

EYES AND NO EYES; OR, THE ART OF SEEING.

From EVENINGS AT HOME; OR, THE JUVENILE BUDGET OPENED.

BY JOHN AIKIN AND MRS. BARBAULD

1792–1796. One of the most popular stories in the early children's story collection, written jointly by Aiken and his sister. Almost every educated household, with children, had a copy of the book. The book went through numerous editions during the first part of the 19th century. "Eyes and No Eyes" was influential on many early British naturalists and nature writers.

The full book is available here: <https://archive.org/details/eveningsathomeor00aikirich>

"Well, Robert, where have you been walking this afternoon?" Said Mr. Andrews to one of his pupils, at the close of a holyday.

Robert. I have been, sir, to Broom-heath, and so round by the windmill upon Camp-mount, and home through the meadows by the river-side.

Mr. Andrews. Well, that's a pleasant round.

Rob. I thought it very dull, sir; I scarcely met with a single person. I had rather by half have gone along the turnpike-road.

Mr. An. Why, if seeing men and horses is your object, you would, indeed, be better entertained on the high-road. But did you see William?

Rob. We set out together, but he lagged behind in the lane, so I walked on and left him.

Mr. An. That was a pity. He would have been company for you.

Rob. O, he is so tedious, always stopping to look at this thing and that ! I had rather walk alone. I dare say he is not got home yet.

Mr. An. Here he comes. Well, William, where have you been ?

William. O, sir, the pleasantest walk ! I went all over Broom-heath, and so up to the mill at the top of the hill, and then down among the green meadows by the side of the river.

Mr. An. Why, that is just the round Robert has been taking, and he complains of its dullness, and prefers the high-road !

Will. I wonder at that. I am sure I hardly took a step that did not delight me, and I have brought my handkerchief full of curiosities home.

Mr. An. Suppose, then, you give us some account of what amused you so much. I fancy it will be as new to Robert as to me.

Will. I will, sir. The lane leading to the heath, you know, is close and sandy, so I did not mind it much, but made the best of my way. However, I spied a curious thing enough in the hedge. It was an old crab-tree, out of which grew a great bunch of something green, quite different from the tree itself. Here is a branch of it.

Mr. An. Ah ! This is mistletoe, a plant of great fame for the use made of it by the Druids of old, in their

religious rites and incantations. It bears a very slimy white berry, of which bird-lime may be made, whence its Latin name of *Viscus*. It is one of those plants which do not grow in the ground by a root of their own, but fix themselves upon other plants j whence they have been humorously styled parasitical, as being hangers- on, or dependants. It was the mistletoe of the oak that the Druids particularly honoured.

Will. A little farther on I saw a green woodpecker fly to a tree, and run up the trunk like a cat.

Mr. An. That was to seek for insects in the bark, on which they live. They bore holes with their strong bills for that purpose, and do much damage to the trees by it.

Will. What beautiful birds they are !

Mr. An. Yes ; they have been called, from their colour and size, the English parrot.

Will. When I got upon the open heath, how charming it was ! The air seemed so fresh, and the prospect on every side so free and unbounded! Then it was all covered with gay flowers, many of which I had never observed before. There were, at least, three kinds of heath, (I have got them in my handkerchief here,) and gorse, and broom, and bellflower, and many others of all colours, that I will beg you presently to tell me the names of.

Mr. An. That I will readily.

Will. I saw, too, several birds that were new to me. There was a pretty grayish one, of the size of a lark, that was hopping about some great stones and when he flew he showed a great deal of white above his tail.

Mr. An. That was a wheat-ear. They are reckoned very delicious birds to eat, and frequent the open downs in Sussex, and some other counties, in great numbers.

Will. There was a flock of lapwings, upon a marshy part of the heath, that amused me much. As I came near them, some of them kept flying round and round just over my head, and crying pewit so distinctly, one might almost fancy they spoke. I thought I should have caught one of them, for he flew as if one of his wings was broken, and often tumbled close to the ground ; but as I came near, he always made a shift to get away.

Mr. An. Ha, ha! You were finely taken in then! This was all an artifice of the bird to entice you away from its nest; for they build upon the bare ground, and their nests would easily be observed, did they not draw off the attention of intruders by their loud cries and counterfeit lameness.

Will. I wish I had known that, for he led me a long chase, often with my shoes in water. However, it was the cause of my falling in with an old man and a boy who were cutting and piling up turf for fuel, and I had a good deal of talk with them about the manner of preparing the turf, and the price it sells at. They gave me, too, a creature I never saw before — a young viper,

which they had just killed, together with its dam. I have seen several common snakes, but this is thicker in proportion, and of a darker colour than they are.

Mr. An. True. Vipers frequent those turfy, boggy grounds pretty much, and I have known several turf-cutters bitten by them.

Will. They are very venomous, are they not ?

Mr. An. Enough so to make their wounds painful and dangerous, though they seldom prove fatal.

Will. Well - I then took my course up to the windmill on the mount. I climbed up the steps of the mill, in order to get a better view of the country round. What an extensive prospect ! I counted fifteen church-steeple ; and I saw several gentlemen's houses peeping out from the midst of green woods and plantations; and I could trace the windings of the river all along the low grounds, till it was lost behind a ridge of hills. But I'll tell you what I mean to do, sir, if you will give me leave.

Mr. An. What is that ?

Will. I will go again, and take with me Cary's county-map, by which I shall probably be able to make out most of the places.

Mr. An. You shall have it, and I will go with you and take my pocket spying-glass.

Will. I shall be very glad of that. Well, a thought struck me, that as the hill is called Camp-mount, there

might probably be some remains of ditches and mounds with which I have read that camps were surrounded. And I really believe I discovered something of that sort running round one side of the mount.

Mr. An. Very likely you might. I know antiquaries have described such remains as existing there, which some suppose to be Roman, others Danish; we will examine them farther, when we go.

Will. From the hill I went straight down to the meadows below, and walked on the side of a brook that runs into the river. It was all bordered with reeds and flags and tall towering plants, quite different from those I had seen on the heath. As I was getting down the bank to reach one of them, I heard something plunge into the water near me. It was a large water-rat, and I saw it swim over to the other side, and go into its hole. There were a great many large dragon-flies all about the stream ; I caught one of the finest, and have got him here in a leaf. But how I longed to catch a bird that I saw hovering over the water, and every now and then darting down into it! It was all over a mixture of the most beautiful green and blue with some orange colour. It was somewhat less than a thrush, and had a large head and bill, and a short tail.

Mr. An. I can tell you what that bird was - a kingfisher ; the celebrated halcyon of the ancients, about which so many tales are told. It lives on fish, which it catches in the manner you saw. It builds in

holes in the banks, and is a shy retired bird, never to be seen far from the stream where it inhabits.

Will. I must try to get another sight of him, for I never saw a bird that pleased me so much. Well - I followed this little brook till it entered the river, and then took the path that runs along the bank. On the opposite side I observed several little birds running along the shore, and making a piping noise. They were brown and white, and about as big as a snipe.

Mr. An. I suppose they were sand-pipers, one of the numerous family of birds that get their living by wading among the shallows, and picking up worms and insects.

Will. There were a great many swallows, too, sporting upon the surface of the water, that entertained me with their motions. Sometimes they dashed into the stream; sometimes they pursued one another so quick, that the eye could scarcely follow them. In one place, where a high, steep sandbank rose directly above the river, I observed many of them go in and out of holes with which the bank was bored full.

Mr. An. Those were sand-martens, the smallest of our species of swallows. They are of a mouse-colour above, and white beneath. They make their nests and bring up their young in these holes, which run a great depth, and, by their situation, are secure from all plunderers.

Will. A little farther I saw a man in a boat who was catching eels in an odd way. He had a long pole with broad iron prongs at the end, just like Neptune's trident, only there were five instead of three. This he pushed straight down among the mud in the deepest parts of the river, and fetched up the eels sticking between the prongs.

Mr. An. I have seen this method. It is called spearing of eels.

Will. While I was looking at him, a heron came flying over my head, with his large flagging wings. He lit at the next turn of the river, and I crept softly behind the bank to watch his motions. He had waded into the water as far as his long legs would carry him, and was standing with his neck drawn in, looking intently on the stream. Presently, he darted his long bill as quick as lightning into the water, and drew out a fish, which he swallowed. I saw him catch another in the same manner. He then took alarm at some noise I made, and flew away slowly to a wood at some distance, where he settled.

Mr. An. Probably his nest was there, for herons build upon the loftiest trees they can find, and sometimes in society together, like rooks. Formerly, when these birds were valued for the amusement of hawking, many gentlemen had their heronries, and a few are still remaining.

Will. I think they are the largest wild birds we have.

Mr. An. They are of a great length and spread of wing, but their bodies are comparatively small.

Will. I then turned homeward across the meadows, where I stopped a while to look at a large flock of starlings which kept flying about at no great distance. I could not tell at first what to make of them ; for they rose all together from the ground as thick as a swarm of bees, and formed themselves into a kind of black cloud, hovering over the field. After having a short round they settled again, and presently rose again in the same manner. I dare say there were hundreds of them.

Mr. An. Perhaps so, for in the fenny countries their flocks are so numerous as to break down whole acres of reeds by settling on them. This disposition of starlings to fly in close swarms was remarked even by Homer, who compares the foe flying from one of his heroes, to a cloud of stares retiring dismayed at the approach of the hawk.

Will. After I had left the meadows, I crossed the cornfields in the way to our house, and passed by a deep marl-pit. Looking into it, I saw in one of the sides a cluster of what I took to be shells; and upon going down, I picked up a clod of marl, which was quite full of them ; but how sea-shells could get there I cannot imagine.

Mr. An. I do not wonder at your surprise, since many philosophers have been much perplexed to account for the same appearance. It is not uncommon to find great

quantities of shells and relics of marine animals even in the bowels of high mountains, very remote from the sea. They are certainly proofs that the earth was once in a very different state from what it is at present ; but in what manner, and how long ago these changes took place, can only be guessed at.

Will. I got to the high field next our house just as the sun was setting, and I stood looking at it till it was quite lost. What a glorious sight! The clouds were tinged purple, and crimson, and yellow, of all shades and hues, and the clear sky varied from blue to a fine green at the horizon. But how large the sun appears just as it sets ! I think it seems twice as big as when it is overhead.

Mr. An. It does so; and you may probably have observed the same apparent enlargement of the moon at its rising.

Will. I have ; but pray, what is the reason of this ?

Mr. An. It is an optical deception, depending upon principles which I cannot well explain to you till you know more of that branch of science. But what a number of new ideas this afternoon's walk has afforded you ! I do not wonder that you found it amusing: it has been very instructive. Too. Did you see nothing of all these sights, Robert ?

Rob. I saw *some* of them, but I did not take particular notice of them.

Mr. An. Why not ?

Rob. I don't know. I did not care about them, and I made the best of my way home.

Mr. An. That would have been right if you had been sent with a message ; but as you only walked for amusement, it would have been wiser to have sought out as many sources of it as possible. But so it is - one man walks through the world with his eyes open, and another with them shut; and upon this difference depends all the superiority of knowledge the one acquires above the other. I have known sailors who had been in all the quarters of the world, and could tell you nothing but the signs of the tippling-houses they frequented in different ports, and the price and quality of the liquor. On the other hand, a [Benjamin] Franklin could not cross the channel without making some observations useful to mankind. While many a vacant, thoughtless youth is whirled throughout Europe without gaining a single idea worth crossing a street for, the observing eye and inquiring mind find matter of improvement and delight in every ramble in town or country. Do you, then, William, continue to make use of your eyes: and you, Robert, learn that eyes were given you to use.