

## HOME LIFE ON THE ROCKS.

### Guillemots.



NOTHING is more interesting than to look down from the summit of some precipice on to a ledge at no great distance below, which is quite crowded with guillemots. Roughly speaking, the birds form two long rows, but these rows are very irregular in depth and formation, and swell here and there into little knots and clusters, besides often merging into or becoming mixed with each other, so that the idea of symmetry conveyed is of a very modified kind, and may be sometimes broken down altogether. In the first row a certain number of the birds sit close against and directly fronting the wall of the precipice, into the angle of which with the ledge they often squeeze themselves. Several will be closely pressed together, so that the head of one is often resting against the neck or shoulder of another, which other will also be making a pillow of a third, and so on. Others stand here and there behind the seated ones, each being, as a rule, close to his or her partner. There is another irregular row about the centre of the ledge, and equally here it is to be remarked that the sitting birds have

their beaks pointed towards the cliff, whilst the standing ones are turned indifferently. There are generally several birds on the edge of the parapet, and at intervals one will come pressing to it through the crowd in order to fly down to the sea, whilst from time to time others also fly up and alight on it, often with sand-eels in their beaks. On a ledge of perhaps a dozen paces in length there may be from sixty to eighty guillemots, and as often as they are counted the number will be found to be approximately the same.

Most of the sitting birds are either incubating or have young ones under them, which, as long as they are little, they seem to treat very much as though they were eggs. Much affection is shown between the paired birds. One that is sitting either on her egg or her



*Guillemot.*

young one—for no difference in the attitude can be observed—will often be very much cosseted by the partner who stands close behind or beside her. With the tip of his long, pointed beak he, as it were, nibbles the feathers (or, perhaps, scratches and tickles the skin between them) of her head, neck, and throat; whilst she, with her eyes half closed, and an expression as of submitting to an enjoyment—a “Well, I suppose I must” look—bends her head backwards, or screws it round sideways towards him, occasionally nibbling with her bill also amidst the feathers of his throat, or the thick white plumage of

his breast. Presently she stands up, revealing the small, hairy-looking chick, whose head has from time to time been visible just peeping out from under its mother's wing. Upon this the other bird bends its head down and cossets in the same way—but very gently, and with the extreme tip of the bill—the little tender young one. The mother does so too, and then both birds, standing side by side over the chick, pay it divided attentions, seeming as though they could not make enough either of their child or of each other. It is a pretty picture, and here is another one.

A bird—we will think her the female, as she performs the most mother-like part—has just flown in with a fish—a sand-eel—in her bill. She makes her way with it to the partner, who rises and shifts the chick that he has been brooding over from himself to her. This is done quite invisibly, as far as the chick is concerned, but you can see that it is being done.

The bird with the fish, to whom the chick has been shifted, now takes it in hand. Stooping forward her body, and drooping down her wings, so as to make a kind of little tent or awning of them, she sinks her bill with the fish in it towards the rock and then raises it again, and does this several times before either letting the fish drop or placing it in the chick's bill—for which it is I cannot quite see. It is only now that the chick becomes visible, its back turned to the bird standing over it, and its bill and throat moving as though swallowing something down. Then the bird that has fed it shifts it again to the other, who receives it with equal care, and bending down over it, appears—for it is now invisible—to help or

assist it in some way. It would be no wonder if the chick had wanted assistance, for the fish was a very big one for so small a thing, and it would seem as if he swallowed it bodily. After this the chick is again treated as an egg by the bird that has before had charge of him—that is to say, he is sat upon, apparently, just as though he were to be incubated.

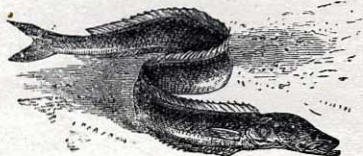
On account of the closeness with which the chick is guarded by the parent birds, and the way in which they both stand over it, it is difficult to make out exactly how it is fed; but I think the fish is either dropped at once on the rock, or dangled a little for it to seize hold of. It is in the bringing up and looking after of the chick that one begins to see the meaning of the sitting guillemots being always turned towards the cliff, for from the moment that the egg is hatched one or other of the parent birds interposes between the chick and the edge of the parapet. Of course I cannot say that the rule is universal, but I never saw a guillemot incubating with its face turned towards the sea, nor did I ever see a chick on the seaward side of the parent bird who was with it.

I observed that the chick—even when, as I judged by its tininess, it had only been quite recently hatched—was as alert and as well able to move about as a young chicken or partridge; but whilst possessing all the power, it appeared to have little will to do so. Its lethargy—as shown by the way in which, even when a good deal older, it would sit for hours without moving from under the mother—struck me as excessive; and it would certainly seem that on a bare, narrow ledge, to fall from which would be certain death, chicks of a lethargic disposition would

have an advantage over others who were fonder of running about.

The young guillemot is fed with fish which are brought from the sea in the parent's bill, and not—as in the case of gulls—disgorged for them after having been first swallowed. It is, however, a curious fact that the fish when thus brought in are, sometimes at any rate, headless. The reason of this I do not know, but with the aid of glasses I have made quite certain of it, and each time it appeared as though the head had been cleanly cut off. Moreover, on alighting on the ledge the bird always has the fish (a sand-eel, whenever I saw it) held lengthways in the beak, with the tail drooping out to one side of it, and the head part more or less within the throat—a position which seems to suggest that it may have been swallowed or partially swallowed—whereas puffins and razor-bills carry the fish they catch crosswise, with head and tail depending on either side.

I have once or twice thought that I saw a bird which just before had no fish in its bill all at once carrying one. But I may well have been mistaken; and it does not seem at all likely that the birds should usually carry their fish, and thus subject themselves to persecution, if they could disgorge it without inconvenience. With regard to the occasional absence of the head, perhaps this is sometimes cut off in catching the fish.



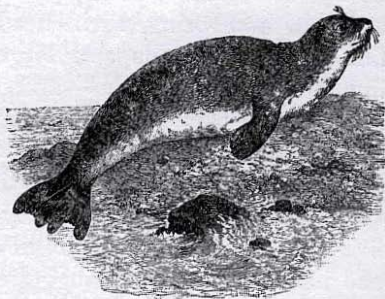
### Seals.

Quite near to where I watch the guillemots there is a little iron-bound creek or cove, walled by precipice, guarded by mighty "stacks," and divided for some way into two by a long rocky peninsula running out from the shore.

On the rocks in one of these alcoves were lying eight seals, which were afterwards joined by another, making nine, whilst in the adjoining one were four—also, as it happened, joined by another, as I

watched—making fourteen in all: such a sight as I had never seen before.

I watched these seals of mine on this, my first meeting with them, for a considerable time from the top of the cliffs—the glasses giving me a splendid view—and soon knew more about them than I had done before, and got rid of some popular errors. For instance, I had always imagined that seals had one set attitude for lying on the rocks—namely, flat on their bellies—a delusion which every picture of them in this connection had helped to foster. Imagine my surprise and delight when it burst upon me that only some three or four were in this attitude, and that even these did not retain it for long. No; instead of being in this state of uninteresting ortho-



*Common seal.*

doxy, they lay in the most delightful free-thinking poses, on their sides, showing their fine, portly, columnar bellies in varying degrees and proportions; whilst one utter infidel was right and full upon his broad back, yet looked like the carved image of some old Crusader on the lid of his stone sarcophagus. Every now and then they would give themselves a hitch, and bring their heads up, showing their fine round foreheads and large mild eyes; a very human—mildly human—and extremely intelligent appearance they had, looking down upon them from above. Again, they had the oddest or oddest-appearing actions, especially that of pressing their two hind feet or flippers together, with all their five-webbed toes spread out in a fan, with an energy and in a manner which suggested the fervent clasping of hands. Then they would scratch themselves with their fore feet lazily and sedately, raising their heads the while, looking extremely happy, having sometimes even a beatific expression. And then again they would curl themselves a little and roll more over, seeming to expatiate and almost lose themselves in large, luxurious ease—more variety and expression about them lying thus dozing than one will see in many animals awake and active.

Even in this little time I learnt that they were animals of a finely touched spirit, extremely playful, with a grand sense of humour, and filled "from the crown to the toe, top-full" of happiness. Thus one that came swimming up the little quiet bay, in quest of a rock to lie upon, seemed to delight in pretending to find first one and then another too steep and difficult to get up on (for obviously they were not),

and would fling himself from off them in a sort of little sham disappointment, gambolling and rolling about, twisting himself up with seaweed, and generally having a most lively, solitary romp. A piece of bleached spar, some four or five feet long, happened—and I am glad that it happened—to be floating in the water at quite the other side of the creek and, espying it, this delightful animal swam over to it, and began to play with it as a kitten might with a reel of cotton or a ball of worsted. More frolicsome, kitten-hearted, and withal intelligent play I never saw. He passed just underneath it, and, coming up on the opposite side, rolled over upon it, cuffed it with one fore foot, again with the other, flipped it then with his footy tail as he dived away, and returning, in a fresh burst of rompiness, waltzed round and round with it, embracing it, one might almost say. At last, going off, he swam to a much steeper rock than any he had made-believe to find so difficult, and, scrambling up it with uncouth ease, went quietly to sleep in the best possible humour.

What intelligence all this shows! Much more, I think, than the sporting of two animals together. This seal was alone, saw the floating spar at a distance, and swam to it with the evident intention of amusing himself in this manner. Later, another seal played with this same spar in much the same way; yet both of them seemed to be quite full-grown animals.

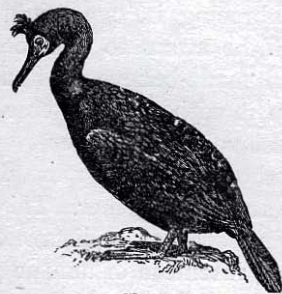
Then I saw something which looked like a spirit of real humour, as well as fun. Three seals were lying on a slab of rock together, and one of them, raising himself half up, began to scratch the one next him with his fore foot. The scratched seal



—a lady, I believe—took it in the most funny manner, a sort of serio-comic remonstrance, shown in action and expression: “Now do leave off, really. Come now, do leave me alone”—and when this had reached a climax the funny fellow left off and lay still again; but as soon as all was quiet, he heaved up and began to scratch her again. This he did—and she did the other—three times, at the least, and if not to have a little fun with her I can hardly see why.

### Shags.

Now I have found a nest with the bird on it, to see and watch. It was on a ledge, and just within the mouth of one of those long, narrowing, throat-like caverns into and out of which the sea, with all sorts of strange, sullen noises, licks like a tongue. The bird, who had seen me, continued for a long time afterwards to crane about its long neck from side to side or up and down over the nest, in doing which it had a very demoniac ap-



*Shag.*

pearance, suggesting some evil being in its dark abode.

As it was impossible for me to watch it without my head being visible over the edge of the rock I was on, I collected a number of loose flat stones that lay on the turf above, and, at the cost of a good deal of time and labour, made a kind of wall or

sconce with loopholes in it, through which I could look and yet be invisible. Presently the bird's mate came flying into the cavern, and wheeling up as it entered, alighted on a sloping slab of the rock just opposite to the nest. For a little both birds uttered low, deep, croaking notes in weird unison with the surroundings and the sad sea-dirges, after which they were silent for a considerable time, the one standing and the other sitting on the nest *vis-à-vis* to each other. At length the former, which I have no doubt was the male, hopped across the slight space dividing them on to the nest, which was a huge mass of seaweed. There were now some more deep sounds, and then, bending over the female bird, the male caressed her by passing the hooked tip of his bill through the feathers of her head and neck, which she held low down the better to permit of this. The whole scene was a striking picture of affection between those dark, wild birds in their lonely wave-made home.

The male bird now flies out to sea again, and after a time returns carrying a long piece of brown seaweed in his bill. This he delivers to the female, who takes it from him and deposits it on the heap, as she sits. Meanwhile the male flies off again, and again returns with more seaweed, which he delivers as before; and this he does eight times in the space of one hour and forty minutes, diving each time for the seaweed with the true cormorant leap. Sometimes the sitting bird, when she takes the seaweed from her mate, merely lets it drop on the heap, but at others she places and manipulates it with some care. All takes place in silence for the most part, but on some of the visits the heads are thrown up,

and there are sounds—hoarse and deeply guttural—as of gratulation between the two.

The nest of the shag is continually added to by the male, not only while the eggs are in process of incubation, but after they are hatched, and when the young are being brought up. In a sense, therefore, it may be said to be never finished, though for all practical purposes it is so before the female bird begins to sit. That up to this period the female as well as the male bird takes part in the building of the nest I cannot but think, but from the time of my arrival on the island I never saw the two either diving for or carrying seaweed together. Once I saw a pair of birds together high up on the cliffs, where some tufts of grass grew in the niches. One of these birds only pulled out some of the grass, and flew away with it, accompanied by the other.

It is not only seaweed that is used by these birds in the construction of the nest. In many that I saw grass alone was visible, though I have no doubt seaweed was underneath it; and one in particular had quite an ornamental appearance, from being covered all over with some land plant having a number of small blue flowers; and this I have observed in other nests, though not to the same extent. I think it was on this same nest that I noticed the picked and partially bleached skeleton—with the head and wings still feathered—of a puffin. It had, to be sure, a sorry appearance to the human—at least to the civilized human—eye, but if it had not been brought there for the sake of ornament, I can think of no other reason; and brought there or at least placed upon the nest by the bird it must

almost certainly have been. The brilliant beak and saliently-marked head of the puffin must be here remembered. Again, fair-sized pieces of wood or spar, cast up by the sea and whitened by it, are often to be seen stuck amongst the seaweed, and on one occasion I saw a bird fly with one of these to its nest and place it upon it. In all this, as it seems to me, the beginnings of a tendency to ornament the nest are clearly exhibited.

Both the sexes share in the duty and pleasure of incubation, and (as in some other species) to see them relieve each other on the nest is to see one of the prettiest things in bird life. The bird that you have been watching has sat patiently the whole morning, and once or twice, as it rose in the nest and shifted itself round into another position on the eggs, you have seen the gleam of them as they lay there "as white as ocean foam in the moon." At last, when it is well on in the afternoon, the partner bird flies up and stands for some minutes preening itself; while the one on the nest, who is turned away, throws back the head towards it, and opens and shuts the bill somewhat widely, as in greeting, several times. The new-comer then jumps and waddles to the farther side of the nest, so as to front the sitting bird, and sinking down against it with a manner and action full both of affection and a sense of duty, this one is half pushed, half persuaded to leave, finally doing so with the accustomed grotesque hop. It has all been done nearly in silence, only a few low, guttural notes having passed between the birds whilst they were close together. Just in the same way the birds relieve each other after the eggs have

been hatched, and when the young are being fed and attended to.

A shag is sitting on her nest with the young ones, whilst the male stands on a higher ledge of the rock a yard or so away. He now jumps down and stands for a moment with head somewhat erected and beak slightly open. Then he makes the great pompous hop which I have described before, coming down right in front of the female, who raises her head towards him, and opens and closes the mandibles several times in the approved manner. The two birds then nibble, as it were, the feathers of each other's necks with the ends of their bills, and the male takes up a little of the grass of the nest, seeming to toy with it. He then very softly and persuadingly pushes himself against the sitting bird, seeming to say, "It's my turn now," and thus gets her to rise, when both stand together on the nest over the little ones. The male then again takes up a little of the grass of the nest, which he passes towards the female, who also takes it, and they toy with it a little together before allowing it to drop. The insinuating process now continues, the male in the softest and gentlest manner pushing the female away, and then sinking down into her place, where he now sits, whilst she stands beside him on the ledge. As soon as the relieving bird has settled itself amidst the young, and whilst the other one is still there—not yet having flown off to sea—it begins to feed them. Their heads—very small, and with beaks not seeming to be much longer in proportion to their size than those of young ducks—are seen moving feebly about, pointing upwards, but with

very little precision. Very gently, and seeming to seize the right opportunity, the parent bird takes first one head and then another in the basal part, or gape, of his mandibles, turning his own head on one side in order to do so, so that the rest of the long bill projects sideways beyond the chick's head without touching it. In this connection, and while the chick's head is quite visible, little, if any, more than the beak being within the gape of the parent bird, the latter bends the head down and makes that particular action as of straining so as to bring something up which one is familiar with in pigeons. This process is gone through several times before the bird standing on the ledge flies away, to return again in a quarter of an hour with a piece of seaweed, which is laid on the nest.

As the chicks become older they thrust the head and bill farther and farther down the throat of the parent bird, and at last to an astonishing extent. Always, however, it appeared to me that the parent bird brought up the food into the chicks' bills in some state of preparation, and was not a mere passive bag from which the latter pulled fish in a whole state. There were several nests all in unobstructed view, and so excellent were my glasses that, practically, I saw the whole process as though it had been taking place on a table in front of me. The chicks, on withdrawing their heads from the parental throat, would often slightly open and close the mandibles as though still tasting something, in a manner which one may describe as smacking the bill; but on no occasion did I observe anything projecting from the bill when this was withdrawn, as one would expect

sometimes to be the case if unmodified fish were pulled up. Always, too, the actions of the parent bird suggested that particular process which is known as regurgitation, and which may be observed with pigeons, and also with the night-jar.

Young shags are at first naked and black, also blind, as I was able to detect through the glasses. Afterwards the body becomes covered with a dusky gray down, and then every day they struggle more and more into the likeness of their parents. They soon begin to imitate the grown-up postures, and it is a pretty thing to see mother and young one sitting together with their heads held stately upright, or the little woolly chick standing up in the nest and hanging out its thin little featherless wings, just as mother is doing, or just as it has seen her do. At other times the chicks lie sprawling together either flat or on their sides. They are good tempered and playful, seize hold playfully of each other's bills, and will often bite or play with the feathers of their parent's tail. In fact, they are a good deal like puppies, and the heart goes out both to them and to their loving, careful, assiduous mother and father.

When both birds are at home, the one that stands on the rock, by or near the nest, is ready to guard it from all intrusion. Should another bird fly on to the rock and alight, in his opinion, too near it, he immediately advances towards him, shaking his wings, and uttering a low grunting note which is full of intention. Finding itself in a false position, the intruding bird flies off; but it sometimes happens that when two nests are not far apart, the sentinels belonging to each are in too close a proximity and

begin to cast jealous glances upon one another. In such a case neither bird can retreat without some loss of dignity, and, as a result, there is a fight.

I have witnessed a drama of this nature. The two locked their beaks together, and the one which seemed to be the stronger endeavoured with all his might to pull the other towards him, which the weaker bird, on his part, resisted as desperately, using his wings both as opposing props and to push back with. This lasted for some while, but the pulling bird was unable to drag the other up the steeply-sloping rock, and finally lost his hold. Instead of trying to regain it, he turned and shuffled excitedly to the nest; and when he reached it, the bird sitting there stretched out her neck towards him, and opened and shut her beak several times in quick succession. It was as if he had said to her, "I hope you observed my prowess. Was it well done?" and she had replied, "I should think I did observe it. It was indeed well done." On the worsted bird's ascending the rock to get to his nest, the victorious one ran, or rather waddled, at him, putting him to a short flight up it. This bird was also cordially received by his own partner, who threw up her head and opened her bill at him in the same way, as though sympathizing, and saying, "Don't mind him; he's rude." In such affairs, either bird is safe as soon as he gets within close distance of his own nest; for it would be against all precedent, and something monstrous, that he should be followed beyond a charmed line drawn around it.

EDMUND SELOUS. (*From "Bird Watching" and "The Bird-Watcher in the Shetlands." J. M. Dent and Co. By permission.*)