

A Devonian headland.

Contributors

Miller, W. J. C. 1832-1903.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

Publication/Creation

[London] : [publisher not identified], 1894.

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/gsswrs5k>

Provider

Royal College of Surgeons

License and attribution

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by The Royal College of Surgeons of England. The original may be consulted at The Royal College of Surgeons of England. where the originals may be consulted. This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.



Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

15.

A Devonian Headland.

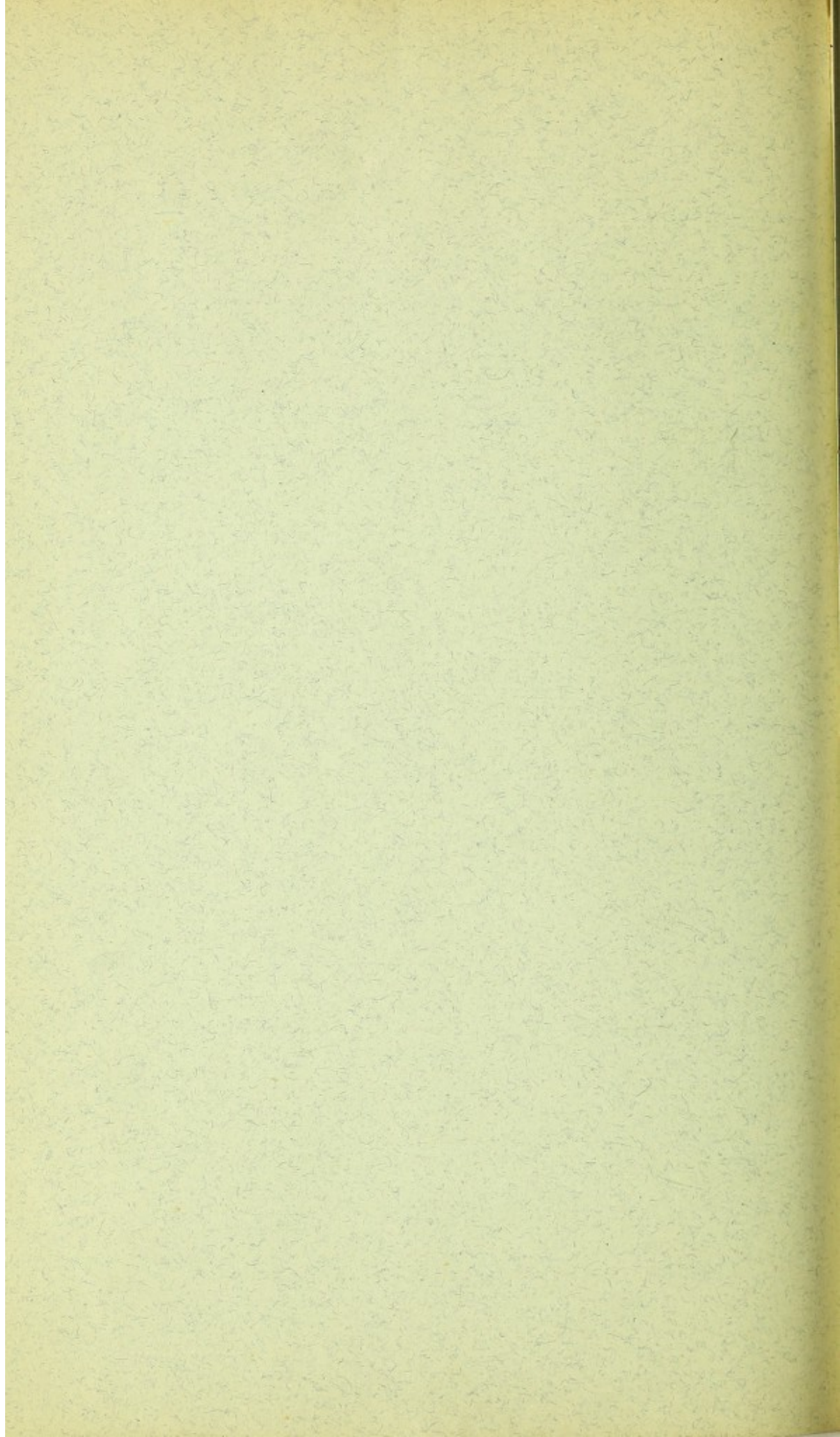
by

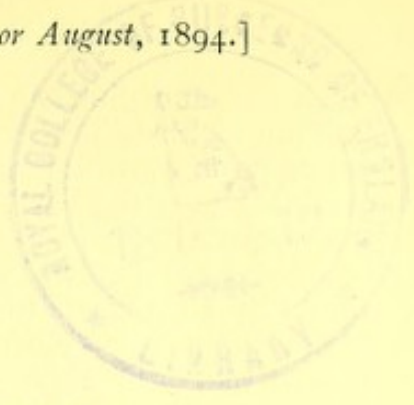
W. G. B. Miller.



Native Notes.

1894.





A DEVONIAN HEADLAND.

DEEP within the great West Bay of Dorset and Devon lies a headland to which sea-birds have always flocked as to a chosen retreat. The upland down ends in lofty cliffs that run sheer to the water's edge; and close by, both east and west, clear brooks, which spring from the underlying greensand, have worn out charming little valleys that bear the local name of *combes*, such as we find, for instance, in Salcombe and Babbicombe.

The headland itself bears a Norse name, derived from the hamlet that lies in the eastern valley—it was a little way off, on the shores of the same great bay, that the Norsemen had their first *historic* conflict with the English—but the hamlet might well bear a similar place-name with its western neighbour, and be called, more appropriately, Chalcombe.

The headland used to be, in the breeding season, alive with sea-birds. Prominent among them was the graceful form of the herring-gull, and the snake-like neck of the cormorant and its cousin, the shag. More numerous than these was the scarcely less graceful-winged common gull, and the kind called, from its utterance, like the cuckoo and the Turtle-dove, the kittiwake; while the sea below was often dotted over with guillemots and razor-bills, known by the fishermen under the local name of *mers*, a name wherein they preserve, no doubt unknowingly, the excellent title of *mergus*, or diver.

Chalcombe Head was almost entirely appropriated by sea-birds. The cliffs are here lofty, hard, and everywhere well nigh perpendicular: they were thus entirely unclimbable, save only at one perilous gap near the hamlet, where adventurous smugglers, by a terrible path which we may well look down with awe, used to carry up the brandy-kegs, or, as they were called, *tubs*—with which, in their open lug-sail boats, with picturesque bark-browned sails, they ran across the Channel, often in dark and boisterous weather, from the French coast at Cherbourg, or, as they called it, Sharebrook.

The birds could here breed unmolested. About half-way down the cliffs, kindly Nature seemed to have especially provided for them a fit and secure nesting-place. For there, one of the layers of flints, which run regularly along the upper chalk, had

fallen out, and thus left a long and deep horizontal ledge, which was full of birds' nests, from one end to the other. When the young birds were hatched, an observer who could look without dizziness over the edge, straight down the high cliffs, might see the necks of the young protruding beyond the ledge over the rocks and sea below. And then, sometimes, adventurous boys would tie a tin kettle to one end of a long rope, and rattling the kettle against the cliff all along the ledge, would thus, at the utmost risk of breaking their necks, send the nestlings flying off into space, and raise such an amazing clamour among the alarmed parents as would add much to the delightful excitement of the perilous pleasure. High over head the angry gulls would fly, each one of the frightened flock striving, as it would seem, to make more noise than its companions. Now and then one after another of the anxious mothers would make a swoop down, right at the head of the disturbing boy, as if she was going to try to knock the intruder over the edge of the cliff. And a downrush of the wonderful flight of the big white herring-gulls, as one lay near their stronghold at the edge of the cliffs, might certainly seem alarming. After many attempts with a tin kettle, the birds got to regard them much as land-birds do a passing railway train:—they became, as it were, kettle-hardened. Then ingenious youth would try the letting down of a lighted furze-branch, which, though more perilous and difficult to do properly, would sometimes prove for awhile more effective. But birds soon get used to threats that do them no harm; thus these yearly encounters between the boys and the sea-birds seemed to end at last like lovers' quarrels, and proved little beyond the renewing of love. For there were then no rifles, no guns indeed of any kind, to strew the cliffs and shores with death. The railway was then far off, and, from their sport amidst these birds, the boys learnt lessons in bird-life, and went therefrom to other lore in natural history, such as no books in their after lives could teach them, and no exile from these pleasant regions could ever deprive them of. More than one young Selbornian has, amidst scenes like these, acquired tastes and laid up knowledge, through which he has been enabled to find delight in the most unpoetic duties that he might afterwards have had to perform.

On the eastern side of Chalcombe Cove there stands a noble cliff, the very *beau idéal* of the famous English white cliffs, which was examined and reported on by Sir Henry de la Bèche, in the early years of the Geologic Survey, and of which a fine picture, taken mainly from the geologic point of view, hangs in the Jermyn Street Museum of Geology. This cliff was a little less difficult to climb, either up or down, than the headland; and, on its extreme eastern slope, what the geologists call a fault had uplifted some of the softer marls that elsewhere lay among the Jurassic strata lower down; thus inquisitive boys were able to study the abodes of the denizens of these cliffs by closer methods than those of the rope and tin kettle. At the Head, the lower

greensand, which the waves had hardened into compact rock, rests immediately on a layer of *lias*, from which, for ages, the fishermen had derived excellent ballast-stones for the boats that were used for fishing and, of old, for smuggling.

The denizens of this cliff were mainly jackdaws, kestrels, ravens, and rock-pigeons, though now and then the nest of a gull or some other sea-bird might be found among them. Many an arduous climb had at last been rewarded by the sight of a gull's nest, a jackdaw's, a raven's, or a pigeon's, and then the difficulty would be how to get up or down again. More than once a boy has tumbled down from some great height, but, fortunately, his light weight fell harmless on soft earth, or marl, or rubble that had accumulated at the base of the cliff.

The cliffs on both sides dip, lovingly as it were, towards the little cove, as if they would embrace it from the world in a basin of its own; and along their bases, or on the little contained beach, strange objects have been often picked up, mixed with cuttle-fish and driftwood, after stormy weather. Large numbers of mers—that is to say, of razorbills, guillemots, and the like—mixed, now and then, with a rare puffin, or smew, or merganser, have been found, cast dead upon the shore; and one might often have wondered why diving birds like these, which swim like fish, should have met with such a fate. The fishermen's view was that, owing to the long continued dirty state of the weather and the water, the mers had been unable to capture their prey; and as they lived entirely on fish, they had become so weak that they had been actually *drowned*, and so cast ashore. A stormy petrel, or Mother Carey's chicken, has been picked up inland, and as it had been observed in storms, disporting itself in erratic course among the breakers, while others have been noticed elsewhere along the coast, it has been supposed that, in such a likely region, a breeding-place existed somewhere, though no nest had been found.

Besides the petrel many another uncommon bird has been observed at times about the headland. On the down above it an osprey or fish-hawk, and a hooded crow, have been seen; on the rocks or the sea below, a goosander, an eider-duck, a great northern diver, and a solan goose or gannet; while shearwaters have been often seen off the head a little way out at sea, and the commoner shore birds might have been noticed about here at almost any time.

The red-legged and red-beaked chough has been rarely seen here, and of late years not at all. Since the rifle period it has, in fact, become scarce everywhere, having been shot for private collections or museums. Shakspeare's chough of Dover cliff, the bird of which Edgar tells us, in *Lear*, that

"The crows and choughs, that wing the midway air,
Show scarce as gross as beetles,"—

the chough, too, of the fine old glee,

"The chough and crow to roost have gone"—

was, no doubt, the jackdaw; and that bird was very pert and plentiful all about these cliffs. Very interesting was the sight—which used to be a nowise uncommon one upon the Head—to witness the mobbing, by a mingled flock of rooks and jackdaws, of an ancient pair of ravens, which had built for ages in the neighbouring cliff. The smaller and more agile birds would swoop down again and again upon the ravens, often missing their aim, but, by numbers, tiring out the ravens, who were unable to retaliate; till at length, the din of notes in croaks of varying pitch—raven, rook, jackdaw—would, by degrees, die away in the distance, and the ravens would at last find shelter from their tormentors in some wood, or cleft, or cave. According to popular belief, the raven lives to the age of a hundred years or more, and a story is told of a farmer from Somerset—where, it used to be added, the wits are sometimes dull—who once got a pair to keep, in order to ascertain whether the legend was true! The legend seems to have been accepted by the poets, for a famous jilted lover tells the world the oft-repeated tale that (*crow* being the accepted generic name for any black bird of the rook type) he should forget the dear one

“Never, though his mortal summers to such length of years should come,
As the many-wintered crow that leads the clanging rookery home!”

The little combes that lie east and west of the Head are delightful abodes for land-birds, as, indeed, they are for many other kinds of residents or visitors. Since the railway penetrated into the region, a lady novelist spent her summer holidays in a cottage in one of the combes, and so charmed was she with the little vale that she called it

“The island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly, but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns,
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea.”

She laid in the combe the chief scenes in one of her novels, written on the spot; and in it she describes scenery, characters, and incidents clearly recognisable to those who know the district well, her only error being that when she wished to introduce a little local dialect she put into the mouths of the peasantry, who spoke the soft, poetic language that had descended to them from the Wessex English of King Alfred's days, the broad northern dialect of the Brontë region of Yorkshire. The birds delighted her, as well they might, though she did not stay long enough to see the whole bird-life of the year; and, alas! the days of guns and rifles and general massacre had arrived, and had destroyed much of its poetic charm before she came to describe it in her novel. The Philistine period of death and destruction had set in, and the poetry of the birds had, it might be feared, well-nigh gone for ever.

How delightful it was in the old-world days to which these

notes refer, to watch the graceful wheatears, in pleasant family parties, dotted about over the downs; to observe the motions and catch the pleasant chirpings of the stonechats and the whinchats among the furze bushes; to catch the swift and dazzling flight of the kingfisher, and find its nest by the river-bank; to note the stately heron, patiently fishing in the stream, or sailing slowly off to another resting-place; to look out for the early arrival of the spring migrants; to hear the cuckoo's welcome voice, or, by the delightful turr-turr of the turtledoves in the woods, to be reminded that for six months, at least, we might say, with Virgil's Melibaeus,

"Nec gemere aeria cessabit turtur ab ulmo."

Pleasant, too, though telling of winter's approach, would it be to see every roof crowded with the swallow-tribe, and many a field by the cliffs covered with the beautiful *yellow* wagtails, when these birds were preparing to leave us for awhile for milder climes.

In October the woodcocks would pour in, so exhausted in the early morning from their flight, that you could almost pick them up as they feebly moped along the ditches. Later on towards winter, the Norwegian thrushes would arrive, the fieldfares and the redwings—the latter called by Linnæus the night-ingle of Norway, but known by the local name of the wynnol—all seeking a region milder than their native shores; and the motions of these birds it would be very interesting to observe through the cold weather, as they endeavoured to pick up a scanty sustenance from the lee sides of the hedges.

In this district the life of almost every kind of bird might be studied, even down to the very swans, which, when frozen out of their lake at Abbotsbury, inside the eastern shore of the great bay, might be seen and heard, winging their way down the valley of the pleasant river, which flowed across three of the western shires to join the sea not far from Chalcombe Head. Interesting, too, would it be to see how the rare appearance of the kite would set all the small birds quivering; and to hear the poultry in the farmyard piteously proclaiming the appearance of the enemy overhead. Pleasant also would it ever be to see the flights of terns sweep gracefully by, or to note the dotterels flitting about the beach beside the cove. A bit of nature's secrets would be the finding of the habitat, rare in the south of England, of the dipper or water-ouzel—a song-bird that dives, and wades, and swims—to watch its motions under water, and to find its nest year after year in the same stream.

The view from the Head is one of the finest along our fine coast. At one end of the great bay there stretches, outside, the grey mass of Portland; at the other end we may see, in clear weather, past Torbay, Berry Head, and Dartmouth, that Start Point which bears, in its designation, the word which we have in the name of that pretty fire-tailed bird, common in the combs,

the redstart. On a dark night we may watch with interest the varied revolving lights of the light-houses on these two extremities of the great bay. Then, at times, it is a glorious sight to see the sun set behind the distant tors of Dartmoor, and to catch the twin granite peaks of Heytor standing out distinct against the glow and radiance of the western sky.

Of historic and poetic memories, a perfect wealth lies all around. The inland heights, which we may catch with our eye, were a chain of hill-forts—now called burys or castles—which were fought over, and no doubt bled over, ages before the Romans or the English came over to conquer the land. Looking across to the three-shired river-valley we may see what is left of the house where was born the greatest of English commanders, the man under whom the English marched proudly to victory at Blenheim and Ramilies and Malplaquet. A little further up the same valley we look on the now sleepy little town which was the birthplace of the professor who bewitched Oxford with the charms of geology—a town which existed as a British village long before Roman times, and whose name is borne by a special kind of Turkey carpet, invented here, but now made in busier regions. A little below lies a grey-walled and ivy-clad ruin, which was the ancient home of the Courtenay family; and not far off was the home of the Bonvilles, a famous race that fought, and bled, and perished in the Wars of the Roses.

Close by, in the western combe, nestles picturesquely the house, now a farmhouse, where was born the founder of one of the Oxford colleges; and, in the old village church, the attention of little boys used to be diverted from the sermon by counting the effigies of the founder's mother and the twenty children borne by her to her two husbands, which stood, in two little diverging rows, behind her. Not far off up the bay stands the little cobb—a quite local term for a pier or small harbour—where landed the invasion of the ill-fated Monmouth, known by the peasantry as King Monmouth, which came to so disastrous an end at Sedgemoor, the last battle that has been fought, or it is hoped will ever be fought, on English soil! On the other side of the bay, behind the Berry Head that we look across to, landed the later invasion by the Prince of Orange, which brought in the dynasty that now rules us.

Looking seawards we have immediately on our right a land-slip, more than a century old, where lie

“Rocks, crags, and knolls, confusedly hurled,
The fragments of an earlier world,”

while halfway up the cliff is one of the mouths of a quarry of hard chalk that runs under the down—the other mouths being a mile inland—which has probably been worked for upwards of a thousand years, has furnished materials for almost all the old churches and edifices within a circuit of many miles, and has had its stones deftly carved and fashioned into the delicately shaped foliage, fretwork, and finial that we admire in the fine old

cathedral at Exeter. All about us, too, lie sites associated with those great sailors who fought nobly—as so many Devonshire men did—in Britain's Salamis, the defeat of the Spanish Armada.

Two or three out of many of the near poetic spots may well be recalled. Near the head of the neighbouring river dwelt Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, when Raisley Calvert had, by his legacy of £900, enabled them to cultivate their famous "plain living and high thinking;" here they were visited by Coleridge, and here the gifted trio would "walk the lovely meadows above the combes," and cultivate poetic intercourse, and enjoy from the hill-tops the glorious view over the whole of the great west bay.

In a very characteristic Devonshire village, lying just under one of the British hill-forts, was the home of the poet to whom we owe that well-known and affecting hymn, which the writer, with quiet humbleness, says "may be used living or dying," and a translation of which Laurence Oliphant heard the Armenians singing with tears in their church at Constantinople

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me."

Just over the hills on the west is a sweet Devonshire river-valley, where were born two very famous men. One was Samuel Taylor Coleridge—logician, metaphysician, bard—whom Wordsworth called

"The rapt one of the godlike forehead, the heaven-eyed creature,"

and of whom Swinburne says: "Of his best verses, I venture to affirm that the world has nothing like them, nor ever can have; they are of the highest kind, jewels of the diamond's price, flowers of the rose's rank, but unlike any rose or diamond known." This small town has been immortalised by Thackeray in *Pendennis* as "Clavering St. Mary," a slight variation only from its current name—and Thackeray's bits of description well set forth some of the charms of the scenery among which he spent some of his early days. "At sunset," he writes, "from the lawn of Fairoaks, which comes down to the little river Brawl, there was a pretty sight; it and the opposite park of Clavering were in the habit of putting on a rich golden tinge, which became them both wonderfully. The upper windows of the great house flamed, so as to make your eyes wink; the little river ran off noisily westward, and was lost in a sombre wood, behind which the towers of the old abbey-church of Clavering (whereby the town is called Clavering St. Mary to the present day) rose up in purple splendour."

Not far down the valley of the same "little river Brawl," there still stands, in good preservation, the farmhouse where was born one of the very foremost amongst the many worthies who adorned the spacious age of Queen Elizabeth—Sir Walter Raleigh.

With scenes and spots like these, it is surely pleasant to be

able to associate a land so rich in all varieties of bird-life; and especially of that headland which stands prominent in its midst.

The flora of the region would well repay a study; but, for one article, the bird-life, together with a few of the local spots made memorable by famous men, may well stand alone; and the exact position of the headland may be veiled, though, to those who know it, as *transparently* veiled as Thackeray's "Clavering St. Mary," under the name of Chalcombe Head.

W. J. C. MILLER.

*The Paragon,
Richmond.*