



AN UNFASHIONABLE DAY AT THE SEA-SIDE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "WHO IS SYLVIA?" ETC.



"SHALL we run down to the sea for a couple of hours?" asks our host at the luncheon-table of a country rectory, and an instant chorus of assent greets the proposal.

The day is one of the first of early summer. The warmth, delicious though it be, makes every one feel lazy. A taste of salt air, plus a rural drive, minus a band, a pier, a promenade, and all the fashionable terrors of a recognised bathing-place, will be the very acme of enjoyment, the mere notion of which puts every one in high spirits.

So bells are rung; orders given; the wagonette comes round for the elders; the pony-carriage takes four young folks; a neighbour's Norfolk cart is borrowed for the boys, and off we go.

We are in a county understood far and near to be one of the least attractive in England. We are often twitted with being uninteresting, muddy, aguish, and ugly. But as our rapid drive takes us along—now winding country roads sheltered by feathery-boughed elms, now lanes whose hedges are redolent of sweet-briar, most excellently lovely with wild roses; now past plantations whither scuttle coveys of baby partridges at our approach; now with a splash through a wide shallow ford, whose margins are fringed with

forget-me-nots; now up a long, long hill, *the* hill of the district; then through wide pastures, whose short fine grass is cropped by scores of sheep; over a causeway that parts the mainland from the islet we aim at; by a network of creeks fast filling with the incoming tide; by acres of flower-farms on our other hand, where stocks and gillyflowers freight every breeze that blows—then do we declare this corner of the world unkindly slandered, and by the time we reach the shore, and sight the wide, silvery waters, pronounce ourselves champion of the whole scene's peaceable beauties for evermore.

For us who are not young, nothing is pleasanter than, first, a stroll along the seaweed line of the morning tide, then a Scotch rug on the shore, a barricade of carriage cushions at our back, and to be left guardian of the boys' shoes and stockings, while they go out across the sandy flat to meet the rising flood.

Here it comes, ruffled and rippling under a south-west wind!—smiling in myriads of diamond-tipped sparkles, whispering its salutation from afar in dreamy murmurs; hush—sh—shing us half to sleep as presently its long wavelets break almost at our feet.

But our drowsy enjoyment is very soon dispelled. Shrieks of fright and fun reach us from yonder wooden breakwater. There the young ones having perched themselves with naked toes dangling in the water, these extremities are seized upon by a tribe of voracious crabs, who in their turn are captured and brought triumphantly to us, to be stowed away in a basket. This prize made safe, away hie the lads again in quest of the "pater," whom they intend to badger

into letting them have a bathe among the jelly-fishes, and we are left for another half-hour's solitude.

Now, if so disposed, we may jog up our antiquarian lore, recalling the days when this very spot was no insignificant stronghold, and the so-called "Saxon show" harboured, if one may judge by the remains continually coming to light, many of the richest of Britain's foreign protectors.

Or we may look across the glittering expanse, past the little white-sailed smacks scudding up to their haven, and across the bay where our island lies, to that long promontory yonder, and moralise upon the mutability of glories temporal, as we remember that there first vast Roman earthworks (and tradition adds a huge fortress), and next a noble priory, founded by a Saxon saint, have not only crumbled away under the hand of time, but their every vestige now lies buried beneath the encroaching waters which still creep yearly forward upon the coast doomed to submergence.

But while we sit meditating thus, an unlooked-for catastrophe occurs. We hear a queer little scratching sound at our side, and behold, there through a chink between basket and lid, our crabs are all escaping! In a clumsy bustle of excitement, out come the whole haul of semi-opaque crustaceans and (to our secret satisfaction) away they go to their native brine, we determining to hazard never a nip by detaining one of them. Their loss is vastly deplored by the boys who come rushing up after their dip: we meekly accept a scolding and suggest consolation in the fact of the tide having turned and "winkling" being soon possible.

To watch the bare-legged youngsters, who have turned to "winkling," we seniors venture out upon a slippery jetty of loose shingle, where greeny-grey shrimps dart about in the salt-water pools, and "whelks" stick to the wooden piles at either side. Our hostess and her daughters join us here, bringing jugs of milk and tempting little hot cakes from the farm they have just visited, whereof the orchard, not yet blossomless, runs down close to the shore.

Another daughter returns with the guest of the day, a young London barrister of archaeological tastes, to whom she has been exhibiting a splendid bit of tessellated pavement, lately discovered by diggers of a drain across a turnip-field. Up come our other gentlemen, who have been punting about under convoy of a native fisherman, and who have made some wonderful bargains in lemon soles and sand-dabs, in the little straggling village that we have not visited. We all laugh at each other for having such scorched faces. With keen appetite we devour our food, and rather wish there was twice as much again. We begin to notice how long the boys' shadows are, on the shining sands. We rather unwillingly take forth our watches and discover it is getting late, and we must be going home. Then ensues a great halloaing to the winkling party, who don't wish to be disturbed, and pretend not

to hear us. A small amphibious boy, who has come up with the master's purchase of fish, volunteers to "go arter 'em," which he accordingly does at great speed, wending his way among shallows and flats like an eel in its natural habitat.

Our juveniles hailed at last make a virtue of necessity, gather up their spoil of little black sea-snails, and race their messenger back towards us with more haste than discretion. Presently a dismal howl announces disaster, and lo, there is the most diminutive of the party up to his waist in one of the oozy pits of black mud which abound along that shore! The situation seems alarming. Before, however, any of us have time to be frightened, off start other fisher-boys—always on the look-out for this sort of calamity with unwary strangers—and in a twinkling Master Jack is extracted from his inky bath, not at all damaged, but smelling most horribly! Hurried off to a cottage nigh at hand, he is there vigorously tubbed by the friendly mistress, and very soon returned to us safe and sound, cutting a comical figure in the Sunday garments of the youngest of his rescuers.

By the time this little episode is happily ended our vehicles are waiting. Wraps are not to be despised, for as we drive off, we meet a brisk air blowing seaward, and casting back a farewell look from the crest of the island, we see a light fog hanging over the distant coast. Sorry to bid the sea good night, and yet weary enough to relish the thought of getting home, we drive soberly along, less conversational than when we came, but enjoying to the full the sweet calm of the June evening. Overhead herons fly screaming from inland woods, to search after what the tide has left them for their supper. The sun goes down under a splendid canopy of gold and purple clouds. By the time we reach the top of our "high hill," the boundaries of the many parishes our host pointed out in the morning are no longer discernible. Only the grey church towers, or white winding roads, gleam out here and there. Twilight and weariness envelop us as we reach our journey's end.

But those hours of quite unfettered enjoyment have been very pleasant. Doubly so we think them when a nondescript meal—dinner, tea, and supper all in one—has revived our spirits.

As afterwards we sit alone in a dusky corner of the drawing-room, workers gathered round the lamp at the further end of the room, a very delicate touch waking harmony close by, we feel inclined to wish ourself banished from city life, free to revel often in such hours as these have been. We are disposed to ask our young London friend if he is not of our mind in this matter, but it appears he has beguiled Miss Amy out to hear the nightingales. So we will not disturb them, but put our pleasures down in pen and ink, and let the young couple, if they will, devise a conclusion which shall fitly crown

"With happy memories a happy day."

A. P.

