

AT CREAG NA H' IOLAIRE.

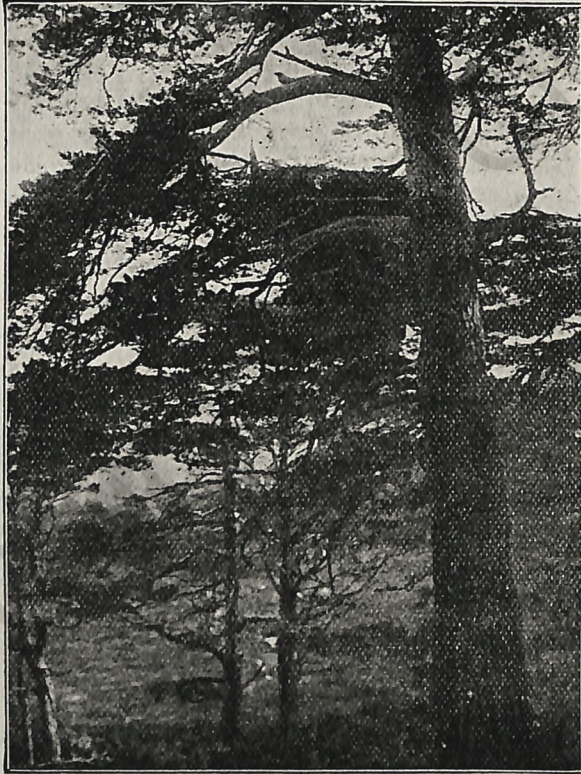
FRANKLY, to begin with, the names used in this story are coined, with the intention of concealing the localities referred to. Otherwise the story is true.

There was reason to think that Golden Eagles had been nesting not very far from our summer holiday quarters in the Highlands. More than one Eagle had been caught in a fox-trap, and we had seen a specimen caged and querulous. Cautious enquiry led to no very definite information, but it became evident that the nesting site was known to the gamekeeper, who apparently had received instructions from his employer that all information was to be withheld from "summer visitors" and others. This was, of course, all right, for if the nesting-place were widely known, then egg-collectors might commit depredations, or the young birds might be carried off, and so our Eagles would cease from among us. I was glad to find that the Eagles were to be protected, but I was not at all willing to remain out of the secret. Accordingly I devoted one day to a careful search of a likely tract of mountain land, and was rewarded by finding the nest and seeing one of the birds.

I cycled along the main high-road to the neighbourhood of a mountain that I may call Carn na Criche. Leaving my cycle in a place of safety near the mountain foot, I started straight up the brae face. I knew that near the summit and on the far side were crags that offered suitable nesting places, and my plan was to approach these in succession as stealthily as I could, in the hope that I might find the nest somewhere among them. The search had in it all the elements of excitement that accompany a "stalk", and called for wary movement and keen watchfulness, for an Eagle is a more difficult creature to find than a deer, as it is more easily concealed, and has much

greater freedom and speed of motion. Nevertheless, I thought it not unlikely that human wit would be equal to the task of discovering the bird and the nest.

When I approached the summit region of the hill, I focussed my field-glass for a probable distance, and, keeping a good look-out, lest the Eagle should see me



A BALMORAL EYRIE.

Photo by

Seton P. Gordon.

before I saw it, I moved cautiously and slowly from one crag to another. For some time I did not see any crag that looked a very likely place; then on the far side of the hill I found one much higher and steeper than any I had previously visited. Peering round an intervening tor, I vainly searched this crag with the glass. But I was looking obliquely across the crag, not commanding it very

thoroughly, and I determined to fetch a compass and approach it from behind, and so come to it from above. With this intention I began to work round its near end, taking my way through a little slochd in the hill. I was then close to the far or inner side of Carn na Criche, and I saw that in a few yards, and before turning towards the crag I was making for, I should clear the last ridge of my hill and look from it across the glen to its bigger neighbour, which I may call Creag Dhu. I was actually above the Lochan na Beinne that lies high up among the peat hags in this glen, and if I moved forward I should see, and might be seen from, the near outlying face of Creag Dhu. So I crawled forward til I could peep over the col, and there, right on the face of Creag Dhu, was a fine crag, much more likely to be a Creag na h' Iolaire, Eagle's Crag, than the one I was stalking. It was, of course, necessary to examine this new crag before showing myself on the sky-line. So I put the glass on to it, by good luck on to the very centre of it, and even at the very moment I did so an Eagle dropped from that middle point towards the lower edge of the crag, sailed silently, darkly, and swiftly away to the end of the crag, followed the bend of the hill, and disappeared. My search was rewarded, for there, at the very spot from which the bird had dropped, was the nest, plainly to be seen even across the glen—a large pile of sticks on one of the many jutting ledges of the crag. Before moving forward, I searched all round with the glass, to assure myself that no other bird was in sight.

I had now no further need of concealment or caution, so I rose from my crouching position and resumed a more natural mode of progression. As I began the descent of Carn na Criche into the glen, the Eagle I had just seen appeared again, soaring high up so as to overlook the crag I was quitting and the glen I had to cross. After a few slow circles of observation it sailed away, and I did not see it again that day, though many time I looked around and above in case it should re-appear. The general dark brown of the Eagle is a good protective colour as seen

against the broken ground of a crag face, and I have no doubt that even so large a bird might easily escape notice as it silently floats along. The only point of colour that caught my eye was the yellow of the beak; this was quite noticeable, as the sun was shining from behind me and full on the bird.

Dropping rapidly down the hillside, I passed the head of the lochan, made my way among the peat hags and pools in the flat, and reached the foot of my Creag na h' Iolaire. Here I got a nearer view of the nest, and could see that it was a largeish pile, probably about two feet high and five or six in diameter. Many sticks had fallen from it, so many that I half feared the nest had been disturbed. It was situated some thirty or forty feet above the base of the crag, and after two or three attempts I was able to climb up to within about ten feet of it. Here a plain rock face stopped me. Descending again, I scrambled round one end of the crag, and got up to the heathery flat above it. Here were many fluffy feathers of the Eagle—the bird is always more or less moulting—and I found also a few feathers of larger size worth carrying away. Carefully working along the crag edge, I was able to get down on to two small ledges nearly over the nest. But these ledges were wet and slippery, and gave but unsafe standing; there were no handholds in the rounded rocks above, and so I could get but a very imperfect view of the nest. It was enough, however, to show me that the nest had not been disturbed and was still in use. From above, the nest was quite inaccessible without the help of a rope, and there was nothing near to which a rope could have been attached—nor had I a rope. But I had no special desire to approach the nest any nearer, for the young birds or bird had flown some weeks before. If there had been young in the nest, I should certainly have tried hard for a close view of them.

I have already indicated that my line of approach to the Creag na h' Iolaire, being across the glen at its base, was quite open to the view of the Eagle when the bird was at the nest. I had therefore now to study the detailed

topography of the rough hill-side behind the crag, and make out a line of approach from a different quarter, so that it would be possible to reach either the top or the bottom of the crag without coming within the ken of the bird. This I did to my entire satisfaction, and then, having impressed the necessary detail well on my memory, I managed to establish also a reasonably easy connecting route with a steep hill-track to which access could readily be got from the highway. This done, I felt that for purposes of observation the Eagles and their nest were then mine.

A few days later—the delay being caused by persistent bad weather—I took my wife to see the new sight. The day was one of brisk and somewhat chilly wind, brilliant sunshine, and occasional showers. We sheltered under trees from one heavy shower before we left the highway, and nearly gave up the expedition. But the returning sunshine encouraged us to proceed, and, accordingly, quitting the highway, we entered on the hill path, and, after a steep, stiff pull up, found ourselves far above the level of human habitations, and during a resting halt enjoyed a wide view over mountain and glen, river and loch. Then we struck up the brae through the heather, following the easy line selected on the previous day, and approached the hill-top below which was the Eagle's Crag. As we entered the final slochd silence was the order of the day; no speech was allowed above a whisper, and but little of that; feet and sticks were carefully kept from contact with stones; the field-glass was taken from its case and adjusted to a probable focus; and with all senses on the alert we cautiously crept forward. The critical rock at the extreme near end of the base of the crag was reached, and I had just turned to indicate to my wife that she should step in front of me and peep round it, in the hope that the Eagle might be at home, when we heard the curious, melancholy, musical yelp of the bird. At once we both crouched low in the heather, and with upturned eyes watched, and in a few moments saw an adult Eagle, in all the darkness of its mature plumage,

float above the crag, calling as it flew. For some little time we had this intermittent view; then again creeping cautiously forward we gradually brought the front of the crag obliquely into view, and saw that the bird was floating to and fro over and near its nest. Then flying to the far end of the crag, the bird alighted on the top, and there to our delight we saw a second bird already perched. Bringing now the glass into action, we had an extremely good sight of the two birds. I suppose, however, that the sunlight glinted from the bright metal—field-glasses should be all dull black except the actual lenses—and we saw the first bird at once looking towards us. With but a moment's delay it rose again on wing, and sailed over the crag edge, and we saw it no more.

But still keeping low down among the heather and rocks, we watched the second bird. After looking about as if to seek what had alarmed its companion, it also took to wing, and we were charmed to see that it was a young bird in its immature plumage—perhaps the most attractively handsome condition of the bird. The under surface of its widespread wings was very light-coloured, appearing white against the darker plumage, and the narrower part of the tail had a band of the same colour across it. As the bird floated and turned in the brilliant sunlight, it made a marvellously fine picture, in which the splendid beauty of its form and colour was combined with the power and majestic dignity of its movement. After a few gyrations, seeing nothing to alarm it—for we kept low and still—the bird returned to its former perch at the distant end of the crag, and we saw it there plucking and tearing with its beak at some food that it held down with its claws. When we moved from our place of concealment, at once the bird rose, displaying again its beautiful plumage, and sailed far away to a pine wood on a distant hill-side; here it dropped among the trees and was lost to our view.

Congratulating ourselves on our good luck, we then scrambled along the crag edge to the top, looked down towards the nesting ledge, saw where the bird had been dining, and picked up several feathers, one of them more

than a foot long. Suddenly the sunshine was blotted out, the wind became very cold, and we had to shelter behind a rock while a heavy rainstorm swept over the country. This, though unkind, was not out of keeping with the wildness of the place; and the march of the rain columns across the glen and up the hill was a fit match for the powerful flight of the Eagles. When the storm had passed, we made our return journey, gathering some white heather and also some of the deep mountain red that so worthily matches it, and adding them to our Eagle plume as a memento of our day at Creag na h' Iolaire.