

## HOW EIDER DOWN IS GATHERED.

THE rocks and sea-coasts of Norway, the rugged steeps and barren precipices of the Shetland, Orkney, and Farøe Islands, and the wild scenery of the Hebrides, are the abodes of numerous tribes of aquatic birds, as puffins, herons, cormorants, and eider fowl. The simple inhabitants of some of these secluded spots depend in a great measure upon these creatures for their food and clothing. The flesh of some is eaten when fresh, and some is salted for keeping: the eggs are esteemed excellent food, though much too strong in their taste to be relished by persons unaccustomed to such delicacies; the skins of the eider-ducks form under-clothing, which is proof against very severe cold; and, without any very material injury to the birds, a vast quantity of the finest down is collected from them annually. This invaluable substance is so firm and elastic, that a quantity which, when compressed, might be covered by the two hands, will serve to stuff a quilt or coverlet, which, together with extreme lightness, possesses more warmth than the finest blanket. The importance of such a defense in the inhospitable climate of these exposed regions, may be well imagined. Accordingly, one of the chief employments of the inhabitants, is the collection of these indispensable articles; an occupation, in the pursuit of which the adventurous fowlers are often exposed to dangers, the bare idea of which would seem enough to deter the most courageous from the attempt, had not long practice rendered them almost insensible to fear. We shall give a short account of the method pursued on these occasions.

On the coast of Norway, there are many low and flat islands, upon which the birds, during their breeding season, lay their eggs in great abundance: these the fowler approaches in his boat; leaving it moored to the rocks, he quietly examines the nests, which are made on the ground, constructed of sea-weeds, and lined with the finest down, which the female plucks from her own body. The eggs are generally four in number, of a pale-green color, and somewhat longer than a common duck's egg. With great caution and gentleness, the fowler removes the female from the nest, and takes possession of the superfluous down and eggs, being careful, however, to leave one behind, lest the nest should be deserted. The patient bird endures this robbery with the greatest resignation, and immediately commences the reparation of her loss, by laying more eggs, and covering them with fresh down, in which latter office her faithful mate bears a part, and yields up his own plumage for the defense of their yet unhatched progeny. This operation is often repeated more than once upon the same nest. It is asserted that, although the birds will bear quietly this treatment from the hands of those to whom they are accustomed, the appearance of a stranger is by no means acceptable, and that they testify their displeasure at the work of destruction by loud and fearful screams. This singular fact may perhaps be accounted for

by the great kindness with which the natives treat them; so great, indeed, that in Iceland they have been almost rendered tame, and will often build their nests close to the houses. Their quiet and peaceable dispositions are also manifested by the circumstance, that two females will sometimes lay their eggs in the same nest, in which case they always agree remarkably well.

The ease and facility, however, with which the plundering of these nests is effected, are remarkably contrasted with the extreme danger to which the same occupation is exposed in other parts. The most precipitous and inaccessible rocks are often the chosen abodes of these winged creatures, where they remain in apparent security, seemingly far removed from man's rapacious hand. But who shall say what difficulties are so great, that patience and courage may not overcome them? The bold adventurer, inured to toil, with sinews well strung by constant labor, and animated by a spirit of dauntless courage, climbs the most rugged steep, surveys with coolness the most frightful precipices, and trusting himself to ledges of rock scarcely large enough for the foot to rest on, loads himself with the hard-earned spoil, and returns to the bottom with as much indifference as ordinary men would descend a ladder.

The Holm of Noss, a vast rock separated by some violent convulsion of nature from the island of the same name—one of the Shetland group—presents remarkable difficulties to the bird-catchers. Its sides are extremely precipitous, its distance from the mainland is about sixteen fathoms, and the gulf between is occupied by a raging sea—yet have all these been overcome. A kind of bridge of ropes is thrown across, by which the fowler, seated in a cradle, is drawn over, and commences his operations. The original formation of this bridge, if such it may be called, is somewhat remarkable. The rock had been long inaccessible, when at last an adventurer, bolder or more skillful than the rest, having landed at the base, contrived to scramble his way to the summit, after encountering incredible difficulties; his companions threw across to him a strong rope, which he made fast to several stakes previously driven firmly into the ground, and the same was done by them on the opposite side; to this a basket or cradle was then attached, which, by means of cords fastened at either end, might be drawn backward or forward. The end of the story is truly tragical. Emboldened by his success, instead of returning by the means of conveyance he had thus provided, the unfortunate man determined to descend the rock where he had come up; but the task was too difficult even for his practiced foot: one false step, and all was over; his mangled body at the foot of the rock too plainly attested the madness of the attempt.

But not always can even these means be had recourse to; it is often necessary to descend from the cloud-capped summit down the face of the naked precipice, to seek for nests hidden in the fissures of the stone. The reckless daring exhibited by the islanders on these occasions, has

called forth the admiration and wonder of all who have had an opportunity of witnessing them. We subjoin the account given by Sir G. Mackenzie, of the method which the inhabitants of the Farøe Islands pursue in their search for puffins. "When the rocks are so high and smooth as to render it impossible for the fowlers to ascend, they are let down by means of a rope from above. To prevent the rope from being cut, a piece of wood is placed at the verge of the precipice. By means of a small line, the fowler makes signals to those above, and they let him down or pull him up accordingly. When he reaches a shelf of the rock where the birds have their nest, he unties himself, and proceeds to take them. Sometimes he places himself on a projecting rock, and, using his net with great adroitness, he catches the birds as they fly past him—and this they call veining. This mode of catching birds is even practiced while the fowlers are suspended. When a projection of rock is between the fowler and the place where the birds are, he swings himself from the rock so far that he turns round the projection. In this, great address and courage are requisite, as well as in swinging into a cavern. When he can not, with the help of his pole, swing far enough, he lets down a line to people stationed in a boat below, who swing him by means of it as far as is necessary to enable him to gain a safe place to stand upon. Besides being exposed to the risk of the rope breaking, the fowler is frequently in danger of being crushed by pieces of the rock falling down upon him." The same method is pursued in the other islands. The ropes employed are of two sorts—one made of hides, the other of hair of cows' tails—the former are most esteemed; they have the advantage of ancient usage to recommend them, and they are, besides, less liable to be worn away by the sharp edges of the rock. The mode of constructing them is as follows:—A hide of a sheep and one of a cow are cut into slips, the latter being the broader; each slip of sheeps' hide is then plaited to one of cows', and two of these compound slips are then twisted together, so as to form a rope of about three inches in circumference. The length of these ropes varies from 90 to about 200 feet, and they are sold at thirteen pence a fathom. So highly are they valued, that, at St. Kilda, a single rope forms a girl's marriage-portion. In this island, the most westerly of the Hebrides, a mere speck of land in the wide waters of the Atlantic, old and young alike engage in the same hazardous pursuit. Accustomed from infancy to creep to the extremest verge of the precipice, dangers which, to the unpracticed, appear most appalling, only serve to afford them amusement. A modern traveler informs us that he has seen very young children creep over the edge of a tremendous cliff, 1300 feet high, formed by the termination of Conachar, the loftiest eminence in the island, and considered to be the highest precipice in Britain, and coolly collecting the eggs or birds by means of a slender pole like a fishing-rod, furnished at the end with a noose of cow hair, stiffened by the

feathers of a solan-geese. The same writer witnessed the extraordinary feats of a bird-catcher, who, while supported by one companion alone, with whom he was conversing carelessly, contrived to catch four birds, and, burdened with two in each hand, still held fast by the rope, and striking his foot against the rock, threw himself out from the precipice, and returning with a bound, would again dart out, capering and shouting, and playing all manner of tricks. When we consider that one false step of the man above, one momentary yielding of his strength, would inevitably prove fatal to both, we can not but feel the greatest astonishment at their presence of mind. Accidents, however, though extremely rare, do sometimes occur, and those of the most frightful nature, of which the following may serve as an example:

It is by no means uncommon for fowlers to proceed alone on these excursions: on such occasions they fasten the rope to a stake driven into the ground above, and thus descend. It was upon one of these solitary expeditions that the following occurred: A bird-catcher left his home one morning to pursue his usual occupation, but alone; having secured his rope to the summit of the cliff, he let himself gradually down, and reaching the spot where the rock overhung a ledge, on which he expected to reap an ample harvest, he dexterously swung himself forward, and gained the resting-place. As he expected, he here found a number of nests, and, in his ardor, forgetting the usual precaution of fastening the rope round his body while in the act of plundering a nest, the cord slipped from his grasp, and after swinging backward and forward for some time, but without coming within reach, at length settled many feet from the spot where he stood. For a moment he stood aghast, uncertain how to act; the sudden blow almost deprived him of the power of thinking; gradually, however, he recovered the use of his faculties, and looked anxiously around for means of escape. Fearful, in truth, was the prospect: the heavy mass of rock above, smooth as if chiseled by the mason's hand, offered no crevices to which the most tenacious grasp might cling: many hundred feet below, the raging waters burst with terrific noise upon the pointed crags; while the depth to which he had descended, the solitude of the spot, and the roar of the tumultuous waters, altogether precluded the possibility of making himself heard, and summoning assistance to rescue him from his dreadful situation. One chance alone remained, and that a desperate one: by a bold leap he might regain the rope—it was an awful hazard; if he failed, instant destruction must be the result; but death, though slower in his present state, was no less sure: his resolution was taken; breathing a short and energetic prayer, he summoned all his strength, and fearlessly sprung forward. He lived to tell the tale, for the rope was caught, and the summit gained in safety.

Such are the usual methods pursued for capturing birds when they build near the summit of

the highest rocks, and such the dangers to which the attempt is exposed. But similar risks are run in taking those which have their haunts below. For this purpose, the expedition sets out in a boat, and having landed at the spot selected for their operations, one of the most daring of their number fastens a rope round his waist, and taking in his hand a long pole, furnished with an iron hook at one end, either climbs up the rock, or is thrust upward by his companions, until he can find a resting-place sufficiently large for their purpose. Having reached this spot, he lowers the rope, and hauls up one of the boat's crew; the others are then raised in the same manner; and this process of climbing and hauling is repeated as often as necessary, until they reach the spots most frequented by the birds. The fowlers then separate, and distribute themselves over the face of the rock, acting, however, for the most part in pairs, each being provided with a rope and fowling-staff. For the sake of mutual security, two frequently connect themselves together by their ropes, and whenever the nests are below the ledges on which they stand, one permits himself to be lowered down by the other, until he can reach them. In this laborious occupation they often spend many days together, throwing the booty they have collected into the boats below, and spending the nights in the crevices of the rocks, being at the same time not unfrequently ill supplied with provisions.

Another plan sometimes adopted in these islands, is that of setting gins or nooses over night, in places most frequented by the birds; these are examined next morning, and often afford a large supply. It was upon one of these occasions that the following occurred: A bird-catcher of St. Kilda had been fixing some traps upon a ledge, elevated about 150 feet above the level of the sea, and was moving forward for the purpose of re-gaining his rope, when, unfortunately, his foot caught in one of the nooses, and before he was aware of the fact, tripped himself, and fell over the edge of the precipice. There he hung, suspended by one leg, and with a full view of the boiling surf below him. In vain he wrenched his body round, and strove to grasp the edge from which he had fallen; all his exertions were to no purpose; the bare stone afforded nothing to his grasp, and his strength became rapidly exhausted. He shouted and screamed till the rocks re-echoed with his clamor, but none was at hand to lend him succor; the shades of night were fast closing in, and he was obliged to resign himself patiently to his fate, hoping that the morning might bring some assistance. In this perilous situation he passed the live-long night. Pierced with cold, suffering the severest agony, the weight of his whole body being supported by one limb alone, and momentarily expecting the noose to give way and precipitate him headlong into the angry waters, it seemed as if the hours would never end. But morning came at last, and, as surrounding objects gradually emerged from the darkness which had concealed them, his eyes wandered anxiously around in search

of some sign of life. Who may describe the pleasure that thrilled through his bosom, as first he distinctly recognized the form of a companion! The sight gave new vigor to his frame; he summoned all his strength, and uttered a loud cry for help. His call was heard, and no time was lost in relieving him from his dreadful situation.

We who have been brought up in comparative ease and luxury, can scarcely picture to ourselves a more wretched lot than that of these poor islanders, compelled to undergo such toils, and expose themselves to so great dangers, for acquiring the mere necessaries of life; yet they are a happy race of men, and would be loth to exchange this kind of existence, with all its excitement and pleasures, for the more quiet lives and less spirit-stirring employments of the inhabitants of cities.

#### A LONDON CURATE'S STORY.

JUST now a young man, a parishioner of mine, has called in to relieve the fullness of his heart, by pouring out his feelings to me. The few obstacles which stood between him and the girl he loves, have been removed, and in the elation of his joy, he is ready to call upon heaven and earth to rejoice with him.

Well, I have heard him out. I have listened for more than an hour to the expression of his lover's raptures, of his fears which are past, and of his hopes and expectations which are on the eve of realization. I have given him smile for smile, sympathy for every word, and hearty congratulation for each distinct item of his communication. Now I have seen him to my door, and as I come back to my dingy study, it strikes me as looking more cheerless and chill than usual.

There lies my half-written sermon on the desk, but I seem to have lost the spirit and earnestness with which I commenced it. The din of the noisy streets, to which habit has accustomed my ear, is suddenly become unbearable. How is it that now I notice that my little fire burns with such a dead and sluggish aspect—that the weather is so heavy and oppressive—that there is such a sombreness and disheartening influence in every thing around me?

Let the truth be spoken, I have never told my secret to any man; nor would I now to the dearest friend I have, and in the closest hour of mutual confidence, break the sad, deep silence of the last twenty years. But young Luke Hamilton, with his eager story, coming to the gray-haired curate, has done him an evil he little suspects. He has broken the seal of the fountains locked so long! passion and feeling kept under during nearly half my lifetime, stir into rebellion beneath the resolute foot that has held them down; a smouldering agony has striven into flame again!

What I would not tell my friend I will tell the public; to its wide, impalpable ear I will pour out my heart. I can not go about my work with this weight upon my soul, with this secret which is burning inwardly, unspoken. There is some-