

# THE TURNING OF THE TIDE

(By Hugh Ross.)

THE tide had gone out and the mud-flat, its black surface wimpled with countless shell-fish, lay awaiting the encroachment of the channel waters. Yet that big tract of mud, for all its barren appearance, was literally festooned with life. Small scuttling crabs, almost as numerous as the shell-fish, were eagerly foraging for food a short distance from their burrows. At one spot they were packed layers deep in a hideous, pulsating mass; nothing but crabs was visible although a close investigation would have revealed the remains of a fish beneath. There were a great number of red-billed and black-backed gulls, mostly congregated into small flocks, dotted here and there upon the flat. For the most part these birds slept, although odd ones still preened their feathers. Later the flocks would divide, at which time the individual birds ran hurriedly hither and thither to seek meals at the edge of the incoming tide. Solitary birds had already started; they were thoroughly investigating isolated pools to the consternation of miniature inhabitants therein, who, having marooned themselves with the idea of avoiding voracious attacks of larger fish, were now finding themselves at the mercy of foes equally formidable.

Drifting slowly across the estuary was a shadow, whose owner, a harrier-hawk, came down-wind from the west. He was flying at a fairly low altitude, perhaps sixty or seventy feet, a convenient height, too, for it enabled his wide-open yellow eyes to take in every detail of the panorama unfolding beneath him. On he went, searching, searching for the food that past experience had taught him was usually to be found here. At a biggish pool his flight halted momentarily. He twisted about and made a half-hearted dive at something which evidently fled to the safety of deeper water because the would-be marauder straightened from the attack and flew on. At length he came to that place where the crabs feasted. Without the slightest hesitation he swooped down to alight upon the mud near by, sending the crabs scuttling with desperate haste for safety. Hardly had the last of them left the fish than the harrier-hawk commenced his meal.

While the hawk feasted, a change was tak-

ing place out in the channel. The current had abated in force until particles of drifting rubbish remained stationary upon an unruffled surface.

Abruptly a soft stirring took place in the waters; three wavelets rippled in quick succession up-stream; water half an inch deep washed from the main channel to froth and hiss upon the hot mud. As though at a given signal those dozing sea-birds, almost without exception, raised their heads and rose with unhurried deliberateness to their feet. Many of them were hundreds of feet away from the swelling flood yet they knew, instinctively perhaps, that the tide was on the turn.

Meal time in the estuary! What symptoms of excitement were being exhibited by the birds! The flocks commenced to break up. They called, sharply and insistently, the harsh notes of the red-billed gulls being almost drowned by the shrill, wierd-sounding "kli! kli! kli's!" of the black-backed gulls, who, opening yellow bills, gave free vent to their vocal organs. Then, one and all, they began to feed. For the main, although spreading out along the channel to some extent, all the birds kept fairly close to one another. Very little fighting and pushing took place, each bird taking care to maintain a prudent distance between himself and his neighbour. Now and again, however, a luckless member of the party, too ardently concentrating upon a succulent tit-bit tantalizingly avoiding his attempts at securing it from the tide-wash, would inadvertently collide with a neighbour. Then there would be a quick burst of temper from the bumped bird and the lightning flash of a bill. "There!" the insulted bird seemed to say, "maybe that will teach you to stop pushing a fellow around." And there was never a doubt but that the lesson served its purpose, because the bitten one would inevitably utter a cry of alarm and hasten away to another place.

There were two or three species of birds who seemed to go daily to meet the tide, birds, moreover, that one would have considered had little place in such incongruous surroundings. There were pipits, or native larks, for instance, and a glance at their corpulent forms made it