







 MOORLAND
 IDYLLS
 SUMMER STROLL
 BY GRANT ALLEN

MY friend the Poet and I walk the world together on somewhat different principles. It is a fixed belief of his that illusion is far more beautiful than reality. He likes to see the distant hills through some dim veil of mist ; he likes to believe the skylark feeds on dew and sunshine, and he is revolted when I explain to him, in spite of Shelley, the actual staples of its unromantic diet. To him, it seems, everything loses just half its beauty when he knows all about it. Analysis, he says, is destructive of pleasure. Only in an imagined and unrealised

world can he find the pure elements that delight his fancy.

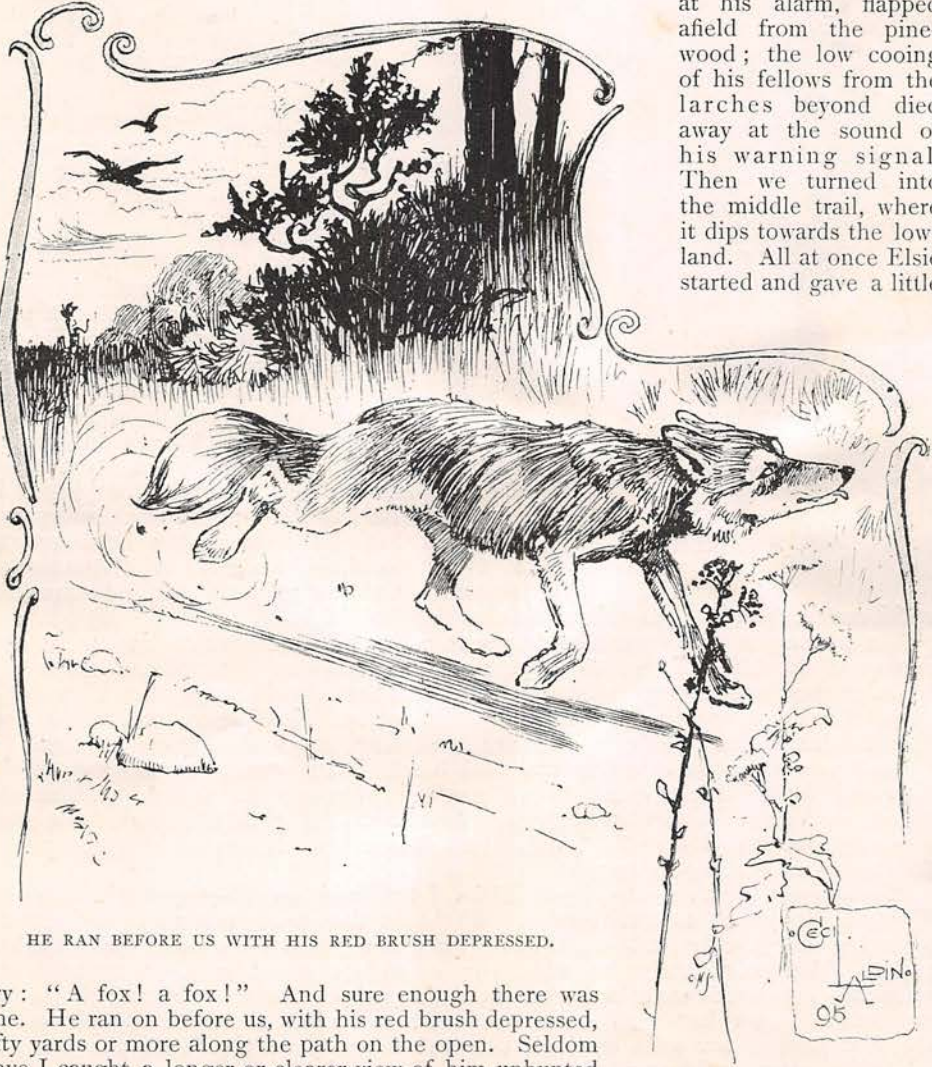
But to me the actual world as it stands is beautiful. I love to descry the very contour of the hills ; I love to watch from afar the saucer-shaped combs on the flanks of the South Downs, when the afternoon light floods and bathes them in its glory. Illusion to my mind is less lovely than reality. Nothing on earth seems more beautiful than Truth. I love to catch her face behind the clouds that conceal her.

And now it is the plain unvarnished Truth I am going to give you in this Moorland Idyll. I am going to tell you just what we saw to-day, without one episode or incident save what really occurred to us. I could not make that stroll more exquisite than I found it if I tried till Doomsday. It was an idyll of real life. May many more so come to me !

We strayed together—the Poet, Elsie, Lucy, and myself—across the moor to Highfield, in search of strawberries. Highfield lies some two miles off, at the beginning of the valley ; a lost old-world farm, in a dell of the moors, with a market-garden. You poor Londoners, when you go to buy strawberries, go to buy them prosaically at a commercial fruiterer's in a noisy street ; but we moorlanders go with our basket in our hands to some lonely grange across the heather-clad upland. The first part of our walk lay high over the ridge where the heath was burnt in the Jubilee year by the great fire ; you can still plainly mark the point up to which the flames made a clear sweep of the heather, and the point where they left off, held in check by the beaters. For heather is really a forest-tree of some fifty years' growth ; and the waste where the fire raged is still covered to this day with a shorter crop of young seedling gorse and ling and whortleberry, while the older vegetation unburnt beyond rises tall and bush-like. The blasted part, too, shows by far the finest and deepest purple of any ; not because the flowers are really bigger or thicker, but because where the plants are still short the Tyrian purple of the Scotch heather is seen to greatest advantage ; whereas, when they rise higher, the Scotch heather is overtopped by the bushier and coarser and taller-growing ling, with its somewhat insipid pale pink blossoms. The Poet thinks the fire makes the heath burn brighter. I think myself it keeps the ling lower.

Anyhow, that spur is one blaze of glory. Not a spot on the moor flares so splendid a purple. We passed through it, single file, by the narrow footpath, where the ling rises knee-high on either side, and the little brown lizards dart wildly to their holes at first sound of a footfall. Along the ridge, past the broom-bushes, now hanging with silvery pods, we continued on the path till we reached the white beam-tree. There the trail diverges a little suddenly to the left; a cock-pheasant broke with a shrill cry on the wing; his whirr as he rose startled the shallow valley.

A wood-pigeon, alarmed at his alarm, flapped afield from the pine-wood; the low cooing of his fellows from the larches beyond died away at the sound of his warning signal. Then we turned into the middle trail, where it dips towards the lowland. All at once Elsie started and gave a little



HE RAN BEFORE US WITH HIS RED BRUSH DEPRESSED.

cry: "A fox! a fox!" And sure enough there was one. He ran on before us, with his red brush depressed, fifty yards or more along the path on the open. Seldom have I caught a longer or clearer view of him unhunted in England. We were but ten yards behind, and had fairly surprised him. However, he took his discovery like a gentleman, and instead of skulking away to right or left, where the heath rose high, he ran on along the open so as to give us a fine stare at him. Lucy, who is a visitor, unused to country ways, save as townfolk know them, had never seen a live fox in the wild state before, and the incident charmed her. He was so lithe and red, and he ran so well, with his sharp head held low, and with the wild air of his species.

By the chestnut plantation, where a grassy little lane dips close between the trees, cropped and cut for hop-poles, we began to descend in real earnest to the valley. A rabbit just dashed across the sward on the slope of path; his twinkling white tail scarce betrayed him for a moment. Two hawks hovered above, but

held off for fear of us. Rustlings in the fallen foliage beneath the sapling chestnuts to right and left gave sign of other rabbits, unseen, but scurrying burrow-ward. As we reached the open we disturbed a young covey of nursing partridges. Most of them disappeared after their prudent mother before we could catch a glimpse of them; but one poor little chick, belated and terrified, darted with its tiny half-naked wings erect in an agony of alarm in the opposite direction. It found covert in the chestnuts, its tiny heart throbbing. Alas, that it should have conceived at so early an age so justly unfavourable an idea of humanity!

Beyond the plantation we turned aside into a field, and oh! such a field! Have I words to picture it? It had been sown for grass, but no grass was there. "Bad season," says the farmer. "Thank Heaven for these slovenly farms," says the botanist. Blue cornflowers grew in it, thick as stars in heaven; and huge spikes of viper's bugloss as tall as a man's waist and more lovely than a turquoise. Who shall describe their hue, their form, their fashion? A great spotted stem, like a lizard's skin, green flecked with russet brown, and uncannily to look upon; on either side, long twisted spirals of red-and-blue blossoms, each curled like a scorpion's tail, very strange and

lurid. The individual blossom is bright blue, when fully opened, with crimson stamens; the buds are deep red; the dead flowers dry violet. Altogether, a most weird and witch-like plant; I think one might use it with great advantage for incantations and sorcery. The Poet decided to try its effect next time he would rid himself of a discarded lady-love. We plucked great armfuls, and carried them along with us as far as Highfield. Other flowers were there, too, of less poetic interest—bright yellow corn-marigolds, and scented white campion; scarlet poppies by the score, with waving panicles of not a few tall grasses. We gathered of them all, and they stand before me now, gladdening my eyes as I write, in the coarse red pots of plain Hampshire earthenware.

They had no strawberries left, after all, at Highfield. We had our walk for nothing. If that be nothing! So we used the empty basket to carry back our trophies. But returning by the lane, we filled our vacant arms once more with foxgloves; and the fox himself crossed our path for a second again at the self-same turning without seeking to reclaim them. Even the Poet admitted we had saved one day from Time's devouring maw. And that's how we live, up here in the moorland.

