip-toe on their hind feet; so that the resulting shape is a product, so to speak, of rabbit into gorse-bush. Where the soil is light and sandy, as here, burrowing is universal; but on cold wet moors, the rabbits avoid the chance of rheumatism by constructing long tunnels above ground instead, through matted galleries of heather and herbage.

Cowardice is the principal defence of the rabbit, as of all other unarmed rodents. At the first alarm, he flies headlong to his burrow. What swiftness of foot does for the open-nesting hare, that swiftness of retreat does for his underground cousin. Natural selection in such a case favours the most cowardly; for to be brave is to court immediate extinction. That is why rabbits have the noticeable patch of white under their tails – their scuts, as sportsmen very aptly call them. At first sight you would suppose such a conspicuous white mark must be a source of danger. In reality it has been evolved as a patent safety-signal. For while the rabbits crouch and feed, unseen in the grey grass, they are

very little conspicuous; but the moment one of them spies any cause of alarm, off it scampers to its hole; and, raising the danger-signal as it goes, it warns the whole warren, all whose members scuttle after it apace without waiting to inquire into the nature of the panic. The mouth of the burrow runs quite straight just at first, so that the retreating bunny can dash into it at full speed without checking his pace; but at a convenient point, a few feet in, it begins to bend and divaricate, besides branching and subdividing as a precaution against weasels and other vermin enemies. It has also at least two entrances and exits, like a room at the theatre, in case of pursuit; and it is cunningly engineered against the chance of intrusion. But the nursing-chamber, where the timid wee mother hides her naked and shapeless young, is quite differently contrived with but a single mouth, and is fitted up with every internal luxury. The good parent lines it with soft fur pulled from her own warm coat, and goes stealthily by night to suckle her little ones. When she comes away, she plasters up the entrance with earth to conceal it as well as she can from prying enemies; and there the baby rabbits remain alone in the dark till her next visit. Three or four such broods are produced each year, for your rabbit is indeed an uxorious creature.

VI.
THE ADDER'S SIESTA

Two "hedgers and tiners," demolishing a bank of earth at Turner's Corner as I walked along the Headley Road this morning, came, to their great surprise and no little horror, on a coiled and twisted colony of hibernating adders. I paused in my stroll for ten minutes to watch the unearthing. It was a curious sight; the lithe and sinuous creatures, recognizable at once as genuine vipers by the zigzag pattern of dark diamond-shaped spots down their glossy green backs, lay curled and entwined with one another in snaky amity, fast asleep past waking, and completely filling up, as with a living mass of inextricable knots, the curves and crannies of the underground hole where they had taken refuge. They were there, of course, for their little winter siesta, which occupies them for a trifle of six months at a sitting. I pleaded hard for their lives with the men, explaining most earnestly that they would do much more good than harm, from the point of view of those whose talk is of beeves, and who regard standing corn as the one really sacred object in this beautiful universe. But I need hardly say my special pleading proved of no avail; the hedgers chopped them up fine before my eyes with their murderous spades, on the familiar antique principle of "larning them to be adders." Poor helpless creatures, expiating

thus unaware the *delicta majorum*! They would have killed more mice in a week than the men could catch in a summer; but they were snakes for all that, and your rustic hates and shrinks from snakes, *et dona ferentes*.

The adder's siesta is just as much a part of his fixed yearly cycle as the fall of the leaf is to the tree, or migration towards warmer lands is to the swallow or house-martin. Snakes can't migrate; because, of course, they've got no wings to migrate with; and being chilly creatures, evolving little animal heat of their own from their sluggish circulation, and warmed by the sun alone into spasmodic activity, they are compelled to bury themselves in holes in the ground, where they lie close to all others of their species that they can find, so as to utilize in common, by mutual aid, whatever trifle of bodily warmth they possess between them. Indeed, a snake, like a tree, can only be said really to live for half its lifetime; the other half these Persephones of the north spend underground in the torpid condition. The heart almost entirely ceases to beat; the lungs cease to act; sensation is suspended; and the animal dozes away his time unconsciously till the summer warmth of the surface soil begins once more to revive him. Then he ventures forth timorously from his hole on some bright May morning, to see how things are progressing in the upper world; and meeting, peradventure, some belated shrew-mouse or some early spring chicken, makes a dash at it at once with what life he has left in him, strikes it with his poison-fang, and, swallowing it whole, straightway regains fresh fuel for the battle of existence.

Adders were always friends of mine. They are numerous hereabouts, on our heathy uplands; and for my own part, I do my best to protect and preserve them. For we have not so many wild creatures left in England that we can afford to despise any lingering element of our native fauna. Besides, they do next to no practical harm; occasionally, indeed, they may spring at a dog who provokes their otherwise placid and meditative tempers by treading on them in the heather; and they will still more rarely make a dash at a man who incautiously handles them; but as a rule they are timid and rather sluggish creatures, much more likely to take fright and flee when discovered than to turn and rend one. I come across them frequently on basking paths among the heath in summer; they lie sunning themselves on the warm sand; but when I endeavour to rouse them to resistance by poking at them with my stick, they refuse, as a rule, to show fight, and after a few minutes of hesitation and lazy reluctance to move, they retire in high displeasure to their home among the bracken. Never once have I known them try actively to resent my intentional intrusion on their post-prandial reflections.

We have but two kinds of snakes, all told, in England, popular prejudice to the contrary notwithstanding. One of them is the harmless and pretty ring-snake, easily distinguished by the absence of the rhomboidal zigzag markings; the other, who may as easily be recognized by their presence, is the venomous adder, known also under his frequent alias as the viper, and often supposed to be two distinct creatures. In reality, one reptile

doubles the parts, as an actor would say, being but a single snake under two disguises. The adder is remarkable for bringing forth its young alive, instead of hatching them out of eggs, like most typical serpents; and the very name *viper* is short for *vivipara*. As for the blind-worm, or slow-worm, who is also one animal masquerading under two aliases, he must not be considered a snake at all, being a legless lizard, who tries deceptively to pass himself off in serpent's clothing. Nay, he is not even, strictly speaking, legless, for he has rudimentary limbs, with bones to match, though they never quite succeed in pushing themselves through the scaly integument. He is a lizard, in short, arrested on his road to complete serpenthood. Neither the ring-snake nor the blind-worm is in the slightest degree dangerous; but when in doubt as to whether a particular crawling animal is an adder or otherwise, it would be safer to give him – and yourself – the benefit of the doubt, by abstaining from handling him. The poison-fangs of the viper are two in number, set in the upper jaw; they are hollow, perforated, and erectile at will by the muscles of the animal. Their poison is secreted by a gland at the back, which communicates through a tube with the canal in the fang; and it is not really so very venomous. But if you provoke an adder overmuch, and he sees a chance of remonstrating with you, I do not deny that he will throw back his smooth head, erect his angry fangs, dart quickly forward, and express his disagreement by inflicting a bite upon the offender's trousers. In this he acts much as you and I would do if he were a man and we were adders.

Put yourself in his place, and you will think less ill of him.

VII.
A FLIGHT OF QUAILS

It is one of the wonders and delights of the moorland that here alone Nature pays the first call, instead of demurely waiting to be called upon. Near great towns she is coy; and even in the fields that abut on villages, she shows but a few familiar aspects; while aloof on the open heath she reveals herself unreservedly, like a beautiful woman to her chosen lover. She exhibits all her moods and bares all her secrets. This afternoon, late, we were lounging on the low window-seat by the lattice that gives upon the purple spur of hillside, when suddenly a strange din as of half-human voices aroused our attention. “Look, look!” Elsie cried, seizing my arm in her excitement. And, indeed, the vision was a marvellous and a lovely one. From the lonely pine-tree that tops the long spur above the Golden Glen, a ceaseless stream of brown birds seemed to flow and disengage itself. It was a living cataract. By dozens and hundreds they poured down from their crowded perch; and the more of them poured down, the more there were left of them. What a miracle of packing! They must have hustled and jostled one another as thick on the boughs as swarming bees that cling in a cluster round their virgin queen; while as for the ground beneath, it seethed and swelled like an ant-heap. For several minutes the pack rose from its camp, and fluttered

and flowed down the steep side of the moor toward Wednesday Bottom, flying low in a serried mass, yet never seeming to be finished. They reminded me of those cunning long processions at the play, when soldiers and village maidens stream in relays from behind the wings, and disappear up the stage, and keep moving eternally. Only that is clever illusion, and this was reality.

"Lonely," people say! "No life on the hilltop!" Why, here was more life at a single glance than you can see in a whole long week in Piccadilly; an army on the march, making the heather vocal with the "wet-my-feet, wet-my-feet" of ten thousand voices!

But you must live in the uplands to enjoy these episodes. Nature won't bring them home to you in the populous valleys. A modest maid, she is chary of her charms; you must woo her to see them. She seldom comes half-way to meet you. But if you dwell by choice for her sake in her chosen haunts, your devotion touches her: she will show you life enough – rare life little dreamt of by those who tramp the dead flags of cities, where no beast moves save the draggled cab-horse. For you, the curlew will stalk the boggy hollows; for you, the banded badger will creep stealthily from his earth and disport himself at dusk among his frolicsome cublets; for you, the dappled adder will sun his zigzag spots, and dart his tremulous tongue, all shivering and quivering; for you, the turbulent quail will darken the ground in spring, or spread cloud-like over the sky on cloudless summer evenings.

And what poetry, too, in their sudden entrance on the scene, dropped down from heaven, one would think, as on Israel in

the wilderness! Small wonder the marvel-loving Hebrew annalist took those multitudinous birds for the subject of a miracle. But yesterday, perhaps, they were fattening their plump crops among the vine-shoots of Capri, the lush young vine-shoots with their pellucid pink tendrils; and to-day, here they are among the dry English heather, as quick and eager of eye as by Neapolitan fig-orchards. Swift of flight and patient of wing, they will surmount the Apennines and overtop the Alps in a single night; leave Milan in its plain and Lucerne by its lake when the afterglow lights up the snow on the Jungfrau; speed unseen in the twilight over Burgundy or the Rhineland; cross the English Channel in the first grey dawn; and sup off fat slugs before twelve hours are past, when the shadows grow deep in the lanes of Surrey. Watt and Stephenson have enabled us poor crawling men to do with pain and discomfort, at great expense, in the chamber of torture described with grim humour as a *train de luxe*, what these merry brown birds, the least of the partridge tribe, can effect on their own stout wings in rather less time, without turning a feather. If you watch them at the end of their short European tour from Rome to England at a burst, you will find them as playful and as bickering at its close as if they had just gone out for an evening constitutional.

Quails are the younger brothers of the partridge group; but, unlike most of their kind, they are gregarious and migratory. They spend their winters in the south, as is the wont of fashionable invalids, and come northward with the

spring, in quest of cooler quarters. Myriads of them cross the Mediterranean from Africa with the early siroccos, and descend upon Calabria and the Bay of Naples in those miraculous flights which Browning has immortalized in "The Englishman in Italy." Quail-netting is then a common industry of the country about Sorrento and Amalfi; thousands of the pretty little gray-and-buff birds are sent to market daily, with their necks wrung, and their beautiful banded heads, "specked with white over brown like a great spider's back," all dead and draggled. Many of the flocks stop on during the season among the vineyards in Italy; but other and more adventurous hordes, tired of southern slugs and fat southern beetles, wing their way still further north, to Germany, Scandinavia, England, and Scotland. At one time they were far from uncommon visitors in our southern counties; but brick and mortar have disgusted them, and their calls are nowadays liker to angels' visits than in the eighteenth century. Yet a few still loiter through the winter in Devonshire or Kerry; while in summer they still reach to the Orkneys, Shetland, and the Outer Hebrides.

Beautiful as quails are, both to look upon and to eat, they are not personally amiable or admirable creatures. Their character is full of those piquant antitheses which seventeenth-century satire delighted to discover in the human subject. They are gregarious, but unsociable; fond of company, yet notoriously pugnacious; abandoned polygamists, with frequent lapses into the strictest monogamy; fighters destitute of the sense of honour; faithless spouses, but devoted, affectionate, and careful mothers.

I fancy, too, they must have a wonderful instinct in the matter of commissariat, increased, no doubt, by ages of strategical evolution: for it can be by no means easy to find supplies for so large an army on the march; yet quails seem always so to time their arrival at each temporary stopping-place as exactly to fall in with some glut in the insect-market. Only a few days before they came here, for example, not a beetle was to be seen upon the parched-up heath; but day before yesterday it rained insects, so to speak; and last night one could hardly take a step down the Long Valley without crushing small beetles underfoot, against one's will, by the dozen. The quails must somehow have got wind of the fact that there was corn in Egypt, be it by scent, or scouts, or some mysterious instinct; and here they are to-night, swarming up in their thousands, to enter into possession of their ancestral heritage. You should see them wage war on the helpless longicorn! I hope they will nest here, as it is amusing to watch them. Each little Turk of a husband keeps a perfect harem of demure brown hens, looking slily askance from the corners of their eyes, and watches over them close by with all the jealousy of a Mahmoud or a Sultan Soleyman. The rival who tries to poach on his lordship's preserves has, indeed, a hard time of it; he will retire, well pecked, from his rash encounter. Quails, in fact, are still in the Mohammedan stage of social evolution, while our more advanced and enlightened English partridges have attained already to a civilized and Western domestic economy.

VIII.
IN LEAFLESS WOODS

Yes: these bare boughs, I take it, are not all pure loss. They have their consolations; they have their artistic and intellectual value. They show us, after all, the true inwardness of the tree; they enable us to realize, as none could otherwise do, the infinite diversity of architecture and ground-plan in the design and execution of the forest denizens. While dense masses of foliage clothe and obscure the boughs with their gay greenery we can gain but a rough idea of the underlying structure. But just as a Leonardo or a Luca Signorelli must needs pry beneath skin and muscle to discover the actual framework and bony supports of the body, so the lover of the trees desires from time to time to catch some glimpse of the very limbs and joints of oak or maple – to get rid of the green covering in favour of the naked underlying reality. So only can one enjoy the delicate lissom twigs of the silver birch, etched in tender grey against the hard blue sky; so only can one observe the forked upright branches of the Lombardy poplar, like natural candelabra, in striking contrast with the long hanging boughs of the weeping-willow, divided and subdivided into pendulous twigs, and losing themselves at last in fine spray of living threads, like a wind-driven cataract. Every kind of forest-dweller has thus its own special beauty of

architectural plan; and every one of them can be realized in all its naked grace and variety of outline only when relieved of the glorious green weight that so richly concealed it.

And bare boughs are instructive, too, as well as beautiful. They suggest to one the endless vicissitudes and cataclysms in the history of growth; they show us how the knotted trunk acquires its final form, and by what course of evolution branch added to branch builds up at last the whole noble shape of the buttressed beech or the spreading horse-chestnut. Take, for example, our dear old friend the ash. In summer you can hardly discern through a canopy of green the outline of his bent boughs, curved downwards by their own weight of heavy feathery foliage, each leaf a little branch with numerous spreading leaflets. But when autumn comes, and the heavy leaves drop off one by one, you get revealed at once the peculiar beauty of his mode of growth – that delicious combination of angular and curved form which makes the ash the acknowledged king of the winter woodland. All the branches dip gracefully in a long arch towards the end, and then rise again with an abrupt curve; this hooked type of terminal bough being so distinctive and so well marked an ashy feature that you can tell an ash by it afar off in its wintry nakedness as you whirl by in a train at a mile's distance, especially if it happens to be silhouetted against the sky on a bare ridge or hilltop. The growth of the oak, on the other hand, so gnarled and irregular, is quite equally characteristic; while the disposition of the buds soon reveals the fact that this very irregularity itself

owes its origin in the last resort to a survival of the fittest among many abortive branches. For the oak tries, as it were, to grow symmetrically like a conifer; but frost and wind play such havoc with its delicate young shoots that it never succeeds in realizing its ideal, but grows habitually distorted against its will by external agencies.

Nor does our winter leave us wholly leafless. Even in England we have a fair sprinkling of native-born evergreens. And I really don't know that I would wish them more frequent; for nothing can be more monotonous, more sickly sweet, than the unvarying green of tropical forests; while the grateful contrast of drooping birch twigs or big-budded bare oak branches with the dark and sombre verdure of our northern Scotch firs, is in itself one of the chief charms of English winter. During the Tertiary period, indeed, our English woods were full of large-leaved evergreens of the southern types – camphors and cinnamons, and rhododendrons and liquidambars; but with the coming on of the Great Ice Age those lush southern forms were driven southward for ever, leaving us only the Scotch fir, the yew, and the juniper, with a few broader-leaved kinds of shiny evergreen, of which holly, ivy, and box are the most familiar examples. These, with the exotic laurels and aucubas, the daphnes and the laurustinuses, are quite enough to diversify pleasantly our northern scenery. Then our recent acquisitions of exotic conifers, like the Douglas pines, the sequoias, and the beautiful glaucous firs, "the greenest of things blue, the bluest of things green," which now abound in

plantations, have done much to redeem the surviving reproach of the glacial epoch.

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