

OUR EARTHQUAKE EXPERIENCES.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "AN UNFASHIONABLE DAY AT THE SEASIDE," ETC.



STRANGE, and almost incredible, as the news first sounded to English ears when shouted forth with all the lung-power of small evening paper boys, on April the 22nd last, a terrible throb of some little-understood pulse, beating in Nature's dark places—a veritable earthquake—had just lifted a quiet corner of our land into unenviable notoriety, and startled thousands of country folks out of their comfortable belief that such things were confined to that wide *terra incognita*—"foreign parts."

Knowing as little as the very humblest in our village the origin of this happily rare terror, and feeling that no personal speculations on "faults," explosions of gases manufactured deep beneath our sight, muttered messages from Hecla to Vesuvius, or any other theory of scientific men would be worth the ink they were written with, we will pass at once from cause to consequence, and tell briefly some effects of this most unexpected visitation.

Long indeed will twenty minutes past nine on the morning of that spring Tuesday be remembered through the valley of the Colne, and over many a mile of eastern coast.

So stormy and windy was it, that labourers at work a-field mistook the first rumble of the approaching earth-wave for a strong gust among distant tree-tops, or the warning note of a coming tempest.

But only for a few seconds was mistake possible.

Then from the heart of the earth below rose up a great groan—a sound more awful than cannonading from unseen battle-fields. Upheaving first, then backwards and forwards rocked the troubled land. A dizziness—not of fear, all was too quick for that—absolutely physical, seized on every one standing, and by the time the question had formulated itself, "What is it?" the sight of falling chimneys, cracking walls, cottages unroofing, church-towers rending, and homesteads magically wrecked, supplied the appalling answer.

Swiftly as the shadow of a summer cloud sweeps over wide country tracts, so glided by the invisible power, and ruins marked its course.

When the actual active force of the calamity had come and gone, then terror had its turn. A mighty fear overcame most living things. Birds flew wildly hither and thither, uttering sharp, startled cries. Beating in blind haste, perhaps, against trees or walls, many a little feathered victim fell lifeless to the ground. A flock of sheep being driven up a hill-side could with difficulty be kept together, and one poor woolly matron died within a few minutes of the shock

—her fate being shared by two lambs of very tender age. Farmyard fowls huddled together in abject fright. Dogs howled and cowered in amazement. Cottage folk tell, almost unanimously, how they "wholly looked to be swallowed up!" And as for the womenkind, rushing terror-stricken out of their falling homes, it seems that with one accord, to use their own emphatic phrase, "they shruck."

"'T must be London blown up!" was one man's scared suggestion; but, "Nay, mate," made answer a more reasoning mind. "Not if all London was blown up 'twouldn't shake we like this. It's something wuss!" And for the panic that ensued, all who, like the writer, have made a pilgrimage through only part of the afflicted district, must own there is ample reason.

North-west of the Colne's mouth positive damage seems to have begun in one of the three Layers.

Layer Marney, outermost of these villages, felt the oscillation but slightly. Its singularly interesting church and tall tower residence reared by the Lords of Marney in Tudor times are uninjured. About a mile nearer the water is Layer Breton—less lucky, but still in better plight, than the last of these sister parishes, Layer de la Haye, where sundry big cracks in a comparatively new aisle of the church, dislodged battlements, a displaced key-stone in a western arch, and considerable havoc among house-chimneys, manifest the severity of the shock, even at this distance from its centre.

Here, at an isolated farm, the mistress was opening a door from without, when, as she drew forward the handle, the whole building seemed to sway forward, and down came showers of bricks and mortar right and left, eliciting the terrified exclamation, "What *have* I done!" and a momentary dread that in some mysterious way she was actually demolishing her own dwelling. Here too, as in scores of places, very little children had marvellous escapes, and, sitting by the fire-side, were instantaneously changed, by a black downpour, into unrecognisable figures—a transformation which, however, signified not a straw to the thankful mothers who, in the first direful confusion, sought and found their small treasures safe though sooty!

But nearing the coast from this village come very dismal scenes.

At Great Wigborough, upon a peculiar round-shaped hill, said by archæologists to be a huge ancient barrow, stands a church—tall, shapely, bearing little outward token of damage, but on closer examination found to be so racked and wrenched that the fiat has gone forth concerning it, "Unsafe," and from pinnacle to base it must probably be rebuilt.

At Little Wigborough, nearer the wide estuary of the Blackwater, and on the heavy land which seems to have transmitted the force of the disaster much more

readily than the lighter soils, a perfect ruin represents what has long been a somewhat decaying ecclesiastical building, and from Wigborough Hill, looking across the broad marshes to Mersea, and over undulating lands east as far as the eye can reach, almost every dwelling is more or less shattered, with torn gables, beams and rafters snapped like matches, big holes in roofs where chimneys used to be, and the said chimneys lying in ugly, mutilated heaps about the bright spring gardens.

At Peldon, a straggling parish that reaches to the salt water by the "Strood," or road which joins the mainland to the island called "Mersea," the devastation is most saddening. Houses of the better, as well as poorer classes, appear as if they had been taken up, shaken, jerked, twisted, dislocated, and then set down to tumble to pieces at their leisure. Families ran forth at the first sense of danger, and in more than one instance cannot re-enter their homes till weeks of builders' and bricklayers' labour have restored them to safety. The fine old church, which, standing high, was, like its neighbours at Great Wigborough, a landmark for miles around, is cruelly torn from east to west. Great zig-zag cracks disfigure the chancel walls, clerestory windows are badly damaged—looking in one instance as if an attempt had been made to wring the mullions into corkscrew shape—and the grey old tower, weather-beaten by nigh five centuries, and never quite upright in the memory of living man, now leans most ominously, its topmost courses shattered, wrecking in their fall the nave roof, where, through a great gap, one now sees the blue sky, and long strands of dislodged ivy waving from the tottering walls.

Close beneath that undesirable loophole stands a beautiful old font, earlier probably by a hundred years than the existing church.

"How fortunate that *that* was not hurt!" said we to the parish clerk, who keeps on guard about the building.

"More fortunate 'tweren't at church-time it happened," answered he; "there'd ha' bin a deal more hurt than the stone then!"

And we, claiming as friends near and dear the individuals who usually occupy that corner of the nave, accepted the reproof, turning away with a feeling of profound thankfulness for the protection extended to human life in the midst of such sudden and far-extending danger.

Melancholy as are the two miles past Peldon towards the marshes, where no tenement stands that has not suffered, where cottagers have to cook out of doors, camp gipsy-fashion on the common, and often sleep in sheds or any lean-to they can get, the most grievous sight of all waits us at Langenhoe, a spot on the flat, "fleet-drained" land, between the Blackwater and the Colne.

Here the quaint little Perpendicular church is a complete wreck; yet once more gratitude must out-weigh

regret. Across the west end of the small nave runs, or rather ran, a wooden gallery, wherein on Sundays sat the school-children of the parish with their teachers; and that gallery is knocked to pieces by masses of descending stone from the tower, till it looks like fagots of fire-wood flung pell-mell upon the floor. To think of the hearts that would have been half broken if the hour of this awful visitation had been altered, and the gallery filled with its usual troop of youngsters, may well send us away acknowledging humbly that the Hand which orders these things *is* Divine!

Close by Langenhoe lies Abberton, and there destruction, notably among old buildings, has been rife; but the little church of St. Andrew, although most palpably shaken and partially unroofed, still stands secure enough to shelter worshippers, and offer itself on one portion of each Sabbath for the use of its more distressed neighbour, Langenhoe.

Between here and the Colne Mouth lies Fingrinhoe, where bulging walls, impromptu roofs of straw, tarpaulins or big threshing-cloths, shored-up gables, scaffolding round stack after stack of chimneys, and a church needing a heavy total of restoration look mournfully over the waters at Wivenhoe, whence come piteous tales of demolition almost worse than any we have yet described: and so winding up the river we reach Colchester, whose terror and troubles and losses found many chroniclers while their fear was first on them.

We say "fear," for there must indeed have been few minds that could pass through those terrible ten seconds with normal calm, and stout must be the nerves which can recall such experience without a shudder.

Here in the rural parts it seems not so much to have roused voluble alarm as to have what the labouring people call "dazed them."

It is something altogether out of their ken. "A warning," they say, all interpreting the word according to the bent of their own intellect. Many find it very hard to pull themselves together for common every-day work again; but they are doing it patiently and uncomplainingly. Not a single murmur have we heard among our rustic folk. Every soul seems so infinitely thankful at having escaped "what might have been," that repining for what *is* finds no place on any lips. They accept with a bravery which on different lines would earn wide plaudits, heavy and to some irreparable losses, such as, were their condition more widely known, would surely call forth freer practical sympathy than yet seems roused on their behalf. Is it too much to hope that some who read this imperfect sketch of some of the earthquake's dismal doings will join in helping the sufferers, re-erecting shaking homes, and rearing anew God's sanctuaries as a thank-offering for immunity from this great peril which for years to come must mark April 22nd, 1884, as a black-letter day in the calendar of the Eastern Counties?

