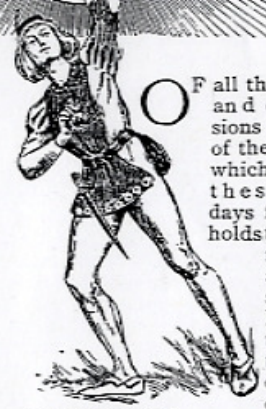
BY CHARLES Q. TURNER.



THE "FALCONER,"
CENTRAL PARK, NEW YORK.

OF all the sports and diversions worthy of the revival which marks these latter days falconry holds the most remarkable position. But yesterday the falcon sat on the wrist of queens and at the saddle-bow of emperors; but yesterday prince and peer, abbot and holy-water clerk, esquire and yeoman, gentle and simple, rode out to watch its prowess; but yesterday it was a felony, punishable by long imprisonment, to take even the falcon's eggs. To-day, except by a select, but ever-increasing band, he is treated as an outlaw and a thief—the sportsman's Ishmaelite, against whom every hand is raised, on whose head are heaped malediction and anathema as loud and deep as those heaped upon the jackdaw of Rheims.

How has the mighty fallen! For a thousand years well within historic times, from the seventh to the seventeenth century, the falconer reigned supreme, with a magnificence of accessory and a social status which make his disappearance one of the historic mysteries. In the reign of the first James, the gravest affairs of state must wait his pleasure; by the end of the reign of his son, scarce a vestige of the sport was left but its memories.

JESS AND BELL.

How deep the national passion had been stirred by the noble pastime may be estimated by those memories. For two hundred years after the tinkle of the falcon's bells had ceased in the land, no living sport, though exercised from day to day, had such a hold on the popular imagination. The falcon and the falconer indeed had become heroic. There may be thousands who cannot tell the difference between a woodcock and a blackcock, or a beagle from a foxhound, yet where is the schoolboy who cannot limn you the hooded falcon? Its form is as vividly impressed on the popular mind as that of St. George and the dragon. The sport might die, but its history and its traditions lived. To the boor the very signpost of his village inn kept its memory green; who has not heard of the "Three jolly postboys drinking at the Falcon"?

America shared with the rest of the world the passion and the sport of falconry. Thirty-five years before the Pilgrim Fathers landed in New England Thomas Harriot, one of Sir Richard Grenville's colonists on Roanoke Island in 1585, wrote of it. In 1610 William Strachey enumerated among the birds of Virginia five different kinds of hawks. They were even exported to England, for Izaak Walton in his "Compleat Angler," published in 1635, gives the falcon of Virginia a high place in his category of the sports of the English gentry.

THE HOOD.

Later American writers have shown an intimate acquaintance with

THE EYESSES, OR NESTLINGS.

six of the scarcely less valuable gerfalcons of his country.

Not a Plantagenet or a Tudor but was a devoted follower of this royal bird; indeed, with all the Tudors hawking was a passion. Henry VIII. very nearly came by his death in following it, for once on a time his zeal outran his discretion, and in his eagerness to follow the chase he forgot his weight; so, leaping a ditch near Hitchin, by the usual aid of a jumping pole, the pole broke and let him down into the water, where he had like to have died but for a fortunate rescue. His daughter, Elizabeth, the Queen of that name, was, as all the world knows, as keen a sportsman as any in her kingdom, and almost daily indulged in the pastime of falconry, as ladies had done at all times, and sometimes alone, of which there are illustrations in the thirteenth and fourteenth century manuscripts, both in France and in England, which the curious may consult in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the British Museum.

That James I. should have developed a passion for falconry is in no way surprising, for his unfortunate mother, the lovely and tragic Mary, Queen of Scots, during her long captivity was often beguiled by Sir Ralph Sadlier, her gaoler (who, by the bye, got into disgrace for it), with the diversion of "hawking the river," in other words, hawking wild duck and widgeon and other riparian birds, a pastime for which James himself had a passion so powerful as at times to be quite a nuisance. To indulge it he would rise abruptly from the council board and leave the weightiest matters of state in abeyance.

Nor were the English alone amongst the Western Europeans in their zeal for this sport. France was ever its favored home. Even the parsimonious, crafty, and cruel Louis XI. could unbend at hawking, and for his indulgence in the pastime kept over a hundred falconers.

To limit the purview to Western Europe, however, is to dwarf the importance of the subject; the extent of its practice is attested by its literature. England affords early evidence of its importance in her early printed books (Dame Juliana Berners, printed in 1561, and Turberville, in 1575); but in every country, even the most remote, works on falconry abound. They are to be found printed in almost every language which civilized nations have spoken. In Greek, in Latin, in Arabic, in Egyptian, in Persian, in Hindu, in Japanese (profusely illustrated, too), in Spanish, Italian, Russian, and German, and they attest with no uncertain significance the antiquity and wide-spread prevalence of the practice of hawking.

The why and the wherefore of the discontinuance of hawking in England are not easy to solve; whether it were the invention of firearms, or the puritanical spirit which found its short triumph in the blue laws of the Cromwellian period, or both, is not by any means clear. There is one point, however, which would always make even its temporary cessation have a tendency to become permanent, and that is the fact that the sport can be carried on only by a continual breaking in of wild hawks. The hawk is not bred in captivity, and therefore could not lie by (as a particular breed of dog might, for instance) for a

CAPTURED ON PASSAGE.

few years, and then be bred from and be ready to hand; the hawk would have to be obtained in a state of nature. Although that at first would present no difficulty, yet if the skill of the falconer died out (as in a few years it would tend to do from want of practice), the effect would probably be permanent, as, in fact, it was.

Had not the craft lingered on like the aboriginal inhabitants in the remote districts of the Highlands of Scotland, we should have utterly lost the mystery and teaching of the English school, a school quite distinct from the school of Holland and the school of France. In Scotland it lived both amongst the peasantry and the old nobility. It was to a Scotch falconer that the Duke of Athol was indebted for his ability to present to King George IV. at his coronation a cast of hawks, that being the tenure by which the Athol family held the Isle of Man in fee from the Crown. What the result of failure to perform this service would have been, the antiquary and the lawyer must settle. The Duke of Gordon has always kept up the diversion of falconry, his hawks breeding in the rocks of Glenmore.

OFF TO THE PLAINS.

On the other hand, in England the sport died out so completely that it is doubtful whether by the year 1700 there was any one professing the art of falconry, except the Hereditary High Falconer to the Crown, whose ample salary and obsolete duties both preserved the office, if not the craft. About a hundred years ago the scattered remnants of the craft were gathered together, both in Scotland and in England, and quite a marked revival of falconry followed, under the management of Col. Thornton, of Thornton Royal, in Yorkshire.

The confederated hawkers of the Falconers' Club and the hawks of its members brought back the sport to almost its original place — at least, in point of skill. Since that time, though in varying degrees, falconry has delighted hundreds of the gentlemen of England; nor is this surprising, for few more delightful books exist in the English language than Col. Thornton's "Sporting Tour in the Highlands," the record of his hawking there in 1804.

Falconry is now a well-recognized profession, and although falconers are not so numerous as of yore, few falconers ever had greater knowledge or expertness than the Pells, father and son, of Lakenheath, the Barrs of Brandon, and old John Gale, of Dorsetshire, who died in a snowstorm, hawk on wrist.

The main point in the craft of the falconer is to render his birds obedient. Nature has made them skillful and deadly. In order to effect this, the schools of Holland and of Scotland take different courses: the Hollander catches

his hawk when on the passage, and of mature age; the Scotch take theirs from the nest. Hence, of course, two different modes of treatment. The bird taken of full age must be broken straight away; the eyess, or nestling, on the other hand, begins life in a state of partial liberty. At first his only impediment is a trifling clog to his leg, to prevent its flying off and hunting on its own account.

Few sights which the falconer enjoys are more beautiful than his young hawks on a lawn at play. They are as sportive and as mischievous as kittens, and as graceful as swallows. It is at this early time, however, that their education is begun. Whilst so flying *at hack*, as it is called, the falcon is daily accustomed to the falconer's voice, and trained to come farther and farther for his food. His troubles begin when the falconer dares no longer trust him, and the next, and hardest, task commences when he has to be taught to sit on his master's wrist quietly, and to bear the hood without irritation. This is a task which requires the greatest patience, practice, and manual determination. At this period the bird is semi-confined—that is, his movement is restricted to the length of his leash. Then he has his bells put on his legs. When he is flown, the leash and its swivels are slipped, but the jesses and bells remain on the legs, so that it may be known that he is a trained, and not a wild, hawk—a precaution which does not always save him from the predatory gun of the loafer, or the more designedly murderous one of the misguided keeper.

In ancient times, the tones of those bells were a matter of some moment, the critical ear of the "dark ages" being satisfied with nothing less than perfect cadence. An instance of this occurs in an old play where, speaking on this subject, the keeper says:

"Her bells, Sir Francis, had not both one weight,
Nor was one semi-tone above the other;
Methinks these Milane bells do sound too full,
And spoil the mounting your hawk."

This training completed, and it is not either a very long, or a very difficult process, the hawk is ready. The questions which then arise are questions of the game available for the particular hawk you have trained, and the applicability of the nature of the country you intend to use him in; two points which, of course, will have readily occurred at the earlier period when you selected the hawk. Hawks are of vastly different proportions and strength, consequently, the killing range of each is limited within certain lines; furthermore, they work at different game in different ways, one requiring a wide-open country, while others will do as well in a far more restricted one.

The four principal hawks used in Great Britain are the peregrine and the merlin of the dark-eyed, long-winged varieties, and the goshawk and sparrow-hawk, of the yellow-eyed and short-winged varieties. The gerfalcon of Ireland and Norway is rarely in modern use, and the little "hobby," the most graceful perhaps of all the hawks, is very rare. Of the four varieties in common use the peregrine may be said to be the most useful and most popular. This hawk, known in America as the duck hawk, is mostly gotten from the cliffs on the wild coasts of Scotland; the merlin from the English moors; the goshawk is imported from Germany or France; the sparrow-hawk is the only one quite numerous in England. Some other varieties, like the lanner (figured by Cassin in his illustrations of American birds), once used quite frequently in England, the saker, and the Barbary falcon are now but museum curiosities.

He, or rather she, for the female hawk is the stronger and better bird, will, according to training, fly and kill freely grouse, rook, snipe, duck, widgeon, and other such like birds. I have never seen a hawk kill a pheasant (though Lundy killed one in 1888), but in earlier times it did so. I have seen an early set of prints showing it, with falconers, cavaliers, and ladies enjoying the sport, and underneath the inscription:

"The pheasant cock the woods doth most frequent,
Where spaniels spring and search him by the scent;
And when in flight, the hawk, with quicken'd speed,
With beak and savage talons, makes him bleede."

One who knows the female peregrine well, and her superiority to the tiercel (male), says "with her there is no slacking as though afraid of hurting her foot with the blow, but downright, headlong,

rapid, earnest, brave, honest, mighty chasing; there is the very character of commanding power in every hiss of her rushing bells and in every stroke of her glorious wings. She goes into battle knowing that she will conquer; she hurries on the prize as one who would only snatch her own; she comes down, an armed cruiser, with all her sails set, certain of the craft that is bounding before her. She is the queen of the wilderness and of the sky; but man is her master. She bids defiance to the winds, the hail and the lightning; she goes out in her fury at his bidding, and comes down gently to his feet out of the very clouds of heaven."

Her mode of work depends upon the quarry she is to fly. If it be grouse then she is cast off as the falconer approaches the place where it is known grouse are. The falcon rises to her pitch and rides there, circling round and round, "waiting on" the falconer and his party, often for a very long time. The dogs then spring the game. Even whilst the dogs point, some falcons will come partly down, well knowing what that means. The grouse takes the air.

"The falcon hovering flies;
Balanced in air and confidently bold,
Hangs o'er him like a cloud."

Then down the hawk comes headlong and straight from her great height with force enough to break the grouse's back. Sometimes, of course, the bird is able to dodge the first blow, but unless cover is quite close that is a futile reprieve. Quickly recovering, the falcon rises and, with a second swoop, shorter and sharper than the first, the end comes. With some birds the battle is much longer; Col. Thornton mentions an incomparable flight after a snipe, which lasted sixteen minutes, and then the snipe escaped, having covered in its flight nine measured miles besides an infinite number of buckles or turns.

In the southern parts of England or such open parts, like Salisbury Plain and the open Hertfordshire hills, as are fitted for it, the quarry is the more homely but more plucky rook; therefore different tactics are necessary. Instead of the falcon being cast off to "wait on" whilst the quarry is flushed, it is kept hooded on the wrist till the rook or rooks, are comparatively near; off then goes the hawk in a spiral course, for she is long-winged and must go so. Off goes the rook, straightening himself out to his best and rising in a direct line through the air, for the rook is a hard fighter and will take the falcon far up into the blue. As soon as the falcon gets fairly above the rooks he starts his downward course, not falling straight, for both are in rapid motion and near matched, but gliding obliquely with tail closed and compressed. She makes her clutch if she is a good footer; there is a "croak," a flutter of feathers, the fatal grip, and a headlong tumbling earthward, where it may be the battle is renewed; but it is there of short duration because those snake-like toes with tiger's talons, were not given for nothing, and the falcon knows how to use them.

The other long-winged dark-eyed hawk (the merlin) is quite a different creature; small, slim, beautifully marked and graceful, she has ever been the lady's hawk. Walter Scott in the "Lay of the Last Minstrel," depicts the bride with one:

"The ladye by the altar stood;
Of sable velvet her array,
And on her head a crimson hood
With pearls embroidered and entwined,
Guarded with gold and ermine-lined.
A merlin sat upon her wrist,
Held by a leash of silken twist."

In olden times merlins were the constant companions of ladies; they took them everywhere, even to church, and many were the fruitless edicts of the Church against the practice. The merlin is a gentler bird than any of the others; will sit best unhooded, and, after killing her quarry, will return to the wrist; but, though comparatively and at those times of such a gentle mood, she is a fierce hunter and, for her size, the boldest of all the British falcons. She kills in a manner peculiar to her; she strangles her quarry. Occasionally she is flown at pigeons, but her principal game is the lark, than which no more difficult bird to kill flies in the heavens. It is doubtful whether a full-feathered lark ever was killed; it is only when one is somewhat disabled by moulting that the merlin has her chance, and that is a very even one. The chase by the merlin of the lark is a beautiful display of skill and endurance, for the lark can rise more directly overhead than any other bird, and so he gets a greater advantage over the circling falcon; more-

over, as the commonest experience testifies, she can drop quicker and straighter down to cover than any other bird, almost as quickly, in fact, as the merlin; indeed, no two birds start more fairly than the fully fledged lark and the merlin, and none afford a more interesting exhibition.

Of the two short-winged hawks the goshawk is by far the larger and stronger; it can be used in a far more inclosed country than the long-winged hawks. It will kill partridges freely. The Duke of Leeds had one which killed 123 in one season. When a covey of partridges is put up, the goshawk selects one, and he will pass, with the rush of a winged arrow, through all the other birds to strike that one. He is a keen sportsman and sits unhooded on the glove, watching every bush or clump from which a rabbit might run, and is as courageous as he is keen. His clutch of the rabbit is terrible; when he gets one foot on the rabbit's nose and the other as far behind the ear as he can stretch, it is seldom that the little animal escapes; indeed, the goshawk has been known to catch the rabbit at its hole and hold it with one foot, gripping the bank with the other, to prevent himself being drawn in. Even the hare is not sure to escape the goshawk's terrible grip and quick eye; an eye so quick, indeed, that there is more than one instance of the bird having caught a rabbit in mid-air, in the momentary spring with which it started on its hoped escape.

The sparrow-hawk flies at bolt only, that is from the wrist, and will prey on birds only. It is a graceful, useful hawk, but from its size is applicable solely to the lesser birds. As a picture the male sparrow-hawk is perfection, slim as a canary and thoroughbred as a greyhound.

Of the royal, but now obsolete, sport of heron hawking nothing has been said, because to revive it would of necessity extirpate the few herons left.

"Enough for me
To boast the gentle spar hawke on my fist
To fly the partridge from the bristly field,
Retrieve the covey with my busy train,
Or with the soaring merlin dare the lark."

In America it is different. There are herons of several varieties and in abundance in many localities; indeed, of all the countries in which the sport of falconry could be indulged in to perfection, none exceeds in all essentials the United States; it has clear air, bright sunshine, open space; it has the hawk (witness the magnificent collection sent to England by Lord Lonsdale), and of game and wild birds enough; for the sport does not require dense quantities. It may not be generally known, indeed, that in Mexico falconry is quite commonly practiced. The author to whom I am indebted for this information says that the natives are well acquainted with the sport, that numbers of persons there keep hawks for taking partridge, and that there are in California and Oregon several varieties of hawks well suited to the purpose. I can quite believe this, and I see no reason why the practice of falconry should not be extended eastward, where nature and the social conditions have united in preparing for its reception. There are open champaigns, undulating hills, marshes, and good game, at the very doors of thousands of men and women with sufficient leisure to master the training of the hawk, and the instinct of the sportsman to enjoy it. There is no reason to doubt, and every reason to expect, that ere long the tinkle of the falcon's bell and the melody of the old sport will resound throughout the United States.