IN TOUCH WITH NATURE

BY

WILLIAM GORDON STABLES

Freeditorial

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter One.
Rowan-Tree Cottage.

"The merry homes of England!
Around their hearths by night,
What gladsome looks of household love
Meet in the ruddy light!
There, woman's voice flows forth in song
Or childhood's tale is told,
Or lips move tunefully along
Some glorious page of old."

Mrs Hemans.

"You're my Maggie May, aren't you?"

There was a murmured "Yes," and a tired and weary wee head was laid to rest on my shoulder.

We were all sitting round the log fire that burned on our low hearth, one wild night in winter. Outside such a storm was raging as seldom visits the southern part of these islands. It had been hard frost for days before, with a bright and cloudless sky; but on the morning of this particular day the blue had given place to a uniform leaden grey. The cloud canopy lowered, the horizon neared, then little pellets of snow began to fall no larger than millet-seeds, till they covered all the hard ground, and powdered the lawn, and lay on the laurel-leaves, and on the ivy that the sparrows so love. Gradually these pellets gave place to broad dry flakes of snow.

"How beautiful it was, falling so silently all day long,
All night long, on the mountains, on the meadows,
On the roofs of the living, on the graves of the dead."

Yes, silently it had come down, and by sunset it was some inches deep on every tree; and very lovely were the Austrian pines and spruce-firs on the lawn, with their branches bending earthwards under their burdens of snow.

But later in the evening a change had come over the spirit of the scene, and a wild wind had begun to blow from the east. It blew first with a moaning, mournful sound, that saddened one's heart to listen to; but soon it gathered force, and shrieked around the cottage, and tore through the leafless branches of the tall lime-trees with a noise that made both Frank and me think of gales and storms in the wide Atlantic.

Little Ida, our youngest tottie, was sitting on the hearth painting impossible birds of impossible colours, and using Sir John the Grahame's back as an easel. She shook her paint-brush at me as she remarked seriously, "She is my Maggie May, and ma's Maggie May, and Uncle Flank's Maggie May, and Sil John the Glahame's Maggie May." My wife looked up smiling from her sewing.

"Quite right, child," she said, "she is all our Maggie Mays."

"O! ma," remonstrated Ida, "that's not dood glammer. There touldn't be two Maggie Mays, tould there, pa?"

"Quite impossible," I replied; "but how would you say it?"

"I would say—'She is all of us's Maggie May.'"

Having put our grammar to rights, Ida went quietly on painting.

Maggie May, it will be gathered from the above, was a pet in the family circle: she certainly was at present, though not the baby either.

The facts of the case are as follows: Maggie May was an invalid. Not very long before this she had been lying on a bed of pain and illness, from which none of us had expected to see her rise. She was but a fragile flower at the best, but as her recent indisposition had been partly attributable to me, I had tenfold interest in getting her well and strong again.

It happened thus: our bonnie black mare Jeannie has been allowed to have a deal of her own way, and never starts anywhere till she has had a couple of lunch biscuits and a caress. After this she will do anything. I had driven the two girls over to a farm about eight miles from our cottage, and on the way back had occasion to call on a friend. "Stand quiet," I said; "Jeannie, I won't be long, and I'll bring you a biscuit." Jeannie tossed her tail and moved her ears knowingly as much as to say, "All right, master. Don't forget. A bargain is a bargain."

But woe is me! I did forget, completely; and when I jumped into the phaeton Jeannie refused to budge.

Well, I suppose I lost my temper. I flicked her with the whip. Then the mare lost hers. She screamed with rage, and next moment she was tearing along the road with the bit in her teeth at a fearful speed. All my efforts to control the speed of the runaway were in vain. Little Ida clung in terror to me; Maggie May sat firm, but pale.

On we rushed, luckily meeting nothing on the road. A whole mile was speedily pat behind us. But half a mile further on was the dismal dell called Millers' Dene, with the descent to it dangerous even at a walking pace. To attempt to take it, at the rate we were now moving, would be certain destruction. Could I check the mare before we reached the brow of the hill? I tried my utmost, but utterly failed.

Then my mind was made up. There were broad hedges at each side of the road, and no ditch between.

Summoning all my calmness and strength then, for a supreme effort, and just as we had reached the end of the level road, and the dreadful dene (a glen or ravine) lay deep down before us, with a sudden wrench I swerved the mare off the road and put her at the hedge.

It was a desperate remedy, but so far successful, and the only one really hurt was poor Maggie May.

It was one of those adventures one never forgets.

The child had received a terrible shock, and for weeks hovered 'twixt death and life. No wonder then that we made much of her, now we had her back amongst us once again; and that each of us did our best to nurse back the life and joy she had been almost bereft of for ever.

This needed all the more care, in that the shock had been purely nervous, and her mind, always sensitive, sympathised with her body.

Very pleasant, quiet, and delightful were the evenings we now spent at Rowan-Tree Cottage. We cared very little to-night, for instance, for the wild wind that was raging without, albeit we sometimes thought—not without a kind of shudder—of sailors far at sea, or of travellers belated in crossing the moors.

Uncle Frank—as we all called him—and I had constituted ourselves the story-tellers at these little fireside reunions. A right jolly, jovial sailor was Frank, with a big rough beard, tinged with grey, a weather-beaten face as brown as the back of a fiddle, and blue eyes that swam in fun and genuine good nature.

Frank had been everywhere by sea and land, and I myself have seen a bit of the world. It would have been strange indeed, then, if we could not have told stories and described scenes and events, from our experience, that were bound to interest all who listened.

Sometimes these experiences would be related in the form of conversations; at other times, either Frank or I had written our stories, and read them to our little audience.

Stories were interspersed with songs and the music of the fiddle. Frank was our sweet singer for the most part; he was also our musician. Flaying, however, on his part was never what you might call premeditated; something in the air, you might say, or in the state of our feelings, rendered music at times a necessity; then Frank would take up his instrument as quietly and mechanically as if it had been that meerschaum of his which, being a sailor, he was allowed to smoke.

Now, in the evenings, with his fiddle in his hand, Uncle Frank was simply complete. “An accomplished player?” did you ask. Perhaps not; certainly not what is called a trick-player. But the fiddle—O! call it not a violin—the fiddle when in Frank’s hand spoke and sang. They say that a good rider ought to appear part and parcel of the horse he bestrides. Frank seemed part and parcel of the instrument in his grasp. Bending lovingly over it, his brown beard floatingly on its breast, while he played, the fiddle verily seemed inspired with Frank’s own feelings and genius. And while you listened to the melting notes of some old Irish melody, the green hills of Erin would rise up before your mind’s eye, and the fiddle sang to you of the sorrows of that unhappy isle. Or the strains carried you away back through the half-forgotten past, to the days of chivalry and romance, when—

“The harp that once through Tara’s halls
  The soul of music shed.”

But in a moment the scene was changed, and Frank was playing a wild Irish jig which at once transported you to Donnybrook Fair. Paddy in all his glory is there; you think you can see him dancing on the village green, as he twirls his shilelagh or smokes his dudheen.

But anon Frank's fiddle, like the wand of a fairy, wafts us away to Scotland, and the tears come to our eyes as we listen to some plaintive wail of the days of auld lang syne, some sweet sad "lilt o' dool and sorrow."

Or we are transported to the times of the Jacobite rebellions, and as that spirited march or that wild thrilling pibroch falls on our ears we cannot help thinking that, had we lived in those old days, and heard such music then, we too might have fought for "Bonnie Prince Charlie."

It would be difficult to give the reader any very definite idea of the appearance of our cottage outside or inside. Though not very far from the village, it was so buried in trees of every sort—elms, oaks, lindens, chestnuts, pines, and poplars—that no photographer, or artist either, could ever sketch it. Much less can I. But just imagine to yourself all kinds of pretty shrubberies, and half-wild lawns, and rustic rose-clad arches, and quaint old gables, and verandahs over which the sweet-scented mauve wistaria fell in clusters in spring, when the yellow laburnum and the lilacs were in bloom. Let flowers peep out from every corner and nook—the snowdrop, the crocus, daffodil and primrose in April, with wild flowers on the lawns in summer, and syringas and roses even in the hedges; and people the whole place with birds of every size, from the modest wee wren or little tit to the speckled mavis and orange-billed blackbird, that sang every morning to welcome the sunrise; let wild pigeons croodle among the ivy that creeps around the poplar-trees, and nightingales make spring nights melodious; and imagine also all kind of coaxing walks, that seemed to lead everywhere, but never land one anywhere in particular; and you will have some faint notion what Rowan-Tree Cottage was like.

To be sure our place was most lovely in spring and summer, but it had a beauty of its own even in winter, when the snow lay thick on the lawns and terraces, and seemed to turn the trees into coral. We had pets out of doors as well as pets inside—wild pets as well as tame ones.

The former were chiefly the birds, but there were splendid great brown squirrels also, that used to run about the lawn with their immensities of tails trailing over the daisies, and that, if they heard a footstep, simply got up on one end the better to see who was coming: if it was any of us, they were in no hurry to disappear; but if a stranger hove in sight, then they fled up a neighbouring elm-tree with a celerity that was surprising.

There were tame dormice too, that peeped out from among the withered leaves or climbed about on the may-trees close beside our garden hammocks. They easily knew the shape of a stranger, or the voice of one either, and used to slide slily away if any person unfamiliar to them appeared on the scene.

“Listen to the wind,” said mamma; “why it seems to shake the very house!”

“It sounds like wild wolves howling round the door,” said Frank.

“But see how brightly the fire is glowing,” I remarked, in order to give a less dismal tinge to the situation.

Frank got up and went to the door to look out, but speedily returned. “Why,” he said, “it is almost impossible to breathe outside. It puts me in mind of some nights I spent during the winter of 187-, in the Polar Regions.”

“Tell us all about it, Frank; but first and foremost just put a few more logs on the fire.”

Frank quietly did as he was told, and presently such a glorious gleam was shed abroad as banished every feeling of gloom from our hearts.

Sir John the Grahame, our great wolfhound, who had been dreaming on the hearth and doing duty as Ida’s easel, begged leave to withdraw, and Ida herself drew her footstool back.

Frank took his fiddle and sat for some time gazing thoughtfully at the fire, with a smile on his face, playing meanwhile a low dreamy melody that we could have listened to long enough.

The air he was playing we had never heard before, but it seemed to refresh his memory and bring back the half-forgotten scenes of long ago. “If,” he began at last, still looking at the fire as if talking to that, “if you will take a map of the world—”

But stay. Frank’s story deserves a chapter all to itself, and it shall have it too.

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Chapter Two.

A Christmas in the Arctic Ocean.

"Here Winter holds his unrejoicing Court,
Here arms his winds with all-subduing frost,
Moulds his fierce hail, and treasures up his snows,
Throned in his palace of cerulean ice."

Thomson.

"If you will take a map of the world," began Frank, "and with a pin or a needle to direct you, follow one of the lines of longitude running south and north through England, up towards the mysterious regions round the Pole, you will find that this line will run right away through Scotland, through the distant Orkney and Shetland, past the lonely Faroe Isles till, with Iceland far on the left, you cross the Arctic Circle. Go north still, and still go north, and presently you will find yourself near to a little island called Jan Mayen, that stands all by itself—oh! so desolate-looking—right in the centre of the Polar ocean. In that lonely isle of the sea I spent my Christmas many years ago.

"What took me there, you ask me, Ida? I will tell you. I was one of the officers of a strongly built but beautiful steam yacht, and we had spent nearly all the summer cruising in the Arctic seas. For about three weeks we sojourned near an island on the very confines of the No-Man's land around the Pole, and nearly as far to the nor'ard as any soul has ever yet reached.

"We named this island the Skua, after our good yacht—a wild mountainous island it was, with never a trace of living vegetable life on it, but, marvellous to relate, the fossil remains of sub-tropical trees.

"I say we sojourned there, but this need not give you the idea that we stopped there of our own free will, for the truth is we were caught in a trap—a large one sure enough, but still a trap. We found ourselves one morning in the midst of an ocean lake, or piece of open water in the ice-field, as nearly circular as anything, and about four miles in width. We wanted to get out, but everywhere around us was a barrier of mountainous icebergs.

So, baffled and disappointed, we took up a position in the centre of the lake, blew off steam, banked our fires, and waited patiently for a turn in events.

“In three weeks’ time a dark bank of mist came rolling down upon us, and so completely enveloped our vessel that a man could not see his comrade from mast to mast.

“That same night a swell rose up in the lake, and the yacht rocked from side to side as if she had been becalmed in the rolling seas of the tropics, while the roar of the icebergs dashing their sides together, fell upon our ears like the sound of a battle fought with heavy artillery.

“But next day the swell went down, the motion had ceased, and we found to our joy that the great bergs had separated sufficiently to allow us to force a passage southwards through the midst of them. A very precarious kind of a passage it was, however, with those terrible ice-blocks, broader than the pyramids, taller than churches, at every side of us.

“South and south we now steamed, and the bergs got smaller and smaller, and beautifully less, till we came into the open sea, and so headed away more to the west.

“‘Boys,’ said our good captain one day, ‘this is a splendid breakfast.’ And a splendid breakfast it was. We had all sorts of nice things, beefsteaks and game pasties, fresh fish, and sea-birds’ eggs—the latter so beautiful in shape and colour that you hesitated a moment before you broke the shell, to say nothing of fragrant tea and coffee, and guava jam and marmalade to finish up with.

“‘Boys,’ said the captain again, as he helped himself to an immense piece of loon pie, ‘it is far too soon to go back to England yet, isn’t it?’

“‘Yes, much too soon.’

“‘Well, I’ve got an idea. Let us bear still more to the westward, and have a look at the island of Jan Mayen. We’ll get some fun there, I’ll be bound; it used to be quite uninhabited, you know, but I was told before leaving our own country that the Yankees—enterprising fellows—had resolved to build a walrus station there for summer months. Now, wherever you find Yanks in these seas, you find Yacks (a tribe of Innuits, of somewhat migratory tendencies). And between the two of them we ought to enjoy ourselves. Shall we go?’

“‘By all means,’ cried everybody.

“Well, we made the island easily enough, in about ten days’ time, and after sailing about halfway round it without seeing anything at all except immense cliffs of snow-capped rocks, against which the waves were beating with a noise like distant thunder, we found a kind of bay, with a beach on which boats could land. Into this we steamed boldly enough, and presently the noise of the anchor cable rattling over the bows seemed suddenly to awaken—it was early morning—the inhabitants of a curious little village that stood near the head of the bay. There was only one long low wooden hut, all the rest of the buildings being primitive in the extreme; indeed, they looked far more like gigantic mole-heaps than the residences of human beings.

“But forth the inhabitants all swarmed; at all events, to the number, I should think, of ’twixt thirty and forty, and a stranger-looking group of individuals it has never been my lot to witness.

“I guessed then, and I found afterwards I was right, that they consisted of men, women, and children; but the fun of the thing was that they were all dressed perfectly alike and looked alike, differing only in size. The dress of the men was composed of skins entirely; they were about five feet high, and broad in proportion. The dress of the women was identical; they were six inches shorter: and the children were all dressed just like their papas and mammas, so they looked like tiny old men and women. And when we landed and stood on the beach among these strange but harmless creatures we found them funnier-looking still; for they all had round, brown faces, all flat noses, and all little beads of eyes that seemed to twinkle with merriment, although nearly hidden by brown cheeks that seemed to shake every time they spoke.

“Amongst these strange people there was one tall figure who stood aside, all by himself, and didn’t laugh in the least. A Yankee he was, six feet four in his boots, if an inch. He was dressed from top to toe in the skin of a polar bear.

“‘Gentlemen,’ he said, presently, ‘if you’re quite done guffawing, perhaps you’ll permit me to welcome you to the island of Jan Mayen.’

“We were serious in a moment, took off our caps and apologised, and ten minutes afterwards we were rowing the Yankee off to breakfast.

“He told us, in the course of conversation, that he was head of the walrus station; that during his stay in the island they had got no end of ivory and blubber; that there was capital sport; and ended by saying:

“‘And now that ye’re come, gentlemen, I hope ye’ll stop and spend next Christmas with me.’

“We laughed at the very idea of spending Christmas in such a place; but little we knew.

“The Yankee was right, the sport was glorious; all sorts of Arctic birds and beasts fell to our guns, and weeks went by, and still we postponed our departure; but at last, one day, we determined to start.

“When we awoke, however, on the following morning, it was to find that during the night an immense shoal of heavy icebergs had floated in from the sea and entirely hemmed us in. The same day the frost set in.

“The captain first pulled a long face, then he laughed.

“‘Boys,’ he said, ‘we must make the best of a bad job. We are bound to stop here till spring.’

“October flew past, November died away, and before we knew where we were Christmas week came round. You see the time had gone quickly because we really had been enjoying ourselves.

“Yet I, for one, could not help contrasting my present position with what it would have been at home in old England. How different it was here! yet the very difference made it quite charming. Suppose that you had stood on the deck of our brave yacht and looked around; you would have seen that the whole bay was frozen over with thick black ice. No need for boats now, we could skate to the shore. Behind us, seaward, across the month of the bay, stretched a rugged wall of serrated icebergs; on each side of the bay were the ice-clad rocks; shoreward, as you turned your eye, there was first the Innuit village, then the land rose gradually upwards, a snow-clad valley rock-bound, till, in the far distance, behold a vast, towering mountain of ice.

“Now remember that we never saw the sun at this time; we had no day at all, nor had had for a whole month. But who can picture the glory of that Arctic night? My pen seems to quiver in my hand when I attempt to describe it to you. During this Christmas week we had no moon. We did not miss the moon any more than we missed the sun. But we had the stars; and somehow, away up in these regions of the Pole, we seemed nearer to the heavens; anyhow, those stars appeared as large as saucers and as bright as suns, and the sky’s blue between them was blue.

“We had the stars, then, but we had something else; we had the Aurora Borealis, in all its splendour of colour and shape. At home we see the Aurora on clear frosty nights only, as a bow of white scintillating lights above the northern horizon. Here we were dwelling

in the very home of the Aurora; it stretched from east to west above us, a broad belt of radiant coloured lights. It was a gorgeous scene.

“I have said that the bay in which our yacht lay was all frozen over; but this is not strictly true, because there was one portion of it, about half an acre in extent, and lying close under the barrier of icebergs, which was always kept open. This piece of open water was not only our fishing-ground, but it was a breathing-spot for many sea-mammals.

“During this happy but strange Christmas week we had all sorts of fun on board, and all kinds of games on the ice. Skating under the Aurora! why, you should have seen us; a merrier party you never looked upon.

“‘Boys,’ said the captain one morning, ‘I’m going to give those Innuits a Christmas dinner.’

“‘Hurrah!’ we all cried. ‘What fun it will be!’

“Christmas came at last, and preparations had been made to spend it cheerfully for more than a week beforehand.

“After service—and how impressive the service was, held on the deck of that Aurora-lighted ship, I shall never forget—after service, we all rushed down to dinner. We were to have ours early, because the Yacks’ entertainment was to be the great event of the twenty-four hours.

“After our dinner we had songs and pleasant talk—the pleasantest of talk; for we chatted of the dear ones at home, who probably at that very moment were fondly thinking of us. The men forward enjoyed themselves in like manner. Then the cry was ‘Hurrah! for the shore.’

“A large marquee, which we had on board, had been erected, and in this tent we found all the male and female Yacks assembled. Expectant Captain Bob, who commanded the Innuits, and was the merriest of them all, sat at the head of the great deal table, and on one side of him was his wife, Oily, on the other his pet sister, Shiny. Both Shiny and Oily were all on the titter with joy.

“When the great pudding was carried in on a hand-barrow and placed in front of Captain Bob, the astonishment on the faces of these funny little folk was extreme; but when the brandy was ignited on the top of the pudding, then up started Captain Bob and every Yack in the room, and a wild rush was made for the door. But peace was soon restored, and this king of puddings served. It was well it was a large one; it was well

there were two more of the same size to follow, and I do believe if there had been half a dozen they would have found room for them. No wonder that when they had eaten and drunk until more than satisfied they rose up to dance. As they danced, too, they chanted a wild, unearthly kind of a song, each verse ending in 'Ee-ay-ee,' from the women, and 'Oh! ah! oh!' from the men.

"At last there was a dead silence, and all the Yacks flocked together, and presently out from their midst came Captain Bob—not willingly, for Oily and Shiny were shoving him along, yard by yard, with many a slap on his sheepish shoulders.

"'Go 'long wid you,' they were saying; 'de capitan man not eat ye. Plenty quick go.'

"'What is it, Bob?' said the captain.

"'They want more pudding,' said shy Bob.

"'Ah!' cried Captain Browning, laughing; 'I thought that would be the cry. Steward, bring up the last two puddings, positively the last.'

"The puddings were cold—they were frozen; and this is how they were served: they were simply rolled like bowling balls into the midst of them.

"And here I drop the curtain. We went away and left them scrambling over their frozen fare.

"When spring returned, with many a blessing following us, we steamed away south, and in due time reached dear old England once again; but no one who was on board the saucy Skua is likely to forget that Christmas we spent in the Arctic Sea."

"So now good-night, Maggie May, and good-night all," said Uncle Frank, getting up and laying his fiddle as carefully aside as if it had been a living, breathing thing.

"I'll sleep soundly to-night," he added.

"The wind in the trees won't keep you awake," I said, laughing.

"Quite the reverse, lad," replied Frank; "I shall take it for the sound of the waves, and dream I am far away at sea."

And after he had gone aloft, as he called it, we could hear that deep manly voice of his, trolling forth a verse of that grand old hymn:

“Rocked in the cradle of the deep,
I lay me down in peace to sleep;
Secure I rest upon the wave,
For Thou, O Lord! hast power to save.”

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Chapter Three.

Birds and Beasts in Winter.—The Owl and the Weasel.

"O! Nature, a' thy shows and forms
To feeling pensive hearts have charms,
Whether the summer kindly warms
Wi' life and light,
Or winter howls in gusty storms
The lang dark night."

Burns.

Our birds out of doors had all a pitiful tale to tell next morning. Not that they had any reason to complain of the boisterousness of the weather, for the wind, after blowing the snow into the most fantastic of wreaths that blocked the roads and walks, and shut us quite up and away from the village, had retired to the cave of its slumber, wherever that may be. The sun, moreover, was shining from a sky of brightest blue, and the trees were like trees of coral, yet the frost was intense.

So while Buttons proceeded to feed the dogs—always an interesting operation—and I stood by looking on, the birds came round us in flocks. The robin, of course, was the tamest; he would almost eat from my hand: later on he did.

This was our own particular robin, who had come backwards and forwards for years, and knew every one of us, I verily believe, by name.

"It is terrible weather, isn't it," he said to me confidentially; "there is nothing to eat; everything is covered up, and the worms have all gone down a yard beneath the earth to keep themselves cosy. My feet are almost frozen!"

"That is right," he added; "I cannot live without a little animal food, and this shredded morsel of sheep's-head is delicious. Some feed their birds in winter on crumbs alone. They ought to study their habits, and add a bit of meat now and then. There, don't go away till I finish my breakfast, because, the moment you are off, down comes Mr Thrush and gobbles up the lot."

“But,” I said, “you’re not afraid of the sparrows.”

“I’m not afraid of a few of them, though five is more than I can fight, and often ten come. They are cowardly creatures in the main.”

“Now, Buttons,” I said, “as soon as you have fed the dogs give them all a romp in the snow; then set up the birds’ sheaf.”

I alluded to a custom we have at our place of giving the birds a Christmas-tree, whenever there is snow on the ground. It is a plan taught us by the Norwegians, and I would rejoice to think it was universally adopted; for surely we ought to feed well in winter the birds that amuse and delight us when summer days are fine.

The Christmas-tree is simply a little sheaf of oats or wheat tied to the top of a small spruce-fir. It is positively a treat to see with what delight they cluster round it.

Another good plan—which gives much amusement, as witnessed from the dining-room window—is to tie up a little sheaf of oats by a string to the branch of a tree.

Tie also up some scraps of meat, and, if you have it, a few poppy-heads for the tits. The poppy-heads must be gathered and garnered in autumn, being cut down before they are too ripe, and with long stalks attached to them.

I am not sure that the seeds are not almost capable of intoxicating the birds, but they do so luxuriate in them, that I have not the heart to deny them the delight.

Here is an excerpt from my diary of this winter before the snowstorm came on:

“December 19.—It is a bright beautiful day. The garden-paths are hard. The grass on lawns and borders is crisp and white with the hoar-frost that has fallen during the night. Though it is past midday, the sun makes no impression on it. There isn’t the slightest breath of wind, nor is there a leaf left on the lofty trees to stir if it did blow. A still, quiet, lovely winter’s day.

“But I do not think the birds are at all unhappy yet. The blackbirds and the thrushes are still wild. They have not come near the door yet to beg for food. But the sparrows have, and eke cock-robin. The latter has just eaten about a yard of cold boiled macaroni, and now sits on an apple-tree and sings loud and clearly a ringing joyous song of thanksgiving. I cannot help believing that he looks upon poor me as only an instrument in the hands of the kind Providence, who seeth even the sparrow fall.

“Perhaps even the sparrows are thankful, though music is not much in their line. These gentry are not particular what they eat, and it is surprising how soon they make away with a soaked dog’s biscuit, if one be left in their way, or a pound or two of the boiled liver that Hurricane Bob is so very fond of. The old nests of these birds are still up in the wistaria-trees that cover the front, or one of the fronts, of the cottage. Those nests are crowded with the birds at night. They have used them now for two seasons, simply re-lining them. Memo: to pull them all down as soon as the days get warmer; laziness should not be encouraged even in sparrows.

“December 21.—The weather is still hard and calm. Cock-robin had a sad story to tell me this morning. He looked all wet and draggled and wretched, quite a little mop of a robin.

“‘Whatever have you been doing, Cockie?’ I asked. ‘Have you had an accident?’

“‘Accident, indeed!’ replied Cockie. ‘No, it was no accident, but a daring premeditated attempt at parricide.’

“‘Parricide,’ I cried, ‘you don’t mean to say that your son—’

“‘O! but I do though,’ interrupted Cockie. ‘You know, sir, that he follows me to the door, and attempts to take the bit out of my mouth, and you’ve seen me fling him a piece of meat.’

“‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘and then try to chase him away, and the young rascal runs backwards, and sings defiance in your face.’

“‘True, sir; and to-day, when I tried to reason with him, he flew right at me—at his father, sir—and toppled me heels over head into the water-vat, and I’m sure I’ve caught a frightful cold already.’

“‘There’s a fire in my study, Cockie, if you care to go in.’

“‘No, thank you, sir, I’ll sit in the sun.’

“December 22.—The weather gets colder and colder. I interviewed a speckle-breasted thrush to-day, who had come to the garden-room-door to be fed.

“‘On winter nights,’ I asked, ‘do you not suffer very much from the cold?’

“The bird looked at me for a moment with one big bright eye and said:

"'No, not as a rule. You see we retire early, always seeking shelter at sunset, and generally going to the self-same spot night after night, for weeks or months; for all the winter through we can do with quite a deal of sleep. Yes, as you say, we make up for it in spring and early summer, when we sing all the livelong day and seldom have more than four hours of rest. We rest in winter under the shelter of a hedge or tree, or eave, away from the prevailing wind.

"'In winter we are more warmly feathered all over, though our garments are less gay than in summer, when we have to appear on the stage, as it were. Even our heads are well clad, and when perched on a bough our toes are covered, and we hardly feel the cold a bit.

"'But at times in winter it is bad enough, for when the snow covers the frozen ground we get but little warmth-giving food. This alone prevents us from sleeping soundly; and sometimes the wind gets high and rages through the trees, and we get blown right off our perches. Then, as it is all dark, we are glad to huddle in anywhere, and many of us get snowed up, and never see the glad sunshine any more.

"'Wet is even worse than snow, and if there is wind as well as wet we are very numbed and wretched. Then the night seems so long, and we are so glad when day breaks at last, and the warm sunshine streams in through the bushes.'"

Our little village was so truly small and so unsophisticated, that with the exception of the clergyman and doctor it could boast of nothing at all in the shape of society, while the families in the country districts were mostly honest farmer-folk, who had seen but little of the outside world, and only heard of it by reading the weekly paper. Their talk was chiefly about growing crops and live stock, so that, interesting though this might be, neither my friend Frank nor myself had much temptation to leave home on winter evenings.

But we had plenty to talk about nevertheless, and I cannot help saying that it would be a blessing to themselves if the thousands of country families, situated as we were, would cultivate the art of instructive conversation and story-telling. Science gossip is infinitely to be preferred to fireside tattle about one's neighbours, to say nothing of its being free from ill-nature, and elevating to the mind instead of depressing.

About a week before Christmas, my wife was busy one evening trimming an opera-cloak for Maggie May—would she ever wear it, I wonder—with some kind of grebe.

"Is it grebe?"

“Yes, it is the skin of a grebe of some kind,” was the reply; “but there are so many different kinds, in this country find America.”

“A kind of duck, isn’t it?”

“Or a kind of gull?”

“Betwixt and between, one might say. Grebes are nearly allied to the great Northern Diver, but their feet are not, like his, quite webbed. They frequent the seashore and rivers by the sea, and live on fish, frogs, and molluscs of any sort. Their nests are often built to float among the reeds, and to rise and fall with the tide.”

“When I get an opela-cloak,” said Ida, “I’ll have it tlimmed with elmine.”

“Why with ermine, Ida?”

“Because the Queen had elmine on, in the waxwork.”

“Yes; and the ermine is only a weasel after all, and all summer it wears a dress of red-brown fur, which speedily gets bleached to white, when the thermometer stands below zero.”

“No, Frank, I haven’t seen my weasel for some time. He is dozing in some snug corner, you may be sure; and really, Frank, I believe the subject of hibernation is but very imperfectly understood. I don’t want to go into the matter at present physiologically, except to say that it seems to be a provision of Nature for the protection of species; and that a variety of animals and creatures of all kinds that we little wot of, hibernate, more or less completely. We see sometimes, in the dead of winter, a beautiful butterfly—a red Admiral, perhaps—suddenly appear and dance about on a pane of glass. We wonder at it. It is not a butterfly’s ghost at all, but a real butterfly, who had gone to sleep in a snug corner of the room, and has now awakened probably only to die.

“I found an immense knot of garden worms, the other day, deep down in garden mould. They were sleeping away the cold season.

“But, talking about weasels, I’ll tell you a story, Ida.”

The Owl and the Weasel.

“From yonder ivy-mantled tower,

The moping owl doth to the moon complain,
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign."

"By what you tell me," I said, "I can now guess where all my wild rabbits have gone."

I was talking to a weasel. And indeed the weasel seemed talking to me, for he stood upon his hind-legs, on the balcony, staring in at me through the French window that opens from my study on to the long shady lawn. As I did not move, he had a good look at me, and I think he felt satisfied that I was not likely to harm him.

"Yes," I continued; "under that verandah, under the wooden balcony where you now stand, used to dwell six wild rabbits, and did I not delight to see them gambolling on the grass on the early summer mornings, the while the blackbirds, the thrush, and the mavis enjoyed the bath placed on purpose for them under the shade of the scented syringas."

"Well," replied the weasel, with a little toss of the head, "I dwell there now, and very comfortable I find the quarters."

"And the rabbits?" I inquired.

"Good morning!" said the weasel, and it departed.

The weasel often came to see me in this fashion, and sometimes, when I took my chair outside of an evening, he would suddenly appear at the far end of the balcony.

"O, you're there, are you?" he would seem to say, quite saucily. "Well, don't trouble yourself getting up; I sha'n't stop."

I had often wished to have a tame weasel; but though my present visitor was not afraid of me, and I know it took the milk I used to put down for it in a small bit of broken basin, I could never make a real pet of it.

But one bright lovely day I was passing along in the country on my tricycle. It was a lonesome upland, where I was travelling, with neither hedge nor ditch on either side of the road, only green grass and trees, with here and there a bush of golden furze. I was going along at no extra speed, but thoroughly enjoying myself; still, I put on all the power I could after a time, and seemed to fly towards what appeared to be an immense black snake hurrying across the broad pathway. This snake, however, on a nearer inspection, resolved itself into one mother weasel and five young ones, all in a row. Seeing me dismount, the old mother hurriedly snatched up one of her little ones,

perhaps her favourite, and in a few moments they were out of sight, far away in the thicket. Nay, not all of them, for here was one entangled in the rank grass by the pathway. What should I do with it? If its mother did not return it would very likely be left to perish. “Ah! I have it,” I thought, “I will take it home and tame it and keep it as a pet.” It needed some taming, too, young as it was; this I soon found when I commenced to capture it, but not without considerable risk to my fingers; but at last I had it secure in my tricycle basket.

I must at once confess that I was not successful in my endeavours to domesticate this poor wee weasel. As far as a cage could be, its abode was palatial; it had the warmest and softest of nests, and everything to tempt its palate that I could think of; but although it came to know and not fear me in a very few weeks, yet it never seemed perfectly content, and seemed to long for the wild woods—and its mother.

And at last the poor little mite died, and I buried it in a tiny box under a bush, and vowed to myself as I did so that I would never take any wild thing away from its mother again.

Some people would tell you that you ought to destroy stoats and weasels whenever you see them. I myself think you ought not, because, although they do sometimes treat themselves to a young leveret, or even a duckling or chicken, they should be forgiven for this when we consider the amount of good they do, by destroying such grain-eating animals as rats and mice, to say nothing of our garden-pests, the moles.

Even the owl is a very useful bird of prey, because he works by night, when hawks have gone to sleep. Like many human thieves and robbers, mice like to ply their pilfering avocation after nightfall, and they might do so with impunity were it not for those members of the feathered vigilance committee—the owls.

Now, so long as an owl does his duty, I think he has a right to live, and even to be protected; but even an owl may forget himself sometimes, and be guilty of indiscretion. When he does so, he has only himself to blame if evil follow.

There was once a particularly well-to-do and overweeningly ambitious owl, who lived in an old castle, not far from the lovely village of Fern Dene.

“Oh!” he said to himself one bright moonlight night, as he sat gazing down on the drowsy woodland and the little village with its twinkling lights; “I should like a repetition of last night’s feast—a tasty young weasel. Oh! I would never eat mouse again, if I could always have weasel.” And he half closed his old eyes with delight as he spoke.

“And why not?” he continued, brightening up; “there were five of them, and I only had one. So here I go.”

And away flew the owl out of the topmost window of the tower, and flapping his great lazy wings in the air, made directly over the trees to the spot where the weasel had her nest.

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said one bat to another, “if our friend Mr Owl finds more than his match to-night.”

Farmer Hodge, plodding wearily homewards through the moonlight, about half an hour after, was startled by a prolonged and mournful shriek that seemed close to his ear, while at the same time he saw something dark rising slowly into the sky. He watched it for many minutes; there was another scream, but a fainter one higher up in the air; then the something dark grew darker and larger, and presently fell at his feet with a dull thud. “What could it be?” he wondered as he stooped to examine it. Why a great barn-owl with a weasel fast to its neck. Were they dead? Yes, both were dead; but one had died bravely doing its duty and defending its homestead; the other was a victim to unlawful ambition.

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Four.

Away in the Woods.

"Come to the woods, in whose mossy dells,
A light all made for the poet dwells;
A light, coloured softly by tender leaves,
Whence the primrose a mellower glow receives.

"The stock-dove is there in the beechen tree,
And the lulling tone of the honey-bee;
And the voice of cool waters, 'midst feathery fern,
Shedding sweet sounds from some hidden urn."

"I went up with the dogs this morning," I said one evening, "to see how my woodland study looked in winter."

"You did not do any work?"

"I did indeed. It was so warm under my great oak-tree, that I could not resist the temptation of sitting down and writing fully half a chapter of a new tale."

It is a clear sunny day, with the ground flint-hard with the frost. The leaves are still on the bramble-bushes, so dear to school-children when autumn days ripen the big luscious-looking black and bronze berries. The leaves also closely cover yonder little beech-trees. The furze is of a dark olive-green colour, covered here and there with patches of white, where the hoar-frost lodges, and with spots of brightest yellow when the blossoms still flourish. There are buds on the leafless twiglets of the oak, though the tree still soundly sleeps, and the ground is everywhere covered with moss and broken mast. Not a sound is there to break the stillness of the winter's morning, save now and then the peevish twitter of a bird among the thorns, or the cry of a startled blackbird, while now and then a rabbit goes scurrying across the glade, stopping when at a safe distance to eye me wonderingly. How different it all is from Nature here in her summer garb.

My Woodland Study in Summer.

It is an open glade in the middle of a pine-wood. Not all green and level is this glade, with trees standing round in a circle, like the clearings in forests of the Far West, which I used to read of in the novels of Cooper and that so bewitched me when a boy. No, for judging from the rough and rutty pathway that leads up to it, and from the numerous banks and hillocks in it, there can be no doubt that, in far distant days of the past, gravel must have been dug and carted hence.

The wood itself—glade and all—stands on a hill. At any time of the day I have but to ascend one of these furze-clad banks to catch a view the beauty of which can hardly be surpassed by any other scene in bonnie Berkshire. It is warm to-day—'tis the 1st of August—and there lies a greyish-purple haze over all the landscape, that tones and softens it. The nearer trees, just beyond the field down there where the sheep are feeding, the stately ashes, the spreading elms and planes, and the towering poplars, stand out green and clear in the sunshine; but the hills beyond the valley of the Thames and the trees along its banks have a blotted, blurred, and unfinished look about them, but are very charming to behold nevertheless, all the more in that, here and there, you catch glimpses of the silvery river itself, reflecting the glorious sunshine.

Down yonder is the road that leads past my pine-wood. You could not help noticing that it is very beautiful. It is a road of yellow gravel, bounded on each side, first by broad grassy banks on which rich white clover blooms and yellow celandines are conspicuous, and next by a wild indescribable tangle of a hedge. It had been originally blackthorn, but has been so cut back that many other bushes and weeds far less easily offended have asserted their independence, and tower over it or swamp it. Yes, but, taken as a whole, it must be confessed they swamp it in beauty. Yonder are patches of dark-leaved nettles, yonder clumps of orange-brown seedling docks, side by side with lofty spreading pink-eyed iron-weed. Yonder is a canopy of that marvellous creeper the white briony: very small are their little greenish-white flowerets, but what a show their myriads make, and the clusters of its berries, green and crimson, rival in beauty those of the blue-petalled woody nightshade that are growing there as well. High over the hedgerow stands the yellow tansy and the wild parsley, while in it, under it, and scattered hero and there are the crimson glow of field poppies, the orange gleam of leopard's bane, and starry lights from ox-eyed daisies.

The banks or hillocks in my woodland study—among which you may wander as in a labyrinth, lose your way, and finally perhaps, much to your surprise, find yourself back again at the very place whence you started—are clothed with tall furze-bushes; their yellow blossoms have faded and fallen, and downy seed-pods that crackle in the sunshine, as they split and scatter their seeds, have taken their place, but the beauty of these blossoms is hardly missed, for over and through the dark-green furze the brambles creep and trail, dotting them over with clusters of pink-white bloom.

If you went close to these trailing brambles, you would find that each cluster of bloom had a bee or two at work on it. There are plenty of the bees of commerce there, dressed in homespun garb of unassuming grey or brown, quite suitable for the work they have to do—make honey for the humble cottagers that dwell in the village nestling among the trees down yonder. But besides these, there are great gaudy bees that go droning from blossom to blossom, clad in velvet, with stripes of orange, white, or red, each arrayed in his own tartan, one might say, each belonging to his own clan or ilk. Here is a great towering thistle—emblem of Scotland, pride of her sons. How beautiful the broad mauve-coloured, thorn-protected flowers are, and on each of them is one of the aforesaid big tartan bees, and on some there are two revelling in the nectar there distilled! Now do those Scottish thistles exude a kind of whisky, I wonder, or rather a kind of Athole brose (a mixture of honey and whisky). Whether they do or not, one thing must be patent to the eyes of all observers—those tartan bees do positively become intoxicated on those Scottish thistle-tops; from other flowers they gather honey in quite a business sort of a way, but once they alight upon the thistle they are down for the day. They soon become so drowsy that they don't care to move, and if you go near them they hold up their forelegs and shako them at you in a deprecating sort of a way.

"For goodness' sake," they seem to say, "don't come here to disturb us; go away and look after your business, if you happen to have any, only don't come here."

If you are an early bird, you may find some of those bees asleep on the thistle-tops at six o'clock in the morning, the down on their backs all bedraggled, and dew on their wings, evidence enough that they have not been home at all, and mean to make another day of it.

Shrub-like oaks, stunted willows, and dark-berried elders also grow on the banks among the furze and the bramble, and here and there a patch of purple heath.

Between the little hills the ground is level, but carpeted over with grass and moss, and a profusion of dwarfed wild flowers of every tint and colour under the sun.

The wood itself is of fir and larch pine, with here and there a gigantic and widely spreading oak. There are dark spruce thickets too, much frequented by wood-pigeons—I can hear their mournful croodling now—and there are darker thickets still, where the brown owl sits blinking and nodding all day long, till gloaming and starlight send him out, with the bat, to see after supper.

It is under the shadow of a splendid oak-tree, which overhangs a portion of my glade, that I mostly write, and under it my little tent is pitched, the shelter of which I only

court when a shower comes on, being, like every other wild creature, a thorough believer in the benefits of a life spent in the fresh open air.

Yonder hangs a hammock in which, when tired, I may lounge with a book, or, soothed by the sweet breath of the pine-trees, and lulled by the whisper of wind and leaf, sleep.

But when work is done, hammock, tent and all are packed upon or behind my tricycle, which, like a patient steed, stands there waiting to bear me to my home in the valley.

My woodland study is fully five-hundred feet above the level of the sea, and yet it is easy to see from the size, shape and surface of the pebbles all around me, that this glade was once upon a time a portion of the ocean's bed; that glass-green waves once rippled over those banks where the furze now grows; that congers and flat fish once wriggled over the gravel where those thistles are blooming; and that thorny-backed crabs used to lie perdu in the holes where dormice now sleep in winter.

I pick up one of those pebbles and throw it—well, just in yonder among the whins; where the stone has alighted a wild old fox has a den, and she has cubs too in spring-time; so I am not the only wild creature that frequents these solitudes. Oh no; for apart from the birds, who all know me, and do pretty much as they please, there are mice and moles in the grass, and high aloft orange-brown squirrels that leap from tree to tree, besides rabbits in dozens that scurry around the hillocks and play at hide-and-seek. At this very moment up on yonder bank sits a hare; his ears are very much pricked, and he is looking towards me, but as he is chewing something, in a reflective kind of way, he cannot be very much alarmed. And only last evening I saw a large hedgehog trotting across my glade, dragging behind him a long green snake, a proof, methinks, that innocent hoggie is fond of something more solid than black beetles and juicy slugs as a change of diet.

With the exception of an occasional keeper, wandering in pursuit of game, no human being ever disturbs the sanctity of my woodland study; and no sound falls on my ears, except the distant roar of a passing train, the song of linnets, and croodle of turtle-dove and cushat.

Sometimes, in blackberry season, far down in yonder copse, I can hear the laughing voices of children at work among the brambles. Just under a furze-bush, not five yards from the spot where I am now reclining, a pheasant some time ago brought forth a brood of young. She never used to move when I went close to her, only looked up in my face, as much as to say, "I don't think you are likely to disturb me, but I mean to stick to my nest whatever happens."

There is something new to be seen and studied in this woodland haunt of mine all the year through. What a wondrous volume is this book of Nature! I honestly declare that if I thought I had any chance of living for, say a couple of thousands of years, I would go in for the study of natural history in downright earnest, and at the end of even that time, I daresay, I should feel just as ignorant as I do now.

But I don't come to my woodland study to laze, be assured; a good deal of honest work is done in this sylvan retreat, as many a London editor can testify. Only, there are half-hours on some days when a drowsy, dreamy sensation steals over me, and I pitch my pen away and lie on the moss and chew the white ends of rushes, and think.

It is, say, a beautiful day in mid-July. There are wondrous clouds up yonder, piled mass on mass, with rifts of bright blue between, through which the sun shines whenever he gets a chance. There is a strip of sunshine, even now, glittering on those feathery seedling grasses, and varnishing them as it were. It is gone, and a deal of beauty goes with it.

It is close and sultry and silent, and with half-shut eyes I take to studying the liliputians that alight with fairy feet on my manuscript, or creep and crawl across it.

Here is a gnat—the Culm communis—a vast deal too communis in these wilds, especially at eventide, but my hands have long ago been rendered proof against their bites à la Pasteur. This is a new-born culex; he hardly knows what the world is all about yet. But how fragile his limbs, how delicate his wings! These last are apt to get out of order, a breath of wind may do damage, a raindrop were fatal. This gnat has lost a leg, but that does not seem to interfere in the least degree with his enjoyment of life. He is a philosopher, five legs are fun enough; so away he flies.

Here are some small spiders—crimson ones. There are other tiny ones, too tiny yet to build a web, so they stalk for wee unwary flies.

Here comes a great mother spider, quite a Jumbo among the others; she walks quickly across the sheet, but, strange to say, half a dozen pin-head young ones are clinging to her, and now and then she drops one, and it quite unconcernedly goes to work to make its own living. Fancy human parents getting rid of their offspring in this way! No such luck, many will add.

Skipjacks go jumping about on my paper, clicking like little watches; the very clowns of insect-life are these. Elateridae is the long name they go by in history.

Here is a little scoundrel no bigger than the dot of the letter “i,” but when I touch him with the point of a blade of grass, hey! presto! he has jumped high in air and clean over twenty lines of my ruled foolscap—i.e., more than a hundred times the length of himself. How I envy him the ability and agility to jump so!

Here is a wee Anobium, as big as a comma; he can’t jump, but he knows his way about, and when I touch him he shams dead. He has a big brother, called the death-watch, and he does the same.

But here comes a bigger jumper, and here another; one is yellow and the other brown. In a day or two the yellow one will be as dark as the other. They are Aphrophorae. They were born in a spittle, for so the country folks term the frothy morsels of secretion we see clinging to such herbs as sour-dock. Let them hop; I am not going to take their lives on this lovely day, albeit they do much harm to my garden crops.

But here is a bigger arrival, a Saltatorial gryllide, a lovely large sea-green grasshopper; his immense ornamental hinder legs put you in mind of steam propellers. He is on my blotting-paper, watching me with his brown wise-looking eyes, ready for a leap at a moment’s notice. I lift my hand to brush a gnat from my ear: whirr! he is off again and out of sight. He doesn’t care where he flies to, and when he does spring away into infinity he can’t have the slightest notion where he will land. What a happy-go-lucky kind of life! What a merry one! He toils not, neither does he spin; he travels where and when he pleases; there is food for him wherever he goes, and nothing to pay for it. A short life, you say? There is no one can prove that, for one hour may seem as long to him as a year to you or to me. To be sure a bird may bolt him, but then he dies in the sunshine and it is all over in a moment.

Here is a tiny elongated Coleopterite who, as soon as he alights for a rest, folds away his wings under his tippet (elytra). He does not bite them off as some silly she-ants do. For as soon as the sun blinks out again this insect will unfold his wings and be off once more, and he may perhaps alight in some human being’s eye before evening and be drowned in a tear.

There are some of an allied species, but so very very tiny that when they get on to my manuscript while I am writing, they are as bewildered as I have been before now on an Arctic ice-field. Perhaps they get a kind of snow-blind. At all events they feel their way about, and if they chance to come to a word I have just written, they dare not cross it for fear of getting drowned—every stroke of my pen is to one of these wee mites a blue rolling river of ink. So they’ve got to walk round.

Here is a new-born Aphis (green-fly). It is still green. It has not been bronzed yet, and its wings are the most delicate gauze. It does not seem to know a bit what to do, or where to go, or what it has been put into the world for, any more than a human philosopher.

This wee thing takes advantage of a glint of sunshine and essays to fly, but a puff of wind catches him, and, as "the wind bloweth where it listeth," he has to go with it. He will be blown away and away, thousands and thousands of midges' miles away. He will never come back to this part of the wood, never see any of his relations—if he has any—again. Away and away, to the back of the north wind perhaps; he may be swallowed by a bat or a sand-marten; he may be impaled on a thorn or drowned in a dewdrop, or alight on the top of a pond and get gobbled up by a minnow; but, on the other hand, he may be blown safe and sound to some far-off land beyond the Thames, settle down, get married, and live happy for ever afterwards.

Clack—clack—clack—clack! A great wild pigeon has alighted on the pine-tree above me. I have been so quiet, she does not know I am here. I cough, and click—clack—click go her wings, and off she flies sideways, making a noise for all the world like the sound of that whirling toy children call "a thunder-spell."

But she has knocked down a cone. It is still green, but somehow the sight of it takes me far away north to bonnie Scotland, and I am roaming, a boy once more, on a wild moorland, where grow, here and there, tiny pine-trees—seedlings, that owe their habitat, if not existence, to the rooks, who have carried cones like these from the forests. Like Byron, "I rove a young Highlander o'er the dark heath."

"I arise with the dawn, with my dog as my guide,
From mountain to mountain I'm bounding along,
I am breasting the billows of Dee's rushing tide,
And hear at a distance the Highlander's song."

I close my eyes, and it all comes back, that wild and desolate but dearly-loved scene; the banks where lizards bask; the "pots" and the ponds in that broad moor, where teal-ducks swim, and near which the laughing snipe has her nest; I hear the wild whistle of the whaup or curlew, and the checker of the stone-hatch in the cairn. I am wading among crimson heath and purple heather, where the crowberry and cranberry grow in patches of green. And now I have wandered away to the deep, dark forest itself; and near to a kelpie's pool, by the banks of a stream, I lay me down to rest. There are myriads of bees in the lime-trees above, through which the sunshine shimmers, lighting up the leaves to a tenderer green, but the bees begin to talk, and the murmuring stream begins to sing, and presently I find myself in Elfin-land, in the very midst of a fairy revel.

The “Midsummer Night’s Dream” is a masterpiece of art, but nothing to this. That was a mere phantasy; this is a reality. This is—

“Pa! papa!”

I start up. I am still in my woodland study. But a sweet young face is bending over me, and tender eyes are looking into mine.

“Pa, dear, how sound you have been asleep! Do you know it is nearly sunset?”

“Have I? Is it?” I reply, smiling. “I thought, Ida, you were queen of Elfin-land.”

It is my tiny daughter who has come toddling up to the wood to seek for me.

Three minutes after this, we are tooling down the hill homewards, and Ida—my own little queen of the elves—is seated on the cycle beside me.

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Five.

Summer Life in Norland Seas.

"To the ocean now I fly
And those Norland climes that lie
Where Day never shuts his eye."

"And nought around, howe'er so bright,
Could win his stay, or stop his flight
From where he saw the pole-star's light
Shine o'er the north."

It was no wonder that, with the snow lying deep around our dwelling, and the storm-wind rattling our windows of a night, and howling and "howthering" around the chimnies, both Frank's thoughts and my own should be carried away to the wild regions of the Pole, where both of us had spent some years of our lives; or that I should have been asked one night to relate some of my experiences of Greenland seas and their strange animal inhabitants, seals and bears among the rest.

I related, among other things—

How Seals are Caught in Greenland.

"That sealing trip," I said, "I shall never forget. My particular friend the Scotch doctor, myself, and Brick the dog, were nearly always hungry; many a midnight supper we went in for, cooked and eaten under the rose and forecastle."

Friday night was sea-pie night, by the universal custom of the service. The memory of that delicious sea-pie makes my month water even now, when I think of it.

The captain came down one morning from the crow's-nest—a barrel placed up by the main truck, the highest position in the ship from which to take observations—and entered the saloon, having apparently just taken leave of his senses. He was "daft" with excitement; his face was wreathed in smiles, and the tears of joy were standing in his eyes.

“On deck, my boys, on deck with you, and see the seals!”

The scene we witnessed on running aloft into the rigging was peculiarly Greenlandish. The sun had all the bright blue sky to himself—not the great dazzling orb that you are accustomed to in warmer countries, but a shining disc of molten silver hue, that you can look into and count the spots with naked eye. About a quarter of a mile to windward was the main icepack, along the edge of which we were sailing under a gentle topsail breeze. Between and around us lay the sea, as black as a basin of ink. But everywhere about, as far as the eye could see from the quarter-deck, the surface of the water was covered with large beautiful heads, with brilliant earnest eyes, and noses all turned in one direction—that in which our vessel was steering, about south-west and by south. Nay, but I must not forget to mention one peculiar feature in the scene, without which no seascape in Greenland would be complete. Away on our lee-bow, under easy canvas, was the Green Dutchman. This isn’t a phantom ship, you must know, but the most successful of all ships that ever sailed the Northern Ocean. Her captain—and owner—has been over twenty years in the came trade, and well deserves the fortune that he has made by his own skill and industry.

If other proof were wanting that we were among the main body of seals, the presence of that Green Dutchman afforded it; besides, yonder on the ice were several bears strolling up and down, great yellow monsters, with the ease and self-possession of gentlemen waiting for the sound of the last dinner gong or bugle. Skippers of ships might err in their judgment, the great Green Dutchman himself might be at fault, but the knowledge and the instinct of Bruin is infallible.

We were now in the latitude of Jan Mayen; the tall mountain cone of that strange island we could distinctly see, raised like an immense shining sugar-loaf against the sky’s blue. To this lonely spot come every year, through storm and tempest, in vessels but little bigger or better than herring-boats, hardy Norsemen, to hunt the walrus for its skin and ivory, but by other human feet it is seldom trodden. It is the throne of King Winter, and the abode of desolation, save for the great bear that finds shelter in its icy caves, or the monster seals and strange sea-birds that rest on its snow-clad rocks. At this latitude the sealer endeavours to fall in with the seals, coming in their thousands from the more rigorous north, and seeking the southern ice, on which to bring forth their young. They here find a climate which is slightly more mild, and never fail to choose ice which is low and flat, and usually protected from the south-east swell by a barrier of larger bergs. The breeding takes place as soon as the seals take the ice, the males in the meantime removing in a body to some distant spot, where they remain for three weeks or so, looking very foolish—just, in truth, as human gentlemen would under like circumstances—until joined by the ladies. The seal-mothers are, I need hardly say,

exceedingly fond of their young. At all other times timid in the extreme, they will at this season defend them with all the ferocity of bears. The food of the seals in nursing season consists, I believe, of the small shrimps with which the sea is sometimes stained for miles, like the muddy waters of the Bristol Channel, and also, no doubt, of the numerous small fishes to be found burrowing, like bees in a honeycomb, on the under surface of the pieces of ice. The wise sealer "dodges" outside, or lies aback, watching and wary, for a fortnight at least, until the young seals are lumpy and fat, then the work of death begins. I fear I am digressing, but these remarks may be new to some readers.

"The Green Dutchman has filled her fore-yard, sir, and is making for the ice;" thus said the first mate to the captain one morning.

"Let the watch make sail," was the order, "and take the ice to windward of her."

The ship is being "rove" in through the icebergs, as far and fast as sail will take her. Meanwhile, fore and aft, everybody is busy on board, and the general bustle is very exciting. The steward is serving out the rum, the cook's coppers are filled with hams, the hands not on deck are busy cleaning their guns, sharpening their knives, getting out their "lowrie tows" (dragging-ropes), and trying the strength of their seal-club shafts by attempts to break them over their hardy knees. The doctor's medical preparations are soon finished; he merely pockets a calico bandage and dossel of lint, and straps a tourniquet around his waist, then devotes his attention exclusively to his accoutrements. Having thus arranged everything to his entire satisfaction, he fills a sandwich-case, then a brandy-flask and baccy-pouch, and afterwards eats and drinks as long as he can—to pass the time, he says—then, when he can't eat a morsel more, he sits and waits and listens impatiently, beating the devil's tattoo with his boot on the fender. Presently it is "Clew up," and soon after, "All hands over the side."

The day was clear and bright and frosty, and the snow crisp and hard. There was no sinking up to the knees in it. You might have walked on it with wooden legs. Besides, there was but little swell on, so the movement of the bergs was slow, and leaping easy.

Our march to the sealing-ground was enlivened by a little logomachy, or wordy war, between the first mate and the doctor. The latter began it:

"Harpooneers and clubmen," he cried, "close up behind me, here; I'm gaun to mak' a speech; but keep movin' a' the time—that's richt. Well, first and foremost, I tell ye, I'm captain and commander on the ice; d'ye hear?"

“You commander!” exclaimed the mate; “I’ll let ye ken, my lad, that I’m first officer o’ the ship.”

“Look here, mate,” said the doctor, “I’ll no lose my temper wi’ ye, but if ye interrupt me again, by ma sang, ye’ll ha’ to fecht me, and ye ken ye havena the biceps o’ a daddy-lang-legs, nor the courage o’ a cockney weaver, so keep a calm sough.—Now, men,” he continued, “I, your lawfully constituted commander, tell ye this: there is to be nae cruelty, this day, to the innocent lambs we’re here to kill. Mind ye, God made and cares for a’ His creatures. But I’m neither going to preach or pray, but I’ll put it to ye in this fashion. If I see one man Jack of ye put a knife in a seal that he hasna previously clubbed and killed, I’ll simply ca’ that man’s harns oot (dash his brains out) to begin wi’, and if he does it again, I’ll stop his ’bacca for the entire voyage, and his grog besides.”

Probably the last threat was more awful to a sailor than actual braining. At all events, it had the desired effect, for during the whole of that day I saw nothing among our men but slaughter as humane as slaughter could be made. Even then, however, there was much to harrow the feelings of any one at all sensitive. For the young Greenland seal is such an innocent little thing, so beautiful, so tender-eyed, and so altogether like a baby in a blanket, that killing it is revolting to human nature. Besides, they are so extremely confiding. Raise one in your arms—it will give a little petted grumble, like a Newfoundland puppy, and suck your fingers; not finding its natural sustenance in that performance, it will open its mouth, and give vent to a plaintive scream for its ma, which will never fail in bringing that lady from the depths beneath, eager-eyed and thirsting for your life.

Towards the middle of the day I strolled among the crew of the P—e. The men were wildly excited, half-drunk with rum, and wholly with spilling blood, singing and shouting and blaspheming, striking home each blow with a terrible oath, flinching before the blood had ceased to flow, and sometimes, horrible to say, flinching the unhappy innocents alive. All sorts of shocking cruelties were perpetrated, in order to make puppies scream, and thus entice the mother to the surface to be shot or clubbed. I saw one fellow— Pah! I can’t go on.

Blood shows to advantage on ice. Here there were oceans of it. The snow was pure and white and dazzling in the morning—I leave it to the imagination of the sentimental to guess its appearance at eventide. The stout Shetlandmen, with their lowrie tows, dragged the skins to the ship. There were no regular meals any day during sealing. The crew fed and drank alike, when they could and what they could. There was but little sport in all this—a certain wild excitement, to be sure, quite natural under the circumstances, for were we not engaged in one of the lawful pursuits of commerce and

making money? The bears were having fine times of it, for there was but little inclination on our part to pursue them, while there were seals to slay; and Bruin seemed to know this, and was correspondingly bold and impertinent, although never decidedly aggressive; for compared to seals men are merely skin and bone, and Bruin has a penchant for adiposity.

In ten days there was not a seal left, for ships had collected from all quarters—like war-horses scenting the battle from afar, or like sea-gulls on "making-off" days—to assist in the slaughter. By-the-by, what peculiar instinct or what sense is it that enables those sea-gulls to determine the presence of carrion in the water at almost incredible distances? On making-off days—that is, idle days at sea—when, there being nothing else to do, the hands are employed in separating the blubber from the skins, putting them in different tanks and casting the offal overboard, there shall not be a single gull in sight from the crow's-nest, even within ken of the telescope; but when, twenty minutes afterwards, the work is well begun, the sea shall be white with those gulls, singly or in clusters fighting for the dainty morsels of flesh and blubber.

We got frozen in after this, and in a fortnight's time we found ourselves forsaken by the bears, and even by the birds, both of which always follow the seals.

What a lonely time we had of it for the next month, in the centre of that silent, solitary icepack! But for the ships that lay here and there, frozen in like ourselves, it might have been mistaken for some snow-clad moorland in the dead of winter. And all the time there never was a cloud in the blue sky, even as big as a man's hand; the sun shone there day and night but gave no heat, and the silence was like the silence of space—we could have heard a snow-flake fall.

Once a week, at least, a gale of wind might be blowing, hundreds of miles away from where we were—it was always calm in the pack—then the great waves would come rolling in beneath the ice, though of course we could not see them, lifting up the giant bergs, packing and pitching the light bay-ice over the heavy, and grinding one against the other or against our seemingly doomed ship with a shrieking, deafening noise, that is quite indescribable. We thus lived in a constant state of suspense, with our traps always packed and ready to leave the vessel if she were "nipped." One ship had gone down before our very eyes, and another lay on the top of the ice on her beam ends, with the keel exposed.

But clouds and thaw came at last, and we managed, by the aid of ice-saws and gunpowder, to cut a canal and so get free and away into the blue water once more.

"Were you not glad?" said Maggie May.

“Yes, glad we all were, yet I do not regret my experience, for in that solitary ice-field we were indeed alone with Nature. And, Maggie May, being alone with Nature is being alone with God.”

“Ah! Frank,” I added, “it is amid such scenes as these, and while surrounded with danger, that one learns to pray.”

“True, lad, true,” said Uncle Frank solemnly, “and strange and many are the wonders seen by those who go down to the sea in ships.”

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Six.

Face to Face with Ice-Bears.

"Why, ye tenants of the lake,
For me your wat'ry haunts forsake?
Tell me, fellow-creatures, why
At my presence thus you fly?
Conscious, blushing for our race,
Soon, too soon, your fears I trace;
Man, your proud usurping foe,
Would be lord of all below,
Plumes himself in Freedom's pride,
Tyrant stern to all beside."

Burns.

"If ever a true lover of Nature lived," said Frank one winter's evening, as we all sat round the fire as usual, "it was your Scottish bard, the immortal Burns."

"Yes," I said, "no one was ever more sensible than he that a great gulf is fixed between our lower fellow-creatures and us—a gulf formed and deepened by ages of cruelty towards them. We fain—some of us at least—would cross that gulf and make friends with the denizens of field and forest, but ah! Frank, they will not trust us. I can fancy the gentle Burns walking through the woods, silently, on tiptoe almost, lest he should disturb any portion of the life and love he saw all about him, or cause distress to any one of God's little birds or beasts. See the wounded hare limp past him!—poor wee wanderer of the wood and field—look at the tears streaming over the ploughman's cheeks as he says:

"'Seek, mangled wretch, some place of wonted rest—
No more of rest, but now thy dying bed!
The sheltering rushes whistling o'er thy head,
The cold earth with thy bleeding body prest.'"

“And what,” said Frank, “can equal the pitiful pathos and simplicity of his address to the mouse whose nest in autumn has been turned up by the ploughshare?

“‘Thy wee bit housie too in ruin,
It’s silly wa’s, the winds are strewin’,
An’ naething, now to big a new ane
O’ foggage green,
An bleak December’s winds ensuin’,
Both snell and keen.’”

(Big means build; snell means keen.)

“Yes, Frank, and he says in that same sweet and tender poem:

“‘I’m truly sorry man’s dominion,
Has broken Nature’s social union,
An’ justifies that ill-opinion
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor earth-born companion,
An’ fellow-mortal!’”

“Well,” replied Frank, “I’m very much of Burns’s way of thinking; I would like to be friends with all my fellow-mortals, and have reason to believe it is really man’s cruelty that has broken the spell that should bind us.

“Why, away up in the north, the biggest beast in the sea is the simplest and the best-natured. I mean the whale. The birds are so tame you can almost catch them alive, and even bears will pass you by if you do not seek to molest them.”

“Tell us some bear stories, Frank.”

Frank accordingly cleared his throat.

“What I tell you, then, about Polar bears,” he said, “you may believe. My facts are true facts, not ordinary facts, and I gained my experience myself, and neither from books nor from imagination. But talking about books,” he continued, pulling one down from the shelf and spreading it open before him, “here is one on natural history, and as there are pictures in it, it will be sure to please you. The book is not an old one, and is a reputed authority. Well, look at that. That is supposed to be a Polar bear just come out of a cave,

and having a sniff round. It is more the shape of a dormouse that has lost its tail in a trap.

“Here again is the picture of a dismantled barque, apparently stranded on the top of Mount Ararat, and in the foreground a lot of very ordinary looking men with billycock hats and very ordinary looking axes and spades, making an ice-canal to the water, at the edge of which another bear or dormouse is standing up quietly to be shot.

“One more illustration. Glance at this! three bears close under the bows of a ship among the ice; one lies dead beside a spit-kid; another is sitting thinking; and a third is walking on his hind-legs towards a group of men, who are evidently poised to receive cavalry, with duck-guns and old-fashioned battle-axes.

“The text is quite on a keeping with the illustrations—that is, hardly in accordance with Nature.

“We read in travellers’ tales wonderful accounts of the size, strength, cunning, and extreme ferocity of the Polar bear. I used to believe all I read, even Jack the Giant-Killer. But nevertheless, as to ferocity and strength, there is no doubt that our Arctic friend is king of the ursine race. It took me a whole year to settle in my own mind whether this bear was actually a bold, brave beast or the reverse. From all I have seen and heard he undoubtedly possesses bravery, but it is tempered with a deal of discretion. He is not like the old Norse kings; he does not kill men for the mere sake of making a record. He fights for food and not for glory. If a man and seal were both lying asleep on the ice, I believe a hungry bear would prefer his customary diet, and leave the man in peaceful possession of his dreams. But if the man awoke while the bear was having his mouthful or two—he does not eat much of a seal—then I guess the consequences would be rather serious for one of the party. Yet I came upon a bear once behind a hummock of ice that, I am sure, had been fast asleep till I fired my rifle at something else quite close to him. He might have killed me then easily, but I assure you he did not. He emitted a sound as if he had swallowed about three yards of trombone and was trying to cough it up again. Then he ran away.

“But another day I ran away. I was two miles from my ship and burst my gun. I wasn’t going to stop and fight that bear with the butt-end—not likely; but he followed me nearly halfway. Our spectioneer, dear old man, saw the race from the crow’s-nest, and sent men out to meet us. He said at dinner that he had saved my life; but according to him, he saved my life more than once and in more ways than one. He must have been always saving my life, I suppose; but then I was young and headstrong. That spectioneer of ours, although he must have been nearly fifty years of age, was a kind of Donald Dinnie

in strength. He fought an Arctic bear once single-handed and with no other weapon save a seal-club. The man is still alive; the bear isn't.

"The spectioneer did not force the fighting, remember. He rounded the corner of a large hummock of ice, and came upon the foe quite unexpectedly. One lucky but fearful blow pierced the upper part of the brute's neck close behind the ear, and he fell dead. A seal-club is a terrible weapon in the hands of a strong man. It is in shape somewhat like a pole-axe, only the iron or steel portion is sharp, and not blunt. Our spectioneer was one of the best and bravest seamen ever I sailed with, and one of the most modest of men. I remember laughing once when he told me that he would as soon fight a bear with a seal-club as a bladder-nosed seal. I did not know much about this species of seal then. I believe there is some Irish blood in the brute, for at any time, whether in the water or out of it, he will as soon fight as not, and woe be to you when he cocks his crest if you have only a club, and no rifle wherewith to defend yourself!

"Ever hear tell of the mad surgeon who fought the Polar bear? I'll tell you the story, then, as it was told to me, and I have no reason to doubt its accuracy in the main details.

"Dr C— was a young medical man, just newly passed. He was to have been married very shortly after the capping and gowning ceremony, but had a few hasty words with his affianced, bade her an angry farewell, and took steamer to Lerwick some weeks before the arrival of the Greenland fleet at that ancient place, in the hopes of finding a ship that was in want of a surgeon. He was not disappointed; one of the doctors wished to go back; the voyage from Hull to Lerwick had been quite enough for him, so Dr C— took his place.

"Now Dr C— was reckless; he confessed that he cared very little what he did, or what became of him; he had loved the girl that he had meant to make his wife very dearly, and now that he had lost her he didn't mind, he said, although a whale swallowed him, and he thought he could sleep as comfortably, and far more soundly, in Davy Jones's locker than anywhere else.

"He showed he was reckless even before he left Lerwick. It was usual in those days for the youthful surgeons of the fleet to assemble for the purpose of eating, drinking, and carousing at the only respectable hotel in the town, and having well primed themselves, to march in a body through the narrow streets. This used to lead to cruel fights, in which the medicos were very often worsted. But on this particular year Dr C— went in for organisation, as he called it. He armed and drilled the fleet surgeons, and in person he used to lead them out to fight, and in consequence the riots lasted often long into the night, despite the efforts of the police and military—five men and a sergeant—to quell them.

“After his ship sailed, Dr C— took to vinous imbibition—in plain English, he drank rum to excess. The ship got frozen in about a week after arrival ‘in the country,’ and by this time the surgeon was so ill that he was confined to bed. Literally speaking, confined to bed, for he had to be strapped to it. One day he heard the captain and first mate talking about the large number of bears that were about, and so quiet did he become after this that restraint was thought no longer necessary. It was early in the season, and the sun still set, and the night, or rather dusk, was of about two hours’ duration. When a ship is beset in the ice the commander naturally enough is anxious in mind, and spends a good deal of his time in the crow’s-nest with his eye at the glass. The commander of Dr C—’s ship was in the crow’s-nest very early one morning, and, somewhat to his surprise, saw what he took to be a seal lying on a hummock about half a mile off. It lay very still and motionless, and was very black. It was not long before he noticed something else—an immense bear coming stalking down towards the dark object on the ice.

“So intently was he watching the movements of the bear that he did not notice the trap-door of the nest move. It was the steward that had run up to tell him that the doctor was not to be found anywhere in the ship.

“In a moment the truth flashed upon the captain’s mind. He hailed the deck below, and in less than a minute a party of ten men, rifle-armed, were over the side and away to the surgeon’s assistance.

“There was nothing further for the captain to do but watch proceedings through the glass. I was not there, of course, so can only imagine what an exciting scene it must have been, for the captain in his crow’s-nest to witness that man and bear fight.

“The doctor it seems was neither tall nor strong—a thin wiry little fellow, more fit to contend with a badger than a bear. He had armed himself with his longest amputating knife, which he had tied to his wrist and hand, in such a way that it could neither slip nor be dropped. The captain saw the bear spring upon the man and rise with him, and fall again and roll with him, and he saw the doctor plunge the knife again and again into the brute’s body; then both fell and both lay still. When the men arrived it was to find Bruin dead enough, and the surgeon just breathing. He was fearfully lacerated in the back and legs, but, strange to say, he survived, and before the ship returned to Lerwick he was clothed and in his right mind.

“I have a great respect for my friend the Arctic bear; I cannot help admiring his immensity, his power of endurance, his wonderful swimming capabilities, and his great

sagacity, which latter he shows in a hundred different ways, known only to those who have thoroughly studied the tricks and the manners of the monster.

“A Polar bear has all the cunning of a fox, all the agility of an otter, and more than the strength of the largest lion.

“The she-bear is remarkably fond of her young, but not more so, I think, than the seal is of her offspring. A seal, indeed, is at most times one of the most timid and wary animals in creation, but she will, and often does, lay down her life for her young ones. If young seals are on a piece of ice with their dams, the latter will naturally take to the water on the approach of men on the ice or in boats; but if a young one cries, or is made to cry on purpose, the mother will appear again, and, defying all danger, make towards it, paying the penalty of death for this exhibition of her maternal instinct.

“I do not think that bears actually hibernate in a dormant state; but in very bad weather they no doubt take long spells of sleep in holes under the snow, and a capital way of passing the time it must be; if mankind could only do the same, then sleep would be the poor man’s best friend. But your Arctic bear is fond of a good nap in the sunshine, even in summer; I was beset for nearly two months once, some little way south and west of the island of Jan Mayen. One day, with Dana’s ‘Two Years Before the Mast’ in my hand, and my binocular slung across my shoulder, I wandered away from the ship. I had neither rifle nor club, not expecting to need either. I found myself at last by the foot of a very tall hummock, composed, I daresay, of bay-ice squeezed up at some time or other and finally snowed over. I like to get on tops of eminences, and this hummock looked like a small tower of Babel in the midst of the flat and wide expanse of snow-clad ice; so up I went, and sat down to read. On looking around me presently, I noticed a yellow mark or spot on the snow some hundred or hundred and fifty yards off. On bringing my glasses to bear on it, I found it was a bear; and he was moving or wriggling. He evidently had not seen me yet, nor scented me. I had no more heart to read Dana just then. I thought the best thing I could do would be to sit still, and keep semaphoring with my right arm and Dana towards the brute; the mate was in the crow’s-nest, I thought, and would be sure to notice me soon, and know something was wrong. But the mate did not notice me. The truth is the steward had taken him some coffee, with a dose of rum in it, a drink of which he was inordinately fond, and he was smacking his lips over that. I semaphored with my right hand until it was temporarily paralysed; then I turned quietly round and semaphored with my left. This change of position necessitated my looking over my shoulder to the ship. On again turning round I was horrified to find that Bruin was up, and evidently wondering who or what I was, and what I meant. He came closer, and stood again to look, for bears are inquisitive. I kept up my motions—there was nothing else to be done, and my heart felt as big as a bullock’s. Presently the bear commenced gyrating his great head and neck, the better to scent me, I suppose; only it

looked as if he was mimicking my actions. So there the pair of us kept it up for what seemed to me about five hours, though it might not have been a minute. Then Bruin quietly turned stern and shambled off.

“An old authority describes the pace of a Polar bear as equal to that of the sharp gallop of a horse. I believe a bear can spring as far as a horse can jump, or nearly, but his pace is not even half as fast, nor anything like it.

“I have eaten a great many strange things in my time, but I should be sorry indeed to have to dine off Arctic bear in the seal season. Everybody is not so particular, however, and the Norwegians make many a hearty meal off bear-beef. I was in the cabin of a Norwegian once when they had bear for dinner. There was the captain and first and second mate at table. In the centre stood a dish with an immense hunk of boiled bear on it; by the side of it was placed a large plate of potatoes, cooked in their skins. Nobody used a fork, only the knife; so on the whole it was a pretty sight to see them. I was asked to partake. I begged to be excused, and to escape from the odour of the fishy-fleshy steam, I ran on deck, and lit a cigar.”

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Seven.

"Spring is Coming:—The Storm.—The Fairy Forest: A Tale."

"The brown buds thicken on the trees,
Unbound the free streams sing,
As March leads forth across the leas
The wild and windy Spring.

"When in the fields the melted snow
Leaves hollows warm and wet,
Ere many days will sweetly blow
The first blue violet."

"I have all my life possessed such a love for nomadic adventure, that I often wondered if I have any real gipsy blood in me."

This was a remark I made an evening or two after Frank had told us all about his friends the Arctic bears. I was looking at the fire as I spoke, as one does who is in deep thought.

"What do you see in the fire?" asked Frank.

"I see," I replied, without removing my eyes from the crackling logs and melting sea-coal, "I see a beautifully fitted caravan, drawn by two nice horses, jogging merrily along a lovely road, among green trees, rose-clad hedgerows and trailing wild flowers. It is a beautiful evening, the clouds in the west are all aglow with the sunset-rays. I see figures on the broad coupé—female figures, one, two, three; and I can almost hear the jingle of the silver bells on the horses' harness."

"Who are the ladies—can you distinguish them?" asked Frank.

"Not quite."

"O! I know, it's me and ma and Maggie May." This from little Ida.

"Ida," I said, "your language is alliterative, but hardly grammatical."

“Never mind about the grammar,” said Frank, laughing. “You’ve got an idea of some sort in your head, so just let us have it.”

“I have it already,” cried Maggie May, springing towards me with a joy-look in her eyes, and a glad flush on her cheek. “I dreamt it,” she added. “The caravan is already built, and you are going to take us all gipsying when summer comes.”

I am not good at equivocation, so I confessed at once that Maggie May was right, and from the amount of pleasurable excitement the announcement gave her, I augured well. Indeed, we all felt sure that from our romantic trip, Maggie May would return home as well as ever she had been in all her little life.

There is nothing to be compared to the joy of anticipating pleasure to come. And from the very day our beautiful caravan rolled into the yard and was drawn up on the lawn, everybody set about doing what he or she could towards the completion of the fittings, of the already luxuriously furnished saloon of the house upon wheels. (Note 1.)

This was indeed a labour of love. There were so many little things to be thought about, to say nothing of decorations, neat and pretty curtains, a lovely little library of tiny but nicely bound books, mirrors, flower vases, etc.

The cooking department had its head centre in the after-cabin; here, however, no bulky open and dusty stove burned, but a pretty little oil range, and the kitchen fittings and pantry fixings would have compared favourably even with those of Lady Brassey’s yacht, the Sunbeam.

Frank and I, being both old campaigners, saw to everything else.

We had a good coachman, two splendid horses, besides an extra smaller covered cart in which Frank himself, who was to be both valet and cook, could sleep at night.

To make sure of not being robbed on the road we had good revolvers, and, better than all, our noble Newfoundland, Hurricane Bob.

When everything was complete and ready for the road, we had nothing to do but sit down and long for spring to come.

“I really believe,” said honest Frank to me one bright beautiful morning in March, “that the child is better already with the thoughts of going on this romantic tour of yours.”

And so indeed it seemed, and that forenoon, when my friend and I prepared to go out for a ramble, Maggie May was by our side, fully equipped and in marching order.

“It really does seem,” she said joyfully, “that spring is coming.”

Spring is Coming.

The birds and the buds were saying it, and the winds were whispering the glad news to the almost leafless trees. The early primroses that snuggled in under the laurels, and the modest blue violets half hidden among their round leaves, were saying “Spring is coming.” And the bonnie bell-like snowdrops nodded their heads to the passing breeze and murmured “Spring is coming.”

Cock-robin, who sang to us and at us now whenever we came into the garden, told the tale to the thrush, and the thrush told it to the blackbird, and the blackbird hurried away to build his nest in the thick yew hedge; he would not sing, he said, until his work was finished. But the mad merry thrush sang enough for ten, and mocked every sound he heard.

The lark, who pretended that he had already built his nest among the tender-leaved wheat, just beginning to shimmer green over the brown earth, sang high in air. You could just see him fluttering against a white cloud, and looking no bigger than the head of a carpet tack. He sang of nothing but spring—such a long song, such a strong song, such a wild melodious ringing lilt, that you could not have helped envying him, nor even sharing some of his joy.

“Oh, skylark! for thy wing!
  Thou bird of joy and light,
That I might soar and sing,
  At heaven’s empyreal height!
With the heathery hills beneath me,
  Whence the streams in glory spring,
And the pearly clouds to wreathe me,
  Oh, skylark! on thy wing!”

“Spring is coming:” every rippling rill, every sparkling brook, were singing or saying it.

The hedgerows put forth tiny white-green budlets, the elders and the honeysuckles expanded early leaves, those on the former looking like birds’ claws, those on the latter like wee olive-green hands.

We saw to-day, in the woods, early butterflies and early bees, and many a little insect friend creeping gaily over the green moss.

And high aloft, among some gigantic elms, the rooks were cawing lustily, as they swang on the branches near their nests. We heard a mole rustling beneath dead leaves, and to our joy we saw a squirrel run up a branch and sit to bask in a a little streak of sunshine.

“Yes,” said Frank, “sure enough spring is coming.”

The Storm.

March 15.—Why, it is only two days since that delightful ramble of ours. Two days, but what a change! The snow has been falling all night long. It was falling still when these lines were penned, falling thick and fast. Not in those great lazy butterfly-like flakes, that look so strange and beautiful when you gaze skywards, nor in the little millet-seed snow-grains that precede the bigger flakes, but in a mingled mist of snow-stars, that falls O! so fast and looks so cold.

The whole world is robed in its winding-sheet. The earth looks dead. To-day is but the ghost of yesterday. The leafless elms, the lindens and the oaks are trees of coral, the larches and pines mere shapes of snow shadowed out with a faint green hue beneath.

And the birds! Well, the thrush still sings. What a world of hope the bird must carry in his heart! But the blackbird flies now and then through the snow-clad shrubbery with sudden bickering screams that startle even the sparrows. The lark is silent again, and shivering robin comes once more to the study-window to beg for crumbs and comfort.

And this snow continues to fall, and fall till it lies six good inches deep on roof and road and hedgerow. And it is sad to think of the buried snowdrops, of the crocuses, yellow and blue, and the sweet-scented primroses.

March 17.—The pines are borne groundwards, at least their branches droop with the weight of snow; they are very weird-like, very lovely. The snow has melted on the roofs, but the dripping water has frozen into a network of crystal on the rose-bushes that cling around the verandah. It has mostly melted off the tall lindens also, only leaving pieces here and there that look for all the world like a flock of strange big birds.

Everything is beautiful—but all is silent, all is sad.

The sun goes down in a purple haze, looking like a big blood orange; and an hour afterwards, when the stars come out, there is all along the horizon a long broad band of rose tint, shading upwards into yellow, and so into the blue of the night.

I close my study-windows, and go into the next room; how bright the fire looks, how cheerful the faces round it! Hurricane Bob is snoring on the hearth, Ida is asleep beside him, Maggie May has got hold of a picture and wants me to weave a story to it.

Note that she says "'Weave' a story."

"I would have put it plainer," says Frank, laughing, "and said 'Spin a yarn.'"

At another time, I might have been inclined to attach some semi-comical signification to the picture Maggie May held coaxingly out to me.

It represented a wide unbroken field of dazzling snow, with the outlines of a pine-wood in the far distance. There were two dark and ugly figures in the centre of the snow-field—an ugly fierce-like boar and a gaunt and hungry, howling wolf. You could see he was howling.

But with the rising wind beginning to moan drearily round our house, and the icicle-laden rose-twigs rattling every now and again against the glass, I could see nothing amusing in Maggie May's little picture.

The Fairy Forest.

"Had you been walking across that wild wintry waste, Maggie May," I began, "you would have seen at some distance before you a great pine-wood, half buried in drifting snow, the tall trees bending before the icy blast and tossing their branches weirdly in the wind."

"Don't you want slow music to that?" said Frank, pretending to reach for his fiddle.

"Hush, Frank! When you looked again, Maggie May, lo! what a change! The fairy forest has been transformed into a city. There is a blue uncertain mist all over it, but you can plainly distinguish streets and terraces, steeples, towers, ramparts, and ruins; and instead of the mournful sighing of the wind that previously fell on your ear, you can now listen to the music of bells and the pleasant murmur of the every-day life of a great town. Towards this town then, one day, a big wolf was journeying. It was summer then, the sun shone bright, clouds were fleecy, and the sky was blue, and the plain all round him

was bright with the greenery of grass and dotted with wild flowers. But neither the beauty of the day, nor the loveliness of the scenery, had any effect on the gaunt and ugly wolf. Not being good himself, he could see no goodness in Nature.

"'I'm far too soon,' he grumbled to himself, 'I must curl up till nightfall; I wish the sun wasn't shining, and I wish the birds wouldn't sing so. Moonlight and the owls would suit me far better. I wonder what makes that skylark so happy? Well, I was happy once,' he continued as he lay down behind a bush, 'yes I was, but, dear me, it is long ago. When I was young and innocent, ha! ha! I wouldn't have stolen a tame rabbit or a chicken for all the world; I was content with the food I found in the wild woods, and now I'm lying here waiting for night, that I may fall upon and slay a dozen at least of those pretty lambkins I see gambolling down on yonder lea. I wouldn't mind being young again though, I think I might lead a better life, I think—'

"He did not think any more just then, for he had fallen sound asleep.

"The hours flew by. The sun went round and down, and a big moon rose slowly up in the east and smiled upon the landscape.

"The time flew by, as time only flies in a fairy forest.

"The wolf moaned in his sleep, then he shivered, and shivering awoke. No wonder he shivers: he had lain down to sleep with the soft balmy summer winds playing around him; now all is cold snow.

"No wonder he shivers, for yonder in front of him, and not two yards away, stands one of the most terrible-looking apparitions ever his eyes beheld. A great grizzly boar!

"'O! dear me,' cried the wolf, 'what a fright you gave me! Who are you at all?'

"'I'm Remorse,' was the stern reply; 'you used to call me Conscience once.'

"'O! well,' said the wolf, 'do go away, you have no idea how dreadful you look. I'll—hoo—oo—oo!'

"And the wolf laid back his ears, lifted up his head and voice, and howled till the welkin rang, just as you see him in the picture.

"'I didn't always look dreadful,' said the boar; 'when I was young I was tender, but you seared me and hardened me, and tried to bury me. Do you remember the days when I

used to beseech you to do unto others as you would that others would do unto you? Now I'm come to do unto you as you have done to others. Aha!'

"'Hoo—oo—oo!' howled the wolf. 'O! pray go away. Hoo—oo—oo!'

"'Nay, nay,' said Remorse, 'I'll never leave you more.'

"'You must be joking,' cried the wolf, 'you must be mad. Hoo—oo—oo!'

"'Must I?' said Remorse; 'you've led a life of discontent. Your evil deeds are more in number than the bristles on my back.'

"'Pray don't mention them,' exclaimed the wolf, shivering all over.

"'You've led a cruel, selfish, useless life. Do you feel any the better for it now? You don't look any better.'

"'O! no, no, no.'

"'Now look at me.'

"'I daren't. Hoo—oo—oo!'

"'Well, listen.'

"'I must.'

"'Yes, you cannot shut your ears, though you may close your eyes. Before you tried to crush and kill me, I was your best friend, the still small voice within you guiding you on to good. What am I now? Your foe, your tormentor—Remorse!'

"'Mercy, mercy!' cried the wolf. 'O! give me back my innocence. Be my Conscience once again.'

"'Too late!'

"And now a cloud passed over and hid the moon, and next moment, had you looked, neither wolf nor wild boar would you have seen.

"Nothing there save the distant fairy forest, with the wind bending its branches and sighing mournfully across that dreary waste of snow."

Note 1. A complete description of this caravan is to be found in my book, “The Cruise of the Land Yacht Wanderer,” published by Messrs Hodder and Stoughton, Paternoster Row. The book is at all libraries.

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Eight.

On the Road.—Neptune: A Story of Strange Meetings.

"Love, now a universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
One moment now may give us more
Than fifty years of reason;
Our minds shall drink at every pore
The spirit of the season."

Wordsworth.

It was on a lovely morning early in the month of June that—after many trial trips here and there across country—we started on our long and romantic tour, away to the distant north.

Come weal or woe, we determined never to turn our horses' heads southwards until we had reached and crossed the Grampian mountains.

All the village turned out to see us start—the older folks shouting us a friendly farewell, the children waving their arms in the air and cheering.

But in an hour's time we were away in the lonesome woods, and when we stopped on a piece of moorland to eat our first real gipsy lunch, there was not a sound to be heard anywhere except the bleat of sheep, and the singing of the joyous birds in the adjoining copse.

A blue June sky was above us, June butterflies floated in the soft June air, June sunshine glittered in the quivering beech-tree leaves, June wild flowers were everywhere, and the joy of June was in all our hearts. I had never seen Frank look so buoyant and young as he did now, despite those tell-tale hairs of silver in his brown beard. Some of the roses of June seemed to have settled in Maggie May's cheeks already, my wife looked calmly happy, and wee Ida madly merry, while Hurricane Bob rolled lazily on his back and pulled up and threw to the winds great tufts of verdant moss.

Ida was Frank's coupé companion. His caravan came behind ours, and sure enough these two gipsies had plenty to say, and they saw plenty to laugh at.

It is time to tell the reader about one little wanderer that has not been mentioned before—Mysie, the caravan cat. We really had intended leaving Miss Mysie at home in charge of the old cook, but Miss Mysie did not mean to be left. She had watched with the most motherly interest all our preparations for the tour, and at the very last moment in she jumped and took possession of a corner of the caravan sofa, commencing forthwith to sing herself to sleep.

And there she was now, while we sat on the greensward at lunch, walking round big Bob, and rubbing her shoulders against his head, as happy as a feline queen.

For believe me, dear reader, cats are very much what you make them. I have made these animals a study, and found that the old ideas about them which naturalists possessed, and the conclusions they so ungenerously jumped at, are all wrong. I do assure you—and you can easily prove it for yourself—that if you use a cat well, feed her regularly and treat her as the rational being it undoubtedly is, you will find that pussy is not a thief, that she is fonder far of persons than places, that she is true and faithful, loving and good.

As soon as luncheon was over, and we had rested a little and the horses' mouths were washed out—they had been busy all the time with nose-bags on—we resumed our journey. We had no intention, however, of seeking for, or of sojourning even for a single night, in any large town. As our home by night and by day for months to come would be the caravans, so our bivouac must be in woods and wilds. At all events we must keep far away from the bustle and din, the trouble and turmoil, of towns.

Towards evening we found ourselves drawing near to a cosy little roadside inn, and here we not only got a meadow in which to place our wooden houses, but stabling for our steeds. And while Frank put up the tent and dinner was being prepared, I busied myself looking after the horses, and seeing to their bedding and general comfort. This was to be one of my duties every evening.

The day had not been altogether devoid of adventures, for we lost our way entirely once in a labyrinth of lanes that seemed to lead nowhere, or rather everywhere, through beautiful woods on the banks of the Thames. We got clear at last, however, and soon found ourselves on a hill so steep, that it was with the greatest difficulty our powerful horses managed to drag the caravans up and over it.

But now all our troubles were forgotten; and no wonder, for such a dinner as our cook and valet Frank placed before us in the tent, surely gipsies never sat down to before.

We were all as happy, if not as merry, as larks, for everything was so new to us; and this life of perfect freedom seemed, somehow or other, precisely what each of us had been born for.

When, after the tent had been cleared, and Frank had brought in his violin and commenced to play, it appeared quite a natural thing that the figure of a handsome young man in cyclist's uniform should come to the doorway to listen.

I beckoned him in, and presently he was squatting in the midst of us.

"Now, Gordon," said Frank, when he had finished playing a symphony, "we'll have your story, and then perhaps the young stranger will give us some of his experiences."

"I'll be delighted, I'm sure," said the cyclist, smiling. "That is," he added, "if I can think of anything."

"I'll tell you, then," I said, "one of my service adventures."

"Is it true?" asked Ida.

"Quite true, Ida," I replied.

"I shall call it—

"Neptune: a Story of Strange Meetings.

"'The world is not so very wide after all!'

"This exclamation, or one somewhat akin to it, we are constantly hearing in these times of rapid travelling. For my own part I am never in the slightest degree astonished at meeting any old friend anywhere, for nowadays there seems but little to prevent everybody from going everywhere.

"I could instance scores of cases of strange and unexpected meetings from the diary of my own life, and some of them would be amusing enough, but one or two must suffice.

"When I first left home to join the service I left Geordie M— ploughing in one of my father's fields, with an ox and the 'orra' beast. I specially mention the ox and the 'orra' beast, by way of showing that Geordie was by no means even a first-class ploughman. (Orra, Scotice 'of all work,' or 'for doing odd jobs.') He was an orra man himself, and

couldn't be trusted with a team of the best horses. He was slow in his motions, and slow in his notions; he wore a corduroy coat, his boots weighed pounds, he never lifted his feet, but trailed them; such was Geordie.

"Just two years after this I was one day sitting forward in the sick bay examining and taking the names of a batch of marines who had come to join us from another ship. It was at Bombay, and the weather was hot, and I was drowsy, so I seldom looked twice at my man, and was not in the best of tempers; but there was one marine in the lot, and a right smart clean-footed fellow he was, who attracted my attention, because he laughed when I spoke to him. He talked in the broadest of Scotch, and the very sound of his voice recalled to my memory Highland hills clothed in blooming heather. I rubbed my eyes and looked at him again. As sure as I live it was Geordie.

"I bade good-by to a medical friend of mine once in Soho Square. He was going away to the country to get married, and settle down in a mining district among the Welsh hills. Years flew by. I was out on the eastern shores of Africa. We were hunting slavers. One rascally old dhow gave us much trouble and a long chase. We ran her at last down to shooting distance, and as she would not stop we brought our big guns to bear on her; still she flew on, and on, fair and square before the wind, till a lucky shot knocked the mainmast out of her. When we boarded her, the very first person seen on deck was the medical friend I had bidden a final adieu to—as I thought—in Soho Square. There was not much mystery about the matter after all. He had not got married. He had not settled down among the Welsh mountains. He was on his way to Zanzibar to join a mission, and had taken passage in this dhow for cheapness' sake.

"Peter Middleton—this is not his real name—was a blacksmith's apprentice in my parish. He was clever, too clever, for he often got into trouble for requisitioning hares, rabbits, and such small cattle of the hills. When he took at last to paying midnight visits to the farmers' fowl-runs, the farmers waxed wroth, and Peter had to run himself, and no more was heard of him in that place. My ship was lying some time after at a town in South Australia, and I received a polite but badly spelt note from a resident medical man requesting me to come on shore for consultation on a difficult case. The house was a smart one and well-furnished, but judge of my surprise to find that the doctor himself was no other than Peter Middleton, ex-poacher and poultry-fancier. It is a strange world!

"But to my tale. I very seldom travel anywhere, by sea or land, without taking as a companion a well-trained and handsome dog. It is nearly always a pure black Newfoundland, a breed for which I have obtained some celebrity. These animals are of such extreme beauty and so prepossessing in manners, and so noble withal, that they never fail to make friends wherever they go. It may seem a strange thing to say, but it is

strictly true nevertheless, that my dogs have introduced me to many of those who at the present moment I rank among my most valued acquaintances.

"About two years before the tremendous war broke out between Germany and France, happening to have earned a 'spell of leave' as sailors call it, I was very naturally spending it in touring through the Scottish Highlands, my only companion being as usual a noble Newfoundland, who not only performed the duties of bodyguard and sentry over my person, but also those of light porter, for he carried my portmanteau. Had I possessed any desire for exclusiveness on this journey, I should have been quite miserable, for wherever I went—on steamboat, in trains, or walking on foot—my princely companion was the subject of conversation and admiration. If I had tied a slate about my neck and pretended to be deaf and dumb, I might have been allowed to hold my tongue, but I should have had to write.

"Who that has travelled in summer among the Western Isles of Scotland, does not know the grand steamships of the country, with their splendid decks and palatial saloons. One beautiful day my dog and I were on board one of these boats on our way to Portree, the capital of Skye. Nero was looking his best and sauciest, his crimson silver-clasped collar showing off his raven-black colour to the best advantage. I seated myself in an out-of-the-way corner right abaft, with a book to read, and threw my tartan plaid over the dog. I thought we should thus escape observation, and I would not have to answer the same questions over and over again which I had been replying to for the last month. But the book was too interesting. I became absorbed in it, I lost myself, and when I found myself again, I found I had lost my dog. But yonder he was with quite a crowd about him, his beauty greatly enhanced by the rich colours of the plaid that floated from his broad back on each side of him, making him look like some gaily caparisoned elephant or embryo Jumbo. From the laughing and talking I could hear, it was evident he was amusing them by performing his various tricks, such as sneezing, making a bow, saying 'yes,' standing on alternate legs, etc, all of which brought him buns and tit-bits.

"'Your dog's been 'avin' a blow out,' a sailor said to me. 'I see'd 'im eat the best 'alf of a turkey, besides two pork-pies, and no end of lumps of sugar, biscuits, and buns.'

"I soon stopped the performance, but did not get away until I had told the whole history of the dog, his breed and pedigree, and the points and characteristics, whims and oddities of Newfoundlands, and about fifty anecdotes of dogs in general, given a kind of canine lecture; in fact, I had become used to the rôle of public platformist by this time.

"The dog slipped down that day to dinner with the rest of us, and lay down between a young German gentleman and myself. The steward wished to turn the dog out. I said

‘certainly, by all means.’ The great good-natured dog also said ‘certainly, by all means,’ when the steward addressed him; ‘but,’ the dog added, ‘you’ll have to carry me.’

“As the Newfoundland weighed over nine stone, the steward permitted him to remain. Then the German and I got talking about the weather, the ship, the sea, my country, his country, history, poetry, music and painting. His English was very good and his accent almost faultless, and his conversational powers were great; but though he could speak well, he could also listen, and the earnest look, the smile, or the occasional hearty though well-timed laugh, showed he possessed a soul that could appreciate originality in others, in whatever form it came. Before I was an hour in this young German’s company, I had come to the conclusion that there were only two human beings on board the steamer, and that they were Hans Hegel and myself. I have reason to believe that Hegel himself was much of the same opinion.

“We stayed at the same hotel, and next morning—and a delightful morning it was—as we sat together on the pine-clad hill, with the blue waters of the Loch shimmering in the sunshine far beneath us, and on every side the marvellous rocks and wondrous hills, we agreed to travel in each other’s company for the next three weeks at least.

“When I say that those three weeks got extended to six, it will readily be believed that we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly. Of all romantic scenery it has ever been my luck in life to gaze upon, that of the ‘Winged Isle’ is by far and away the most enchanting. See Skye in summer, and you will have something to think about and dream about until your dying day.

“I was somewhat proud to be able to show my newly found friend all the wild beauties of the island, the mysterious caves among its rocks, the frowning glories of its mountains, the sylvan sweetness that hovers dream-like around bonnie Armadale, and the awesome sublimities of lonely Coruishk. I know Skye so well, and there was not a glen, a hill, a bleak moorland or one mile of surf-tormented beach, on which I could not cause to reappear the heroes and heroines of a bygone age. There was no attempt at effect in anything I said; I told but what I knew, I spoke but what I felt, and if I did sometimes warm to my subject or description, the warmth welled right up from the bottom of my heart.

“Every enjoyment must come to an end at last. I got a letter one morning—a long white service envelope contained it—which demanded my presence on the other side of the world.

“We were reclining on a wild-thyme scented knoll not far from the edge of a cliff, that went down a sheer five-hundred feet to the sea below. We could hear the boulders

thundering on the beach, though we could not see them. Beyond this was the Minch, flaked with foam; it was a breezy day, and far away on the horizon the blue outline of the Harris hills.

"'No,' he said, in answer to a question of mine. 'We will not hamper each other with a promise to correspond. This world is full of sad partings. We must bend to the inevitable. I'll think of you though, sometimes, and Skye, and this lovely dog.'

"'I have one of his puppies,' I said, 'he shall be yours.'

"The Franco-German war was over; even the demon of civilised warfare had been exorcised at last by blood and tears, and peace smiled sadly on the soil of France once more.

"I had been for a short time attached to a corps of German dragoons, in the capacity of correspondent. But there was little more for me to do now, only I think the officers, with whom I had got very friendly, wished me to see their reception at home, and I could not resist the temptation to march along with them. I have often been 'homeward bound,' but never saw before such genuine happiness as I now did. How they talked of the mothers, wives, sweethearts, and little ones they were soon again to see, and often too with a sigh and a manly tear or two about the comrades they left behind them under the green sod!

"Our mess was a very jolly one. Sometimes at night the wind rose and roared, causing our tents—we had a tent then—to flap like sails in a storm at sea. Or the rain would beat against it, until the canvas first sweated inside, then dropped water, then ran water, till we were drenched. But, whether drenched or dry, we always sang, oh! such rattling choruses. The villages we passed through had all we wanted to buy, the villagers often scowled, and I think they were usually glad to see our backs. But some fawned on us like whipped hounds for the sake of the money we spent. Yet I must say in justice that the Germans took no unfair advantage, and if any allusion was made to them as conquerors, they but laughed carelessly, muttered something about the fortunes of war, and changed the subject.

"I was riding along one morning early, when I saw several of our fellows on the brow of a hill looking back with some degree of interest, but trotting on all the same.

"I should have followed their example, but the mournful howling of a dog attracted my attention, and went straight to my very heart. So I rode up and over the hill.

“I was hardly prepared for what I saw. A beautiful black Newfoundland, whining pitifully beside what appeared to be the dead body of a man.

“I dismounted, and the dog came to meet me. He jumped and fawned on me, then rushed wildly back to the side of that prostrate form. But I stood as if one transfixed. I could not mistake those eyes. It was Neptune, that I had given—a seven months’ old puppy—to Hans Hegel three years before.

“And the poor fellow who lay before me with sadly gashed face, upturned to the morning sun, was Hegel himself.

“He lay on his sword, lay as he had fallen, and the absence of the coat, the sash-bound waist, and sleeve up-rolled, told to me the history of his trouble in a way there was no mistaking. He had fallen in a duel.

“But was he dead? No. For, soon after I had raised him in my arms, and poured a little cordial down his throat, he opened his eyes, gazed bewilderedly at me for a moment, then his hand tightened on mine and he smiled. He knew me.

“I should have liked some of those strange people who do not love dogs to have been present just then, to witness the looks of gratitude in poor Neptune’s eyes as he tenderly licked my hand with his soft tongue.

“My regiment went on: I stayed at the nearest village hostelry with Hans Hegel.

“When he was well enough he told me the story of the duel. So far the affair was unromantic enough, for there was not a lady in it. The quarrel had been forced upon him by a fire-eating Frenchman, and swords were drawn on a point of national honour.

“‘I owe my life to you,’ Hegel said.

“‘You owe your life,’ I replied, ‘to Heaven and that faithful dog.’”

“And now, Sir Stranger,” I said as I concluded my story, “we look to you.”

“Well,” said the cyclist, “as you gave a name to your tale, I daresay I must follow suit. Your tale had a dog in it. Mine has a horse, and as the horse’s name was Doddie, so I call my story.”

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Nine.

Old Doddie; the Cyclist's Story.

"Thro'out the annals of the land,
  Tho' he may hold himself the least,
That man I honour and revere,
Who, without favour, without fear,
In the great city dares to stand
  The friend of every friendless beast."

Longfellow.

"I had dismounted to light my tricycle lamps, and to 'oil up,' previously to accomplishing the last part of my day's ride—a good fifteen miles, through a rough and very lonely bit of country on the borders of North Wales. I had already ridden somewhat over thirty-five miles that day, and the roads were sticky, and in many parts stony, for it was very early in the spring, and the metal that had been put down a month or two before had not yet smoothed down.

"I was not sorry, therefore, to stretch my legs a little and gaze at the sky. The sun had set about an hour before, and the heavens in the south-west were lit up with most singular beauty of tinting. There was nothing stern or harsh about the colouring—no saturnian glare, no sulphureous glow, like what was so often seen during the winter of 1883-84. High up, the sky there was of a palish blue; in that blue shone a solitary star with wonderful brilliancy. Beneath this was pale saffron-yellow. Lower down still this pure yellow melted gradually into a soft tint of carmine, while between that and the horizon was a bar of misty steel-grey.

"'How lovely!—how inexpressibly lovely!' I couldn't help saying to myself, half aloud.

"'It is indeed beautiful!' said a voice close by my elbow that made me start and look round. 'But it bodes no good. You couldn't see me coming,' he said, smiling, 'because I was under the shadow of the hawthorn hedge; and you couldn't hear me, because I walked on the grass.'

"'And what did you come for?' I inquired. 'But stop,' I added, before he could answer my question; 'I have no right to ask you. The road is free to both of us.'

"'But I'm not on a journey,' he replied, 'so I will answer. My house is in here, behind that hedge, though you can't see it, and there is not another for the next ten miles. You are seventeen miles from L—, where, I presume, you are going. Had you not better come in and rest a bit? The moon rises at eight to-night.'

"'You are really very kind,' I said; 'but my being so far from home makes hurry all the more necessary. I'll light my lamps and be off.'

"'As you please,' he said carelessly.

"Just then I discovered, very much to my astonishment—for I pride myself on the perfectness of my outfit while on the road—that my match-box was empty.

"'I'll follow you, thanks,' I said, 'and borrow a few matches from you.'

"'Come on, then,' said my would-be host pleasantly; and trundling my cycle in front of me, I followed him.

"He was a man apparently about forty—square-shouldered, tall, straight, and manly-looking. He did not look a farmer, but he evidently was, from the appearance of his place—and a farmer, too, of sporting proclivities.

"A boy was drawing water from a deep well; a fine old hunter stood by watching the boy—a dark bay horse, whose hollow temples and somewhat drooping under-lip gave proofs of age. A couple of beautiful setter dogs came careering up to meet their master, and received a fond caress. The old horse left the boy at the well and ambled up, then, laying his head on my host's shoulder, nickered low but kindly.

"'Bless his good old heart! Has he had his supper?'

"My heart warmed to a man who could speak thus kindly to a dumb brute.

"'You love that horse, evidently,' I said.

"'I do,' was the reply. 'I have good cause to. Down, Doddie—down on your knees to this gentleman.'

“Doddie, as he called him, did at once what he was told to, and there remained while I smoothed his ears and caressed him on the brow.

“‘Trot off now, Doddie, and have a drink.’

“And away went Doddie.

“I was not sorry to rest awhile; the fireside was so pleasant, and the room all so cheerful. The hostess, a fragile little fair-haired body, who must have been bewitchingly pretty a few years back, and who did not look a bit like a fanner’s wife, brought in a tray laden with bread, cheese, and butter, and a mug of home-brewed beer.

“To have refused partaking of this cheer would have been most unmannerly. I did justice to it, therefore, and we soon got quite friendly. Two hours passed very quickly indeed; then I was startled to hear the wind howling in the chimney, and the rain beating against the panes.

“‘I knew it was coming,’ said my host, whose name, I found, was Morris. ‘That is one reason I asked you in; the other was,’—here he smiled very pleasantly—‘a selfish one—I don’t have a talk with a gentleman once in a month. Mary, fill our mugs again—it’s only home-brewed, sir—and I’ll tell the gentleman why we love old Doddie so.’

“Mary sat by the fire quietly knitting, while Mr Morris told me the following particulars of old Doddie.

“‘Been a rover all my life,’ he began, ‘till three years ago, when Mary’s father brought us home here to his native place, bought this little farm for us, then died—poor old soul! He’d been a farmer out in Mexico, but didn’t save much. Like myself, he seemed but to live to prove the truth of the proverb that a rolling stone never gathers moss. But he was never such a rolling stone as I, sir. Bless you! no. I’ve been everything—Oxford graduate, coffee-planter, actor, soldier, trapper, miner, ne’er-do-weel. Eh, Mary?’

“Mary merely smiled, but she gave him one kindly glance that spoke volumes.

“‘Well, sir, my story—and it is short enough I mean to make it—commences, anyhow, in my trapper days, and there are two things it proves: the first is, that even a redskin can be grateful; and the second is, that Tom Morris has been a lucky dog, and drawn, at all events, one trump card in his day.

“‘I was living in a log hut in one of the wildest parts of the north-west of Mexico, and had been for nearly a year. The hut didn’t belong to me. There was nobody in it but a half-

starved dog when I came upon it, so I just took quiet possession; but the owner never returned, and from stains of a very suspicions colour all about the doorway, I guessed he had been killed and robbed by the Indians.

"'I had an idea there was gold somewhere thereabout. I had this idea from the very first, and I wasn't altogether wrong. I found enough to cause me to stay on and on. I spent most of my time prospecting among the hills, the forests, and the canons, killing enough game and enough fish to keep me alive, with the help of a few sweet potatoes that grew in a patch close by the hut.

"'I found gold, but I didn't make a pile. But in my wanderings I came across the cattle ranche that belonged to Mary's poor old father here. I was surprised to find a white man so far away from civilisation. But Mr Ellis knew what he was about. There was the river not far away, and the forest adjoining, and this river was navigable all the way down to the town of C—, some sixty or seventy miles. At C— was a splendid market for skins and grain. Mr Ellis paid nothing for his cattle, and very little for the labour of farming, and he had no rent to pay, so on the whole I didn't blame him for staying where he did. He had only one companion, and that was his little daughter Mary here, and his servants, men and women, numbered about ten in all.

"'The farm buildings must have been a kind of an outpost at one time, when the Indians and the States were hard at it, for they were completely surrounded with a log rampart and a ditch. There had been a drawbridge and a gate, but it was now a solid affair of stone. But over his bridge, please remember, lay the only road into Fort Ellis farmhouse.

"'Although the fort was twenty miles 'cross country, and more than forty by the regular road, I found myself very often indeed at the farm, and poor Mr Ellis—heigho! he is dead and gone—and I got very friendly indeed.

"'And Mary and I—ah! well, sir, you cannot wonder that, thrown together thus, and in so wild a country, we got very fond of each other indeed.

"'But to proceed. The Indians were never very friendly to the white man. They bore a grudge against him—a grudge born, sir, of many and many a broken treaty. So they were not to be depended on even when the hatchet was buried.

"'There came to my hut, sir, one summer's day, crawling painfully on bands and knees, an Indian of the tribe I am talking about. He had been bitten by a snake—a moccasin, if my memory served me aright. I took him in out of the sun, and gave him nearly all the aqua ardiente I had in the hut. For days he lay like a dead thing, and I was beginning to think about where I'd bury him, when he opened his eyes and spoke. I gave him the

aqua ardiente now in teaspoonfuls. I nursed him almost day and night, hardly ever leaving him. But he was on his feet and well again at last, and if ever tears were in a redskin's eyes, they were in his when he bade me good-by. I hadn't been much at the fort during the redskin's illness, and they were getting alarmed about me, when one forenoon Doddie and I came clattering over the drawbridge.

"'A few months flew by so quickly, sir, because I was in love, you know; and one evening in autumn the dog barked; next moment my redskin stood before me with a finger on his lip.

"'Hist!' he said; and I drew him into the hut.

"'O! sir, sir! Tom Morris was a madman when he was informed by that poor friendly redskin that at twelve that night the fort would be attacked by a wandering tribe of redskins, every one murdered save Mary, who was to be dragged off into captivity.

"'I thanked the Indian, blessed him, then hurried to the stable and brought Doddie out. The saddle was broken; it must be a bare-back ride. There was time if we met no accident. It was now eight o'clock, and I mounted, waving adieu to the Indian, and rode away eastwards in the direction of the fort. In an hour I was at the river. Here the main road branched away round among the mountains. There was no time to take that. My way lay across the ford and through the forest, cutting off a long bend or elbow of the river, and coming out at another ford, within a mile of Ellis Fort and Farm.

"'I headed Doddie for the stream, and we were soon over. I knew the path, and the moon was up, making everything as light as day.

"'But look ahead! The glare was never the moon's light. Alas! no, sir; it was fire. The forest was in flames. I think to this day it was done by the savages to intercept me. In half an hour more, sir, the flames were licking the grass within ten yards of our pathway, and running in tongues up the bark of the trees.

"'Doddie neighed in fright, reared, and I was thrown. Next moment I was alone in the burning forest. To fly from the fire was impossible. I threw myself on my face in despair. O! the agony of those few minutes! But even then I believe I thought more of poor Mary and her father than of my own wretched end.

"'All at once I started to my feet, for a soft nose had nudged me on the arm. It was Doddie, and in an instant we were flying again through the forest. I think we might have made the ford, but my horse now seemed to lose all control of himself, and I of the horse, for the bridle broke.

"'Doddie made for the river above this ford, and took a desperate leap into the deep water. But he was quieter now, and it was easy to head him down the stream, and at last we were once again on terra firma, with the broad river between us and the fire.

"'We blew up the bridge and barricaded the gate immediately on my arrival. And not a whit too soon, for half an hour afterwards the fort was surrounded by howling savages.

"'Our relief came next evening, in the shape of mounted soldiers; and I feel sure, sir, that it was that grateful Indian who sent them.'

"I have, reader, given a mere epitome of my host's story, which was altogether interesting and took quite an hour to tell. By the time it was finished, the squall had blown over; the moon shone out bright and clear over the hills, and bidding Mr Morris a kindly 'good-night,' I mounted my cycle and resumed my journey.

"But I assure you I did not go until I had patted poor old Doddie on the nose, and given him a lunch biscuit from my cyclist's wallet."

The stranger started up as soon as he had finished.

"I must be early on the road," he said; "and so I suppose must you."

"Good-night all."

"Good-night: sound sleep!"

An hour afterwards we were all enjoying that sound repose that only the just, and gipsies, ever know.

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Ten.

Spare the Sparrow.

"Ye slay them! and wherefore? For the gain
Of a scant handful, more or less, of wheat.
Or rye, or barley, or some other grain."

On this grand gipsy-tour of ours we had reason to be thankful every day for a good many things. First and foremost, that our horses were so sturdy, strong, and willing; that the great caravan itself was so comfortable, and the smaller one so snug, and both so delightfully and artistically fitted up, that they looked more like the saloon and cabin of some beautiful yacht than the homes of amateur gipsies.

It took us a whole month to get across the borders and well into bonnie Scotland. But a more pleasant month I for one never spent before nor since. We took it easy. We were determined to study the otium cum dignitate and dolce far niente, and at the end of this month it would have been difficult to say which of us was the hardier or jollier. The horses were sleek and fat, Hurricane Bob spent most of his time either lying among rugs on the coupé with the children, or tumbling on the daisied sward, while the cat did nothing but sing and look complacent. We human beings were so happy, we could even afford to laugh and be gay when thunders rolled, when gales of wind blew and rocked the caravan as if she had been a ship at sea, or when the rain came down in torrents.

Maggie May had already ceased to be an invalid, and Ida had got as brown as if she really were a true-born Romany-Rye.

No, we never hurried the horses. For there was so much to be seen, fresh scenery at every turn of the road, beautiful wild flowers to be gathered to fill the vases. The children at lunch-time even made great garlands of them, and hung them round the horses' necks.

Of course the village children always took us for a show, and ran out to meet and cheer us, but most grown-up folks took us simply for what we were—a party on a pleasant summer tour.

Mysie, strange to say, although she often stopped out of doors all night, was always back in good time for the start in the morning.

I fear she proved a great enemy to the birds.

One evening she brought into the tent a beautifully plumaged cock-sparrow.

Now I am very fond of sparrows. They are historical birds, and birds of Bible times, so I relieved Mysie of her poor prisoner, and let it flutter away.

We then had some talk about sparrows, and I embody my ideas of them in the following sketch.

The British Sparrow: a study in ornithology.

The sparrow, although it undoubtedly belongs to the great natural family Fringillidae, which includes among its members the weavers and whydah birds, the linnet, the goldfinch, and bullfinch, to say nothing of the canary itself, can hardly be said to rank with the aristocracy of the bird world. Quite the reverse; in fact, the Passer domesticus is a bird of low life. He is by no means a humble bird, however. There is nothing at all of the Uriah Heep about my little friend; he has quite as good an opinion of himself as any feathered biped need to have. Yet if it be possible for some classes of birds to look with disdain on the behaviour and doings of others, sparrows are surely so treated by their betters. And no wonder, for they are neither elegant in shape nor appearance; they do not dress well either in winter or in summer; it is not their lot to be arrayed in scarlet or in gold, but in humble brown and russet grey. So much for the appearance of the bird.

In manners and in deportment sparrows are far beneath bon ton; their knowledge of music is exceedingly limited, their appreciation of sweet sounds conspicuous only by its absence—why, they think nothing of interrupting even the nightingale in his song—and if any bird can be said to talk Billingsgate, those birds are sparrows. Should any one doubt the truth of my last statement, let him go and listen for one minute to the wrangling linguamachy that goes on of an evening after sunset, as they are retiring to roost in a tree.

Yet, for all this, many of the tricks and manners of these plebeian birds are well worth watching, and often highly amusing.

It is not, however, merely to amuse the reader that I now write, but quite as much in behalf of the bird itself. For of late years the character of the British sparrow has been aspersed in this country, but more particularly abroad; and I think he ought to have a

fair and impartial trial. I therefore stand forward, not, mind you, as the champion, but the counsel both for and against the prisoner at the bar—the said Passer domesticus, who, on this occasion, is not arraigned for the murder of cock-robin, but for a far more heinous offence, namely, that of constituting himself a common nuisance, and doing more harm than good in the world.

For some years back I have had many—nay, but constant—opportunities for studying the habits of sparrows and many other kinds of birds, and I am not unobservant. I live in one of the prettiest and leafiest nooks of tree-clad Berkshire. The village that adjoins me nestles among trees; the gardens all about the houses are masses of shrubbery and flowers; stone fences are utterly unknown; there are hedges everywhere. Our trees are wide-spreading oaks and planes, drooping acacias, leafy lindens, elm, ash, willow, poplar, and what not.

Up the lordly line of splendid poplar-trees that bound my cosy little paddock the green ivy grows, and here sparrows dwell in hundreds. I do not shoot my wild birds, nor do my children chase and frighten them. Linnets build every year in the laurels close by the dog-kennel: robins feed with the dogs, and some older sparrows know names that we have given them, and come to be fed. No need to hang up boxes for them to build in—we live in the bush; but in summer-time they have a bath on the back lawn, and it is a sight to see them in the early morning. Thrushes, blackbirds, finches, sparrows, starlings—they all agree as well as if they had learned Watts' hymns, and laid them all to heart. More about my birds another day—perhaps. One starling, however, I must mention here; he comes down every sunny morning, with his wife; he sends her in to bathe and splash; he sits on the edge of the bath and receives the drops—that is all the bath he takes. She is a dutiful wife.

The plumage of the domestic sparrow is almost too well known to need description. In one of the very excellent publications of Messrs Cassell and Co.—viz, "Familiar Wild Birds"—the following remarks occur:—

"The difference in the appearance of the plumage of a country sparrow, as compared with his town-bred cousin, would be hardly imagined, the fresh bright plumage of the one displaying the prettily marked black, white, and brown, whilst smoke and dirt hide the beauty of the town sparrow, so that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the sex at a glance. The male, however, has a brilliant black throat, and is otherwise more determined in colour, the hen being especially deficient in the bright brown of the wings and the chocolate mark over the eyes."

This is quite true. The author might have added, however, that the black bib which the male sparrow wears is seldom perfect until June, and the birds pair and build long

before they have acquired their summer dresses. They are in such a hurry that they do not wait for their wedding-garments.

Now, this is just the place to mention a fact that I have proved again and again, to my own satisfaction at all events. It is this: sparrows are polygamous; house-sparrows are undoubtedly so, and I believe also so are their first cousins, who build in trees. I myself was reared in the woods and wilds of Scotland, and, like most boys, was fond of bird-nesting. It often used to strike us lads as strange that differently marked eggs were found in the same sparrow's nest. We did not suspect then that these were laid by different birds. Last week a family quarrel arose among some sparrows in the large wistaria that covers the front of my cottage, and during the row an immense hammock of a double nest was knocked down. When I say a double nest I mean two nests joined in one—a kind of a "butt and a ben," only with separate doors. One nest was empty—only clean, well-lined, and ready for use. The other contained four eggs—two pairs. They have the distinctive colouring and markings of ordinary sparrow's eggs, but each pair is different, and the gentleman sparrow who owned that semi-detached cottage has two wives; they have built another and private residence some yards from the old site, and it is to be hoped will live happy ever afterwards.

I have a sparrow who answers to the name of "Weekie," and who comes to call. This sparrow has three wives.

In many ways he is a remarkable bird. For several winters he has slept on the same rose-twig close under the verandah, with his wives—at first he had but two—not far from him. I used to watch Weekie from a top window sending his wives to roost just at sunset and before he retired himself. He would perch himself on the top of a tall cypress-tree and call them, turning his head this way and that as he hailed them, evidently not knowing from what direction they would come. But they always did come, and after some friendly remonstrance went to roost. About ten minutes after Weekie would give himself a little grateful shake, and hop in under the verandah to his favourite twig.

It was Weekie who first taught me that sparrows build for themselves little shelter-nests—any person in the country who takes the trouble to study these birds can prove to his own satisfaction that such is the case. It is only, however, in frosty weather that the sparrows take the trouble to erect these nests of convenience.

Some two or three years ago we had a very severe frost. During the first day or two I observed straws lying about the verandah; then I noticed that Weekie brought a straw with him at night, and on taking the lamp out to look at him—Weekie meanwhile looking down with one wondering bead of an eye—I noticed that he had his straw over his shoulder. Well, there couldn't have been much comfort in this, but it was a hint to

his two wives, and sure enough they took it, and I saw them building a nest of moss and straw, not larger than half a goose's egg, around and under Weekie's twig—not above, because there the verandah sheltered him. Weekie was happy now, I suppose, and warm as to his toes. Weekie's wives are dutiful wives, but mark this: they themselves had no shelter-nests, and all through the terrible frost-spell they cowered by night within a foot or two of their lord and master—but on bare twigs.

I notice now that these shelter-nests are quite common. A cock-sparrow slept in one last winter in the great Gloire de Dijon rose-tree that covers the northern wall of my stable; but this was built above the perching-twig—it was, in fact, a little arbour.

When they don't build shelter-nests, sparrows crouch at night under eaves, in ivy thickets, in old nests, and in the holes of trees, which they sometimes line.

The great work of the year—building and bringing forth their young—among sparrows commences early in March, or much sooner, if the weather be fine. But long before this married sparrows who have determined upon a change of residence, and bachelor sparrows who intend to set up for themselves when summer comes, go prospecting around, popping into holes, examining eaves, and chimneys, and ivied trees.

The former take their wives with them, whom they seem to consult and try their best to please, often in vain, for the female sparrow appears to derive a genuine pleasure from house-hunting, and keeps it up as long as possible—till probably the warm weather comes upon them all at once, and they are fain to settle down anywhere.

In the early part of the season the nests are not built very rapidly: about June or July they are often run up in three or even in two days.

The birds seem to have a dreamy kind of happiness in building the first nest, and want their sweetness long drawn out. In fact, it is the honeymoon.

Example: A half-built nest in the wistaria-tree just under a huge cluster of sweet-scented blossom. It is noon, a bright March sun is shining, and up in the tree it is almost as warm as summer. The particular sparrow who owns that half-built nest has only one wife; it is his first season, and hers. They are both young and innocent, not to say ignorant. The foundation of the nest is terribly untidy, exceptionally so. The hen sits about a yard from the nest, with her consequential morsel of a bill in the air, giving her body a little jerk every now and then as if she had the hiccup, and saying "po-eete." The cock is closer to the nest, busy preening his feathers in the sunshine. Presently he hops into the nest, and has a turn or two round by way of seeing how things are going on. This

is a hint to the hen, and excites her to a little more activity, and away she goes to look for a mouthful of building material. She stops on the garden-path to pick up a tiny beetle or two, then hops on to the vegetable beds, shakes up a few bunches of dry couch-grass roots, but finally abandons them for a terribly long and terribly strong wheaten straw. Back to the wistaria-tree she flies with this, half frightened at her own temerity in carrying anything so large. She sticks it up at the side of the nest—it hangs a long way down the tree—and retires to look at it. The cock looks at it too. They both study it.

"It is very hard, isn't it, my dear?" says the cock at last.

"It is a very fine piece of straw though," replies the hen, slightly piqued.

"Yes," says the cock, "as a straw it is certainly a very grand specimen. I admit that. The puzzle is how to work it in."

So they both sit down with their wise wee heads together, and look at that strong straw, and think and wonder in what possible way or shape it can be made use of. They sit there for quite two hours giving vent only to an occasional suggestive "cheep," and a jerk of their little bodies as if they both had the hiccup. But at last they suddenly awaken to a sense of their folly. Two whole hours of sunshine lost, and all for a straw! That straw is at once cast loose, and both fly off and soon return with something far more useful, if less ornamental. And so the work goes on.

My sparrows build the main portion of their nests principally with hay, straw, and withered weed roots, but this is mixed and mingled with a variety of other material, rags, pieces of old rope or twine; but paper above all things, especially, it appears to me, tracts and bills relating to cheap sales, because the paper on which these are printed is soft. A long string of white or coloured cloth may often be seen fluttering pennant-fashion from a sparrow's nest. Some believe this is so placed in order to frighten cats and hawks. More likely it is mere slovenliness. Well, a sparrow's nest outside does look a most untidy wisp. But there is an art in its very untidiness, and the thickness of the nest renders it cool in summer and warm for a shelter-nest during winter. The amount of feathers crammed into a single nest, particularly that of a tree-sparrow, is often quite astounding.

An old nest is sometimes made to do duty over and over again during the season, but it is always overhauled and re-lined.

Sparrows are not invariably wise in the selection of their building sites. Instance: Two sparrows built this summer in the rose-covered spout of my verandah. A terrible storm of rain came, and the young were drowned in the torrent of water that came from the

roof. But I daresay these silly birds think such a thing will not occur again—in their time. At all events, they have thrown the dead birds out to the cat, renovated and re-lined the nest, and there are eggs in it now. I was staying last summer for a week or two with a friend not far from here. There were plenty of martens about, and three nests under the eaves right over my bedroom window. For several mornings I had noticed grains of wheat on my window-ledge, and on looking up towards the nest I noticed feathers protruding. Now, had I been Samuel Pickwick, I should have at once taken out my note-book and made the following entry:—"N.B. The house-martens in Hampshire line their nests with feathers and feed their young on wheat and barley."

I laughingly told honest Joseph G—, my friend's gardener, of my discovery in natural history. He was too old a sparrow to be caught with chaff, however.

"It's the sparrows, beggar 'em," he said, shutting his fist; "they're at their games agin. I'll shoot 'em, I will. They waits till the swallers builds their nests, then they goes and turns 'em out and finishes up wi' feathers."

"Don't shoot them," I said, "they have young."

"Indeed, sir, but I will," cried Joseph G—. "What right has they to turn the swallers out, eh? Fair play, I says, fair play and no favour."

Some years ago I read that the sparrows in Australia had constituted themselves a kind of plague, and in rather a strange way they stole all the hay to build their nests, and every plan, such as smoking them, and turning the garden hose on the nests, etc, had been tried in vain. We must not believe all colonists tell us. They are noted perverters of the truth. Why didn't they retaliate and turn the sparrows into pies—a sparrow pie, they say, is a dainty dish. I do not care to eat my sparrows. I believe that killing sparrows is like killing house-flies—others come to fill up the death vacancies.

Now there are some things about sparrows that I confess I cannot quite understand. Knowing that they are often bigamists, sometimes polygamists, I am never surprised to see two or three hens helping a cock to build the family nest; but when I notice, as I have frequently done, a sparrow who has only one wife being assisted in the construction of his domicile by another gentleman sparrow, what am I to think? Who, I want to know, is the other fellow who drops round of a forenoon in a friendly kind of way with a weed in his mouth, and even gets inside and "chins" the nest. Is he a brother-in-law, or a father-in-law, or the son by a former marriage, or what? I give it up, but there is the fact, and "Facts are chiels that winna ding."

It may not be generally known that there are bachelor sparrows, who remain bachelors all the summer from choice, and old-maid sparrows who are obliged to be so, and who sometimes build nests and sit by them looking disconsolate enough, sighing and singing "po-eete" for the poet who never comes.

Here is an anecdote with a little mystery about it that the reader may possibly be able to unravel, for I can't. It is a little tragedy in one act, and must have been a very painful one to the principals. My splendid Newfoundland, Hurricane Bob, came down to my garden wigwam one forenoon last spring. He was whining and apparently in great distress of mind.

"Come on up here with me, master," he said, "there are some strange goings on at the front lawn."

I followed him, and could soon hear the pitiful cries of a sparrow, up near a spout that comes out from under the wooden eave of the tallest gable of the cottage. The dog pointed up there, continuing to whine as he did so, and evidently in grief because he couldn't fly.

It was not long before I mastered the whole facts of the case. They were as follows:—Close by the funnel-shaped mouth of the descending spout, and supported by some branches of the wistaria, a pair of sparrows had built in the previous spring and raised several broods. It was February now, and they had come round prospecting—impressed doubtless by old associations—to see if the same nest could not be refitted, and thus do duty again. Full of excitement, the cock bird had hopped down between the woodwork of the eave and the spout, and seeing a crack about half an inch wide beneath, had attempted to come out there. He got his head through and one wing, but there he had stuck.

It was quite affecting to witness the agony and perturbation displayed by the hen bird—the poor imprisoned cock did nothing but struggle and flutter—her cries were pitiful, and every now and then she would seize her spouse by head or by wing and try to pull him through.

Meanwhile, on a twig of wistaria not a yard away sat another cock-sparrow, an interested but inactive spectator. He simply looked on, and never volunteered either assistance or a suggestion.

As soon as I could procure a ladder long enough to get up, I went to the rescue, but the poor bird's head had drooped—he was dead; and so firmly fixed in the crack that I could neither drag him through nor push him back. The hen sparrow and the strange cock sat

looking at me some little way off, but the former after this made no further attempt to relieve the cock bird. He was no more, and she must have known it. But who the mystery was the strange cock—the impassive spectator? Was he father, brother, or, dear me! was he a former lover—a rival? Did he sit there mocking the dying agony of the other bird? Did he address him thus:—"You're booked, old man. You may kick and flutter as much as you please. I tell you you are as good as dead already. When you are gone I'll hop into your place. This nest will suit us nicely. Us, I say, d'ye hear? It will suit us, and we will soon forget you. Good-by, old man, keep up your pecker."

I would have torn down the old nest, but I really was curious to know if the dead sparrow's widow would wed again, and take up house there. Surely she would never bear to pop out and in at the doorway of that nest, with the skeleton of her late lamented husband hanging out through the crack. I left the nest for a month or two, then tore it down, but no birds have ever built there since.

There are more hen than cock-sparrows, and this may account for the prevalence of polygamism in the community. As to old-maid sparrows, I have assuredly often known nests built by hens alone, but am willing to admit that these hens may be relicts, some accident may have happened to the husband. However, it is a fact that there are plenty of bachelor sparrows, who live a free and easy life all the summer, and never dream of becoming Benedicts; you see them in the gardens, and you meet them out in the fields, and they are always in company with other male sparrows of their own way of thinking.

Now every one who lives in the country is perfectly familiar with those little disturbances that often arise all of a sudden among sparrows, when about half a dozen go flying into a bush together, squabbling, bickering, and fighting with fearful ferocity. Some books gravely tell us that these squabbles are in reality courts-martial being held on some erring brother or sister of this genus Passer. I never took this for granted, and for three or four summers I have used my best endeavours to get at the true explanation of the matter, and I am satisfied they are caused by differences of opinion between Benedict and bachelor sparrows, resulting in a match "'twixt married and single," a free fight, in which the females take part.

Female sparrows often fight most viciously together from bush to bush, but preferably on the ground. I have often seen a stand-up battle between the two wives of a bigamist sparrow. He himself would simply stand about a yard off, and look on.

"It's no good interfering," the cock appears to think; "it is a sad state of affairs to be sure, but what can a fellow do? I must try to manage matters differently another year."

Sparrows may keep the same mates from year to year, and so they may arrange for pairing as early as November or December the year before, flying about with their coming queens, and roosting near them at night. But considering the number of these birds that are killed every year—by our bold sparrow-club men for example, by misguided gardeners, and by bucolic louts who net them in the ivy after nightfall for the purpose of supplying matches with the needed birds—considering the quantities of them that cats and hawks kill, and the numbers that die from frost and starvation, to say nothing of the young birds of last season, the mating time is a very busy one indeed. The cocks are then as full of fight as an Irishman on a fair day, and the hens—well they simply sit and look on.

"None but the brave deserve the fair," they seem to say to themselves, "and it is certainly very gratifying to one's self-esteem and respect to know that all these sanguinary battles now raging round the rose-trees and in under the laurel-bushes are about us."

Here are a few notes I took some months ago:—A bright spring morning in March. Sunshine on the red brick walls of our cottage, sunshine on the wistaria. Wistaria not in blossom yet.—N.B. Blossom comes before leaves, though it is now covered with long soft downy buds, tipped with a suspicion of mauve. The forenoon is quite warm, delightful to be out of doors. Yet at seven o'clock there was hoar-frost on the ground, and thin ice on the dogs' water. The sparrows are unusually lively, and bickering constantly—especially the cocks. Yonder a fight has commenced, just under the eave; it rages there a few moments, then down tumble the belligerents from a height of twenty feet, holding viciously on to each other's jaws all the while with the ferocity of bulldogs. Now they struggle together on the lawn, lunging and pecking, and wrestling with wings outspread and legs everywhere. There are beads of blood about their eyes, and tiny drops on the grass. What a serious matter it seems! Death or victory! they think and care for nothing else. I believe I could steal up and put my hat over the pair of them. "England's difficulty," says my Persian cat, creeping up, "is Ireland's opportunity." No you won't, puss. Go away at once, or I'll call for Collie to you.

But see, one sparrow has triumphed. Vae Victis! He chases the conquered and breathless bird from bush to bush, till his own lungs give out, and he returns open-mouthed but glorious, and flies up to the tree where sits the cosy wee hen that all the row has been about. He is going to say something or make a proposal of some kind, when back flies the conquered cock, and the battle is renewed with double vigour. This is a longer fight than last, but victory once more declares itself on the side of the former champion, and back he flies again to the trysting twig—to find what? Why, another fellow who has been actually taking a mean advantage of his absence in the battle-field, and pruning his feathers in front of his hen. There is another fight there and then, and

perhaps there may be many more to come. But in the end all things will be well, and the fittest survive.

Round the corner are a pair of birds already matched and mated; they are at peace with all the world, and can afford to sit quietly on their twigs and witness the fighting and the fun.

The cocks this lovely morning seem striving to do all they can to make themselves conspicuous. The hens, on the other hand, sit quietly on their twigs, their morsels of tails at an angle of about 45 degrees, their little beaks in the air, and their feathers all balled out to catch the sunshine.

To one of these independent little mites a black bib sidles up. He addresses her in wretchedly bad grammar, but what can you expect of a sparrow?

“It’s you and me this season, ain’t it?” he says.

She tosses her bill higher in air than it was before, as she replies—

“Oh dear no, sir. I couldn’t think of changing my state.”

“Here, you!” cries another black bib, hopping on to the same twig, “it’s you and me, if you please.”

Then another fearful fight begins between the two black bibs.

And so the fun goes on.

But this I have observed: Before mating actually takes place the male sparrow often gives the female a thrashing. Well, perhaps it is as well they should have their little differences out before marriage instead of after. Quien Sabe?

Early in June my sparrows may be seen hopping or flying about with sprays of blue forget-me-not in their bills. A lady visitor at my house was much struck with seeing this last summer.

“Whatever do they carry flowers for?” she asked laughingly; “your sparrows are more refined in their tastes than any birds I ever even read of.”

But the explanation is simple enough. They cut and carry away the sprays of forget-me-not for sake of the seeds that are already half ripe at the lower end of them.

A little innocent girl asked me the same question, her pretty eyes filled with sweet surprise, and I wickedly replied, “There is going to be a grand fête of some kind to-day among my sparrows, and they are going to decorate their nests.” She simply answered, “Oh!” but she looked believing.

In this short paper I have not said one-half of what I should wish to say about these interesting and independent wee birds that follow and take up their abode with mankind wheresoever he goes in the wide world, but I hope I have said enough to gain for sparrows a little more consideration and a little less cruelty than they generally meet with.

“But they are so destructive?” Yes, I knew some one would say that. Yet I maintain that they do far more good than harm in the world. If space were given me I could prove this. Meanwhile here is an extract from Land and Water, which is well worth reading and considering:—

“What the swallow tribe do in killing innumerable flies in country parks, the sparrow does to some extent in the gardens and squares of London, especially in its more immediate suburbs. All the sparrows have got nests, many containing callow young, a few ‘flyers,’ and some are still sitting on the eggs. An old sparrow might be seen perched on the top of a house, and presently with a graceful motion the bird ‘rises to a passing fly’ and secures the morsel. If the bird or birds had got young in the water-spout hard by, or in the hole often left by builders missing a brick at the end of a row of houses, in ivy, or in the thick foliage of the Virginia creeper, the young birds get the ‘catch.’ Besides this fly-catching, I have noticed for the last few weeks the sparrows working in every evergreen bush, also in jessamines, in lilac-trees, and especially in the crevices of old walls, in search of spiders, earwigs, green-fly, daddy long-legs, etc. The adult birds seem to prefer this wall and bush ‘food’ more than crumbs of bread regularly thrown out for them, except where they have got a nestful of hungry youngsters, and then the latter get some of both. But how hard the sparrows work, and the starlings too!”

Now let us go a little farther from home. Some years ago the English sparrow was introduced into that country of free institutions called the United States. The sparrow has certainly made himself at home there. He has increased and multiplied a millionfold, and now America wants to “Extirpate the vipers.”

But the Americans do not always know what is good for them. Example: They have slain all their big game (where will you find a herd of wild buffalo now?), they have killed nearly all their birds, and well-nigh cut down their last bit of genuine forest.

Yes, the sparrow makes itself at home in America. Some months ago I was sitting in one of the beautiful open squares in New York. The sparrows were plentiful enough all about and enjoyed themselves very much, especially in flying through the playing fountains; it must be delightful to take a bath on the wing. A tall Yankee was sitting near me with outstretched legs. A sparrow alighted on the toe of his boot; he wore Number 10's. He eyed it curiously and critically. I smiled.

"A cheeky bird," I couldn't help remarking.

"Yes, sir," was the reply, "but—it's British. That accounts."

I "dried up" after that.

But even in America the British sparrow has made a few friends, as the following extract from Forest and Stream will prove:—

"A Good Word for the Sparrows.—I send you by this mail a lot of leaves of the maple growing in front of my office, which when gathered were literally covered with insects. What attracted my attention to them was the busy action of some two dozen English sparrows, hopping here and there in the tree, peering under the leaves, and savagely feeding on something. An inspection revealed the cause of their eagerness, and the cause of the early shedding of the leaves. Examine these vermin and tell us what they are. The sparrows were so busy they would scarcely keep out of the reach of my hand. I called the attention of several gentlemen, who watched them for some time. This proves (to me) the insectivorous habits of the English sparrow."

Sparrows are treated with systematic cruelty by many in this country; they are trapped and shot wholesale and at all seasons, and not only are their nests torn down with the eggs in them, but even when filled with young, and these are allowed to expire—mere little naked things—on the ground.

Sparrow matches are a disgrace to our country, and to those who engage in them. Every reader will surely admit this much. As for members of sparrow clubs, I never saw one, and Heaven forbid I ever may.

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Eleven.

On the Breezy Cliff-Top.—Our "Hoggie."

"Ah! what pleasant visions haunt me
As I gaze upon the sea!
All the old romantic legends—
All my dreams come back to me."

One of the sunniest memories to all of us is the time we spent on the cliff-tops of romantic old Dunbar. There is nothing more calculated to give pleasure to a true Briton, unless he happens to have been born by the beach, than a few days spent at the seaside; that is, if he or she can have thereat some comfort. Here at Dunbar was no noise, no bustle, no stir, and, to us, not the worry inseparable from living in lodgings. Our little homes were all our own: we could go when we liked, do what we liked, and there was no landlady at the week's end to present us with a bill including extras.

The only noise was the beating of the waves on the black rocks far beneath us, and the scream of sea-birds, mingling perhaps with the happy voices of merry, laughing children.

Stretching far away eastwards was the ever-changing ocean, dotted with many a sail or many a steamer with trailing smoke. Northwards was the sea-girt mountain called the Bass Rock, whilst south-eastwards we could see the coast-line stretching out to Saint Abbé Head.

We were so pleased with our bivouac on the breezy cliff-tops of Dunbar that we made the place our headquarters, journeying therefrom, up the romantic Tweed, visiting all the places and scenery sacred to the memory of Scott and the bard of Ettrick.

We did not forget to make a day's voyage to the Bass Rock, and well might we wonder at the grandeur of this wild rock, with its feathered thousands of birds, that at times rose about like a vast and fleecy cloud.

It was, however, no part of our ideas of happiness to in any way hamper each other's movements. No, that would not have been true gipsy fashion.

Sometimes, one of us would be quietly fishing from the rocks, while two more might be out at sea in a boat, a little dark speck on the blue. As for me, it was often my delight to—

"Lie upon the headland height and listen
To the incessant sobbing of the sea
In caverns under me.
And watch the waves that tossed and fled and glistened,
Until the rolling meadows of amethyst
Melted away in mist."

Often, when she found me all alone, Ida would pounce on me for a story. To this child a tale told all to herself had a peculiar charm. Here is one of our little sketches.

Our "Hoggie."

One dark, starless night in October, 1883, I had been making a call upon a neighbour of mine in the outskirts of our village. I had a tricycle lamp with me, not so much to show me the way as to show me my dogs, a valuable Newfoundland and a collie. Both are as black as Erebus, and unless I have a light on a dark night, it is impossible to know whether I have them near me or not.

Just by the gate, but on the footpath, as I came out, I found my canine friends both standing over and intently watching something that lay between them.

"It is a kind of a thorny rat," Eily the collie seemed to say, looking up in my face ever so wisely; "I have kept it in the corner till you should see it; but I wouldn't put my nose to it again for a whole bushel of bones."

Eily's thorny rat was, as you may guess, a hedgehog, and a fine large fellow he was.

Now I should be one of the last people in the world to advise my readers to capture wild creatures and deprive them of their liberty, but I knew well that if the boys of our village found this hedgehog, they would beat it to death with sticks and stones; so for its safety's sake I went back to my neighbour's house and borrowed a towel, and in this, much to the dog's delight, I carried "Hoggie" home with me. The children were not in bed; they were half afraid of it, but very much pleased with the new pet, and set about making a bed for it with hay in an outhouse, and placed cabbage and greens and milk-and-bread sop for it to eat.

When we all went to see Hoggie next morning, he had his head out and took a good look at as with his bright beautiful beads of eyes. He looked as sulky as a badger nevertheless. We offered him nice creamy milk, but he would not touch it; we even put his nose in it.

“No,” he appeared to tell us, “you can take a horse to the water, but you can’t make him drink.”

So we placed a saucerful of bread and milk handy for him, and left the little fellow to his own cogitations, and determined not to go near him till next day. When we did so, we found, much to our joy, that all the bread and milk had disappeared. He was certainly no dainty feeder, for he had had his fore-feet in the saucer, which was black.

We soon discovered that night was the only time he would take food, and that he very much preferred lying all day curled up in his bundle of hay, sound asleep.

It has been said that rats will not come near a place where a hedgehog is. This is all nonsense; we had plenty of conclusive evidence that the rats which swarm about our place kept Hoggie company.

Under one particular tree the earthworms used to swarm, always coming out of their holes at night, and around this tree it occurred to the children to build Hoggie a garden. They fenced it round with wire-work, and put a box and a bundle of hay in it at one corner. Hoggie was now indeed as happy as a king, and he soon grew as tame as a rat, for kindness will conquer almost any wild animal.

We did not interfere with his natural instincts, but in the evenings we used to have him out for a little run, and very much he seemed to enjoy it. He was afraid neither of dogs not cats, and would allow any of us to smooth him just as much as we pleased, and pat his pretty little brow between and above his pert, wee eyes. There was only room for one finger there, so small was his head, but this was quite enough.

“Don’t hedgehogs sleep all winter?” asked little Inez, my eldest daughter, one day; “and isn’t this winter?”

“Yes, baby,” I replied, “this is winter. It is now well into December, and poets and natural historians have always given us to believe that hedgehogs do hibernate.”

“I’m not going to hibernate,” replied Hoggie, or he seemed to reply so, as he gave a kick with one leg and commenced a mad little trot round and round his yard. “The idea of going to sleep in fine weather would be quite preposterous, as long,” he added,

swallowing a large garden worm and nearly choking over it, “as the worms hold out, you know.”

But great was our dismay when one morning we missed Hoggie from his yard. It was nearly Christmas now, and frost had set in, and once or twice snow had fallen.

Our gardens and paddock are quite surrounded with hedges, and trees of all kinds abound; so with the dogs we searched high and low for Hoggie, but all in vain. Eily found a rat, Bob found a dormouse, and rudely awaked it, but no dog found poor Hoggie.

“Poor Hoggie!” the children cried.

“Poor Hoggie!” said the youngest; “I hope poor Hoggie has gone to a better place, pa.”

“Has Hoggie gone to heaven, pa?” this same prattler asked me in the evening.

Now let me pause in my narration to say a word about hoggies in general. I have had many such pets; they get exceedingly tame and quite domesticated. They seem to prefer to live with mankind, and can be trusted out of doors quite as much as a cat can. They are sure to come back, and generally come in of an evening, trotting very quickly and in a very comical kind of fashion, and make straight for the kitchen hearthrug.

“It is so dark and cold and damp out of doors,” they appear to say, “and quite a treat to lie down before a cheerful fire like this.”

Well, hedgehogs are the best-natured pets in the world, and so full of confidence, and are not afraid of any other creature when once fairly tame. You know, I daresay, that one hedgehog will keep the house clear of black beetles. But nastier things than beetles come into country kitchens and cellars sometimes—newts, for instance. Well, hoggie will eat these; indeed, hoggie would eat a snake. I saw a hedgehog one evening in the dusk crossing the road with a snake trailing behind her. It was in summer, and I daresay that the snake was being taken home to feed the young ones.

The young are born blind and white and naked, but the bristles soon come, and by-and-by they begin to run about; then the mother hoggie takes them all out for a run in the cool, dewy evenings of May or June. The father hoggie looks very proud on these occasions, and runs on in front for fear of danger, and to guide his little family to spots and places where plenty of food is to be found.

In the domesticated state, a hedgehog will pick up its food in summer out in the garden; but if kept indoors it must have food gathered for it—worms, slugs, a little green food, and roots, chiefly those of the plantain. Besides this, it should have bread and milk, and perhaps a little cabbage and greens, which it may or may not eat.

I may tell my little readers that tame hedgehogs are very cleanly, and of course they do not bite, nor do they put their bristles out when being petted by those they love.

The hedgehog is the gardener's best friend, and any man or boy who destroys one, is really guilty not only of cruelty, but of folly.

Now to complete my sketch of our Hoggie. I have a wigwam, although I am not a wild Indian. My wigwam is a very beautiful house indeed, built of wood and surrounded with creepers. It stands in the orchard, on the top of a square green mound, with steps leading up to it.

Well, one day in spring, when the gardener was busy cutting the grass around this wigwam, he told the children something that caused them to come whooping up the path, all in a row, just like American savages.

"Oh, pa!" they shouted, emphatically, "Hoggie's come back. He is underneath the floor of the wigwam!"

I was as glad as any of them, because I am very much of a boy at heart.

I got a candle, though it was broad daylight, and peeped into a hole beneath my wigwam, and there was Hoggie sure enough, smooth little brow, black little eyes, bristles and fur and all.

Hoggie came out that same night.

"I've been hibernating," he seemed to say, "and ain't I hungry, just! Got any bread and milk? Got any worms, any slugs, any anything?"

You may be sure we fed him well.

And Hoggie goes and comes, and comes and goes, at his own sweet will. But his home is underneath the wigwam floor, where he has one companion, at all events—a pet toad of mine, a very amusing old fellow, whose history I will tell you some day, if our kind friend the editor will give me leave.

The following two stories were told by Frank and me on this same breezy cliff-top at Dunbar, the most interested portion of our audience being apparently Ida, Hurricane Bob, and Mysie, the caravan cat.

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twelve.

Danger; A Study in Dog Life.

"Shall noble fidelity, courage, and love,
  Obedience and conscience—all rot in the ground?
No room be found for them beneath or above,
  Nor anywhere in all the Universe round?
I cannot believe it. Creation still lives,
  And the Maker of all things made nothing in vain."

Tupper.

Danger is a very suggestive name for a dog, especially when that dog happens to be a guard-dog and a bull-terrier to boot. But such was the name by which the hero of this brief biography was always known. The probability is that he was descended from very ferocious ancestors; indeed, the dog had all the external appearance of one that could both tackle and hold, if occasion demanded any such display of his powers. However, one should judge, not even of a dog, from first impressions.

The dog Danger did not advance very high in my estimation at our first meeting. It wasn't love on sight with either of us. I had gone into a shop in the dusk of a summer's evening, to buy a small guide-book, being then on a tour through the lovely vale of Don, Aberdeenshire. I found no one in attendance except Danger, whom I did not at once perceive. A low ominous growl soon drew my attention to the spot where he was lying. I could just trace the dim outline of his figure, and see two eyes that glittered like balls of green fire. It would have been quite enough, no doubt, to make a person unaccustomed to dogs feel uneasy, more particularly as the shopkeeper seemed in no hurry to put in an appearance. He came at last, though.

"Is your dog dangerous?" I asked.

"He is very far from that," was the quiet reply. "I often wish he were a trifle more so. But his name is Danger," he added, smiling, as he lit the gas.

I had now a better look at the animal. He certainly was no beauty, and I thought at once of the painting by Landseer—"Jack in Office." Danger was huge and somewhat ungainly,

though not really so large as he looked. It was his immense head, and the general cloddiness of his body, that gave him the appearance of size. His ears were small and lopped over gracefully, his nose was both flat and broad, and his eyes did not look a bit more conciliatory in the light than they did in the semi-darkness. He came round behind, and forthwith instituted a very minute investigation of the calves of my legs. This was probably a proof of the dog's high intelligence, but it was not over-pleasant to me nevertheless.

"There is hardly anything that animal won't do," said the shopkeeper.

"I can quite believe that," I replied, with a furtive glance over my shoulder; "I can quite believe it."

Danger went away presently, apparently satisfied with the result of his scrutiny, and my mind was relieved.

I had occasion to make many visits to the same shop after this, and Danger and I got to be very friendly indeed. There was something decidedly honest about Danger's every look and action when you came to know him. Perhaps he had the same opinion about me. I trust he had. At all events he appeared to take to me, and had a quiet, queer way of showing his regard that many people wouldn't have altogether relished: to wit, if I sat down in the shop, as I sometimes did, Danger would come and lay his great head in my lap; it weighed about ten pounds, apparently; any attempt at getting him to remove it, until he himself pleased, elicited a low growl, which was by no means reassuring. Yet, while he growled, he wagged his tail at the same time, as much as to say:

"I really do not wish to quarrel with you, unless you force me."

If I stood in the shop instead of sitting, it was much the same, because Danger used to lie down beside me, and put his monster head on top of my foot, and go through the same performance if I attempted to disturb him. Nor would he always obey his master and come away when told; he was like the spirits in "the vasty deep."

I made the village of V— my headquarters for several months it was so quiet, and I wanted rest. It came to pass eventually that Danger took it into his big head to go with me in my walks and rambles; I did not dare to refuse the convoy, though so forbidding did the animal look, that I was often ashamed to be seen in his company. I flatter myself that there is nothing of the Bill Sykes about my personal appearance; if there were, Danger was just the dog for me. Ladies meeting me and my questionable friend, would often look first at Danger and then at me, in a way I did not at all relish.

Danger was not a young dog; he had certainly arrived at years of discretion. He was well known in V—. Indeed, he was as much a part and parcel of the village as the town clock itself; and a fine, free and independent life Danger led, too. It was also a life of singular regularity. As soon as he had eaten his breakfast of a morning, he used to take a trot down the street, visiting exactly the same places or spots every day. Coming back, he would seat himself at a bend of the road and right in the middle thereof, where he could see all that was going on either up the street or down the street; and hear as well, for he always kept one of his ears turned each way—a very convenient arrangement. Danger spent the greater portion of every forenoon, wet day or dry day, in this way, only on Sundays he never appeared at all.

He was not only well known to every human being in the village, but to every dog and cat also, and no dog ever went past Danger without coming and saying a friendly word or two, or exchanging tail-waggings, which is much the same. I have sat at my window and seen all sorts and all kinds and conditions of dogs come and make their obeisance to Danger of a forenoon—lordly Saint Bernards, noble Newfoundlands, stately mastiffs, business-looking collies, agile greyhounds, foxy Pomeranians, wee, wiry Scotch-terriers, daft-like Skyes, and even ladies' darlings, the backs of whom Danger could have broken at one bite, had he been so minded.

I am perfectly sure that Danger knew he was not very prepossessing in appearance, and that he looked a fierce dog, though he did not feel it. Occasionally a strange dog would come trotting up the street, and then it was amusing to watch Danger's tactics. Of course the new dog would not like to pass Danger without making some sign. To do so would have looked cowardly, and no dog cares to show fear, whether he feels it or not. Danger would bend all his energies to getting the new-comer to advance and be friendly. He would not get up, because that might be construed into a menace, but he would positively wriggle on the road and grin. This made him appear more grotesquely hideous than ever, but the other dog seldom failed to understand it.

"I confess I do look terribly ugly and terribly ferocious," Danger would seem to say, "but I am the meekest-minded dog in all the village. Come along. Don't be afraid. I never met you before, but I am satisfied we shall be the very best of friends."

"Well," the new dog would apparently reply, "you are certainly no beauty, but I think I can trust you nevertheless."

Now there came to the village one day a large half-bred cur, partly smooth sheep-dog, and partly mastiff. He came swinging up the street in a very independent manner indeed, and as soon as he saw Danger he stopped short, and raised his hair from head to tail. This was meant for a challenge to Danger, but Danger was slow to see it; he simply

began to grin in his usual idiotic fashion. But when the mongrel advanced, Danger grasped the situation in a moment. At the same time the cur seized Danger by the neck, and a fierce fight ensued. Five minutes after the mongrel slunk away home, beaten, bleeding, cowed; and Danger lay quietly down again as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Dave," as the mongrel was called, had had enough of Danger, and used to go past him afterwards as if he saw him not; but he took his revenge on the other village dogs, all the same. There was scarcely one he did not attack and badly use. When, however, Dave one day lamed a Pomeranian, who was a great favourite with Danger, and when that wee dog came limping up and seemed to show Danger his grievous wounds, the latter thought it was quite time to be up and doing. He now purposely threw himself in Dave's way at every opportunity, and stout and fierce were the battles fought, Danger invariably coming off triumphant.

Dave belonged to a wood-carter, and both man and dog had bad names. When Dave at last took to worrying sheep by the dozen, his master was communicated with in a way he hardly relished, and so Dave was put on chain, and peace in the village canine community was happily restored.

The winter came on, and a wild, bitter winter it was, with high, icy, east winds, sleet and snow. I happened to be passing one day near to the cottage where Dave's master dwelt, and, hearing a mournful whine issuing from a shed, I peeped in. There lay poor dog Dave, and a pitiable sight he was, and no sign of either water or food was to be seen. My heart bled for the creature. Bad enough he was in all conscience, but to make him suffer thus was revolting. I got little satisfaction at first from his cruel master, who told me he had no time to attend properly to a dog on chain. The promise of an occasional coin brought about a better state of existence for Dave. But this did not last long. Once only I saw him led out on a string for a little exercise. How wretched he looked!—lean and mangy, and trembling like an old aspen-tree, his hocks plaiting and bending beneath him at every step. There was no fight in Dave now! He even wagged his tail to Danger when he met him, and Danger returned the salute with a hearty goodwill, which showed how much of benevolence dwelt beneath that ugly phiz of his.

But I was witness to a still greater proof of the kindness of Danger's heart, a few days after this. It was a grey, dull day, with a keen wind blowing from the north-east. I was just dressing to go out, when who should I see making his way along the pavement but my friend Danger. He had a great ham-bone in his mouth. I got out as quickly as I could, and followed Danger down the street and down the lane, and straight to the shed where poor Dave lay dying—for dying he undoubtedly was.

I never before had read or heard of so generous an act being done by one dog to another—that other, too, a quondam foe. Dave lay on his miserable bed of damp, unwholesome straw in the woodshed, through every cranny and chink of which the wintry wind was whistling and sighing. Dave was shivering, but more, I think, from sickness than cold. Danger approached with a ridiculous grin on his foolish phiz, and many an apologetic wag of his tail. “Here, Dave,” he seemed to say, “here is a bone I have saved for you; there certainly isn’t much on it, but it may just do for a picking.”

But poor Dave was past even picking a ham-bone, and two days after this the shed had no tenant; Dave was dead. I do sincerely wish that my tale had not so gloomy a finish, but as I am writing facts, I have no power to make it otherwise. Danger’s master lived in a cottage about a mile up the Don, and close to its bank. One night a terrible rain-storm came on, and I was told next day that the river was in “spate;” that many sheep had been carried away, and even cattle and horses. After breakfast I went to see it. There was something even awe-inspiring in the sight; the quiet and placid river of the day before, with its clear, brown, rippling water, was swollen into a wide, yellow, surging, roaring torrent. The sturdy old bridge on which I stood shook and trembled with the force of the water that dashed underneath. Pine-trees, hay, straw, and even the carcases of cattle, came down stream every minute. I left the bridge at last, and walked slowly up along the top of a wooded cliff.

Till this day I regret that I did not go straight home from the bridge, for I shall always remember what I saw. Something was coming floating down the turgid river, right in the centre, and rapidly approaching me, swirling round and round in the current.

It was a small hay-cock. How he had got on I never knew, but on the top thereof was my honest friend Danger. I called him.

The pitiable, pleading look with which he replied went straight to my heart. Danger could not swim!

What made the matter more mentally painful to me was, that there was quite as much of the ludicrous as the pathetic about the situation. For, poor dog, his great solemn face never looked uglier, never looked more distressed than now; and the glance he gave me as he was borne hurriedly onwards to certain destruction—why, I have but to close my eyes to see it even now, as I sit here.

And that was the last that was ever seen of Danger; he never appeared again on the streets of the village of V—.

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Thirteen.

Dicky Dumps: the Parson's Pony.

"A little water, chaff and hay,
And sleep, the boon of Heaven;
How great return for these have they,
To your advantage, given!
And yet the worn-out horse or ass.
Who makes your daily gaining,
Is paid with goad and thong, alas!
Though nobly uncomplaining."

Tupper.

There are, or were, two immortal men, who never spoke without saying something—I refer to Shakespeare and Burns; and when the former remarks so prettily,—

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."

we cannot help replying, "That is true."

But for all that, every one who owns a pet animal of any kind, that he really loves, will be ready enough to admit that seemingly senseless though the names be which we sometimes give them, there is generally some reason in them, albeit there may not be much rhyme. When we talk to animals which we have a great affection for, we often use a deal of ridiculous abbreviations. Never mind—they, our favourites, understand them, and really appear to prefer them. Just one or two examples. There is an immense Newfoundland lying not far from me while I write, an animal who by reason of his beauty, his bounding independence, and his very roguishness, takes all hearts by storm. His name was originally "Robin;" that soon came down to honest simple "Bob." He is known in what is called the canine world as "Hurricane Bob," he being a show dog. He derives the sobriquet "Hurricane" from the mad way he rushes round his own paddock when he first gets out of a morning. With his long black hair floating in the wind, he is hardly visible as he races round and round about you. You can just see a black shape,

that is all, which you conclude is Hurricane Bob. You can set him off racing round and round at any time by calling—

"Hurricane, Hurricane, Hurricane!"

He has a great sense of humour and of the ridiculous; but if you say to him, "Robert, come here," he then approaches very gravely indeed.

"What's up!" he seems to say, "that I am being called Robert? Have I done anything wrong, I wonder?"

Again, if you call him Bobbie, he expects to be patted, caressed, and made much of.

So he has a name for all weathers, as a sailor would say.

"Eily" is the name of a splendid collie of mine. In the course of years her name became Eily-Biley. She prefers this. There is love and affection and pats and pieces of cake, and all kinds of pleasantness associated with the name. Eily is simply her business name, as it were, and there are times when she is called "Bile" emphatically, and on these occasions she knows she has been doing something wrong and is to be scolded, so she at once throws herself at my feet, makes open confession, and sues for forgiveness.

"Yes, dear master," she seems to say; "it is quite true, I did chase the cock, and I did tree the cat. They did provoke me, but I will try not to do so again."

I have a great many wild-bird friends. There are several sparrows visit me every day, at and in my wigwam, or garden study. One comes to name. That name is "Weekie!" I heard his little wife call him "Weekie" one day, so the name has stuck to him. We have been friends for years, Weekie and I. He is bold and pert, but affectionate. He roosts in winter among the creepers on my wigwam, and steals morsels of my manuscripts to help in building his nest in summer.

So there is something in pet names at all events. I daresay most of my readers would think that "Dumps" was a queer name to give a pony. Well, and so it is; but the name grew, for he was originally Dick; from Dick to Dickie the transition is natural. "But how about the 'Dumps'?" you may ask. Well, Dickie belonged to a good old country parson that I knew, who lived some years ago in one of the wildest glens of our Scottish Highlands. If this parson was not, like some one else, "Passing rich with forty pounds a year," he managed to live and support his family upon not much more than double that sum. But he had a very thrifty wife, and his children were each and all of them as good as they looked, and that is saying a deal. They possessed the kind hearts that are worth

more than coronets, and the simple faith that is better far than Norman blood. So poor though Mr Mack, let us call him, was, his home was a very happy one. Mrs Mack rather prided herself on her cookery, and her skill in the art was fully appreciated by all the family—including Dickie the pony. But what Dick particularly loved was a morsel of suet dumpling.

The dining-room window looked over Dick's field, and was entirely surrounded with lovely climbing roses, as indeed was all the cottage, for great yellow roses could be gathered even through the attic windows, and they actually trailed around the chimneys.

In spring and summer the dining-room window used to be left open, and Dickie would station himself there, and wait with equine patience for his morsel of dumpling. Sometimes he got two or three pieces, and even then would have the audacity to ask for a fourth help. "It is so nice," he would appear to say, with a low, comical kind of a nicker. "It is dee-licious. Do you know what I'll do, if I don't have more dumpling? I'll crop the rose-leaves."

"Ah, Dickie, would you dare?" Mrs Mack would cry; for she dearly loved the roses.

"Well, then," Dick would appear to answer, "give me some more dumpling."

Even at breakfast-time, if the window were open, Dick would pop his head in, and apparently ask: "Is there any of that dumpling left? I don't mind taking it cold."

So there is no great wonder that the pony came to be called "Dickie Dumpling," and finally, for short, Dumps.

Poor old Dumps, he was such a favourite; and no wonder either that the children all loved him so, for they had grown up with him; the eldest girl, Muriel, was seventeen, and Dumps was at the parsonage when she was a baby.

Dumps had been grey, when in his prime—a charming grey, almost a blue in point of fact; but, alas! he was white enough now, and there were hollows in his temples that, feed him as he would, his master never could fill up. Sometimes, too, Dumps' lower lip would hang a bit, and shake in a nervous kind of way; and as to his teeth! well, the less said about them the better; they could still scoop out a turnip or bite a bit of carrot, but as for his oats, Dumps had a decided preference for them bruised.

These, of course, were all signs of advancing age; but age had some advantages, for the older Dumps grew, the wiser he got. There was very little that concerned him that Dumps didn't know, and very little that concerned his master either.

The Rev. Mr Mack was one of the most tenderhearted men I ever knew. Many and many an old pauper blessed and prayed for him. Yes, and he for them; but I am bound in honesty to say that Mr Mack's blessings often took a very substantial and visible form. There was a large box under the seat of the old-fashioned gig, that the parson used to drive, and Dumps used to drag; and, nearly always, after he had prayed with, read, and talked a bit to some poor afflicted pauper, Mr Mack would go to the door, and stretch his arm in under the seat, and haul something out: it might be a loaf of bread, it might be a bit of cheese, a pot of jam—Mrs Mack was a wonder at making jams and jellies—it might be merely the remains of yesterday's pie, or it might be—whisper, please—a tiny morsel of tobacco, or a pinch or two of snuff in a paper.

"Don't go away, Dumps," the parson would say to the pony, as he returned into the house.

Dumps would give a fond, foolish little nicker, that sounded like a laugh.

"At my age," the pony would seem to reply, "I'm not likely to run very far away."

I happened to be practising in Mr Mack's parish for six weeks, having taken the duties of a gentleman who was gone away to get married. I drove, the parson's pony.

"Just give him his head," said Mr Mack on the first day that I went to visit my paupers; "he'll take you all round."

Not knowing anything at all about the roads, I was very pleased to leave the whole arrangement of my visits that day to Dumps. He went jogging up the road, half a mile, then down a lane, and finally brought up at a long, low, thatched cottage. Then he jerked his head round to me, as much as to say, "Get out here."

And in the same way poor Dumps took me everywhere over the parish. Here would be a sick child to see, here a bedridden old woman, here a feeble, aged man, and so on and so forth.

The sun was set, and the stars coming out, and it appeared to me I must have still ten miles to drive before I reached the parsonage, when all at once that dear, rose-clad old cottage stood before me, and there were Mr Mack and two of his charming daughters standing at the gate laughing.

I was indeed surprised. The explanation is this: Dumps had returned by a different road. He had really and truly taken me on a round.

My friend, who had gone to get married, returned at last, and I left the glen. But happening to be on half-pay in the June of the succeeding year, I received a pressing invitation from my brother professional to spend the summer with him, and enjoy some fishing, a sport of which I am extremely fond. It was while I was at his house that a cloud shadow fell on the old parsonage, and its inmates, hitherto so quietly happy, were plunged into grief.

I did not know, nor had I any business to know, the exact history of poor Mr Mack's trouble. From the little he told me, however, it was pretty evident that it was occasioned or arose from his own kind-heartedness: he had become security for the debts of a friend. O! it is the same old story, you see; the friend had failed to meet certain demands, and they had fallen on Mr Mack. How willingly I would have come to the kindly parson's relief had it been in my power, and I believe he would have accepted assistance from me as soon as from any one, for I was looked upon as a friend of the family.

I could not help noticing now that it was a case of pinch, pinch, pinch with the Macks. Indeed, I fear their table no longer groaned with the weight of the good things of this life, but rather for the want of them. But for all that—let it be said to his credit—the poor of the parish never went without the dole to which they had been so long accustomed.

Things grew worse instead of better, although, when I expressed my concern, Mr Mack assured me, with a sadly artificial smile on his face, that after a certain day it would be all right again.

"My dear," said Mr Mack to his wife one evening as she sat sewing after the young folks had all gone to bed, "to-morrow is the fair at B—, and I fear I must go. Poor old Dumps! My heart is as cold as lead at the thoughts of parting with our children's pet."

His wife never looked up. She couldn't have spoken a single word if she had tried to, but the tears rolled down her cheeks and fell thick and fast on the white seam.

Mr Mack was up next morning betimes. I question if he had slept a single wink. He was up before the lark, and long before any one in the house was stirring. He made himself a hasty breakfast, fed Dumps, and started. It was better, he thought, to go ere the family were about.

When Mrs Mack took the children into the study, and explained to them why they were forced to part with Dumps, they showed far less exuberance of grief than might have been expected, and lent their aid individually to console the mother; but—

O! the sorrow was deep, though silent.

The father returned the same evening alone. He looked jaded and wan. Hardly any one touched a bit of supper that night, and, judging from their faces next morning, I feel sure some of the girls mast have cried themselves to sleep.

It would be waste of words to say that Dickie Dumps, with all his droll, wise ways, was sadly missed. Poor old fellow, they would have given almost anything now to see his head popped in through the breakfast-window, or even to see him cropping the rose-leaves. Who, they thought, would give him his morsel of dumpling now? And they hoped and trusted that he might have a good home.

One day the parson came to see me.

“I’ve got bad news to-day,” he said. “O! I wouldn’t that my wife and darlings knew it for all I possess.”

“Nothing very serious, I hope,” I inquired anxiously.

“Some might not think so,” he replied. “My dear old pony! He is working in a coal-mine: slaving away down in the dark and grime; the horse that took my wife away on our marriage tour, the horse that has been my children’s friend all their lives. Don’t think me foolish, Gordon, but only think, the poor old fond creature that loved us all so well, been used to the green country all his life, to sunlight and daisied leas and kind treatment, and now—”

He couldn’t say any more, and I did not wonder; and I tell you, reader, that at that moment I wished to be rich as much as ever I did in my life.

I went away over the hills. I walked for miles and miles. It is a capital plan this, when one is thinking. I was thinking, and before I returned I had concocted a scheme which, if successful, would restore Dumps once more to the bosom of his family. I told the parson of the plan, and he was delighted, and rubbed his hands and chuckled with gladness.

A day or two after, a short series of lectures was advertised to take place in the village school-house, to be illustrated with a magic lantern. Two lecturers were to officiate every night, and together tell stories of their lives and wandering adventures. One was a

soldier friend of mine—dead now, alas!—the other my humble self. The lectures were somewhat original in their way, for we not only told stories on the little stage, but we sang songs, and even gave specimens of the dances of all nations, including the savages of America, Africa, and Southern Australia. I daresay we succeeded in making fools of our two selves; but never mind, we made the people laugh and we drew bumper houses, and the best of it all was, that we raised money enough to buy back Dumps.

"Never say a word to anybody," whispered the parson to me, "till Dickie is back again in the stable."

Nor did I.

But though Dumps had gone away a white pony, he returned a black one, and what made matters worse was that it was raining hard on the evening I led him round to his old stable at the manse.

I stopped to supper, of course, and as soon as thanks had been returned, Mr Mack went away into the kitchen and came back with the lantern lighted.

"I want you to see something," he said, "that I have in the stable."

Ah! but the parson spoiled the whole thing by looking so happy. His wife and children could read his face as easily as telling the clock. There was a regular shout of "Dumps! O! pa, it must be Dumps!"

His wife snatched the lantern out of his hand, and the children, wild with joy, ran after her, so that instead of being first in the stable the parson was the very last.

There was no occasion now to hide tears as they caressed the old pony, for they were tears of joy. Dumps was back, and nickering in the old foolish fond way, and nosing everybody all over in turn.

"Isn't it first-rate?" Dumps seemed to say; "fancy being back again among you all; and how is the grass, and how is the rose-tree, and how is the dumpling?"

When we returned at last to the parlour, the parson glanced at his family and burst out laughing, and the members of his family looked at each other and laughed too. And no wonder, for what with the rain, and the coal-dust of the pony's neck, I never before or since have seen a family of faces that more needed washing.

But what did that signify? Wasn't Dumps in the stable once more?

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Fourteen.

A Quiet Evening—Rover's Experience.

"Lo! in the painted oriel of the west,
Whose panes the sunken sun incardines,
Like a fair lady at her casement shines
The Evening Star, the star of love and rest."

Longfellow.

"I can't see them," said Frank.

"Nor I either," was my answer.

The sun had gone down some time ago, not as the song says:

"The sun has gone down o'er the lofty Ben Lomond,
And left the red clouds to preside o'er the scene."

There were no red clouds worth the name, only far up in the west a few scarlet feathers. But projecting straight up into the heavens from the spot where Sol had sunk in a yellow haze, was one broad beam or ray. It looked strange, weird-like, and it remained for quite a long time. Meanwhile an orange flush of intense depth spread all along the horizon, and the pine-trees on the distant hills were etched out in darkest ink against it; higher up was all sea-green, then blue, and here shone the evening star.

We had the front door of the caravan open. Frank sat on the driver's seat—the horses were sung in stable, bedded up to the knees—and I and the children lay among the rugs on the coupé. Our coupé, mind you, was quite a verandah.

How very still it was, how beautiful was the scenery all around us! We were far north of Dunkeld, we had toiled through the pass of Kiliecrankie, and were on the verge of one of the loneliest passes of the Grampian range.

There was hardly a sound to be heard, except the monotonous drowsy hum of a waterfall, hidden among those solemn pine-trees in the glen close adjoining.

“No,” continued Frank, “they won’t come out.”

“What is it?” said Maggie May.

“That tall ray of sunshine,” I answered, “is the nearest approach to what we in Greenland call sun-dogs, and Frank and I were looking for them.”

“What are sun-dogs?”

“A strange kind of mirage, Maggie May, in which the sun is reflected four times in the sky, so that you can actually see four or even five suns—that is, one real, and four unreal.”

“Now,” said Ida, “tell me a stoly.”

“And me a story too,” said Maggie May.

“Get your fiddle and play, Frank.”

Frank did so, and sang too, but the children would not be put off, so I had to begin.

“It is about a little dog—a spaniel, Ida—and it is the poor little fellow himself that is supposed to be speaking. Do you understand?”

“I twite understand; go on.”

Rover’s Experience.

“I’m not tired,” said Rover, for that was the dog’s name, “and I’m not sad, though I sigh—at least, not very sad.”

“O,” he continued aloud, his brown eyes dilating with earnestness, as he began to tell his story, “it was not my dear old master’s fault that he parted with me. He was poor, and tempted by a large price; and the tears coursed down his cheeks as he bade me farewell. I could see them, though he tried to hide them.”

"'Good-bye, dear old Rover,' he said, 'you will be happy where you are.' The luxury of tears is denied to dogs, but, O! what a big choking lump was at my throat, as, led by a string, I went away with my new master.

"I tried to do my duty by him at first, although I could see he was empty, vain, and foolish. He gave me a new name, he bought me a new collar, such a fine one, and he bought a new silver-mounted whip—dear old master never used a whip. He bought something else—he bought a muzzle!

"'This,' he said, shaking it at me and smiling, 'is to put on you in the dog days, my boy.'

"I shuddered. This man, then, believed in the old worn-out fallacy and superstition that dogs go mad in the dog days. From that very moment I determined to leave him. I would not return to my old master. No; I would not pain him by proofs of my disobedience, but I would go somewhere—anywhere away from the cruelty that now surrounded me. It was the cruelty of ignorance—the cruelty, I might say, of luxury—for my kennel was superb, the dish from which I lapped my milk was china, my chain was of polished steel; but had it been of the purest gold it was still a chain, a fetter. And, alas! while I had plenty of the best meat and bones to eat, I often lacked bread; and although my milk was brought fresh every morning, I often wanted water. All my master cared about was to hear me praised and called beautiful.

"My relief came at last. I was taken down to the copse one day in June; my master had his gun.

"'See now, good dog,' he said, 'if you can't start a rabbit. In you go.'

"'With all the joy in life,' I replied, speaking with my tail. But it is not given to men like him to understand the language of dogs.

"I plunged into the copse, and my master started to walk round and watch. He may be walking round and watching till this day for anything I know, or care. I did not go far till I sat down, to enjoy, to drink in a portion of the life, the freedom, and the joy everywhere around me.

"It was in a little glade carpeted with meadow grass and wild flowers, many with pink eyes peeping through the green, many with blue; then there were tall branching ferns and trailing white-blossomed brambles, and glittering buttercups, starry-flowered fairy bedstraw, and the modest little crow-pea that rivalled the buttercups in richness of yellow. Down in this quiet copse the nightingale and blackcap still trilled their song, and

gorgeous birds and butterflies innumerable flew hither and thither, all so happy in their freedom.

"'Don't leave the copse till nightfall,' said a sweet bell-like voice that proceeded from a beautiful moth deep hid among the crow-peas, 'don't leave till nightfall—we never do; don't leave, don't leave—' I heard no more; slumber stole over me, a slumber more sweet than any I had enjoyed for many months; and when I awoke the stars were all out, and a lovely moon, and the moths were floating and dancing among the elder blossoms. It was very dreary in that copse, and when I heard the distant village clock chime out the hour of midnight and the owl hoot mournfully, I felt frightened, for all dogs are superstitious.

"Flap! flap! flap! At that moment a great owl flew right over the glade, and I started and ran, and never pulled up until I was miles upon miles away from that eerie, dreary copse.

"I got to a highway at last, and went straight on, and on, and on; but towards morning, when the stars began to pale, I forsook this road, and took once more to the wilds, keeping the direction in which I knew London to lie, for that I determined should be my destination. I had been running since midnight, and was now very tired and very hungry, and glad enough I was, you may be sure, when I came to a humble cottage, from the roof of which the smoke was curling. Here a woman gave me a little milk to drink, and would fain have caught me afterwards; but, though not ungrateful, I was too near the place from which I had escaped; and so I ran on again once more.

"All that day I slept under a wreath of newly mown hay, until the stars once more shone out that I thought were to guide me on to London. Then I had the good fortune to find a plentiful repast, in the shape of a young rabbit. Part of it I ate, and part I took along with me.

"Towards morning I was in quite a wild country. There was not a house to be seen, save one shepherd's hut, and this I determined to avoid; but Fate willed it otherwise. I caught my leg in a trap that had been set for a fox. How can people be so cruel! My limb was frightfully lacerated, and when towards evening the shepherd's boy came to my relief, I expected nothing but death. How different was the treatment I received at the hands of the dear boy who found me! He carried me away to his mother's cot, and for weeks between the two of them they tended and fed me as if I had been a baby. The food I had may have been rough. What of that? I had it regularly, and my drink was the pure water from the neighbouring rill. When at last I was able to follow my kind young protector away over the wild moorland after his fleecy flock, O! I don't think there could have been a much happier dog than I. I could have lived there for ever. But happiness will not, cannot, last in his world. One day a bird-catcher came over the moor. I went to look at

him, he threw me a piece of meat and I ate it. I remembered no more until I found myself tied by the neck with a rope, and the blackness of darkness everywhere about me. How I blamed my greed in not having been contented with the kindly fare my humble master and mistress never failed to place before me. But my life with this bird-catcher was of short duration; he sold me, and before many months were over I was re-sold, and sold and sold again. Sometimes I was owned by rich, sometimes by poor; at times I slept in stables, at times on beds of down; but I cannot say I ever was happy. I was seldom fed with regularity either—indeed, the time on any day at which I dined was merely chance; my water, whenever I had a dish, was seldom pure; and as for exercise, I had to take it whenever I could. Folk little think how cruel such treatment as this is, but the time is coming when they will know, although my poor bones will then be mouldering in the dust. We have but a short life, we poor doggies. I think those who own us, and whom we love and try to serve so faithfully, might often be a little kinder to us than they are. But there—I will not sadden this happy meeting by one word of complaint. The last master I had was one of the best of all, but even he was thoughtless, and I determined if I had the chance to leave him. That chance came. It came with Christmas Eve. I could see that preparations were being made to send me away, and to my joy I heard more than once mention of the name of London. Finally, I was led to the station and consigned to the tender mercies of the railway officials. Never shall I forget the horrors of that journey, for instead of putting me in a clean hamper, properly directed as he ought to have done, my master simply sent me off on a collar and chain. So I was thrust into a terrible box, called 'the boot,' with at each end of it a grating; the way was long, the night was piercing cold, I had neither food nor water, nor straw to lie upon, and the wind whistled over me till my very bones felt frozen. But, worse than all, I had to change carriages towards morning. I was taken out, therefore, and tied up at the station at a corner, where the wind blew most fiercely, and the whirling snow almost choked me. The snow was all the refreshment I had for many, many hours; so there I starved and shivered all the livelong day. Rosy-cheeked, happy-looking children and people in holiday attire brushed past me, friends met friends; there were laughing and gaiety and joy on all sides, but no one looked towards poor me. Yes, forgive me if I forgot thee, dear mild-eyed gentle woman, you came and stood in front of me, and I could see a tear quiver for a moment, ere it fell on my head. This dear lady, whom I never saw again, opened her bag and gave me to eat.

"At length came a porter, a rough, hard-handed, cruel man, and undid my chain, but my poor limbs were quite paralysed, and refused to move.

"'Come, you must,' he cried, and kicked me.

"But I could not; then he dragged me along on my side by the chain; I was choking, my eyes were starting from their sockets, when at last my champion came.

“Only a railway guard—only a big, burly, bine-coated, brass-buttoned railway guard—but as, lamp in hand, he stood there, square-shouldered and erect, glancing with indignant eyes at the wretched cowering porter, he seemed all a hero.

“‘How dare you use a dog in that way?’ he cried.

“Then he took me in his arms and carried me into his own van, and gave me a bed of warm straw. Heaven bless his brown beard, wherever he is; but for him I should have died.

“I was left to starve again at the London station, and here by sheer force I pulled my head through my collar and fled.

“That is my story then,” said Rover, “and it proves that the world is not all bad, and that there are many good guards on railways who are kind to travelling doggies; and once more I say, Heaven bless their brown beards where’er they may be.”

“A very nice stoly indeed,” said Ida.

“And now me,” said Maggie May.

“Well, Maggie May, I see you have got Mysie there to nurse, so I’ll put a pussy in your story, if you don’t mind.”

“Yes.”

“Then Frank will fiddle again, and after that we’ll all go to bed as gipsies ought to at this time of night.”

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Fifteen.

Just Like Tiny.

"The family friend for ten years or more
That basked in the garden and dozed in the hall,
And listened for songs on the mat on the door."

Tupper.

"Just like our Tiny!" said little Ada Mair when she first saw the subject of my present sketch. "Just like our Tiny!" repeated her wee sister Ailie, going directly up, throwing her arms about Charlie's neck and kissing him.

Charlie, you will understand, was the dog's name, a small black and tan, with a coat as dark as a raven's wing, and as soft and sheeny as satin. Not, mind you, that it was soft in reality, only it felt so. The tan in Charlie's cheeks, and eyebrows, and neck and feet, was of the richest mahogany, and his eyes were like the eyes of a young seal, or some lovely gazelle. Altogether we were all very fond of Charlie, and not a little proud of showing off his tricks to strangers, and we were positively astounded when one day we were told by a gentleman who knows a very great deal about dogs, that although our Charlie was "a very pretty fellow," still he was not quite well enough shaped in the head, too short and broad in fact, to take a prize at a show.

"O! you must be mistaken," said our maiden aunt, bristling up; "we think him perfection."

I smiled, but said nothing, for I knew the critic was right.

"And just like our Tiny!" said Ailie again, as she repeated the kiss.

Charlie was seated on a chair, a favourite location of his, because he was out of reach of the old cat's claws. Tom the cat never agreed with Charlie, and there was no love lost between the pair of them. The truth is Tom was jealous, and took every opportunity that presented itself to make poor Charlie's life as miserable as it could well be. Tom used to invite Charlie to have a drop of milk out of his saucer sometimes.

“Real new milk!” Tom would say; “have a drop, Charlie, it will do you good.”

“Do you really mean it?” Charlie would ask, talking with those great eyes of his.

“Of course I do,” puss would reply.

About a minute after this, Charlie would be coming flying up the back stairs as if the house were on fire, with Tom behind him, whacking him all the way, and crying:

“I’ll teach you to touch my milk.”

Sometimes Charlie would have a bone, and when done with it, would hide it in a corner. Well, pussy would settle down behind it, and presently when Charlie came back:

“Come away, Charlie,” pussy would say, or seem to say. “Come away, dear; I’ve been watching your bone. Those thieving rats, you know.”

“O, thank you, Tom,” Charlie would say.

But half a minute later Charlie would be once more rushing madly up the back stairs, and pussy after him, clawing him all the way.

Pussy’s favourite seat was the footstool, and in a winter’s evening, when tea was on the table, a bright fire in the grate, the kettle singing on the hob, and Tom half asleep, but singing all the same, on the hassock, our parlour looked so cheerful. But sometimes Tom would say to Charlie:

“I’m going away to the woods to-day, Charlie, for a long, long hunt after the rats and weasels, so you can curl up on my footstool all day.”

“O, thank you!” Charlie would say.

Then away Tom would trot, and Charlie would be up on top of the hassock, and asleep in five minutes, for on the whole Charlie was a shivering little fellow when the weather was cold—just like your Tiny.

Well, pussy would not go farther away than the paddock gate; she would sit there for perhaps ten minutes, making little funny faces at the sparrows, and at cock-robin. Then back she would come.

“He’ll be asleep by this time,” Tom would say to himself, as he came stealing to the parlour.

Next moment there would be another race up the back stairs, and Charlie would be howling most dismally.

This was very naughty of pussy, and it was not at all pleasant for Charlie; no wonder he preferred sitting in the chair.

I’ll never forgot the day Charlie caught and killed his first rat. It was a very big one, and he was as proud as any deer-stalker. He must needs bring it into the parlour and lay it on the rug before us all. Tom smacked him, and took the rat away to a corner, and gloated and growled over it, and told Charlie that all the rats and mice about the place belonged to him.

Charlie could swim as fast as a Newfoundland, he could follow the carriage for miles, and whenever it stopped he used to jump up and sit on the horse’s back, and perhaps go to sleep there, for he was a sleepy little fellow at times—just like your Tiny.

Charlie used to fetch and carry. Does your Tiny do so? He would carry things much, much bigger than himself. A carriage rug, for example. And this was funny, if the rug were very heavy Charlie would stop pulling it and give it a good shaking, growling all the time as if the rug were alive. Then he would stop and look at it for a minute or two, with his head first on one side and then on the other, as much as to say:

“Will you come now, then? I’ll give you more if you don’t.”

Bright, loving, brave, and gentle was Charlie. You see I say “was Charlie,” so you will know that Charlie is not alive now; I will tell you how it happened.

It was a winter evening. Our house, The Grange, is a good mile from the station, across a wild bleak common. It would be quite three miles round by the road, so we seldom go that way. Some of our friends were coming to spend a week with us. They ought to come by the 4:30 fast train, and I was there to meet them. It was eight before they arrived, however, and O! such a dreadful night. The snow had come down and was already fully a foot deep, and lay on the road in great wreaths that no horse could pass. Then the wind blew a perfect hurricane, and the drifting snow almost took our breath away. We must go by the common or remain at the station all night. Our friends were only two, a young lady and her father, but both were very brave.

Alas! we never could have crossed the common that night, had it not been for Charlie. Many a life was lost in that terrible storm, which will long be remembered in our shire. I had not taken Charlie with me, but when in the very middle of the moor, with poor Miss B— all but dead and my friend and I sinking, and not knowing which way to turn—we had probably been going round and round in a circle—I spied something black feathering about among the snow. It was Charlie! I leave you to imagine with what joy we received him.

"Go home, Charlie!" we cried.

And away went our little guide, sometimes quite invisible, but always coming back to encourage us. Half an hour afterwards we were all at home in our bright and cheerful parlour.

But poor Charlie never recovered it. He must have been out in the snow for hours. Next day he was ill, and got rapidly worse. Strange to say that Tom the pussy was now actually kind to him.

"I fear," I said one evening, "Charlie is worse than ever."

Charlie was worse—one pleading look at us, one slight shiver, and our pet was no more.

There is a little grassy grave down in the orchard, that the children always cover with flowers in spring-time and summer.

That is Charlie's.

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Sixteen.

Professor Dick's Academy: A Strange Adventure.

"Bodily rest is sleep—is soothing sleep,
Spirit rest is silence deep,
O daily discord! cease, for mercy cease,
Break not this happy peace."

The caravan lay high up on a lonely moorland, amid the solitary grandeur of the Grampian mountains—a thousand good feet and over above the level of the sea.

The scenery around us was desolate in the extreme, for no vestige of human life, no house, no hut, not even a patch of cultivated land, was anywhere to be seen around us. Above was the blue sky, with here and there a fleecy cloud, and yonder an eagle soaring. Around us, as a horizon, the eternal hills, many of them flecked and patched with the snows, that never melt. Far beneath, at one side, was a stream; though not visible, we could hear its drowsy chafing roar, as it tumbled onwards, forming many a foaming cataract, to seek for outlet in some distant lake. On the other side was a good Scotch mile of heathery moor, blazing purple and crimson in the sunshine.

Here and there, on grassy banks, great snakes glittered and basked in the noontide heat, while agile lizards crept over the stones or stood panting on the heath-stems, to stalk the flies.

It was strangely silent up here. We could listen to the lambkins, bleating miles away, and the strange wild cry of mountain plover and ptarmigans, while the song of insects flitting from alpine flower to alpine flower was pleasant music to the ear.

On the right I could see the dark tops of pine-trees. But they were far away. Never mind, I would walk towards them. I so love forests and woodlands.

No, I would have no companion save my trusty friend Bob. A word was sufficient to deter Maggie May from accompanying me in my ramble. That word was "Snakes!" Frank was not so easily shaken off; but when I told him I was probably going to write verses, he refrained from forcing his company on me. So Bob and I set out on our

rambles alone. Verses? Well, verses come sometimes when least expected. Better than wooing the muse, is being quiet and letting the muse woo you.

But a sweet spirit of melancholy was over me to-day. I wished for silence, I longed for solitude. A breeze was murmuring and sighing through the weird black trees of the forest when I entered it, and I sat me down on a stone to listen to its wail. Nature seemed whispering some sad tale to my ears alone. This to me was spirit rest.

It was indeed a strange forest. The trees were all dark firs, though not tall and not close together. But I had never seen such trees before. Gnarled and bent and fantastic, taking shapes and casting shadows that positively looked uncanny. I had not walked an hour among them till I fancied myself in some enchanted wood, and almost wished myself out of it and away. I stooped down more than once to smooth and talk to the great Newfoundland, to reassure myself; and once, when passing an ugly brown pool of water, I started almost with fright as some water-birds sprang whirring into the air in front of me.

Still I had as yet no thoughts of retracing my footsteps.

When, at last, I climbed a rocky mound and saw the sun going right away down behind a hill, like a ball of blood, I made up my mind to get homewards at once.

But in which direction did the caravan lie? My answer to this was a very hazy one. However, standing on this mound would not help me, so I set out to retrace my steps.

For fully half an hour I walked in what I considered the right direction, but I did not come to the pond again, and the trees seemed different—more close together, and more weird-looking and uncanny, if that were possible.

I got tired at last and sat down.

I had been pensive when I started, I was now perplexed. No wonder, for night was coming on. Stars were glinting out in the east, a big brown owl flew close over me, with a most melancholy shriek of “tu-whit-tu-whoo-oo,” that made my blood feel cold.

I was lost!

Yes, but what had I to fear? I thought I had been lost before, lost in Afric wilds, on prairie lands, and in Greenland mists: was I going to be baffled by a Highland forest and moorland?

“Tu-whit-tu-whoo-oo!”

A sweet spirit of melancholy is very nice, but one may have too much of it.

“Tu-whit-tu-whoo-oo!”

Bother the bird. His wings too are flapping on the night air, and rustling as they say evil spirits do.

The trees grow more uncanny-looking every minute, and after going on and on for fully twenty minutes more, these ghostly ill-omened pines positively seem to advance to meet me, and wave their gnarled arms in the starlit air as I pass.

“Tu-whit-tu-whoo-oo-oo.”

Horrible!

“Bob, my boy, bark, speak, and scare that awful bird.”

“Wowff—wowff—wowff!”

Listen! Hark!

At no great distance we can hear the sharp “Yap! yap! woo-oo” of a shepherd’s collie. No mistaking it. It cannot be a fox, and there are no wolves about.

I take my bearings by a star that shines over the place from which the barking appeared to come, and Bob and I make straight in that direction. To our great joy and relief, we presently emerge from among the black-branched uncanny trees, and on the moor, at no great distance, see a light streaming from the open door of a hut.

A creature very like a wolf, with hair all on end, comes grumbling and yelping in a most threatening way to meet us.

“Let me settle him,” says Bob.

“No, Bob,” I reply. “He is watching his master’s house. He is right.”

But one glance at Bob is enough for the collie. He disappears—goes bounding away over the hill, evidently to seek his master, for when we enter the one-roomed hut we find it deserted.

There is a bright fire on a low hearth, however, and the smoke finds its way up a real chimney, and not through a hole in the roof, as is the case so often in Highland shepherd huts. There is a pot hanging over the fire, simmering away slowly, and raising its lid a little every now and then to emit a whiff of steam, so savoury that Master Bob begins to lick his lips, and seems to wonder that I do not at once proceed to have supper.

I shake my head, as he looks up in my face inquiringly.

"No, no, Bob," I say; "that pot does not belong to me."

"Nonsense," says Bob; at least he thinks it. "Nonsense, master, all the world belongs to you if you could only believe it. You're king of the universe, in my mind at all events."

We sit and look at the pot. There is an old-fashioned wag-at-the-wall clock, tick-ticking away, but no other sound. After a time the clock clears its throat, and slowly rasps out the hour of nine, then goes quietly on tick-ticking again.

A whole hour passes. The clock clears its throat once more and gives ten wheezy knocks.

Bob suggests supper more emphatically. I am getting very weary.

Those we left behind us must think we are indeed lost, or swallowed up in a quagmire. The thought makes me very uneasy, and I begin almost to wish my adventure in the weird forest may be all a dream, that presently the peat-fire, pot and soup and all may vanish, and I may wake in bed.

But while thus musing I am startled very much indeed, and so too is Bob, at hearing a cracked and dismal world-old voice close beside me say with a long-drawn sigh:

"Heigho! I wonder what o'clock it is!"

There is no one in the room, not a soul to be seen.

Next moment, from another direction, but whether above or beneath I cannot be sure, issues a low, half-demoniacal laugh of self-satisfaction.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

The great dog starts up. His hair is on end all along his spine. He growls low and glances fearfully round him as if he expected to see a spectre.

Again the mournful old-world voice and the long-drawn sigh.

“Heigho! Will he ever, ever come!”

The dog looks in my face with terrible earnestness. He expects me to explain. I cannot—I feel uneasy. We listen for many minutes, but hear no more, till the rising wind moans drearily round the house and the fire gets low on the hearth.

“Ha! ha! ha!” The demon laugh again! It is a kind of half-ironical chuckle, impossible to describe. Then a voice in pitiful tones of entreaty:

“Don’t do it. Don’t do it.”

I am really getting frightened. I look towards the door, which had hitherto been open, and stare to see it slowly shut as if moved by some spirit hand. The wind howls now like wild wolves outside.

“What is it? What is it? Ha! ha! ha! What is it?”

Then a wild unearthly shriek, and a yell of “Murder!” rises high above the wind. My nerves are quite unstrung. I verily believe my hair is moving under my Highland bonnet.

I would not stay another moment here for all the world.

I open the door, and rush out into the night, Bob at my heels, and shrieks and laughter resounding in my ears.

Out and away—anywhere, to be free of that uncanny hut.

A big round moon is shining now, and the weird pine-trees are casting weird shadows on the moorland.

Look, though, is that a pine-tree?

No, it is a tall figure, in Highland garb, with a long crook, which it grasps high up, the plaid depending from the uplifted arm.

“Yap, yap, yap—”

That is the collie’s bark, and yonder figure is no doubt that of his master. He advances, and the moon shimmers brightly on the pleasant face and snow-white beard of an old man.

“Welcome, stranger. You’ve lost your way. My dog came to tell me. Come back and share my humble supper, then I will conduct you home.”

I thought it strange to be addressed in such good English. But I was not reassured. Was this a wizard, or a spectre—the spirit of this haunted wood?

“Back!” I cried, with a shudder; “back among goblins!”

“Ha! ha! ha!” he laughed, and I could not help noticing that his laugh was precisely the same as that I had heard in the hut.

“Pardon me,” he said, “but my cockatoos have been talking to you from behind the scenes. Come back, sir, it is all right. See, our dogs are playing together.”

That was true. Bob and the collie were already the best of friends.

From the very moment he mentioned the word “cockatoos,” I felt somewhat ashamed of myself.

So back I went, and shared the shepherd’s soup, and we were soon enjoying a very interesting conversation.

I told him all about myself and caravan, and he explained who he was. A shepherd by choice, because a lover of Nature. A wizard according to some, a poet according to others, because his verses which, he said, were as rough as the heather and the granite rocks on the hillside, found entrée to the Glasgow papers. After supper, he lit a great oil-lamp: we had hitherto had only the fire-light.

Then he pulled aside a screen, and lo! and behold, a dozen at least of cages, each containing a cockatoo, and one a starling.

“What is it? What is it?” said this latter.

“Nothing much, Dick. But you’ve frightened this stranger.”

“Strange!” said Dick.

The old shepherd opened the cage-door, and out flew the bird, and straight on to the supper-table.

“Professor Dick,” said my host, “won’t say another word till he has finished his meal.”

“Professor Dick, you call him?”

“Yes, and I may as well tell you at once how I live and how I manage to get warm clothing, good food, and plenty of books.”

“I see your library is a most extensive one,” I put in.

“It is, for a poor man. I am a hermit by choice; I live all alone in these wilds; I am rent-free, because I have the charge of sheep, and I dearly love the solitudes around me.

“The house or hut I occupy I call Professor Dick’s Academy. Dick is my all in all. The collie comes next in my affections.

“But Dick maintains us.”

“Dick maintains you?”

“Yes, you see all these cockatoos? Well, Dick trains them all to speak. And he trains them tricks, he and I between us. Without Dick I would be nowhere, and perhaps Dick would go to the bad without me.”

“But what becomes of the cockatoos?”

“I sell them. That is the secret of our wealth and happiness. They are Australian hard-bill crestless cockatoos. I pay thirty shillings for each of them. I sell them for ten and even fifteen pounds. There is one there, forty years of age; the most wonderful bird in all the world. Rothschild is very rich, sir, and so is Vanderbilt, but neither possess money to buy that darling bird. No, nor Dick either. But here comes the Professor.”

The bird came hopping towards me, jumped up, perched on the back of a straw chair, and eyed me curiously for quite a minute, using first one eye, then the other, as if to make quite sure of diagnosing me properly.

I thought him somewhat brusque and peculiar at first. He asked me three questions in rapid succession, but gave me no time to answer: “Who are you? What do ye want? Are you hungry?” The Professor and I, however, soon settle down to steady conversation, and talked on all kinds of topics, as freely as if we had known each other for years. Only, like the dictionary, Dick was apt to change his subject rather frequently.

I must say, however, that this pretty bird was the cleverest and best talker I have ever known or heard. There positively seemed no end to his vocabulary, and the ridiculously amusing remarks he made would, I believe, have caused a horse to smile.

“In the name of goodness,” I was fain to exclaim at last to my host, “is this really a bird, or is it some sprite or fay you have picked up in the depths of this weird forest?”

The old shepherd seemed pleased. He nodded and smiled to Dick, and the bird waxed more boisterous and funny than ever.

“I begin to think,” I said, “that I have got into some house of enchantment, and that nothing around me is real.”

The shepherd put Professor Dick to bed at last, and conducted me safely over the moor. He promised to call for us next day, and take us back to the cottage in the forest to hear the Professor teaching his class.

There had been anxious hearts in the caravan during my absence, but Bob went bounding away in front of me to announce my arrival.

Frank was dressed and ready to go off to seek me, stick in hand and plaid across his manly shoulders. But all is well that ends well.

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Seventeen.

The Old Man's Dogs.

"But there was silence one bright golden day,
Through my own pine-hung mountains."

The sun shone very brightly next morning; the sky was blue; and a silence, broken only by the constant roar of the torrent, brooded over the bills.

We all went to see, or rather seek, for Professor Dick's Academy.

But for a long time all in vain, and I was beginning to think the events of last evening must all have taken place in dreamland, when, emerging from the trees, the stalwart form of the old shepherd himself was observed coming towards us. In a few minutes more we were in the cottage.

And there, sure enough was Dick hard at work teaching his class. He was loose, his pupils all caged. We were warned to keep silence, and did so as long as we could.

Dick repeated words and sentences over and over again, and some of the pupils were most attentive and apt. And the way some of the more earnest stretched down their necks, cocked their heads and listened, was amusing in the extreme.

But there was one bad boy in the class—a saucy-looking cockatoo, with a red garland round his neck.

"I want a bit o' sugar," was all he would say, and he kept on at it. "A bit o' sugar, a bit o' sugar; I want a bit o' sugar."

The Professor went towards the delinquent's cage, as if to reason with him; but the naughty bird laughed derisively, and finished off by making a grab at Dick through the bars.

The old man at once threw a black cover over the cage, upon which the bird's tune was changed, and in the dark he seemed to bitterly bemoan his fate, repeating in a most lugubrious voice the words—"Poor Polly! Poor dear little Polly."

One of us laughed.

The spell was broken, and the Professor would teach no more.

“My birds will have a half-holiday,” said the old shepherd, laughing.

He came with us to the caravans, and greatly delighted he was. We gave him books and magazines, and that same morning shifted camp farther east, promising, if ever we came that road again, to visit the shepherd and Professor Dick’s Academy.

The story of the evening was—

The Old Man’s Dogs.

“I would not enter on my list of friends
(Though graced with polished manners and fine sense,
Yet wanting sensibility) the man
Who needlessly sets foot upon a worm.”

When a boy at school, of all my favourite authors, Bulwer Lytton was facile princeps. Walter Scott fascinated, and Cooper enthralled me, while the “Arabian Nights” held me spell-bound; but there was a charm to me about all the writings of the first-mentioned novelist and poet that nothing else could equal.

Girls often have what they call “a hearty cry” over the book or story which moves their feelings; boys do not. I do not remember ever putting down a book in order to weep. Such a matter-of-fact way of going to work never occurred to me; yet, while reading, tears have often filled my eyes—yes, and sometimes do—so as to interfere materially with the distinctness of the print I hold before me.

Now, there is in my opinion no one less to be admired than an ungrateful person. One might surely be pardoned for thinking that ingratitude ranks as a great sin in the sight of Heaven. But we are not to judge, far less condemn. It were often better, perhaps, to extend pity rather than anger to one who has been found guilty of ingratitude, for so universal, as an inborn sentiment, is the feeling of gratefulness, not only in man, but in the animals he has domesticated, that the absence of it would seem to denote an imperfection of brain-structure rather than anything else.

Those who have to do with children should not forget that gratitude is a feeling that can be fostered and cultivated, even in those among them in whose minds it exists only in embryo. But if it can be cultivated, so also can it be crushed; that, too, should be borne in mind.

What a power gentle words and kind persuasion have over even the "brute" nature, as it is called! You may always lead, though you cannot always drive. My Newfoundland dog is very fond of being in the house. "Bob" has a temper of his own to strangers, and a strong will of his own at all times. Sometimes it is necessary that he should go to his kennel and mount guard when he would far rather stay indoors. If, on such occasions, I speak somewhat sharply to him, he refuses to move. No force could get him from under the table; but a few gentle pats on the head, and a few kindly words, succeed at once. The great dog jumps up and comes trotting along with me, looking up in my face as much as to say:

"Always talk like that, master, and I'll go through fire and water to please you."

Says Phil. G. Hamerton, "Whoever beats a dog gives evidence of his own personal stupidity; for a dog always tries his best to understand, and you can make things clearest to him by gentle teaching, if you know how to teach at all."

I had to part with a lovely spaniel dog some years ago. We had had many a happy day together in the woods and fields, and the poor animal got exceedingly fond of me. Well, it was two years after that I met him by chance at a great dog show. I had passed his bench three or four times without knowing him. I only noticed that a certain spaniel was making frantic efforts to break his chain, and rush into somebody's arms; and it was not until I at last stood opposite to him that it occurred to me to look at the catalogue, when I found it was my own old "Beau" that I had not known among the multitude of strange dogs, all of the same colour and shape. Ah! but he had known me in the multitude. But I am so thankful I noticed the dear fellow, and did all I could to make him happy for one short day at least. Suppose I had gone away and never said a word to him—never given one kind word or loving caress; it would have seemed to him so cruel and ungrateful!

On the stormiest winter's day I seldom wear a hat about my own grounds. And shall I tell you why? It is because I cannot bear to see dogs disappointed, for whenever I do put on my hat, the dogs, with the impulsiveness characteristic of their race, jump to the conclusion that I am going for a walk, and that of course they are going as well.

But referring to Bulwer Lytton's novels, or Lord Lytton's, if you prefer it, there is a passage or scene in one of his charming tales that, when a boy, I could not read without

the tears rising up and blinding me, and that I cannot think of, even as I write, without emotion.

An old man has none to care for him or tend him on earth save a daughter, whom he tenderly loves. But he finds a letter which proves her worse than false, worse than ungrateful, for she is, in that epistle, coolly reckoning and calculating on his death at no distant day. What a shock to the father! He is no longer any use; is a positive encumbrance; and she, whom he had so thoroughly trusted, she, too, wishes him away. He calls his dogs to him. They come to his knee, and with wistful, wondering eyes gaze up into his face, for they can see poor master is in grief. And his heart feels ready to break, as he pats his poor dumb friends and exclaims:

"Will there be no one even to look after the old man's dogs when he is gone?"

There is a species of cruelty to animals, happily, I believe, very rare. I refer to that which induces a person to treat harshly and unkindly some dumb creature for the simple reason that it belongs to an enemy. Whatever of harm an animal's master may have done me, it, at all events, is guiltless of evil. Reference to this is made in Holy Writ, and if we turn to Exodus twenty-three, verse 5, we read the following: "If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying down under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him."

On the other hand, the pets of those we love become doubly dear to us in the absence of their real master or mistress. Yonder, let us say, is little Maggie's pet canary. Maggie is always the merriest of the merry when she is about the house. It would be difficult indeed to say whether the canary or she sings the louder, or looks the brighter or the happier all day long. But there were tears in Maggie's eyes on the day she went away, and when she went to the cage and said, "Bye, bye, birdie," it was all she could do to keep from crying. And the bird seemed sad too, and does not sing so blithely now; and every morning, when any one enters the breakfast-room, he extends a very long neck indeed, for he is looking for and expecting the loved one. Now would it not be cruel if the person in whose charge that birdie is left were not more than kind to it in Maggie's absence?

Yonder is Johnnie's rough wee terrier dog. O, what romps and games and rambles far and near Johnnie and that little dog did use to have! But Johnnie has gone to sea. The little dog mourns for him; any one can notice that. But he does not mourn for him as one dead, for often when a step somewhat like his master's sounds on the gravel, how wildly the little dog rushes to door or window to have a look, and how very low his tail droops as he returns disconsolate to his seat on the hearth. May Heaven send Johnnie safely

home again; and won't he find his doggie sleek and fat? It will not be our fault if he does not.

If any one were to ask me how long I supposed a dog would remember an absent master, I should answer—and I should speak advisedly when I did so:

"A dog will remember and mourn for an absent master until his return, no matter how long that may be; or until the dog's own loving eyes are closed in death."

About the mystery of death itself, I question if dogs know very much. They must at any rate imagine that there is a possibility of the dead one returning again to life.

Does the reader remember the story of the gentleman who lost his way among the mountains and was killed, his body being found a quarter of a year afterwards, with his faithful dog still beside it? Or Scott's beautiful lines on the subject, a few of which I cannot resist the temptation to quote?

"Dark-green was the spot 'mid the brown mountain heather,
Where the Pilgrim of Nature lay stretched in decay,
Like the corpse of an outcast abandoned to weather.
Till the mountain-winds wasted the tenantless clay.
Nor yet quite deserted, though lonely extended,
For, faithful in death, his mute favourite attended,
The much-loved remains of his master defended,
And chased the hill-fox and the raven away.
How long didst thou think that his silence was slumber?
When the wind waved his garment, how oft didst thou start?
How many long days and long weeks didst thou number.
Ere he faded before thee, the friend of thy heart?"

I was travelling one time in Ireland in a jaunting-car which I had hired for some days. I had no other companion save a large Newfoundland dog, for whose comfort the seat of the car was hardly broad enough. But there was the driver to talk to, and nothing loth was Paddy either to carry on the greater share of the conversation.

It was the sweet summer-time, and whatever my companion the dog did, I know I felt as happy and light-hearted as the birds.

"See them two dogs?" said the driver to me, as we passed an old-fashioned gate, about a mile from the village of C—.

“Yes,” I replied, “pull up a moment, Paddy, till I have a look at them.”

A pair of lovely Basset hounds they were, a dark or liver-coloured and a light one, coupled together by a short chain. They were waiting for some one, apparently; the white one turned his head to look at us, but the other was all eagerness, all attention. He seemed to me to hear a footstep.

“Waiting for some one, I should think,” I said to my driver.

“Indeed, yes, sorr,” replied Paddy. “It is waiting for their master they do be. It is waiting for him they’ll never see again, they are, sorr. They call them ‘the old man’s dogs,’ and every evening at five o’clock out they trot, just as you see them, and there they stand, sorr, and there they listen for hours and hours together; then trot back, with hanging heads and tails, sorr; but they’ll never see him more.”

“Is he dead, then?” I inquired.

“Yes, sorr,” said Paddy; “but we’ll drive on a bit if we’re going to talk.”

I gave one last glance towards the dogs, and the look of eager expectancy in the dark one’s eyes I shall not soon forget.

“It was all owing to treachery, I think, sorr,” said Paddy, as we drew up under a drooping lime-tree.

“But there it was; the old man B— used to stay much in foreign parts, but he came home at last to settle down. He had an only daughter with him, that he loved right dearly, and barring her neither kith nor kin, that ever we could see, belonging to him.

“He was always cheerful, sorr, and she seemed always happy. He used to go to L— every day; his carriage waited him on his return at the station, and them two faithful brutes, sorr, at the old gate. So everything seemed to go as cheerfully as wedding-bells, and just as easy like.

“There was a count, they called him, that used often to stay at the mansion, sorr. Whether he had anything to do with it or not, it’s not myself that can tell you. But I won’t keep you waiting, for it’s a cruel story. The old man came home one day to an empty house. He was never the same after. Broken-down like he was, and didn’t seem to care for anything but them two dogs. Well, just in one month, sorr, the daughter came back. She never saw her father alive, though. He was carried in the same day at the old

gate, dead, sorr. He had dropped down in a fit, or, as some do say, of a kind of heartbreak.

“I needn’t tell you more, sorr. There is nobody at the old manor now. She is abroad, and just guess you, sorr, what her feelings are if ever she thinks, as think she must. The house is a kind of tumbledown like, and there is no one ever likely to live there again owing to the ghost, you know.”

“I don’t care about the ghost, Paddy,” I said; “but what about the dogs? Where do they live?”

“Just inside the old gate, sorr, at the gardener’s cottage. And it’s waiting they do be, sorr, waiting, waiting. Hup! mare, hup!”

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Eighteen.

Up the Vale of Don.—A Peep at Paradise.

"Between these banks we in abundance find,
Variety of trouts of many different kind;
Upon whose sides, within the water clear,
The yellow specks like burnished gold appear.
And great red trouts, whose spots like rubies fine.
Mixed 'mong silver scales refulgent shine."

The summer sped away.

But early autumn still found us among the bonnie blooming heather.

We were real gipsies now. We had settled down long since to our strangely delightful nomadic life. We were both healthy and happy. There were roses on the cheeks of Maggie May, and—let me whisper it—freckles on her nose.

Frank was as brown as a brick, and even Bob and the caravan cat had increased in size, and looked intensely self-satisfied, and on good terms with themselves.

This chapter finds me fishing in the Don; Maggie May is basking in the sunshine, book in hand, and the rest of our crew are invisible.

"There is something radically wrong, Robert," I said, casting my fly for the fortieth time, and so coaxingly too, over the very spot where I knew more than one fine finny fellow was hiding.

"Something radically wrong, Bob; either the sky is too clear or the water too bright, or there isn't wind enough, or I haven't got the right fly on. But never a bite and never a ghost of a nibble have I had for the last half-hour. I'm tired of it; sick of it. But they are there, Bob, for many a one we have landed on luckier days than this. Besides, what says the old, old poem?"

Bob wagged his immensity of a tail by way of reply, but he never took his eyes off a hole in the bank, that he had been as earnestly watching as I had been flogging the pool.

Whip! Splash! I thought I had one then. And I believe I would have had one, only out of its hole sprang a big black vole, and took to the water. In floundered Hurricane Bob after it, and there was an end to my fishing.

Bob came out of the water presently, and stood between me and the sun, and shook himself several times, causing a rainbow to appear around him each time he did so.

I wound in my tackle, and put up my rod.

Half an hour afterwards, Maggie May, Bob, and I were on the braes above Balhaggarty. We lay ourselves down on a sweet mossy bank, bedecked with many a wild flower; peacock butterflies are floating in the sunshine, and great velvety bees make drowsy music in the air; and not far off, on a branch of a brown-trunked fir-tree, cock-robin is singing his clear, crisp little song. Before us, beneath us, and on every side, is spread out one of the fairest landscapes in all the wild romantic North. Woods and water, hills and dales, stretch away as far as the eye can reach. Yonder is the wimpling Ury, meandering through the peaceful valley to join the winding Don. Near its banks stands, or lies, or rather lies and sleeps, and seems to dream, the village of Inverurie. Very blue are the roofs of its houses in the surrounding greenery, very white are its granite walls, and its spires and steeples look like snow or marble in the autumn sunshine.

That was the village home of one of Scotia's noblest bards—the gentle, genial Thom. Though six-and-thirty years have fled since they laid him to rest in the moors, there is more than one old man and woman living in the village there yet, who knew him in his prime, and have stories well worth listening to, to tell of the poet of the Ury; but as long as pine-trees shall nod on Scottish hills, as long as the dark plumes of Caledonia's sons shall wave in the van of battle, so long will Thom's name be known in the land of his nativity, and among his countrymen all over the world.

Far to the right of the spot where we are reclining, the giant mountain, Ben-na-chie, rears its proud head into the air.

It is a solitary hill, and yet tourists to this land of romance ought to know that from its summit the view obtained on a fine day is probably more beautiful, varied, and extensive than any other I know of in "a' braid Scotland."

It is a solitary hill—a wild, bold, cliffy mass—yet—

"The clouds love to rest on this mountain's dark breast, Ere they

journey afar o'er the boundless blue sea."

A solitary hill—and O! if it could but speak, what tales it could tell: eeriesome, drearisome tales, tales of intrigue and plot, plot domestic and plot political, tales of battle and slaughter and strife—for not a glen for miles and miles around it, not a moorland, not a hill the heather on which has not over and over again been dyed with the blood of fiercely fighting foemen.

Nor were the struggles that took place among these hills and forests and glens of merely local importance; for Aberdeenshire has cut as deep notches in the history of this country as any other shire I wot of.

Down yonder is Bruce's howe, or cave, by the side of the Don at Ardtannies, celebrated in history as the place where the sick king lay, broken in health and fortune, and where he had his memorable interview with the spider, which so raised his hopes that he feared not shortly after to sally forth, give battle to and defeat the fierce, false Cumyn.

Then Bruce laid Buchan waste. After this the whole North of Scotland soon owned his sway, and five years after the sanguinary battle of Inverurie here Bannockburn was fought, and Scotland freed of its would-be conquerors.

But to-day we are seated on the very edge of the great battle-field of Harlaw.

This battle was fought here on a summer's day in July 1411. The Duke of Albany, then regent of the kingdom, had managed by hook or by crook—more likely it was by crook—to secure the earldom of Ross to his son John Stewart, Earl of Buchan, although by rights it belonged to the wife of Donald, Lord of the Isles. Now Donald did not see any reason why he should submit to so barefaced a robbery. The Donalds and the McDonalds of the Isles have always been a bold and straightforward set of billies. The reader may remember the anecdote that is related of one of these Lords of the Isles. At a royal feast, having entered somewhat late, he had seated himself at the far end of the board, seeing which the king sent a messenger to ask him to come and sit by him, at the head of the table.

"Tell his Majesty," was the reply, given loud enough for all to hear, "that wherever McDonald o' the Isles sits is the head of the table."

Donald of the Isles sent the fiery cross through the length and breadth of his domains, and soon crossed into the mainland at the head of his followers. He fought and conquered at Dingwall. Then captured Inverness, swept through the Highlands, and

encamped here at Harlaw, determined to push on next day and attack the Aberdonians in their city of granite.

"Give their roofs to the flames,
And their flesh to the eagles."

Donald had reckoned without his host, however. That host was the bold Earl of Mar, who with a splendid little army of not more than a thousand men, officered by the flower of the county, hurried out and gave Donald battle here on the hill-head of Harlaw. Donald's wild followers numbered 10,000, though they were badly armed. But it was Greek to Greek, it was Scot to Scot, and the conflict was a terrible one.

As I look around me on this lovely autumn evening, my imagination can easily depict the conflict and people the plain once more with the brave knights, and men-at-arms, the mailed Lowlanders that made up the battalions of Mar, and with the wild kilted warriors that formed the hosts of Donald of the West.

Yonder is Mar himself leading the centre fight, on his right the Gordons, Leiths and Leslies, on his left the Keiths and Forbeses, and many other brave clans; all feuds are forgotten for a time, they make common cause against the foe. The Highlanders fight on foot, armed only with dirk and sword, the Lowlanders ride them down and hew them down in hundreds, but the odds against them are fearful; all day even till nightfall the battle rages, when in the darkness Donald draws off the remainder of his forces and slowly retreats by Ben-na-chie; leaving nearly one thousand dead on the field, while Mar is left presumably master thereof, but too sore beaten and far too weak to leave it.

The terrible nature of the struggle may be gleaned from the fact that of the thousand Lowland knights and men-of-arms, who had entered the battle, hardly four hundred remained alive. What a sad day for the gentry of Angus and Mearns! In many cases every male of the house was slain. Leslie of Balquhain fell with every one of his six bold sons, and besides others, Sir James Scrymgeour, Sir Alexander Ogilvie and son, the Constable of Dundee, the Provost of Aberdeen, Sir Alexander Irvine, Sir Thomas Moray, Gilbert de Greenlaw, Sir Robert Maul, etc, etc.

But Donald was conquered and Aberdeen was saved.

Just a word about the Ury for the reader's sake, for who knows but these lines I write may lead some tourist who is fond of the romantic, fond of the beautiful, and fond of fishing, to sojourn for a time in these sequestered glens.

The trout-fishing then of the Ury and of many a brawling wee burn around here, and which are literally alive "wi sonsy fish," can easily be obtained on application to the magistrates, and the kindly landlady of the Kintore Arms has also liberty to grant the boon to those who make her house their home.

"The Ury," says Skinner, "moves onward in noiseless sweetness, winding and winding, as if aware of its own brief course, and all unwilling to leave the braes that hap the heroes of Harlaw. By-and-by it creeps mournfully past the sequestered graveyard of Inverurie, and kisses the Bass, and is then swallowed up in the blue waters of the Don."

The Bass is a small round hill evidently made by human hands, and supposed to be the burial-place of an ancient Pictish king. I visit the quiet graveyard. I have reasons for doing so—sad ones. I might say with Thom—

"Move noiseless, gently Ury, around yon grassy bed,
And I'll love thee, gentle Ury, where'er my footsteps tread;
For sooner shall thy fairy wave return from yonder sea,
Than I forget yon lowly grave and all it hides from me."

The roads here are glorious, and what matter the hills when the air is so fresh and invigorating; if there are braes that one must walk up, there are also braes down which one can roll, at any speed one pleases without a touch on treadle. And how delightful it is to linger on these breezy hill-tops, and while positively drinking in health with every breath of the ozone-laden air, leisurely, dreamily scan the bold and matchless panorama spread out before us.

Yonder is Ben-na-chie again. You never can get past Ben-na-chie. Go where you like in this region, it is always frowning over your path just before you, or alongside, or on the horizon to the right or to the left.

There is "an ower true story" connected with that mountain which might well and easily furnish subject-matter for a three-volume novel. The Earl of Mar's Master of Horse at the Harlaw was a Sir Thomas Leslie, of Balquhain, a wild and lawless man of unbridled passions. On the very summit of yonder mountain he built a fortress, to which he was in the habit of carrying off young women of beauty sufficient to attract him. One of these was Chief Allan's daughter, the Fair Maid of Strathdon. In like manner his son bore away the Fair Maid of Kemnay, who was betrothed to young Sir John Forbes of Drumminnon. Sir John soon after attacked and burned the mansion or castle of Balquhain, and Sir Andrew Leslie, in revenge, sallied down from his fortress and laid waste the lands of the Forbeses with fire and sword. So much for the Fair Maid of

Kemnay, and here is the village itself. High up on a table-land it is situated, among pine-woods and quarries, every house is a charming cottage, built of the whitest of granite. Surely poverty is unknown in such a place, and people here must live for a century at the very least! I'd like to come to Kemnay some time and live for a month in perfect peace, far from the bustle and worry of city life; to live and laze, and fish and dream—perchance to write a book.

Almost buried among trees is Monymusk, as primitive in every way as the grand old hills around it, with only one hotel, or rather inn, but a very cosy one; and O! so quiet is everything here, that in the silence of the night, gazing from the coupé when the moon was silvering the mountain-tops, I have positively heard the field-mice sneeze.

About a quarter of a mile from Monymusk is New Paradise, a kind of a sylvan fairy-land. Here are miles of charming walks, here are rustic-seats, and wells, and streams and bridges, and arbours, and a lake, the whole embosomed in woods, in which are many a bosky dell beloved of birds and all kinds of wild forest creatures. There are little glades, where ferns and brackens grow nearly ten feet high; it is sweet to see the soft evening sunshine shimmering down from among the trees, and falling on these, their greenery relieved by patches of warm autumn brown, and by the crimson lights of tall foxgloves.

Do lovers come here in the evening? We never see them. We have the sweet place all to ourselves, and when we want to change the scene we journey farther on, and soon enter a gloomy defile or forest ravine. This is Paradise Old. Its gateway is a huge jawbone of a whale; for anything I know to the contrary, it may have been the identical whale that swallowed up Jonah. The tourist, at all events, feels swallowed up as soon as he has entered. The long avenue that lies before him is one of the most remarkable in Scotland. It is on moss you are walking, at each side are trees—larches, spruces, and firs, as straight as arrows, and fully one hundred and twenty feet in height, the stems of which two men can hardly touch fingers round. To your right, dimly seen, is the roaring Don, beyond it cliffs and braes, covered with forest and fern, heather and blaeberries.

You come at last to a large circle of gigantic beeches and limes, eighteen in all, inside which seats and tables have been placed, though they are now but little used.

The most remarkable thing about these wondrous trees is that they have grown almost straight, their stems are mighty pillars, and even their branches have gone upwards, skywards, as if seeking the light, the result being a vast and leafy colosseum forming a dome for over a hundred feet high.

The silence is unbroken save for the steady hum of the river, or the occasional cry of some wild bird, and as he looks upwards or gazes around him, a feeling of awe steals over the beholder, which cannot be repressed.

There is in the valley of the majestic Don many a village where the tourist might dwell for a time with a certainty of enjoyment. The scenery everywhere is grand and noble; it is all a classic land, and eminently historical; in every glen a battle has been fought, every parish has its castle ruins, every castle has a story of its own, and be you artist, author, actor, or antiquary, or merely an invalid seeking rest and health, you cannot do better than visit—

"The banks and braes o' bonnie Don."

In Touch with Nature by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Nineteen.

Back Once More in Bird-Haunted Berks.

"We have wandered in our glee
With the butterfly and bee,
We have climbed o'er heathery swells,
We have wound through forest dells:
Mountain-moss has felt our tread.
Woodland streams our way have led;
Flowers in deepest shadowy nooks,
Nurslings of the loneliest brooks,
Unto us, have yielded up
Fragrant bell and starry cup."

Back in Berkshire once again. Were we glad to return? It was a question many a worthy neighbour asked us. Could we answer it in the affirmative? We could not, and did not. Not even for politeness' sake.

But we dearly love Berkshire for all that, love its rolling meadows, its fields of waving corn, the trees that go sweeping over its round hills like cloudlands of green; its placid river, its quiet streams, where the glad fish leap in spring and summer; love its birds, love its beasts, all the way up from the timid wee field-mouse to the saucy fox who leads so merry a life in the woods; and love its people, its peasantry—honest and true are they, sometimes rough, but always right. Yes, and I am not sure we have not even a kindly regard for its long-nosed pigs. So there!

But the fact is that, in one sense of the term, we really had never been from home. We had taken our home with us.

And what a long delightful summer and autumn ramble we had had of it to be sure. No single one of us could remember everything we had seen and come through. But when we get chatting together of a winter's evening, and especially when I get my log-book alongside me, then it all comes back.

I have many log-books, for though I do not consider myself a great traveller, I have sojourned in many lands, and sailed on many seas. And those logs serve often and often to bring me back the past. Here, for instance, is—

A Reverie.

I am sitting alone in my wigwam. This pretty and romantic snuggery stands not anywhere near the forests of the Far West, nor by the banks of the broad Susquehana, nor on alkali plain, or rolling prairie, nor, despite its name, anywhere in the Red man's country at all. It is built on a green knoll in my orchard, down in bonnie Berks. An old well-thumbed log lies before me.

It is the month of February, and the cold winds moan carelessly through the black and gloomy Scotch pines out yonder, and through the lordly poplars, tall and bare, with a sound that carries one's thoughts seaward.

I read but a line or two of the dear old log, and lo! the scene is changed, the inky pine-trees, the weird and leafless poplars, the solemn cypresses and drooping yews, grow indistinct and fade away—the very wind itself is hushed. I am back once more in the Indian Ocean, and my Arab boat is quietly gliding over a calm unruffled sea of bright translucent blue.

It is a day that would make a man of ninety years of age feel life in every limb. Was ever sky so bright before I wonder, was ever sea so warm, so soft, so smooth—was ever air so fresh and balmy? The very sea-birds seem to have gone to sleep, and to be dreaming happy dreams, as they float, rising and falling on the gently heaving water.

Revooma, my boy or boatman—everybody has a boy as a kind of body servant who goes gipsying all alone on this lovely seaboard—Revooma, I say, holds the sculls, and I am dreamily steering.

"Gently, R'ooma, gently," I murmur. "Nay, never row so fast; the day is all before us, to do with as we will. Let the oars touch the water in silence. I would hear nothing harsher than the dripping of the water from their blades, or musical rhythm of rowlock. Now, R'ooma, pause—nay, draw in your oars; we are a good way off yon coral island shore, yet see, we are in water that is almost shoal. Now, look overboard, R'ooma, down through the glassy water to the ocean's bed. Can't you, R'ooma, even you, admire that? You do. Is there anything so lovely on shore, R'ooma—anything else so lovely in Nature? I'm a poet, am I? Thank you; but look again, do not talk, but look; have your fill of the gorgeous beauty of that submarine garden, I will, R'ooma. And years and years after this, perhaps, when lying on a sick-bed, I will have but to close my eyes, and that sight

will return to cheer me. Have ever you seen flowers that grow on earth like these? Why! every moving—for move they do, as if a gentle wind were for ever stirring them—every moving leaflet, twiglet, twig, or stem, is a flower in itself—alive with light and colour combined. Are they really weeds, or are they living things? Then, look at those anemones. What splendid tints! What gorgeous colouring!

"What a bright, white, clear patch of sand this is down here, R'ooma! How distinctly everything can be seen. See, I drop this pin, and it wriggles, wriggles, wriggles all the way to the bottom, and yonder it lies; somewhat distorted, I admit, but still it is the pin all the same. Look at that black, wrinkled claw, R'ooma, appearing from under the edge of yonder coral rock. And now the body slowly follows, and a strange-shaped, spider-legged, warty old crab stalks forth. How hideously ugly he is, R'ooma; and this very hideousness, I verily believe, is his defence against his foes. But watch him, boy; what is he going to do? He paws the sand. He stamps on it. Is it possible, R'ooma, he is about to dance a kind of a submarine Ghillie Callum? O, but look about a yard ahead now. See the white silvery sand gently, so gently, moved. And the white, warty crab stops dancing and listens, and rolls his stalky eyes around, Handy to have eyes on stalks, you say? You're right, R'ooma. But, behold, our warty friend has beaten a hasty retreat to his cave, and up from the sand appears another, a facsimile of the first—only more ugly, more warty, and more hideous still. They have been playing at hide-and-seek, R'ooma. That is all just a little game to pass the summer's day away.

"But, while we have been looking at the antics of these crabs, we have not been noticing the hundred and one other beautiful things that are floating about. Plenty of fishes down there, R'ooma; but we haven't seen a very large one yet. Lovely in colours all they are, especially those strange, wee, flat fish that sail on an even keel, and are more gaudy in colour than a goldfinch; but most of them are ridiculously grotesque in shape. I am quite certain of one thing, R'ooma, none of them can have very much sense of fun or humour, else they would laugh at each other till they split their sides, and floated dead on the top of the water. Yonder, look, goes a whole flotilla of jelly-fishes, as big as parasols; and watch how the bright blue or crimson light scintillates from their limbs as they kick and float. And here comes a fleet of quite another shape, so far as their tentacles are concerned. Most independent gentlemen these are at sea, R'ooma, and I wouldn't catch one for the Queen; but when stranded on a lee-shore, they are about the most helpless creatures in the universe. The little nigger boys kick them about, and they soon look more like a dish-cloth rolled in sand than anything alive. I've got them out to sea again, after such rough experience of shore-going life as I couldn't have believed even a jelly-fish capable of surviving, and have seen them revive, and float, and put away to sea once more, with the trifling loss, of perhaps one or more limbs or tentacles.

“They tell me, R’ooma, that those medusae, or jelly-fishes, have hardly any nervous system, but they have very large heads, if they haven’t brains. They always put me in mind of dishonest lawyers, these medusae—they kick and sting for a livelihood. They live on little fishes. They throw out so many feelers all around them, that they are sure to inveigle some small, unwary innocents; and when they do—well, then, I’m sorry for the fishes. But when the medusae, or the lawyer, gets shoaled himself, he is a very pitiless object indeed; all the little fishes gather round, wag their heads or their tails, as the case may be, but no one is a bit sorry for him.

“What for I called de funny fish Metoosah? Is that what you ask, my innocent and unsophisticated body-slave. I will tell you. Once upon a time, R’ooma, far away in the Lybian wilds, and by the banks of a magic lake, there was a beautiful garden, more enchanting by far, boy, than that down under the sea beneath our boat. This garden grew all kinds of luscious fruit, and all kinds of lovely flowers; but there were also trees therein, laden with apples of purest gold. Yes, you may well open your eyes in wonder, R’ooma. But these apples of gold were guarded night and day by a dreadful dragon—a creature bigger than a crocodile, uglier than the iguana, with bat-like wings, as large as the jib-sails of a boat, that enabled it to fly wherever it had a mind to, and its teeth and eyes were frightful to behold. And in the garden, R’ooma, there dwelt three fearful ladies—and one was called Medusa. Her hands and claws were of brass, she had wings that shone like burnished gold. Her body was covered with scales, like the crocodile’s, and her teeth were more formidable than those of the lion of the jungle. And she braided her hair with deadly snakes, that were for ever wriggling in and out, like the tentacles of yonder medusae just floating past us. And so awful were her eyes that, if she looked upon any one, he was turned into stone. She was slain at last, R’ooma; and they say that every drop of her blood changed into a thousand venomous snakes.

“Is dat where all de dreadful snakes come from? you ask me. Nay, boy, nay; never look so frightened, R’ooma. There, pull on shore into that little sandy bay, beneath that ridge of black rocks so beautifully fringed with green. In that cool spot, R’ooma, I would drink my coffee and rest; and there, too, I will tell you a simple story, that I tell all my boys, about Him who made and cares for us all, who gives motion to the air, flight to the birds, leaves to the trees, and life and joy to every creature we see around us. Row, R’ooma, row.”

The above, reader, you may if you choose consider a kind of a reverie, nevertheless it is true in every touch. Poor R’ooma, I wonder where he is now! A good and a childishly innocent lad he was, and loved me so dearly he would have died to please me. That very day, I remember, which I allude to in the above reverie, after a good, long rest, and after telling the story to R’ooma, which I had promised, I went into the warm sea to bathe. R’ooma came too. I had an idea that there might be sharks, and these ground-sharks will

not touch a black man. Well, if one had appeared R'ooma might have covered my retreat. I have seen a black man jump into the sea after a sailor's cap where sharks were in swarms.

We had a long way to walk through shallow water, before getting into a place deep enough to swim with comfort. On our way out, seawards, I came upon an immense univalve shell in about three or four feet of water. I could see that it was alive, and was a volute of some kind. It was by far and away the largest I have ever seen—quite an armful of a volute. I called to R'ooma to stand by and watch it while I bathed. After my swim, I hurried back shorewards to secure my prize, when, much to my chagrin, I found my boy floating about, enjoying himself.

"O, but, sah," he said to me, "I have marked de place where dat plenty mooch big cowrie sleep. We soon findee he for true."

My boy had marked the place by putting a piece of seaweed to float over it. So we didn't "findee he for true." The "plenty mooch big cowrie" was not to be caught napping, and, doubtless, moved away into deep water as soon as we had left. But I have even dreamed of that shell more than once since then.

In the sides of the cliffs that surrounded the bay where R'ooma and I had coffee that morning, and deeply imbedded in the rocks, were fossil shells, bivalves of some kind, in shape like the Patella, or cockle of our coast, only in size about two feet across. Fancy a cockle two feet across. As big as a turtle! It would make a dinner, I should say, for twenty hungry marines. In the shoal water were immense quantities of the common Holothuria, or sea cucumbers. They were of gigantic size. But the shores of these little uninhabited islands north of Zanzibar abound everywhere with shells of the most beautiful and curious kinds. Many of the islands are covered with wood, and snakes live there, if little else does. How did the snakes get there? Did they swim across from the mainland? Snakes can swim well; but I doubt if they could cross twelve or twenty miles of salt water.

On one of these islands I once had an encounter with a snake that cost me a pair of good shoes, and I had to go barefooted for a week. More about this in my next log-leaf.

R'ooma was a boy of an inquiring turn of mind, so I took a delight in teaching him many things which, perhaps, he remembers to this day. He used to make the oddest remarks about the creatures and things around him, which caused me often to say to him:

"You're a poet, R'ooma! I declare, R'ooma, that you are a poet!"

R'ooma was not slow in returning the compliment whenever he thought there was a chance.

"You are one poet, sah. I declare to goodness, sah, you are one poet."

This would be R'ooma's remark when I said anything he thought clever. Or if I did anything he thought clever, it was just the same. For example, in Lamoo one forenoon a half-caste Arab insulted me. I'm afraid I hit him. At all events he fell, and his turban came off, and he looked ridiculous without it, as he had a shaven skull.

R'ooma laughed till he was obliged to double himself up like a jack-knife to save his sides from cracking.

"O, yah!" he roared, "I declare to goodness, sah, you are one poet."

Yea, there really are worse places to go gipsying to than the Indian Ocean, and, if time and space permitted, I am sure I could tell you stories of my wanderings on the shores of Africa, in its woods and wilds—stories of its strange birds and beasts and beetles, of its wild beasts and wilder men—that would quite interest.

Some other day, perhaps—who knows?

Well, leaves have a time to fall, and so also have curtains.

Down drops ours, then; our little play is ended, and our tales are told.

But as regards the gipsying part of our story, if one further proof that such a mode of life is enjoyable in the extreme to all who love Nature and an outdoor life, it surely rests in the fact that in this first month of spring I now throw down my pen to go and prepare our great caravan for another thousand miles' tour through the length and breadth of Merry England.


Freeditorial