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BIRDS OF OMEN  
IN SHETLAND.

(INAUGURAL ADDRESS TO THE VIKING CLUB, LONDON,  
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BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE VIKING BOYS," ETC.

WITH

NOTES ON THE FOLK-LORE OF  
THE RAVEN AND THE OWL.

BY

W. A. CLOUSTON,

AUTHOR OF "POPULAR TALES AND FICTIONS," "FLOWERS FROM A  
PERSIAN GARDEN," ETC.

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Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore!"—*E. A. Poe.*

It was the Owl that shrieked,  
That fatal bellman, that gives the stern'st Good Night.—*Macbeth.*

---

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1893.

City  
and  
Royal Burgh  
of  
Kirkwall.

THE HISTORY OF THE

ISLAND OF OMAHA

FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT TO THE PRESENT TIME  
BY JOHN W. WOOD

NEW YORK

1854

THE

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF  
THE RIVER AND THE CITY

OF OMAHA

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ART OF PRINTING IN GREAT BRITAIN

# BIRDS OF OMEN IN SHETLAND.

BY

JESSIE M. E. SAXBY.

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I AM afraid that you will think that I have chosen a very gruesome subject to talk about; but perhaps you will see "light" when I mention that my purpose is to dwell upon the "surroundings" of Birds of Omen as much as upon the feathered folk themselves. Moreover, I shall confine my remarks to a couple only of the many birds who figure in mythology and superstition as the augurs of Fate. And, because we are an association of Northern folk, my two Birds of Omen are the pair best known to our beloved fatherland. They are the Corbie and the Katyogle.

Not only are these well known in the North, they stand first of birds in all folk-lore. The Corbie (or Raven) is sacred to the All-Father. The Katyogle (or Owl) is consecrated to the goddess of wisdom. From Odin came the "strong hand," which made the sea-kings masters of men while the human race shall exist upon earth. From Pallas Athenê came the mighty mind which made the Greeks a living power for all time. Now, I hope you will not think the time misspent which we are going to give to the history of two such notable and interesting creatures as the "familiars" of the greatest of gods and the wisest of goddesses.

I have too much respect for the Corbie and Katyogle to dwell in detail upon their *natural history*. I care not for their "order," according to the scientist. The genus and species to which they belong influence me not one whit. Why—when I know on the authority of a Shetland witch, that the Corbie can assume any form he pleases, and that the Katyogle is the inhabitant of another world in disguise—why should I trouble my spirit with assigning to either a place in the Darwinian circle?

What does a katyogle who can read the future care for systems which are formed upon things seen and proved? What does a corbie, whose ancestor scorned Noah and the flood, care for the rules laid

down in class-books? *They* don't care, and no more do I when thinking of them: their *legendary* history is that which interests me, and which I hope to make interesting to you.

Before entering further into the details of their story, I may remark that, in glancing back at the nature-worship of primitive man, it is easy to discover how certain birds and beasts become associated with certain attributes, and, later, with certain persons. As a matter of fact, the virtues and vices of humanity live in the lower orders of creatures, and are as marked in *them* as in individuals of our race. Any person interested in the study of natural science must notice this constantly. We are not much in advance of our nature-worshipping forefathers when we talk of children as "little ducks," of amorous couples as "turtle-doves," of a lawyer as a "sly fox," of a treacherous coward as a "cur," of a vain person as a "peacock."

Indeed, we may frankly own that in many things our forefathers were wiser than we; they reflected more, and they looked abroad beyond their own kind more. "The proper study of mankind is man," says a famous writer; but I venture to differ from him. It is from the creation beneath us, and the creation above us, from physiology and psychology, that we gather our most valuable lore. It is from the study of "beasts which perish," and the study of "things unseen and eternal," that we learn what we are ourselves.

I do not in the least wonder that folk lang syne believed that the "birds of the air" could "tell the matter," and I think that Sigurd the Volsing understood the language of wood-peckers, chattering about himself, just as well as Eve knew what a serpent had to whisper in a woman's ear. I do not say this scoffingly. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy," and I am more than willing to give credence to a great deal of what we have been taught to sneer at as superstitions, but which I prefer to call "glimpses of the unknown," distorted, no doubt, but proceeding from some hidden source of truth all the same.

And now we return to our two royal Birds of Omen, and beginning with Yarl Corbie, let us dwell first upon his character and his antecedents.

I trust no native of our Isles, or of Scandinavia, is so left to himself as to confound a Raven with an ignoble, base-born Crow: let that crow be as black as the vilest of his kind is painted. The Sassenach, who walks by things seen, may detect little difference; but the Northman, who has risked his life in scaling the precipices to take a Raven's nest; the udaller, who has seen the eye struck out of the head of his "puir aumous baste o' a rül 'at wis in liftin'"; the islander, who has watched the bold reiver fly away with his "awlie fool"; the fisher, who has cursed

the ominous "corp! corp!" that followed him from the land, when his boat's head was for the haaf: these know that a mere Crow can never presume to call himself brother to a Raven.

Even from a naturalist's point of view, the two are quite different in character and habits. The Crow is social, fond of gossiping, and inquisitive to a degree. The Raven is recluse in his habits, and never troubles himself about any fowl outside of his immediate circle, and the requirements of his dinner-table. The Crow is a petty pilferer, dodging around back-doors and stealing any trifle he can find. The Raven prosecutes the profession of "lifting," after the manner of a Rob Roy, or a Viking. The Crow is a shuffling, sneaking, common thief. The Raven is a dignified and daring brigand.

Those who have studied the Raven can well understand how the Sea-kings of the North took *him* for their emblem in preference to all other creatures.

The lordly bird, dwelling aloof in some inaccessible precipice, floating silently on black wings over the heads of more common creatures, dropping with stern, implacable ferocity on his prey, calmly croaking of doom when the sun shines, rejoicing in a storm, haunting the footsteps of death, feasting on the dead: well might he be taken as the symbol and companion of Sea-rovers, whose sable flag was the terror of nations, whose Raven ensign seldom drooped before the banner of a foe. The Raven was held sacred by the Vikings. When setting out on marauding expeditions, the Raven was, with many ceremonies, let loose, and where he led the Norsemen followed, believing that their Bird of Omen would lead to some scene of triumph.

The device on Odín's shield was a Raven; so was that on the Landeyda of Sigurd. At the prow of each Viking ship, at the mastheads, on the warrior's crest, sat the Raven. Little wonder if the bird had become associated with images of death and despair. When Odin first appeared in Northland, he was accompanied by "two Ravens who could speak all manner of tongues, and flew on his behests to the uttermost parts of the earth." When the famous Viking Floki set out on his first great voyage of discovery, he took with him three Ravens, which he had previously consecrated to the gods Odin, Thor, and Balder. On approaching Iceland Floki "let fly before him" the Ravens. The bird consecrated to Thor flew away back to the Faroe Isles, from whence the Viking had sailed; the bird consecrated to Odin returned and rested on the ship; the bird consecrated to Balder flew onward and directed the voyager to the land of which he was in search. This Floki was one of the first of the Sea-kings who set out for the express purpose of *discovery* rather than *plunder*. To fight and conquer had always been the Scandinavians' first object, but Floki seems to have been possessed

of a passion for more peaceful and laudable adventure. He had boundless faith in the Raven, and was so fortunate in all his voyages, through following his noted birds, that "Rafn," or "Hrafn," was added to his name; and he is spoken of in the Saga as "Floki Rafna."

On the eve of battle the Ravens were supposed to gather from afar, and foretell the results of the impending conflict, by hovering over those who would be vanquished. But the Bird of Omen was not the only creature who came to the field of fight, with the instinctive knowledge that the clashing of arms was the beginning of war:

Worms of the earth and fowls of the air,  
Beasts of the forest all gathering there;  
All regarding man as their prey,  
All rejoicing in *his* decay.

These *must* be gainers no matter which side lost or won. The war-song of Harold Harfager begins with a grand description of the part which nature, animate and inanimate, takes in the fierce meeting of heroes:

The sun is rising dimly red,  
The wind is wailing low and dread,  
From his cliff the eagle sallies,  
Leaves the wolf his darksome valleys,  
In the mist the ravens hover,  
Peep the wild dogs from the cover,  
Screaming, croaking, baying, yelling,  
Each in his wild accents telling—  
"Soon we feast on dead and dying,  
Fair-haired Harold's flag is flying."

One of the most beautiful legends of the Raven I know is that of the young Sea-king Ingulf, who sailed away to win renown, carrying with him his father's blessing and the family Raven, who had been the companion of his ancestors for more than a century. For long months old Torsting looked for his only son's dragon to return, but the ship came not. Months, ay, years, went by, and then one day the Raven alighted by the threshold. He was recognised and welcomed, and eager eyes turned to the sea expecting to behold Ingulf's dragon at last. There was no vessel in the offing, and old Torsting, on whose wrist the Raven had perched, discovered an iron ring upon the bird's leg. That Ingulf was a prisoner he never doubted, for that fatal badge of captivity told the story: and in grief and wrath the father prepared to go forth to search for his son, and free him from his chains or die in the attempt. The Raven he doubted not would guide to the place where Ingulf languished; but a week before the day of the intended departure the Raven disappeared. The omen was dark, but old Torsting still determined on embarking, and when the appointed time



arrived he sought the shore where his ship lay ready. As he stood a moment to bid farewell to weeping wife and daughters, the Raven was seen swiftly flying over the sea towards his master. Without sound, as direct as a bullet, the bird shot downwards and dropped dead at Torsting's feet. As the Sea-king raised the lifeless Raven he found, tangled in its beak, a long lock of golden hair with a piece of gory scalp and a well-known silver fillet attached to it. "The hair of Ingulf! My son no longer lives!" said the old man. "Yet will I go in search of him; I will follow Ingulf to Valhalla: let my pyre be lit in yonder ship." Bearing the dead Raven on his folded arms Torsting stepped aboard to

Perish on the wave,  
 Like the old Vikinger brave,  
 And in high Valhalla's halls,  
 Hold eternal festivals;  
 And drink the blood-red draught  
 None but heroes ever quaffed,  
 With Odin and the spirits of the free.  
 In the fire, or in the wreck,  
 He will die upon the deck,  
 And be buried like a monarch of the sea.

After such a tragedy as that, I scarcely like to enlarge upon a different kind of story of a Raven, which, however, might have ended in a tragedy too:

A certain Shetland witch was in the habit of changing persons with a Corbie, which she kept as a "familiar." *He* would sit harmless in the chimney corner, as a decent auld wife in "mutch" and "slug," while *she* roamed the skies on evil errands, in the ominous garb of a Raven. The witch had a daughter who was graduating in her mother's profession, and the daughter one day tried to personate the Raven too. By ill-luck she forgot the magic words necessary for bringing her back to human shape; and she must have remained a corbie for the rest of her days, if her witch-mother had not received intimation of the state of affairs, from the real Raven, disporting himself as a comely lass, but desirous of recovering his own person ere long. By some mighty effort of witchcraft, the proper transformation was effected, but with a little drawback: the girl did not recover the use of her human tongue, but croaked like a Raven to the end of her days; and *that* was the origin of the burr in speech which we call "corbieing." Any person who has this particular kind of articulation is believed to have witch-blood in him. No doubt you have heard and believe, that, when Ravens are seen "conflicting in the air," and calling occasionally "corp! corp! corp!" somebody is going to die. A sceptic may say that a Corbie is safe to predict that there will be a corpse knocking around, for there generally is. But that is not a fair inference; and so you will find, if you chance to be the

person who sees and hears the Raven so prophesying. For the "corp" to which he alludes is one in which you, the listener, are personally interested.

I often think that Yarl Corbie wishes us to accept him in the words of one of his kind, who spoke from a basket on the back of Barnaby Rudge. "I'm a devil! I'm a devil!" loudly proclaimed that Raven; and as a fallen angel is a grander creature than a mere earth-born fowl, I think, I rather prefer to accept the Raven on his own statement. He certainly looks Satanic, and we know him to be in league with powers of darkness. He commands our respect and awes us in spite of ourselves. When I see a Raven I want to remember some "guid wird" that will "sain" me, and I would advise you all to take the same precaution.

Ravens are not in the habit of "flocking," like crows and other ignoble birds. They only gather in crowds when death has spread the banquet for the Raven. You will not find more than one or two pairs frequenting a district; but if some poor beast dies, the Corbies soon appear in numbers around the body. Where they come from, and how they know *so soon* of the feast spread for them, is a mystery, unless, as I have already said, they are in league with Satanic powers.

Although Ravens are not uncommon in our Islands, I daresay one would be over the mark in saying that a hundred couples have residence in our cliffs, yet on one occasion some eight hundred were found collected to gorge upon "flinched" whales at Uyasound. Now, where did all those corbies come from? And where do all the Corbies come from whenever carrion is around? It has been observed that Ravens do far more harm on Sunday than on any other day of the week; and an old man told me the reason was that the "odious craters want to shaw their disrespect for Gude, like the Deil's ain bairns 'at they are."

A more commonplace explanation is that on Sunday there are few people out of doors in Shetland; all is quiet, and the Raven, taking advantage of the Sabbath silence and solitude, boldly carries on his "lifting" with impunity. It is a common belief that Ravens are attracted to a house where a corpse is lying, and I see nothing unreasonable in the belief, when we know that Ravens flock mysteriously to some spot where carrion lies; a spot where never more than two or three have been seen together. They are not "fetched" by their brothers. They come from afar, led by some subtle sense beyond the senses of mere man to comprehend.

The Raven attaches himself to a locality and clings to that spot with extreme tenacity. Year after year he resumes his nest on the same cliff, and will not be driven from it. There he dwells winter and summer, amid the lofty precipices overhanging the sea. The night

winds wail and the billows foam around. The snows drift over the rocks, and salt waters fling their spray upon his nest, but, unmoved and immutable, the Raven remains king of the cliff while generations of men are born and perish.

BUT perhaps I have dwelt long enough upon the Bird of Odin, so will now turn to the Bird of Pallas—the bird of “profound meditation” and “prophesy.” The Serpent, which was also one of Pallas Athênê’s “familiar,” represents her *wisdom*, and the Owl her *reflective* and *prophetic* attributes. I do not know what kind of owl it was that the goddess chose. It may have been the “sad Aziola,” which Shelley thought was “some tedious woman,” until he learned to love its melancholy tones. It was in Italy that he found this owl, and possibly the Aziola is the Owl of Greek mythology. But as I have not, like Shelley, studied that creature in its native haunts, and as history gives us no details regarding the Bird of Pallas, I will speak of the king of its kind with whom I am familiar; that is the Snowy Owl, the Katyogle of the North. There is something eerie and awesome in the very word Katyogle. I have never got over my early impressions regarding the creature, and these were of a most ghostly nature, being associated with winter, darkness, the death of a neighbour, and whispers of the Katyogle being “sent” as “a warning,” if “folk wad but look and understand the signs that come frae Abune.” I well remember the occasion when I first beheld a real live Katyogle. One was crippled, captured, and brought to my father, and we were desired to go and look at this *rara avis*. If it had been before explained to me that a Katyogle is a Snowy Owl, familiarity with pictures of its congeners might have destroyed my illusions regarding the creature; but when I heard its English name I also saw its living self, and that confirmed my childish belief in its supernatural character. A large, lordly bird, of snowy plumage, with solemn face, bespeaking a mind rapt in contemplation of nature’s mysteries, yet alive to the degradation of captivity. His great, golden eyes looked boldly into ours, and their gaze, so concentrated, so wary, so indignant, so savage, had a magnetic force in it, and cast a spell on me. The Katyogle did not move his burly person when the curious observer went round to inspect him. He merely turned his head and followed with that unwinking stare of mingled feelings.

You can scarcely imagine the peculiar, not ludicrous, but fearsome, effect produced by the solemn, over-wise face looking straight at you over the creature’s back. The neck had no appearance of being twisted from a more comfortable position. He seemed to find it as easy to wear his head one way as another. When we approached very near, he hissed and looked malignant enough to deter any meddling person

from laying hands on him. Being a philosopher, the Katyogle reconciles himself to the uses of adversity. He grows comparatively tame in captivity, he learns to eat what is placed before him, to recognise with a measure of gentleness those who treat him with consideration, but he never becomes, like the Raven, a willing captive. Like the Raven, he is supposed to live to a great age. When young, the bird is speckled all over with brown, black, grey, or russet, but year by year as he grows older he becomes more white, until at last he stands in his snow-coat, pure as the shroud of his Arctic birthplace.

If the Katyogle does live, as affirmed, for more than a century, we cannot wonder at the accumulation of wisdom which pervades the countenances of mature males. It is believed that, like all higher orders of beings, the Katyogle takes a mate "for better, for worse, till death do them part"; and, like all Northern folk, he has the love of Home very strongly developed. When a Katyogle has chosen a certain locality for his abode, he will cling to it in preference to any other, and will return to his favourite spot, even when scared from it betimes by the blood-thirsty Briton, who is never so happy as when hunting a living thing to death.

A pair of Katyogles haunted Crushafiel for years, although assured that the Heogues had many advantages. There may have been a better reason than love of a certain place which made the couple continue to reside in the hill of Crushafiel. It may be that there is an understanding among Katyogles regarding rights of property. They are a reserved and stately race. They prefer a recluse life. Probably their code of honour leaves a certain amount of ground to be hunted over by certain individuals, and does not permit others of the species to encroach thereon. This may explain why more than one or two birds seldom haunt the same district.

Crushafiel is undulating and covered in some parts with heather. Flowers of Alpine beauty and brightness abound; there are many scattered boulders and sheltered nooks, but the hill is flat at its highest level and commands an extensive view. There the golden plover and sandy loo delight to nest, and you may hear their wistful piping any day or night that you may choose to wander over the shaggy hill; there the mountain linnet loves to sport; there the merry little wheatear practises its gift of mimicry; there the pretty little field mouse weaves its dainty cradle; there the fairy rings are set. It has been supposed by some that those circles mark a place where the Law-ting was held, or where honoured men were buried. Others insist that the "fairy rings" refer to some system of religion, Druidical or Scandinavian. Either, or all, suppositions please me! The Katyogle lights upon those magic rings, and muses on history, and we

cannot wonder that he looks with aversion on our kind as he reviews "what has been." But I want you to know some of our dear old faulds and fiels; our heogues and sayters; and so I will tell you more of the Katyogle's haunts.

When that couple of snowy owls were romancing by the "fairy rings," and feeding their poetic souls upon golden plover, an ancient Katyogle was keeping watch on the Muckle Heogue by the tombs of the mighty dead. Perhaps he was moralizing on the littleness of our great men. The muckle Heogue is a small steep hill, set on the top of another hill; and on its crown there is an ancient burying-ground. At its base is a second and later place of sepulture, from whence the hill slopes gradually towards Baltasound on the south, and Haroldswick on the north. Of this second burying place there exists a legend: A battle was fought close by, and a mighty Viking named Harold was slain and buried there. The cairns which covered the graves have been overthrown, and the tombs are open and empty of all save ferns and lichens. They are built of large stones, are much shorter than a man, and deep enough for a person to sit upright. In that position the warriors were "left in Glory's bed." Of the burying place on the summit of the Heogue no tradition remains. It was accidentally discovered when a bonfire was lit to celebrate our Prince's marriage with the fair Dane whom the Hialtlanders claim as kinswoman. Some urns were found and preserved, and a few charred bones. When the scientist had poked among the stones, and had rifled the graves to his heart's content, the place was left once more to be the Katyogle's haunt. And there he comes with the winter snows, year by year; silently, spectrely, he alights upon a boulder at the base of the Heogue, and surveys the scene, weird and desolate in *our* sight, congenial and inspiring in *his*. He has been brought from the charmed Arctic circle on the impulse of a strong northerly gale, and he has fasted long. The short winter day has ended, and in the dusky light we can scarcely distinguish the Katyogle from the surrounding stones and patches of snow. He makes himself small and long shaped, and looks all around very keenly. Then he draws himself in close, and full, and ponders over what has happened since he left Hialtland in the preceding Spring. Presently it occurs to him that in all probability some beetles are hiding among the mosses at his feet. Softly he drops from the stone and inspects; while doing so his golden eyes are made very small. His search is rewarded, but he does not relish beetles very much; so, after sacrificing a few, he returns to his vantage ground and his musings. Ere long a flutter of many pinions, and the tinkling twitter of birdies, rouse him to keen interest in practical things. Then the broad, white wings

of the Katyogle expand; the glorious eyes flash like the radiant locks of Balder; he utters a fearful screech; and, taking a swift, slanting, course, drops upon the flock, which scatters in terror. A bird is caught, and in brief time the Katyogle makes complete end of it; but before that is done, the snafool have flown to the shelter of a farmyard.

The noise made by the Katyogle has scared a juvenile rabbit of small sense, that had been amusing itself with darting out and in among the gravestones. It had never seen or heard a snowy owl in its life, and in uttermost terror it scampers over the hill to reach its burrow. Alas! it is seen and dropped upon by the enemy. Short shrift has the "kyning," and when its remains have been conveyed to their living tomb, Katyogle settles himself once more by Harold's grave, and continues there for hours, motionless as if he were carved in stone. The winds moan drearily around; the snow-flakes drift over the hill: these do not affect him. He has seen generations of men return to the dust. He has eaten a substantial meal. These things are enough for him to consider. Surely he composes a saga on the spot!—The miles of rugged hill and moor which stretch between Southavoe and Uyasound are a favourite resort of the Katyogles; and small wonder! That is the nesting-ground of lapwing, snipe, golden plover, and various tiny birds. Their nursery duties are, of course, ended before the Katyogles arrive from Iceland and Lapland, but some species flock during the winter months, and are always to be found on these hills.

If you linger by the burn o' Watley in the gloaming you will hear the snipe "drumming" over the marshes not far away. You will hear the golden plover sadly appealing to each other from hill to hill. A heron, fishing in the loch, and disturbed, will startle you by uttering his hideous scream as he rises in the air and seeks another locality. Presently a dunlin, or sandy-loo, will whistle softly as he runs over the shingled margins of the burn, and then skims away, seeking the sea-shore. The plaintive piping of "whaups"; the hysterical cries of lapwings; the varied interjections of gulls; come to you also from passing birds. And be sure the chorus is not infrequently augmented by the profound remarks of a hoodie crow out on the prowl. It may be that a grim Raven's sepulchral "corp! corp! corp!" is added as he sails overhead, with his sinister glance upon you. He is probably *en route* for Helyawater, by whose sheltering knowes he expects to find a feeble lamb, or a worn-out pony. If you follow the burn to its source, you will probably find his Ravenship by the haunted vatn. He will have alighted on the cairn which rises from a tiny islet in the loch. He may be descended from the identical

Raven that belonged to a Viking, and used to dwell on that holm—tradition says. It is said that the Yarl was buried there, and by his grave dwelt the Raven.

One wild Yüle night a lad dared the spells of evil and tried to reach the cairn. He was drowned in Helyawater, and the Raven remained master of the situation. If you approach very cautiously you may catch a glimpse of the Katyogle near the vatn. He has been slumbering all day in that sequestered spot among the stones, from some of which he is scarcely distinguishable, for they are white, streaked with grey lichen. Helyawater lies apart from all tracks, and the Hialtlander remarks that thankfully when he has occasion to cross those hills after dusk.

Even by daylight few people care to visit the lonely vatn. But the birds love it, though many a defenceless one falls victim there to the falcon, crow, and owl. I do not think the aristocratic Katyogle cares to prosecute his nocturnal art under the observation of a critical Corbie, therefore he will silently wing his way to some brae where he can overlook a hamlet. He knows that plenty of mice may be in the yards, or among the stubble, that skylarks and mountain linnets are cowering among the grasses and corn-stacks. In one cottage lies a dying man, and all is quiet around that dwelling, for no one ventures to leave it unless on some most imperative duty.

Naturally the Katyogle prefers the quiet kail-yard of that house to others where merry folk and busy folk are making noise out and in. The Katyogle's character is antagonistic to fuss. Solitude is his paradise. We can now understand how he "takes to" the neighbourhood of sick and dying people. Katyogles will frequently be found on the Isles of Hoonie and Balta, which are riddled with rabbit burrows, and whose shores swarm with little birds. These islands are the favourite haunts of the Raven also. We should not grudge our Birds of Omen their haunts and their share of game. After all is said, their methods of sport and their weapons are God-given. When they adopt breech-loaders and train ferrets to do their hunting, will be time enough to think of putting restraints on them.

The Corbie seldom attacks living creatures unless they are weak and unprotected. The Katyogle leaves Hialtland ere its feathered folk begin to wed; doubtless he has engagements of his own of the same sort in the Arctic regions during the spring and summer, and does not return to our Isles till the nestlings are reared and flown. I do not mean to say that Corbie and Katyogle would pass an egg or a half-fledged birdie, if such came their way; but, as a matter of fact, brooding parents have not much to fear from our

Birds of Omen. The one is far away when their households are upon their minds, the other—prefers dead meat! For sake of associations revered and cherished, I pray you, spare the Corbie and Katyogle to haunt the hills and rocks, and add the poetry of superstitious legend to the wild beauty of our Isles.

I hope I have not exhausted your patience. If I have not proved myself—as Shelley feared the owlet would—a “tedious woman,” perhaps you will allow me to finish with a poem which describes the Corbie and Katyogle, exercising their functions as Birds of Omen, premising with this little bit of Scottish folk-lore :

“If a raven flies across the fisher’s path, when bound for the sea, his voyage will be unlucky; and if the bird appears, or croaks, when you are looking out for the boats, evil will happen. When a snowy owl *takes to* (haunts) the neighbourhood of a home, some one in it will die.”

ON his mighty wing of ebon,  
Comes the Bird of Night :  
Not upon the misty hill top  
Does he stay his flight ;  
Spurning valley, rock, and ocean,  
All before him spread,  
Slowly on his dusky pinion,  
Sails he overhead.  
Where the fisher’s home is freshened  
By the passing waves,  
Hoarsely bodes the warning Raven,  
As he lower laves.<sup>1</sup>  
Quickly from her lonely dwelling  
Comes the gentle wife,  
Looks she out where ocean carries  
All she loves in life.  
There are shadows on the mountain,  
There are ripples on the fountain,  
And a rainbow spans the lea ;  
Clouds across the azure heaven  
By a waking wind are driven :  
There is sorrow on the sea.

Then the spectre Bird of Omen,  
Dark as midnight’s gloom,  
Hovers, uttering weird-like warning  
Of a coming doom.  
Ah! she knows the dismal croaker,  
And her cheek grows pale ;  
Wistful glances sends she seawards  
Searching for *his* sail.  
Downward roll the awful thunders,  
Answering billows rave,  
Swiftly close the angry waters  
O’er the fisher’s grave.  
Solemnly departs the Raven,  
And the mourners dwell  
Where he boded evil tidings,  
Where his shadow fell.  
O’er the vatn<sup>2</sup> in the valley  
Ghostly wreaths of vapour rally  
To enshroud the smiling lea.  
In a mist each rocky giant,  
Frowning, holds his head, defiant  
Of the sorrow from the sea.

On a snowy wing of silence,  
From the distant hill,  
Gleaming, like a white-robed spirit,  
In the evening still,  
Comes the lowly Owlet, bearing  
Death to broken hearts ;  
And he haunts the house whence sorrow  
Never more departs.  
Round the cot, on noiseless pinion,  
Flits the unkin<sup>3</sup> bird ;  
And the dying wife has seen it,  
And her soul is stirred.  
“Welcome,” says she, “well I ken thee,  
Phantom bird of snow ;  
Thou hast come to call my spirit,  
And I gladly go.”  
Over hill and rock and river,  
Restless shapes of darkness quiver,  
And upon the quiet lea  
Lies an amp<sup>4</sup> of chill foreboding,  
Troubled bosoms overloading  
With the sorrow of the sea.

Silently, as shadow falling  
From a sombre cloud,  
Goes the Owlet back to Norland,  
Wrapped in downy shroud ;  
And upon the Arctic mountain,  
Where the bleak winds moan,  
Full of melancholy dreamings,  
Broods he all alone.  
Troubled breakers dash tumultuous  
O’er the fisher’s breast ;  
On the grave where sleeps his widow  
Pale flowers meekly rest.  
And the Raven bodes of evil,  
As he did of yore ;  
But a silence binds the homestead  
By the wave-washed shore.  
Death and darkness cast their mantle,  
“Düil an’ whan ! abüne a hantle,”<sup>5</sup>  
And their shade lies on the lea :  
Birds of Omen from them borrow  
The insignia of sorrow—  
The sad secret of the sea

<sup>1</sup> Laves—hovering without motion of the wings. <sup>2</sup> Vatn—a small fresh-water lake. <sup>3</sup> Unkin—stranger. <sup>4</sup> Amp—weight on the spirit foreboding evil. <sup>5</sup> Sorrow and alas! above a great deal.



FOLK-LORE  
OF  
THE RAVEN AND THE OWL.

BY W. A. CLOUSTON.

I.—THE RAVEN.

MANY and interesting are the superstitions which have been current, time out of mind, among almost all peoples, regarding the Raven, whose appearance and harsh cry are universally considered as foreboding misfortune. We read in the Old Testament that the Raven was twice singled out from all other birds as being endowed with mysterious intelligence—when Noah sent a raven forth from the Ark, to ascertain whether the waters had abated, and when ravens were divinely commissioned to feed the prophet Elijah, while he dwelt “by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan.”

According to the Korán, after Cain had slain his brother, Adam was perplexed how to dispose of the body when it was become offensive, till “Allah sent a raven, which killed another raven in his presence, and then dug a pit with his beak and claws, and buried him therein,” thus showing our great progenitor what he must also do.

The Rabbis say that when Noah sent forth the raven, the bird thus remonstrated: “From all cattle, beasts, and fowls, thou sendest none but me.” Noah retorted: “What need has the world for thee? Thou art good neither for food nor sacrifice.” But God commanded Noah to receive the raven, as the world should one day be in need of him. “When?” asked Noah. The allo-

cution from on high was: “When the waters are dried up from off this earth, there shall in a time to come arise a certain righteous man, and then I shall make use of the raven.” This, says Rabbi Eliezer, explains what is written of the prophet Elijah, when he dwelt by the brook Cherith, that “the ravens brought him bread and flesh every morning” (1 Kings xvii, 6). Yet the raven, according to Jewish law, is unclean (Deut. xiv, 14).

Originally the raven was white, the Hebrew doctors inform us, and was changed to a deep black as a punishment for its deceitful conduct: a legend which they may have borrowed from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, B. ii, Fab. 9, 10, where it is related that Apollo having been told by a raven, which he employed as a messenger, of the misconduct of Coronis, the god in his sudden wrath slew her with an arrow, and immediately repented of his rash action; and as a warning to all tale-tellers—to cite old Gower, who has the story in his *Confessio Amantis*, B. iii—

Upon the bridd he tok this wreche:<sup>1</sup>  
That there he was snow-whyte to fore,  
Evere afterward colblak therefore  
He was transformed, as it scheweth,  
And many a man yet him beschreweth,  
And clepen<sup>2</sup> him unto this day  
A Raven, be whom yet man mai  
Take evidence whan he crieth  
That some mishap it eignifieth.

1 Revenge.

2 Call.

This legend is reproduced—*mutatis mutandis*—in the *Arabian Nights*, with a parrot, and in all European versions of the *Seven Wise Masters*, with a magpie, in place of the raven.<sup>1</sup>

The Tyrolese have a very different story to account for the sable hue of the raven. In the olden time ravens were of beautiful appearance, with plumage as white as snow, which they kept clean by constant washing in a certain stream. To this stream came one day the Holy Child, desiring to drink, but the ravens prevented him by splashing the water about and befouling it; whereupon he said: "Ungrateful birds! Proud you may be of your beauty, but your feathers, now so snowy white, shall become black, and so remain until the Day of Judgment."

The expression "raven blackness" has become synonymous with the deepest hue of black. Solomon says that the locks of the beloved are curly, and "black as a raven" (Cant. v, 11). Milton, in his masque of *Comus*, says that sweet strains of music "smoothed the raven down of Darkness till it smiled."<sup>2</sup> And in the most pathetic of all the countless pathetic Scotch songs, the faithful, loving, old wife reminds her spouse—

John Anderson, my jo, John,  
When we were first acquaint,  
Your locks were like the raven,  
Your bonny brow was brent.

In *Bartholomæus de Proprietatibus Rerum*, a kind of encyclopædia, compiled in Latin by an English monk, about the middle of the 13th century, and translated into English in 1397, it is said: "The raven beholdeth the mouths of her birds when they yawn. But she giveth them no meat ere she know and see the likeness of her own blackness, and

<sup>1</sup> In No. 4 of Callaway's *Zulu Nursery Tales*, a raven betrays a false bride.

<sup>2</sup> Byron is reported, in Captain Medwin's *Conversations*, to have tried to be-little this fine passage by comparing it to "stroking a black cat, to elicit electric sparks." One might with as much propriety say that Byron's expression "the music of her face" (in *The Bride of Abydos*) meant that the lady had "a singing face"—only he filched the thought from Richard Lovelace.

of her own colour and feathers. And when they begin to wax black, then afterward she feedeth them with all her might and strength. It is said that ravens' birds are fed with dew of heaven all the time they have no black feathers by benefit of age. Among fowls," adds the learned Bartholomew, "only the raven hath *four and sixty changings of voice*"! (Lib. xviii, c. 10.)

This notion of the raven being at first regardless of her young is alluded to in Psalm cxlvii, 9: "He giveth to the beast his food, and to the young ravens when they cry"; also in the Book of Job (xxxviii, 4): "Who provideth for the raven his food? When his young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat." And again it is employed in the gospel of S. Luke, xii, 24, as an example of God's providence: "Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls?" The faithful old servitor Adam, in Shakspeare's play of *As You Like It* (ii, 3), also alludes to the same wide-spread belief:

He that doth the ravens feed . . .  
Be comfort to my age.

Burns, also, in his *Cottar's Saturday Night*, represents the "parent pair" as praying—

That He, who stills the raven's clam'rous nest,  
And decks the lily fair in flowery pride,  
Would, in the way His wisdom sees the best  
For them and for their little ones provide.

A terrible punishment is threatened to be inflicted by this carrion-loving bird on disobedient children in the Proverbs ascribed to Solomon (xxx, 17): "The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it." And in several passages of the Old Testament ruined cities are described as the haunts of ravens and owls.

Porphyry tells us that the Magians called the priests of Mithras, the sun-god, ravens: on the mantle of Mithras a raven was perched. After the mysterious disappearance of Aristæas, the necromancer, it was

believed that he returned to the earth in the form of a raven.

In the Norse mythology Odin's two ravens, *Hugin* and *Munin* (Mind and Memory), after roaming over the world, returned and perched on his shoulders, and gave him a full account of all they had seen and heard; hence one of the numerous names of Odin was *Hrafnagud*, the Raven-god. In the Sagas we read that when Sigurd told his mother that he and his followers were about to encounter in battle an enemy that outnumbered them by seven to one, she said, "I would have raised thee in my wool chest, if I had been certain that thou wouldst live for ever. Better is it to die than to live in shame. Take this *merki* (*i.e.* standard), which I have made with my best skill, and which I believe will be victorious for those before whom it is carried, but fatal to him who carries it." This standard was in the shape of a raven, and when the wind blew on it, it seemed as if the raven spread his wings. Sigurd Jarl went against Finlleik Jarl at Skidamyri, and both arrayed their men. When the fight began, the Scots slew the standard-bearer of Sigurd Jarl; he appointed another to carry it, but after a while he, too, fell; three standard-bearers were slain, but Sigurd Jarl was victorious.

The most famous raven-standard was called *Landeyda*, or Land-ravager. "It was said to have been woven and embroidered in one noontide, by the daughter of Regner Lodbrok, the son of Sigurd—that dauntless warrior who chanted his death-song while perishing in a horrible pit, filled with deadly serpents. If the the Danish arms were destined to defeat, the raven hung his head and drooped his wings; if victory was to attend them, he appeared to be soaring."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the *Heimskringla*, Earl Hakon, commander of the fleet, is called "Warder of the Waves' Raven."—Pliny mentions that the natives of Taprobane, when blown far out to sea, were enabled to return to land by steering in the same direction as the crows flew; and it is curious to find the Raven was employed for the like purpose by the adventurous Norsemen.

On the celebrated Bayeux tapestry, William the Conqueror (who was a descendant of the old Vikings) is represented at the battle of Hastings with a banner on which is the figure of a raven. When Thor's terrible hammer, *Miölnar*, fell in Denmark before the Cross, the time-honoured raven-standard was superseded by the symbol of the Christian religion.

Moslems call the raven "the Bird of Separation," because it did not return to the Ark (but, from the expression "to and fro" in the biblical narrative, it is clear that the bird must have returned to the Ark at intervals);<sup>1</sup> and also "Abū Zajir," or Father of Omens, from the universal belief in its powers of foretelling coming events, especially misfortunes. In Western as well as in Eastern lands the appearance, or hearing the cry, of a raven on one's *left* hand foreboded death, or some serious calamity, while the reverse was understood when the bird was seen or heard to cry on one's *right*. Thus, in Dryden's translation of Virgil—

The hoarse raven on yon blasted bough,  
By croaking to the *left*, presaged the  
coming blow;

In Plautus' play of *Aulularia* (iv, 3):  
"It was not for nothing that the  
raven was just now croaking on my  
left hand." In Gay's *Fables* (xxxvi,  
27 ff.)—

That raven on yon *left-hand* oak  
(Curse on his ill-betiding croak!)  
Bodes me no good.

The Arabs and Persians set great store by the appearance of certain animals and birds on the right or left hand, as indicating the success or failure of any enterprise about to be undertaken; and to this the

<sup>1</sup> Sir David Lyndesay, in his *Dialog betuix Experience and one Courteour*, Book First, says that, when Noah perceived the sky clear—

He send furth Corbie messenger  
In to the air for to espy  
Geve he saw ony montanis dry;  
Sum sayis the Ravin did furth remane,  
And come nocht to the ark agane.  
The phrase "corbie messenger" used to be applied to one who had been sent on an errand and was slow in returning, or did not return at all.

Egyptian poet Baha-ed-Din Zohayr alludes gracefully :—

My love is like a young gazelle,  
Appearing on the huntsman's right;  
And, oh, the bargain prospered well,  
When she and I our troth did plight.

In English folk-lore, to see *one* raven was accounted lucky, but to see *three* was an unfortunate omen. Thus, in M. Lewis' ballad of *Bill Jones* :

"Ah, well-a-day!" the sailor said,  
"Some danger must impend!  
Three ravens sit in yonder glade,  
And evil will happen, I'm sore afraid,  
Ere we reach our journey's end."  
"And what have the ravens with us to do?  
Does their sight betoken us evil?"  
"To see *one* raven is lucky, 'tis true,  
But it's certain destruction to light upon *two*,  
And meeting with *three* is the devil!"

The Persians regard this matter somewhat differently, as the following droll story will serve to show. A gentleman before retiring to rest said to his servant, "If you see two ravens together early in the morning, let me know of it, that I may also behold them, as it will be a good omen that I shall pass the whole day pleasantly." It so happened that the man did see two ravens sitting together, but when his master came out he saw but one, the other having flown away, at which he was very angry, and began to beat the poor fellow, when there arrived a present to the gentleman of some choice food and wine from a friend. Upon this the servant exclaimed, "O my lord, *you* saw but *one* raven, and have received a fine present; had you seen *two*, you would have had *my* fate."

The belief in the prophetic powers of the raven is widely spread. In Denmark its appearance in a village is considered a prognostication that the parish priest will die shortly. It is believed to be an exorcised spirit; the hole in its left wing was caused by a stake driven into the earth where the spirit was exorcised; and woe to him who looks up when the bird flies overhead, and sees through the hole, for he will become a night raven himself, and the spirit in the raven's form will be released. The raven is for ever flying eastwards, in hope of reaching the Holy Sepulchre, for when it arrives there it will find

rest. — In Sweden ravens which scream by night in forest swamps and moors are believed to be the ghosts of murdered men, whose bodies have been concealed in those places by their undetected murderers, and have therefore not received Christian burial. In Iceland it is still held that ravens not only know what is going on at a distance, but they are also acquainted with all that is to happen in the future.

Cornish folk have a legend that King Arthur is still alive in the form of a raven, and many will not shoot the bird, lest they should slay "the coming king." In many parts of England, when a raven is seen over the head of either a bride or a bridegroom, it is regarded as the forerunner of sorrow and misfortune. In Bohemia ravens are believed to be tenanted by the souls of the damned, and even by the arch-fiend himself, for witches ride on them. In Andalusia, if the raven is heard croaking over a house, an unlucky day is expected; if his croak is repeated thrice, it is a fatal presage; and perching high and croaking, a corpse will soon come from that direction. In Languedoc they say that wicked priests after death become ravens, and wicked nuns become crows.

In Germany, according to Rochholtz, when a raven sits upon the roof of a house where there is a corpse, it means that the dead man's soul has *not* gone to Paradise! In the Tyrol, when the raven shrieks a misfortune impends in the neighbourhood; and in the canton of Berne, when ravens flock to a house, it means sickness to the cows.

Among the Arabs of the Great Desert, the Raven's presence is a presage of good or evil according to circumstances. For example, they say: "When you see a raven fly alone, wandering in the sky, do not pursue your journey; but if you see two fly together, proceed with confidence." In certain parts of South Germany the Raven is believed to be the harbinger of good fortune.

Allusions to the evil-boding cry of the Raven are very frequent in the works of the Elizabethan dramatists.

Thus, in Shakspeare's *Troilus* (v, 2) Thersites malignantly exclaims: "Would I could meet that rogue Diomed, I would croak like a raven, I would bode, I would bode." In the Third Part of *Henry V* (v. 6), Henry of Gloster says that at his birth "the raven rooked her on the chimney-top." Lady Macbeth remarks (i, 5)—

The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements.

The noble Othello, devoured by jealousy, and too ready to yeild credence to the arch-villain Iago's insinuations against the chaste Desdemona, exclaims (iv, i)—

Oh, it came o'er my memory,  
As doth a raven o'er the infected house,  
Boding to all.

In the play of *King John* (iv. 3), we read—

Vast confusion waits,  
As doth a raven o'er a sick-fallen beast;  
and in *Titus Andronicus* (ii, 3), "the fatal raven"; and Hamlet, referring to the murder of his father, says (iii, 2)—

The croaking raven  
Doth bellow for revenge.

The poet Spenser speaks of—

Death's dreadful messenger,  
The horse night-raven, trompe of doleful  
drere.

George Peele, in his drama of *David and Bethsabe*, makes the Chorus speak of—

The fatal Raven, that in his voice  
Carries the dreadful summons of our deaths;  
and the violated maiden Thamar  
resolves to hide her shame—

in desert woods;  
There will I lurè with my windy sighs  
Night ravens and owls to rend my side,  
Which with a rusty weapon I will wound,  
And make them passage to my panting  
heart;

and Joab, referring to Absalom, says:  
Night ravens and owls shall sing his fatal  
knell.

In Barham's tale of "The Old Woman of Berkeley" (*Ingoldsby Legends*)—

The Raven croaked as she sat at her meal.  
And the old woman knew what she said;  
And she grew pale at the Raven's tale,  
And sickened and went to bed;

and in a Scotch ballad—

Yestreen, I was working my stocking,  
And you wi' your sheep on the hill,  
A filthy black corbie sat croaking—  
I'm sure it foreboded some ill.

Besides being a harbinger of grief and death, the raven was believed to possess the dreadful property of conveying infectious diseases. Thus the monster Caliban (*Tempest*, i, 5) invokes on Prospero and Miranda—

As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed  
With raven's feather from the unwholesome  
fen

Drop on you both!

And in Marlowe's play of *The Jew of Malta*—

The sad, presaging Raven, that tells  
The sick man's passport in her hollow beak,  
And in the shadow of the silent night  
Doth shake contagion from her sable wing.

When many a "braw fellow" was hanged for reiving in the Border country, the Raven must have had great feasts on the bodies which were left dangling—as a warning "to whom it might concern." Of this we may accept the following rhyme, current in Berwickshire in those days of fierce unrest, as good evidence—

The Corbies in the Corbie Heugh  
Are crouping, like to dee;  
But our laird will give them meat enough,  
And that you soon shall see,  
When Houdie and his reivers rude  
Hang on the gallows tree.

The "corp! corp! corp!" of the Raven received a very original interpretation from David Ferguson, one of the early Scottish reformers: "At St. Andrew's he met along with other ministers of the Church, in order to protest against the installation of Patrick Adamson as Bishop of that see. On that occasion a person came in and reported that there was 'a Corbie croupin' on the kirk.' 'That's a bad omen,' said Ferguson; 'for its origination is from *avium garribus*, the Raven is *omnimodo*, a 'black' bird, and therefore ominous; and if we read rightly what it speaks, it will be found to be corrupt! corrupt! corrupt!'"<sup>1</sup>

But while we may very properly despise the once universal belief,

<sup>1</sup> M'Crie's *Sketches of Scottish Church History*, vol. i. p. 118.

that the croaking of the Raven was a prognostic of the death of some human being in its neighbourhood, the notion, which prevails in some parts of Ireland, that the appearance of a number of ravens in Autumn is a sign of great mortality among sheep, seems to have foundation in ascertained fact.—In an old chap-book, entitled, *The Shepherd's Prognostication for the Weather*, printed in 1573, it is said that "if ravens be seen to stand gaping towards the sun, it is a manifest sign of extreme heat to follow"; and doubtless this, like many other bits of the weather-lore of our simple forefathers, was the result of close observation of natural phenomena. In some districts of Scotland ravens build their nests in the sea-cliffs, says the Rev. Walter Gregor. "If they make short flights inland, it is taken as an indication of stormy weather; but if they make a strong flight inland to a considerable distance, it is a token of fair weather."<sup>1</sup>

Reference has already been made to the popular belief that Satan often assumes the form of the Raven. In Danish folk-songs (says Grimm, in his *Deutsche Mythologie*), the "vilde ravn," "vilde val-ravn" (*corvis stragis*), takes exactly the place of the diabolic troll. And in the puppet-play of Dr. Faust "it is remarkable that the raven who is the bearer of the written covenant with the Devil is called the bird of Mercury, which would be exactly right of Odin."—A wild legend is current in Aberdeenshire which tells how a man who had made a paction with Satan at length sickened and died, whereupon a raven flew into the house, crying, "I want my own! I want my own!" The dead wizard's neighbours, to preserve his corpse from the clutches of the fiend, made a circle round it, and standing within the circle, by constantly making the all-powerful sign of the Cross, kept off the raven till day dawned, when he flew away. Another Berwickshire rhyme alludes to the notion that

Satan, in the form of a raven, never fails to claim "his own"—

Satan, in a Corbie's shape,  
Will come and take his pets away.

In some of our early ballads the Devil in raven-form appears at sea, to work destruction. Thus in the Scotch ballad of "The Twa Corbies," one of those diabolical birds says—

As I sat on the deep sea sand,  
I saw a fair ship right at hand;  
I waded my wings, I beat my beak,  
The ship sank, and I heard a shriek.

Here, surely, was either Satan himself or one of his "angels"! In another ballad we meet with him again in the same shape :

The ship rolled on the heavy deep,  
The wind no longer blew,  
And over them, greedy to sink them all,  
The fierce wild Raven flew.

Cicero regarded it as an evil omen when a raven perched on the ship which bore him over the sea. Chinese sailors, when ravens rest on a mast, throw crumbs to them, in order to secure a fair wind. In one of Mr. Giles' *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, a man who has been changed into a raven is thus sustained by the seamen. To disturb ravens in any manner is considered as very unlucky, and Archdeacon Gray relates that sailors on the Yangtze feared most disastrous consequences should the passengers shoot them, as they purposed doing.

Ravens, as well as black cats, were believed to be familiars of witches and wizards. The *Mirakel Buch*, which recounts the exploits of Dr. Faust, was also called *Die Schwartzæ Rabe* (the Black Raven), and the figure of the bird itself appears on the title-page. In Goethe's *Faust*, the witch asks Mephistopheles "Wo sind eure beiden Raben?" (Where have you left your pair of Ravens?); and Faust himself, in another part of the famous dramatic poem, asks, "What weave they there round the Raven-stone?"—the old German name for a place of execution where the corpses attracted numbers of ravens; and in a rejected chorus of Byron's *Deformed Transformed* the grim epithet also occurs—

The Raven sits  
On the Raven-stone.

<sup>1</sup> *Folk-Lore of the North East of Scotland*, p. 137.

After all is said, however, the Raven, like the "certain gentleman" with whom he was identified by the early Christians, and in much later times by the people of most European countries, may not be so black as he is painted. Were not three ravens the companions of St. Benedict? And did not three others escort St. Gregory? In the myth, or romance, of King Oswald, also, a raven flies on to his shoulder, the king talks to it, and even kneels before it. And was it not through the conversation of ravens that the poor blinded tailor, in the German story of "The Two Travellers," learned the means of recovering his sight?

The longevity of the Raven is believed to be much greater than that of any other bird or beast, and it has been known to live in captivity fully a hundred years. On this subject a diverting story is told in the *Lettres Nouvelles de M. Boursault*, 1698: The wife of a shoemaker, having been ordered by her husband to buy him a linnet, went one day to the Quay de la Megisserie, where she met one of her gossips. "What has brought you here? she asked. "I have come to buy a bird," replied her gossip. "And I for the same thing," said the shoemaker's wife. "And I," quoth the other, "choose a Raven." "By my faith," replied the shoemaker's wife, "you select an ugly bird." "Doubtless," said her gossip, "it is not very beautiful, but it is said that it lives seven or eight hundred years, and I would see—my husband and I—if that is true."<sup>1</sup> Boursault adds that the common belief is, that there is no animal which lives so long as the Raven. "It is said that three weasels live the age of a dog; three dogs, the age of a horse; three horses, the age of a man; three men, the age of a stag; three stags, the age of a raven; and three ravens, "un temps innombrable."

Christian hagiology represents two ravens as being the means of con-

<sup>1</sup> One of the *facetiæ* of Hierokles is of a pedant who, having heard that the Raven lives 200 years, bought one, that he should ascertain the fact for himself.

victing murderers: St. Meinrad was a hermit who had built himself a cell on the site of the present monastery of Einsiedeln, in Canton Schwytz, where his companions were two tame ravens. One day he was brutally murdered by two brigands, who had hoped to find treasure, but were of course disappointed. The ravens, eager to avenge their master's death, followed the murderers to a little inn at Zurich, where they flapped their wings against the windows, and screamed for hours. The robbers thought this a warning from Heaven and confessed their crime, and they were at once executed.—The small hostel which was the scene of this remarkable occurrence, was afterwards called the "Ravens' Inn," and a black stone on which were carved the figures of two Ravens was built into the front wall. It would appear that the poet Longfellow found it still "a den of thieves" (in the modern sense of the expression, as applied to hosteleries), since he thus humorously refers to the extortionate charges at the inn—now, however, almost entirely rebuilt, a place of good repute, and called the "Hôtel Bilhartz"—

Beware of the Raven of Zurich!

'Tis a bird of omen ill,

With a noisy and unclean breast,

And a very, very long bill!

It may perhaps be fairly questioned whether such an occurrence as the discovery of the saint's murderers by two ravens, as above related, has any foundation in fact, since it bears a very suspicious resemblance to the old Grecian story of the "Cranes of Ibycus," which, with characteristic modifications, somehow found its way into one or two texts of the *Arabian Nights*, and of which a variant from a Persian manuscript collection of tales, is given in my Appendix to the first and second "Supplement" volumes of Sir R. F. Burton's consummate translation of that famous story-book.

In ancient Welsh romances we read of heroes being aided by troops of ravens—doubtless superhuman beings in the forms of those birds. Thus, the story of "The Lady of the Fountain" (in the *Mabinogion*) con-

cludes as follows: "Thenceforward Owain dwelt at Arthur's court greatly beloved, as the head of his household, until he went away with his followers; and those were *an army of three hundred ravens*, which Kenverchyn had left him. And wherever Owain went with these he was victorious."<sup>1</sup>

It might well be supposed that certain magical properties were believed to belong to a bird so awe-inspiring as the Raven. Our Scandinavian cousins held that if a particular white feather in the plumage of the bird could be privily procured, the possessor would be endowed with all wisdom; but as the raven, when wounded and in its dying agonies, always exerts its last strength to pick out this feather and swallow it, in order that its marvellous sagacity should perish with its life, it may be concluded that few men have ever contrived to obtain the precious plume.

It is also said that the Raven has within its body a talisman, called "Korp-sten" (Raven-stone), which has the property of rendering him who should swallow it invisible to human eyes. Dr. Henderson, of Chirnside, in his *Popular Rhymes, etc., of the County of Berwick*, says that his grandfather, who lived in Ayton about the year 1720, obtained possession of "an article of glamourie which he took out of a Corbie's nest in the Corbie Heugh, and which is said to have wrought many miraculous cures, both on man and beast." Among Dr. Henderson's manuscript notes were found the following particulars regarding the "article of glamourie" taken from a Corbie's nest: "It was in great repute for healing tumours, swellings, and sores, and also for curing distempers in cattle, horses, and sheep: and the Laird of Manderston, near Duns, once sent for it to cure his cattle of some desperate disease which raged amongst them, and which had carried

off some of his best animals, but after the Corbie-stone was laid into the pond where the cattle drank, not one of them died, and they all got better in a day or two."<sup>1</sup>

The flesh of serpents, or the water in which it has been boiled, is often mentioned in folk-tales as endowing him who partakes of either with profound knowledge of the past, the present, and the future; but it is perhaps not so generally known that the like remarkable property belongs to "broth made from a black raven," which, if given to a child before baptism, will make him a wizard.<sup>2</sup>

In Bohemia, the hearts of three ravens are burned, reduced to powder and mingled with water, and the bold fellow who swallows the decoction will become an unerring "shot."

The Raven figures frequently in the popular fictions of Europe as well as in those of most Eastern lands, but one notable example may suffice here: it occurs in the mediæval romance commonly known as the "History of the Seven Wise Masters of Rome," of which the "Book of Sindibád" is the ancient Indian, or Persian, prototype. A knight and his son row over to an island where dwelt a holy hermit. They hear three ravens "conversing," and the father remarks that he should like to know what the birds are talking about. The boy, who was acquainted with the language of birds, replied that he could tell, but was afraid of giving his father offence. The knight insisted on knowing, and at length the boy said that the ravens had predicted that he should become a great man, and that his father should one day hold a basin of water while he washed his hands, and his mother should wait upon him with a towel. The knight, enraged at such insolence, as he deemed his son's statement, threw the boy into the sea and returned home. The youth was picked up and taken on board a passing ship, and (to be brief) actually rose to be heir-presumptive

<sup>1</sup> Another Mabinogi, called "The Dream of Rhonabwy," represents Owain as having an army of ravens in his service, which are engaged in combat with some of Arthur's attendants.—Lady Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion*.

<sup>1</sup> Muirhead's *Birds of Berwickshire*, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> See the Irish story of "The Poor Scholar," by the Hon. John Abercromby, in the *Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. iii, 257.



to a throne, and his own father and mother, now fallen on evil days, unwittingly performed the menial services predicted by the ravens, after which he discovered himself to them, and "they lived happily ever afterwards."

Setting aside the old-world belief in "bird and beast languages," in all of which the sage Hebrew king, Solomon, is said to have been profoundly skilled, the Raven when taken young is easily tamed and taught to imitate human speech to a wonderful degree. An Arabian historian mentions a raven who spoke intelligently, not merely by rote, and recited the *Soorat-es-Sijdeh*, or 32nd chapter of the Korán, and, on coming to the verse which should be repeated with prostration, performed the action, saying at the same time, "My body prostrateth itself to Thee, and my heart confideth in Thee"!

Pliny, in his *Natural History*, x, 60, relates an extraordinary story of a tame raven who was the admiration of all Rome, and whose "murder" aroused the indignation of the populace:

In the reign of Tiberius one of a brood of ravens that had been bred in the top of the temple of Castor, happened to fly into a shoemaker's shop that stood opposite, on which, with a feeling of religious reverence, it was looked upon as doubly recommended by the owner of the place. The bird, having been taught to speak at an early age, used every morning to fly to the Rostra, which look towards the Forum, here, addressing each by his name, it would salute Tiberius, and then the Cæsars, Germanicus and Drusus [nephew and son of Tiberius], after which it would proceed to greet the Roman populace, as they passed, and then return to the shop: for several years it was remarkable for the constancy of its attendance. The owner of another shoemaker's shop in the neighbourhood in a sudden fit of anger killed the bird, enraged, as he would have had it appear, because with its ordure it had soiled some of his shoes. Upon this there was such rage manifested by the multitude that he was at once driven from that part of the city, and soon after put to death. The fame, too, of the bird was celebrated with almost endless obsequies. The body was placed upon a litter, carried on the shoulders of two Ethiopians, preceded by a piper, and borne to the pile with garlands of every size and description. The pile was erected on the right hand side of the Appian Way, at the second milestone from the city, in the field generally called the Field of the Rediculus.

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Thus did the rare talent of a bird appear sufficient ground to the Roman people for honouring it with funeral obsequies, as well as for inflicting punishment on a Roman citizen, and that, too, on an occasion in which no such crowds had ever escorted the funeral of any one out of the whole number of its distinguished men, and where no one had been found to avenge the death of Scipio Æmelianus, the man who destroyed Carthage and Numantia. This event happened in the consulship of M. Servilius and Caius Cestius, on the 5th day before the Calends of April (*i.e.* March 28).

In the *Complaynt of Scotland*, which has been ascribed to Sir David Lyndesay of the Mount, among other writers, we have a very curious story of a crafty shoemaker and his two ravens, during the contest for supremacy between Augustus Cæsar and Antony:

At that tyme ther was ane cordinar of Rome, ane verray subtil riche villane, quha be cam neutral induring the werres; yit he nocht beand certan qua suld be superior of Rome, and else beand desirous to have the grace and favouris of hym that hapnit to be imperiour, he, be grit subtilite, neurissit tua yong corbeis in tua cagis, in tua syndry housis, and he leyrrit them bayth to speik. He leyrrit ane of them to saye, God save thy grace, nobil, victoreus, Augustus Cesar; and he leyrrit the other to saye, God save thy grace, nobil, victoreus, Empriour Anthonius. Than this subtil cordinar set ane of his corbeis that gef loving til Augustus furth at his windo, on the plane reu (*i.e.* row), quhen he beheld ony gentil men of Augustus' allya (*i.e.* allies) pas or repas befor his house; and siklyik he set furth his othir corbe at his windo quhen he beheld ony of the allya of Anthonius pas or repas befor his house. The quhilk thing he did to that effect that he mycht wyn the favor of Augustus, and nocht to tynie the favor of Anthonius. Of this sort he was lyk to the sourd with the tua edgis. Than quhen Augustus Cesar venquest Anthonius, and was pacebil empriour, this subtil cordonar presentit the corbe til Augustus, quhilk gef hym loving in hyr artificial speche, of the quhilk Cesar was verray glad, quhar for he gef the cordonar fyftene hundreth peces of gold. But sune there eftir it was reportit to Augustus Cesar that the said subtil cordonar hed ane corbe that gave as grit loving til Anthonius. Than Augustus causit the said corbe and the cordonar to be brocht in his presens; and quhen he persavit that the cordinar was ane astuce, subtil falou, and dissymilit, he gart hang hym on ane potent (*i.e.* gibbet) befor the Capitol, and his tua corbeis be syde hym. (Ed. 1801, pp. 285, 286.)

In reference to talking ravens, it would never do to omit mention of that particularly weird specimen of

his kind which "perched upon a bust of Pallas" (the Owl, by the way, would have been the more appropriate Bird of Omen for such a place!) above Edgar Allan Poe's chamber door, as he "pondered, weak and weary, over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore"—that Raven whose only answer to all that was said to him was the soul-depressing word, "Nevermore!"

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,

"Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store,

Caught from some unhappy master,  
Whom unmerciful disaster

Followed fast and followed faster,

Till his songs one burden bore—

Till the dirges of his hope the melancholy burden bore—

Of 'Never—nevermore!'"

By way of a set-off to these sad verses (which must call up the whole poem to many readers), let us take a diverting Persian story, which has

been brought to mind by Poe's Raven with its single boding word: A wealthy Mogul, sauntering through the bazaar one day, observed a fine parrot in a cage, and asked its price. "A thousand rupees," he was told. "That seems a very large sum of money for a bird," said the Mogul. "Tell me truly—is it really worth the sum you ask?" The parrot saved its owner from the sin of lying by screaming out, "There's not a doubt of it!" The Mogul was pleased with this "reply so aptly spoken," and at once paid down the money and carried the bird home. But he soon found that the parrot had been taught (or had itself picked up) only the words which had come so surprisingly in answer to the question as to its value, and, with deep vexation, he exclaimed, "I was a fool to buy this bird for a thousand rupees." To which the parrot serenely replied, "There's not a doubt of it!"

## II.—THE OWL.

LIKE the Raven, everywhere and in all times, the Owl has been considered as a bird of evil omen, its sudden presence or cry portending death or dire disaster. The Athenians, however, amongst whom the bird was the symbol of Pallas Athênê, regarded its appearance on the eve of battle as a presage of victory.<sup>1</sup> Juno assumed the form of the eagle-owl because, says Aldrovandus, she might not take on herself the likeness of any small or vulgar bird, but rather be embodied in one whose reign by night was equal to that of the eagle by day.

<sup>1</sup> Athênê was styled Glaukopis=owl-eyed. This symbol of the Owl, according to Payne Knight, was adopted for the goddess of wisdom because the owl was "a bird which seems to surpass all other creatures in acuteness of organic perception, its eye being designed to observe objects which to all others are enveloped in darkness, its ear to hear sounds distinctly, and its nostrils to discriminate effluvia with such nicety that it has been deemed prophetic, from discovering the putridity of death, even in the first stages of the disease." In the Panjáb, on the contrary, the Owl is an emblem of extreme stupidity.

In the fragments of Menander it is said that "if the owl should cry we have reason to be afraid." Pliny terms the bird "bubo funebris et maxime abominatus." Virgil introduces it among the prodigies and horrors that preceded the death of Dido, and makes it

complain,  
In lengthened shriek, and dire funereal  
strain.

Ovid, in the 5th Book of his *Metamorphoses*, relates how Ascalapus was transformed by Ceres into an owl, and condemned to predict evil, because he had accused her to Jove of having eaten a young pomegranate in secret, against the prohibition:

Ill-omened in his form, the unlucky fowl,  
Abhorred by man, and called a screeching  
Owl.

It is said that Demosthenes, before going into exile, declared that Pallas Athênê delighted in three fear-inspiring beasts—the owl, the dragon, and the Athenian people. Owls were so abundant in Athens that the proverb "to send owls to Athens" was equivalent to our English saying of "coals

to Newcastle," the Arab proverb, "dates to Hijar," and the Greek saying, "figs to Syracuse."

The Romans twice purified the city with water and sulphur on account of the appearance of the Great Owl in the temples, to which allusion is made by Butler in his *Hudibras* :

The Roman Senate, when within  
The city walls an Owl was seen,  
Did cause their clergy, with lustration  
(Our synod calls, humiliation),  
The round-faced prodigy t' avert  
From doing town and country hurt.

According to Ovid, the screech-owl was supposed to destroy children if they were not watched; and Hasselquist, writing in the middle of the 18th century, makes the same statement regarding the owls in Syria. In Rome it was customary to nail the dead bodies of owls on the doors of houses, in order to protect the inmates from the dreaded influence of the living birds.

In English folk-lore the barn, or screech, owl is specially invested with supernatural power, and it is probable that the Irish superstition of the Banshee had its origin in the horrifying cry of this species. Ellis, in his *Modern Husbandman*, writes: "With us [in Hertfordshire] the owl is called Hobhouchin, and makes a great whooping noise or cry many times in the night, especially a fair one; for when the owl whoops loudest, and does this oftenest, it is by most deemed a sign of pleasant weather; according to the verse :

Nor the Owl, foretelling vain,  
From the high roof, observing Phœbus set,  
Will idly then nocturnal tales repeat.

She will not sing against rain, and has this farther observation recorded of her, that when she frequents a town more than ordinary it presages mortality and sickness to that place; but, according to the notion of country dames, it is this screech-owl that forbodes death or sickness in this manner; for these make a most disagreeable noise, sometimes in our villages, and about our houses, in the night-time, one of which has been known to screech so near a window as to disturb a family, and then it is reckoned a fatal omen."

A pretty legend is current in Normandy, to account for the Owl's

nocturnal habits: The Wren, in the successful effort of fetching fire from heaven for the use of man, lost all its plumage, and the other birds each presented it with a feather, save the surly Owl, and hence it is ashamed to show its face in the day-time.

The Bat is often associated with the Owl in popular legends as highly objectionable, and even gruesome, and a Welsh tale gives a curious reason why those creatures "love the darkness rather than the light": The Dove and the Bat, on a journey together, came late at night to the dwelling of the Chief of the Owls, and sought and were granted shelter. After supper the Bat broke forth into a loud, laudatory strain on the wisdom of their entertainer, attributing to him qualities which it was well known he never possessed. When the Bat had ended his eulogium, the Dove, with modest dignity, simply thanked the Owl for his attentions and hospitality, on which both the Owl and the Bat attacked her furiously, accusing her of ingratitude, and drove her out into the dark and stormy night. When morning dawned the Dove flew to the King, who in great wrath passed an edict, enacting that thenceforth the Owl and the Bat should never presume to fly abroad until the sun was down, under pain of being attacked by all other birds.

In Sicily the Owl that cries by night near the house of a sick man announces his approaching death; but among owls it is the Horned Owl (*jacobu*, *chiovu*, or *chiò*) that is especially feared. The horned owl sings near the house of a sick man three days before his death; if there are no sick people in the house, it announces to one, at least, of its inhabitants that he or she will be struck with squinancy of the tonsil. The peasants in Sicily, when in spring they hear the lamentation of the horned owl for the first time, go to their master to give notice of their intention of leaving his service.<sup>1</sup>

In Hungary the Owl is called the "bird of death." In the Sanskrit collections of apologues and tales called the *Panchatantra* (Five Chap-

<sup>1</sup> De Gubernatis' *Zoological Mythology*, p. 249.

ters) and the *Hitopadesa* (Friendly Advice) the King of the Crows compares the hostile Owl, who arrives towards night, to Yama, the god of the dead. Josephus (*Ant.* xix, 7) tells us that when Herod Agrippa (cf. Acts xii) was receiving the flattering acclaim preceding his death, he looked upwards and perceived an owl over his head, and knew presently that it was but a messenger of his misfortune; . . . and suddenly he was seized," and so forth.—In Hogarth's "Four Stages of Cruelty" an owl is introduced as hovering above the corpse of the murdered woman, though in some reproductions of the plate it seems more like a bat.

In the New World the Owl is also regarded as an uncanny bird. The natives of Yucatan believe that if it alights on, or even flies over, a house, it is a sure presage of death. The Apache Indians have a great dread of the Owl: "On the Sierra Madre expedition, one of the commanders caught an owlet, which he fastened to the pommel of his saddle. When the ugly bird began its low-muttered notes, the excitement among the Apache scouts was something wonderful to witness. Their head man approached General Crook, and remonstrated against the retention of this sure prognostic of defeat."<sup>1</sup>

Wilson, the American ornithologist, in describing the cry of the Owl, says: "The ghostly watchman has frequently warned me of approaching morning, sweeping down and surrounding my fires, uttering a loud and sudden 'Waugh! O Waugh!' sufficient to have startled a whole garrison."—Sir John Richardson narrates the circumstance of a party of Scotch Highlanders who passed a long winter's night of intense fear in the depths of an American forest. They had made their bivouac fire from wood taken from an Indian tomb. All night long the shrieks of the Virginian Owl rang in their affrighted ears, cries which they at once judged came from the spirit of the old warrior, bemoaning his desecrated resting-place.

The Lummi, inhabitants of the main-

land opposite Vancouver's Island, will never kill an owl, says Mr. Dorman. Among the Aztecs, Quiches, and Mayos, the Peruvians, Araucanians, and Algonkins, the owl was thought to have some relation to the dead. The Ojibways called the bridge they thought the spirits of the dead had to pass the Owl Bridge. The Creek priests carried a stuffed owl with them as the badge of their profession. The Arickaras placed one in their council-lodge, and the culture-hero of the Monquins of California was represented, like Athênê, as having one for his companion. The natives of the Antilles wore tunics with figures of these birds embroidered on them. Among the Zulus owls of pottery were very common objects of worship. Brinton says the Indians were of opinion that there were numbers of inferior deities, and that the irrational animals were engaged in viewing their actions. The Eagle, for this purpose, with her keen eye, soared about in the day, and the Owl, with her nightly eye, was perched on the trees around their camp. Therefore, when they observed the Eagle or the Owl near, they immediately offered sacrifice, or burned tobacco.<sup>1</sup>

In Barbary, if the Owl appear from the northward the evil thus portended will not be confined to one person, but a plague will ensue, which will not be stayed until the bird of ill omen disappears.

The Egyptians and the Ethiopians employed an image of the Owl as a messenger of death, as a bull's head was formerly used in Scotland and some other European countries. When this grim token was sent by the king it was considered as a point of honour for the recipient to kill himself at once, as any attempt to evade the message would be an indelible stain on the family. Diodorus Siculus tells of an Egyptian mother who strangled her son with her girdle, because he sought to escape the doom thus announced.

The dead body of the Owl was used

<sup>1</sup> J. G. Bourke, on "The Religion of the Apache Indians," in *Folk-Lore*, ii, 426.

<sup>1</sup> *The Origin of Primitive Superstition*, by Rushton M. Dorman, Philadelphia, 1881, pp. 262, 263.

for magic charms and in incantations. Horace makes it one of the ingredients in Canidia's infernal mixture. Propertius mingles it in his love-charm. Ovid makes Medea consummate her horrid cauldron of "wonder-working juices" with

A screech-owl's carcass, and ill-omened wings;

which Ben Jonson modifies into

The screech-owl's eggs, and the feathers black.

The hell-broth of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* is seasoned with "owl's wing."

In the folk-lore of many lands the ashes of the Owl's penetrating eyes are good for clearing the sight; the feet, burned with the herb plumbago, render the bite of a serpent harmless; owls' eggs and the blood of their nestlings preserve the hair and make it curly. Owl broth is considered a cure for the whooping cough. And Swan, in his *Speculum Mundi*, recommends owls' eggs to be broken, and put into the cups of a drunkard, or one desirous to follow drinking, with the result that "they will so work with him that he will suddenly loathe his good liquor, and be displeased with his drinking." Hindoos fasten an owl's claw round a child's neck to keep him from nervousness, and the smoke of owl's flesh they consider very efficacious in keeping off ghosts from children.

In Madagascar the spirits of those who die and remain unburied are believed to be doomed to associate with, if not actually become, owls or bats. The wild, unearthly screech of some of the owls in that island renders them objects of dislike and even of terror. The cry of the demon-bird of Ceylon, called by the natives Ulama, is quite as awe-inspiring as that of the screech-owl. Perched on a neighbouring tree (says Davys), it makes low and hideous screams, conveying the idea of extreme distress. Its harsh and horrid notes are supposed to be of evil omen, and a prelude to death or misfortune. In Siam when an owl is seen to perch upon the roof of a house it signifies the death of at least one of the inmates.

The Ainos have a singular legend to account for the tuft on the Owl's

head: A rat having stolen the owl's hoarded dainties, he went to the dwelling of that rodent, and threatened to kill him. But the rat humbly offered to be forgiven, and, as peace-asking, gave the owl a gimlet, whereby he might obtain greater pleasure than he should have derived from the choice food of which he had been deprived. "You must stick the gimlet point upwards in the ground, at the foot of that tree, then climb to the top of the tree and slide down the trunk," said the crafty rat. The owl—who in this instance certainly did not justify the reputation of its kind for superior sagacity—did all as the rat had instructed him, and sliding down impaled himself on the sharp-pointed gimlet. Full of rage, he went off to kill the rat, who, anticipating a visit of this nature, came along the road to meet him, and pacified him with a cap for his head—and this is how the Owl came to have the thick tuft of erect feathers which he wears to this day.

English poetry abounds in allusions to the cry of the Owl. Thus Chaucer, in his *Parlement of Foules*, mentions, The oule, that of deth the bodè bringeth. Spenser speaks of the

Ill-fated owl, death's dreadful messenger. Chatterton, "the marvellous boy," says:

Hark! the death-owl loud doth sing  
To the night-mares as they go.

Its alarming scream has probably often had such effect on the weak nerves of an invalid as actually to hasten death. In Shakspeare's play of *Midsummer Night's Dream* (v, 2), we read:

The screech-owl, screeching loud,  
Puts the wretch that lies in woe  
In remembrance of a shroud.

Among the numerous prodigies which Casca witnessed the day preceding the great dictator's assassination (*Julius Cæsar*, i, 3), he says:

The bird of night did sit,  
Even at noon-day, upon the market-place,  
Hooting and shrieking.

The cry of the dreaded bird is heard by Lady Macbeth. While the bloody deed is being done, the murderer asks, "Didst thou not hear a noise?" and she answers, "I heard the owl

scream and the cricket cry." And in the same tragedy (*Macbeth*, ii, 3) Lennox says that on the night of Duncan's murder,

The obscure bird  
Clamoured the live-long night.

In the play of *Henry VI* (Part 3, v, 6) the king says to the Duke of Gloster, afterwards Richard III :

The owl shrieked at thy birth—an evil sign!

In *Richard III* (iv, 4) the king interrupts the messengers of evil tidings with, "Out on ye, owls!—nothing but songs of death?" In *Henry VI* (iv, 2), "Thou ominous and fearful owl of death!" And in an obscure play we read :

When screech-owls croak upon the chimney tops,  
It's certain that you of a corse shall hear.

But, according to a song in *Love's Labour's Lost* (v, 2), the owl's cry does not sound specially sad in some ears:

When blood is nipt and ways be foul,  
Then mightily sings the staring owl—  
To-who!

To-whit! to-who!—a merry note,  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

The sprite Ariel (*The Tempest*, v, 1) couches "when owls do cry."

Poor Ophelia, in her incoherent babblings, says (*Hamlet*, iv, 5) :

The Owl was a baker's daughter,

alluding to a folk-tale, which recounts how the Saviour, having been refused bread by a baker's daughter, changed her into an owl. A version current in Herefordshire runs thus: Once on a time, a fairy, disguised as a poor old woman, went to a baker's shop, and begged some dough of the daughter, who gave her a very small piece. This she farther requested leave to bake in the oven, where it swelled to the size of a large loaf, and the baker's daughter refused to let the pretended old woman have it, but gave her another and smaller piece of dough, and with the same result as before. A third and still smaller piece grew even larger than the others, and was again withheld by the baker's daughter. The fairy, now fully convinced of the woman's covetousness, resumed her proper form, and striking the culprit with her wand, she was instantly changed into an owl.

According to another legend, it was an earl's daughter who was transformed into an owl for disobedience, and condemned to cry—

"Oh, hoo! hoo! my feet are cold!"

In the north of England she is advanced to the lofty rank of Pharaoh's daughter, and sings—or screeches :

"Oh! ððð—ôô—

I once was a king's daughter, and sat on  
my father's knee,  
But now I am a poor howlet, and bide in  
a hollow tree."

And Waterton, in his *Essays on Natural History*, cites the following verse of a rural song :

Once I was a monarch's daughter,  
And sat on a lady's knee,  
But I am now a nightly rover,  
Banished to the ivy-tree;  
Crying, hoo, hoo, hoo—hoo, hoo, hoo—  
Hoo, hoo, hoo, my feet are cold,  
Pity me, for here you see me  
Persecuted, poor, and old.

In a version current in Norway the woman is changed into a woodpecker—see the story of "Gertrude's Bird," in Dasent's *Popular Tales from the Norse*.<sup>1</sup>—The association of the Owl with ivy is thus referred to by Drayton :

Like an owl, by night to go abroad,  
Roosted all day within an ivy-tod.

The cry of the Owl, like that of the Raven, has also its signification in weather-lore. According to an old chap-book, "when the owl screecheth in foul weather it is a sign of fair weather at hand"; and in several districts of England its cry is sometimes taken as an indication of approaching hail or rain, accompanied by lightning.

The famous Robbers of the Rhine, deeming it too vulgar to whistle as a signal, adopted the owl's "to-who!" which resounded through the forest, even more portentously than the cry of the bird itself.

In Mr. Hardy's novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Joseph Poor-

<sup>1</sup> Miss Garnett, in her *Women of Turkey*, gives a Kurdish story, in which a girl, grieved at the murder of her brother by her cruel stepmother, prays that Allah would change her into an owl, and "she was at once transformed into that sad bird; she flew up and away, and was seen there no more."

grass, on losing his way in a wood at night, shouts "Man-a-lost!" and an owl cries "Who? who? who?" which Joseph imagines is some man answering him.

Once on a time, if we may credit a Cornish story, a young man did not obtain a possibly good wife, and a young woman remained unwed, in consequence of the hooting of an owl. This is how the story goes:

Mr. Lemine had been, as was his wont, spending his evening hours with the lady of his love. He was a timid man, and always returned to Tregenebris early. Beyond this, as the lady was alone, she deemed it prudent to let the world know that Mr. Lemine left by daylight. One evening, it was scarcely yet dark, and our lover was returning home through Leah Lanes. His horse started at an old woman who had crept under the hedge for shelter from a passing shower. As Mr. Lemine saw a figure in the shade he was terrified. "Tu-whit, tu-whoo! ho!" sang an owl. "It's only me—Aunt Betty Foss," screamed the old woman. "Tu-whit, tu-whoo! ho! ho!" sang the owl again. "Don't ye be afeard, Mr. Lemine," shrieked Aunt Betty. "Tu-whit, tu-whoo! ho! ho! ho!" also shrieked the owl. "Oh, it's only John Lemine, of Tregenebris," stammered the frightened lover, who had by this time reached home. He went no more a-courting. He was fully persuaded that either a highwayman and his crew or the Devil and his imps were upon him. He died a bachelor, and the charming lady became a peevish old maid, and died in solitude, all owing to the hooting owl. Some do say that Betty Foss was a witch, and the owl was her familiar.<sup>1</sup>

Samuel Rowland, a prolific writer of the 17th century, in his *More Knaves Yet* (a supplement to his *Four Knaves*), printed in 1613, thus girds at the popular belief in the Owl's ominous screech:

Wise Gosling did but heare the scrich-owle  
crye,  
And told his wife, and straight a pigge did  
dye.

<sup>1</sup> Hunt's *Popular Romances of the West of England*.

It might perhaps be expected that Blair, the author of *The Grave*, should include the hooting of the Owl in his description of a stormy night:

The wind is up—hark! how it howls!  
methinks  
Till now I never heard a sound so dreary:  
Doors creak, and windows clap, and night's  
foul bird,  
Rooked in the spire, screams loud.

Again the screech-owl shrieks—ungracious  
sound!

John Keats, in the opening lines of his story of the *Eve of St. Agnes*, very forcibly describes the severity of the winter's night—

St. Agnes' Eve—ah, bitter chill it was,  
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold.

And Coleridge makes happy use of the Bird of Night in his *Christabel*:

'Tis the middle of the night by the castle  
clock,  
And the owls have awakened the crowing  
cock:

Tu-whit!—Tu whoo!  
And hark again! the crowing cock,  
How drowsily it crew.

And Gray, in his far-famed *Elegy*, uses a very appropriate term in reference to the bird that loves solitude:

From yonder ivy-mantled tower  
The moping owl does to the moon complain  
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient, solitary reign.

Apart from the superstitions which have been always and everywhere current regarding the Owl, and the numerous bad names it has been called, the Bird of Night is one of the best friends of the farmer. Goldsmith says that a single owl is more serviceable than half-a-dozen cats in ridding a barn of its vermin. When it has young, it will bring to its nest a mouse every ten or fifteen minutes. An old writer says: "In the year 1580, at Hallowtide, an army of mice so overran the marshes near Southminster that they ate up the grass to the very roots. But at length a number of strange painted owls came and devoured all the mice." The plague of voles, from which farmers in some districts of Scotland have been lately suffering, is said to be largely owing to the destruction of their natural enemies, the owls. Graham, in his *British*

*Georgics*, has a good word for the Bird of Night :

Let the screeching Owl  
A sacred bird be held ; protect her nest,  
Whether in neighbouring crag, within the  
reach  
Of venturous boy, it hang, or in the rent  
Of some old echoing tower, where her sad  
plaint

The live-long night she moans, save when  
she skims,  
Prowling, along the ground, or through  
the barn  
Her nightly round performs : unwelcome  
guest !  
Whose meteor eyes shoot terror through  
the dark,  
And numb the tiny revellers with dread.

#### ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE RAVEN.

AMONG the Gipsies, the Raven seems to play a part in a remedy for that mysterious influence, dreaded alike in the East and in the West, the "Evil Eye." This is the "recipe" : A jar is filled with water from a stream, and it must be taken with, not against, the current as it flows. In it are placed seven coals, seven handfuls of meal, and seven cloves of garlic, all of which is put on the fire. When the water begins to boil, it is stirred with a three-forked twig, while a "wise woman" chants—

Evil eyes look on thee !  
May they here extinguished be !  
And then seven ravens  
Pluck out the evil eyes,

and so forth. Dr. Wlislöcki, an eminent authority on Gipsy customs, thinks the "seven ravens" mentioned in this incantation are represented by the "seven coals" put into the pitcher of water.<sup>1</sup>

Not only are Ravens popularly credited with the possession of super-human intelligence, but in Wales they are believed to be guardians of hidden treasures—thus taking the place of serpents in Eastern fictions—and it would appear, from the following "thrilling" story, that treasure-seekers had better leave them undisturbed : In a certain cavern in Glamorganshire, called the Ogof Cigfrain, or Cavern of the Ravens, is said to be a chest of gold, watched over by two birds of gloomy plumage, in a darkness so profound that nothing can be seen but the fire of their sleepless eyes. To go there with the

purpose of disturbing them is to bring on a heaving and rolling of the ground, accompanied by thunder and lightning. A swaggering drover from Brecknockshire, though warned by a "dark woman" that he had better not try it, sneeringly said that "a couple of ravens were a fine matter to be afraid of, indeed," and ventured into the cavern, with a long rope about his waist, and a lantern in his hand. Some men who had accompanied him (seeing that he was bent on this rash and dangerous enterprise) held the coil of rope and paid it out as he went in farther and farther. The result was prompt and simple : the sky cracked with loud bursts of thunder and flashes of lightning, and the drover roared with affright, and rushed out of the dark cavern with his hair on end. No coaxing ever prevailed on him to reveal the terrible sights he had seen.<sup>1</sup>

Popular belief in the prophetic powers of the Raven seems to have suggested the title of a curious little work, published at London in 1609 : *The Ravens Almanacke. Foretelling of a Plague, Famine, and Civill Warre, that shall happen this present year 1609, etc. With certaine remedies, rules, and receipts, etc.*

This tract is described as "a mock prediction, and a moral warning drawn up with considerable humour and force, and intermixed with comic novels and incidents. One of the author's objects was to ridicule the pretended prophecies of almanac-makers."

<sup>1</sup> See Charles G. Godfrey's *Gipsy Sorcery*, pp. 51, 52.

<sup>1</sup> Wirt Sikes' *British Goblins*, pp. 389, 390.