

BY S. BARING-GOULD, AUTHOR OF "MEHALAH," ETC.



HOW little one knows of one's own country! For the last four years I have been engaged in exploring the rock castles and cave dwellings of the South and West of France, where to this day whole colonies of people live contentedly in habitations scooped out of the chalk and limestone and sandstone cliffs—just as thousands of years ago the first settlers on the Gallic soil sought themselves caverns, which they contested with the bear and the hyæna, and in which they lived, ate and drank, wept, laughed and died. But that we had similar—identical dwellings in England, and people living in them as happily as do those in France—that never entered my head till the other day, when, on visiting a friend in Staffordshire, on the confines of Worcestershire, he said to me after breakfast—

"What shall we do to-day? Whither shall we go? The weather is fine, will you come and see our Troglodites?"

"Troglodites!" I echoed.

"Well, yes—cave-dwellers. There are a

good number of families, hereabouts, live in the rocks."

"Live in the rocks!" I repeated.

"Yes, they have houses, if I may so call them, scooped out in the New-Red-Sandstone cliffs. You see, this long ridge of hill, Kinver Edge it is called, was a sea-cliff to the great Severn Strait at that time when, somewhere between the second and third glacial epoch, the Principality was an island, and the waves rolled from the Mersey to the Bristol Channel one long strip of twinkling blue sea, beyond which the Welsh mountains stood up and 'Took the morning.' Well, here are the cliffs, old sea-cliffs; here are sandstone rocks once reefs and islets in the Severn Strait. Sandstone, mind you, is comparatively soft and workable: what wonder, if from time immemorial, the rocks have been utilised as habitations for man? First, doubtless, there were the sea-worn and sea-scooped caverns in which the first men of the rude stone-weapon age lived; but these have long ago disappeared or been widened; and now we have very worthy, respectable nineteenth-century people living in these burrows in the rock."

"Let us go at once," said I.

Kinver Edge, a ridge of new red sandstone, terminates abruptly above the River Stour, above Sturton Castle, once a royal dwelling much affected by King John. The extreme

headland, 542 feet above the sea, steep on all sides but one, was fortified by King Wulfhere, who reigned in Mercia from 657 to 675, and the church of Kinver was dedicated to two of his sons, who were accounted Saints. The mighty embankment thrown up by Wulfhere remains, and the place was, no doubt, a stronghold against the incursions of the Welsh. This point of rock has between it and the old seabed a remarkable mass of isolated crag, that goes by the name of Holy Austin Rock, and this is literally honeycombed with habitations in three storeys or stages, with families still occupying the rock at each level, though all the dwellings are not now tenanted. The topmost has a bench and table before the door, and the inhabitants of the cave keep by them a store of ginger-beer and lemonade, wherewith to refresh visitors from Stourbridge or Kidderminster.

In far-away distance of time, so runs the tale, a giant occupied this rock, and he had a

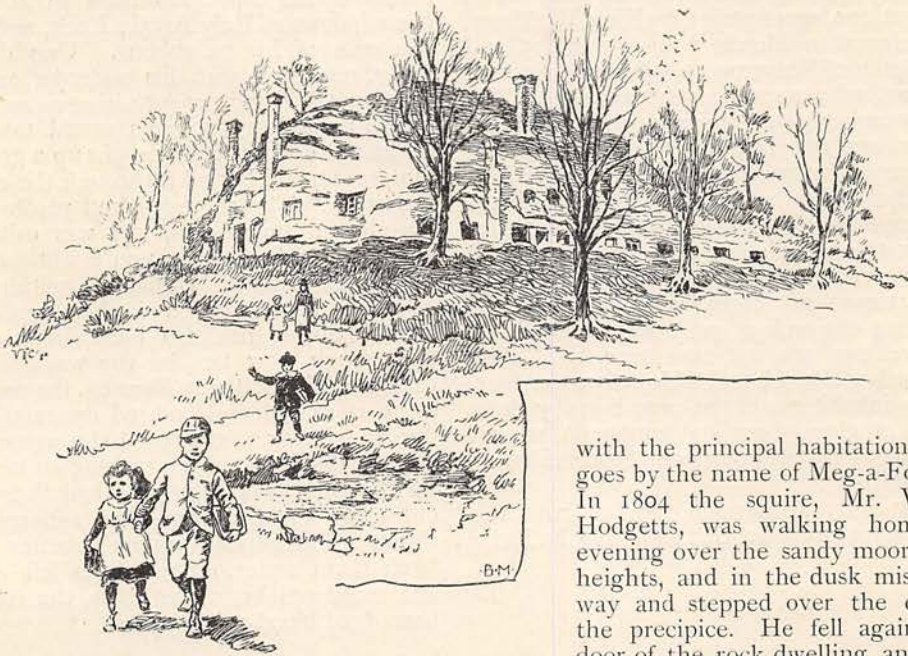
across country, put his head in at one of the windows of Holy Austin Rock, and kissed the wife of his neighbour. One day the latter, returning with his water-jar, saw this, and saw the Enville giant racing away as hard as his seven-leagued boots would take him. So he put down the jar, caught up a great and long stone, and hurled it through the air after the other. The stone fell and planted itself upright in the ground, and was called the Bolt or Bass Stone. It was doubtless a fine prehistoric menhir. Unhappily, within man's memory, it has been broken up. The Giant's Spring has also been diverted, and the trough now lies by the wayside much overgrown by nettles. Near by, the red sandstone is of a deep blood-red dye, and this is due, so folk say, to the blood of a woman here slain by the Danes, when making an incursion up the Stour. The natives had fled to the old camp on the edge, but suffered from thirst. Then one woman volunteered to fetch them water. The Danes fell on her and murdered her; ever since, the rock has been dyed blood-red.



HOLY AUSTIN ROCK.

comely wife. There lived another giant at Enville, in another rock dwelling. Now it happened that water was scarce at Holy Austin, and the giant had to stride away to a slope round the shoulder of Kinver Edge to a trickling stream, the drops of which were collected in a stone trough, still extant, called The Giants' Water Trough. When the Holy Austin giant was collecting water from the dribbling spring, the Enville giant strode

The cave-dwellings are either entirely scooped out in the heart of the rock, windows and doors being cut in the stone, and the front being a mere screen of living rock, or else, as is the case with the topmost storey of dwellings, a brick front has been erected before the caves, and this has been done on account of the original face of rock having been so cut about that it has given way. Usually the only brick structure connected with the cave-



ROCK COTTAGES AT DRAKE'S LOWE.

dwelling is the chimney. One house on the middle stage has this feature in very extraordinary fashion, curled like a worm to avoid the projections of rock.

One of the inhabitants of Holy Austin Rock, not content with scooping out for himself many chambers in the rock, has dug his way through it, and can look out on the face of the precipice on the further side.

These cave-dwellings are warm in winter, and cool in summer; they are very dry, indeed, as one of the inmates assured me—drier in winter than in summer—as in the hot weather the coolness of the stone has an effect of condensing on it any moisture there may be in the air.

Other rock houses are not, however, so salubrious, and some have been condemned by the sanitary inspector, and the occupants, to their great indignation, forced to leave, though they have never suffered inconvenience from lodging in the caves.

Why the rock is called after Holy Austin, neither history nor tradition can tell. Possibly there may have been a recluse of that name who lived in one of the caves in ancient days, possibly the cliff may have belonged to the Augustinian Friars.

About a mile further along the cliff is another group of rock dwellings, now no longer tenanted; the occupants were ejected a few years ago. A melancholy event is connected

with the principal habitation, which goes by the name of Meg-a-Fox-hole. In 1804 the squire, Mr. William Hodgetts, was walking home one evening over the sandy moor on the heights, and in the dusk missed his way and stepped over the edge of the precipice. He fell against the door of the rock dwelling, and when

the man who lived in Meg-a-Fox-hole came to open his door next morning, he had much difficulty in doing so, because it was blocked by the corpse of his landlord.

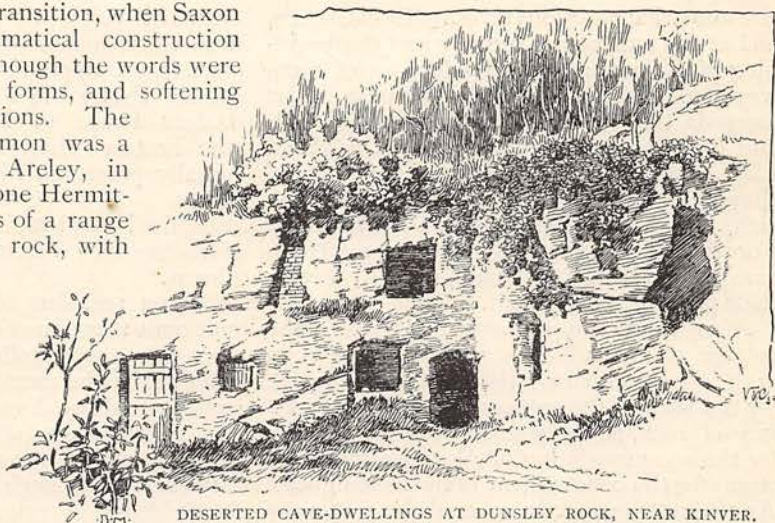
In the rock here are numerous names cut. The earliest is that of H. Kindar, Scriptor, Londini, 1700; the next in antiquity is that of R. Knight, 1749; ancestor of the present Sir F. Knight, of Wolverley.

Another mile takes one to Drake's Lowe, where is a cove or *cirque* in the old sea-cliff, and here are numerous dwellings dug out of the rock, all provided with brand-new chimneys of glazed black bricks.

A smart Board school occupies the bottom of the cove, and an extraordinary spectacle may be witnessed when the school bell rings. From the rock holes issue the children like rabbits from their burrows, and descend the steep and in some places precipitous sides by zigzag paths.

In Worcestershire at Areley Kings is a rock-hewn hermitage in a bluff, called the Red Stone. It was in this parish, and, if tradition may be trusted, in this hermitage that Layamon wrote his poem, the *Brut*, one of the earliest monuments of the English language that we possess. It is a metrical history of Britain, based on the fabulous work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and he wrote either at the end of the reign of Henry II., or not long after his death. Layamon tells us that he was a priest, and that he was a native of Erlen on the Severn, and his language

belongs to the period of transition, when Saxon phraseology and grammatical construction were still preserved, although the words were rapidly changing their forms, and softening down their terminations. The Ernley of which Layamon was a native is the modern Areley, in which parish the Red Stone Hermitage exists. This consists of a range of chambers cut in the rock, with doorways and windows, and do not at all belong to a single habitation. When the church was rebuilt in 1885-86 the early font was discovered, broken up, but bearing on it an inscription commemorative of the poet-priest Layamon.



DESERTED CAVE-DWELLINGS AT DUNSLEY ROCK, NEAR KINVER.

Another very odd rock dwelling is in "The Devil's Spittleful." This is a conical mass of sandstone, some forty feet high, that rises abruptly out of the surrounding heath, between Kidderminster and Bewdley. A thick-set grove of firs covers the steep sides, but in the rock may be seen an opening leading into a hewn chamber, furnished with hearth and chimney. There are traces of other dwellings in the same rock.

"The Devil's Spittleful" takes its name from an odd legend told about it.

A cobbler who had been to Bewdley to fetch some boots to mend, found himself belated among the hills a mile or so from Wribbenhall. He encountered the Evil One with a mighty spade in his hand—termed locally a spittle, charged with sand.

"How far to Bewdley?" asked the spirit.

The cobbler shook his head. "A long way," he answered. "But why do you ask?"

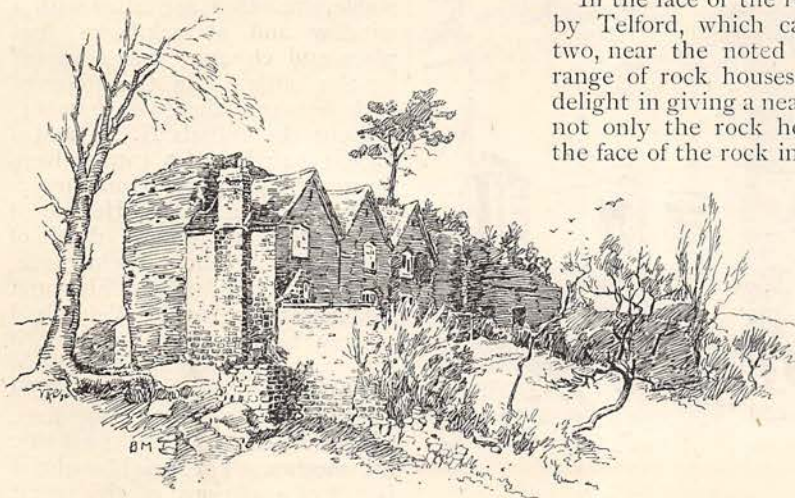
"Because," said the Evil One, "those Bewdley folk are so pious and good, that I am going to block the Severn with this spittleful of earth, so as to turn it, that the river may wash them clean away."

"Ah, master!" said the crafty cobbler, and emptied his sack of old shoes. "Look at all these—I have worn them out walking from Bewdley. You won't get there to-night, nor for a week after."

With an oath the Prince of Darkness cast down his spadeful of soil, and returned on his way—and that is why this conical mass of sandstone bears the name of "The Devil's Spittleful."

In the face of the rock above the canal cut by Telford, which canal cuts England into two, near the noted inn "Stewponney," is a range of rock houses, which the inhabitants delight in giving a neat look by whitewashing, not only the rock hewn chambers, but also the face of the rock in which they are cut.

Near Stourton Castle is an old cottage of brick, with dormer windows, overhung by stately sycamore trees, and with a pleasant sloping garden in front, nothing more innocent in appearance; no indication whatever of subterranean chambers. Yet this cottage is



TOP OF HOLY AUSTIN ROCK,

the somewhat notorious tavern of Lydia Norris, and at the end of last century and the beginning of the present was a rendezvous of highwaymen. These highwaymen were no vulgar footpads, they were gentlemen of the district, and for long no suspicion attached to them. Like Dick Turpin and Robin Hood before, they were credited with only plundering the rich, and with being generous to the poor. For this reason the peasantry were loth to give evidence against them, and to betray their place of concealment.

After a successful robbery they rode to the cottage of Lydia Norris, sent their horses in at the door, whereupon the beasts disappeared, for the back of the cottage was built against a face of rock, and it was dug out into stables for the accommodation of the horses, and into stores for the concealment of the stolen goods. As the cottage exactly covered the portion of rock that was exposed, no one from without could entertain a suspicion that it contained rock chambers and was extensive in the accommodation it afforded "to man and beast."

The highwaymen in question were received

into the best society around. It is related that when one of them named Poulter, *alias* Baxter, was apprehended and hung, the rest, dining that same evening at the Hyde, a stately house in Kinver, were asked by the hostess where their friend was, who usually presented himself at her table with them.

"Alas! madam," was the ready reply; "he has died recently of a quinsy of the throat."

When speaking of highwaymen, we must not omit mention of one at an earlier age, who has left the recollection of his misdeeds stamped in the memory of the people. This was Humphrey Kynaston, of Middle Castle. He was the son of Sir Roger Kynaston, Knight, and he was constituted Constable of Middle, but so neglected his duties that the castle fell into ruins. He maintained himself by depredations on travellers, and for his misdeeds was outlawed in 1490, but he was pardoned by King Henry VII. two years later.

During the period of his outlawry he lived in a cave dug out of the face of a cliff at Great Ness, in Shropshire, some 16 feet above the foot of the precipice, which is 70 feet high. His cave was reached by a narrow flight of steps hewn out of the rock, and it is said that his horse was wont to pasture in a field below, but that when danger approached, Humphrey from his eyrie saw it and whistled to his horse, whereupon the beast ran like a cat up the steps and took refuge in his master's cave. This is double—one portion is the stable, the other, furnished with a window and a rock-hewn fireplace and chimney, was occupied by the outlaw. In the pillar of rock between the two chambers are cut the initials H. K., and a date, 1564; but this cannot have been cut by "Wild Humphrey," as he died in 1534. He was a second son, but on the death of his brother, without lawful issue, the inheritance fell to him and his descendant by a Welsh girl of low birth, whom he carried off and married. Whilst in hiding in his cave "Wild Humphrey" is said to have been furnished with food by his mother. The neighbourhood is full of traditions of this great outlaw.



COTTAGE IN HOLY AUSTIN ROCK.