

## SEA-BIRDS AT THE FARNE ISLANDS.



HE accounts of the ornithological wonders of the Farne Islands always fascinated me since a lighthouse keeper in Devonshire added to my boyish egg collection some treasures he had acquired while stationed at the Longstone;

but it was not until the spring of 1882 that I had an opportunity of visiting the islands.

On the 21st of June in that year I left London with a friend by the night mail, and early the next morning we found ourselves at Bamboorough, one of those old Northumbrian villages which still have a character of their own. The ancient keeps round which the houses cluster speak of rough border raids and fierce

forays when the stolen cattle were herded in vaults far beneath the massive walls. Even the farms were fortified, and many of the mangers hewn in stone have defied the Pictish torch.

We left our luggage at the "Crewe Arms" in Bamboorough, and drove on at once to North Sunderland, the nearest harbor where boats can be procured.

The Farne Islands are romantically situated off the coast of Northumberland. The largest, known as House Island, comprising sixteen acres, is but a mile and a half from the stretch of sandy shore which is overlooked by Bamboorough Castle, and about midway between Holy Island and that weird headland whereon stand the jagged remains of Dunstanborough Castle, fast crumbling away, and showing plainly the ravages time has wrought even since Turner drew his famous plate for the "Liber Studiorum." Before the light-houses existed, a beacon-fire cast its warning glare over these dangerous seas from an old tower on House Island. Many of the islands are mere



BAMBOOROUGH CASTLE.





NEST OF LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL.

low rocks over which the breakers sweep in stormy weather, but few places are better known or more intensely interesting to the ornithologist in the spring and summer.

Since the days of old, when they had little to fear but the stone or wooden weapons of prehistoric man, millions of sea-birds have nested on these rocks. Still these living clouds gather as the spring sun shines upon their haunts. There they hatch and rear their young, which, having reached maturity in the open sea, return again to the birthplace of their ancestors, and, rearing their own offspring, hand down the tradition from generation to generation. Persecution has failed to balk this instinct. As between old families and their lands, there seems to be a tie between these birds and their immemorial haunts.

One of the head-keeper's chief duties consists in showing the islands to those sufficiently enthusiastic on the subject of ornithology to venture to them. He was just leaving the quay with a party of visitors as we reached the village. Our furious gesticulations and shouts were alike disregarded, and we found the North Sunderland fishermen unsympathetic. They were evidently in a thriving way, for, though their boats crowded the harbor, we had no little difficulty in arousing the men from their habitual lounge. At last we succeeded in hiring a coble, the lines of which would astonish a south-coast mariner, and in persuading three fishermen to take us out, who were to have a pound between them and a bottle of beer each. Recklessness is no besetting sin in North Sunderland. The sea, save for a gentle swell, was undisturbed; the

coble was only eighteen feet in length, yet they would have us believe that she required three men to work her. There was a slight inclination to fog, so a compass had to be procured, but at last we embarked on our four-mile voyage.

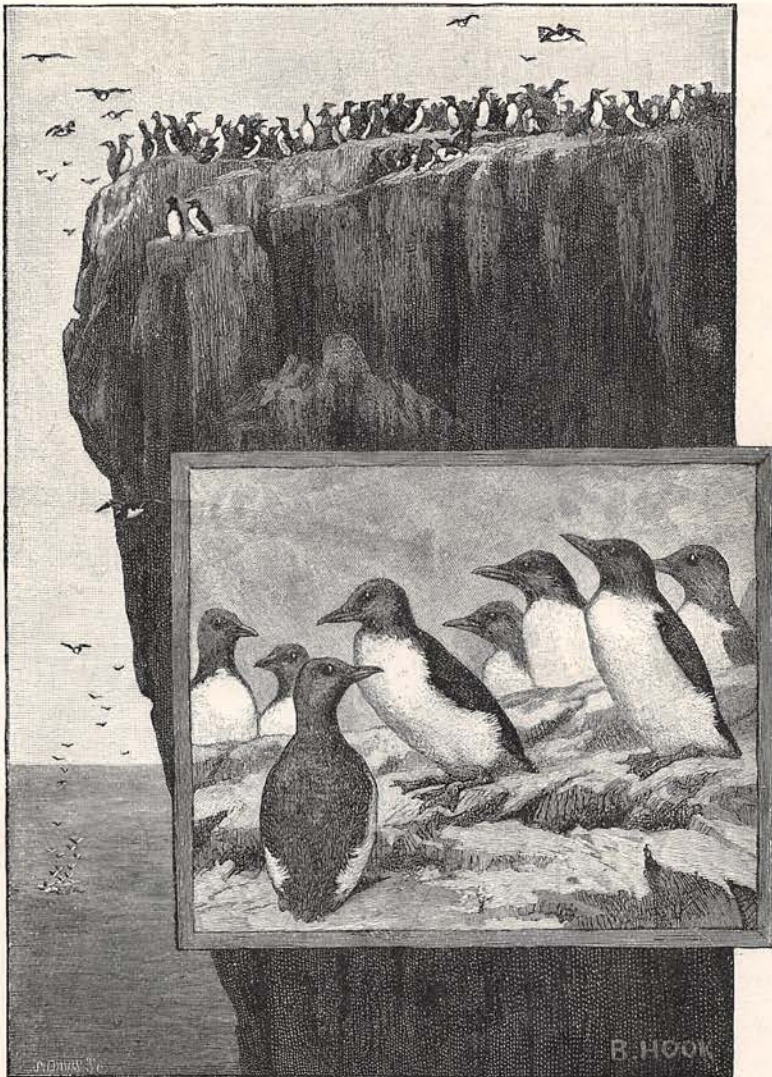
About half-way we were among the birds. Some eider-drakes flew by at close quarters; then a few puffins, their short wings, plump, round bodies, and bright-orange par-

rot bills leaving little doubt of their identity. Small parties of guillemots, disturbed at their fishing, lazily separated before our bows, and, diving suddenly, came to the surface far astern; while high above us soared huge snow-white gannets from the Bass Rock, thirty miles beyond the Scottish border.

To obtain from Cuthbertson, the head-keeper, the necessary permission to land, we sailed after him to the outermost or "Staple" group of islands. We ran our boat alongside his near the Longstone, and soon afterwards were steering for the quarters of the lesser black-backed gulls. We landed on the rocks slippery with oar-weed, and, once beyond high-water mark, we began to find nests in all directions. They were built upon the bare rock, without the slightest attempt at concealment, and the three eggs, blotched with dark brown upon a paler ground of the same color, contrasted but faintly with the mingled feathers, sticks, and straw which formed the ample nest. Generally the three eggs bore a certain family resemblance; but there was a remarkable exception to this rule, where the olive-brown of one, marked boldly with a brown still richer, contrasted with the pale-blue ground of the other two, respectively sprinkled with black and blotched faintly with purplish gray. As we advanced, a crowd of screaming gulls arose, hovered about us, and settled lightly again, like great snow-flakes, when we had passed.

In spite of the unmusical protest of the outraged proprietors, we completed the inspection of their island, and on our way back to the boat came upon the nest of an interloping eider-duck, with three pale-green eggs lying on their bed





GUILLEMOTS ON "THE PINNACLES."

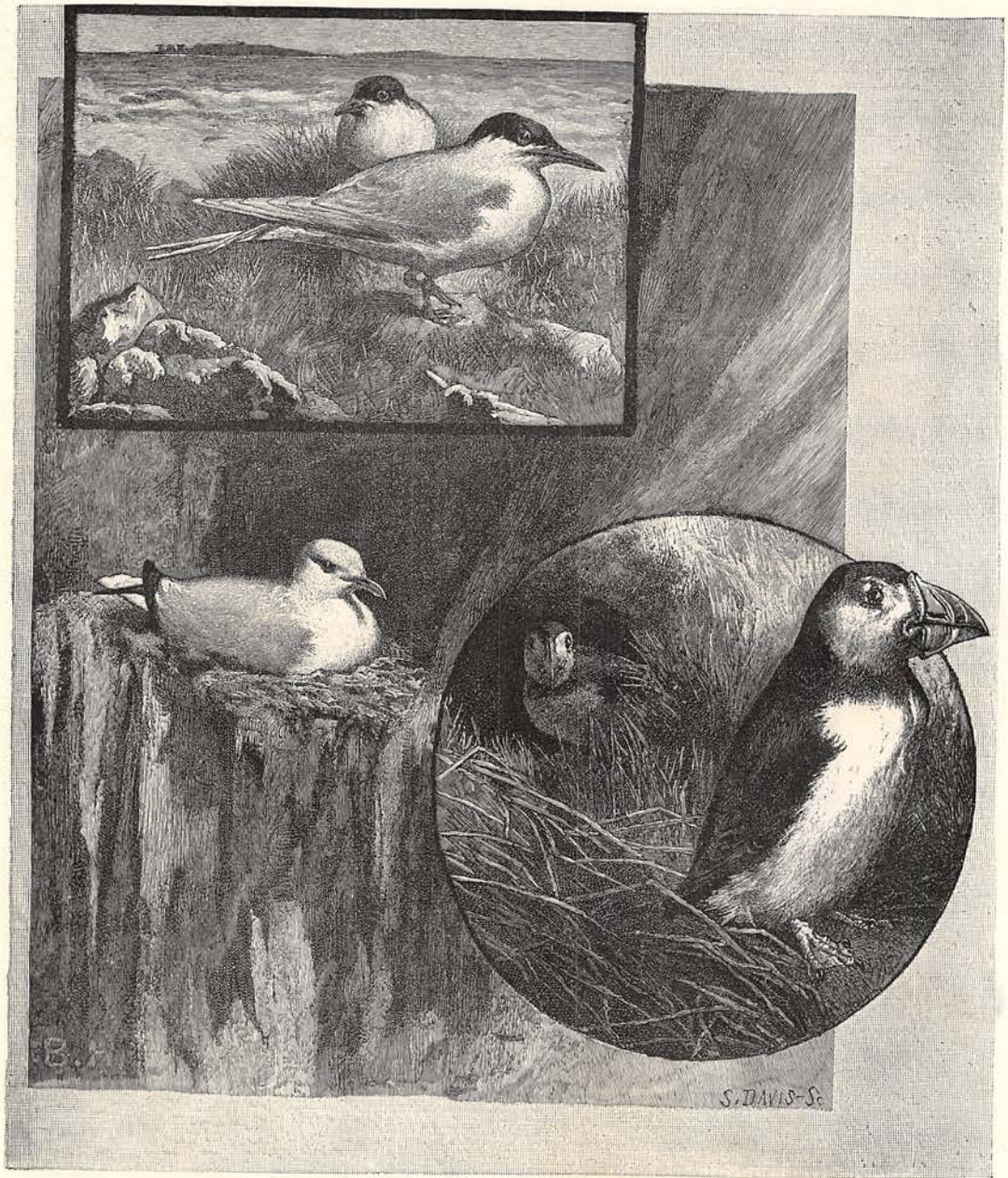
of soft down in a sheltered nook where quantities of tangled grass afforded good cover. This duck is plainly barred with light and dark brown; but her mate, as remarkable in appearance as in habits, is half of a sooty black, half white, blending with a faint blush of orange on the breast and a silky-green tinge on the sides of the head. The eider nestles in few places in the British Islands; never southward of the Farnes (where it is very numerous), and never visiting fresh water. Its chief home is in the Norwegian fjords, and in the perpetual daylight of the Arctic summer it also breeds in vast numbers.

Leaving the territory of the black-backed gulls, we reëmbarked, and, rowing a few hundred yards, found ourselves upon the island

which the puffins had made their own. At the highest part the soil, which was peaty, was burrowed by the birds into a perfect honeycomb of passages, and so completely undermined that it was impossible to walk without frequently breaking into the nesting-holes beneath. Several times I put my hand into the gaps through which my foot had broken, and took out the parent bird, receiving no feeble retaliation from their powerful beaks. The burrows are generally about a yard and a half long, and in a recess at the end a single egg is laid; at first white, with a few gray spots, but in a few days so bedaubed with dirt as almost to match the color of the peaty soil.

Among our native birds there is none so thoroughly droll as the puffin. When taken from



ARCTIC TERNS.  
KITTIWAKE.

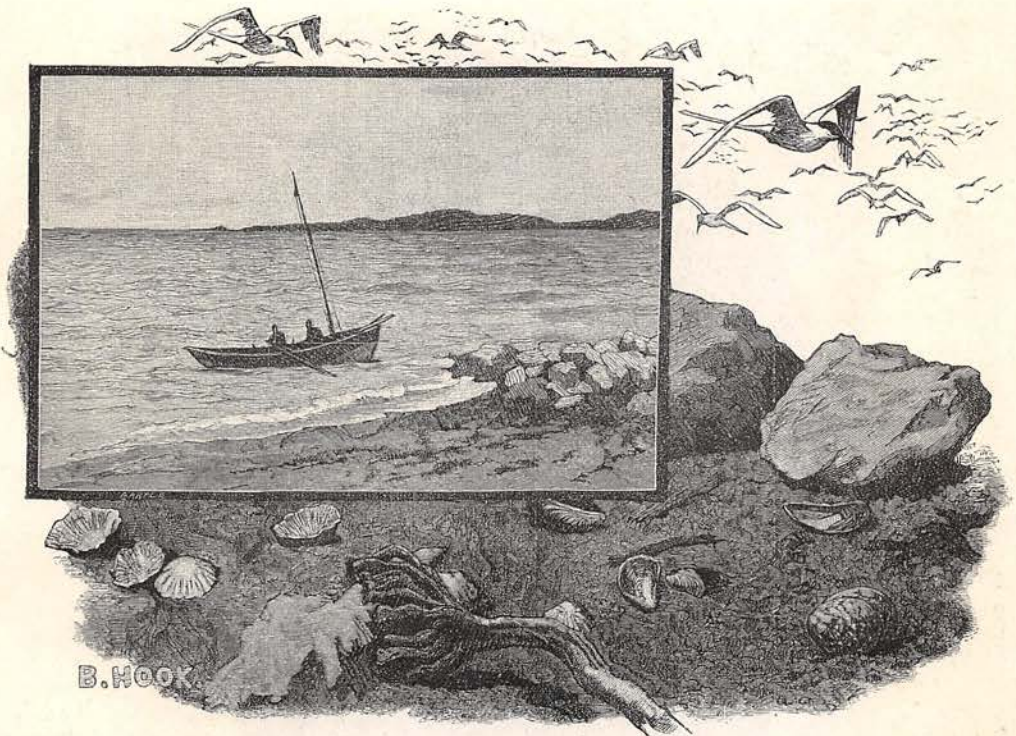
PUFFINS.

his subterranean home he casts around a bewildered glance from expressive eyes protected by curious horny lids; then flaps away upon the ground, till he succeeds in rising.

The eggs were not yet hatched, though a chick's beak projecting from one of them showed how advanced they were in incubation. When the young are born the old birds feed them with small fish, of which they carry six or eight at a time, packed neatly side by side.

A pull of two hundred yards brought us to the Staple Island, and here, in a half-ruined tower, the under-keeper leads a solitary life during the nesting season. On this side, the island ends in upright cliffs of black basalt about forty feet in height. Within a stone's-throw of the cliffs is one of those sights on which an ornithologist is never tired of gazing. Separated from the mainland by a narrow chasm, pillars of jet-black rock, known as "The Pinnacles,"





ALONG SHORE.

A FLIGHT OF ARCTIC TERNS.

rise abruptly from the sea. Upon their level summits huddled a jostling crowd of guillemots, sitting upright as if to exhibit their clean white breasts. Sometimes one, returning from a fishing excursion, alighted clumsily with straddling legs in the thick of his companions without considering for a moment whether there was room. They took no notice of the human beings standing close to them. Compared with the birds, the eggs (of which each female lays only one) are of enormous

size, the color varying from yellowish-white to the most brilliant greenish-blue spotted and streaked with black or brown. It is interesting that the shape of the guillemot's eggs adapts them admirably to the situations in which they are usually laid. Placed upon ledges of the bare rock and unconfined by any barrier, they would easily roll off, were it not that they are very large at one end, tapering to a point at the other, so that when set moving they must roll in a very small circle.



GRACE DARLING'S HOME.





GRACE DARLING.

Notwithstanding this safeguard, so clumsy are the guillemots that I have seen no less than seven eggs roll simultaneously from one ledge as the birds took wing. No sooner are the young hatched than the parents by some means manage to convey them to the water and lead them to the open sea, where they live far out of sight of land. I have often seen these family parties—the little fluffy chick perfectly able to swim and dive; the father and mother always at hand to wait on its cry of distress.

On the sides of "The Pinnacles" kittiwakes were sitting secure upon their nests, placed (as these gulls alone of all their tribe know how to place them) on the narrowest and most inaccessible ledges to be found.

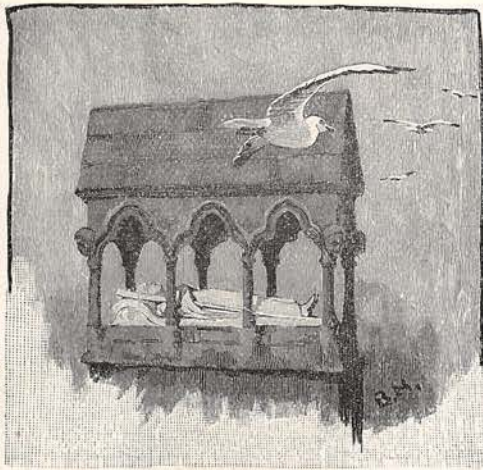
We returned to our boat along a shingly beach, dotted here and there with the nests of the black-backed gull. The under-keeper was lounging in his boat alongside ours, eager to hear any news from the mainland, and on

our making sail he hung on to the stern, continuing the conversation as we towed him along, thus making the most of his slight intercourse with the world.

The wind freshening, we bowled merrily along to the last island we were to visit—an island colonized by terns. We ran the boat into a sheltered, sandy bay, and as we landed graceful, silvery forms sprang in a crowd from a ridge of shingle about fifty yards ahead. With the exception of a few Sandwich terns and one of the common species, the main body were Arctic terns.

If the puffin is the most ridiculous and droll of British birds, the Arctic tern is incomparably the most delicate and beautiful. The swallow of the sea, it comes in May, welcomed by the fisherman as a harbinger of spring. Seeking the brit and sand-launce, it hovers over the shallows or wheels lightly round the intruder, uttering at intervals a curious, wild note of anger that, with its





GRACE DARLING'S TOMB.

pointed wings and long, forked tail, soon becomes associated in his mind with bright days and the gentle murmur of the summer sea on sandy shores. Ever and anon it drops head first into the water as though shot, instantly rising with its prey; or, if the first plunge is unsuccessful, darts a few feet into the air and drops again. The Sandwich tern is a somewhat larger bird, but lacks the beauty of its relative. Like the eider-duck, it makes the Farnes its chief English breeding-haunt, and with the two other species forms colonies upon the beach, where it lays two yellowish-white eggs spotted with black, matching so perfectly the ground on which they lie that it is difficult to avoid treading on them. None of these birds have the faintest idea of making themselves or their young ones comfortable, but lay their eggs merely in a slight hollow. Roseate terns are occasionally met with, but none had been seen this year.

The rain, which had been threatening all day, now came down in earnest, and the rising wind warned us to return. Leaving the Cormorant Island unexplored, we set our large lug-sail, and, close-hauled, were just able to lay our course for North

Sunderland. Reluctantly we looked our last at the white sea-swallows settling upon their eggs again as we left the bay. The pouring rain mingled with the spray which, defying mackintoshes, trickled down our backs. But even this and the pervading odor of stale fish could not mar the enjoyment of our homeward sail.

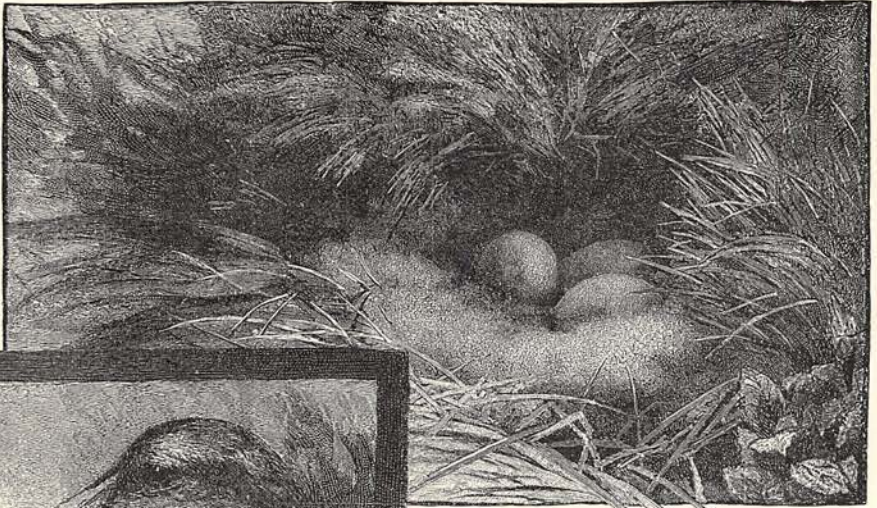
To those who delight in old associations, the Farne Islands are hallowed by the memory of St. Cuthbert, who lived for many years a hermit here. Green tells how, once prior of Lindisfarne, but worn out by his life's work and by the disputes among his brethren, he fled at last to "one of a group of islets not far from Ida's fortress of Bamborough, strewn for the most part with kelp and sea-weed, the home of the gull and the seal. In the midst of it rose his hut of rough stones and turf, dug down within deep into the rock, and roofed with logs and straw." He was afterwards Bishop of Lindisfarne for a short time; but "his bishopric was soon laid aside, and two months after his return to his island-hermitage the old man lay dying, murmuring to the last words of concord and peace."

Probably the Farne Islands have most



DUNSTANBOROUGH CASTLE.





EIDER-DUCK AND NEST.

claim to celebrity in modern times from the well-known story of the wreck of the steamer *Forfarshire*. This ill-fated ship left Hull on the 5th of September, 1838, bound for Dundee. The next day a gale set in from north-north-east, and owing to a leak in the boiler the fires were extinguished, so sail was set to keep her from going ashore. She drifted slowly and surely to leeward. In a dense fog, the gale still blowing, the starboard boat was lowered, in which eight of the crew and one passenger embarked, eventually being picked up and carried into Shields. A quarter of an hour afterwards, with forty souls on board, the ship struck upon the "Hawkers" rock near the Longstone, and in a few moments the stern was swept away and with it the captain and nearly all the remaining crew. The bows drove high upon the rock, where, when morning broke, nine persons clinging to the wreck were seen by the occupants of the light-house, William Darling and his daughter Grace. They launched their boat, and, each taking an oar, embarked on a desperate attempt to render assistance. After long battling with the sea they at length succeeded in reaching the rock, and it was only by Grace's skillful handling of the boat that it was saved from being dashed to pieces while Darling was engaged in getting the exhausted survivors one by one on board. All were

safely conveyed to the light-house, where for three days and nights the same hand which had taken so active a part in their rescue ministered to their wants.

The excitement caused by the heroism of Grace Darling was felt all over England, and even now her name is a household word. So great was her celebrity that the manager of a London theater is said to have offered her a large sum of money to appear upon the stage in a wreck scene, rowing a boat of pasteboard. Her portrait became a familiar and beloved object in hundreds of English homes. Pictures were painted, poems written, and engravings circulated by hundreds. But the object of this wild enthusiasm was as modest as she was brave, and died where she had lived, her father's companion in the light-house of the Longstone Island. She had been waiting in the rain for a boat to take her to Coquet Island; the boatmen there did not see her signal, and before they came she was wet and chilled. Thus were sown the seeds of the rapid consumption which ended in her death on the 20th of October, 1842.

Not very long afterwards a friend of mine was at the Farnes, and went one day to see Darling at his light-house. They were alone together, and the old man, never tired of talking of his daughter, with tears in his eyes showed the collection of shells and other relics of her childhood; and in the same boat in which on that memorable day he had shared her danger and her triumph, he took my friend to the rock where the *Forfarshire* struck. Here he rested on his oars, and with faltering voice told with simple words the story of that wild September dawn.

*Bryan Hook.*