



# MOORLAND MIDYLLS

THE ARCADIAN  
DONKEY  
BY GRANT ALLEN

**O**N the slope by the mountain-ashes, where the ridge curves downward into the combe with the plantation of young larch-trees, I met Peter Rashleigh leading his donkey—*Arcades ambo*. “Jenny looks fat enough, Peter,” I said with a nod as I passed on the narrow footpath; “and yet there isn’t much grass up here for her to feed upon.” “Lard bless your soul, Sir,” Peter answered with an expansive smile, “grass ain’t what she wants. It don’t no ways agree with her. She’s all the better with bracken and furzen-tops.” Furzen-tops is good, like mobled queen. And I believe he was right, too. Jenny’s ancestors from all time have been unaccustomed to rich meadow-feeding, and when their descendants nowadays are turned out into a field of clover they overeat themselves at once, and suffer agonies of mind from the unexpected repletion.

All the dwellers on our moor in like manner are poor relations, so to speak, as the horse is to the donkey. They are losers in the struggle for life, yet not quite hopeless losers; creatures that have adapted themselves to the worst positions, which more favoured and successful races could not endure for a moment. The naked Fuegian picks up a living somehow among snow and ice on barren rocks, where a well-clad European would starve and freeze, finding nothing to subsist upon. Just so on the moor; heather, furze, and bracken eke out a precarious livelihood on the sandy soil where grasses and garden flowers die out at once, unless we artificially enrich the earth for them with leaf-mould from the bottoms and good manure from the farmyards.

More than that, you may take it as a general rule that where grass will grow there is no chance for heather. Not that the heather doesn’t like rich soil, and flourish in it amazingly—when it can get it. If you sow it in garden borders, and keep it well weeded, it will thrive apace as it never thrived in its poor native loam, among the stones and rubble. But the weeding is the secret of its success under such conditions. It isn’t that the heather won’t grow in rich soil, any more than that beggars can’t live on pheasant; but grasses and dandelions, daisies and clovers, can easily give it points in such spots, and beat it. In a very few weeks you will find the



lowland plants have grown tall and lush, while the poor distanced heather has been overtopped and crowded out by its sturdier competitors. That is the reason why waterside irises or Alpine gentians will grow in garden beds under quite different circumstances from those under which we find them in the state of nature; the whole secret lies in the fact that we restrict competition. Cultivation means merely digging out the native herbs, and keeping them out, once ousted, in favour of other plants which we choose to protect against all their rivals. In rich lowland soils the grasses and other soft succulent herbs outgrow such tough shrubs as ling and Scotch heather. But in the poverty-stricken loam of the uplands, the grasses and garden weeds find no food to batten upon; and there the heather, to the manner born, gets at last a fair field and no favour. It is adapted to the moors as the camel is to the desert; both have been driven to accommodate themselves to a wretched and thirsty environment; but both have made a virtue of necessity, and risen to the occasion with commendable ingenuity.

Everything about the heather shows long-continued adaptation to arid conditions. Its stems are wiry; its leaves are small, very dry, uninviting as foodstuffs, curled under at the edge, and so arranged in every way as to defy evaporation. Rain sinks so rapidly through the sandy soil the plant inhabits that it does its best to economise every drop, just as we human inhabitants of the moorland economise it by constructing big tanks for the storage of the rain-water that falls on our roof-trees. Warping winds sweep ever across the wold with parching effect; so the heather makes its foliage small, square, and thickly covered by a hard epidermis as a protection against undue or excessive dryness. It aims at being drought-proof. Its purple bells, in like manner, instead of being soft and fleshy, as is the case with the corollas of meadow-blossoms like the corn-poppy, or woodland flowers like the wild hyacinth, are hard and dry, so as to waste no water; dainty waxen petals like those of the dog-rose or the cherry-blossom would wilt and wither at once before the harsh, dry blasts that career unchecked over the open moorland. Yet the heather-bells, though quite dead and papery to the touch, are brilliantly coloured to attract the upland bees, and form such wide patches of purple and pink as you can nowhere match among the largely wind-fertilised herbage of the too grass-green

water - meadows. Upland conditions, indeed, always produce rich flowers: the most beautiful flora in Europe is that of the Alps, just below the snow-line; it has been developed by the stray Alpine moths and butterflies. Larger masses of colour are needed to attract these free-flying insects than serve to catch the eyes of the more business-like and regular bees who go their rounds in lowland districts.

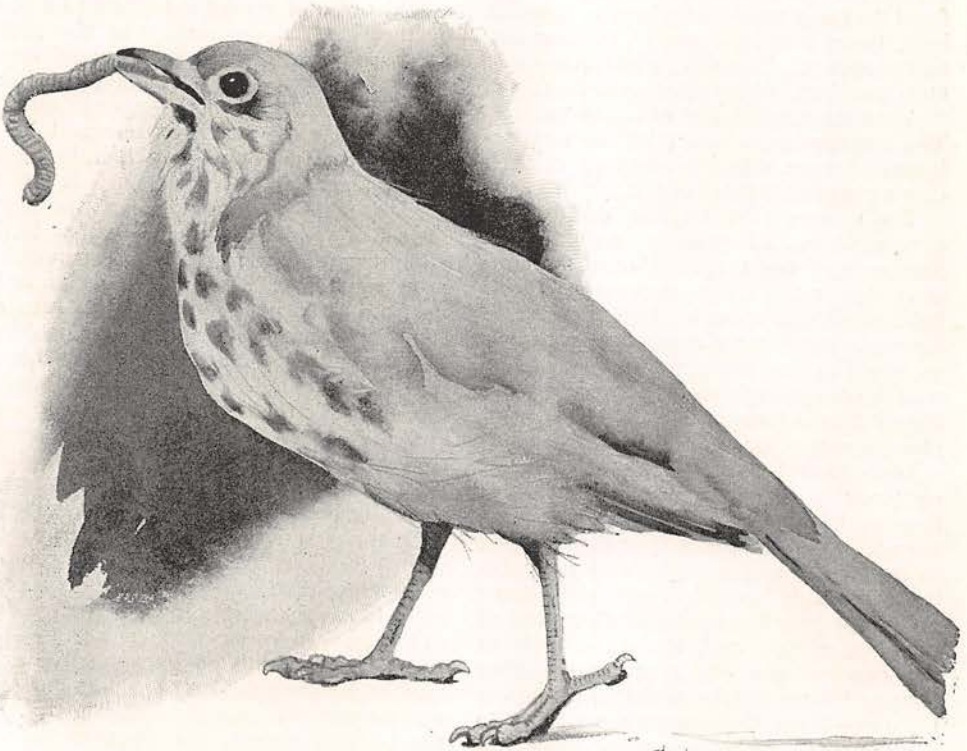
Is not the donkey himself a product of somewhat similar conditions? Oriental in his origin, he seems to be merely the modern representative of those ancestral horses which did not succeed in the struggle for existence. Every intermediate stage has now been discovered between the true horses with their flowing tails and silky coats, and the true donkeys with their tufted tails and shaggy hair, the middle terms being chiefly found in the northern plains of Asia. Now, our horses, I take it, are the descendants of those original horse-and-donkey-like creatures which took to the grassy meadows, and so waxed fat and kicked, and developed exceedingly; while our donkeys, I imagine, are the poor, patient offspring of those less lucky brothers or cousins which were pushed by degrees into the deserts and arid hills, and there grew accustomed to a very sparse diet of the essentially prickly and thorny shrubs which always inhabit such spots, just as gorse and heather inhabit our British uplands. That is why the donkey thrives so excellently to this day on thistles and nettle-tops: they represent the ancestral food of his kind for many generations. Certainly, at the present time, wherever we find horses wild it is in broad, grass-clad plains or steppes or pampas; wherever we find donkeys or donkey-like animals wild, it is among desert or half-desert rocks and on arid hillsides. It would seem as though the horse was in the last resort a donkey grown big and strong by dint of good living and free space to roam over; while the donkey, on the other hand, is in the last resort a horse grown small and ill-proportioned through want of good food and insufficient elbow-room. It is noteworthy that in small islands like the Shetlands small breeds of horses are developed in adaptation to the environment; though, the food being still good pasture in a well-watered country, they retain in most respects their horse-like aspect. But a vengeance o' Jenny's case! I have wandered far afield from Peter Rashleigh's donkey, to have got so soon into evolutionary biology!



## A LIFE AND DEATH STRUGGLE.

It isn't often a man can stand at his own drawing-room window and be the interested spectator at a combat of wild beasts, where one antagonist not only conquers, but also fairly devours the other! Yet such Roman sport I have just this moment been unlucky enough to witness. Unlucky enough, I say, because the victor did not first kill and then eat his victim, as any combatant with a spark

poor unsuspecting annelid, feeling the joy of spring stir in his sluggish veins, comes to the surface for a moment in search of those fallen leaves which form the staple of his blameless vegetarian diet. No mole shakes the earth; the sod is fresh and moist; here seems a propitious moment for an above-ground excursion. So the earthworm pokes out his head and peers around him inquiringly; peers, I venture to say, blind beast though he be,



HE WRIGGLES AND SQUIRMS, BUT ALL IN VAIN.

of chivalry in his nature would have done, but slowly chewed him up alive before my eyes, with no more consideration for the feelings of the vanquished than if the unfortunate creature had been a vegetable. I don't mean to pretend it was tiger versus cobra. The assailant was a thrush, the defender an earthworm. Now, thrushes, we all know, are sweet songsters when they have dined. Has not George Meredith hymned them, as Shelley the skylark? But if you want to see the poetry taken clean out of a thrush, just watch him as he catches and devours an earthworm! The

because his method of feeling his way and exploring by touch is so human and inquisitive. But embodied Fate is on the watch, silent, keen-eyed, immovable; and no sooner does that slimy soul poke his nose above the ground than the thrush is upon him, quick and deadly as lightning. In one second the creature feels himself seized by one of his scaly rings, held fast in an iron vice, and slowly chewed piecemeal with the utmost deliberation. He wriggles and squirms, but all in vain; the thrush munches calmly on, now with this side of his bill, now that, drawing the worm ring by ring



from the soil to which he desperately clings, and enjoying him as he goes with most evident gusto.

Both are intruders here. When first we came to our hill-top there were no thrushes and no earthworms, no house-martins and no sparrows. But the building of one simple red-tiled cottage set up endless changes in the fauna and flora. A whole revolution was inaugurated over a realm of three acres. The house-martins were the first to come; they settled in before us. Ancestral instinct has taught them to know well that where a house is built there will be eaves to nest under, and people will inhabit it, who throw about meat and fruit, which attract the flies; and flies are the natural diet of house-martins. The sparrows came next; but the thrushes loitered longer. And the manner of their coming was after this fashion.

The powers that be had decided on a tennis-lawn. Previously nothing but heather and gorse spread over the hill-top; that is the native vegetation of this light sandstone upland. But in order to have tennis you must needs have a sward; so, much against the grain, we grubbed up wild heath enough to make a court, and sowed it for a tennis-lawn. Grass cannot grow, however, on such poor light soil as suits heather best, so we imported a few cartloads of mould and manure from a farm in the valley. With the mould came worms, who, finding a fair field, began to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth with laudable rapidity. Few or no earthworms live in the shallow sand of the open moor; and, though a mole or two can just eke out a precarious living here and there in the softer and grassier hollows—I see their mounds every day as I cross the common—worms were not nearly abundant enough to tempt the epicurean and greedy thrushes from the shelter of the valley. For the mole, you

see, goes out hunting underground on the trail of the earth-worm; but the thrush must needs depend upon the few stray stragglers which come to the surface morning and evening.

No sooner had worms begun to make castings on the lawn, however, than some Columbus thrush discovered a new world was opened to him. He and his mate took formal possession of the patch of green, which they hold as their own, using it regularly as a private hunting-ground. Every other tennis-lawn in the neighbourhood similarly supports its pair of thrushes, as (according to the poet) every rood of ground in England once "maintained its man." One of our neighbours has three lawns, terraced off in steps, and each has been annexed by a particular thrush family, which holds it stoutly against all comers. It is a curious sight in spring, when the nestlings are young, to see the parent birds going carefully over the ground—surveying it in squares, as it were, the cock a little in front, the hen hopping after him at some distance on one side, and making sure that not an inch of the superficial area remains unhunted. They eat many snails, too, breaking the shells against big stones; and they hunt for slugs now and then in the moist ditch by the roadway. While the nestlings are unfledged the industry of the elder birds is ceaseless; for they lay in early spring, and have to rear their young while food is still far from cheap or abundant. And, oh! but it is a gruesome sight to see them teaching the young idea of their kind how to tackle a worm—how to drag him from his burrow, ring after ring, as he struggles, to chop him up and mangle him till resistance and escape are absolutely hopeless, and then to devour him piecemeal. But in autumn the fierce heart of the carnivore softens; worms being then scarce, he condescends to berries.



TEACHING THE YOUNG IDEA