

NEWFOUNDLAND CORRESPONDENCE.

ST. JOHN'S, Nfld., Nov. 25, 1871.

A CURIOSITY OF NATURAL HISTORY.—A GAWKY FAMILY.—THE GREAT AUK.

When this island was first discovered, and for two hundred years afterwards, the numerous low, rocky islands off the eastern coast were the haunts of that remarkable oceanic bird, the Great Auk, which is now believed to be extinct. The Wadham Islands, the Funk Islands, and the countless islets which stud the bosom of Trinity, Bonavista and Notre Dame Bays, were the favourite resorts of the Great Auk, where they were to be found in incredible numbers. From these islands, which were their breeding-grounds, they spread over neighbouring seas, so as to be a sure sea-mark to the mariners, on the edge of and inside the banks, when they were drawing near the shores of Newfoundland. When the sailors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fell in with the flocks of the Great Auk, they knew that they had reached soundings on the banks, and the sight of these great birds, larger than a goose, paddling rapidly with their wings over the surface of the ocean, or diving after their prey, was very welcome to the weather-beaten tars of those days. They were accustomed to depend on the Auks for a supply of fresh provisions, their flesh being savoury and wholesome, while their capture was a very simple matter. Not only were the crews of the fishing vessels in the habit of consuming vast numbers of these birds fresh, but they were accustomed to salt down many tons of them for future use. Landing on the islands where they bred, the sailors also took off whole boat-loads of their eggs. On land the poor helpless Auks patiently waited to be slaughtered one after another, being unable to make any effort to escape, their wings being useless for flight and only of service as paddles in the water. Armed only with sticks, the sailors landed and in a short time filled their boats with these plump unwieldy birds, who quietly awaited their turn to be knocked on the head. Nay, so accommodating were they, that even on their proper element, where, by using their short wings as paddles, they could move about with astonishing rapidity, they allowed themselves to be captured in any quantity. Not only so, but it seems they were obliging enough to "walk the plank" into a boat from the sea, when the sailors pushed out a gangway for them. This fact is attested by honest Captain Whitbourne, who, in the reign of James I., published a book on Newfoundland, a copy of which was sent by that monarch to each parish in the kingdom, in order to induce Englishmen to emigrate to "The New-Found-Land." The following is the passage in which Whitbourne refers to the Auks, or "Penguins," as he named them: "These Penguins are as bigge as Geese, and flye not, for they have but a little, short wing, and they multiply so infinitely upon a certain flat lland, that men drive them from thence upon a board into their boats by hundreds at a time, as if God had made the innocency of so poore a creature to become such an admirable instrument for the sustentation of man." Thus quaintly does old Whitbourne moralise upon the "innocency" of the Auk, and thus satisfactorily does he account for the "final cause" of its want of common sense, which speedily brought about its extermination.

DOOM OF THE INNOCENTS.

It is evident that in "the battle of life" such a bird as the Great Auk had but a poor chance. In a world where competition for the available provisions is so keen, where "the struggle for existence" is so terrible, and where the weakest go to the wall, and only "the fittest survive," such a simpleton as the Great Auk must sooner or later be gobbled up. When the fat innocent actually walked into the mouth of its foe—Great Gawk that it was—it's doom must be annihilation. Such proved to be the case. The reckless sailors ate it, fresh and salted, feasted on its eggs, burned its fat body for fuel, in order to warm water to pick off the feathers which were of much value; and after slaughtering the gawky birds till they were weary, they shut up huge flocks in low stone enclosures in order to be ready when wanted. The merchants of Bonavista, during the winter season, used to sell these birds to poor people, by the hundred weight, instead of pork. Year after year, this war of extermination went on, and their numbers were vastly thinned. The Penguin Islands, on the northern coast, which were little frequented, afforded them a refuge for a time, but at length they disappeared entirely, and for the last seventy years not a single Auk has ever been seen, where once the very ocean was alive with them. It is the opinion of the best naturalists that the Great Auk, like the Dodo, is now extinct. "The last known breeding-places of the bird are two isolated rocks, extremely difficult of access, off the south coast of Iceland; and at long intervals, sometimes of ten or fifteen years, a few individuals have been obtained thence, up to the year 1844. In that year a pair of birds, male and female, were shot at their nest, on a little islet near to one of the former breeding-places; and since that time, notwithstanding that the most careful search has everywhere been made for it, the Great Auk has nowhere been seen alive." ("Links in the Chain.")

PERSONAL APPEARANCE OF THE GREAT AUK.

It must have been a singular sight, two hundred years ago, to behold these wild, lonely islands literally covered with the strange figures of these birds, as they waddled slowly about, in an erect position, with their broad, webbed feet and short wings, resembling the flippers of a seal. In fact they were the connecting link between the fish and the bird, partaking of the characteristics of both. In these sea-girt isles, uninhabited by man, they were the sole occupants, generation after generation. The *English Pilot* for 1794 thus refers to them: "They never go beyond the bank as others do, for they are always on it or within it, several of them together, sometimes more, sometimes less, but never less than two together. They are large fowls, about the size of a goose, a coal-black head and back, with a white belly, and a milk-white spot under one of their eyes, which nature has ordered to be under their right eye—an extraordinary mark. These birds never fly, for their wings are very short, and most like the fins of fish, having nothing upon them but a sort of down and short

feathers." This description of the Auk is pretty accurate. Its wings were not constructed for flight, but were most efficient as paddles in the water, and with their aid it could plough its way with amazing rapidity. The legs were extremely short but powerful, and placed so much posteriorly that, in resting on the rocks, the birds assumed an upright attitude, the whole of the leg and toes being applied to the surface. The toes were three in number and fully webbed, the hind toe being but rudimentary. The bill was compressed laterally and grooved at the sides. The Auks are natives of the northern hemisphere; the Penguins take their place in the southern. They bred on the ledges of sea-cliffs, in holes, caverns and rocky places. The female laid but a single egg, as large as that of a swan. Their food was crustacea and fishes. It measured nearly three feet in length. The upper part of the plumage was black, the under plumage white; bill and legs dull black. It was once common on the coasts of Norway, Iceland, Greenland and Spitzbergen, as well on the shores of Newfoundland. The Guillemots and Puffins belong to the same family as the Auks.

THE LITTLE AUK—THE RAZOR-BILL—AND THE PUFFIN.

It is consolatory to know that, though the Great Auk has gone for ever, and the place that knew it once knows it no more, the Little Auk survives, and is still abundant around our shores, as well as the Razor-bill Auk, another member of the family. These varieties owe their prolonged existence to the circumstance that their wings are so far developed as to serve for organs of flight, but only for short distances; in the water they are used as oars. They are thus better equipped for the battle of life than the elder branch of the family. The Little Auk or ice-bird is also called "the Sea-dove," from its very strange head and more bird-like look. The Razor-bill abounds on our northern shores and along the coast of Labrador, during the summer months. When the breeding-season is over the Razor-bills and the Puffins migrate southward, and are believed to winter on the coasts of South America, or of the Southern States of North America, revisiting their breeding-places in spring. Thousands of them are killed in Labrador for the sake of the breast feathers, and vast numbers of eggs are collected. The razor-bill is about fifteen inches in length. The head, neck, and upper part of the plumage are black; the under parts white; bill black with a white streak down the sides of each mandible. The Puffin, which may be called the Sea-owl, from its extraordinary head and wise look, frequents in myriads the islands about Bonavista Bay. Its bill is short, nearly as deep as long, and much compressed, the ridge of the upper mandible being thin and sharp. The nostrils are slits on the border of the upper mandible, near the base; the sides of the bill are marked by oblique ridges and furrows, and a loose puckering skin surrounds the corners of the mouth. Two horny appendages are placed on the eyelids, the smaller one above the eye, the larger beneath. The contour generally is thick and rounded. The loose cheeks and the horny fittings around the eyes impart to the Puffin an air of solemnity and profound wisdom, which, with its short round body, produce a rather ludicrous appearance. One of our leading politicians here used to be known by the *soubriquet* of "The Puffin," from his supposed resemblance to the "Sea-owl," in aspect. The epithet tickled the popular imagination, and sticks to the gentleman to this day.

THE GUILLEMOT.

The Guillemot, another of the Auk family, is plentiful on our shores, and is called by the fishermen "The Merr." Along the whole coast of Newfoundland, Labrador and Hudson's Bay, the Guillemots are common. They are also met with in Spitzbergen, the White and Icy Seas, as far as Kamschatka. In Britain, the Orkney Islands, the Bass Rock and the Fern Islands are their favourite resorts. This bird seems specially fitted for existence in the Arctic and even Polar regions, and revels amid the ice and storm of the chilliest seas. In the short but bright summer that gilds its extreme northern haunts, it lays a single egg on the bare rock, without wasting the precious days in making a nest. It is a curious sight to see these birds, where they abound, sitting upon their eggs on the rocky shelves, often in a line, and so close that they nearly touch each other. When hatched, the young guillemot is fed, on the rock, by its parents, with the young of the herring and herring-sprats, and as soon as it is able to bear the shock, it is tumbled from its hard nursery into the ocean, where an abundant table is provided for it. Here it is thoroughly at home, plying its way with wings and feet beneath the waves, and even beneath the ice, and preying upon fish and crustaceans. Its flight is short and rapid and generally directed just above the surface of the sea. The species most common here is the "Foolish Guillemot," so called because of the family failing of waiting patiently to be killed or captured, rather than quit the cliff which it has chosen for its breeding-ground. It is subject to a double moult, and the winter and summer plumage differ in many respects. Its length, from the bill to the claws, is rather more than 15 or 16 inches.

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REMINISCENCES OF BERMUDA.

DISCOVERY AND DESCRIPTION.

By Capt. E. M., R. E.

(Continued.)

GEOLOGY OF THE ISLANDS.

Passing to the geological formation, the Bermudas are calcareous rocks of an oolitic formation, derived from comminuted shells, and vary from hard crystalline limestone, capable of taking a good polish, to a loose sand. The stone is divided into two classes, the hard and soft. The hard is a compact limestone, often tinged with red, (owing to the presence of a minute quantity of oxide of iron) weighing 157 lbs. per cubic foot. It is so durable that it is greatly used for ashlar work and paving, and many of the government buildings are constructed of it. The best cut "Bermudian marble" resembles Parian in texture and general appearance, and is often worked into chimney-pieces and ornaments. The "soft" stone is a calcareous sandstone, exhibiting stratification, the particles being held together by carbonate of lime. It weighs about 100 lbs. per cubic foot, but by reason of its porosity and softness, is ill adapted for building purposes. Both varieties calcined, make capital lime.

EFFECT OF THE AMERICAN WAR.

The late American Civil War brought about great and sudden changes in Bermuda. Numbers of clipper steamers were fitted out at Liverpool, Glasgow, &c., to run the blockade. At the commencement of hostilities, the steamers performed the exploit between Charlestown in South Carolina, and Nassau in the Bahamas, carrying artillery, ammunition, and clothing, and bringing on the return voyage cotton and turpentine to Bermuda. This cargo was then transferred to the warehouses and subsequently shipped to England. As the war progressed, and the Federals so closely besieged Charlestown, the trade was removed to Wilmington in North Carolina, and then the blockade, until the fall of Wilmington, was run between that port and Bermuda, with long low steamers, painted a sea grey colour, and having very short, or no masts. In St. George's there have been from 15 to 20 of these steamers at a time, and twice that number of large colliers and other ships. Hamilton, somehow, was not such a favourite harbour.

A few months before the fall of Wilmington, the blockade-running received a check, as no less than 12 steamers were captured in the course of three months, and their captains and crews made prisoners of war by the Federal Government, instead of being set free as they formerly were. The trade has, however, entirely ended. It will, probably, be well for the colony at large, for although some few individuals accumulated vast sums of money, Bermuda was in reality much injured by the traffic. The crews of the various steamers were very disorderly and turbulent, and the galls full of offenders, while the police establishment was necessarily increased. Such enormous wages were given to labourers at St. George's for their hurried and night work in repairing, lading, and unloading, &c., that farming was everywhere deserted, and the fields and gardens that used to be planted with potatoes, arrow root, onions, &c., were left uncultivated, and became over-run with sage bush (*Lantana sabrifolia*) and weeds. In spite of the high wages, the labourers do not appear to have reaped any permanent benefit from that new state of affairs, for they were so imprudent that they squandered their money almost as soon as they received it, and left their families badly off.

FINANCES, &c.

The Bermuda treasury has reserved a surplus revenue from the duties paid into it upon the liquor, &c., consumed by the increased, though ever varying population. The colony is also, I believe, the only one which taxes Her Majesty's officers for the wine and beer drunk at their mess-table, and for which it imposes the exorbitant tax of 20 per cent! Many of the agents for Liverpool houses, for the southern cotton planters, and of the late Confederate Government, lived at St. George's, a good thing for the house owners, as it increased the rents greatly. Very ordinary houses rented from £100 to £150 a year, a rate which pressed heavily upon the married officers quartered in the colony.

Most providentially an enormous hotel was built a few years ago by the Corporation at Hamilton,—even that was filled to overflowing with the wives and children of Southern gentlemen, who had sent them to Bermuda for safety. A young gentleman—not a Southerner—once caused an excitement among them. Obtaining a short leave from the head of his firm, he started for Dixie land to see how they actually carried on war, taking his passage in one of the blockade-running steamers. As ill-luck would have it, she was captured by the Federals, and he was made a prisoner of war; but finding he was not an American and only a passenger, they let him go. Going to New York he engaged his passage in one of the common trading vessels for Bermuda. At the last moment, as the vessel was quitting the docks, the military police appeared and closely examined the persons of the passengers and their baggage. Amongst his (it was said) were found some letters addressed to Confederate families in Bermuda. At all events he was marched off in custody, and transferred to some fort—of his ultimate fate we have not heard—nor of the feelings of his principal when he did not return to time.

AN EARTHQUAKE.

Bermuda is happily free from that dreadful phenomenon—earthquakes; but, on the night of the 2nd March, 1858, a slight shock was felt, and continued for several seconds. A lengthened description was given in the Bermuda *Royal Gazette*, from which we glean the following:—"We have heard several West Indians say that they have seldom felt a more decided or more prolonged shock." The direction in which the earthquake travelled seemed to be from south-west to north-east, or from south to north. The water in Hamilton harbour was much and peculiarly agitated, vessels strained hard at their anchors, and persons afloat were a good deal tossed about. The shock was far more severely felt by those who were lying down, than by those who were walking or sitting. Children jumped out of bed in great alarm, and even the uninitiated at once exclaimed, "it's an earthquake!" The noise which accompanied, or as some say, preceded the shock, was a hollow, rolling sound, not unlike distant rattling thunder, but longer and more regular in tone. One gentleman felt the shock so much that he said he was unwell for several hours afterwards, and several people stated that they suffered nausea for some time.

A ship, the "Ocean Bird," was at sea about thirty miles off the Bermuda light-house, bearing at the time, (10.30 P.M.) NW., and the Captain reported "that at that hour an alarming shock was felt which made them at first suppose there was an error in their reckoning, and that they had struck upon a rock. The following day the sea appeared to be very muddy. The shock was more severely felt, as far as we can learn, in houses built on solid rock, than in those having their foundations in soft stone or soil. When we remember how many noble cities have been made ruinous heaps; how in 1797, the earthquake of Riobamba not only destroyed the town, but cast the bodies of many of the inhabitants on an adjacent hill, several hundred feet high; how Lisbon, with 60,000 inhabitants, was destroyed in six minutes; and Garaccas in fifty-three seconds was made desolate, and ten thousand of its people killed,—the colony can hardly fail to acknowledge the goodness of God in sparing Bermuda from the dreaded evil. The words of Humboldt may well find place here. "From early childhood," said that great man, "we are habituated to the contrast between the mobile element water, and the immobility of the soil on which we stand. All the evidences of our senses have confirmed this belief. But when suddenly the ground begins to rock beneath us, the feeling of an unknown mysterious