

ROUND ABOUT RYE.

FROM Lydd to Rye we have the choice of two routes—by road or by marsh; the former very circular, but easily followed, the latter shorter actually in distance, but by no means so straight as it seems to the inexperienced explorer. We have a mind to see the veritable marsh, and are not fond of plodding along a dusty road, beneath a burning sun; so we elect to go by the marsh. We set off in the fresh morning, brimful of the anticipation of an enjoyable day, and as for some distance the path is well defined and straight ahead, the turf soft and springy, we congratulate ourselves upon not having been persuaded into going by road, by the dubious headshakings of our Lydd landlord. By degrees the path grows more and more indistinct, so there is nothing to be done but to make for the little town shining on the top of the cliff ahead of us, full of confidence that we shall reach it easily by mid-day.

We are pulled up in our swift onward progress by a ditch—too broad to jump, and too deep to be waded—and this necessitates our striking off at right angles and making for a gate-bridge, over which we clamber, and pursue our course. After a hundred yards or so of plain sailing, we are again confronted by a ditch, and the previous evolution has to be repeated; then another, and another, and another, until we calculate that at the end of an hour we must have come to twenty ditches, and must have made twenty rectangular movements. The sun, too, begins to make itself felt, and we are aware of the existence of our knapsacks; so at the next gate we halt, and instead of clambering over it, sit on it and survey matters. Solitude enough to please the most ardent of recluses! Solitude and silence. Not a human being, or anything betokening the existence of a human being, except distant Rye, in sight. Not a sound save the occasional tinkle of a sheep-bell; not even the cry of a pee-wit, or the hum of an insect. Nothing but grass, dotted with white gates, as far as the eye can stretch

to right or left. Behind us are the tall trees of Lydd, apparently not very much further off than when we started; in front of us, growing hazy in the mirage, Rye. We attempt to picture the aspect of this wild country in mid-winter, and we shudder at the notion; for we can hardly believe that, except perhaps Dartmoor and Salisbury Plain, there can be a more desolate, deserted region in England. We plod on, but we have ceased now to clamber over the gates—we go through them; our tongues are getting

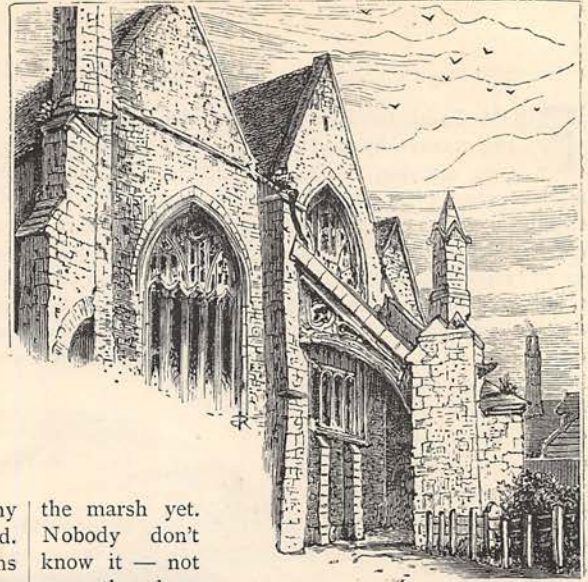
dry, and our knapsacks begin to gall our backs, but there is nothing to be done but steer as straight ahead as we can. This mode of progression lasts for three hours, until the sun shines down with unbroken force; for there is not a breath of air, although the sea is but a mile or two on our left hand. With feelings somewhat akin to those of the shipwrecked mariner who, from his raft in mid-ocean, spies a sail, we observe a low, straggling shanty some way before us. As straight as the ditches will allow us, we make for it.



LANDGATE, RYE.

We enter. A tall form, with shaggy hair, is stooping over a dish. The form possesses petticoats, so presumably it is a woman; but for this evidence, it might be that of some animal. We ask in our most dulcet tones for a drink of water and leave to rest for a few minutes out of the baking sun. The figure turns a copper-coloured face to us, and delivers itself of some gutturals, in response to which a second figure, still wilder and still shaggier, but without petticoats, and therefore presumably a man, emerges from an inner room, and indulges us with what we take to be almost a cannibalic stare. We repeat our request. The man shakes his head, not in refusal but with a gesture of incomprehension. We make the motion of drinking; he can follow that; he goes out and presently returns with a basin of evil-smelling water, which, however, we drink as if it were the finest nectar. Then we rest, moralising on the axiom that truth is certainly stranger than fiction, or

in this island of ours, within a dozen miles of more than one fashionable watering-place, we should not be compelled to gesticulate for a cup of water. Refreshed, we set out again. The figures follow us to the door, and as we go away, exchange gutturals, which, if interpreted, would probably mean, "Where are these foreign fools going to?" More ditches, more gates, but not an atom more life. Our voices ring out with startling clearness into the air, and our footsteps on the turf sound as if we were treading pavement. So we progress, slowly and painfully; for, short as the distance would be along a clearly-defined road, or even across an ordinary piece of country, this continual zig-zagging, this ceaseless exposure to the sun, becomes painful exertion, and we finally determine to strike straight for the coast. We shall be going at least two miles out of our way, but anything is preferable to this unbroken monotony of silence and gymnastics. We reach the coast road. A burly coastguard's-man is making observations through a telescope. We tell him where we have been, and detail what we have gone through. "Lor' bless yer, gentlemen," he says, in reply, "I ain't surprised at it, I ain't. Why, I've been stationed here for twenty year, and blessed if I know the road across



RYE CHURCH—EAST BUTTRESS.

the marsh yet. Nobody don't know it — not even the shepherds, let alone strangers.

There's a many parties wot hev come out snipe-shooting and the like hes been obliged to sleep out all night, they hes." We ask him how far it is to Rye. "About eight miles," he says. "Eight miles!" we repeat, incredulously. "and we've been five hours doing three miles as the crow flies." However, we set out, comforted by the knowledge that the road is clear, and that gates and ditches are things of the past. We halt at the "Royal William," a little wayside inn, for bread and cheese, and by three o'clock we are close to the ancient borough of Rye. We cross the Rother in a ferry, and are on a flat piece of land upon which the boys of Rye are playing cricket. It is hard to believe that, three hundred years back, where cricket is now being played, a grand review of the Cinque Ports Fleet was held. Yet it is an historical fact. Every inch of land we have been treading since early this morning was once sea. There is a mournful air about Rye. It might be a town of sleep, so silent and so lifeless is everything; and, but for the shouts of the cricketers and the whistle of a distant railway-engine, we might to all appearances be approaching a deserted place. Yet there is a considerable trade done at Rye, and although the present harbour is two miles from the town, there are ships there, and a fair number of barges on the river. In the last century, smuggling awoke Rye from her sleep of years, and it became a very hot-bed of illegal traffic, as any of the old fellows smoking their pipes and watching the cricket from the parapet of the cliff will tell us.

Rye is unique; for although there is nothing

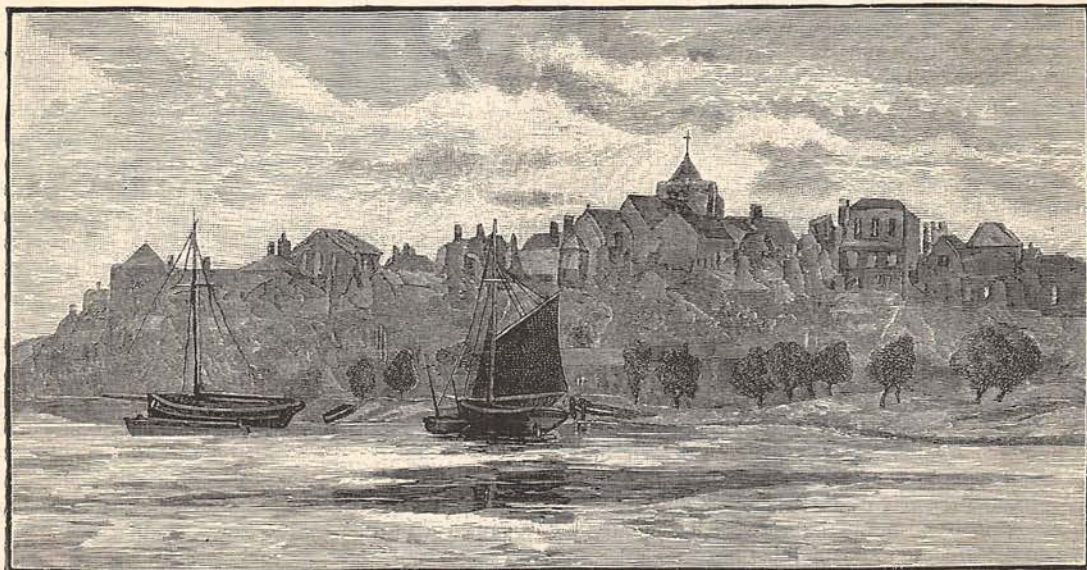


THE PENDULUM IN RYE CHURCH.

in the town of separate commanding interest, one is interested at all points. There is nothing new in it from beginning to end, and could the old fellows who knew it in its palmy days revisit it, they would find it strangely unaltered. One may wander for hours up and down quaint old streets, with quaint old names, where there are fine timbered houses, once the residences of the Cinque Ports merchant princes. But the grass grows in the roadway, and the old houses are either falling from sheer decrepitude or are put to very base uses. On all sides pride, power, and decay go hand in hand. A fisherman, with a short pipe, saunters out of a doorway rich with carved figures and foliage; packing-cases are being hauled in and out of windows to which still cling remnants of delicate stone tracery; out of another window, stained and emblazoned with forgotten coats-of-arms, leans a tattered, dishevelled woman with a baby in her arms; and so on, the contrasts strike us as we saunter through the town.

A very remarkable feature in this country is the stateliness and prominent positions of the churches. St. Nicholas, Rye, stands on the highest ground in the town, which itself is built upon a cliff, and one can well understand how, in the old stirring times, it was an easy matter to send news from Rye to Lydd or Tenterden, and from thence into the heart of the country. It is an interesting old church, which has had more vicissitudes than fall to the lot of most

captured from one of the ships of the Spanish Armada by Sir Francis Drake. Not far from the church is the Ypres Tower—once a fortification of some importance, now used as a prison, although the patriotic men of Rye declare that it never contains a prisoner unless it be a drunken sailor. From the esplanade we get a wide-spreading view towards the sea: flat green land, broken only by the ruins of Camber Castle and the picturesque group of Winchelsea. The only other object worthy of a visit is the Land Gate on the Dover Road—the sole remnant of the ring of fortification put by Edward the Third round the town. With Rye ends the quaint corner of England known as Romney Marsh; but if we strike away inland towards Tunbridge, we pass through a country rich in the three attributes of beauty, interest, and retirement. All about here, and more especially over the Sussex border, was once the "Black Country" of England. Before the development of our northern coal-fields, the dense forest-land was dotted with iron-foundries, as may still be traced in the frequent names of places which denote the old existence of forges and furnaces. Later, the villages gained evil fame for being harbours of smuggled goods; and strange old places they are, with their huge, rambling inns, their fine old manor-houses, and, in the cases of Cranbrook, Hawkhurst, Goudhurst, Horsemonden, and Pembury, their fine old churches. But the route is by no means an easy



RYE (EVENING) FROM THE FERRY.

English churches; for the French were continually burning it, and the burgesses as continually restoring it. There is a pendulum swinging under the steeple which is said to be the oldest in England, and the Communion-table is likewise said to have been

one to follow, and the explorer must not be afraid of using his tongue when he gets the chance—which is not very often—or he will very rapidly find himself adrift amidst the labyrinth of winding lanes and by-ways which seem to lead nowhere.