# BIRD HAUNTS
AND
# NATURE MEMORIES

BY

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"BIRD LIFE AT HOME AND ABROAD," ETC.

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# PREFACE

THE titles and subject-matter of many of the chapters in this miscellany originally appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*, *Scotsman*, *Daily Dispatch*, and *Westminster Review*. Through the courtesy of the proprietors and editors I am able to issue them in their present form. In every case, however, the articles have been revised, and in most recast and extended. "The Preservation of our Fauna" was the subject of an address, delivered as President, before the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society.

The illustrations, except that of the "Dandy," for which I am indebted to Messrs. Nicholson and Cartner of Carlisle, are the work of personal friends, who have taken considerable trouble to supply the subjects I desired. The name of each photographer appears in the list of illustrations.

I am especially indebted to Mr. Archibald Thorburn, and to Messrs. Longmans, Green and Co., who hold the copyright, for permission to reproduce the original drawing of the Noctule. Of all pictures I know, this is the best representation of this bat.

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# MEMORIES OF A CHESHIRE MOOR

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### 1884

AWAY to the north, hazy in the distance, a line of trees screened the quiet village of Carrington; the square tower of the church peeped above them. Eastward, still further away, were the tall Lombardy poplars of Ashton-on-Mersey, but between us and the trees stretched a level expanse of purple ling, a grouse moor, well stocked, within seven miles of the centre of Manchester. Hundreds, nay thousands, living within a radius of a few miles hardly knew of its existence, and certainly did not consider it worthy of a visit. To us as schoolboys it was paradise; the dread of the keeper's stick or of a sudden drop into a bog-hole added a spice of adventure to our visits. Merciful accident, a matter of levels, carried the railway through a cutting at the edge of the Moss; only the smoke of passing trains was visible, whilst the scarcity of houses within sight detracted from the idea of any considerable population.

The ling was thick and rank, its ancient stems intertwisted in a maze, for little systematic burning had been undertaken for many years. As we tramped through masses, nearly waist-high, we flushed again and again the startled grouse. We too were startled at the whir; we thought of keepers and glanced round before hunting for the ruddy, well-protected eggs, whilst the cock bird, yards away, dropped after skimming the heather with bowed wings to give his warning: " Go back, go back, go back." The straight-cut drains, 4 or 5 feet deep, were often overhung and concealed by clumps of ling or bil-

berry; an incautious step and we were floundering in brown peat water and very black mud. In the overhanging clumps the yellow-billed twite, the "heather lintie," made its nest, often using the feathery cotton-grass for a cosy lining; from the oozy mud the snipe rose, dodging and calling; more rarely we disturbed the curlew and heard its plaintive whistle. Doubtless it too nested there, though we never found the nest or the crouching, short-billed young.

Cranberry and bilberry varied the monotony of ling and heather, for both heaths were plentiful; lush tracts were white with the waving flags of cotton-grass. Sundews, three species, took toll of the countless flies which buzzed over the moor and alighted on their sticky, deceitful leaves; marsh andromeda was there, and a few fine clumps of royal fern. Crowberry, often confused with heather, was abundant, as it is on the upland moors. When we disturbed the hare from its form its powerful hind-legs threw up showers of glistening drops as it dodged between the tussocks. We chased and caught the heath moths and the Manchester treble-bar, whose caterpillar devoured the cranberry; we brought away scores of the hairy larvæ of the oak-eggar and lost them at home, finding starved unfortunates spinning in out-of-the-way corners where the domestic brush had failed to reach them. The big, green, gold-spangled grub of the emperor moth was a special treasure; we liked to watch it spin its flask-shaped cocoon, and to examine the bottle-neck with its hair-like stopper: no ichneumon can enter, but the emerging moth can easily push its outward way. Beautiful insects were these eyed moths, the males smaller but far richer in colour than the grey females; often, too often, a dipterous parasite, a large fly, appeared in our breeding cases instead of the much prized moth.

Lizards, though not rare, were elusive; when we saw

THE CURLEW ON THE MOOR.

them quietly sunning themselves we grabbed, but usually either missed them or only gripped the far too fragile tail. Then, as the late owner thankfully escaped amidst the tangled stems, we held the violently wagging caudal appendage in our fingers, watching the reflex struggles grow weaker and weaker. Vipers occurred, but we refrained from familiarities, though we treasured the cast sloughs when we found them.

Almost in the centre of the Moss was a pole-trap, cruel, but legal forty years ago, and near by, on some stunted birches, the keeper hung his " vermin "; when we were sure that the coast was clear we also visited the trap and gibbet. To the top of this solitary post, a tempting perch for any passing hawk, was chained an unbaited circular tooth-trap; many an innocent victim alighted for a rest and remained, hanging in agony, until the keeper chose to make his rounds. We found the mangled corpses of nightjar and cuckoo, even of thrushes and titlarks, on or near the fatal trap, but we were better pleased when we could recover the fairly fresh body of a kestrel or merlin for examination or efforts at the taxidermal art. That arch-robber, the carrion crow, avoided the fatal pole, but we found and annexed one which the keeper had nailed to a tree. Probably the marsh harrier formerly nested on the Moss, as it did on many of the wilder moors; about this time a young bird, perhaps visiting the home of its ancestors, was shot as it quartered the moor. Short-eared owls nested regularly, but in that wilderness of overgrown ling were hard to discover; we longed for but never found the nest.

## 1894

In the previous spring the short-eared owls nested, probably for the last time, and a young bird was shot in the autumn. Carrington Moss was in transition; the last

patch of heather had vanished, and almost the last covey of grouse rose from a field of cabbages. Commerce extends its rapacious arms, populations grow, massing in already congested areas, and nature, unhappy nature, suffers. Eight years before this date Manchester had purchased the moor, cleared the ling and heather, dug up the peat and moss litter, and changed everything. Fussy little locomotives dragged trains of trucks laden with moss litter over the quaking ground, and brought in return loads of refuse from the city; nature's rubbish, converted by natural change into useful fuel, was replaced by the discarded refuse of a teeming population, in its turn to suffer chemical change and become fertilising matter. Gangs of toilers cut and stacked the peats, others tipped in the apparently defiling filth; it was not a pleasant sight. Smoke, grime, and worse had replaced the bright bloom of heather and the sweet smell of fresh cut turf. Already crops were appearing on the marked-out fields, but the Moss was a moss no longer; it was an utterly lost-looking tip, a rubbish heap. Curlew, snipe, twite, viper, emperor, andromeda, and sundew had vanished; docks, nettles, ragwort, and weeds were springing everywhere. The larks and pipits remained, but the sparrow had appeared and the corn bunting found a spot worth colonising.

1904

From north to south and east to west railway lines ran straight across fields whose borders were drainage ditches white with crowfoot; sleepers, well bedded, had replaced the rough planks which had served well enough when the foundations were so uncertain that a truck or locomotive might any time sink into the boggy soil.

Alongside the metals were broad and level roads, leading to the few farms that had already been built.

Nurseries and plantations had come into being, but here and there a patch of bilberry or a clump of ling clung tenaciously to the edge of a ditch. Sidings from the main lines wandered, apparently aimlessly, into ploughed fields; but at the end of these tracks were piles of top-dressing, including tins and pots, old boots, and all the flotsam and jetsam of Manchester's ever-flowing human tide. Acres and acres were under cultivation, but where clearing was still in process big pools of shallow water, not overclean, were the feeding-ground of the black-headed gull, which had discovered that Shudehill's fishy refuse was palatable if ancient.

We were musing over the past history of an umbrella handle, that lay amongst the cinders, the metal of the permanent way, when the sun broke through the clouds. Immediately every field, ploughed or harrowed, flashed out innumerable heliographic signals; the brown, peaty earth was thick with scintillating diamonds, for there is beauty even in the broken glass of countless discarded bottles.

1914

The farm had come to stay; the land was tilled. Low but thick quickset hedges, adorned with the fragrant May, lined the old drainage ditches. The main railway lines remained, but the branches, the sidings, where they had not been removed, were rusted and disused, lost in fields of thick and healthy grass. Manchester refuse had fulfilled its promise, had proved fruitful; save for the level chessboard of fields there was little difference between the Moss and the surrounding country. The corn bunting was no longer in evidence, but the starling, thrush, and blackbird worked the ground for grubs and worms which never appeared amongst the heather; linnets nested in the hedgerows, and the partridge called where once the red

grouse crowed. The skylark and titlark, birds which were there thirty years before, had altered their habits, adapting themselves to changed conditions; they, perhaps, were the sole survivors of the old avifauna. Corn and roots had not only replaced ling and bilberry, but dock, goosefoot, and nettle had vanished; the tip was a tip no longer.

In the centre of the great cultivated area we met a bread van, and by the side of the track, where some of the latest rubbish had been dumped, noted the remnants of a bound magazine. A plough was cutting straight furrows through the rich earth, and every yard it turned up fragments of crockery; in years to come will archæologists collect and piece together some of these fragments to study the ceramic art of the twentieth century? Will they write learned papers on the strange habits of an ancient civilisation which scattered its glass and china broadcast? Or will they talk more correctly of these municipal "kitchen middens"?

1921

There has been less change during these last few years, the decade nearing completion; the hedges are denser and higher, the fields yield better results under crop rotation; the flagging city trees, after a spell in pots in the smoky air, recruit in the nurseries; the motor van and lorry cross unquaking roads, the tractor furrows rich soil. The waste land is perfectly reclaimed.

Is it purely sentimental to regret the change? Near forty years have passed since those happy, careless days of boyhood, and now,

> "When we look back and regretfully wonder
> What we were like in our work and our play,"

did we really appreciate the beauty of the moor, or has

memory added an unnatural halo, a glory which was never there? Yet many of us still claim to be

> "A lover of the moorland bare
> And honest country winds,"

and it is small comfort to know that we must travel further and toil harder to satisfy our cravings. The town grows; its needs increase; it extends octopus arms, grips and demolishes the wilds. The craze for utility overrules æsthetic claims, and, too late, the public conscience awakens to the startling fact that the preservation of open space means more than sentiment—fresh air and health, the conservation of that individual energy which alone makes the citizen worthy of the city. Perhaps Carrington Moss was a better place forty years ago.