



## MOONLIGHT MARAUDERS.

AMONGST the victims of encroaching civilization must be reckoned the bird whose existence has yet, we hope, survived the gloomy superstitions connected with it. Already the great owl (*Bubo maximus*) is reckoned to be so really extinct that the specimens which have undoubtedly been seen in our country of late years are only considered casual visitors. With the old Romans it was a bird of ill omen, and, according to Pliny, the city twice underwent lustration on account of its unwelcome advent. A very similar bird is (or was before they also became

the victims of civilization) the terror of the North American Indians. Wilson, speaking of the Virginian horned-owl,

says:—"His favourite residence is in the dark solitudes of deep swamps, covered with a growth of gigantic timber; and here, as soon as the evening draws on, and mankind retire to rest, he sends forth such sounds as seem scarcely to belong to this world. Along the mountain shores of the Ohio, and amid the deep forests of Indiana, alone, and reposing in the woods, this ghostly watchman has frequently warned me of the approach of morning, and amused me with his singular exclamations, sometimes sweeping down and around my fire, uttering a loud and sudden 'Waugh, O, Waugh, O!' sufficient to have alarmed a whole garrison. He has other nocturnal solos, one of which very strikingly resembles the half-suppressed screams of a person suffocating or throttled. But all men who have heard this weird apparition have not been philosophers; witness the winter night of agony endured by a party of Scotch Highlanders, who made their bivouac in the recesses of a North American forest, and inadvertently fed their fire with a part of an Indian tomb, which had been placed in that secluded spot. The startling notes of the

Virginian horned-owl broke upon their ear, and they at once concluded that so unearthly a voice must be the moaning of the spirit of the departed, whose repose they supposed they had disturbed."

Wilson also tells how a very large one, wing-broken, was kept about a house for several days, and at length disappeared, no one knew how. "Almost every day

prisoner regaling himself on the body of a newly-killed hen! The thief instantly made for his hole, under the house, from which the enraged matron soon dislodged him with the brush-handle, and without mercy despatched him. In this snug retreat were found the greater part of the feathers, and many large fragments of her whole family of chickens."



ON THE WATCH.

after this, hens and chickens also disappeared, one by one, in an unaccountable manner, till in eight or ten days very few were left remaining. The fox, the minx, and the weasel were alternately the reputed authors of this mischief, until one morning the old lady herself rising before day to bake, in passing towards the oven, surprised her late

Possibly no bird exhibits more wonderful adaptation of structure to its peculiar requirements of life than the "cat with wings," as Professor Wilson called the owl. The softness and fineness of their plumage, which ensures the silence of their somewhat slow and ghostly flight; the wonderful arrangement of the frill of feathers which cor-

centrates the light to the far-seeing and accurate eye; the exceptional formation of the ear, whereby their keenness of vision is aided by unusual acuteness of hearing; their sagacity and caution, and perhaps the superstitions connected with them, have always made them objects of varied interest. There is fortunately a splendid collection of stuffed owls at the British Museum, which is perhaps more interesting to observers than the living specimens at the Zoological Gardens; for the death-in-life existence of the latter at such times as the public see them, fails to give any idea of their habits or powers, while it only leaves a sense of disappointment on the mind.

Numerous flocks of the short-eared owl (*Otus brachyotus*) are said to appear on our east coast every autumn, immediately taking to such cover as long grass, turnips, or stubble will afford. They are much more diurnal in their habits than the other British owls. A few remain to breed, but the great majority depart before spring sets in.

It is unfortunate for anecdotal purposes that the owl cannot be seen at his best by daylight. Mrs. Lee tells how amusing it was to watch a pet owl of hers who "used to inhabit a fast-withering old apple-tree in my father's orchard, where I had placed him with one of his wings cut, and, as he could not go far, he was plentifully supplied with food. Occasionally he caught a small bird for himself; and feathers would drop upon the ground underneath. This was observed by a certain impudent eccentric cat, also belonging to me, who would sit under the tree watching for an occasional morsel, and it was laughable to see the two. The odd gestures in which owls always indulge in the light, had all the appearance of his making grimaces at the cat, and she remained with her bright eyes fixed upon him, never offering to run up the tree, and he never descending when she was there, as if they had made a mutual compact to

avoid a quarrel. The large horned-owl, sometimes called the Grand Duke, is one of the most beautiful birds that can be found, with its black and brown plumage, and the extreme majesty of its deportment. One remarkable feature in owls is that they are excellent sitters for their portraits; on which occasions I have had them for an hour before me without moving—the Grand Duke among others: his eyes now and then alone betraying his consciousness that I was close to him."

Though the Romans thought them so unlucky, an owl did as much for Genghis Khan as the geese for Rome. It is related that a certain Tartar, Genghis Khan, who founded the Mogul and Kal-muck empire, "had taken refuge from his enemies in a thicket. They followed with hot pursuit, and came straight upon his hiding-place; but there sat a guardian cherub, in the shape of this noble bird; and they, believing that it would never rest quiet if any man were hidden near, passed by with unblooded scimitars. In the silence of the ensuing night, the Khan made his way to his delighted followers, told them the cause of his safety, and filled them with a reverential love for the bird that became national." Mr. Brown gives the same anecdote, and ascribes it to the snowy owl. These last-mentioned owls are great fish catchers, and dart into the water to seize their prey with their claws. A pair considerably diminished the number of gold and silver fishes kept in a pond; and it has been conjectured that as fishes are attracted by light, the large, round, luminous eyes of the owls, which shine in the dark, cause the fishes to rise to the surface.

The following anecdote, showing the affection of the owls for their young, is related by Mr. Cronstedt, who resided for several years on a farm in Sudermania, Sweden:—"One day in July a young horned-owl which had quitted the nest was seized by one of his servants.

This bird was shut up in a large hen-coop, and the next morning Mr. Cronstedt found a young partridge dead before the coop. He concluded that the old owls had discovered the place in which the young one was confined, and had brought this food. For fourteen nights

spoiled, perhaps, by lying too long in the old one's nest." Mr. Cronstedt and his servants watched at a window several nights, that they might see the supply deposited. The plan, however, did not succeed; but the owls, very sharp-sighted, could discover the moment when



THE OWL AND ITS PREY.

this mark of attention was repeated. The old one brought principally young partridges, for the most part newly killed, but sometimes a little spoiled. Once a moor-fowl was brought, so fresh that it was warm under the wings. At another time a putrid lamb was found,

the window was not watched, for they gave the usual food one night when the window had been left. In August the old birds ceased from bringing food to the young bird, as at this time they usually permit them to shift for themselves.