

ABOVE A DEADLY PRECIPICE.

Rock-Fowling and Its Dangers.

AT various parts of the British coasts, where the cliffs are high, and especially in the Western Highlands of Scotland and all around the Orkney, Shetland, and Färöe Islands, rock-fowling is quite a regular occupation. Where there are wild, isolated, and comparatively inaccessible sea-cliffs, there all manner of sea-birds live and nestle. In springtime and early summer vast quantities of eggs are deposited in these rocky fastnesses. It is the aim of the rock-fowler to secure these eggs, and occasionally young birds, either for sale or consumption—an aim only attained with great difficulty and danger, often entailing the loss of life or limb.

Compared with the peril faced by the rock-fowler, the fisherman's life is pleasing recreation, coal-mining is safe, and rhinoceros-hunting mere play. Dealing neither with land nor water to secure his object, the hardy fowler must assume familiarity with a neutral element: suspended like Mahomet's coffin, he carries on his operations in the air. The edge of the precipice over which he ventures often overhangs the centre and base; and rare skill, nerve and muscles of steel, and the heart of a hero, must all be attributes of the daring coastman or islander who follows the dangerous calling of the rock-fowler. His outfit is simple and comparatively inexpensive. Some fifty to sixty fathoms of rope (say one hundred and fifty yards at the most), a net (somewhat similar to that carried by the angler) with which to take the eggs, and a bag to store them in: these comprise the whole of the apparatus.

As we have seen, the face of the cliff often curves inwards; so to gain the rocky ledge whereon he purposes to commence his operations, having lowered himself the requisite distance, the fowler is obliged to give himself a pendulous motion in order to reach the shelf within. His rope is managed with remarkable dexterity. Having made fast one end to a rock or stake, he swings himself boldly into the air, and generally contrives, on the rope's return, to hit the spot at which he aims.

Landing upon his elevated ledge, with a cloud of clanging fowl flapping all around him, he makes fast his thread of life—for such his frail support may truly be called!—and proceeds to ply his net and fill his basket. Sometimes an old bird will viciously snap at his net and fingers, though, as a rule, the sitter, whether male or female, angrily retires and joins the noisily protesting mass that, between sea and sky, wheels to and fro before the invaded sanctuary. When gathered, the eggs will include those of such birds as the black-backed gull, cormorant, puffin, kittiwake (or black-toed) gull, guillemot, petrel, razorbill, gannet, and scores of others.

Having cleared the eggs off his shelf, or ledge, the fowler takes hold of his rope, swings out into space, and reascends, climbing, or being hauled up, according as he is working single-handed or otherwise; only to resume his operations on another face of the precipice which has not been harried by himself or some other cragsman. Of course, a pursuit so dangerous is attended with numerous accidents, of which more anon. The men of some districts are far more reckless than those of others, oft-times risking the ship for a ha'porth of tar; that is to say, jeopardising their own lives for the sake of a trifling saving in the expense of the all-important rope. Thus, in many parts of the coast, they trust themselves to the perishable hemp, which, in descents and oscillations, is liable to be frayed against projections and sharp

edges of the cliff; and should it part, the fowler finds a certain doom in the boiling surf that lashes the base of the heady precipice, or upon the jagged boulders that fringe the ocean, 1,000 feet beneath him.

On the other hand, the caution exhibited by the people of St. Kilda and some other localities is commendable; a strong rope being used, which is made out of tough raw cowhide, salted for the purpose, and cut circularly into three thongs of equal length. These thongs, being closely twisted together, form a triple cord, able to sustain a great weight, and durable enough to last generations; indeed, such a rope is frequently treated as an heirloom,

and dead men tell no tales, we know.

Perhaps of all the varieties of sea-birds' eggs collected by these intrepid rock-men, there is none so desirable as those of the black-headed gulls, which are not only most excellent eating (being equal in flavour to the noted and costly plover's eggs), but are also vastly plentiful in many parts. Contrary to the habits of more timid birds, which desert a nest they suspect to have been visited or discovered, the confidence of the blackheads remains unshaken; and even after their eggs have been removed, the process of laying is resumed. They are, indeed, most obliging birds: as an old Scotchman observed:—"They dinna tak offence at being robbed, for the mair they're harried, the mair they'll lay."

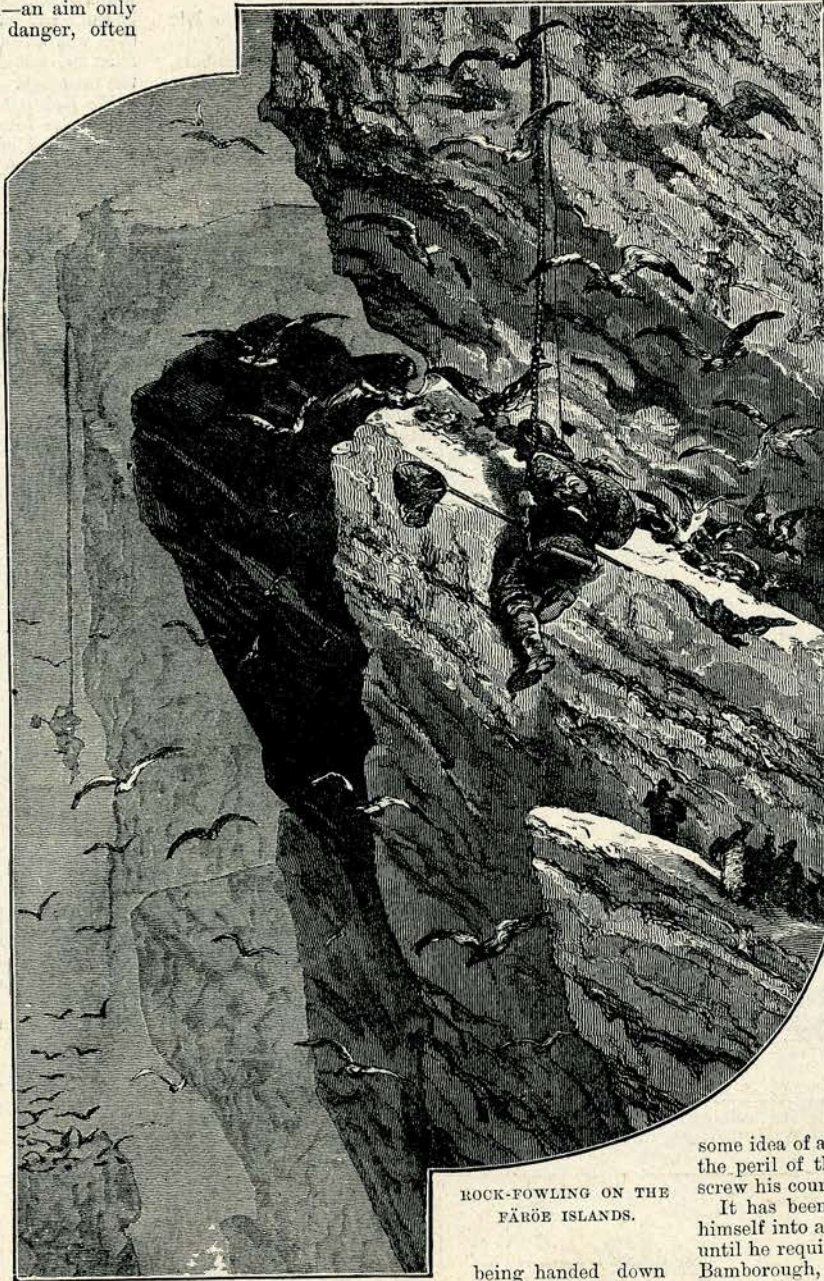
In a general way, most of the numerous species of sea-birds offer little practical resistance to the spoliation of their nests, contenting themselves with hoarse and angry protestations. The cragsman visits lofty cliffs, wild rocks, and lone isles, alive with myriads of kittiwakes, shearwaters, sea-swallows (terns), and a host of the smaller gulls. In due season, every fissure and hollow has its feathered tenant, and even flat and bare ledges are overspread with a wealth of eggs that only require gathering. But let a rock-fowler encounter the skua (*Lestris*), and then he must mind his p's and q's! This fierce and powerful sea-rover builds in the full security and confidence which a well-defended position warrants. From nearly all aggression his nest is safe; the kite and falcon keep at a respectful distance, and even the kingly eagle avoids a conflict with the daring foe, which even man does not assail with impunity. The worst that the cragsman receives in the haunts of the gannet and the cormorant is a hearty scolding, or perhaps a peck, at which he laughs; but the cradle-fastness of the skuas is not to be stormed without inconvenience and some danger. Those who have had the hardihood to attempt the plundering of the skua's fortress with the head unprotected have had their skulls smashed by the repeated dashes of the terrible beaks of the warlike birds.

No; rock-fowling is not pleasant work. In those districts where the dangerous occupation is followed, a thousand stories are told of life saved by the most astonishing self-possession, adroitness, and bravery. Here is one, in conclusion, which will give

some idea of a cragsman's desperate resolution when the peril of the situation demanded that he should screw his courage to the sticking-point.

It has been shown that when the fowler swings himself into a recess of the cliff, he secures his rope until he requires to swing himself out again. Near Bamborough, in Northumberland, a daring rocksmen, fowling alone, had safely made a landing on a narrow ledge at a tremendous height above the shore; but as he was about to make fast his rope, it slipped from his hands and oscillated into empty air. Here was a situation! Hopeless imprisonment in the heart of a precipice until death from hunger and thirst should put an end to his sufferings! A moment's hesitation, and he was hopelessly lost. The first returning swing of the rope might haply bring it within the possibility of grasping; the second, and hope was fled. It came. The desperate man was ready—every nerve braced, every muscle strained. With his eye he marked the rope and measured the point at which its inward oscillation would terminate. The moment came; the fowler sprang desperately into air, grasped the frail rope as it trembled ere it swept beyond his reach for ever—and he was saved! CLIFFORD CORDLEY.

The question now arises as to whether the boy who purloins pie from the family cupboard is guilty of larceny or simply of disturbing the piece.



ROCK-FOWLING ON THE FÄRÖE ISLANDS.

being handed down from father to son.

In some of the islands off the northern and western coasts of Scotland the men usually fowl in couples, while occasionally three rockmen will trust themselves to the same rope. Here is a thrilling story of a mishap which is said to have befallen three such adventurers—a father and his sons:—

The trio were suspended over a deep chasm, when the younger, who hung uppermost, hastily told his brother that the rope was breaking, therefore it could no longer support them all, desiring him to cut off the lower end, on which their father depended. The elder brother indignantly refused thus to consign his father to sudden and violent death, whereupon the younger, without a moment's hesitation, divided the rope below himself, precipitating his father and brother both to instant destruction.

No one has ever vouched for the truth of this dreadful story, though some such an occurrence may undoubtedly have happened. It is, however, improbable that, in this instance, the survivor "gave