

A DEVONSHIRE COMBE.

IT is refreshing in these days of express trains and electric telegraphs, to find oneself in a quiet village, where the whistle of the engine, the rush and rattle of the train, have never sounded; where a railway porter is unseen; where even the deep cutting and tall white posts, the tunnels, the smoke and the signals, are known only by hearsay to most of the inhabitants. A village which has no weekly paper, no shops, save a few cottages which display in their little windows a pleasing assortment of apples, matches, cotton, and tallow candles. A village where there are no morning calls to be paid, where there is, in fact, nobody to pay them. Where you may wander at will through the valleys or along the coast, without the slightest fear of scandalising any of your acquaintance by the shape of your hat, the thickness of your boots, or the well-worn aspect of your general costume.

O charming village! land of liberty! Who would not be happy in your green retreats?

To such a place my fortunate star guided me. Three valleys meeting near the sea: houses nestling amongst the trees in each of them: an old church: an unpretending school-house: that is all.

A quarter of a mile from the thickest batch of houses is the beach. The sea, open, blue, majestic, rolls its clear, crisp waves upon the pebbles at the foot of the cliffs. These rise high, some red, some white, with veins of gypsum running through them. On their sides are plots of ground cultivated with hard labour by some of the farming people and fishermen. Long trains of donkeys wind up the narrow cliff paths, laden with brown seaweed for manure. This can be collected only at particular tides, and the business of collecting it, "tidal work," as it is called, forms at some seasons an important part of the occupation of the men and boys of Combe St. Winifred.

To the lover of pebbles the beach is an enchanted region. Here he may wander for hours, loading himself with great pieces of green jasper and chalcedony; often with beautiful wood-and-moss-agates, and even rarer treasures. If he have luck he may light upon some desirable fossil, easily detached from its soft limestone bed. Anemones, too, and pink filmy seaweeds abound.

No enterprising naturalists with zoophyte knives and orthodox tin pails invade the quietude of Combe beach. Only now and then you see a little fishing-boat put off from the shore, or a knot of "Preventive men," telescopes in hand, appear in front of their little salmon-coloured houses. You may, perhaps, hear the voices of children gathering water-cresses in the brook which rests here after its quick

run through the valley; or of the men and boys—"cleave-farmers," as they are called—at work upon the cliffs; but there are no other signs of life.

Yet the solitude is not oppressive. The dash of the waves at your feet, and the roll of the pebbles which they carry back as they recede, brace and invigorate the nervous system; a flavour of brine mingles with your thoughts, and the mind receives an increased tone of healthy vigour.

You sit down on the old accustomed bit of beach, which you learn to love more and more every day. No one is very near you, and you have the shore almost to yourself. Spread out before you is the sea, calm and placid. The little waves creep up and curl over with a busy whisper at your feet. The sun has not long set, and pink and golden clouds are reflected in the water. By-and-by the bright colours fade; the sky fills with a tender bluish haze; then a star appears, "in pale glory;" then another, and another; the breeze against your cheek grows chilly. You look round; lights are shining in the distant houses, and when you turn again to the sea it is dull, almost leaden. The rising moon casts a bright track of light across the water.

In such moments as these one feels what a tumultuous hurry this life of ours is; what a strife of wills; what a struggle for worldly advancement; what a whirl of feverish longings and strivings after some never-to-be-achieved happiness; what a constant warfare between good and evil in our hearts. And then the sight of that calm unruffled ocean quiets one; we are soothed in listening to its solemn chant: for the "grand diapason" has more power over the spirit than the finest music that was ever composed. It goes to the very heart and root of our being. It is the work of the Creator speaking directly to the soul of man, placing us almost into immediate communion with the eternal and the invisible.

You take your way back to the village through a winding lane, lighted by the glowworms. The country folks would scarcely envy you your walk, for in this remote neighbourhood they are sadly superstitious, and believe and relate many a wonderful tale of ghosts and pixies.

A curious story of supernatural agency is related by one of the oldest parishioners, who heard it from his mother, to whom it was told by his grandmother, who knew the hero: thus establishing its claim to an antiquity of at least two hundred years.

A Combe labourer was one day ploughing alone in a field, when he heard a doleful voice behind him complaining: "I've broken my peel! I've broken my peel!" an instrument not unlike a shovel, used for putting cakes into the oven. The man looked about in all directions, but could see no one, though the voice continued to lament. At last, being a good-natured fellow, he answered, "Give it to me, and I'll mend it." Whereupon the "peel," with a hammer and nails, was laid by invisible hands in the furrow before him, and

taken away as soon as he had repaired it. On the following day he found in the same furrow a freshly-baked cake—the pixie's acknowledgment of his kindness.

Half-way up one of the valleys, about a mile from the village, stands a handsome stone house, which, with its two wings and the farm buildings at the back, forms a complete quadrangle. Though now only a farm, it was in former days a goodly mansion, the residence of an old family whose arms are still displayed on a stone shield over the doorway, and whose many monuments form a conspicuous feature in the parish church.

The house is rather solitary, standing on the slope of a hill, of which the upper part is thickly wooded, and is the resort of white owls, whose dismal hooting forms a fitting accompaniment to the moaning wind which sighs round the angles of the farm buildings on tempestuous nights. Here a headless lady is said to have appeared, many years ago, dressed in the fashion of a bygone age, and walking with echoing steps through a long dark passage, while she paused occasionally to rap at the doors which open out of it with the long-handled broom she carried in her hand. This continued night after night, until someone was found brave enough to follow the apparition, which rewarded his courage by discovering to him some hidden treasure, and then vanished. Some years afterwards the same ghost reappeared, revealed more treasure, and has never since been heard of. Who she was, and when and how she lost her head, remains a mystery; but the story obtains full belief in the neighbourhood.

I have spoken of the "cleave farming" as an important part of the occupation of the men and boys in this district. The combe women, also, have their distinctive employment. Much of the beautiful fabric called Honiton lace is made in this and the neighbouring parishes. As you walk through the villages the rattle of the bobbins sounds pleasantly through many an open doorway, and looking in you see one or more women with their round pillows on their knees, busily engaged in lace-making. The lace for royal wedding dresses is generally made in this district. When the pattern is designed it is divided as much as possible, and the various sprigs are apportioned to different workers. Thus, in a piece of lace consisting of groups of flowers, one woman will make only rosebuds, another only small leaves, and a third, perhaps, full-blown roses, but neither will have any idea of the pattern to be formed with these pieces. This precaution is necessary in all new patterns to prevent the design being copied. When the sprigs are finished, they are fastened together by the best workers, under the immediate superintendence of the lace merchant, and then the fabric is complete.

Most of the young girls of Combe are sent very early to the "lace-schools," where they seem to work cheerfully enough. They have two holidays a year, generally on the same day of the month: the days on which they begin and on which they leave off working by

candlelight. The autumn holiday is known as "nutting-day," while that in the spring is supposed to be devoted to "washing the candlesticks."

Climbing a steep hill from the village, you find yourself in a wild region called "The Pits," overlooking a deep valley, and commanding a distant view of the sea. Here, as the name implies, there were originally limestone pits, which, though now no longer worked, impart to the ground a picturesque and broken appearance, which is a peculiar characteristic of the St. Winifred hills. Up and down you go, over tall hillocks covered with short, stunted grass, and adorned with great tufts of marjoram, round which the brilliant butterflies are hovering—for Combe is a great place for insects.

Sometimes your way is shaded by a graceful ash-tree, its trunk clasped round with ivy, and its clear-cut foliage casting flickering lights and shadows across your path. Sometimes you turn aside to pull the tempting pink-brown clusters from a thicket of nut-bushes festooned with waving clematis; or you suddenly find yourself on the brink of some old deserted lime-kiln, the entrance half filled up with stones and wild flowers, and honeysuckles and brambles climbing down the sides.

The woods, too, are beautiful. Whether we wander through them in early spring, filling our hands with the daffodils and sweet white violets which grow there so abundantly, and watching the merry little rabbits at their gambols; or later, when the boughs are laced together by the "luscious woodbine and sweet eglantine;" or when the hop has flung its graceful tendrils across the hedgerows, and the trees have donned their many-coloured garments, and the dying leaves fall solemnly, not sadly, down, "each to its rest beneath its parent tree."

Beautiful and unsophisticated as Combe St. Winifred now is, how long may we hope it will remain so? Already the indefatigable tourist scents it out; a stranger with a knapsack on his back and a stout stick in his hand, is no longer gazed at as an unknown monster. Artists have come there to sketch the quaint old doorways and picturesque orchards with which it abounds. A few more summers may make great changes in our village; improving it perhaps in many ways, but necessarily taking from it the simplicity which is now so charming; and sweeping away its faith in wonderful white-witches, and charms, and pixies, with the relentless besom of nineteenth century common-sense.

Whatever St. Winifred may become in future years, its later charms can hardly equal those of the tender, quaint originality which makes it now a picturesque and perfect pattern of a Devonshire Combe.

S. M. G.