

CHAPTER XV.

THE SCOUTS OF THE REPTILE HORDE.

EMPIRES rose upon the earth, and crumbled in succession to decay, a thousand ages before the foot of Adam had pressed the soil of the Garden of Eden. A series of dynasties flitted like shadows over the face of our planet, and disappeared beneath the dim horizon of the past, while the empire of man was but an idea dwelling in the Almighty Mind. Here were morning and evening, invigorating sunlight and cooling dew, softly-wooing breeze and fiercely-maddened tempest, springtime and autumn, weeping clouds and placid evening sky, Winter piping his melancholy song upon the withered reeds of Summer, ocean-surges waging everlasting battle with the rocky shore, God alone spectator of the progress of the mighty work which was being accomplished. But there was life, and motion, and consciousness, and enjoyment, and death through all those dim and distant ages. Those dim and distant ages—how imagination halts, and faints, and falters in the effort to shoot back over the infinite stretch of years! Life was here, but without a voice, without a wing, without a footstep. The ignoble mollusc held dominion in the sea through all the morning twilight of animated existence.

The mute fish reared his empire on the ruins of that of the mollusc. In the middle Paleozoic ages this first and lowest form of vertebrate existence appeared in all the seas—not fishes clothed in horny scales like those which swarm in the waters of the human era, but fishes clad in coat of mail, bucklered and helmeted with bony plates, and armed