

Cliff-Climbing and Egg-Hunting.

By L. S. LEWIS.



N egg-hunting, as in other things, there are degrees; and in this article I propose to deal only with the very highest form of this fascinating hobby. I refer more particularly to cliff-climbing, or, more properly, cliff-descending, in search of eggs. Among the most distinguished adepts in this difficult and perilous art is—appropriately enough—one of the most popular officers in the British Army—Lieutenant-Colonel Willoughby-Verner, of the Rifle Brigade, who is, at this moment, a professor of military science at Sandhurst. As his egg-collecting adventures and stories would fill whole volumes, I have some difficulty in “boiling-down,” as the saying is, even a tithe of the interesting material gathered at our interview.

First of all, let me say that in the portrait reproduced on this page Colonel Verner is depicted in full climbing attire—knife, camera, ropes, and sling, or belt. He wears rope-soled shoes, which he bought for one peseta in Andalusia.

“I began egg-hunting as soon as I could climb a tree,” the Colonel said to me; “and later on I used to assist my father in training his sporting hawks and falcons, of which he had a large number.”

While stationed at Gibraltar, between 1874 and 1880, Colonel Verner had splendid opportunities for indulging his favourite pastime. “The lowest—as to situation—and also the very first eagle’s nest I ever took, was that of an Imperial eagle—a tree-nesting species. This nest was in a stunted tree, only 20ft. high, in the middle of an almost impene-

trable thicket, which was surrounded by a large swamp covered with reeds 10ft. high.” Here the great bird relied for security on the solitude of the swamp, and the difficulty of access to the tree. Certainly, Colonel Verner would never have reached that nest were it not for the assistance rendered by a couple of bare-legged Spanish leech-catchers, who beat down the reeds for him with their poles.

By the way, the manner of catching the leeches was simple, but loathsome. As the men beat the reeds, the leeches swam forward in battalions and fastened on to the Spaniards’ bare legs. When a sufficient number had taken the human bait, the catchers dislodged them and commenced again. The men required a pretty liberal diet to make up for the blood they lost whilst following their odious occupation.

The gallant Colonel’s highest nest (as compared with the lowest, mentioned above) was that of a golden eagle, which took up its abode in a dizzy crag, 2,800ft. above Jimena, in Andalusia.

Asked as to the details of his cliff-climbing outfit, Colonel Verner said: “I take with

me 180ft. of 1in. Alpine rope; 50ft. of 2in. rope for ‘bad’ places; a ball of strong twine with lead weight attached, for communicating up or down; a nest of tin boxes for eggs, carried in a bag or creel; field-glasses, dagger, canvas belt (specially made for me by a blue-jacket); water-bottle and provisions; a hand camera, and a set of egg-blowing instruments packed in a case.”

To these may be added a 28ft. rope of pure silk, weighing but a few ounces, yet



LIEUT.-COL. WILLOUGHBY-VERNER IN CLIFF-CLIMBING COSTUME.
From a Photo. by Sergt. Smith, Aldershot.

capable of supporting two men. This rope was given to the Colonel by the late Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria, who had used it himself whilst chamois-hunting in the Tyrol.

In the spring of 1878, Colonel Verner left Gibraltar with a friend for a nesting expedition into the mountainous country north of the Rock. They chanced to visit the nesting-place of a griffon vulture in a cliff, which in most parts inclined at an angle of about seventy degrees. Two-thirds of the entire height was as smooth as a wall. "We had no ropes. We worked our way through a densely wooded ravine to the foot of the cliff, and managed to reach a ledge whence we could command most of the face of the precipice. Here we found it possible to sidle, barefooted, along the narrow ledges, the strata being more closely defined.

"Before reaching the ledge where the nest lay, I had to let myself down 6ft. Having packed the egg, I climbed still higher, and came across two more nests with eggs. Great fissures were met with now and again, and as I was creeping round into one of these, a gigantic griffon vulture flew out with disconcerting suddenness. Here I found another nest. I swung round into the fissure, but could not get back again, so I climbed up the 'chimney' and collected more eggs."

A few moments later the daring climber had a terribly narrow escape from an awful death. He was sidling along the narrow ledges as we see him in the picture (which is from a drawing by himself, made immediately after the occurrence), when the rock gave way under his foot, and he swung out 300ft. above the abyss, holding on to the upper ledge only with the fingers of one hand! "As I slipped," he said to me, plaintively, "my egg-box struck against the rock; and it was just my luck that the most beautifully marked egg of the whole lot should be the only

one that got cracked." And as he spoke, the Colonel produced the identical egg for my inspection.

Colonel Verner casts something more than doubt on the stories of eagles attacking people. "I have taken eggs from scores of eagles' nests in lofty crags," he said, "and have never once had such an experience. Certainly it is a little dangerous when one of these huge birds, affrighted, dashes out of a cavern, close to one's head, whilst one is clinging to the face of a sheer precipice; but I have never known an eagle to directly attack me."

At first the gallant officer used to make water-colour sketches illustrating the incidents of his expeditions; but the incredulity of friends induced him to take up the irrefragable photography. From the popular point of view, however, the Colonel's photos are a little disappointing, in that they show

no human figure on the terrific precipices scaled. This is because in most of his expeditions he was attended only by native goat-herds; and, of course, he could not take a photo. of himself in the awful places he reached. He did succeed in getting photos. of eagles' and vultures' nests *in situ*; but these are impressive only when one knows the circumstances under which they were taken. On one occasion the Colonel was gyrating at the end of a rope 200ft. from the top of the cliff, and nearly 400ft. from the bottom. He then had to hold

his camera at leg's length from the cliff in order to get a photo. of the nest.

Sometimes the camera itself came to grief. Finding himself quartered at Dublin two or three years ago, Colonel Verner began collecting the eggs of sea-birds—guillemots, gulls, and the like. One day, at Lambay Island, whilst seeking for cormorants' nests, he found one that contained five eggs. Selecting a



"A GIGANTIC GRIFFON VULTURE FLEW OUT."
From a Water-colour Drawing by Lieut.-Col. Willoughby-Verner.

suitable point of view—and the range was limited, seeing that he was dangling half-way down a formidable cliff—the Colonel was just about to photograph the nest, when the buckle of the camera-strap gave way, and down fell the little instrument 150ft. into the boiling surf below.

“A few minutes later I saw it floating out to sea, and, of course, I gave it up for lost. A coast-guardsmen, however, who accompanied me, volunteered to recover the camera, which was now 200ft. or 300ft. from the shore. Forthwith he was lowered into the sea, and not long after he swam back with the camera in his mouth, for all the world like a retriever!”

This camera is the one the Colonel is holding in the portrait on the first page.

The next photograph reproduced here shows in quite a startling manner the frightful positions in which cliff-climbers quite commonly find themselves. This daring man is Mr. C. Kearton, of Elstree, Herts, who in collaboration with his brother (Mr. R. Kearton) prepared a unique work (it was illustrated

entirely from photographs taken *in situ*) on “British Birds’ Nests,” which is published by Messrs. Cassell and Co.

I asked Mr. Kearton to describe his method of making a descent, and this is what he said: “Perhaps it would be better,

first of all, if I said a word or two about that photo. In it I am depicted climbing down a cliff on the south coast of Ireland. I am about 50ft. down, and the cliff was nearly 300ft. above the sea. The photo. was taken by a naturalist friend, for whom, however, I had to fix up a second camera, as he knew nothing about photography. I

gave him certain instructions, which were to be carried out at a given signal from me.

“Before starting on a cliff-climbing expedition,” pursued Mr. Kearton, “I first procure a couple of ropes about the thickness of one’s thumb, and in length from 200ft. to 300ft. Next, a crowbar, which I fix firmly in the ground some distance from the edge of the cliff. One rope (the guide-rope) is securely tied to this crowbar, and then thrown over the cliff; whilst the other is passed once round the bar, and then held by the man who is letting me down. Attached to the end are three loops, which are placed round my body and under my legs to prevent me from falling out. With the camera slung

over my back, and the guide-rope in my hand, I deliberately walk *backwards* over the brink of the cliff, the rope being controlled by a man who unwinds it at given signals. On firing my revolver, the situation of a nest is at once revealed by the sudden flight of the birds.



PHOTOGRAPHING BIRDS' NESTS—MR. C. KEARTON WALKING BACKWARDS DOWN A CLIFF.

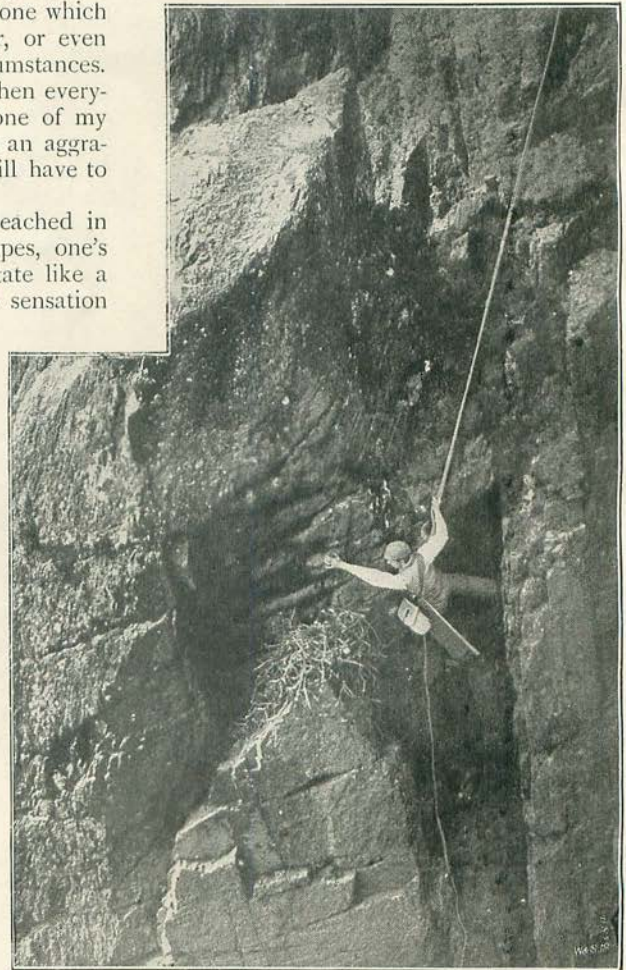
From a Photo. by Mr. C. Kearton, Elstree.

As I am lowered, I carefully dislodge with my feet every loose bit of rock within reach, so as to avoid a possible shower of rubble and stones (the result of contact with the rope) when below. This is vitally important. At will, I can sit in the girth or sling. As the sound of one's voice is lost when at a depth down the cliff of about 50ft., another man is stationed at a point where I can see him; and it is through his agency that the man at the crowbar receives my signals. The nest to be photographed may be found on a fairly accessible ledge, in which case the manipulation of the camera is comparatively easy; but where it is built on a projecting stone or small ledge, tremendous difficulties have to be overcome. In such cases two legs of the camera must rest on my body, most conveniently in the belt round my waist. Having fixed up the apparatus I proceed to focus the object; this is the most difficult task of all, and one which may last five minutes or an hour, or even longer still, according to circumstances. Then it frequently happens that when everything is ready for the exposure, one of my legs will slip or my body sway in an aggravating manner, so that the nest will have to be re-focused.

"Where a recess in the cliff is reached in descending or ascending by the ropes, one's body, being insulated, begins to rotate like a goose on a roasting-jack; and the sensation of twirling round in mid-air at the end of a rope, with the very real possibility of a shower of dislodged stones from above, and—in the event of an accident—certain death beneath, is anything but pleasant. Remember, one's life is literally in the hands of the man at the crowbar. On one occasion, just as I was disappearing over the cliff, this responsible person got joking with his companion, the signal man, and he let the coil of rope slip up to the top of the crowbar. A moment more and it would have slid off altogether, but a horrified yell from me brought the careless fellow to some sense of his duty, just in time to avoid a catastrophe.

"My cliff-climbing in the south of Ireland was uncommonly successful; but on one occasion I was victimized by an Irish peasant, who—far too anxious to

please—spoke of a grand rock dove's nest he knew of at the bottom of a sheer precipice, accessible only by rope. I walked back two miles along the cliffs, and straightway prepared for a descent. When about half-way down, one of the legs of the camera got fixed firmly against the rock, and as I still continued to descend, the full weight of my body came upon it. Next moment the legs of the tripod gave way, and the whole apparatus came to pieces, the shutter falling on to the rocks far below. To photograph the nest now was, of course, quite out of the question. Still I continued the descent, if only to get a glimpse of it, and to find what remained of the shutter of the shattered camera. Having reached the bottom of the cliff, I looked about for the rock-dove's nest. Alas! There was none there, and I had all my trouble for nothing. My informant mentioned



TAKING AN AWKWARDLY-PLACED RAVEN'S NEST.

the non-existent nest solely in order to give me a little pleasurable anticipation and excitement."

The remainder of the very impressive photos. reproduced in this article were taken by Mr. Charles Jefferys (and his colleagues), of Tenby. This gentleman fortuitously combines the zeal and energy of a naturalist with the peculiar skill of a professional photographer. The photo. reproduced on the preceding page was taken for Mr. Jefferys by Mr. H. Mortimer Allen; and it illustrates admirably the dangerous and difficult nature of this work, or hobby—call it what you will. Here the egg-collector is seen taking a raven's nest near Freshwater, Pembroke-shire. This nest was placed in a most curious position—not on the usual ledge of rock, but on a blunt point, so to speak, which sloped abruptly away on each side of the nest. To make it still more difficult of access, the big point of light rock shown in the photo. was separated from the main cliff, rendering it impossible to descend straight over the nest. The photo. also shows that the collector is making desperate endeavours to transfer the eggs to the fishing-creel he carries at his side.

"One of the most remarkable features of Pembroke-shire," says Mr. Jefferys, "is the extent of its coast line. Though one of the smaller of the Welsh counties, its coast line must be fully 100 miles in length, owing to the numberless indentations in the form of bays and inlets. It will, therefore, be under-

stood that a rocky coast, so broken up, must offer unusual advantages for obtaining photographs of portions of the cliff front. Almost everywhere some projecting slope or ledge may be gained, which will reward the climber with a view of portions of the face of these precipitous limestone cliffs, which are the favourite breeding haunts of the raven, chough, peregrine, and buzzard—to say nothing

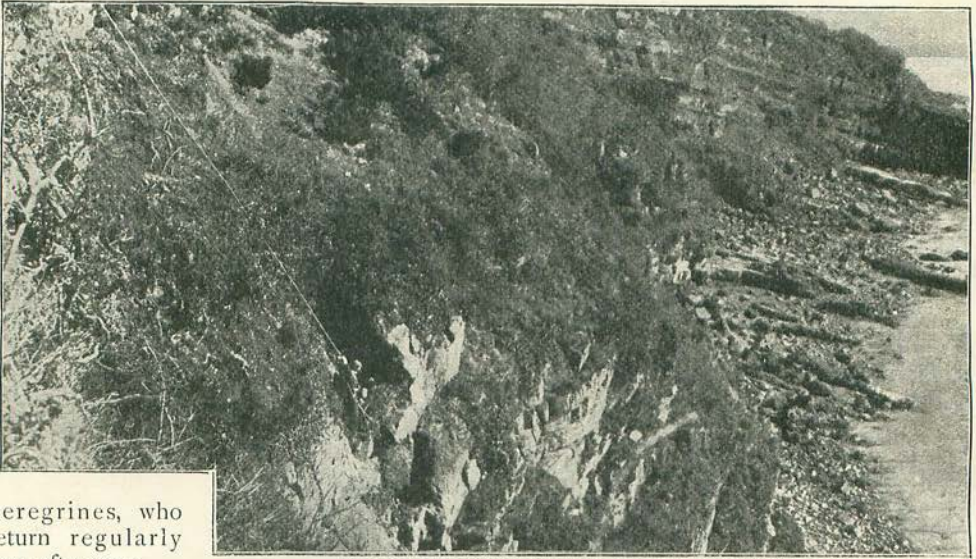
of the countless thousands of guillemots, razorbills, puffins, and gannets, which yearly flock to the coast and adjacent islands for nesting."

Another of Mr. Jefferys' photos. is here reproduced. This illustrates a nesting expedition undertaken by Mr. C. D. Head and Mr. Jefferys. The nest being sought is that of a peregrine falcon, who took up her quarters near Tenby in April, 1894. "The eggs of this bird," explains Mr. Jefferys, "are generally placed in some slight hollow, or hole, at the back of a broad ledge, which is often overhung by the precipitous cliff above. So far as my experience goes, the peregrine never does more in the way of nest-'building' than merely to scrape a slight hollow for

her eggs. Sometimes, however, this bird makes use of disused nests, built by more diligent members of the feathered world. I remember in March, 1894, we emptied a raven's nest, and the following month obtained a set of peregrine eggs from the very same nest." The nesting site shown in the preceding photo. is quite close to the climber; it has been used for a very long time by a pair of



MESSRS. CHARLES JEFFERYS AND C. D. HEAD TAKING A PEREGRINE FALCON'S NEST NEAR TENBY.



TAKING RAVENS' EGGS ON GREAT CLIFF, IN CARMARTHENSHIRE.

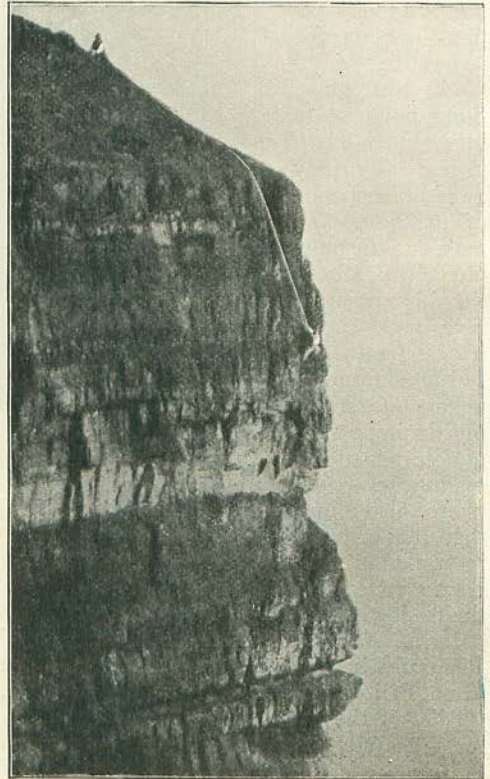
peregrines, who return regularly year after year.

Mr. Jefferys and his colleagues conduct their cliff-climbing in the orthodox way. "We use ropes of the best quality," he tells me; "and given a careful, reliable man on top, there is really very little danger to the climber—always excepting the unexpected descent of loose rock and stones." In many of the photos. the guide-rope is seen hanging below the climber. This rope is made fast to a steel bar, driven into the top of the cliff, and the climber uses it in ascending and descending to take his weight off the "body-rope," which is attached to the "sling." In this way, only one man is needed to attend to the ropes, whilst a second is told off to interpret the climber's signals.

The next photo. shows the taking of a very large raven's nest (compare it with the figure) which was built on a precipitous cliff at the mouth of a tidal river in Carmarthenshire. In difficult or dangerous places, Mr. Jefferys makes fast to the crowbar the body-rope as well as the guide-rope; and he tells me that in Iceland last year he had to use the native hide-ropes—strong enough, but knotted and greasy, and therefore unpleasant to handle.

The taking of a raven's nest at Trevent, Pembrokeshire, is shown in the next photograph. "This nest," says Mr. Jefferys, "was placed in a deep hollow, which is seen a little below the climber (Mr. C. J. Head). The great cliffs at this point are unusually steep and lofty, this one in particular projecting sharply from the main line of cliffs, and

having a raging sea on either side. To reach the spot where the rope attendant (myself) is seen standing, a narrow saddle-shaped ridge of treacherous rock and soil had to be crossed,



MR. C. D. HEAD TAKING RAVEN'S NEST AT TREVENT, PEMBROKESHIRE.

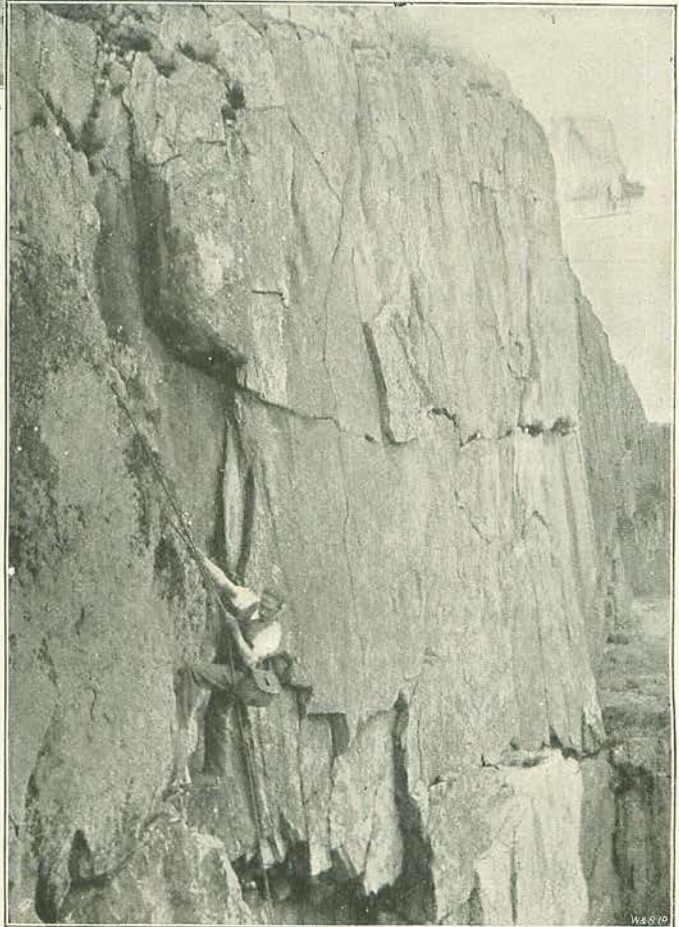


TAKING PEREGRINES' EGGS NEAR LINNEY HEAD, PEMBROKESHIRE.

and this was barely 2ft. wide, so that passing over it was no pleasant task, especially when burdened with steel crowbars, ropes, and other impedimenta. During the past two years the ravens have removed from this spot, and the ledges shown in the photo. are now in the possession of a large colony of cormorants during the nesting season."

"Taking peregrines' eggs—four of them—near Linney Head, Pembrokeshire, April, 1896." Such is Mr. Jefferys' comment on the photo. next shown. "The eggs," he goes on to say, "were placed as usual on a bare patch of soil on a broad ledge, and they may be seen in the photo. near the left foot of the climber—Mr. C. D. Head." This last-named gentleman, being the light-weight of the party, usually made the descents.

The last photo. reproduced shows Mr. Head collecting sea-birds' eggs near Tenby. Mr. Jefferys and his daring companions have quite as thrilling stories to tell respecting their adventures in search of the eggs of tree-birds; and although this work is not so interesting as the cliff-climbing, from a pictorial point of view, still Colonel Verner, the brothers Kearton, and Mr. Jefferys all agree that it is even more perilous. Colonel Verner declares that ropes are apt to make the cliff-climbers careless (he was once horrified to behold his own "half-hitch" knots in a new rope untwisting in the hot sun); but he considers tree work more difficult and dangerous, considering how the nest-hunter has often to crawl out on long, slippery, and perhaps treacherous branches 60ft. or 70ft. above the ground.



COLLECTING SEA-BIRDS' EGGS NEAR TENBY.