



THE NIGHT-JAR.

By GRANT ALLEN.

WE sat late on the verandah last night, listening to the low trilling croon of the night-jar. It was a balmy evening, one of the few this summer; the sunset was lingering over the heather-clad moors, and the lonely bird sat perched on one bough of the wind-swept pine-tree by Martin's Corner, calling pathetically to his mate with that deep passionate cry of his. I know not why, but the voice of the night-jar seems to me fuller of unspoken poetry than that of any more musical and articulate songster. Away down in the valley a nightingale was pouring his full throat among the oak-brush; but we hardly heeded him. Up on the open moorland, in the twilight solitude, that gray bird of dusk sat keening and sobbing his monotonous love-plaint; and it moved us more than all the nightingale's gamut. I think it must be because we feel instinctively he is in terrible earnest. Those profound catches in the throat are the very note of true love; they have in them something of high human passion. And we could see the bird himself, too, on his half-leafless perch, craning his neck as he crooned, and looking eagerly for his lady-love. It was a delicious moment. We murmured as we sat George Meredith's lines—

“Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweep-
ing
Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.
Lone on the fir-branch, his rattle-note un-
varied,
Brooding o'er the gloom, spins the brown
eve-jar.”

We were fortunate indeed in our *mise-en-scène*; for the poet's picture had realised

itself before us. And, as usual, art had reacted upon nature. The cry, that was so beautiful and romantic in itself, gained an added touch of beauty and romance from the great word-painter's exquisite images.

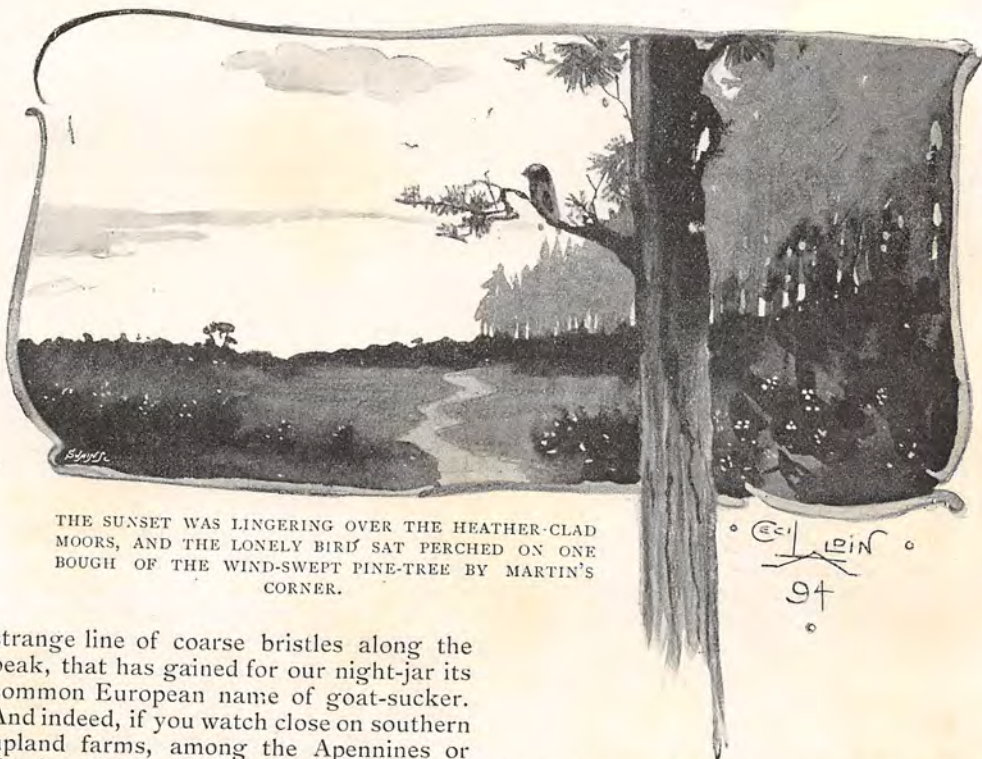
Perhaps, too, some part of the charm in the night-jar and his kind may be due to the sense that here at least we stand face to face with a genuine relic of the older, the wilder, and the freer England. He is a bird of the night, of the heather and the bracken, of the unbroken waste, of the unpeopled solitude. When man invades his high home, he moves afield before the intruder. Here on the great moors we hear him nightly in summer; but only when no other sound assails the ear, save the brom of the cockchafer, and the myriad hum of the flies and moths of dusk among the heather. He belongs, in fact, to that elder fauna which inhabited England before the whirr of wheels and the snort of steam drove the wild things far from us. The perky sparrow can accommodate himself without an effort to the bustle of towns, and can dispute for grains of corn under the horses' hoofs in Cheapside; the rook can follow close the ploughman's heels, in search of worms turned up by the share in the furrows; but the night-jar lives aloof among the solitary fern-wastes, and flies amain before the intrusion of our boisterous humanity.

“Fern-owls” the country people hereabouts call them; and very owl-like indeed they are in outer appearance, with their soft mottled plumage, all brown and gray and melting white, as is the wont of

nocturnal or crepuscular creatures ; but they are not owls at all by descent, for all that, being in reality big fly-hunting cousins of the swifts and the humming-birds. All birds that hawk after insects on the wing have a wide gaping mouth ; the house martins have it, and the swallows, and the swifts ; but in the night-jars this width of gape is pushed to a singular and almost grotesque extreme, though not of course beyond the limit laid by the needs and habits of the animal. It is the enormous mouth, fringed with its

sorting for purposes of common advantage which reaches at last its highest development in the nest of ants, with their associated beetles and their cow-like aphides.

Here in England, our night-jar is but a summer migrant, a visitor to the moors while insects abound ; and we listen for him eagerly in warm May weather. He comes to us from South Africa, where he winters among the Zulus, or, rather, escapes the chill of winter altogether in the opposite hemisphere. For he must



THE SUNSET WAS LINGERING OVER THE HEATHER-CLAD MOORS, AND THE LONELY BIRD SAT PERCHED ON ONE BOUGH OF THE WIND-SWEPT PINE-TREE BY MARTIN'S CORNER.

strange line of coarse bristles along the beak, that has gained for our night-jar its common European name of goat-sucker. And indeed, if you watch close on southern upland farms, among the Apennines or the Atlas, you will see the night-jars at twilight hovering close by the udders of the goats and cattle as they lie stretched in the meadows. But they are not milking them, as the Italian peasant firmly believes ; it is as friends and allies that they come, not as enemies. Peer hard through the gloom, on a moonlight evening, and you can make out at last that nocturnal flies are annoying the beasts, and that as fast as they gather the night-jar snaps them up, while the cattle seem to recognise this friendly office by never whisking their tails so long as the bird attends to them. It is a mutual convenience, an early form of that con-

have insects, flying insects on the wing, and plenty of them. We welcome his first churring among the pines and bracken as a sign of summer ; for he is a prudent bird, and seldom makes a mistake, knowing the marks of the weather well, like Mr. Robert Scott, and delaying his arrival till insects have hatched out in sufficient numbers from the cocoons over the heather-clad uplands. You see him but rarely, for he loves the dusk, and, though far from a timid bird, he usually alights on the ground, hardly perching on a tree, I think, except to utter his love-call. When he does perch, it is always lengthwise to the bough, not

crosswise as is the fashion with most other birds; he seems afraid of falling; and then, this position also assorts better with his passionate attitude of craning expectancy as he leans forward on the branch to summon his helpmate. If you disturb him from the ground, he rises with flapping wings in an awkward and noisy way, bringing his pinions together above his body, somewhat after the lapwing's fashion; but when he hawks on the open after flies, with his big mouth agape, his long arcs of flight are equable, swift, and graceful. Night-jars are fearless beasts; they rear their young in the open, without pretence or concealment. The two veined and marbled eggs are laid boldly in some hard patch among the brake and gorse, on the bare ground, without a nest of any sort; and though they are beautifully coloured when you come to examine them in detail, they so closely imitate the soil and the dry heath around in general effect that you may easily pass them by, even when you have

marked their approximate place by disturbing the sitting mother. Few British birds, indeed, show higher and closer adaptation to special conditions than our dreamy night-jars, essential insect-hawkers of the dusk on open and treeless uplands. Their large and mysterious eyes, their gaping mouths, their straining fringe of bristles, their delicate owl-like plumage, their swift and silent flight, their agile movements, their eerie cry, their curious love-sick nature—all mark them out as marvellously modified nocturnal variants on the general type of the swifts and trogons. They are, in fact, specialised descendants of the same primitive ancestral form, whose bodies and souls have undergone weird and beautiful changes in adaptation to a wild and poetical life in the shades of dusk on the unpeopled moorlands. For birds of twilight have always passionate cries and passionate natures; not accident alone has given us the whip-poor-will and the nightingale.

◦ THE NIGHT-JAR ◦

