

"OLD HARRIER"

By Hugh Ross

THE mists which all that morning had clung in billowing folds above the valley floor were now drifting asunder, enabling the sun's rays to creep through, bringing comfort and cheer to the cold, clammy earth and its inhabitants. Forth from the thinning fog loomed the form of "Old Harrier," who with leisurely, even beat of big wings was making for his favourite perch. I saw him pass—watched him alight upon what was literally a "scrub-bush"—a diminutive growth about fourteen inches high, hideously deformed and growing in advance of its well-proportioned kindred on the face of a steep little hillock fronting the house. With not so much as a preliminary circle the hawk "pan-caked" on to his resting place. An awkward step or two, a flapping of his great wings ere assuring perfect equilibrium and settling down comfortably—probably the most contented hawk for miles around.

Watching the reposing bird I felt a genuine sympathy for the old fellow. Whence he had just come was no mystery, either. In a certain gully were the remains of a sheep upon which he had feasted to repletion, and now, well and truly gorged, he sought a little relaxation. While I watched he preened a feather or two, and then—he began to sing. His notes were those peculiar, glassy rolling warbles that one

associates with friend starling. Indeed, so well did they match the starling's song that only a keen ear would have distinguished the difference. It may be, though, that "Old Harrier's" notes were a trifle louder. For the better part of two hours he remained upon his scrub-bush singing happily to himself or performing his daily toilet, while the sun's rays thawed the dank chill of the gully from his grateful body.

I doubt if I have ever known a more agreeably satisfied bird than that shrewd old hawk. To the best of my knowledge he has hung about the farmstead for several years now, and he does himself well. Very well indeed! There are odd sheep that die as well as waste parts from those killed for mutton to be shared with the dogs, also any number of rabbits both shot and trapped, not to mention those killed by his own skilful hunting. And he had those glorious days, too, after the chaff-cutter had departed when scores of bewildered mice scurried aimlessly amid the deserted stack bottoms. I know also, and without animosity, that hens' nests at times were filched.

The harrier hawk is more or less a scavenger, and "Old Harrier" is no exception. True he is no mean hunter, but at the same time he partakes cheerfully of that which the gods provide. For instance, there is a little scene I saw enacted not long ago. One still afternoon my attention was arrested by the loud squealing of a rabbit. A stoat must have been trailing its prey for some time, because when I became aware of the tragedy the hapless victim was firmly grasped by the back of the neck and the stoat was delivering the final coup-de-grace. A moment later the stoat himself narrowly missed "getting it in the neck!" "Old Harrier" had drifted on the scene. Not a second did he waste in unnecessary hovering, but, swooping down, struck viciously with his steel-like talons. The stoat's sharp hissing bark of fear as he hurled his lithe body to one side in order to avoid the clutch of death was audible at nearly a hundred yards. Like a yellow streak he "snaked" for the shelter of a gully. Later he returned to bark in helpless

[Photo: Thos. M. Wainwright.]

