

A bird-haunted pine-grove.

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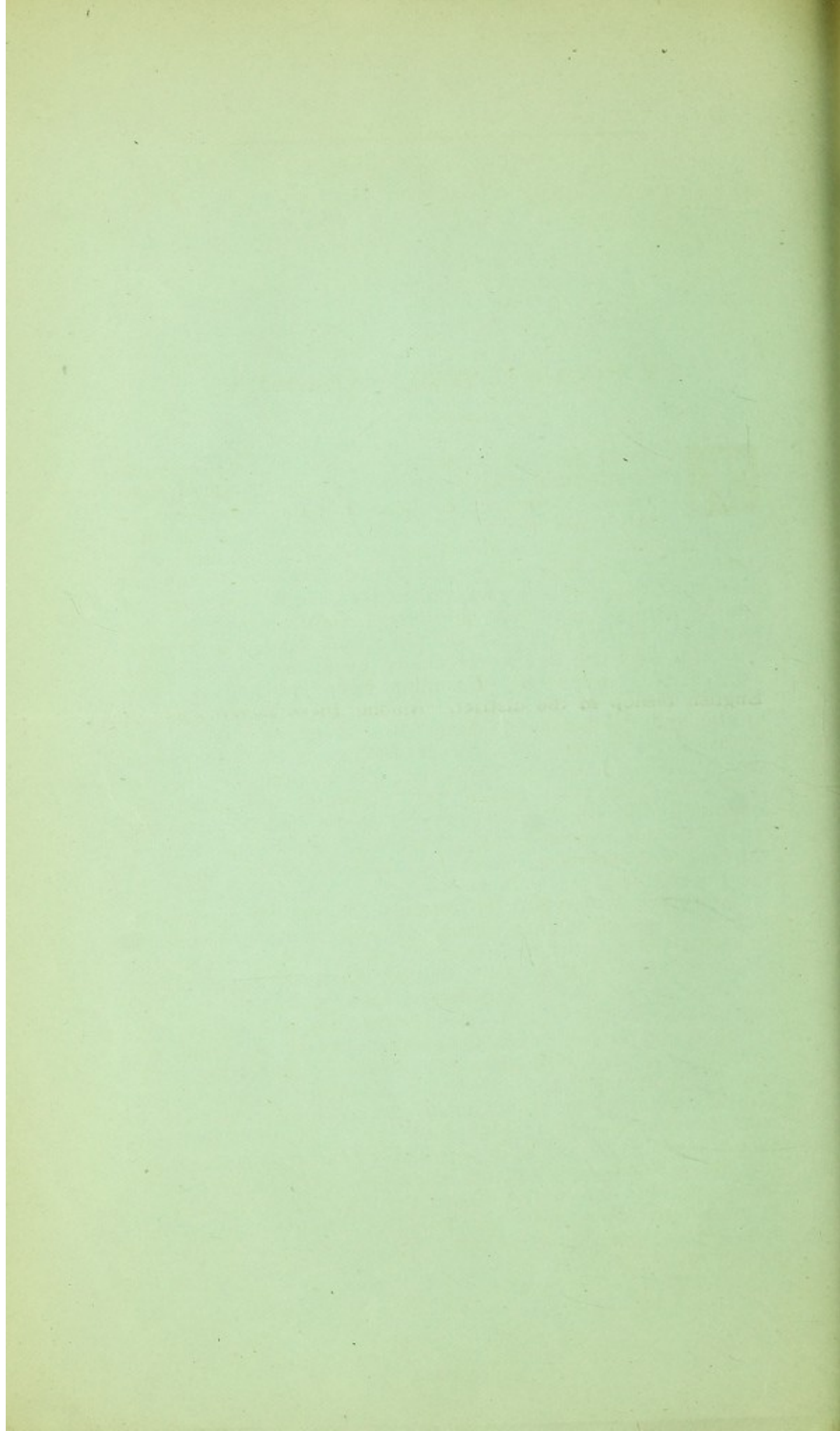
by

W. G. B. Miller.



Nature Notes.

1895.



With the Author's compliments.

A BIRD-HAUNTED PINE-GROVE.

IN one of the loveliest spots along our pleasant coast lies a region that may well be called a bird-haunted pine-grove. At one end of the district there was slain, in early times, a king who was canonized, and who has ever since been designated as a saint; while at the other end, there was shot a later king whom nobody has ever thought of calling a saint, but who was, in truth, even among kings of that day, one of the saddest of sinners. Between them is a district full of objects of varied and almost unsurpassable interest. Near the first end lies a well-known headland that bears the name, slightly perverted, of another saint who was an early English bishop in the district. Among these sacred spots of saints, and death-sites of kings, are many fine rivers and estuaries, the favourite haunts of salmon, as in earlier times they had been of invading Norsemen; and between the estuaries stands the pine-grove where, half a century ago, a shrewd landowner had the foresight to call in an architect and lay out pleasant slopes for building purposes, amidst banks clothed with gorse and broom, which had long been the resorts of the woodcock.

Nowhere can you hear the sweetest songsters of our groves to greater perfection than among the pines that have now, in many parts of this region, been nurtured up, or have grown up, to a great height and density. In early spring the thrushes and blackbirds make the whole district resound with their melody, singing out of sight in the pine-tops, as they love best to do. In no region do our sweetest songsters sing so beautifully as amid these pines. It is quite a mistake to suppose that birds sing everywhere with the same beauty of melody. Though their general style of song is, no doubt, the same everywhere, the cultivated ear, trained to bird-notes, can at once tell that the song of the thrush is finer in one district than it is in another; that the flute-like notes of the blackbird are richer here than there; and that the jug-jug of the nightingale is here, perhaps, he may clearly be able to say, the most rapturous of all. And among these pines you can listen to them all in a beauty of melody unsurpassed.

It is pleasant here to look out for the coming of the spring migrants, and to catch their notes on their first arrival. In some small garden you may watch the coming in of the first whitethroat or warbler, and mark the familiarity with which, after a long flight from distant Africa, the little bird seems to recognise the spot where it was born, or where, perhaps, it might have reared a brood. Pleasant is it, too, to see the lark soaring and singing in circles over some small railway station, or to catch, in so unusual a place, the well-known note of the nightingale, and to learn from a bird-loving railway porter that the bird breeds yearly at a fitting spot near the station. The arrival of the swallows, martins and swifts can be well noted on the cliffs, along which they love to career in joyous course. The cuckoo, like the nightingale, does not seem to love the close neighbourhood of the sea, where, perhaps, these birds do not find the food they like best: they are to be heard and seen better a little way inland.

If we take a wider sweep around, we may come on moors and sand-wastes, with stunted pines and shrubby undergrowths, the only things here nourished by the sandy and gravelly soil. Here in some cultivated slope we may hear the landrail; and here, certainly, skimming past us like a phantom, we may see or hear the night-jar, finding abundant food among the moths and night-insects that are bred in multitudes on these breezy heaths. You may possibly drop on a brood of night-jars, fully feathered, but, not yet having tried their wings, only able to scamper away among the fir-twigs and heather-shoots. Among the springs and rills that ooze out in the hollows, we may find the favourite haunts of the woodcock, though the bird is getting, year by year, scarcer here, as in other regions.

In walking about the district we may note many interesting aspects of bird-life. In some parts, the cooings of the ringdove or woodpigeon are very pleasant to listen to. This is the bird that the poets call the *cushat* dove, the name being probably derived from its note; and by this name it figures in Scott's couplet:

"In answer cooed the cushat dove,
Her notes of peace, and rest, and love."

The notes are not always, we may observe, notes of *peace*; for the birds (presumably the males, the fighting sex) seem often to enjoy a combat; and then they bow their heads to the ground, and coo their loudest, and fly up in encounter, and coo again, and go on to fight again for any length of time, and seem to enjoy the duel. Of this Haydn probably knew nothing when he wrote so sweetly about these doves in his *Creation*.

Sometimes we may come on a pond or a stream where the birds take their morning bath; and it is a very interesting sight to watch them at their bathing unobserved. Once, when I was enjoying such a scene, I was puzzled by a pretty yellow and dark bird among the bathers, which I took at first to be a yellow

wagtail. As I watched, this bird began to fly along the still water, and to dip in, and to fly along, dipping again and again; so that I thought the pretty bird was bathing and dipping even more freely than I had ever seen a wagtail or a swallow; but by and by I saw it resting like a beautiful leaf upon the water, and then I saw that it was dead, that it had been drowned in bathing. With some difficulty I got the bird ashore, and then I found that it was a very pretty goldfinch-canary mule, which had, no doubt, got away from much petting in some cage. Immediately below the pines, the birds are mostly content, like pious Moslems, to enjoy a bath of dust or sand, which some of them seem to like better even than water.

Outside the heaths and pine-groves we come on the breeding-places, or the resorts, of multitudes of sea-birds. Around the end sacred to the bishop and the canonized king, there are grand and mighty cliffs, wrought out below by the waves into caves and arches famous to geologists, who name from the neighbourhood some of their formations; and these cliffs, here and there upheaved in twisted and contorted strata, are, in the breeding season, tenanted by vociferous flocks of gulls and guillemots and cormorants, and other sea-birds. Here no one can get at them, from above or below; and here, accordingly, they breed, and have bred for ages, undisturbed. As we walk along, on the pine-grove side, it is very pleasant, in the quiet of early morning, to look down on small flocks of guillemots fishing along the bay; or to watch the flight of a cormorant as it wings its way for miles close to the sea, from one fishing-ground to another. And the sea-gulls, at such hard times as they come to feed up the Thames, or in the lake of St. James's Park, will come in to be fed at a window, while tits and other winter residents are supplied by a bird-feeding handmaiden under the trees below.

The estuaries into which pour the salmon-loved rivers, are visited every winter by flocks of sea-fowl that stream southwards from the summer homes of such sea-birds in Norway. In a severe winter, one of these estuaries may, perhaps, be frozen over, and thus afford sporting ground somewhat unusual on our coasts. And all of them afford sport of another kind to those who love to stalk, and to follow, and to shoot these visitors. By such sportsmen, the wary habits of the brent geese are carefully studied; and all the other devices are adopted and followed that are needed to circumvent the visiting sea-fowl. And so great is the ordinary Englishman's love of sport in slaughter, that, save by one's own observation, almost the only thing you can learn about these interesting visitors is how best to entrap them, or how most successfully to shoot them.

An able and enthusiastic ornithologist has a museum filled with birds that he has shot in the district; and among them he exhibits the Spoonbill, the Avocet, the Bittern, the Stork, the Night-heron, the Gadwall, the Goosander and the Smew,

all as quite common fowl, like the Gannet, the Northern Diver, and various kinds of Grebes; while, among the rarer swans and geese, he has two of the very rare Polish Swans.

But it is, perhaps, at the end of the region that lies around the death-site of the non-canonized king that the greatest interest would, by most visitors, be found. There an ancient forest remains a forest still, uncultivated, and fortunately, owing to the geological conditions of the soil, likely long to remain so. The unsaintliness of the slain monarch may be regarded as set off by the ruins of an ancient abbey, lying amidst the outlet into an estuary of streams that emanate from the forest. Here, then, we have a bit of genuine wild nature, which fitly closes in on this side a district full of such varied loveliness. But the whole region is, to the properly trained eye, full of a varied and well-nigh unsurpassable interest. For the worshipper of saints and churches there are shrines, minsters, and cathedrals all over the region; such memories as those of a canonized bishop that names a headland, and of a saintly king that lingers round an ancient castle demolished in the Civil War by those iconoclasts, the Roundheads of Cromwell. And to those who may be content with a moderate reverence for canonized kings, and who look to churches mainly for their beauty of situation or of architecture, there are spots that they may hold in reverence, and visit again and again, in much the same spirit that the pilgrims of old went to the shrine of Becket. There is one unsurpassed minster, the oldest church of all, situated in the loveliest of all lovely sites, on an estuary, and to the student of poetry consecrated by the cenotaph of one of our noblest poets, the lyrist who has sung rapturously of the soaring lark as something more than a mere bird, upon whom he has called to

"Teach me half the gladness that thy brain must know,
Such delightful madness from my lips would flow,
The world should listen then, as I am listening now."

This minster presents its towers from many a broomy heath, and through many a gorse-clad glade. The student of antiquity may have his tastes gratified by visiting not far off an ancient and elevated earthwork, now quite deserted, but in earlier times crowded with buildings, religious, military, and domestic, then forming one of the most important cities in our land, and the seat of a bishop, long since transferred to a city close by, and in later times noteworthy as furnishing an admirable type of how best not to represent the people. In the upper reaches of the river whose estuary washes the poetic minster, lies the Nunnery founded by one queen to expiate the murder of her stepson; where another hapless queen spent her last days, and where, hidden by her wealth of hair, she grovelled in the dust at the feet of her forgiving husband; and where, in later times, was written a noteworthy poem of the last century. A little way off lies what has been called "the noblest monument of Albion's isle," the finest of all those ancient works that are, to those not

over-particular about niceties, ascribed at once to those ever-convenient builders, the Druids.

But the chief of all memories in the region are those that arise for the delight of the lover of nature. Near the old abbey there lived in the last century a high priest of nature who called especial attention to the picturesque beauty of trees all over our land, more especially in the district in which he lived and laboured, where trees lay in abundance all around him. And along the route followed, for ages, by pilgrims to one shrine, we may, in another part of the district make our pilgrimage to the place where lived and died another such high priest, the quiet observer to whom we owe more than to any writer and observer whatsoever, the naturalist who called special attention to our bird-life, and who has sent many a man to the culture of that knowledge which has been found to form, in leisure, one of the great joys of life. When visiting the shrines of these naturalists, or reading their charming works, we feel a renewed ardour for such researches, and go, with an added delight, to that study to which they have so wisely directed us. From such studies, or from the visit to such shrines, we may well go,

“Knowing that nature never did betray
The heart that loved her : 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy : for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith, that all that we behold
Is full of blessings.”

In a district so rich in such objects of varied interest, we find opportunities to cultivate all tastes, and to gratify and enhance every predilection. With many of us, the taste that lasts longest, perhaps, and finds most materials for study, is one that gathers round the central region, and leads us to think of former visits, and to look forward to visits to come, in the district that may well be called, as it has been here, a bird-haunted pine-grove.

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