

## A SEAFARER'S HOME.

By F. A. FULCHER.

TRULY a seafarer amongst birds is the little whistling pipit of the rocks.

All the year round, come weal or woe, come rain to polish the pebbles and reveal their hidden depths, or drought to dry the sea tangles and blazen the cliff with poppies; come clouds scudding, and waves hurtling, or light vapours floating overhead, while summer ripples croon along the shore; come what will, come what may, the rock-pipit is always at home in his boulder-strewn pebbly domain.

For the rock-pipit has never taken to the wandering ways of the travelling birds, whose fashion it is to spend the winter here and the summer there; to go south with the swallows and invalids, or north to the moors with plovers and sportsmen, or to Scandinavia with the fieldfares, and redwings, and fishermen, hooded-crows, snow-buntings, North-West passage explorers, bramble-finches and the rest of the north-wending travellers.

Here, there, and everywhere, go migrants and tourists nowadays, but the rock-pipit keeps the even tenor of his way, unmoved by the nightingales who rest on his borders in the spring, and sing of tempting swarms of dainty insects they have left on the edge of Sahara sands; or the wheatears, who whisper of corn in Egypt; even the family traditions of his cousin, the tree-pipit, cannot lure him from home.

He keeps open house in the winter, when numberless arctic birds, frozen out of their home in the lands where winter is proverbially inhospitable, come to sojourn with him. The shore-larks, with their fine manners and handsome yellow throats, and the turnstones, who make free with his stores, nearly eat him out of house and home at times. Then, indeed, but only when he has shared his last crust with them, the rock-pipit has to take his guests up the cliff and out to the fields where the meadow birds live, in search of seeds and worms. But he never strays more than a mile from his home on the shore, and soon wearies of the dulness of these inland excursions; it is well-known among the land birds that it is hopeless to try to keep him.

By the end of April, the ogre which held the northern countries fast bound in iron bands has departed, no one knows whither; but the rock-pipit's visitors are free to return; yet they cannot induce the rock-pipit to pay them even a flying visit in return for his hospitality; nothing will persuade him to leave home for a day.

Such a beautiful home! so full of treasure and wonderment; rich with gems from ocean depths; strewn with flowers of the cliffs; gay with the wings of flashing gulls; musical with the songs of the larks

above and the waves below ; all the glory of sea and sky is shed here, all the awe of powers beyond our ken rests here. No wonder the bird loves it.

His delicate black legs and long-toed slender feet run nimbly over some of the choicest treasures of the world's museum. Here lie among the common stones many of those handsome choanites which so well repay the collector of natural bric-a-brac by showing marbled depths of fine colour and crystal clearness when polished, and the curious form of the animal encased in this gorgeous sarcophagus. You may scarcely know them among the stones of the beach till you learn the secret of the tiny clear specks that appear on their rough surfaces, and the spot where the cylindrical body of the choanite, which runs through the pebble, shows in a round patch at either end. The rock-pipit dare not have them polished or they would soon all be stolen from him, except now and then when it rains or storm-spray beats high, for then few pass his way, and his treasures are safe. His choicest gems are disguised and hidden in rough cases.

Learn the secret of another of his safes. Some of those round nodules of flint, opaque and valueless to all appearance, are diamond mines. Search till you find one with a tiny hole in its surface, running deep to the centre, break it open, and the chances are ten to one it contains a glittering mass of crystals gathered in the beautiful form of the branching sponge, which first collected them to itself, and which has long since disappeared. Some of these nodules contain crystals of pure white, some of pink, others of brown, and grey, and yellow ; very lovely are all of them.

The old shepherds on the downs above, where also many are found, call them "noodles," and I have been told by them that they are the swedes and turnips which the Romans planted hereabouts, petrified and crystallised ; but the rock-pipit doubtless has studied that complex system of old time sponges and knows better, or he would not collect them.

Fossils too, innumerable, are buried in the rocks here ; often the walls of the crevice in which the little green bird makes its round and bulky nest of coarse grass is studded with the remains of the dwellers in some ocean long since dried up or run away. The finely-shaped nautilus, beautifully formed ammonites of many kinds, sea-urchins traced over with delicate geometrical patterns, shells and fish of many varied kinds lie buried in the great mausoleums of the rocks. They too, though, lie hidden, and only betray their presence where one small portion is exposed on some storm-rent or water-worn surface. But this is quite sufficient to guide the seeker to them ; the rest can be unearthed with chisel and hammer, and care. Wondrously beautiful in symmetry of form are some of these creatures of bygone ages ; their like is almost solely now existent among the creatures of very deep sea soundings, the last remnants of types and races which are slowly dying out in the darkness of fathomless ocean bottoms.

In what lies the fascination of the past that its relics attract us so irresistibly? A tiny shell half hidden by chalk or mud come down to us from a thousand thousand years away; a piece of old rag from the poor mummy of nobody knows who; a chip of brick from an old wall; a scrap of old vellum penned by some unknown hand: these, of no beauty, of no intrinsic value, have nevertheless grown sacred by the flight of years, and we value them and ponder over them and make our speculations, possibly very far from the truth, with as much favour as though they were some exquisite specimen of Etruscan art or the rolls which hold the story of a nation.

But I doubt much if this has struck the rock-pipit. He takes life as it comes, and the treasures that lie lavish around him he questions not.

There are beautiful living things in this home of his too. No need for the rock-pipit to pick flowers and bring hither to decorate his pasture as those curious birds the bower-builders do. The spring lays out his garden for him, and while the bower-bird's flowers die as fast as he plants them, the rock-pipit's pleasure is gay all through the summer.

Over the pebbles purple tassels of sea-pea trail their green leaves after them. There is an old legend that this small plant arrived miraculously in some time of famine to afford food for a starving people; but, if this be so, its little size and bitter taste must cruelly have mocked them. Close to it grows sea silene, short of stalk and single flowered, with grey-green leaves and the swelled seed-cup with purple veinings. The yellow-horned poppy comes up golden crowned, like a king among flowers, wherever wind-blown dust has clung to the rock. Tufts of pink thrift and bosses of saxifrage, sprays of wild rose, blue harebells, white lychnis and wall-flower blown from some distant garden, or brought by the birds, come up on these patches of soil. Wild mignonette, waving tamarisk, bachelor's buttons, and sea-holly, with its fine, blue flowers and handsome leaves, all these grow up the cliff under the sunny skies that shine blue in the heavens above and bluer still in the seas below where the rock-pipit dwells.

There are sea flowers on the beach, thrown up by every tide even in summer; but in winter there come such masses on storm-driven waves, that great banks of seaweed lie along the shore. Sometimes the poor come to glean this harvest, and throw it on the land to enrich it; sometimes they dig pits, and burn it to make kelp; sometimes it is theirs to keep or to sell; sometimes they earn good wages in harvesting it for an employer. In either case it is in two senses a windfall, and adds many an extra gain to their regular earnings.

Some of the seaweeds thrown up on his estate are of the most delicate colours—pink, and mauve, and scarlet—but the greater masses are of a uniform brownish-green, and these it is that must have taught the rock-pipit what to wear. For it is the fashion among all pipits to adopt a mimetic style of dress. The tawny pipit of arid

deserts in the East wears a sandy, yellow suit; the tree-pipit of our woods is clad in a sober brown, just the hue of the boughs in which he perches; the meadow-pipit is scarcely noticeable in the ploughed lands and fallow fields which he loves; the pipit of the rocks wears olive-green so like the colour of the seaweeds that gather slimy and slippery over their surface, that he may defy even the keen glance of a hawk or a falcon on all ordinary occasions, though sometimes we must admit the fates are against him; and in such case not even mimetic colouring will save bird or beast.

Many charming birds visit this seafarer's home. Flocks of gulls sail in, circling and wheeling in mazy figures, now over sea, now over shore, now floating lightly on the waters, now settling like flakes of sea-foam on the low-lying rocks of low tide; stormy petrels come in from their life on the ocean wave to hide their nests deep down in the shingle; guillemots fly heavily down the cliff to dive for small fish that glitter as they rise again with their prey. Maybe the oyster-catchers and ringed plovers from some neighbouring beach of sand, or a mud-flat not far away, come when the tide is low; and land birds from above—wheatears, and stonechats, and sometimes a rare Dartford warbler—visit the rock-pipit by the sea. Peep, peep! cheep, cheep! Always the same answer he gives to the various cries that greet him; and I think it means, "Here I am, and here I mean to stay," for even to us—and we frighten him a little as we wander through his home—he says this. Peep, peep! cheep, cheep! sounds from crag and boulder a little ahead, as he flits before us in short, wavering flights, and gives us plainly to understand who is lord of the manor in this Seafarer's Home.

