



By GRANT ALLEN.

A FLIGHT OF QUAILS.

IT is one of the wonders and delights of the moorland that here alone nature pays the first call, instead of demurely waiting to be called upon. Near great towns she is coy; and even in the fields that abut on villages, she shows but a few familiar aspects; while aloof on the open heath she reveals herself unreservedly, like a beautiful woman to her chosen lover. She exhibits all her moods and bares all her secrets. This afternoon late, we were lounging on the low window-seat by the lattice that gives upon the purple spur of hillside, when suddenly, a strange din as of half-human voices aroused our attention. "Look, look!" Elsie cried, seizing my arm in her excitement. And, indeed, the vision was a marvellous and a lovely one. From the lonely pine-tree that tops the long spur above the Golden Glen, a ceaseless stream of brown birds seemed to flow and disengage itself. It was a living cataract. By dozens and hundreds they poured down from their crowded perch; and the more of them poured down, the more there were left of them. What a miracle of packing! They must have hustled and jostled one another as thick on the boughs as swarming bees that cling in a cluster round their virgin queen; while as for the ground beneath, it seethed and swelled like an ant-heap. For several minutes the pack rose from its camp, and fluttered and flowed down the steep side of the moor toward Wednesday Bottom, flying low in a serried mass, yet never seeming to be finished. They reminded me of those cunning long processions at the play, when soldiers and village maidens stream in relays from behind the wings, and disappear up the No. 137. February, 1895.

stage, and keep moving eternally. Only, that is clever illusion, and this was reality.

"Lonely," people say! "No life on the hilltop!" Why, here was more life at a single glance than you can see in a whole long week in Piccadilly; an army on the march, making the heather vocal with the "wet-my-feet, wet-my-feet" of ten thousand voices!

But you must live in the uplands to enjoy these episodes. Nature won't bring them home to you in the populous valleys. A modest maid, she is chary of her charms; you must woo her to see them. She seldom comes half-way to meet you. But if you dwell by choice for her sake in her chosen haunts, your devotion touches her: she will show you life enough—rare life little dreamt of by those who tramp the dead flags of cities, where no beast moves save the dragged cab-horse. For you, the curlew will stalk the boggy hollows; for you, the banded badger will creep stealthily from his earth and disport himself at dusk among his frolicsome cublets; for you, the dappled adder will sun his zigzag spots, and dart his tremulous tongue, all shivering and quivering; for you, the turbulent quail will darken the ground in spring, or spread cloud-like over the sky on cloudless summer evenings.

And what poetry, too, in their sudden entrance on the scene, dropped down from heaven, one would think, as on Israel in the wilderness. Small wonder the marvellous Hebrew annalist took those multitudinous birds for the subject of a miracle. But yesterday, perhaps, they were fattening their plump crops among the vine-



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shoots of Capri, the lush young vine-shoots with their pellucid pink tendrils; and to-day, here they are among the dry English heather, as quick and eager of eye as by Neapolitan fig-orchards. Swift of flight and patient of wing, they will surmount the Apennines and overtop the Alps in a single night; leave Milan in its plain and Lucerne by its lake when the afterglow lights up the snow on the Jungfrau; speed unseen in the twilight over Burgundy or the Rhineland; cross the English Channel in the first gray dawn; and sup off fat slugs before twelve hours are past, when the shadows grow deep in the lanes of Surrey. Watt and Stephenson have enabled us poor crawling men to do with pain and discomfort, at great expense, in the chamber of torture described with grim humour as a *train de luxe*, what these merry brown birds, the least of the partridge tribe, can effect on their own stout wings, in rather less time, without turning a feather. If you watch them at the end of their short European tour from Rome to England at a burst, you will find them as playful and as bickering at its close as if they had just gone out for an evening constitutional.

Quails are the younger brothers of the partridge group. But unlike most of their kind, they are gregarious and migratory. They spend their winters in the south, as is the wont of fashionable invalids, and come northward with the spring, in quest of cooler quarters. Myriads of them cross the Mediterranean from Africa with the early siroccos, and descend upon Calabria and the Bay of Naples in those miraculous flights which Browning has immortalised in "The Englishman in Italy." Quail-netting is then a common industry of the country about Sorrento and Amalfi; thousands of the pretty little gray and buff birds are sent to market daily, with their necks wrung, and their beautiful banded heads, "specked with white over brown like a great spider's back," all dead and draggled. Many of the flocks stop on during the season among the vineyards in Italy; but other and more adventurous hordes, tired of southern slugs and fat southern beetles, wing their way, still further north to Germany, Scandinavia, England, and Scotland. At one time they were far from uncommon visitors in our southern counties; but brick and mortar have disgusted them, and their calls are

nowadays liker to angels' visits than in the eighteenth century. Yet a few still loiter through the winter in Devonshire or Kerry; while in summer they still reach to the Orkneys, Shetland, and the Outer Hebrides.

Beautiful as quails are, both to look upon and to eat, they are not personally amiable or admirable creatures. Their character is full of those piquant antitheses which seventeenth century satire delighted to discover in the human subject. They are gregarious but unsociable; fond of company, yet notoriously pugnacious; abandoned polygamists, with frequent lapses into the strictest monogamy; fighters destitute of the sense of honour; faithless spouses, but devoted, affectionate, and careful mothers. I fancy, too, they must have a wonderful instinct in the matter of commissariat, increased, no doubt, by ages of strategical evolution: for it can be by no means easy to find supplies for so large an army on the march; yet quails seem always so to time their arrival at each temporary stopping-place as exactly to fall in with some glut in the insect-market. Only a few days before they came here, for example, not a beetle was to be seen upon the parched-up heath; but day before yesterday, it rained insects, so to speak; and last night one could hardly take a step down the Long Valley without crushing small beetles underfoot against one's will by the dozen. The quails must somehow have got wind of the fact that there was corn in Egypt, be it by scent, or scouts, or some mysterious instinct; and here they are to-night, swarming up in their thousands, to enter into possession of their ancestral heritage. You should see them wage war on the helpless longicorn! I hope they will nest here, as it is amusing to watch them. Each little Turk of a husband keeps a perfect harem of demure brown hens, looking slyly askance from the corners of their eyes, and watches over them close by with all the jealousy of a Mahmoud or a Sultan Soleyman. The rival who tries to poach on his lordship's preserves has, indeed, a hard time of it; he will retire, well pecked, from his rash encounter. Quails, in fact, are still in the Mohammedan stage of social evolution, while our more advanced and enlightened English partridges have attained already to a civilised and western domestic economy.