

The home of the jackdaws.

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The Home of the Jack-daws

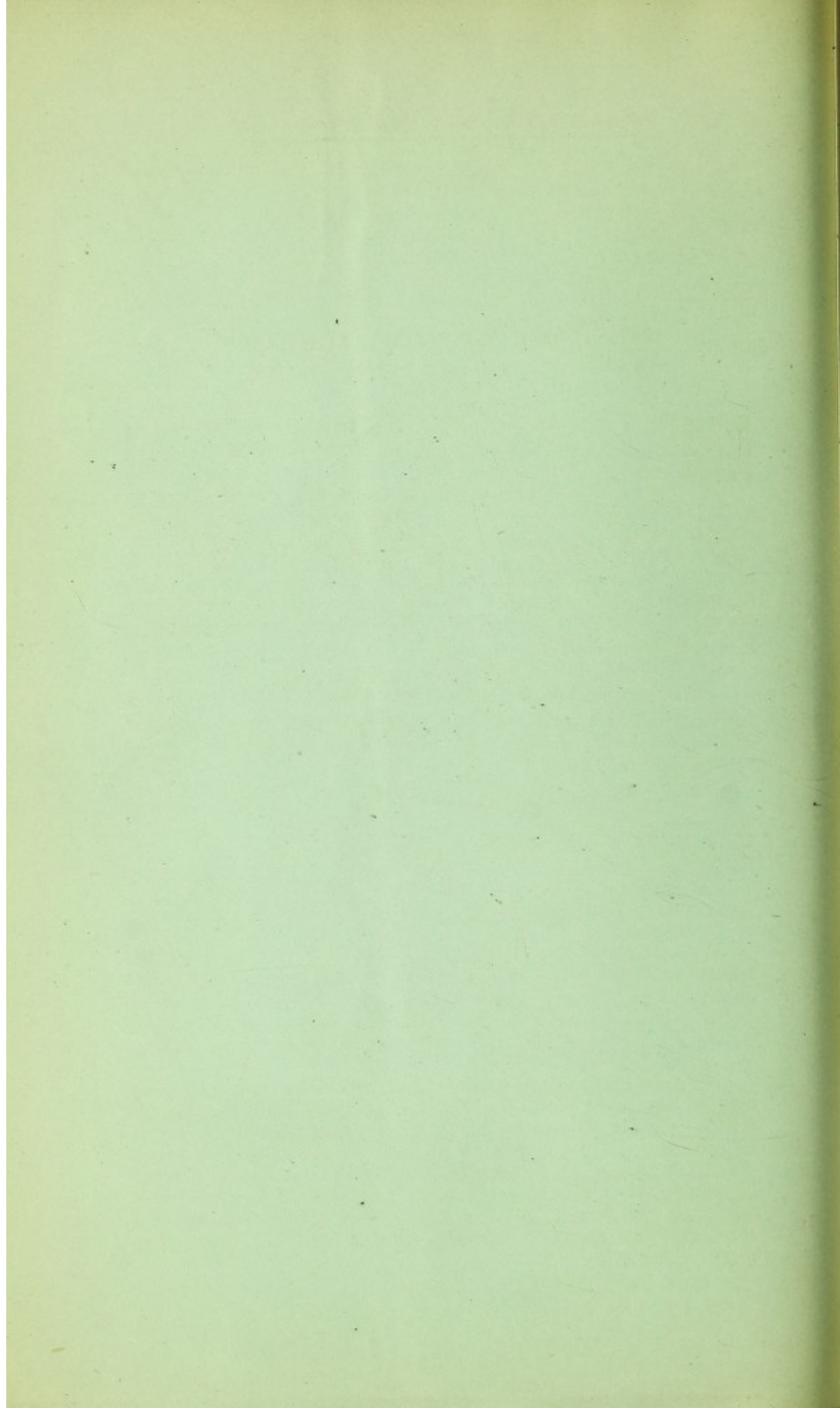
by

W. G. B. Miller




Nature Notes

1895.



With the Author's compliments.

THE HOME OF THE JACKDAWS.

NE of the most interesting birds to study, in his intimate relations and habits, at home, is the jackdaw. We are seldom, it is true, able to trace the bird's ways in any other than some abnormal habit, such as he has, it is to be feared, acquired from his patrons or protectors. He has been given to the purloining of unconsidered trifles that may have been left about, or even of more valuable articles that have somehow come within his reach, more especially if they have been in any way tempting in form or colour. The jackdaw that we hear the most about had, at a great church festival, behaved so badly that, at length,

"The monks with awe, as his pranks they saw,
Said 'The Devil must be in that little jackdaw!'"

Afterwards this jackdaw carried off the Lord Cardinal's turquoise ring, and was excommunicated, with the dire result that, when next discovered, he was

"No longer gay, as on yesterday,
His feathers all seemed to be turned the wrong way ;
His pinions drooped, he could hardly stand,
His head was as bald as the palm of your hand ;
His eye so dim, so wasted each limb,
That, heedless of grammar, the monks cried 'That's him !
That's the rogue that has done this scandalous thing,
That's the thief that has stolen the Lord Cardinal's ring !'"

We all know, by frequent recitations, how that jackdaw repented, was received into the bosom of the Church, and that he

"Long lived the pride of that country side,
And at length in the odour of sanctity died ;
When, as words were too faint his merit to paint,
The Conclave determined to make him a saint."

We thus find that the poets and the novelists, whom we may regard—especially the best of them, such as Dickens, George Eliot, and Thackeray—as our prose poets, are in the habit of treating the jackdaw on the humorous side, much as they do the parrot, the starling, the magpie, and the raven. Some of these birds have been taught to learn the language of men, and it is sad to know that what they take to most readily is swearing, and the use of bad language generally. From these instructors, too,

they are apt to learn the arts of purloining and concealing; and of this the jackdaw's theft of the Cardinal's ring is a noteworthy example. In St. James's Park, I have heard an escaped parrot swearing soundly, to the amusement, though not to the edification, of some little boys that were listening. As a set off to such profanity, it might be well to record that once when an escaped parrot had got up a tree, it looked down on those that were seeking it beneath, and said, with great solemnity, "Let us pray!"

At the hands of one or two writers the jackdaw has, however, fared somewhat better. Vincent Bourne, who was one of the teachers of Cowper at Westminster School, has written on the jackdaw a Latin poem, in which he calls the bird a great frequenter of the Church, and fond of the speculative height of the weather cock, whence he securely sees the bustle that occupies mankind below, and wherefrom

"He sees that this great roundabout,
The world, with all its motley rout,
Church, army, physic, law,
Its customs and its businesses,
Are no concern at all of his,
And says—what says he?—Caw."

Cowper himself puts in a plea for such a bird as the jackdaw when he tells us that though he should not think of putting a goose into a cage for the sake of his melody, yet a goose on a common or in a farmyard was no bad performer. Much the same may be said of the notes of the jackdaws, which, when heard in their homes, seem very clearly in perfect harmony with their surroundings. In the famous white cliff by Chalcombe Headland, the notes of the jackdaw are mingled with the scream of the sea-gull, the rarer cry of the kestrel, and the harsh croak of the raven. There I should not regard the jackdaws as at home, though I have often found their nests mingled with other cliff-breeding birds, and, aided by the strata that there underlie the chalk, have, as a cliff-climbing boy, mounted, with difficulty, to the nest, and therefrom, unable to descend, have, with still greater difficulty, ascended by climbing to the summit, with one egg in my mouth, the only secure receptacle, amid the screams of many disturbed birds whose nests lay all around me. Other similarly tenanted cliffs I had often seen elsewhere.

But there is one perfectly ideal bay on our south coast which may be well called the *Home of the Jackdaws*. In that lovely bay they occupy the lofty cliffs of pure white chalk all to themselves; and in these cliffs we may study the birds, in their intimate relations and habits, altogether unmolested, and entirely at home. In these tall cliffs there are deep vertical grooves, with many holes in each, where, entirely sheltered from wind, or rain, or storm, they may breed, and rear their young, and gather in colonies, and live entirely beyond fear of molestation, and quite at their ease.

In this charming little bay, which is a delight to all lovers of the picturesque, a gifted lady, who had written very interesting books on Norway and the Canaries, built, close to the sea, a house that she called by the name of the most poetical island about which she had written. This house, named after one of the most poetic heroes of romance—a hero whom we recall in connection with a hapless queen, whose wealth of golden hair shrouded her when she grovelled in the dust at the feet of her forgiving husband—was afterwards transformed into an admirably managed hotel, under the care and supervision of a lady. There, in a perfectly idyllic spot, quite free from cares of the world, a lover of quiet may enjoy the perfection of woman's management, attended, at small tables in a sweet dining-room, and elsewhere, by graceful handmaidens in pretty costumes, with all other details in harmonious accordance.

There a person of poetic tastes may enjoy a perfectly ideal holiday, quite alone with the abundant charms of nature. A secure roadstead sends forth multitudes of ships, in whose voyages he may take a passing interest. From a near arsenal there may come past, on trial trips, some powerful ironclad, armed with might, though not clothed in beauty; and, between the bay and the coasts of France, which often stand out in startling clearness and proximity, ships pass up and down all day long. Across the narrow channel the Spring migrants pass in hosts to their early landing-places on our shores; and from the north, as winter comes on, other birds pour down, seeking refuge from the land of the long night. And here, at his utmost leisure, if he be disposed, he may quietly observe the manners, at home, of the jackdaws. Life-paired birds, their intimate habits are worthy of attention. In qualities of *mind* they seem to excel all birds, just as others do in qualities of *melody*. Perched on small projecting pieces of flint, we may see them indulge in small caresses or tokens of affection; then, in wanton playfulness, they will knock each other off their precarious perches, with the same jocularly that, under other training, might lead them to purloin rings or teaspoons.

If you watch the bird closely, you may observe a peculiar look that holds attention more than mere beauty or grace. His flight is easy and buoyant, and he is very fond of aerial pastimes, such as chasing one another in play. When you see him sitting in repose with head drawn in, beak inclining downwards, feathers puffed out all round his head, face turned towards you, and his bright, whitish-grey eyes set close together, he looks somewhat human, though, especially in the gloaming, a little uncanny. If you stroll on the high over-lying downs, some 600 feet or more above the sea, there, as Milton puts it,

“Watching where shepherds pen their flocks at eve,
In wattled cotes amid the field secure,”

you may see the jackdaws, mingled with the rooks, forming an harmonious conclave, in countless myriads, perching on the

hurdles, hopping from one to the other, or to and from the sheep's backs, busy and, as always, gay, happy, and jocular. The reason why he gets on better than any of his friends of the other corvus-tribe is that he is, like the sparrow, very adaptive. He will breed apart from his fellows, like the carrion-crow; in common cities, like rooks; in hollow trees in parks; in ruins, and on church towers; or, perhaps best of all, in holes and crevices of the cliffs, where he may sometimes live with rock-pigeons and puffins. Gilbert White tells of jackdaws that built every year in the rabbit-burrows underground; that their nests were found by listening at the mouths of the holes to hear the young ones cry, and that the nests were then twisted out with a forked stick. Another spot used by these birds, which White thought a very unlikely spot, was Stonehenge, where they built their nests in the interstices between the upright and the impost-stones, though, he adds, they built so high that they were quite out of the reach of the shepherd-boys who were then always idling about the place. White remarks that the jackdaw's peculiarity in building at Selborne in the rabbit-burrows arose from the fact that there were hardly any towers or steeples in all the country; Hampshire and Sussex being then, as he states, more meanly furnished with churches than almost any counties in the kingdom. This he contrasts with the shires of Cambridge, Northampton, Huntingdon, and the fens of Lincoln, where he had been amazed at the number of spires that presented themselves in every point of view. As an admirer of prospects, he lamented the want in his own country of what he considers very necessary elements in an elegant landscape. Since that time the want has been fairly met, as we can see by looking over the New Forest at the elegant spire of Lyndhurst Church, or at the towers and spires of the churches in the fine town of Bournemouth. We generally find that, like monks of old, jackdaws continue to live on the fat of the land, though often without ostensible means of living. They are apt at levying blackmail on sillier birds, such as guillemots, whose prey, brought for the young ones, they often carry off.

Playing around churches, the ecclesiastical daws secure a certain immunity, and justly so, too. You may find a pair building for years just under the single bell of some church, caring nothing for the frequent and loud sound; and apparently training their offspring in good church principles, and sending them off to inhabit church-tower or belfrey elsewhere. In their exercises you may see them circle about in the air, pursue and playfully buffet one another, mount aloft and then tumble downwards, renew work, and then chase and battle again. They are loquacious birds; they call loudly on each other when perched or in flight, and their voice has a clear, sharp, querulous sound, somewhat like the bark of a small dog.

Amid such pleasant surroundings, we may well watch the habits of these interesting birds, while enjoying to the full the

much-needed delights of the *dolce far niente*. Here, surely, you may be content to do nothing, and to enjoy such needed rest. And here, more than anywhere, the jackdaws are thoroughly at home. The cliff-breeding gulls abound here, as on all the seas around our coasts, but they have their homes in neighbouring cliffs. An ancient pair of ravens may, now and then, be seen here; but these wary birds, too, breed with the gulls, and live on terms of amity with the jackdaws here, although at the Devonian Headland I have seen another pair of long-lived ravens mobbed by a mingled flock of rooks and jackdaws till they were glad to find a refuge from their persecutors in some wood or cave. Thus the jackdaws have these cliffs entirely to themselves.

In winter there flock in from Norway the hooded-crows, with whom the jackdaws do not amalgamate so peaceably as they do with the rooks. Seeking to appropriate to themselves the best holes, the crows come at times into conflict with the smaller and less powerful jackdaws, and a temporary dispossession sometimes takes place; but the holes in the cliffs are many and deep, and there is room enough for all; thus the birds live on, under occasionally strained relations, till, as spring comes in, the crows fly off to their breeding places in Norway, and the jackdaws are again left sole tenants of the cliffs. And whether Hobbes of Malmesbury was right or not in his philosophic maxim that the normal state of *mankind* is a state of warfare, it seems to be certainly the normal state of *birds*; thus we may regard the winter stage of warfare as a period of enjoyment in conflict for both daws and crows. Besides the ecclesiastical daws that frequent churches, we may find some archæological daws in old ruins like those of Corfe Castle; but they get sadly interrupted by visitors who take luncheon on the grass underneath, and they do not form there so numerous a colony as they do in this bay.

Ravens are not, as to offspring, like the jackdaws. The young ravens are said to send off their *parents* to seek a home elsewhere. An intelligent old workman, who was engaged in some work just under the jackdaws' home, said he should not have liked his children to send him off as the young ravens do. And as he was working with his son, while a little grandson was playing on the beach close at hand, he had presumably fared better than the old ravens are thought to do.

With these daws and crows it is pleasant to connect the greatest of all poets, for the jackdaw is no doubt Shakspeare's chough that figures in this passage from *Lear*, written of a neighbouring cliff:—

“The crows and choughs that wing the midway air,
Show scarce so gross as beetles; half-way down
Hangs one that gathers samphire; dreadful trade!
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
The murmuring surge
That on the unnumbered idle pebbles chafes,
Cannot be heard so high.”

In the corvus tribe, the best of poets are sometimes indiscriminating or inexact, as, for example, Tennyson, who, though one of the best of poets about birds, writes of "the many wintered crow that leads the clanging rookery home." Thus the jackdaw is probably the bird called chough in the fine old glee that tells us that "the chough and crow to roost have gone."

As we recall these things we can see growing all around us in luxuriance, at the foot of these cliffs, the samphire that Shakespeare's Edgar saw one gathering, as a dreadful trade, half way down. And as we sit about or move about here, we may well satisfy ourselves, by careful observation of the tides, that it was past this very bay that the great Cæsar passed with his ships on that August afternoon just 2050 years ago, when he tells us that, after lying at anchor till the tide turned—as we see sailing vessels and French fishing boats having to do now—he sailed with the tide to find a suitable landing place clear of the cliffs where from missiles might, he saw, be readily thrown by the waiting Britons upon his troops below. And we may, at ease, walk by the very cliff route along which marched the watchful British troops with their war chariots, following the Roman legions as they sailed past. With pretty fair certainty we may feel that we have come to the very beach where the mighty Julius beached his boats and ships and attempted to land, whereupon the Britons marched into the sea, with cavalry and war-chariots, and seemed to have the Romans entirely at their mercy. In such a new kind of conflict, fighting at every disadvantage, the all-conquering legionaries might well show some hesitation in jumping overboard till, after calling upon the Gods to favour his attempt, the standard-bearer of the famous tenth legion sprang with his eagle into the sea, calling out with a loud voice these ever-memorable words:—"Desilite, commilitones, nisi vultis aquilam hostibus prodere: ego certe meum reipublicæ atque imperatori officium præstitero." With Cæsar's *Commentaries* in hand, we may call up there the scene of the first recorded battle ever fought on our shores; and we can well imagine that it was a very close and sharp fight (Cæsar says it was "*pugnatum acriter*"), and though, with their famous short two-edged swords, the well-disciplined veterans triumphed, it was only after a very sharp struggle; so that we feel that our ancestors were nowise disgraced. The next year, as we know, Cæsar came earlier in the year with 800 ships, and a mightier array of legions; that the Britons, feeling they could not oppose such an array on the shore, allowed him to land, placed Cassivelaunus at their head as leader, watched and impeded the Romans across the Stour, therefrom across the Thames, for which the latest critic (Col. Dodge, in 1892) states that "Cæsar chose a spot between Kingston and Brentford," thence on to St. Albans, Cassivelaunus's capital, till, at length, by tribal disunion and dissensions, the usual Celtic failures, Cæsar managed to patch up a peace, to impose hostages that were never sent,

and to get back, fortunately, before the winter gales came on. Bearing in mind how the August springtides had nearly made an end of the first fleet, drawn up and handled by those who had known hardly any tides in their own Mediterranean, and how the boisterous gales of the inhospitable coast had nearly wrecked the second fleet, we may feel sure that Cæsar had as narrow an escape on our shores as ever he had from the water-drinking Nervii—whom he praises alike for temperance and for bravery—two years earlier in Belgium, and that it was by the merest good luck that the Romans ever got back at all, even though led by that Caius Julius Cæsar, whom a great historian proclaims to be “the greatest name in history.” Thus the Queen of Shakespere’s Cymbeline had, we feel, good reason to recall to her people :

“The natural bravery of your isle, which stands
As Neptune’s park, ribbed and paled in
With sands that will not bear your enemies’ boats,
But suck them up to the topmast. A kind of conquest
Cæsar made here, but made not here his brag
Of came, and saw, and overcame : with shame,
The first that ever touched him, he was carried
From off our coast twice beaten ; while his shipping,
Poor ignorant baubles ! on our terrible seas,
Like egg-shells moved upon their surges, cracked
As easily ’gainst our rocks.”

With reminiscences such as these it is pleasant to associate one of the most restful and charming places that could be found wherein to spend a peaceful holiday. And to a student of bird-life it may be well to remember the spot as, more especially, the Home of the Jackdaws.

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