

MY FIRST VISIT TO THE ISLE OF WIGHT.

OF all the islands that it has ever been my lot to visit, the Isle of Wight is certainly the most beautiful—that is, if you happen to see it on a fine day, which fine day, in the dark humid climate of Hampshire, occurs about once every two or three months. In this blessed county the visits of the sun are something like the appearances of a comet in other parts of the world, a matter for speculation, and the good people of Vectis would do well to have an almanack of their own, in which such rare events might be calculated after the fashion of eclipses; as thus—“on such a day, there will be a cloudless sky, and the sun will make his first and only appearance for the spring quarter,” whereupon the islanders should all turn out to give him welcome as a stranger who comes but seldom, and is likely to make but a brief stay amongst them.

But, though I abhor these days of drizzle—drizzle—drizzle, in which Dame Nature may be compared to a great sulky schoolboy, blubbering over his bread and butter, with red eyes and dirty streaked face, I have no objection whatever to a thorough storm, which lends a grandeur to the scene, superior perhaps to the quiet beauty of a bright blue sky. And just such a day it was, about the time of the autumnal equinox, when I paid my first visit to Vectis. Cowes, Newport, Ryde,

and all the more inhabited portions, which are completely summer pictures, appeared dreary enough; but once upon the high downs, the scene was glorious beyond description. Certainly, a hill is not a mountain, nor can a little slip of salt water be dignified into an ocean by any one except a cockney; and yet, for all that, the scenery of the Island—as the natives term it—may, under certain aspects of the season, be called sublime. When, on a rough winter's morning, you stand upon one of these downs and look around you, it is with the same sort of feeling that you gaze upon a painted landscape, which, in its image of desolation, awakens all the ideas of the sublime without any of the dangers that belong to the reality. It may seem an odd way to describe the Isle of Wight; and perhaps, after all, it does not exactly convey to others my feelings on the subject: but I would say, that it is a miniature resemblance of all that is beautiful in many countries, combining in itself their various attributes. To see it in this point of view, however, you must burn your guide-book, and break the neck of your guide if he is not to be got rid of on easier terms; the moment you take a companion either in the shape of a human being, or of a book, the whole beauty of this, as of every scene, vanishes after a fashion truly marvellous. The fact is, you may teach a man, or at least some men, to reason, but to teach them to admire is a thing not to be thought of.

The back of the island is, as I have just observed, the only place for a winter excursion; and this, notwithstanding the many villages that figure in the map, is as pretty a piece of desolation as a reasonable traveller would desire. I should have walked over all these villages in broad daylight, without being aware of their

existence, but from the natural spirit of inquiry excited by hunger; then, indeed, I found that some half-dozen hovels, placed tolerably close to each other, constituted a village; so on I went, famishing and edified, but in high good humour with the whole course of the Undercliff, which comprehends somewhat more than half the way from Shanklin Chine to Black Gang Chine. It is astonishing how many, and how different from each other, are the objects to be seen in this short space; and if the walk be extended to Freshwater, the route will be complete. I will not stop to describe all of them, nor will I take those described in their actual order; but will present them to my readers, as the half-faded images brighten and revive upon the recollection. And how singularly, in reverting to the past, does one idea act like a talisman in calling up another! A little while since, before I took the pen into my hand, not a single image of the island was present to memory; yet now, in an instant, a veil seems to have dropped away from between the past and present, and I remember a thousand minute circumstances that bubble up, as it were, from the waves of time. From St. Catherine's Tower to St. Lawrence's Church is a jump, somewhat after Macbeth's fashion, when he proposed to "jump the life to come;" yet, though recollection started with the former, in the next moment comes before me, as freshly as ever, little Mary, the janitress of St. Lawrence: how proud she was of her church, and of its celebrity as being the smallest in the world! it might, indeed, have served for the King of Lilliput, and magnates of some kind there must have been in the neighbourhood; for the cockleshell had pews, and these, as every reader knows, were confined in the good old times to persons

of the first rank. *Apropos de bottes*. In the reign of Elizabeth flourished a Sir John Townley, who thus expresses himself in regard to pews:—"My man Shuttleworth, of Hacking, made this form, and here will I sit when I come; and my cousin Howell may make one behind me if he please, and my sonne Sherburne shall make one on the other side, and Mr. Catterall, another behind him; and for the residue, the use shall be, first come first speed, and that will make the proud wives of Whalley rise betimes to come to church." Much cannot be said for the gallantry of the doughty knight, but he seems to have hit upon a most happy expedient to ensure the early attendance of the female part of his congregation.

On leaving St. Lawrence, my attention was attracted by a handsome building, the very reverse of the Saint's domicile in point of size. "What house is that?" asked I; and the little Mary replied with a curtesy, "The Great House, Sir."—"And who lives there?" A second curtesy, and a look of infinite surprise—"The Great People, Sir." I never like to spoil a good story, or a good reply, by impertinent questions, so the "Great People" must remain to the reader, as to myself, a profound mystery.

Steephill.—There is a sort of quaint beauty about this spot, which it would be exceedingly difficult to convey an idea of by description. *The Picturesque Pocket Companion* discreetly observes, "It is a place of little consequence, except for its scenery." Many thanks for the information!—and what the plague should give it a consequence, if not its scenery? Oh, Mr. Kidd! Mr. Kidd! the plates of your neat little volume are really beautiful; but do, pray, in your next edition, follow the Queen's excellent advice to old Polonius, and give us

“more matter with less art.” A guide-book should not be altogether like a very pretty woman with a very silly head, and for this obvious reason—a lady’s lips may make amends for the faults of her tongue, but the unlucky book has no such advantage.

In this Eden, the Earl of Dysart had a cottage when I first visited the island; but the property has passed away into other hands, and, as a natural consequence, the cottage has been suffered to fall into decay. There is something exceedingly mortifying to human vanity in such changes; they seem to hint how little posterity, to whom your neglected gentlemen are in the habit of addressing themselves, is likely to think of us or our concerns. Indeed, if he listened to all our complaints, he would have no time to attend to his own affairs.

The Sand Rock Spring finds an honourable mention in the guide-books—why, the compilers of such trivia best know themselves. For my part, I only mention this quackery to caution my readers against being deceived by it. The chalybeate was discovered—so say its admirers—by one Waterworth, an obscure apothecary, and, it is to be presumed, of little practice, or he would not have found time for spring-hunting. Be this as it may, the spring had been known for years to all the old women of the island, as well as to their mothers and grandmothers before them, but, not having the worldly craft of the pill-vender, the simple souls never thought of bottling up a filthy, useless fluid, and puffing it off as a real elixir vitæ. *Bile tumet jecur*—my bile rises at the thought, as it once did at the taste of this abomination.

Black-Gang Chine.—This is one of the most remarkable features in the island. It is an immense, savage-

looking chasm, torn out of the solid rock—or, to speak correctly, the cliff; for the precipice, which is here about five hundred feet above the level of the sea, has neither stone or chalk in its rugged sides. From the top splashes, or rather creeps, a thin, discoloured stream; and, following this in its descent, I had nearly tumbled over a second declivity when I fancied myself already on a level with the shore. Having luckily escaped from this awkward chance, I blundered on through mud and mire to the sands, or rather to the shingle, for the whole beach consists of nothing better. It was a glorious sight to one who loves the sea. The waves were coming in six feet abreast, and bursting with a noise to which the thunder of an English storm is as nothing. I could have dreamed over such a scene for ever—which means as long as my legs and my appetite would let me. Really, there is something very delightful in these day-dreams, this mental intoxication, which has all the exhilarating effects of wine, without the intolerable head-ache of the next morning. To be sure, it is sometimes followed by the heart-ache, when the wandering spirit returns from its silent and blissful communings with Nature to the harsh realities of life. In my case, however, there was somewhat less than the usual chance of this invisible and unacknowledged malady, inasmuch as I narrowly missed breaking my neck in my attempt to re-ascend the cliff. By this time it was well nigh dusk, and before I had got half-way up the rock, I had missed the usual path, if path it could be called, and was with no little difficulty clambering up a cliff that every moment grew more and more perpendicular. My early days in Kent had somewhat accustomed me to this sort of work; yet, still I did not feel too comfortable. The wind, moreover, which

had indulged in a lull for the last two or three hours, was rising fast; and suddenly a squall came whistling and bellowing about my ears, that, had it reached me a minute sooner, must infallibly have ended all my troubles in this world. Just as the blast began to strike me, I had got to an open rift or channel in the rock leading upward; into this I flung myself at once, regardless of the mud and brambles; and lucky it was for me that I did so; nothing could have stood up against the beating of those iron wings, which for full ten minutes lashed at me with uncontrollable violence. By that time its fury ceased, though the wind was still high enough to have torn a mill-sail to pieces, and great was my joy when I found myself safe again on the top of the precipice. It must be exceedingly unpleasant, that same breaking of the neck, I calculate—a thing to be eschewed if possible; unless, indeed, you happen to be in love, and I—alas the day!—was only married.

Not far from here is Scratchell's Bay, remarkable for its fossils, but the account of them belongs to another time and another place. There is, however, an anecdote connected with this spot, that may prove useful to the married portion of Her Majesty's lieges, though I must cross the Solent, rough as the evening is, for the commencement of my tale. In the register of the church of Lymington, is a memorandum under the year 1736, "Samuel Baldwyn, Esq., sojourner of this parish, was immersed without the Needles, in Scratchell's Bay, *sans cérémonie*, May 20th." This was performed in consequence of an earnest wish he expressed to that effect a little before his dissolution; and what reason dost thou think, reader, could urge him to have his body cast into the ocean, rather than quietly committed to

the earth? No motive of erring superstition, no whim of bewildered reason, but a determination to disappoint the intention of an affectionate wife, who had repeatedly assured him in their domestic squabbles, which were very frequent, that if Providence permitted her to survive him, she would revenge her conjugal sufferings by occasionally dancing over the turf that covered his remains.

Such is the grave relation of the Hampshire historian, who no doubt thought it a serious matter, or he would not have introduced it into so solemn a work as his ponderous quartos. Peace be to the manes of Squire Baldwyn!—Poor fellow! His living body must have had a sad time of it, or his last will and testament lied most abominably. Has the spirit of his lady anything to do, I wonder, with this wild weather—with the howling of the wind and the roaring of the waters? Heaven bless me! I am getting sentimental, when the best thing I can do is to get home, for the shades of evening are closing round me.

The lights from Yarmouth—not the Yarmouth so celebrated for its fine herrings and its bad roadstead, but a snug little town so named—gleamed invitingly from the distance. But the spirit of Mr. Baldwyn, I suppose, urged me on in spite of weary limbs and the encroaching darkness; and, like a Paladin of old, I resolved to brave fatigue and night, and return by the same way I had come. This plan, commenced in freak, I would seriously advise my readers to pursue in their next visit to the island, abating always the absurdity of clambering up rocks, where no one has any business that I know of, except the sea-gulls and the puffins. What I mean is, commence your trip a little after the sun has

risen, while every thing yet wears its morning face, and return by the same road when the shadows of night begin to fall. The change, arising from the different aspect of the hour, will be more striking than any that could be gained from the change of route. At least, I have always found it so in all my excursions, whether at home or abroad.

The Under Cliff at Evening.—The rocks loomed out larger from the twilight; the hills looked blacker and loftier; the sea rolled more darkly, more coldly; and the waves seemed, like some wild beasts, to have grown bolder from the absence of day. In one part of the road, or rather way,—for road there was none, in the civilized meaning of the word,—I could almost have fancied myself approaching the remains of some ancient city—one of those primæval ruins, that, like the ruins in America, we can only account for by supposing they existed before the deluge. The ground was covered with rocky fragments of all sizes, some bare, but discoloured by time, some covered with moss, others again half hid by shrubs and weeds; but all bearing, more or less, a fanciful resemblance to broken capitals and disjointed pillars. The way itself was a broad ledge, many feet in width, closed in on one side by a perpendicular wall of rock, while below, at the distance of many feet, lay a second ragged strip, or platform, which was beaten by the roaring waters of the Solent. While I was still wrapt in my own fancies, fashioning more strange shapes from the darkness than ever child imagined in the burning embers of a coal-fire, the moon suddenly burst forth from the clouds that had oppressed her, and in her doubtful light the landscape put on another form. It was as if the whole scene had been touched by the rod of some fairy—and by the bye

the elves, when they were allowed to exist at all, were particularly fond of the island. Below, at no very great distance, lay Puckaster Cove, which the antiquarians assert has derived its name from the tricky spirit; and about Gad's Hill still clings the traditionary legend of fairy opposition to the erection of a church on any site but the one they had themselves chosen. Then too there is Puck Pool—but that is far off; and so too is my little inn, and it is getting late. Via, my friends, for the most curious adventure of the twenty-four hours is yet to come.

Heartily glad was I to find myself once again in my temporary home, snugly seated before a comfortable fire, with certain necessary accompaniments upon the table, in the shape of cold ham, fowl, beef, ale, and brandy. If I had toiled hard for an appetite, I had fully achieved my object, as the poultry relics, the elongated bone of the ham, and the empty jug, soon bore a sufficing testimony to. Now, there are some folks who pretend to be mightily indifferent to such matters; if they are sincere, they are blockheads; if not, they are hypocrites.

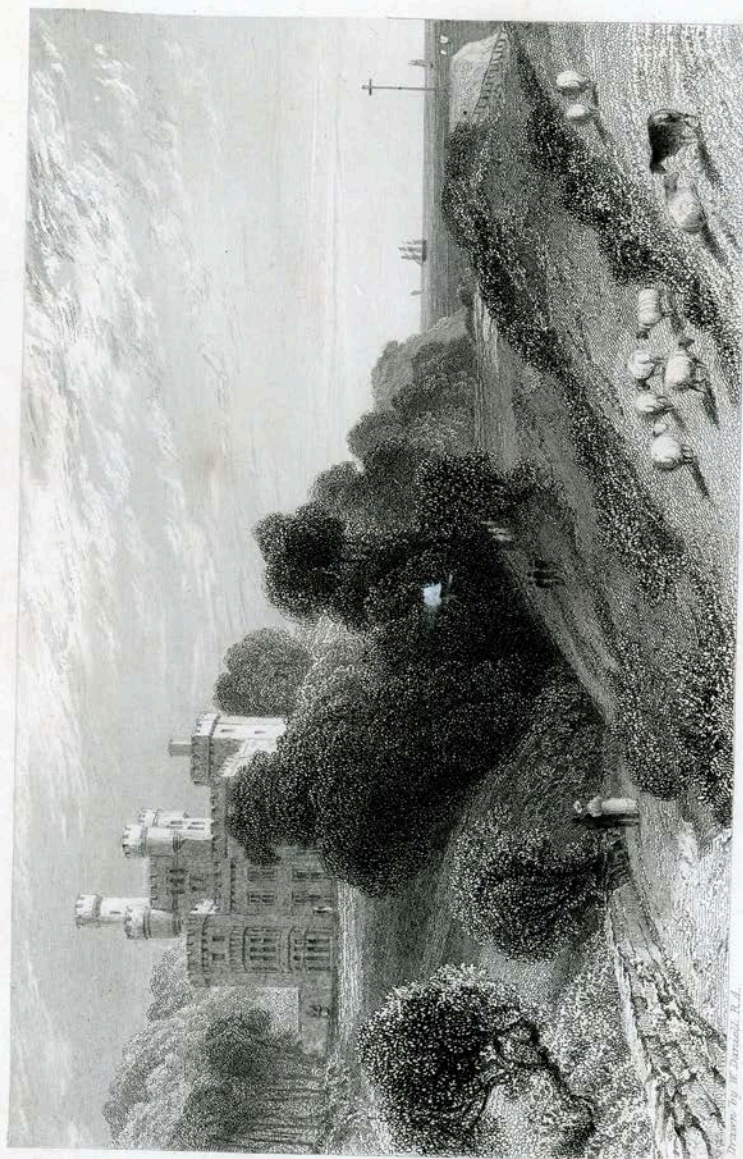
Next to the luxury of a good supper is a good bed; but, somehow, even a bed is not always one of roses, as I was doomed to experience on this eventful night. Such dreams!—such horrid dreams! I was tossing on the ocean, and as the vessel plunged and tore through the water, I felt all the hurry and dizziness of an inexperienced rider, when his horse runs away with him for the first time. It was like anything but sailing. The speed of the ship was preternatural, and the cloths snorted, rather than flapped, when the wind dragged them from the bolt-ropes. Then the crew mutinied; but they were like no crew that had ever been seen

before. They had vizarded themselves from all manner of wild beasts; some wore the face of the wolf, some of the tiger, others again of the jackall, and not a few growled about me as lions, or chattered at me with the heads of monkeys. The ludicrous never was so horrible, or the horrible so ludicrous. By a strange transition, I escaped from these monsters to the cliff by Black-Gang Chine, and dreamed over again the perils of the evening. But now I knew it was a dream; I had an indistinct consciousness that if I would only let go my hold and fling myself down at once, I should wake, or at all events this painful vision would pass away. With no little difficulty I accomplished this and awoke. I had far better have continued in my uneasy sleep. By the side of my bed sate a venerable but stern old man, whose eyes were fixed upon me with a severe gaze, while the forefinger of his right hand pointed to the page of a volume, that lay open in his left. As the window was opposite to the foot of the bed, and the curtains had remained undrawn, the broad moon, now in all her lustre, shone full in his face and upon the book. I started up and gazed in wonder, while a creeping thrill of awe came over me. Still the finger pointed to the open page, and, obeying the mandate thus held out, I endeavoured to read, but in vain; the letters danced and flitted about the leaf, forming all manner of combinations, yet never remaining long enough in the same position for me to catch the purport. The old man's brow grew yet sterner with impatience, and an angry fire seemed to light up his cold grey eyes. Again I endeavoured to fix the capricious lines, as much from a secret and undefined dread as from curiosity. This time I succeeded, and a groan of horror escaped me as I read the

wavering letters; it was a prophetic page in the history of my life, the record of an event that was to be, but of so appalling an import that I would rather have read a tale of murder; it struck a blow at the peace of one I loved with a passion beyond the power of words to tell it. Love!—Love!—why have the poets painted thee as a young and innocent child? they should rather have shown thee in the guise and with the attributes of a devil, for you make devils of the best of us.

The old man took no notice of my horror, though the feeling was much too strong not to have found its visible reflection in my face. So much of his errand seemed to be done, and he again proceeded busily to turn over the leaves, pausing every now and then upon a fresh page, but always going on again with a dissatisfied shake of his head, as if the object of his search was yet to be found. About the middle of the volume, it appeared that he had stumbled upon what he wanted, for he fixed his eyes, as before, upon me, and pointed with his finger to the open page. It was a glimpse—only a glimpse—I caught of the happy future, when the old man hastily closed the volume, and with all his features relaxed into a benevolent smile, slowly passed into the room that adjoined my bed-chamber, and which, like it, was on the ground floor. For the first moment the idea flashed across me that I was the dupe of some idle deception. Starting up, I hurried into the parlour, and saw the old man passing over the grass-plot in front of the French windows. How he had got there was to me incomprehensible, for the window was still bolted; and when I opened it to follow him, the cold air that rushed in almost stifled me, and he was gone. Did I dream?—impossible; everything was too palpable to the sense for dreaming.

Was I the dupe of some childish plot?—that was just as unlikely, for in the first place no human ingenuity could have carried the thing so far; and in the next, if possible, no end whatever could have been answered by all this outlay of time and trouble. Might I not be the victim of the same sort of illusion that tormented the famous Nicolai, the Berlin bookseller, who was daily and hourly visited by spectral shadows, the consequences of an overwrought brain? I thought so at the time—I think so still; my mind and body had both, in the course of the day, been stretched beyond the healthy point of tension, and a passing fever, of which I was not myself conscious, might have been the result. But after all, what is *real*? Some philosophers have said that nothing is—and are they not right? May not life itself be the dream of another mode of existence? But I am getting into a chapter that certainly does not belong to the English Annual.—Farewell, therefore, gentle reader, and should you be disposed for another little excursion in my favourite island, I shall be most happy to accompany you. Perhaps we may pay a visit together to the smugglers. I will hold you harmless, for they are old acquaintances of mine, and, notwithstanding their rough faces and rugged manners, you will find this “*terribile gente*,” as Napoleon called them, more amusing than a host of the last fashionable novels.



Engraved by J. C. Armytage

Steph. Hill. Isle of Wight.

London, Edward Clutton, 36, Holles Street.