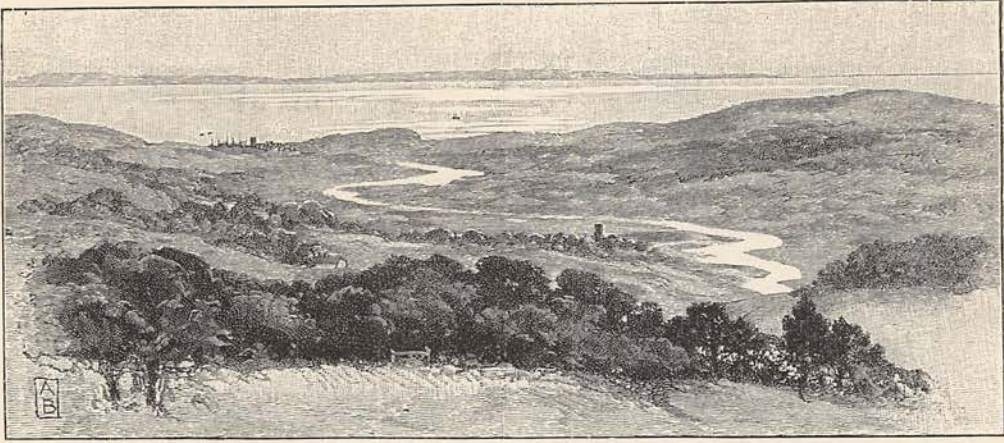
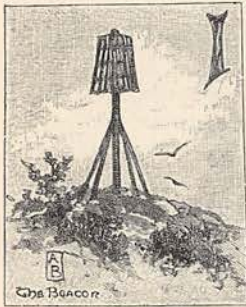


## A POET'S COUNTRY.



THE VALLEY OF THE YAR, FROM HIGH DOWN.

*(Farringford Wood in the Foreground.)*

It would be unfair to call any one district exclusively the country of Tennyson in the sense that we associate Stratford with Shakespeare, or Grasmere and Rydal with Wordsworth. The early associations of Lincolnshire colour much of his earlier work, and have left their impress, indeed, on all his writings; the

heather-clad hills on the Surrey and Sussex borders have been the chosen summer resort of his later years. But the country that lies round Farringford—the western end of the Isle of Wight—associated as it is with many happy years of the poet's life, and in the minds of many with happy memories of admission there into the charmed circle of the poet's home, seems to ally itself with him in a special manner, and to make the name I have given to it not altogether an unfitting one.

Those who visit it now for the first time must bear in mind that there have been many changes since Tennyson first came to Farringford. Much of the seclusion of former years has been lost through the ever-growing number of summer visitors, and the accommodation it has been found necessary to provide for them both in Freshwater and the newer resort of Totland Bay. And now the railway is creeping gradually along the valley of the Yar. Still, the main features of the district cannot change, nor has it altogether lost that air of rest and leisure, of quiet and retirement, which belongs so essentially to the pure country.

For in this little district of Freshwater there is the happiest blending of the country and the sea.

Sheltered by the sloping Downs, as you follow the winding lanes between luxuriant hedges under over-arching trees, or crossing one of the little village greens, branch off into a footpath through meadows and corn-fields, you might think yourself in the heart of an English county. Yet only a few steps further, when you reach the crest of the next hill-slope (for all the surface of the land is gently undulating, as if unconsciously repeating the landward slope of the Downs) although the sea itself on the one hand is hid by the Downs, the grey-blue Solent is in sight on the other, with its distant gleam of white sails.

The long ridge of Downs which crosses the island from east to west slopes down at Freshwater Gate in the massive slant of Afton Down. Immediately opposite, and rather more abruptly, rises the High Down, continuing the ridge to its western end. Between these two sentinels there is just room for the little bay, or cove—it is scarcely more—of Freshwater, a fairy bay when the sun shines on the bluest of blue seas, and on the white chalk cliffs to whose very edge is spread a smooth close carpet of turf.

Not a hundred yards from the sea rises the river Yar, which, flowing, curiously enough, away from the sea, forms a kind of boundary to our district. Scarcely more than a little ditch at first, choked with weeds and marked by about half a dozen pine-trees, which grow in a little group at the foot of Afton Down, it develops presently into a small stream, flowing along the low-lying reedy meadows insignificantly enough, until it reaches the old stone bridge, called the Causeway. But passing under this, the stream expands immediately to quite a small lake below the rising ground on which the old church stands, with its square tower and red-tiled roof, and thence you can trace its course flowing on broadly and placidly to the Solent, where the grey tower of Yarmouth Church

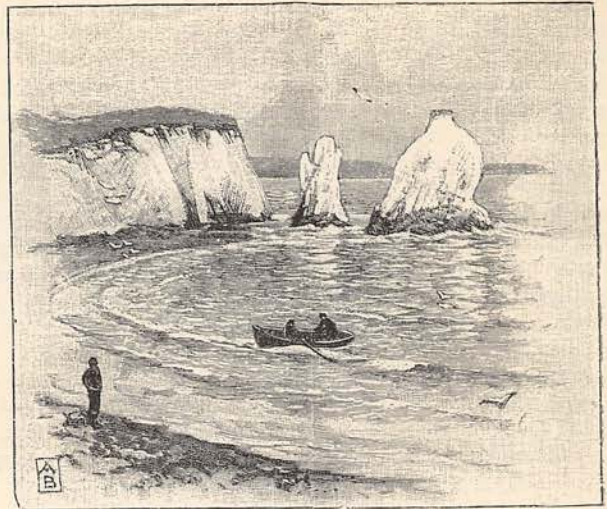
shows in the near distance amidst a cluster of dark trees, and beyond it the masts of a vessel lying near the pier.

It is in the heart of this quiet country, midway between the river and the two seas, that Farringford lies. Every one remembers the poet's own description of it :—

“Where, far from noise and smoke of town,  
I watch the twilight falling brown  
All round a careless ordered garden,  
Close to the ridge of a noble down.”

The woods of Farringford stretch along the foot of the High Down, divided from it only by one or two fields. The house itself—“half hid in the gleaming wood”—can only be seen from the immediate precincts, so thick is the belt of trees in which it is set. Photographs have rendered most people familiar with the picturesque front, with its walls and windows so clad with green that they look almost like part of the surrounding wood, and you can scarcely tell where the building ends or the trees begin. A great wide-spreading cedar casts its shadows across the grass, and beside it tall elm-tree-trunks are veiled with a wealth of ivy. From the slight bank of turf, with its light park railing, which shuts in the lawn, a stretch of park-like meadow-land slopes gently to the south, broken here and there by clumps of trees. Beyond it rises the great dome of Afton Down. A few elm-trees, blown rather out of shape by the force of the west wind, interpose to break the outline of the cliff, and between and beyond these flashes the brilliant blue of the sea. Turn to the east as you stand at the upper end of the meadow-ground, and looking across the gentle slopes and the woods beyond, you can catch a glimpse of the Solent and the Hampstead cliffs.

A lane overarched for some distance with trees,

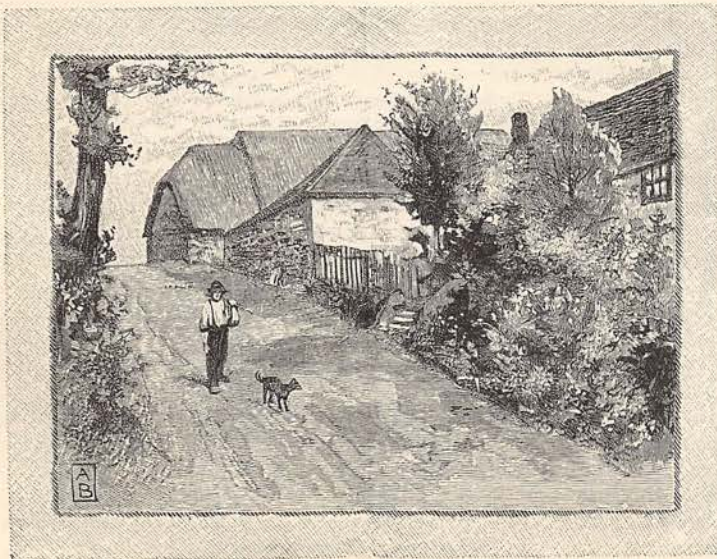


IN THE BAY.

green and golden as the sun shines through their leaves, traces the western boundary of Farringford. On the left hand a field stretches along to the foot of the High Down. There are pine-trees scattered across this field, and a belt of elms beyond. Then as the lane skirts the thick trees which surround the house, it becomes a mere cutting between grass banks, and so roofed in that rain can hardly penetrate. A turning at right angles leads by a straight course to the Down. Beyond this the ground sinks a little, and the Down is hidden by a thick belt of trees running along the ridge of an undulating meadow. By the gate of the meadow is a muddy pond, with a large willow bending over it. There is an old wall on your right hand over which, at the corner, hangs a wealth of ivy. Within, visible above the ivy, is a ripening apple-tree. You

have turned eastward now, and the lane widens a little, past a farmyard with thatched cottages, between which a pink rose is flowering in clusters almost as high as the chimneys. There are geese and hens in the opposite field, which has large hay-stacks under the trees in the corner. Passing these, you emerge into the road, not far from the entrance to the main drive, by a short avenue, quite stately from the height of the trees and their wealth of foliage. You have come almost three-parts of the way round Farringford, and have skirted the house at no great distance, but there has hardly been a sign of it—so completely do the trees hide it away in their green recesses.

The straight path that leads to the Down is bordered by



HOOK HILL.

bramble-hedges, beneath which the grass banks are thickly starred with pale pink and white convolvulus. The crest of High Down, with its long outline, is broken only by a clump or two of furze here and there, but there is a good deal of furze on this northern slope. Under the Beacon it has been greatly charred and blackened by fire, but seen from a distance this only lends a deep purplish shade to the hill-side, which is rather a pleasing contrast than otherwise. What a sense of freedom there is on the summit of the Down! How the strong pure air blows round and through you! You give yourself up to it and drink it in eagerly, as if there were a new life in the draught. And so there is. Sit down under the shadow of the Beacon, and watch the butterflies fluttering over the turf—white butterflies in numbers, and with them the small blue butterflies, more plentiful just here than in any other part. When they first settle you lose sight

dark sides of Headon Hill are clad with it, and it spreads like a pink and purple carpet to the edge of the cliffs at Alum Bay. Some of the purple clumps at the very edge stand up a mass of blossom against the blue background of the sea, and to and fro amongst the flowers the bees come and go with a low continuous hum of pleasure. Look out over the smooth blue water, and watch the pleasure-boats, as they make the passage between the Needles, driven back once and again by the force of the current. Or perchance you may see

—“below the milky steep,  
Some ship of battle slowly creep,  
And on thro' zones of light and shadow,  
Glimmer away to the lonely deep.”

As day advances, the long wall of chalk cliff puts on the tenderest shade of cool bluish-grey, while little purple shadows steal along the water from its foot.



AFTON DOWN.

of them, for the softly speckled drab of their closed wings is hardly noticeable. But in a moment or two the wings open, and disclose the deep lavender-blue within, paling at the edges to a little silvery line.

Beyond the Beacon there is a dip in the Down, and it looks only a short distance to the further end, though in reality it is a long way. There are a few patches of heather on the slope, but very dwarf and brown. Not many wild-flowers are here. They grow mostly on the slope immediately above Freshwater Gate, where the turf is carpeted with them. All along the level tract to the west, the ground is strewn with the white and grey feathers of the gulls. You do not see very many, but you can hear them crying incessantly to one another—a plaintive cry, as of a child in trouble. Now and again two of them will rise above the edge of the Down, circling round each other and calling, then sinking again, or one will pass along with a strong steady flight. But the swallows skim across and across, almost touching the turf as they pass and, sometimes, settling quite close to you as you walk.

There is hardly any heather on High Down, but the

Our poet has given us a perfect picture of Alum Bay in “The Wreck” :—

“The broad white brow of the Isle—that bay with the colour'd sand—  
Rich was the rose of sunset there as we drew to the land;  
All so quiet, the ripple would hardly blanch into spray,  
At the foot of the cliff.”

Any one who has stood at the end of the Down above the fort and looked over into Scratchell's Bay, with its magnificent front conspicuous in its dazzling whiteness for miles and miles, or entered the Solent from the west when the afternoon sunlight falls full on the warm pink and glowing yellow of the Alum Bay cliffs, will recognise the perfect truth and beauty of the description.

“Maud” was written at Farringford, and though we must not press too much to find here the precise originals of its different scenes, it is yet true, as Mr. Haweis says, that it is “full of Freshwater scenery.” There is one passage which must have been written on the Farringford lawn, and which breathes the very spirit of the place :—

"O, art thou sighing for Lebanon,  
 In the long breeze that streams to thy delicious east,  
 Sighing for Lebanon?  
 Dark cedar, tho' thy limbs have been increased,  
 Upon a pastoral slope as fair  
 And looking to the south, and fed  
 With honey'd rain and delicate air,  
 And haunted by the starry head  
 Of her whose gentle will has changed my fate,  
 And made my life a perfumed altar flame;  
 And over whom thy darkness must have spread,  
 With such delight as theirs of old, thy great  
 Forefathers of the thornless garden.

\* \* \* \* \*  
 "Here will I lie while these long branches sway,  
 And you fair stars that crown a happy day  
 Go in and out as if at merry play.

\* \* \* \* \*  
 "It seems that I am happy, that to me  
 A livelier emerald twinkles in the grass,  
 A purer sapphire melts into the sea.

\* \* \* \* \*  
 "Is that enchanted moan only the swell  
 Of the long waves that roll in yonder bay?"

What, again, could be a more perfect image than this of the deep brilliant blue of the sea as it winds in and out round the headlands to St. Catherine's Point in the distance, binding the land as with a bright ribbon?—

"When the far-off sail is blown by the breeze of a softer clime,  
 Half lost in the liquid azure bloom of a crescent of sea,  
 The silent sapphire-spangled *marriage ring* of the land."

But turn inland away from the sea along some of the lanes or across the fields. Here in a large wheat-field, within sight of the sea, the mowers are at work, five of them in a steadily advancing line, four using their scythes well together with a kind of rhythmic swing, the fifth coming in irregularly. In the opposite field they are leading, and scattered straws along the hedges tell where the carts have passed. A week later, and the ploughs will be at work in the fields.

The hedges are a great delight, although the early summer must be the time to see them in their full beauty. Close to Farringford there is a little green, and from this the most tempting of footpaths leads away along a little stretch of grass left between the fields, with a view of the high mound of the Golden Hill Fort in front. The grass is full of wild-flowers, the hedges a mass of brambles. A little further on, where there is some water, hardly more than a ditch, by the side of the path, the foundations of the overhanging hedge are old hawthorn-boughs, upon which wild plum and wild rose bushes have reared a superstructure, interlaced and bound together by trails of the wild convulvulus. Amongst these, one large leaf shines out a deep blood-red, with a few purplish-black freckles at the edges, and there is a little half-blown bit of meadow-sweet. Below, amongst the nettles and grasses down by the water, gleams one small pink blossom of the Herb Robert.

There is another delightful hedge along the footpath which leads across the fields to Totland Bay: a high hedge with oak saplings in it, and a ridge of furze above it on the further side. All kinds of wild growths

have their home here. The blossoms and berries of the brambles abound, of course. There are branches of nuts, and great trails of convulvulus, full of buds and large white flowers. The lavender scabious and the purple knapweed bloom beside the path; there are scarlet poppies here and there, and ferns amongst the nettles and grass. The butterflies love this hedge, and form quite a body-guard, fluttering round you as you walk along: white butterflies, blue butterflies, and tortoiseshells.

Along the ridge of the fields, where the view across the Solent opens out before you, and the bracing air from the north meets you as you come up from Middleton Green or Freshwater, there is another hedge where the brambles run riot—one great trail bowing down over another, and spreading along the ground: large blossoms—some white, some with a faint blush of pink, others through all shades of pink deepening almost to violet—the berries reddening, some beginning to turn black, and the bine in many places crowded with them. A few leaves here and there have turned yellow with freckles of brown, but most of them still retain their colour. Some wild honeysuckle has twisted itself through from the other side of the hedge, with a few blossoms partly out, and a cluster of bright crimson and purple berries. Above the brambles is a mass of elder, full of berries, green and purple, but the clusters looking red because of the crimson stalks. Beyond the hedge the ground dips again, and you look right across to the sea. A place, this, to watch the sunset, when the western sky is all flooded with golden light, or a purple haze lies along the coast-line, and the sun goes down amidst deep rosy and purple clouds; or perhaps there is a bank of grey cloud along the horizon, and the sun, as he sinks behind it, gilds the upper edges of the clouds and throws up quivering shafts of light.

I have been writing of days in late summer. But there are times when the fields and the Downs assume a very different aspect: when the rain comes down steadily out of a grey sky, and a wall of white rolling mist slowly descends and blots out the Beacon Hill: when sometimes, even in August, a fierce gale springs up from the south or south-west, when the waves in Freshwater Bay break on the shingle with a crash, and the spray flies up on to Afton Down, and the water streams across the little esplanade, from whose ledges it pours back in a cascade down the slant of beach: when the wind is so strong that you can hardly stand against it, while between the showers there come broad gleams of sunshine, and the swift shadows darken the Downs as they pass: when the rain and the wind have beaten the scent out of the balsam poplars, and the air is full of it, and as you go across the fields the hedgerows breathe out the spicy almond smells of the wild-flowers; or such a time as that when Maud's lover—

—"arose, and all by myself, in my own dark garden ground,  
 Listening now to the tide in its broad-flung shipwrecking roar,  
 Now to the scream of a madden'd beach dragg'd down by the wave,  
 Walk'd in a wintry wind by a ghastly glimmer, and found  
 The shining daffodil dead, and Orion low in his grave."

R. W. R.