

THE FOREST OF DEAN

ARTHUR O COOKE

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THE FOREST OF DEAN



From Lydney Golf Links.

THE FOREST OF DEAN

BY

ARTHUR O. COOKE

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR AND FIFTY-SIX IN BLACK AND WHITE

NEW YORK
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PREFACE

THE dwellers in Dean Forest may, in the following pages, find but little which is not "familiar in their mouths as household words." The book is one intended rather for the tourist, for the stranger in the Forest's gates. But a word or two are due from me to those whose homes lie, and in many instances have lain for generations, in the shadow of the mighty woods.

Of these words the first must be an apology for having undertaken a task for which not a few of my Forest friends were far more competent than one to whom, not ten years since, the Forest was a place unknown. The second shall convey my grateful thanks for all the help and kindness which I have received while gathering material for this book. Without such help, to write it would have been a task well-nigh impossible. All those who have the care of the Crown woods, from chief officials to hard-handed wielders of the axe and saw, have given kindly help. To aid description of the Forest's ancient

dwellings, squire and yeoman have alike thrown open hospitable doors ; rectors or vicars hastened to set forth the beauties of some venerable church. To each and all my thanks are due, and warmly given.

ARTHUR O. COOKE.

YEWBERRY HOUSE,
NEAR CHEPSTOW,
September, 1912.

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THE FOREST OF DEAN

CHAPTER I

ENGLISH FORESTS

THE purpose of this volume is to draw attention to the many beauties of the great Crown woodland which lies in the peninsula of Gloucestershire between the Severn and the Wye; and also to such points of scenic and historic interest as, though now outside the reduced limits of the Forest of Dean itself, were formerly either within its area or in some way closely connected with it. The Forest of Dean, although a district of great and infinitely varied beauty, has not, so far, met with its full meed of appreciation from the artist and the tourist. Volume after volume has been devoted to our fairest English counties; our chief rivers are traced by some enthusiast from source to mouth, and have full justice rendered to their charms by pencil, pen and brush; but the Forest of Dean has received comparatively scant attention. No "beautiful book" has as yet illustrated the charms of the district; though an excellent little guide written by the late John Bellows of Gloucester, the well-known Quaker printer and man of letters, will lead the tourist to some of its chief attractions. He will

there learn that the Forest is not, as many strangers to the district have been led to think, a forest only in name.

A volume on Dean Forest would be incomplete without some slight and occasional reference to its economic aspect. The woods, once much neglected and mismanaged, are now being brought into good order steadily if slowly; slowly of necessity, for the renovation of neglected woodlands is at best but tedious work, and in a Crown possession there are special circumstances which fetter and embarrass the hand of the would-be improver. A school for the training of working foresters now exists within the Forest, and is doing excellent work. But these matters will be noticed in due course.

Here, before leading the reader to the Forest itself and pointing out to him some of its many charms, while leaving him to find out many another for himself, one or two preliminary chapters seem desirable or even necessary. The Forest of Dean has a history; first that history which it shares with other forests of our country, both the two or three which still remain to us, and the many which once existed but which we now know no more; and, secondly, its own story, exclusive and peculiar to itself. The general history of English forests, followed by that of the Forest of Dean in particular, will therefore now be lightly sketched. Sketched only, for this volume does not pretend to be a history of the Forest of Dean. For such a work there is no lack of material; but that material requires to be dealt with by a writer far more able for the task than the author of the present volume.

As a first step towards tracing the history of a

royal forest we shall do well to examine the word itself; such an examination is in fact needful, if only to remove the erroneous impressions which too generally prevail as to the true meaning of the term. A brief glance at its derivation will perhaps dispel these.

The average man, speaking at a venture, would probably define a forest as "a large wood." He might, while doing so, reflect on the seeming anomaly of applying the term to extensive areas of land, in Scotland and elsewhere, almost, if not wholly, bare of woodland, and devoted to the preservation of deer. He might explain this anomaly to his own satisfaction by supposing a deer-forest to have been at one time covered with trees. Yet this was by no means necessarily the case; and the term "deer-forest," as also the use of the word "forest" to describe such comparatively treeless wastes as Dartmoor and Exmoor, is etymologically perfectly exact and fully justified.

This is the case even though authorities may differ as to the true derivation of the word. Let us trace it, for example, to the Welsh *gores* or *gorest*, meaning a *waste* or *waste ground*—a word, by the way, from which we get the name of golden blooming gorse, a growth of rough uncultivated land. Or we may derive it from the Latin *foris*, *out of doors*. This seems somewhat vague until we come to connect it with the root from which comes the French *hors*, *outside of*; that is waste land beyond—outside of—the pale of peopled cultivated country.

Coke has defined a forest as a "safe preserve for wild animals of the chase." Such *feræ* may, by the

corruption of a vowel, have given a name to their dwelling-place and natural haunt. This, at any rate, will bring us to an understanding of the way in which our all too few remaining forests have been handed down to us.

The origin of our English woodlands dates of course from the days when the land emerged from the iron grip of the Age of Ice, and vegetation, not again to be seriously affected by geologic or climatic changes, grew once more upon the so long sterile soil. Woodlands—we will avoid for the moment the use of the term forests, a word which has been shown to be misleading and which was unknown in England before the Norman Conquest—woodlands covered the face of England from shore to shore.

The Paleolithic man did little or nothing to raise his hand against these woods. He needed no timber for building purposes, for his dwelling was a cave; the woods sheltered the beasts on which he preyed, and gave him windfalls for the fire on his cavern hearth.

But in every country and in every age, advancing civilization has made war upon the woods. The world to-day devotes acres by the thousand to furnish wood pulp for the printing of halfpenny newspapers and sixpenny magazines. The successor of the Paleoliths—the Neolithic or the New Stone Man—did not attain to this orgy of vandalism; but he had wider aims than the cave-dweller. Although his tools and weapons were still but of stone, they were better fashioned and of greater power. His axe was equal to the cutting down of trees; his flint-toothed saws were sharp, and could

divide the branches into needed lengths and shapes. Instead of confining himself to the ready-made shelter of a cave, he excavated a hole in the ground, roofed it with boughs and turf, and made a sloping entrance, which also served as exit for the smoke. He baked and spun and wove ; his crops of wheat and flax required clearings where they might be grown ; and thus the hitherto untouched primæval woods began to yield before his slow advance.

But in spite of the advancing civilization of this and subsequent ages, as when the discovery of metals and the consequent need of fuel for the primitive smelting-furnaces and forges, led to an increased attack upon the woods, the Romans yet found Britain largely a wooded country when they landed on its shores. Their conquest was greatly hampered by this condition of things ; for, on each reverse of war, the inhabitants retired into the natural stronghold of the woods—then, as ever, a place of safety for the attacked, of ambush, pitfall and danger for the attacker. Before the Roman conquest was complete the woodlands had perforce still further shrunk.

Thenceforth the denudation of the land went on apace. The felling of the woodlands was a necessary prelude to the advance of the most simple arts. It went before the preparation and the tilling of a field, before the building of a town ; and though a certain amount of pasturage was then and subsequently carried on within the shadow of the trees themselves, the use of true pasture as we now understand the term would mean the disappearance of the woods.

The pre-Norman monarchs saw this diminish-

ment of the woodlands with alarm. Hunting was then almost the sole amusement of kings and of the great. The king regarded all wild animals as his property, a claim not altogether illogical, as they had obviously no other owner. We are accustomed to connect the cruelty and oppression of the Forest Laws and their severe penalties solely with the Norman invaders; but royal forests or hunting-grounds existed long before the coming of the Conqueror. The code of forest laws attributed by the Normans to Canute, and said to have been promulgated by him in 1016, has of late years had grave doubts cast upon its authenticity. Probably, if not an absolute forgery, it had been—edited, shall we say?—in the interests of the Norman successors. But, long before 1066, the reigning monarchs, alarmed at the decrease of woodlands and waste places, and at the consequent increasing scarcity of wild game, had reserved to themselves large tracts of country in which the right of hunting was for them alone.

The royal demesnes which William acquired by conquest, as well as the estates of resisting nobles, proved all too little for that paternal love of the "tall deer" which was so deeply rooted in his own heart and in those of his successors. He at once resorted to the process of "afforestation"—a term very liable to be misunderstood. Such afforestation, or making of a forest, would in the present-day acceptation of the term mean an extensive planting and enclosing. The fallacy of such a supposition as applied to the afforestation of eight centuries ago must be obvious upon a moment's thought. Woods do not grow up in a day, and the life of

even kings is uncertain and often short. The Norman monarchs wanted their pleasures of the chase at once. The afforestation of a tract of country—often of a whole county, as in the case of Essex and others—meant its being subjected to the already existing special forest laws.

It goes without saying that a royal forest usually included large tracts of woodland ; but it was by no means necessarily entirely composed of such. In the same way newly afforested land, while naturally in the neighbourhood of woodland, might and did include a large amount of arable and pasture, with even villages and small towns. The monkish accounts of the devastation of whole villages and the destruction of churches are open to more than a little doubt ; still, much desolation was undoubtedly the result of this arbitrary afforestation.

Afforestation did not, however, as might perhaps be imagined, imply the actual seizure of land by the monarch. Landowners, both great and small, were left in undisputed possession of their freeholds, so far as actual proprietorship of the soil was concerned. Their rights of doing what they would with their own were, however, greatly restricted. If they owned woods, or if timber grew otherwise on their property, they might not fell a tree, except with express permission and under the immediate supervision of a forest officer. They might not build a house or cattle-shed ; they might not turn a pasture into arable ; nor might they erect a fence or wall of sufficient height to impede the wanderings of the deer. The monarch and his hunting-train had full right of chase across such freehold land, and the owner must moreover be content to watch the

king's deer feeding on or damaging his crops without daring to disturb them.

This then was a Forest in the original sense of the term—"A certen Territorie of wooddy Grounds and fruitful Pastures, priviledged for wild Beasts and Foules of Forest, Chase and Warren to rest and abide there, in the save Protection of the King, for his Princely Delight and Pleasure." Such is the definition given by Manwood in his *Lawes of the Forest*, published more than three centuries ago.

Vexatious and oppressive—often brutally cruel—the forest laws were. Yet we to-day are hardly in a position to condemn them too sweepingly, for we owe an undoubted debt of gratitude to those who framed and enforced them with such rigour. Their makers had no thought but for their own pleasure and the preservation of the beasts of chase; they cherished the woods, not for their beauty nor for the value of the timber, but solely for the better preservation of the game. Yet, granting this, they were for centuries the sole preservers of our English woodlands from destruction. A striking example of what, without such protection, would have been the fate of the woodlands, is offered by the later records of the Forest of Dean itself. They recount the doings of Sir John Winter when, in the seventeenth century, the Forest passed into his hands. Without the long-surviving protection of the forest laws we should to-day in all probability be without even those small possessions which still remain to us—without the New Forest or those of Epping and of Dean. Selfish and uncaring for anything beyond the pleasure of the moment as our early Norman rulers may have been, they, like

worse and better men before and since, yet builded better than they knew.

Although there may be no occasion to allude later in this volume to either Chases, Parks or Warrens, it may not be amiss to explain these terms here. Their names, like that of the forest itself, are liable to misconstruction ; moreover, they are a sort of poor relations of the more important royal possession.

In many ways a chase resembled a forest ; the chief difference was usually in the matter of ownership—ownership of the hunting rights, that is. A forest was royal property ; or rather the right of hunting was retained in royal hands, for, as we have seen, private ownership of the soil could and did exist within the limits of a forest. In a chase, on the other hand, the hunting rights were usually vested in a subject, often coming to him as a princely gift. Nor must the delver in old records be puzzled should the terms "forest" and "chase" appear at times to be used interchangeably. A royal forest granted to a subject might become a chase ; a chase passing to the hands of the monarch might, by such transfer, become a forest. Some forests were, however, undoubtedly held at times by subjects ; an instance is the Forest of Pickering, granted in the fourteenth century to the Earl of Lancaster. Probably the forest laws did not apply to chases in their fullest force.

A park was an enclosure, fenced by wall, hedge or fence, the privilege to empark being one frequently granted. A park might, and frequently did, exist within the area of a forest.

Warren, too, is a word of which the original

meaning has now almost wholly disappeared from common use. It conjures up before our eyes at present a colony of rabbit-holes, either constructed by the rabbits themselves, or specially made for their benefit—and for that of their breeder. Though the rabbit has always been a "beast of the warren," the word as we know it is used in a restricted sense.

In ancient days the right of hunting certain wild animals over waste and unenclosed land was free to all—always provided that such land was not within the limits of a forest or a chase. An inexpensive royal favour, however, was the grant of exclusive hunting over such a piece of ground. The word had therefore a double meaning, describing both the grant itself and the land over which the hunting rights were given.

In nearly every forest, including that of Dean, will be found one or more places still bearing the name of The Purlieu. The term marks land afforested by Henry II, and disafforested—made free or "pure"—by Henry III.

What were the beasts which formed the quarry of a royal hunt—the "beasts of the forest"? Manwood, who was for long the chief authority on this and all other matters connected with the subject, enumerated them as five; namely, the Hart, Hind, Hare, Wild Boar and Wolf. Later investigation has, however, shown him to be somewhat in error here; he seems to have confused "beasts of venery" with "beasts of the forest"—those animals, that is, which were protected by the forest laws.

The hare, though a beast of venery, was not

generally a "beast of the forest." It is, however, mentioned as being preserved in a warren which lay within the bounds of a Somersetshire forest; and there may have been other special instances elsewhere. Generally, however, it does not seem to have been cared for by the forest laws.

The hart and hind are the male and female of the red deer, a fact which further reduces Manwood's list. Moreover the forest laws made no general distinction between red deer, fallow deer—introduced into England at some unknown and early date, but possibly by the Romans—and the roe-deer, a small and very active animal, formerly common in England though now less often seen. The status of the roe as a beast of the forest was, however, sometimes questioned. In earlier times it seems to have been included in the list; in Manwood's own days it had perhaps ceased to hold that rank.

If we allow a distinction and count the several varieties of deer as three, the wild boar will make the fourth and final beast preserved under the forest laws. The wild boar shared with deer the honour of the term "venison."

There is no evidence that the wolf was ever a preserved "beast of the forest"; Manwood himself admits that it was not so accounted by the forest laws of Canute. Common sense would indeed negative such a supposition. The royal hunters might be indifferent to the havoc wrought by such an animal among the flocks and herds in and near a forest; they would be keenly alive to its depredations on the deer. There is frequent reference in various forest records to the trapping and destruction of wolves. If the creature was

ever protected at all, it was probably not till comparatively recent times when its numbers were becoming small. Wolves were common in the Forest of Dean in the time of Edward I.

These then were the recognized "beasts of the forest"; but custom—carefully to be distinguished from any legal regulations—acknowledged certain others as beasts of the chase or of the warren. Starting with the deer the list of beasts of the chase descends through practically all the wild fauna of the country, sometimes as far as the squirrel. The fox, badger, otter and wild-cat were hunted there.

As suggested above, the hare was the principal creature the hunting of which was included in a "grant of warren"; though this position has at times been claimed for the roe-deer. Other beasts of warren were the fox and the rabbit. Fowls of the warren were the pheasant, the partridge and the woodcock; but even the lark is mentioned, and it is probable that a grant of warren made it a "trespass" for an outsider to take or snare any bird.

It now remains to notice briefly the various courts by which the forest laws were administered, and the many officers who had the royal hunting-grounds within their charge. In considering this matter two points must be borne constantly in mind. Firstly, that the procedure and custom varied greatly in different forests; and secondly, that our present knowledge—even the knowledge of experts—concerning the details of forest government in ancient times is as yet exceedingly limited.

CHAPTER II

THE FOREST COURTS AND OFFICERS

IN a volume such as the present it is neither necessary nor possible to give anything approaching a complete account of the legal control of English forests from the earliest known times. All that seems called for is a very brief sketch of the forest courts and officers, more particularly during those days when the whole machinery of forest law was in its fullest working order. The reader who, strolling through the glades of Dean Forest, wishes for a fuller and more detailed picture of what went on within its bounds in bygone days, will find material in more than one volume.

Even if we accept the theory that the code of forest laws attributed to Canute is a mere Norman forgery—and at least one highly competent modern authority has spoken in its defence—it is impossible to suppose otherwise than that our forests were subject to some special legislation in pre-Norman days. But it was only with the coming of William the Conqueror that there began that reign of terror which, with occasional brief relaxations of its severity, lasted for a century and a half.

The story of the forests under the two first Norman monarchs, both of whom are famous as enthusiastic followers of the chase, is one of in-

creasing severity. William the Conqueror replaced the mere fine inflicted by his predecessors for the killing of a deer, by the putting out of eyes and other mutilations. Rufus increased the penalty to that of death. No offender was too high in rank, even if united to the king by ties of blood, to escape the vengeance of the man who "loved the tall deer as though he were their father." Both the Williams were ruthless in afforesting immense tracts of country.

Henry I and Stephen assumed on their accession a conciliatory tone; doubtless from motives of prudence, for the severities of their predecessors had roused even the higher classes to a dangerous pitch of discontent. But as they felt their seat secure beneath them their true intentions were displayed. While each carried out a greater or less amount of disafforestation at the commencement of his reign, each in his turn reversed this procedure in later years and re-afforested much land.

Henry II, though ruling with a milder and a wiser sway, also greatly increased the area under forest law. Twenty-three years later the Regency of the boy-king Henry III granted the Forest Charter of 1217, which was revised and modified in 1225. By this the forest laws were brought into order.

This famous charter held the clause: "No Man from henceforth shall lose neither Life nor Member for killing our Deer." The substituted penalty was to be a fine, failing payment of which the culprit suffered imprisonment for a year and a day. On being released he had to find sureties for his future good behaviour, or was compelled to leave

the kingdom. Much land was disafforested, and henceforth the forest dwellers lived under an easier rule.

Of the Forest Courts the highest was the Court of Eyre or Justice Seat, presided over by an itinerant justice or justices appointed by the king. This Forest Eyre was the only court competent to pronounce judgment and pass sentence on any but offences of the most trivial kind. It was appointed to sit not oftener than every third year. In practice it was in many cases held at very irregular and infrequent intervals, periods of thirty and even fifty years sometimes elapsing without a sitting.

The business of this Court of Eyre consisted in examining and pronouncing sentence upon the various cases brought before it by the lower courts. Of these lower courts we may first speak of the Court of Attachment, held by the forest Verderers every forty days—and in Dean Forest still held, as will presently be seen. It had the limited power of receiving and examining the complaints of the various forest officers, and of "attaching" offenders, usually by bail or surety. Its sole power of punishment consisted in the infliction of small fines for various minor offences. It dealt with "vert" offences only; with those concerning "venison" this court is generally believed to have been powerless to deal.

"Vert" offences included the cutting down or otherwise damaging timber trees or undergrowth. There was in most forests a limited right enjoyed by the in-dwellers of helping themselves to housebote, hay-bote and fire-bote; wood, that is, for

repairing dwellings, making or mending hedges, and feeding the household hearth.

The Verderers, presently to be mentioned more particularly, likewise presided at the Swainmote held three times a year. The term Swainmote has often been loosely applied to other courts and even confused with the Attachment Courts; erroneously, however, for the Swainmote as ordered to sit by Henry III's charter was a different court. It was to meet fifteen days before midsummer, at the commencement of the *fence* or fawning month, when special precautions were necessary to secure additional quiet and protection for the female deer. At this time also the Agisters, of whose duties we shall shortly speak, arranged for the pasturage of domestic animals in the forest. The Swainmote met again fifteen days before Michaelmas, when the Agisters received the fees for such pasturage and arranged for the *pannage* of swine on the autumnal fall of beech-mast and acorns; and once more at Martinmas, when the Agisters again gathered to receive the pannage fees.

The care of the "venison" was chiefly the concern of Inquisitions, both General and Special. A Special Inquisition was held forthwith if a deer were found dead or wounded, representatives being summoned from the four nearest townships. Offenders against venison were also dealt with here, and committed for trial at the Court of Eyre. For minor offences against venison the accused was allowed bail; and the chances were not small of his having disappeared or died before the next sitting of the Eyre Court. For killing a deer, provided he were "taken in the manner,"

the offender was forthwith imprisoned to await trial at the supreme forest court.

This being taken "in the manner" covered four distinct stages of the crime, any one of which sufficed to justify committal to prison. *Stable-stand* was the obvious lying in wait for the deer: *dog-draw* the actual chase with dog or dogs; *bloody-band* the cutting up of the carcase, and *back-bear* the carrying it away.

In regulating the holding of these various lesser courts Henry III's charter had removed a great abuse. In former reigns forest officials had held such courts practically at their own will and pleasure, summoning the forest dwellers to attend on mere pretence of need, and fining them heavily for non-appearance—a fruitful source of income to the Crown officials, a great cause of the loud murmuring against the forest laws.

In addition to these courts already named, a survey or *Regard* was to be held every third year by twelve *Regarders*. As first appointed these Regarders were to be knights, but, later, knighthood seems to have been a non-essential to the position.

The Regard was a general inspection of the condition of the forest. Among the many points which it was the duty of the Regarders to notice and to make report of at the ensuing Eyre Court, were any *purprestres*, *wastes*, or *assarts*. Building or enclosing—"taking for one's-self"—was a purprestre. Cutting down trees or cover, or ploughing a meadow, was a waste; while the total clearing of land by grubbing up its wooded growth constituted an assart.

The Regard likewise took notice of dogs kept within the forest bounds, and saw to it that all mastiffs were *expeditated*—a cruel but effectual mode of laming for which the poor beasts were indebted to Henry II. The expeditation consisted in the removal of three claws from one fore-foot by a sharp blow struck on a chisel; the size of the chisel and that of the block of wood on which the mastiff's foot was to be placed both being regulated by law.

The chief local official of a royal forest was the Steward or Warden—also variously known as the Keeper or Chief Forester, the title differing in different forests. In the Forest of Dean, Warden was the term. Though the appointment was usually one direct from the Crown it was in some cases hereditary. The Warden presided with the Verderers at the minor forest courts.

Below him were the Verderers, who, though elected by the freeholders of the forest, were solely and directly responsible to the Crown. They were generally knights, or at any rate of the class which we should now call "county people," and their office was honorary. The number of Verderers was usually four, but might be more or less according to the size and importance of the particular forest. Under the presidency of the Warden they were the judges at the lesser forest courts, and in certain "vert" cases could dispose of the matter by the infliction of a small fine.

Third in rank came the Foresters, whose duties were the active guarding of the vert and venison in their own "walk" or district of the forest. They were empowered to arrest trespassers in the

forest, if such were accompanied by dogs, or carried bows and arrows or snares, even though no overt act of poaching had been committed in their sight. They usually received various perquisites, such as pasturage, pannage for swine, with one or more deer annually, as well as trees for fuel. Their receipt of a regular salary is a less certain matter. In some cases they undoubtedly received definite payment; twopence daily for three hundred and sixty-five days annually is a recorded rate of pay, for these officers were supposed to be ever at their work. But it is also certain that, in many cases, far from receiving pay, they paid the Verderers or Warden for their posts, recouping themselves by the obvious method of levying endless and unauthorized extortions on the forest folk.

The Foresters were sometimes supervised by one of a superior rank. Moreover, in some forests, that of Dean among others, there were hereditary Foresters-of-Fee. This hereditary post might pass to a woman or a priest, in which case the duties were discharged by a deputy.

The name of the Woodward seemingly explains his position and duties, but both require comment. As already pointed out, the area of a royal forest frequently, even generally, extended over much land which was owned by others than the king. The freeholder enjoyed undisputed possession of his land, always with the important reservation of the king's hunting rights. He might neither build houses, fell timber, establish forges nor burn charcoal—might not, in fact, do anything to prejudice the well-being of that all important animal in royal eyes—the deer.

The Woodward was an official appointed by the owner of woods within the forest, ostensibly for the purpose of guarding his—the owner's—rights ; really to watch over the well-being of the deer. Though appointed and employed by the owner or owners of land, the Woodward took oath to serve the king "in the matter of venison," and consequently had full power to "attach" offenders against the peace of the deer.

Most of these forest officers had their distinguishing symbols of office, and thus their rank and occupation can often be identified on many still existing tombstones, even when the carven words which tell the story of the man who lies beneath are now illegible. The official symbol of a Verderer was an axe, of which several slightly varying representations still exist. A Forester is represented by a hunting-horn, a Chief Forester by a bow. Many memorial slabs, however, show both these tokens, often with an arrow as well. Our coming rambles in the Forest of Dean will bring us to the tombstone of a Forester-of-Fee, on which there is displayed a hunting-sword and horn.

It still remains to speak of the Agisters of the forest, those officers, namely, who had in charge the Agistment of the forest and the receiving of the fees. Though the two words are often used indifferently, agistment referred more particularly to the pasturage of horses and cattle, and also of sheep where these were allowed. Pannage was the autumn feeding of swine on the fruit of oak and beech.

The fees payable for agistment and pannage in the king's own woods were rendered either in

money or in kind. The latter was often the case in regard to pigs, the king taking as his pannage-due one pig out of a certain number.

Under the forest laws of the early Norman kings sheep were not allowed to pasture in the forest; it being alleged—though the theory was strongly combated by flock-masters—that they spoilt the herbage for the deer. There seems, however, to have been but one opinion as to goats, it being generally admitted that the deer found their rank scent most distasteful. Evelyn in his *Sylva* affirms that their saliva has a most injurious effect on trees on which they browse.

The disafforesting of large tracts by Edward I in 1301, and the gradually weakening of the forest laws till their practical disappearance in the seventeenth century, may have made life easier for many a forest-dweller, but had a terrible effect upon the woods themselves. The hand of the destroyer grew heavy upon them. The ultimate fate of different forests is too varied to be followed here. Having sketched their rise and general history, we will now deal briefly with the story of the Forest of Dean in particular.

CHAPTER III

HISTORY OF DEAN FOREST

AS this volume is intended to serve chiefly as a guide to the woodland beauties and to the many points of antiquarian interest in and about the present limits of the Forest of Dean, the sketch here given of the forest's history will be of the slightest; more especially as the *Historical and Descriptive Account of the Forest of Dean*, published a little more than half a century ago by the Rev. H. G. Nicholls, M.A., a local clergyman, may be consulted by those readers who desire fuller details. Allusions to the forest's history will moreover be found in many of the following chapters, not a few of the localities which will call for description by reason of their beauty being likewise associated with matters interesting to the antiquarian.

More than one derivation has been suggested of this forest's name; some old writers holding that it is an abbreviation of the British word "arden," meaning a wood; others that it was so called from having formed a shelter for the Danes. But the true origin is probably to be found within the forest itself, in the ancient market town of Micheldean upon its northern side. Two other villages of similar name, Little Dean and Ruardean, are still within its bounds.

The forest as we know it to-day in the form of

a possession of the Crown is much reduced from its original extent. In the time of Henry II the little town of Newent in Gloucestershire stood at its north-east boundary, while the north-west angle came to within a mile or so of Ross in Herefordshire. Southward from these two points it occupied —with a single exception to be noticed later on— almost the whole of the tapering peninsula which ends with the junction of the Severn and the Wye at Beachley Point, two miles below Chepstow. The eastern boundary of the northern portion was the little river Leadon which joins the Severn near Gloucester; farther south the Severn itself. The windings of the Wye from Goodrich to Beachley marked its western limits.

Almost the only lands within these boundaries which did not fall under the jurisdiction of the forest laws were a Chase possessed by the Bishop of Hereford at Penyard, near Ross, and a Warren held by the Earl Marshal at Tudenham. This latter still survives as Tidenham Chase, an inclosed common situated on very high ground four miles from Chepstow, and commanding glorious views of the Severn and the Cotswold Hills.

The disafforestation effected by Edward I largely reduced the forest's extent. A broad strip was taken from its northern portion; while to the south it ended in an undulating line drawn from near Awre on the Severn to a point on the Wye a little below St. Briavels.

The present area of the forest, as owned by the Crown and under the guardianship of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, is still smaller. It occupies an irregular oblong near the centre of

its former limits, nowhere extending to the Severn, and to the Wye only at certain points.

The actual extent of Crown possessions in the Forest of Dean proper is 18,700 acres, of which more than 15,000 are woodlands. The Crown has the right to inclose up to 11,000 acres at one time, though the present inclosures do not reach the full extent. In addition to this the Crown owns adjoining land to the extent of some 4000 acres, nearly all of which are woodland and under the same management as the forest itself. The New Forest, it may be noticed, while extending to some 60,000 acres in extent, has but a third of that area actually under timber.

With regard to this matter of inclosures it may be well to enlighten the intending tourist, who may otherwise imagine himself excluded from the full enjoyment of a large portion of the forest. The powers of the Crown are absolute, and no right-of-way can be maintained against them. Gates, however—locked indeed, but with an adjacent stile—will be found nearly everywhere giving access to the fenced-off portions of the woods; and so long as the visitor confines himself to the numerous "drives" and obvious paths, and refrains from any act of damage, he is free to wander at his will.

The Castle of St. Briavels, now standing outside the forest's western boundary, but still a Crown possession, perched 600 feet and more above the valley of the Wye, was the ancient head-quarters of this royal hunting-ground. Not long after its erection it passed into the hands of the Crown as a royal fortress, and its constableship was usually associated with the office of Warden of the

Forest. As the castle, with the village of St. Briavels and its ancient church, will form the subject of a later chapter it demands no further notice here.

The forest frequently received its early royal owners for the pleasures of the chase. It was here that William I was hunting when his sport was marred by the news of the Danes having invaded Yorkshire. John was a frequent visitor, his nightly resting-places, recorded on several occasions during his reign, being Gloucester, Flaxley Abbey, St. Briavels, Monmouth and Hereford. It has already been noted that the forest contained wolves in the time of Edward I. Wild boars too were common here, and in 1216 John seems to have had their well-being on his mind. He wrote from Lincoln to the Constable of St. Briavels, ordering that cattle should only be agisted on the fringes of the forest, and particularly in no places where such agistment would be likely to disturb the boars. Ten years later Henry III granted to the abbey of St. Peter at Gloucester a tithe of all the forest boars.

To-day the visitor will find no swine wilder than the domestic pigs turned out in autumn by the cottagers to hunt for acorns dropped from roadside oaks and in the open portions of the woods. He will, too, look in vain for deer. The last of these, to the number of some hundred and fifty bucks and three hundred does, were removed from the forest in 1850. It was shown by a committee appointed to investigate the matter that their presence was a direct incentive to poaching, and thus detrimental to the morals of the forest folk. But formerly the

forest held them all—red, roe and fallow deer. Red deer predominated largely until towards the time of Edward I, after which fallow deer were in greater proportion. At a comparatively recent date an attempt was made to re-introduce red deer; but the new arrivals proved savage, and several people were attacked. The presence of roe-deer in the forest is specially mentioned in ancient records.

The first recorded perambulation of the forest took place in 1228, at which time its area was practically the whole peninsula south of Newent and Ross, as mentioned on a previous page. We have records of the Court of Eyre held in Gloucester in 1258. The next Court was held in 1270, and the following one in 1282, thus proving the comparative infrequency of the sittings.

At this time the forest was divided into ten bailiwicks, nine of which were in the charge of foresters. Abbenhalle, Blakeney, Berse, Bicknoure, Great Dean, Little Dean, Stauntene, Le Lee, Bleight's Bailye, Rywardyn—the last-named being watched over by the Warden himself—may all, beneath the thin disguise of altered spelling, be identified to-day.

Among other interesting cases brought before this Eyre of 1282 are some concerned with the illegal shipment of timber and other wood by boat across the Severn to Bristol. The immediate proximity of a broad and navigable river like the Severn was the cause of constant trouble in this and other respects; venison, as well as timber, being frequently removed in this way. The forest-dwellers were guilty of even more daring acts.

Thus in 1344 they attacked and plundered a ship of Majorca. In the time of Henry VI the men of Tewkesbury complained of frequent similar acts of robbery committed against their "ships and trowes."

It must be borne in mind that this forest differed from most others in England by the possession of mines of iron ore dating from pre-Roman times; for dealing with the work of these special legislation was necessary. Any modern game-preserver whose covers are situated near a factory town will understand that the presence in the forest of a mining population boded little good to authorized sport. Moreover, smelting-furnaces and forges need fuel. The abundant coal-seams which lay beneath these wooded glades, and which were to be discovered and worked later, were unknown in Norman days. Wood, or rather its product charcoal, was the iron-smelter's fuel. There was thus a constant struggle on the part of the monarch to limit the number of forest forges, which were both fixed and itinerant, and thus check the destruction of the timber which they used. In 1282 there were in the forest seventy-two of these itinerant forges, their existence being licensed by the Crown at seven shillings each a year. The possession of two forges was one of the special rights attached to the abbey of Flaxley.

But the men of the forest had virtues as well as failings; they were essentially a good fighting race. Accustomed to the use of the bow, whether as poachers or as acting on occasion more legitimately under the orders of the forest officers, they were efficient archers; the workers in the iron

mines could act as military sappers and as engineers. No less than six times between the years 1310 and 1365 contingents of bowmen and miners were called from their western woodlands to take part in the various sieges of Berwick.

It was in the Forest of Dean that were captured the Earl Rivers and Sir John Woodville, father and brother of Edward IV's unpopular queen. In the reign of Edward VI the "farming" of the forest to Sir Antony Kingston is the principal event of local note.

The reign of Elizabeth and the coming of the Spanish Armada gave rise to a story of the forest which, even if it be only *ben trovato*, must be recorded here; Camden, Fuller and Evelyn all hand it down. It is to the effect that the Spaniards, being fully aware of the value of Dean Forest timber to the English Navy, were keenly anxious for its destruction—presumably by fire. The commanders of the Armada were enjoined to effect this if possible, even should the reduction of the kingdom in general prove beyond their power. It is, moreover, said that special emissaries were despatched to carry out the task.

Spain, owing to the great difference between her climate and our own, was very probably quite unaware of the impossibility of destroying an oak forest by fire in so damp a country as England. The Spaniards may possibly have heard of the burning of Scotch woodlands by invading English armies, and have failed to grasp the difference between English oaks and resinous Scotch firs.

The visitor should not, however, presume on this immunity and proceed altogether without

caution in the disposal of his matches and tobacco ash. He will not indeed find, as in some of our south-country woods, any prohibition against smoking. But bracken grows almost everywhere in the forest, while gorse—highly inflammable—is plentiful in many parts. It may be impossible to set fire to a full-grown oak; to destroy, or at least irretrievably damage young seedlings, is the easiest thing in the world, where the surrounding undergrowth is dry. The fact that all the forest "lodges" are linked by telephone communication, specially intended for use in case of woodland fires, should demonstrate the need of reasonable care. Such fires not infrequently occur within its bounds. The lighting of fires by picnic parties is anathema to the Crown authorities.

With the coming of the seventeenth century the forest entered on disastrous days; and the few notes which follow will, to the possibly disappointed visitor, account for the almost total absence of really ancient trees. Two or three such patriarchs there are; and one, standing in the village of Newland and now outside the limits of the forest, is of enormous girth and probably at least a thousand years in age. But the Forest of Dean has been too roughly treated to exhibit many such survivors. Its historic interest is undoubted; its great beauty consists in the large extent of mixed plantations, threaded in every direction by picturesque paths and "drives"; and especially in the charm of its situation, alternating between densely clothed broad and steep hillsides, well-wooded tableland, and lovely vales.

In 1612 the Earl of Pembroke received, first

a grant of certain timber, together with the right to dig for iron ore, coal, stone and other minerals; and later, a grant of the castle and town of St. Briavels and of the whole forest, "all great trees" excepted. In 1635 the last forest Eyre was held at Gloucester, and the question of the forest boundaries came before it for consideration. It was proposed to extend these boundaries to those confirmed early in the fourteenth century; but the local population, mindful of their many infractions of the forest laws, and fearful of being called in question for the same, offered great opposition, and the matter dropped.

In 1638 an attempt was made to re-stock the forest with timber, the quantity of which was now alarmingly reduced. Many thousand acres were ordered to be inclosed, four thousand being set apart for the use of the Commoners. But in 1640 Charles I carried out what was effectively a sale of the whole forest to Sir John Winter, in consideration of a sum of money paid at once, ten further instalments, and an annual rent. The new possessor promptly set about the wholesale inclosing of land, and as promptly found himself at issue with the inhabitants. Sir John being an ardent Royalist, the outbreak of the Cival War placed him in still more serious difficulties, and the Commonwealth granted to General Massey the use of the ironworks, woods, etc.—timber-trees, however, being retained in its own hands.

With the return of Charles II, Winter entered once more into enjoyment of his grant. Two years later a February gale wrought terrible havoc among the trees. Not to be outdone in devastation

by the elements, Sir John set five hundred axes to work; by 1667 he had cut down some thirty thousand trees.

An arrangement was now made by which the forest reverted to State control. In 1668 it was enacted that eleven thousand acres should be inclosed; the timber on the remaining portion of the forest vested absolutely in the Crown; the number of the deer reduced; and the functions of the Verderers confined to venison only.

The building of the well-known Speech House, erected for the transaction of general forest business and especially for the holding of the Mine Law Court, was now commenced; the house was not, however, completed till about 1680, and it was largely added to some thirty years ago. In 1675 the ten bailiwicks already mentioned were abolished, the forest being divided into six "walks," each placed under the charge of a keeper, for whose use a "lodge" was built, the Speech House serving as one. These walks with their respective lodges were named after the king and several nobles of the time; King's Walk, otherwise known as Speech House Walk; York, Danby, Worcester, Latimer and Herbert Walks.

But the forest dwellers were still far from satisfied; they rose against the Crown as they had risen against Winter. Riots occurred in 1688, in the course of which the Speech House was damaged and York and Worcester Lodges were destroyed. Onward for many years the forest history is full of trouble. The colliers, ever desirous of obtaining timber for the "propping" of the mines, had a habit of boring large trees, thus causing them to

decay, when they were handed over for their use. Land was encroached upon and cottages were built. Timber was still—in the double meaning of the term—"conveyed" across the Severn or concealed in waggon-loads of coal. A large amount of timber was requisitioned for the building of Gloucester gaol in 1786; it being argued with some ingenuity that, as the gaol was erected on the site of the king's ancient castle, it should be built with the product of the royal woods; and, moreover, that it was only fair that the forest, which provided a somewhat large proportion of the gaol's inhabitants, should furnish the means of their detention. The forest inhabitants were still, in the words of a writer of the time, a "robustic wild people, that must be civilized by good discipline and government." The civilizing process so much needed then is now complete; nowhere, perhaps, will the stranger meet with more general courtesy, whether from the coal-grimed miners or the Forest servants of the Crown.

In 1788 the devastation of the forest had reached a point so serious that a Commission was appointed, and the whole area surveyed by experts. Early in the last century an extensive scheme of re-planting was undertaken, but with disappointing results. The system generally followed was that of planting acorns in holes four feet apart, a young oak being placed in every tenth hole. The oaks flourished, but the acorns were for the most part devoured by field-mice, of which two varieties gathered in vast numbers to the spoil. The official Forest correspondence of the time is swollen with innumerable letters on the subject of this plague

of mice. Cats were procured as a means of coping with the disaster, and forthwith there began to arrive from headquarters ceaseless enquiries as to the welfare and activity of these animals. Happily, attracted by the mice, owls became common, a species, unknown in the district before and since, making its appearance. Moreover, a local genius suggested the trapping of the mice in small pits, a plan which proved successful. The mice not only fell into the pits by hundreds, but, thus imprisoned, were reduced to acts of cannibalism!

The last "great fall" of naval timber took place in 1853; some few survivors of these bulwarks of old England still remain upon the hill above Parkend. Elsewhere the larger trees are of about a century's growth. Other forest events of the last century were the purchase of the High-meadow Estate in 1817, a disastrous frost in 1819, and renewed rioting and pulling down of inclosure fences in 1853. To some readers the building of the forest churches may be of greater interest.

At the compilation of Domesday Book there is mention of a church at Dymock and another at Tidenham. Between these points the only spiritual consoler for the intervening Severn coast-line was a "priest at Awre," unless, as is most probable, a church then existed at Westbury. In the heart of the forest churches were entirely absent; the whole area was, until comparatively recent days, understood to be included in the parish of Newland. Other neighbouring churches included that of Staunton, with the abbeys of Flaxley and Tintern, the latter just across the Wye.

It was not till early in the nineteenth century that any adequate provision was made for the growing population of miners and other forest folk. Owing to the exertions of more than one devoted clergyman Christ Church, which now gives its name to a hamlet, was consecrated in 1816; Holy Trinity at Harry Hill followed in the succeeding year. Parkend received a church in 1822, Cinderford in 1844, and Lydbrook in 1850. It will be clear from this that the lover of ancient churches must confine his search for any hitherto unknown gems to the Forest borders, where, happily, he will not be disappointed.

The visitor has now perhaps been detained too long upon the threshold of the place; but it is still needful to point out his way. The Forest of Dean can be reached with comparative ease from such well-known centres as Gloucester, Ross, Monmouth or Chepstow, as well as from many stations on the lines which link those towns. Indeed, supposing a journey from Gloucester to Ross, we shall, after passing Grange Court, have the northern rampart of the modern forest within sight upon our left. From Ross to Monmouth the railway generally follows the river, and again from Monmouth to Chepstow by the Wye Valley line; thus the western limit of the ancient forest is skirted—remembering, however, that it did not quite extend as far as Ross—and indeed the woodlands of the present day are never many miles distant, though receding considerably as Chepstow is approached. Thence back to Grange Court by the old South Wales main line which skirts the Severn shore—a lovely journey all too little known—and we shall have completed a practical circuit of the Forest. The portion once

included, long since disforested, which lies north of the line from Grange Court to Ross, may, for our purposes, be disregarded.

From Newnham, lying on Severn side and the first station on the South Wales line below Grange Court Junction, there is a recently opened railway motor service, which, calling at several "halts," runs through some lovely districts of the Forest to Drybrook and Cinderford. But the tourist will find a more useful point at Lydney Junction, where a line, worked jointly by the Midland and Great Western Railway Companies, crosses the South Wales line. It starts from Berkeley Road across the Severn, passes the little port and docks of Sharpness, crosses the gigantic Severn Bridge; and from Lydney passes through the Forest, throwing off a branch to Coleford, and serving Speech House Road, Cinderford, and Upper and Lower Lydbrook, finally joining the Ross and Monmouth railway at Lydbrook Junction on the left bank of the Wye. It is this little railway which concerns us most just now.

For the true centre of the Forest, both geographically and from the tourist's point of view, is undoubtedly the Speech House, which is now an excellent hotel. The nearest station, Speech House Road, is not a mile away from the old house, and is reached from Lydney in less than half an hour's railway ride. It is the Speech House, therefore, which shall be the starting-point of our forthcoming survey, perambulation or "regard."

One word more as to means of locomotion. There are good roads in the forest; but carriages and motor-cars perforce must keep to them, and

their occupants are therefore bound to miss ninety-nine fine views and charming rambles out of a hundred. The same drawback applies to the cycle, and, though in a slightly less degree, to that neglected animal of modern days, the horse. To him, indeed, the long grass of the "drives" will be a pleasure rather than a drawback. But the one true way of seeing Dean Forest is to go afoot, and it is to the pedestrian that our choice of routes will most appeal.

CHAPTER IV

THE SPEECH HOUSE

LEAVING Lydney Junction, where the breeze blows fresh from off the Severn Sea, and passing Lydney town, half a mile further inland, the train enters a valley between partly wooded slopes. The Cannop brook flows close beside the line, first on the right, then, after passing Parkend, on the left. Between Lydney and Whitecroft and thence on to Parkend the scattered collieries and straggling villages beside the line and on the hills on either hand, give little grace or beauty to the scene. It is only when Parkend is left behind and the great wood of Russell's Plantation stretches unbroken on our right, with Nagshead Plantation on the left, that the true beauty of the Forest comes in view.

Then and then only are we well within the depth and mystery of the great woods. Oak, fern and foxglove border closely on the little line, the many curves of which, if truth is to be told, are somewhat apt to unseat passengers too much engrossed with the fair scene through which they pass.

Just after leaving Parkend station the train makes a halt among the woods and two or three coaches are uncoupled from the rear. They are bound for Coleford ; and though that little forest town lies in a deep vale just over the long crest of

Nagshead woods upon our left, a long circuitous detour is necessary for any but the pedestrian to reach it, and the line is carried round the jutting elbow of the hill. On this line to Coleford is Milkwalk, the place where Bessemer steel was first made in England.

When, after passing the great ponds upon the Cannop brook, we alight at Speech House Road station, the Forest meets us fairly in both senses of the word ; exhibiting its beauties lavishly, yet scorning to conceal defects. Arrive upon an evening in late May or early June, and the ancestral hawthorns standing on the open stretch of turf beside the road are fragrant in the air. Behind us, as we turn east towards the Speech House, little more than half a mile away, the road crosses the line and breasts the long, steep hill towards Coleford two miles off, the wooded slopes of Worcester Walk lying to its right. Yet the peace of the great woods all round is broken by the clamour of the large stone-cutting works beside the station ; and before we have passed half of the steep road to our hotel the Speech House Colliery is seen upon the left—silent indeed, save for the occasional throbbing of its pump, for little coal is now got here, but still a blot upon the beauty of the oaks and ancient beech that cluster round. Five minutes more, and we have gained the summit of the hill—four hundred feet and more the altitude—to find the Speech House standing boldly on the level ground above.

The present form of the large oblong building fronting north and west needs a few words of comment ; otherwise the guest may give it credit

for an undeserved antiquity. Over the western entrance to the Court Room, in which our Forest appetites will welcome many a good meal, appears a crown, and underneath the more than half obliterated date of 1682. Over the doorway giving access to the taproom at the extreme east of the north front is another stone dated 1676. But this last is not *in situ*, having been removed from a stable entrance when the house was largely added to in 1883.

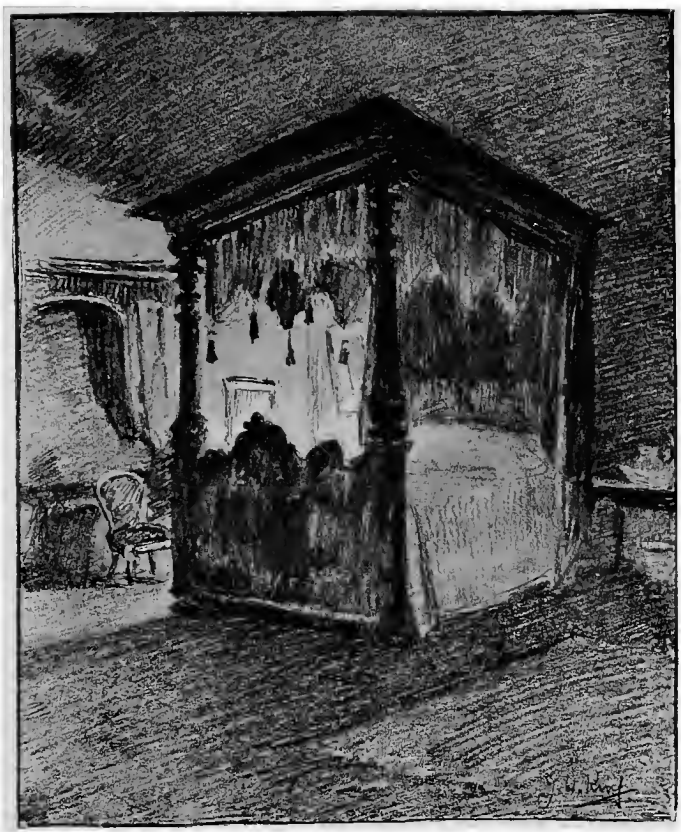
The whole of the west front of the house stands to-day as it was originally built in the seventeenth century, as also do the two small rooms facing north, the bay window in one of which still bears its ancient roof of stone. Beyond the slight recess in the north wall all is of modern date. Not only was the ancient line of roof, with boldly curved and overhanging eaves, followed in the new additions, but the original stones of the demolished sides were preserved and placed in the front of the house, with the result that no unpleasing signs of modern work are to be seen. Even the roof of bright red tiles is swiftly mellowing to a softer hue.

It is to the Court Room at the south-west corner of the house that passing visitors first make their way. It is a room some twenty-five by five-and-thirty feet, the ancient roof-beams supported by curving wall-pieces, a wide and open hearth facing the western wall. At the south end extends a low raised gallery or daïs of oak, where still the Verderers of the Forest hold their forty-day Attachment Courts. All round the walls hang time-worn antlers of the Forest's long departed deer; the horns intact, the fur long crumbled into dust, leaving a somewhat ghastly skeleton of skull.

The drawing-room above is ancient too, a pleasant room with wide low window-seats. For the remaining accommodation of the house, it is that of a somewhat small but excellent hotel; all too small, indeed, at such times as a fine Easter or a sunny Whitsuntide, when the host could fill it three times over, and even then turn would-be guests away; but ample for the long dull winter months when visitors are none, and passers-by are few and far between. The sanitary arrangements are of the twentieth—not the seventeenth century!

Much curious gossip of the Speech House as a modern hostelry may be gathered from the present landlord—a civil engineer by profession and prematurely grey from much hard work and illness on the western coast of Africa, whence he was invalided home to— as he puts it—"keep a pub!" A few years ago he took over the tenancy formerly held by his father, and now keeps a knowledge of engineering and machinery from becoming altogether rusty by running a small mineral water factory in the outbuildings at the rear of the hotel. So visitors may supplement a "cure" of Forest air by aerated Forest water, drawn from a source unquestionably pure at a short distance from the house.

In other ways the house, like Mrs. Elton, has "resources in itself." You will admire the richness of the cream and butter, and still more you will—in the word's literal sense—"admire" at being offered clotted cream. Three handsome Jersey cows graze in the open woods surrounding the hotel, and the clotted cream is made no further in the direction of its native Devonshire than the great kitchen range.



NO. "22," THE SPEECH HOUSE.

Over a pipe or game of billiards our host will give us curious instances of fluctuation in the daily takings to be looked for at the ancient house. Fourpence is, we believe, as yet the minimum, the takings of one snowy Christmas-day; a penny of this total being contributed by a tramp, who, we fancy, got in return something more than value. At the other extremity of the record stands close upon three hundred pounds, the result, in part, of one of the great annual Miners' Demonstrations, in part of bills paid by guests who fled before the advent of ten thousand Forest colliers to the peaceful lawns and glades about the house!

He has a story too anent the visit of a well-known statesman, with his wife and his wife's maid. The maid was taken slightly ill; the doctor was summoned by wire, the landlord adding, "Mrs. C.'s maid." The doctor, a well-known Forest personality, appeared with record speed and descended from his motor with scared face. "A bad business this." "Oh, no, Doctor, nothing much, I think." "Nothing much, you call it, nothing much!" and the telegram was thrust into the hands of the astonished host. The omission of a letter by the local telegraph clerk had changed it to the appalling message, "Mrs. C.'s *mad*."

Your choice of beds is wide at this hotel. Shown to a bedroom containing a structure of brass, moderate in size and modern in design, you beg for something ancient, something more in keeping with traditions of the place. Then, the door of Number 22 or 25, or sundry other rooms, being opened, there stands before you a vast fortress filling half the spacious room; its material shining walnut

or mahogany, its proportions those of the great bed of Ware. Its four vast posts have surely sacrificed a forest tree apiece. With curious carving and fair hangings the whole is less a bed than a stately chamber of repose.

Yourself disrobed, the light put out, you enter on this promised land. Mindful of the extent of territory, you make forced marches and at last conclude yourself within the centre of the citadel. The light of morning shows how widely you have erred. You have been resting merely on the confines of the place ; a vast extent of territory, all unruffled, unexplored, stretches away upon the farther side.

These beds are not indeed coeval with the ancient house itself, being only slightly older than the modern part. At the time of the already mentioned additions to the house in 1883, a mansion on the eastern borders of the Forest was being dismantled of its furniture. The Speech House landlord saw his opportunity and bought the beds.

A night in one of these vast couches makes credible another Speech House tale—that of the lady who temporarily lost her husband in the recesses of the monster bed, and reported him as "up and gone out" to the maid who came to take the breakfast order for the day. The story, nevertheless, met with some incredulity when being recounted by the landlord in the billiard-room, till a gentleman who had heard it with a quiet smile removed all doubt by the admission that he "was the man."

For, isolated and neglected by the general public as the Forest and the Speech House are, those who once know them seldom fail to come again and

often yet again. Some famous names are written in the register of guests at the hotel. But naturally the one above all others who is looked upon throughout the Forest with affectionate regret is the late Sir Charles Dilke, who made a yearly stay of several weeks at the Speech House during his long parliamentary representation of the Forest of Dean division of Gloucestershire.

The Attachment Court, the one and only forest court whose functions have survived to present days, is held, as has been already said, in the Court Room at intervals of forty days. In theory at least; for in practice it is only when the clerk of the court announces to the four elected Verderers that there is business to be done, that these officials meet. Once met, their duties deal neither with venison nor with vert, but with encroachments on Crown land by those who dwell within the forest bounds. Such encroachments are now comparatively rare, but when committed the Verderers have power to punish the offender by a fine.

At first sight these Attachment Courts would appear to be survivals of the early forest laws; but there are those who deem them of a far more ancient origin. A well-known antiquarian, now deceased, has pointed out the following facts. That these forty-day intervals at which the courts were held—and are so still—constitute a very unusual division of time. That the Druid year held three hundred and sixty days, which, divided by nine—a sacred Druidical number—gives the forty days. Are we, as he suggests, upon the track of some old court or meeting held in Druid times?

Then, too, are the old holly-trees which stand

so thickly in the woods around the Speech House wholly the results of plantings in the Stuart times, or are the gnarled and twisted stems to some extent descendants of the Druid days? May not the old forest custom, still practised within the memory of at least one Verderer, of facts being sworn to at the Court by witnesses who took their oath upon a stick of holly, date from a long-forgotten past?

Moreover, the Druid day began at noon; the Attachment Courts were appointed to be held at that hour. These facts certainly lend colour to the theory of a Druid origin.

Although the Verderers' Attachment Courts are still held here, the Speech House was built partly as one of the six original lodges appropriated to the "walks," and partly for the holding of the Forest Mine Law Courts. It is still the headquarters of the mining interest of the district. Here are held the great annual Miners' Demonstrations, and here the half-yearly "gale" dinners.

What is a "gale" dinner? A "gale," oh reader unlearned in Dean Forest lore, is a grant to dig and delve, whether for iron, coal or stone. Formerly the right to dig for coal belonged only to Free Miners—those, that is, who had been born in the Forest and had worked in a mine for a year and a day. An alternative was to serve a Free Miner as his apprentice for a term of years, but such apprenticeships were rare. Coal seems to have been worked in the Forest for some seven hundred years or more; iron ore, now practically neglected except a little ore for "colour," has, as we shall see, a far more ancient origin.



A BEECH TREE, THE SPEECH HOUSE.

In theory the exclusive rights of a Free Miner still exist ; in practice they are more or less extinct, the miners having parted with them to companies who mostly work the coal on modern lines. But little bands of Free Miners still work for their own hand here and there, paying of course, as do the larger collieries, a royalty to the Crown. And so, every February and August, the "gale" dinners take place in the Speech House, attended by miners and colliery managers, as well as by the gaveller and deputy-gaveller—officials who watch over the interests of the Crown below ground as do the Crown surveyor and his deputy above.

Just sixty years ago, in 1851, the output of Dean Forest coal was but a little over some three hundred thousand tons. In 1898 the record year was reached with eleven hundred and fifty thousand tons. In 1907 the total was just over a million tons, while for the last three years, 1908-9-10, the output has kept steady at about nine hundred thousand tons. Both steam and house coal are raised. The great drawback in nearly all Forest pits is the excess of water, and incessant pumping hardly meets the case.

The Lightmoor and Trafalgar Collieries are among those the output of which is most considerable. Very curious are some of the pit names —Strip-and-at-It, No Coal, Gentlemen Colliers, Rain-proof, New Found Out, Go On and Prosper, being fair specimens.

Many interesting details of the iron and coal mining history of the Forest—far more than we have space for here—may be found in Nicholls' volume by those who care to read. In the present

volume the geologist, too, must be content with a few brief lines. Roughly speaking, Dean Forest lies in a basin formed by the Carboniferous System ; the coal-measures are encircled by Millstone Grit and Carboniferous Limestone, the last-named resting in its turn upon the Old Red Sandstone. Eastward, however, towards Lydney and Blakeney, the limestone thins out and disappears.

CHAPTER V

ROUND THE SPEECH HOUSE

IDEAL centre for a survey of the forest as the Speech House is, it will perhaps, for the visitor with time to spare, be many days before he feels disposed to wander very far afield. For the old Stuart house stands closely circled by such woodland scenery as it is difficult to match, impossible to beat elsewhere.

The roads to Cinderford, to Speech House Road station and to Coleford, and to Parkend and Lydney, all lead for some distance through the King's Walk or Holly Wood, among the unfenced glades of which the Speech House stands. The vistas that here present themselves are some of the most delightful in the Forest. There are few statelier oaks than here, and nowhere is the woodland so thickly interspersed with ancient holly-trees, many coeval with the house itself, some possibly much older still. Fully three thousand of these shining evergreens stand scattered all around. It is easy to find hollies with stems five or six feet in circumference, though in many cases the trunk has forked close to the ground, while in others two or three stems which seem to grow from the same root are closely intertwined.

In the unfenced portions of the Holly Wood the constant music of sheep-bells, now half a mile

away, now close at hand, is in our ears. The sheep, small wiry animals with undocked tails, roam at their will upon the immemorial turf which, to a varying width, borders the road on either hand. The visitor from the great Hampshire woodlands of the Crown will perhaps miss the New Forest ponies here ; but the tinkling music made by the Dean Forest leaders of the flock goes far to fill the gap. The autumn months will bring an undertone of grunting pigs, and the imagination conjures up some Gurth the swineherd stretched beneath an oak.

No time, no rules, and for a day or two no plans—except a resolution *not* to plan ; that is the spirit in which the Forest loves to be approached. Wander just where your undirected footsteps stray. Make, if you will, a circuit of the house, bounded on two sides by the twelve-acre meadow now put up for hay ; hay which, come rain or sunshine, must be cut and cleared before the second Saturday in July, to leave the field at the disposal of the ten thousand colliers, more or less, who hold their annual Demonstration on that day. Perhaps it is with a view to assisting in such preparation of the meadow that the landlord's Jersey cows, forsaking the short turf and woodland shade, are on this hot June morning making a steady circuit of the line of fence, thrusting their slender necks between the wire rails, and clearing off a half-yard border round the field.

Such circuit of the house and field will show straight-stemmed and stately oaks and ancient hollies grouped in infinite variety of loveliness. Each step yields something new, something more

beautiful in play of light and shade, something which in its turn will be forgotten and eclipsed within another twenty yards. South of the house, a hundred yards or so east of the Parkend road, we come upon the entrance to the great Spruce Drive ; but that will form an expedition for another day.

True, there is "another way" of seeing the Forest, and certainly it is the one most generally adopted by the passing crowd. From noon to early evening on a summer's day the Speech House guest may see it illustrated to his heart's content. Between the oaks and hollies standing on the turf beside the road to Cinderford, or from beyond the steep hill-brow which dips to Speech House Station, there comes a rapidly increasing hum. A motor-car drives up ; its occupants, cloaked, goggled, veiled, alight. The protestations of the inner man may perhaps prolong the halt for lunch or tea. More often—five times out of six—the engine is not even stopped, but rattles and vibrates a few short minutes at the door. A glance is taken at the house ; a stroll of fifty paces to the top of Sundial Drive, which leads down Beechenhurst. "Fine timber here ; nice views ; more undulating than the New Forest." Then off again, startling the sheep upon the roadside turf, and quickening for a time the mellow music of their chiming bells.

Such transient travellers will at least have satisfied themselves that our Forest is not now a forest "in name only," as was stated not long since by a Sandhurst lecturer to his class, a Gloucestershire hearer writhing meanwhile in indignation on his seat. But it might surprise them to learn that

besides being "more undulating" than the great Crown woodland of Hampshire, its acreage under timber is in far larger proportion than that of the New Forest; so great is the amount of waste and open common interspersed among the Hampshire woods.

The Holly Wood around the house explored, there then is Beechenhurst, northward across the Cinderford and Coleford road. To enter it we pass between two little cannon, "Charon" and "Griper," cast some years since at Cinderford. The curving Sundial Drive which leads down to the railway in the valley is delightful in itself; and right and left at intervals there turn off other drives, and these again present fresh forks and branching paths. North and north-west the Beechenhurst inclosure ends with the railway and the road; but eastward we may wander far unchecked, beguiled by paths and bypaths until all clear sense of time and of locality alike are lost.

Or, again, there is Russell's Plantation, the great wood which, bounded upon the north and east by the Cinderford and Coleford, and Parkend to Speech House roads, will lead us by its long and lonely drives and hundred pathways to Parkend. Parkend itself, the economic centre of the Forest, has perhaps no great beauty of its own, if we except the deputy-surveyor's charming house at Whitemead Park and the great wooded hills which rise above the smoke. But we need not fear arriving at Parkend too soon; the chances are we shall be lost in Russell's Wood long before that; moreover, there will be occasion to pass through Parkend upon another day.

May for the blue wild hyacinth, June and July for foxgloves, Russell's Wood for both. Nowhere, save perhaps near Staunton, are Dean Forest foxgloves better seen than here; they grow in places seven, eight, or even nine feet high. To-day the spread of bluebells is so vast, so infinite, stretching so deep into the woodland from the borders of the drives, that often we are fain to think the flower non-existent, and the azure lake a mere reflection of the cloudless sky. Raise the eyes here and there from feasting on this heavenly riot, and the steep descending paths will give you matchless vistas of the Nagshead Woods across the railway line.

For such as are content to wander thus—not wholly aimless, for they aim at happiness—yet with no carefully mapped goal in view, this careless guidance will suffice. Two hints, prosaic in themselves, may perhaps be given. Wear old and sombre-coloured clothes by preference. The very name will tell you that you cannot gain "inclosures" but by gates or stiles. The gates are locked; the stiles are used by colliers fresh from work. The result is sometimes painfully obvious on a summer frock, or on the lower portion of an elegant light flannel suit. Wear, too, thick boots. Many of the drives are boggy in places, even after long-continued drought. On drier ground the ungrazed grass grows rank and high, and dews of cloudless summer nights are long in drying.

For those who practise still the vanishing equestrian art, the Speech House Hotel possesses two essentials—stabling, and keys which unlock the gates of all the drives. A saddle-horse is likewise

sometimes available ; but to avoid disappointment enquiries on this point should be made beforehand, when arrangements can be made for outside hiring. A carriage can always be had ; but neither carriage nor saddle will show the Forest's inmost secret heart. Its fullest riches are for those who go afoot.

For those who weary of, or perhaps despise, such casual wanderings as those which we have sketched above ; for those who thirst to be shown "something," other than the beauty which encircles them at every step in this enchanted spot, routes must be planned, and something definite and tangible be pointed out. So to the well-defined prosaic task once more.

The Speech House stands beside an ancient Roman road ; indeed, the whole Forest is traversed by these highways of the past. The Ordnance Survey still marks "traces of Roman paving" here and there upon its maps ; but in most instances this notification will be found disappointing, modern highway improvements having swept away or buried deep the ancient stones. One perfect and most interesting strip of Roman pavement still remains within the woods, and makes a future expedition in itself ; another piece in the immediate neighbourhood of the Speech House is sufficiently visible to be worth notice.

To reach it we descend the hill beside the Speech House Colliery until the line is reached. Passing the level crossing at the station, we see at once a turf-grown track upon the right. The most casual examination will at once reveal traces of paving, and these may be followed beside the brook, across the



BEECH TREE, NEAR THE SPEECH HOUSE.

new road recently constructed by the Crown, and up the hill beyond.

Beyond the new Crown road the Roman way has at some date been used as the foundation for a tramway line ; but of its ancient origin there can be little doubt. It leads us up the hill for some little distance until, turning to the left towards the modern Coleford road, it is lost among quarries and heaps of stone and rubbish. It would be worthy of more detailed notice than we give it here, were it not competitive with the far more interesting and perfect strip of road at Blackpool Bridge. This we shall presently visit and shall there be better able to study the construction of a highway made two thousand years ago.

This strip of road has had a use to-day beyond its own intrinsic interest, in that it has led us up the hill and to the neighbourhood of Worcester Lodge, which lies a little off the road upon the right. This is one of the six original lodges already spoken of, and is now occupied by a forest keeper. Like all the seventeenth-century lodges, it is a snug and well-built little dwelling, with ample garden, field, and nursery for infant forest trees. Still we shall turn our backs upon it after a brief glance ; for straight before it, cut through the woods of Worcester Walk, there runs a broad and glorious drive, giving a splendid view of Beechenhurst and of the Speech House Woods—an endless and unbroken vista of tree-tops.

Another short two hours' walk—this time in quest of timber rather than of stone-paved roads. For though the Speech House guest will have already admired the proportions of the noble beech

standing beside the entrance to the Sundial Drive, and will have feasted his eyes on many a fair oak mingled with the shining evergreens of the Holly Wood, he may by now begin to enquire for still more stately and more ancient trees. Of such, as has been said before, the Forest has comparatively few to show; Winter and his five hundred axes did their work too well. Except the oaks within the Holly Wood and some survivors of the last "great fall" upon the hill above Parkend, the really ancient trees are few and far between. Such as there are we hope to view them all; but the generality of oak timber in the forest has hardly yet attained a hundred years of growth, being the plantings of the early nineteenth century.

Still there are fine oaks within an easy walk of the Speech House, so let us turn our steps towards the Three Brothers. They stand in Russell's Wood, and the visitor may chance to come upon them unawares. If so, so much the better; few would pass them by without a pause. But to reach them without loss of time—reckoned, alas, so precious by the large majority of Speech House guests—we follow the Parkend and Lydney road.

At first we pass through the open Holly Wood, musical with sheep-bells, and showing many a handsome oak and beech among its shining evergreens. Then the railings close up to the road on either side. On our left are Saintlow and the Acorn Patch; on the right Russell's Inclosure, divided into the Wet Wood and many another section, the names of which are known to the deputy-surveyor, woodmen, colliers, and to few besides. A walk of perhaps a mile will bring us to the large New

Fancy Colliery upon the left, with two tall chimneys and a towering rubbish-tip.

Just before New Fancy Colliery is reached a path upon the right leads up to Russell's Lodge, half hidden from sight within the wood. It is one of the many lodges added as occasion required to the original five coeval with the Speech House. Figures which give the acreage of the adjacent wood appear above the door, together with the name Glenbervie, which recalls to mind the appointment of that nobleman to the surveyor-generalship of the Forest in 1808. The lodge is a secluded and peaceful little dwelling, albeit within easy earshot of the busy colliery, reached a few steps farther on.

These Forest collieries, occasional blots upon the woodlands as they are, yet have a virtue in their hideous ugliness. More than one rubbish-tip gives us a fine view of the woodlands from its top. We are not yet sufficiently inured to their presence to linger for a view to-day. Directly opposite the colliery there is a cottage with a small timber-yard upon its farther side. Leaving the road and turning down the path between the cottage garden and the prostrate trunks, we enter the inclosure and take the broadest of two cinder-paths beyond the stile. Following the rough track downhill for a few hundred yards we come to where it intersects a broad green drive. Here the Three Brothers stand.

Three fine straight stems they are, though far from scathless and now probably unsound. For arboriculturist and forester they have the special interest of being sessile oaks—which, it may be not amiss

to note, consists in having the acorn stalkless or "seated" on the twig, while the leaf is stalked. The reverse is the case with the great proportion of Forest of Dean oaks, which are pedunculate, bearing stalked acorns and a sessile leaf. But it must be remembered that the forest with its present general crop of pedunculate oaks is of recent planting; the original trees are believed to have been sessile. Writers—and such may be found—who state that the sessile oak is *conspicuous* in Dean Forest are mistaken. It may be found, as here; in early days it may have been general or even exclusive. Intermediate varieties, in which the characteristic distinctions are much modified, are well known to botanists.

The reason for planting the forest with pedunculate oaks a century since is fairly obvious to those who know the different habits of the two varieties of tree. The early nineteenth century planters had the navy in their mind and dreamed not of a ship of steel. Now the pedunculate oak is of a spreading habit, and prolific in those crooks and "knees" so prized by the ship-builder of a day long passed. The sessile oak grows into a taller, straighter stem, as those of the Three Brothers standing side by side.

Continuing down the obvious path, we strike the line, and, turning to the left, may reach Parkend. Or, following the drive, and turning slightly to the right when paths occur, we shall attain the same result. By returning from Parkend to the Speech House by road we pass another group of handsome trees.

They stand upon the steep roadside shortly

before the hill joins the Speech House and Lydney road, at which point we turn, of course, to the left. One, a very glorious tree indeed, is on the right ; three other, smaller, but still stately trees, are opposite.

The single oak especially is worth the camera and the measuring-tape. Only a little short of twenty feet in girth five feet above the ground, it is in this respect a worthy rival of old Jack o' the Yat, a forest "lion" we have yet to see. In stately spreading of its "crown" and in its seemingly luxuriant health it far surpasses it.

CHAPTER VI

THE SPRUCE DRIVE

BEAUTIFUL at all seasons is the Forest. No need to dwell upon its loveliness in summer, when every leaf is opened to its full extent, and bracken is breast high beneath the oaks. Nor need we speak of autumn, with its infinite variety of tints, its golden rain of beech-leaves drifting downwards towards the soil they so enrich, its sombre fern-fronds, dying yet still erect. Beautiful too are many winter days within the woods ; especially about the Speech House, where the hollies, freed from the competition with the summer foliage of surrounding trees, present their loveliness in all its shining charm. And one December day we well recall, a symphony in silver and dark grey, when underneath a leaden sunless sky, each branch and twig throughout the woods was sheathed in shining frost. Come to the Forest when you will, yet never will you seek its beauty fruitlessly.

Yet of all seasons perhaps, the spring and early summer see it at its best. The larches are in their first fleeting beauty then, pale green and infinitely fair beside the budding oaks. The upward springing fern-fronds are unfolding day by day. The woodpecker is calling ceaselessly, the gaudy plumage of the jays is better seen, the cuckoo cries far off. And, to descend to more material views, the



OAK TREE, NEAR THE ENTRANCE TO THE SPRUCE DRIVE.

flies, which in July and August are apt to make tobacco smoke a first necessity of peace, are not yet there, nor has the oak-leaf moth begun its ravages upon the trees.

Better to come too early than too late. For, even should March winds still bluster, coal will not be grudged us on the Speech House hearths; the walls are thick, the rooms are snug. Even outside there are warm places in the woods, and it is such a shelter that we seek to-day.

The great Spruce Drive, planted when the neighbouring inclosures were made about three-quarters of a century ago, is close at hand. In reality there are two such drives, crossing each other at right angles. The shorter one is entered by strolling through the oaks and hollies to the east of the hotel, upon the right side of the road to Foxes Bridge and Cinderford. A fence dividing the inclosure from the open Holly Wood will soon be seen, and in this boundary a gate and stile give access to the drive. But we will make for the north-west end of the longer drive which emerges on the open lawn just south of the hotel.

The two long lines of spruce were planted about forty feet apart, the trees in each being spaced at intervals of nearly thirty feet. They average now some fifty feet and more in height—comparatively shorter at the end nearer the hotel, but growing in towering stately dignity as we proceed. They form two giant hedges, which, as we pass between them, seem at once to shut us from all contact with the woodland life beyond. The March wind may, if blowing from the right quarter, sweep the long drive from end to end; to penetrate the spreading branches

is beyond its power. We hear it harrying the bare trees in the woods upon the farther side ; we hear the shivering rustle of the dead leaves clinging to some sapling oak. But the loud voice dies down to a mere sigh among the dark funereal branches that to-day protect us from the blast. All sounds —the scream of jays, the barking of a distant dog— come to us muffled through these walls of green. It is a place of a great silence, broken only when a squirrel darts across the grass and leaps into a tree, to send a chattering defiance down upon us as we pass. Only above, the hard clear blue of the wind-swept March sky, a radiant vision, brilliant and clear between the dark tree-tops, looks down upon the sombre place.

Away, straight as a dart before us, the green walls stretch out on either hand ; now rising and now falling with the undulations of the ground, but never swerving from their course. There are indeed a few short gaps, and here and there some longer ones, now on this side and now on that, where single trees or more are missing from their place. And presently there is revealed the secret of these vacant places in the long ranks of sentinels. One or two trees, quite recently blown down on our left hand, still lie where they have crashed, turning their earth-encumbered roots towards the drive. These roots are superficial holdfasts and no more ; the spruce has no tap-root by which to take firm hold upon the earth. A perilous fashion of growth, and more especially for evergreens. Autumn and winter gales will find the trees, not with bare boughs or easily stripped leaves, but rearing a dense impenetrable barrier to the storm.

Ranked in such long close lines as form the drive, a gale from the right quarter has the power to overturn them by the score ; they fall as barley falls before the mower's scythe.

Even to our eyes it seems as though the trees need thinning, for the larger ones encroach seriously upon their neighbours. A passing forest woodman tells us presently that there is talk of the whole drive being felled. He parts the branches of two trees, and shows us a long row of tiny spruces planted twenty feet behind each stately line. These are already in their place to form the new Spruce Drive, a possible successor to the stately avenue two generations of the Forest's lovers have enjoyed. But not for us, nor hardly for our children would these tiny saplings grow to make the shadow and the silence that is here to-day. Happily rumours of devastation are not always true, and possibly a drastic thinning may be all the Spruce Drive has to bear.

At one point a little stream of water runs in a culvert underneath the Drive ; so small as hardly to be noticed were its voice not strong from recent rains. It deserves notice too ; for this is Blackpool Brook, which, when strong and broad a few miles farther on its course, will show us one of the most interesting antiquities the Forest holds. Without the Blackpool Brook we should lack Blackpool Bridge with its adjacent ford ; that ford, the curve to which, neglected by the traffic of to-day, preserves a strip of Roman paving perfect as when laid.

The Drive is crossed at intervals by other drives —all worth exploring—and presently by a mineral

railway, but the great trees form rank upon its farther side and still stretch out before us in their stately rows. Reaching the summit of a gentle rise we see their end at last; beyond them lies a hollow backed by the long slope of Staple Edge.

The wind is blowing behind us rather west of north; otherwise we should have sooner heard what falls upon our ears at last—the blows of axe, the ringing stroke of iron mallet striking iron wedge, and then the rending of tough fibres, the breaking of small branches as the doomed tree sweeps past its woodland neighbours yet untouched, the splintering crash with which the proud head strikes the earth; then the great silence, broken by the feller's voice. There are, then, woodcutters at work close by. Pushing aside the sweeping branches of a spruce, we make our way across the inclosure on the farther side; with difficulty, for the ground is strewn with fallen trees and piles of boughs, and crossed by deep and miry drains. At last the men come into view some fifty yards away. That upright sturdy figure, with the ruddy face framed by grey beard and whisker, is familiar to all Dean Forest wanderers as having been for nearly fifty years a servant of the Crown—one of the Forest's oldest "workmen."

He presently explains that he is not quite at his best this morning, a cold on the chest affecting what he calls his "puff." Nevertheless the old man looks the picture of health, and makes a perfect figure for the foreground of this woodland scene. He stands, with axe in hand, among the destined victims he has known for half their lives. Broad-chested and erect is he; his loosened shirt

displays a massive neck, while sleeves rolled backwards to the shoulder exhibit arms that might be those of Hercules himself.

It was a spruce whose fall we heard, and the old man's mate, a stout lad of twenty, is already busy trimming off the boughs—a tough job, as we see later when comparing it with similar work upon a larch. "Fifteen feet there, I reckon," says the woodcutter, as he pauses for a moment to measure with his eye the fallen tree; an interesting question this for the two men, all such work in the forest being paid for by the piece. The woodcutters receive so much per cubic foot of wood contained in the trees felled. The necessary tools, including axes and the great two-handed cross-cut saws, mallets and wedges, are their own concern. Eighteen shillings, the old man tells us, he has lately paid for three new axes, each head consisting of six pounds of highly-tempered steel at a shilling a pound. Nothing inferior to the best would be of useful service here; the life of even first-rate tools is brief.

Before the skilful strokes of the old woodcutter the branches fly like touchwood from a fallen larch, and the trunk soon lies stripped and ready for the timber-team. The woodcutter then sets to work at "spurring out" the victim next in turn, a larch some sixty feet in height. A preliminary matter to consider is in what direction it shall fall. Conditions here are not ideal, the boundary fence being only some three yards away; any damage to that must be repaired by the men themselves. The trees—larch, oak, and spruce—stand thickly in the wood, and it seems difficult to provide a

clear course for sixty feet of stem crowned by a bushy head. Finally a piece of bark is chipped from a slim and spindly little oak which blocks the way. "Dead" is the verdict, and a few vigorous strokes of the axe lay the tree low. There is now a clear space—though not a foot to spare on either side—in which the larch may fall, and serious work begins.

The first few strokes of the axe show us that "spurring out" would be no work for a novice. Clearing away leaves, moss and soil from the ground around the tree, the woodcutter rains blows of accurate precision at a point just above where the root-arms disappear into the earth. A downward stroke is followed by a horizontal one. Each downstroke must penetrate to the same depth, each side blow chip off the bark and outer coat of wood in such a fashion as to leave an accurately levelled "stool." "That be the name as they do give 'em now, but 'stubs' we do mostly call 'em." Not only does this level surface make a neat finish to the job, but it ensures the level working of the saw.

All round the trunk the old man plies his axe, save for a small strip left untouched on that side where he plans the tree to fall. Then his young mate, the stripping off of the tough spruce-boughs finished, is called up. Kneeling upon the ground on either side the tree, the two men ply the saw.

His scantiness of "puff" makes the old woodcutter cry "Wo!" at rather frequent intervals to-day. During these he tells us of the objectionable features of larchwood as compared with oak. Oak, although harder, cuts with a short free grain; the

softer larch is stringy and impedes the movements of the saw. Felling a spruce is harder labour still.

Of this tough and tenacious nature of the larch we have an object-lesson when the sawing is done. The tree has been cut through, with the exception of a mere strip on the far side. Wedges have of course been driven in at intervals to ease the working of the saw; and now the woodcutter deals ringing blows on these to bring the great stem down. The trunk takes on an angle farther from the perpendicular at every stroke; but the tough strip of uncut wood still holds. It is not until the woodcutter has administered a dexterous cut with his axe on the outer side of this strip, followed by a farther assault upon the wedges, that the tree at last overbalances and falls. Mindful of a warning to beware of branches "throwing back," we slip behind a tree-trunk at the final crash; and sure enough two or three boughs rise high into the air and fall around us, broken off and thrown upwards by the violence of the shock.

A stately victim the great tree lies prone. On the sawn end of the trunk the rings of annual growth show clearly, forming a circle as exact as though described with compasses. We count them to upwards of sixty; then they become obscure in the irregularities of the outer portion of the trunk. Not given to undue optimism in his work, the old man owns that the tree may yield perhaps thirty cubic feet; a woodman who has joined us from the lodge just visible upon the crest of Staple Edge, says thirty-five. The scent of the sweet fresh-cut wood is fragrant in the air.

Then comes an interval devoted to the midday

meal. The old woodcutter's home is at Yorkley, barely three miles away from work to-day ; but he is liable to be sent to all parts of the forest, and is often forced to be a mere week-end visitor at his own hearth.

We leave the two men presently, and, crossing the fence which bounds the inclosure and the south-east end of the Spruce Drive, find ourselves in the marshy bottom from which rises the long slope of Staple Edge. Climbing some half-way up the hill we strike a line of telephone-wires which lead to various collieries and lodges. Standing a moment to recover breath, we turn to look upon the course already passed.

There is only one blot upon the glorious view which spreads out northward at our feet—the smoking chimneys and the towering rubbish-tip of the New Fancy Colliery upon the left. Elsewhere the forest lies dense and unbroken.

Among the mass of oaks still bare of leaves we trace the Spruce Drive far into the woodlands from its entrance at the bottom of the hill. After their meal the old woodcutter and his mate are now at work once more ; again, breaking the silence, comes the stroke of axe, the ring of mallet upon wedge, the gathering crash of the doomed tree. Scared even by this distant sound a blackbird skims swiftly past us to the shelter of a bramble-brake, uttering his hurried warning call. From somewhere deep among the woods a pheasant crows.

Westward a timber-track follows the line of posts, and this will bring us to the Blakeney road not far from Danby Lodge. This side of Staple Edge is freshly cleared ; cordwood is ranged upon



SPRUCE TREES.

the slope waiting the teams. But the great hill is still rich in colour. The golden brown of last year's bracken is upon the ground; young birches raise their silver stems crowned by the ruddy purple glow of the young shoots; the dark green of a holly meets us here and there. The dullest winter day is never colourless within these woods.

Emerging from the Middle Ridge inclosure that we have been traversing, we cross the mineral railway by a bridge which spans a cutting deep and not unpicturesque. Then comes the brawling Blackpool Brook, and we are on the road near Brandrick's Green, a district somewhat marred by collieries and railway sidings. If we are returning to the Speech House we follow the road north, and reach our goal after a walk of some two miles by passing the New Fancy Colliery. Blakeney, about three and a half miles away, is in the opposite direction, and gives us an easy downhill walk, the road passing between the Blackpool Bridge and Danby Lodge.

CHAPTER VII

WITH BARK-STRIPPERS IN BEECHENHURST

WITH the closing days of April and the coming of a warm May sun the forest fellings will be practically at an end. It may not be altogether too late to try our mettle at the business end of a great double-handled saw; for there is now little difference between the price given for winter-felled oak and that cut on such a day as this, when sap is freely flowing. But bark-stripping is the special work of the moment, and it is the ripping of the strippers' tools that greets our ears within the woods to-day.

Down in New Beechenhurst, our old acquaintance who was felling near the Spruce Drive in the blustering days of March has a small team of men at work. A small one comparatively, for bark-strippers often work in gangs numbering from twenty to thirty pairs of hands, while those with whom we spend an hour or two to-day are only four. The old workman and his young mate of the Spruce Drive we already know; with them is a small nimble man who has put in the respectable term of thirty years' service in the forest; and a young recruit who tries his hand at stripping for the first time to-day. The party, even with directions given at the Speech House, might be difficult to find within the wide inclosure of New

Beechenhurst, were it not for the sure guidance of the muddy and deep-rutted track made by the teams that cart away the bark. Nearing their place of work we spy out other and more certain signs; trees standing gaunt and stripped, only the topmost twigs and a few slender branches of the 'crown' still clothed in bark.

Seated against the trunk of one such tree we find the party at their midday meal. Their tools are few and unelaborate; two or three short home-made ladders, standing on which the workers strip the portions of the trunks beyond their reach when on the ground, or gain a footing on the lower boughs; axes and choppers and the ever useful double-handled saw for use on trees such as must needs be felled before being stripped; and "strippers" of one or two different sizes.

The longer portion of each iron stripper is a tapering hollow, fitted to a handle made of wood. The narrower end is furnished with a sharp-edged circle of steel about the size of half-a-crown, flat on the one side, convex on the other.

In woods where oaks are grown closely together, and so run up tall and comparatively branchless before the crown is reached, climbing irons are a necessity of the bark-stripper's work, unless the trees are felled before being stripped. Though rarely or never used in the Forest of Dean it is quite possible that their use may be general after the passing of a few score years, when the plantations, at present growing too thinly to meet the approval of the modern forester, shall have come into line with up-to-date ideas. But the old wood-cutter is careful to inform us that he can still climb

an oak and work among its upper boughs if need arise. He usually confines himself to stripping off the lower bark of standing trees, or works on such as have been felled.

A red patch, marked on trees at intervals in a straight line across this section of the wood, shows us the limits of this party's range. Bark-stripping, like tree-felling and other regular Forest work, is paid by piece—so much per ton for bark. Not that the bark is weighed as soon as taken from the tree; only after the expiration of a month or more, during which the bark, propped against rails in a long double row, and open to the action of the sun and wind, has lost no small a portion of its weight. The men, of course, get payment on account meanwhile.

The hooter at Trafalgar Colliery, unseen but not far off among the woods, booms out the meal-time's end, and the head stripper sets forthwith to work upon the lower section of a sturdy oak. Swinging the axe as far above his head as he can reach he cuts a circle of short alternate zigzag strokes all round the trunk, thus severing the bark from that above; "butting" he terms this preliminary of the work. A straight line is then chopped down the bark to where the trunk emerges from the ground. The axe is laid aside and the sharp pointed "stripper" takes its place.

Inserting it within the perpendicular cut, with the flat side of the edged circle laid against the wood, the convex side against the bark, the bark-stripper rips off the tree's protecting sheath with sharp quick strokes; working now up, now down, and with his shoulder pushing back the curling

strip of bark as he moves round the tree. In little more than a minute some six or eight feet of the trunk stand bare, the bark stripped off in one unbroken piece. The lower portion of the tree gleams bare and creamy white—a colour which will swiftly take a darker shade after a short exposure to the air and sun. The naked trunk is slippery with the fast-flowing sap, and smooth as glass.

This, as the old man points out, is easy work. The tree is forward for the time of year, the sap flows freely, and the bark "runs like a sally." Another oak not twenty yards away is showing less forward buds, and here the bark relinquishes its hold reluctantly. It is of first importance that the bark strip well and freely, for it is in the inmost portion that the chief store of tannin lies, and not a scrap of this rich tannin should remain upon the tree.

Such work is done, comparatively speaking, at one's ease, while standing firm and secure upon the ground. The two younger members of the gang, the old man's mate of timber-felling, and to-day's recruit, have climbed each into an oak-tree's lofty crown, and are now perched there like two crows among the boughs. Thus located you get a footing, more or less secure, with one foot on a branch; a resting-place for the other there may, or possibly there may not, be. You grip a branch or the trunk with one arm; the other hand wields the "stripper." The bark may "run" well, or, if the tree is backward, may cling tightly to the wood beneath. As work proceeds your hands and clothes are stained and soaked with sap flowing freely with the warm May sun. The muscles of arms, chest and legs

are strained and stretched; one moment you are reaching round the tree, another straining far to peel the bark from some outstretching bough. A slip or a false move and you are on the ground some forty feet below. But the old leader of the gang remarks with some contempt that he never fell from a tree in his life.

Most of the oaks in Beechenhurst, owing to sparse planting and the fashion of their growth, are furnished with boughs which come within a reasonable distance of the ground. Where there is a straight branchless run of five-and-twenty feet or more the tree must first be felled. One such now comes to hand; the lads are summoned from their lofty posts to share the labour of the saw.

Fired with the ambition to bring down a forest oak we join the elder of the two at the saw's business end—the end, that is, towards which the steel fangs point. For the novice it is an experience not soon to be forgotten.

You kneel as best you may upon the ground beside the tree, and are probably aware within a moment or two that you are upon damp leaves, or a particularly sharp-cornered splinter of oak, cut by the tree-feller when "spurring out." Two minutes' labour and your arm aches to distraction, while the blinding sweat pours down your brow. You would give the world to call a moment's halt; but that is not your business—pride and woodland etiquette alike forbid—and there is nothing for it but to toil on pantingly until the woodcutter shall give the signal for a brief half minute's rest. Reeling and dizzy you watch with half-seeing eyes the creeping progress of the long steel blade on your

side of the tree, as it passes first one small irregularity and then the next upon the bark.

But it is worth the toil and aching muscles when at last the sawing ceases and you are ordered to stand clear. So true has been the guidance of the cut to-day that, even without the introduction of a single wedge, the tree comes down in its appointed place. It is a full half minute before, as we look upwards to that crown whose opening buds will never spread their leaves, we see a movement well-nigh imperceptible but sure. Then, its equilibrium fairly lost, and gathering force, the tall stem crashes to the soil from which it sprung. There is a sense of triumph, but a guilty one at that; you have undone, with sound of laugh and banter, all the slow sure work of close upon a hundred years.

A tree thus felled is one on which to try your 'prentice hand at bark-stripping. Simple as the work may look, its seeming ease soon vanishes when once the "stripper" is within your grasp. The sap-covered and slimy wood immediately beneath the bark is smooth as glass; the sharpened circle slips about like an unsteady foot on ice. But with a little patience comes a measure of success. Pleasant it is to find a tree off which the bark slips well; to hear the tearing sound, to see the clean smooth wood below, and breathe the scent of the life-stirring sap. In less than half an hour two or three pairs of hands have skinned the mighty tree, which lies a prone gaunt skeleton amid the budding living beauty of the wood.

As a barked tree is of course doomed to fall when winter comes, it may seem strange to Forest visitors that the bark-strippers do not fell all

timber first and then remove the bark from the prone tree; but there is a good reason for stripping, whenever possible, the standing trees. Both felling and bark-stripping are undertaken by the men in blocks or sections of the woods. Our friend and his small gang to-day will be paid only for the bark they strip—not for the trees they fell. Unless, therefore, this same gang contract to fell this section of the woods some nine months hence, their felling labour will be thrown away, other men receiving the profit. Thus Forest bark-strippers climb every tree they can.

The afternoon wears on, and presently the friendly hooter serves as warning to the bark-strippers that the day's toil is done. The hours of work in these Crown woods are limited to eight or so a day. So much of the Forest labour being paid for by the piece, the reason for this may not at first appear. But the amount of employment available, especially at certain seasons, being limited, it is necessary thus to regulate the hours in order to ensure full work for all the permanent hands throughout the year.

On such a day as this we shall be wise to dine early in the old Court Room, and so have a calm after-dinner hour or more before the dark. At such an hour few better courses lie before us than down the Spruce Drive, and across the valley to the crest of the long ridge of Staple Edge beyond.

It is the hour of the birds' evening hymn, and the woods on either side the towering walls of spruce ring with the song of blackbird and of thrush. The rest is silence; forest work has ceased, and only a jay's screech or pheasant's lordly call

comes to our ears. Far from the world the Spruce Drive shuts us as within a tomb.

The world—a calm and peaceful evening world—comes into sight again when Staple Edge is climbed. Behind us lies the forest, still and sombre with the coming night. Southward, far off beyond the lower height of Blakeney Hill and the level fields of Awre, the Severn gleams; and, farther still, the sun's last rays light up the Cotswold Hills.

There is a small world nearer still. Staple Edge Lodge, perched on the summit of the hill's long crest, and with a wide unbroken view to east and west, is but a few steps on our left. A forest woodman is its occupant, and—off duty for the moment—is busy milking a choice Jersey cow. But he will have finished soon, and will not only point out to us the road to Blakeney Hill, but even come with us a mile.

The little lodge, one of the many additional ones erected in the early nineteenth century, is a breezy wind-swept place, but snug withal. Its date —1809—together with the acreage of the great hill, is carved upon a lintel in the front. Inside, a glass of prime cider, made in the sheltered orchards of distant Flaxley, is set before us ere we take the path.

The woodman leaves us at a jutting point upon the steep descent, whence Blakeney Hill and its lodge are both in sight. The hill, recently cleared, is set with clumps of larch; and the clusters of the tender green, scattered on the bare hillside or glowing from a darker undergrowth, look, as he well suggests, like a dismembered puzzle awaiting the completing hand. To gain the hill we cross

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROMAN ROAD

MORE than one route is offered from the Speech House as a means of reaching Upper Soudley and of examining from end to end one of the Forest's chief antiquities—the Roman road. We could indeed come at once upon the most interesting section of the road by following the Lydney highway some three miles or more, then turning off to Blackpool Bridge, only a hundred yards upon the left; but we prefer a gradual and a more deliberate approach, the interest of the quest increasing as we go. So we take Upper Soudley as our starting-point.

The village can be reached by crossing Staple Edge and bearing slightly to the left down the long slope upon the farther side; or we can take the Cinderford road as far as Ruspidge and thence follow the highway down the valley, or travel by the railway motor-car. But Staple Edge we have already crossed; Cinderford Valley we shall see again; and the motor service is not too frequent. Rather let us follow the Cinderford road as far as Foxes Bridge, a little more than half a mile from the hotel.

The bridge crosses no definite stream, but carries the road over a mere swamp, from which springs Blackpool Brook. Two or three hundred yards

beyond the bridge we cross a stile upon the right and enter Yewtreebrake. Thence, bearing slightly to the east of south, we take a lovely path which presently will lead us past the busy Lightmoor Colliery upon our left. Even should the most direct route to Soudley be missed we cannot go far wrong; delightful are the inclosures of both Yewtreebrake and Middleridge through which we pass, and it is only a question of the precise point at which we shall strike the road a little above Soudley.

Upper Soudley lies at the intersection of two valleys—one containing the road from Cinderford and Ruspidge to Blakeney, and the other, part of which will be our route to-day, crossing it almost at right angles. At the White Horse Inn—a pleasant little hostelry which can supply a lunch of bread and cheese and ale or a plain tea—we take the road upon the left which leads to Little Dean, and follow it for half a mile or more. By doing so we have turned our backs upon both Blackpool Bridge and the main portion of the Roman road; but a small remnant of the latter lies this way, and for other reasons it is worth our while to deviate for a time.

When the foot of the slight declivity is reached we are in Sutton Bottom, with plantations on each side. These form the Abbot's Wood, some six hundred odd acres granted in the year 1244 to Flaxley Abbey in exchange for the abbot's former right to fell two oaks weekly for the maintenance of his forges. The woods are once again Crown property.

It is a charming spot. An oak wood rises in a

gentle slope upon our left; while on the right the land drops from the road to a hollow in which lie two preserved trout-ponds fed by a rivulet from the hill across the road. Beyond the trout-ponds, and above the young plantations covering the lower ground, rises the higher birch-clothed ridge on the far side of which the famed Blaise Bailey lies.

Now let us turn and travel back to Soudley on this Roman way. For this, like many another forest highway, is an ancient Roman route, leading south-west from Gloucester and elsewhere. A glance at the ordnance map for the district will show us the notice, placed at not infrequent intervals, "traces of Roman paving." The wayfarer will look in vain for such to-day. A Roman road this lane undoubtedly is; but all signs of the former pavement and curbing have been long since swept away by modern highway improvements. This frequently repeated notice is a somewhat misleading error in the maps, and one which has not been corrected even in latest editions.

Nor must every road marked by the survey as Roman be accepted as such without caution. As Mr. Codrington has pointed out in his *Roman Roads in Britain*, the Romans were not the only men to make paved roads. At the close of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century roads were frequently constructed with a paved foundation by Telford and others to meet the requirements of stage-coach traffic. When the surface was neglected and allowed to wear away, such paved foundations became exposed to view, and thus gained credit for a Roman origin.

Presently, the oak wood left behind, the road

bends slightly to the right a little before we once more enter Upper Soudley by the inn. But here we notice that a green turf track leads straight before us. Forward on this for some few paces and we have a genuine Roman pavement underfoot.

Moss-covered and overgrown with turf the old stones are, but pavement made two thousand years ago is here and rings at times beneath our feet. In a few hundred yards it leads us into Soudley, striking the Cinderford road beside the school. Across the modern highway is the railway with its little "halt"; beyond it, for a time, the Roman road is lost.

Before we once more seek its traces across the road, let us turn aside for a few moments to the little green by the school. For here there is a small three-sided camp, its entrance opening towards the ancient road, its apex jutting forth above a long and lovely pool below the fish-ponds which we passed just now. Originally British though the camp may be, it was most probably appropriated by the Romans at some later date. From the summit of the little cliff which falls so steeply from the point above the pool the view of the Blaise Bailey and the Blakeney Valley on the right is very fine. Unhappily the lovely pool—almost a lake—is artificial, and is sometimes emptied to be cleansed of weeds.

From the inn garden we look down upon the houses in the hollow with its ford and bridge. Turning the corner of the garden wall we pass beneath the line and cross the bridge which spans the brook—Cinderford Brook above the village, changing its name to Soudley Brook below.

Straight before us and about two hundred yards away are two of the now familiar red-painted gates and stiles. We take neither of these, but, turning at once to the right after crossing the bridge, pass through a third gate. In a few minutes we have once more picked up our trail.

The forest track that we now follow up the slope is one much used for hauling timber, and the ruts are often nearly three feet deep. But years of heavy traffic have not yet swept away all traces of the ancient road. Rather, indeed, the groaning timber-waggons have revealed them to the eye; at the bottom of the wheel-ruts may in many places be seen the massive stones which formed the road's foundation.

Moveover, constant traces may be seen upon the surface still. Here and there are short stretches of the curbing, now on this side now on that. These bordering lines of curb have as a rule survived the pavement itself; the timber-carriage wheels and trampling teams have left them on one side, while breaking up the pavement and plunging it out of sight into their miry track. The way is bordered by turf and gorse, and careful search often reveals several feet of the curbing still intact and undisplaced, hidden away beneath the prickly screen.

The road leads up the valley at an easy slope. On the left are plantations of young larch ; to the right is oak, and later on cleared ground, backed by the woods of Staple Edge. It is not more than half a mile from the ford and bridge at the village to the summit of the rise, nearly four hundred feet above sea-level ; then the descent begins to

Blackpool Bridge some half mile farther on, where we shall find the Roman road intact as it was laid two thousand years ago.

Even as we loiter down the pleasant "slade" its traces are not far to seek. Keeping to the track of the timber-waggons we may lose it for a minute, for they have sometimes diverged for a few yards this way or that to find an easier route. But step aside through gorse and fern, and remnants of the road are there. Here it is a length of curbing—sometimes on both sides at once; again it is a few irregular square yards of pavement, the old stones broken and sunk, yet making shift to hold in place.

A tinkling rivulet joins us from among the larch plantations of Blakeney Hill Wood and Bradley Hill upon our left. Just after it has crossed the path a louder rush of water greets our ears, and bushes mark the windings of a larger stream—the Blackpool Brook which has its rise at Foxes Bridge. The timber track swerves to the left to cross a little one-arched bridge; to the right a rough barrier of rails protects the Roman road. Passing the fence we stand upon the road perfect and unbroken as it lay beneath the conqueror's traffic twenty centuries ago.

A strip of the pavement, perfect to all intents and purposes and rather more than fifty yards in length, sweeps in a sharp curve almost to the edge of the stream. To the left the foot and timber traffic of to-day passes across the little one-arched bridge, which is absolutely flat, the banks just at that point being several feet above the water. The pavement curves down to take the stream at a ford where, on

either side, the banks slope gently to the water's edge.

Hardly a stone of this strip of pavement is missing or even seriously displaced; some few have sunk, others project above the level of the road and are worn round with age, while all are intergrown with turf and weeds. From outside edge to outside edge of the curbing the width of the road is eight feet. The curbstones vary in length from ten to twenty inches. Those of the pavement itself also vary a good deal in size, but the greater number are oblongs with a length of some eight inches or more.

The pavement ceases abruptly some ten or twelve yards from the water's edge—a fact easily explained by the action of two thousand years of winter flood, as well as by the passage of heavy loads across the ford and the consequent displacement effected upon stones already loosened in their water-sodden bed. The same is the case upon the southern side; then the pavement starts again, continuing in an equally perfect state for close upon a hundred yards. It ceases just short of a bridge which, crossing the road, carries a mineral railway from Blakeney to various forest collieries.

The pavement on the southern side of the ford is in places slightly broader, here and there reaching to a width of eight feet six. In places too are very distinctly seen the massive stones placed as supports outside the curbs and sloping from them at an angle—their purpose to prevent displacement of the pavement in an outward direction by the wear and tear of traffic.

At the point where this southern stretch of

pavement rises from the brook and runs on level ground, is a happy survival on which we are free to speculate. From the eastern curb of the ford road runs a short length of eight or nine stones—all that remains of what was clearly the curbing of a branch road which, diverging from the road across the ford, led towards the bridge. These few stones branch off from the existing road precisely as railway rails fork at a junction.

Clearly this second road was made to cross the bridge—to cross *a* bridge, rather, for the present one is not above a century old. And, just as clearly, it was the ford road which was first made, the road across the bridge being an afterthought; for it is the remnant of the bridge road which is divergent from the line of march.

The brook is but a small one; at the ford, even in winter, you may step across it almost dryshod. Yet everything points to the fact that the Romans, having led the first road across the ford with the opinion that such would form a safe provision for their needs, found from subsequent experience that a bridge was necessary. Moreover, the southern approach to the bridge seems to have been raised and levelled by the making of a broad embankment; for it is at the bridge only that the southern bank is high above the marshy border of the brook. Curiously enough, the ordnance maps ignore altogether this interesting and perfect remnant of a Roman way; our attention is not even called to "traces" in the usual manner!

Here surely is a spot at which to loiter for a while and dream. There will be little traffic to disturb our peace, for passers-by upon the Speech

House and Blakeney road which lies beyond the railway bridge are few. Nor will too many passing trains remind us of the presence of the line itself.

Looking north across the Blackpool Brook, the timber-track by which we have descended to the bridge runs in a broad and shallow gutter between Staple Edge and Blakeney Hill. Both are comparatively bare, for the lower part of the former has been recently cleared of timber, while on our right little is seen besides plantations of young larch. But were the great hills clothed with oaks ten centuries old, the trees would be but children to the pavement at our feet. These silent stones which make no sound save when they ring beneath the footsteps of some passing traveller, have seen all come and go—all but old Mother Earth herself and the small stream that sings towards Severn shore. The few surviving ancient oaks the Forest holds are at the utmost but scarce half their age; the stones had been where now they lie for centuries before the grandfather of Newland Oak had sprouted from its acorn shell.

It is a place where minutes pass swiftly and the hours slip unheeded by. The colour of the Blackpool water makes it perhaps suspect; owing to the drainage pumped from coal-pits few Forest streams are to be lightly tasted save at some clearly uncontaminated source. But the dark water's rippling music is unspoiled; a blackbird sends its flute-like notes from the twin alders growing beside the little bridge; woodpeckers are calling from away on Staple Edge. But just across the Blakeney road the Roman way fares on upon its southern

course and we must follow it, though no such perfect portion waits our coming as we leave behind at Blackpool Bridge.

Crossing the high road we enter on a broad green "drive" between the well-grown oaks of Cockshutt Wood—well-grown at least to uninstructed eyes, but set too far apart to meet the views of modern foresters. After a few score yards upon the soft and yielding turf the now familiar paving once more greets our eyes. But only here and there a stone or stones, and often with long intervals between. Still, we shall track the road by these slight traces for some two miles yet.

Upon our right the hill slopes upwards, crossed every few hundred yards by forest paths. Just out of sight upon a thickly wooded crest above us we should find Danby Lodge. We meet a grimy collier here and there—a strange and startling figure in this woodland solitude; not an unwelcome one, however, for the Dean Forest miner has a civil tongue, and is ever ready with his information as to routes and distances.

This afternoon the Roman paving serves to lead us to our destination without help from other guide; ever it crops up fitfully among the turf. In one place a short line of the curbing is uplifted from the ground as though for exhibition to the passer-by; the grassy cart-way has divided here, and, hollowing out a sunken road on either side, has left this relic of the past elevated upon a wall-like bank of turf.

The oak woods end at the Yorkley and Blakeney road; crossing this we go straight forward between plantations of young trees. These passed and the

hamlet of Oldcroft reached, we cross the tiny common and descend the steep bank to where a sluggish little stream has formed a bog. A sharp climb leads us up a rough broad lane between fields, the Roman road still visible here and there with great distinctness. Finally, in a macadamized lane all traces of the paving cease, though we are still following the ancient way ; till, in something over two miles from Blackpool Bridge, it falls at an angle into the Yorkley and Lydney road—also a Roman way.

From Allaston Meend, where the two roads join, the road to Lydney a mile and half away is not beautiful. The way is grimed with marks of coal ; the cottages are bare and ugly, with the "Jubilee Villa" type too prominent for our peace. But, away to the right across the valley, the great woods are a joy indeed. And, as we presently reach the brow of the hill and begin to descend to Lydney, the Severn shines before us, and the graceful spire of Lydney church serves us for guide. So too does the trail of smoke from the tin-works by the Junction station ; but we make believe to close our eyes to that. From Lydney Town station we can reach the Speech House ; for Newnham or Gloucester we must travel a mile farther to the Junction close by Severn shore.

CHAPTER IX

SPEECH HOUSE TO SYMONDS YAT

MAY-DAY! All seasons have their special beauty in the woods; spring's early dawn, or autumn with its glorious colouring of coming death. Yet this fair cloudless morning of the first of May, after the mingled rain and sun of April's final week, is hard to beat. So we will turn our faces towards old Jack o' the Yat, the sturdiest and most ancient oak within the Forest's present bounds; then on to the High Beeches and across the Forest's edge to Symonds Yat.

We cross the stile and enter on the Sundial Drive exactly opposite the hotel's north entrance door; pause, if we choose, to read the date and acreage of the New Beechenhurst inclosure marked on the iron standard just within the fence, and note the group of yews which was the Forest's contribution to commemorate King Edward's coronation eight years since; and then pursue our way down this enchanting drive.

The cuckoo, his coy voice first heard some ten days back, is calling freely now; but the most noticeable bird this morning is the gayly-feathered jay. Seen first against the light he might be taken for a magpie, with black tail and wings white-barred. Magpies too may be seen at intervals, skimming, on mischief bent, across the drive. But

jays are here in numbers far too numerous to be confused with mischief-making Mag. Silent at first, flitting in pairs across the drive, it is not long before their speech bewrayeth them ; that harsh and rasping scream gives us the clue. And presently one perches boldly on the branch of an outspreading drive-side oak, and then his cinnamon body and the blue-checked bar upon the wing is seen. Undoubtedly the jay is in the foreground of the scene to-day. Far off from the dim distance comes the cuckoo's call ; while through the woodlands flits the woodpecker, occasionally seen, his mellow laughing cry more often heard.

The dainty bunches of the needles of the larch are infinitely tender in their green. Beech undergrowth is showing a similar yet distinctive hue. Upon the small dark-foliaged spruce beside the edges of the drive the buds are bright. Viewed as a distant mass the woods of oak are bare and brown. Seen closely and in sheltered spots each bud is hastening to unfold. To eye and ear alike it is a magic morning, is this first of May.

At the bottom of the drive we cross the Cinderford and Lydney line. Beyond there is a brook down in the hollow, and our way is by a disused tramway of which only the stone bedding for the rails remains. The Speculation Colliery is on our right, surely the least obtrusive and most inoffensive of its kind. No coal is raised from it just now, but the old disused workings are connected with those of its neighbour, the Trafalgar, not far off ; and it is in the Trafalgar's interest that the Speculation pump is still at work. No sound comes from the

buildings but the pumping-engine's long-drawn sigh ; a sound that carries far, but might be that of wind among the trees, or of some forest giant breathing deeply in his sleep.

Sheep too are always here beside the track ; and lambs to-day, whose snowy fleeces have not yet acquired the prevailing Forest tone of grey. For grey must be admitted as the general colour of Dean Forest sheep ; the lean and thin-flanked creatures roam among the cinderheaps and thus acquire a pale ashen hue. But dubious colour does not mar the music of their bells.

Hawthorns are in full leaf beside the path, and here and there within the woods a cherry gives a patch of snow. At intervals among the trees there stands some disused pit-shaft, walled for safety with a squat round tower of grey stone.

Within a mile we strike the new Crown road already spoken of, which runs from Lydney through Parkend to Speech House station and beyond ; and which, if followed some few hundred yards uphill, would lead us to the road from Monmouth and Coleford on the west, eastward to Micheldean. Crossing—not following it—we take a wicket gate a few yards up upon the farther side, to find ourselves in Sallow Vallets Inclosure and close to our first halting-place to-day. When the summit of the short steep climb is reached the pleasant little Sallow Vallets Lodge is seen upon the right.

Jack o' the Yat, the honoured ancient patriarch of the Forest, stands on the road just by the lodge. But we will turn aside for a few hundred yards to view a less ancestral yet stately tree. Following the hedge of the lodge garden to its south-west

corner, we turn at right angles to the left and walk for some three hundred yards or more down a broad drive. There is a noticeable tree upon the left as we proceed ; but farther on upon the right, standing aloof in dignity in the middle of a space apparently cleared for it, is Crad Oak.

Five feet above the ground it is fifteen feet and a half in girth—by no means a large tree compared with some we have already seen. But it is the even spreading of its ample crown which justifies a visit to the oak. It is a somewhat tantalizing tree for the photographer, at least when once the earliest hours of a summer morning are gone by, the freest and best standing-point from which to take it lying to the north-east. But the tree's stately stem and spreading crown are worth some little trouble to secure.

Stag-headed as it is, old Jack o' the Yat, which we shall find upon the roadside turf close to the lodge, is still a stately tree, measuring some two-and-twenty feet about the trunk. Growing close beside it is a second trunk only a little less in size. Whether both stems have sprung in some far distant century from the self-same stole, or whether each bole grew from a separate acorn is a point which has been argued ; but probably the latter is the case. Nevertheless, the great root-arms of the trees have long since grown together on their adjacent sides, while each great trunk leans slightly from its neighbour as though in search of freer space for air and growth.

A line of telegraph wires goes far to spoil the old tree from the photographic point of view, for, no respecter of antiquity, a post stands at its very

side. A few yards farther up the hill appears another venerable tree.

At the top of the rise the road turning down at a sharp angle to the right would lead to Lydbrook and Ross. Here, on the right, is Eastbach Meend —or common—and a fine group of beeches, less towering in height but not much less in girth than the High Beeches whither we are bound. Following the road we are upon the Forest's modern edge, and, when the plantations on our right allow, the eye has a free range towards Herefordshire and Wales.

Jack o' the Yat left some half mile behind, a specimen of forest coal-mining is offered to us in its simplest form. Here is no towering chimney-shaft, no landscape-marring rubbish-tip, no swiftly turning pullies, no pit-frame. Close to the road a single stationary engine puffs forth white steam beneath the shadow of a beech. A wooden shed or two, a line of tramway rails, and that is all.

The tram-rails disappear behind the engine, and, when some fifty yards within the wood, dive into darkness by a narrow opening in the ground. It is a "drift." Even as we watch, three tiny trams emerge, drawn into daylight by the engine's wire rope. Among the turf and budding trees they make their way up to the top of a small staging built by the roadside. You, were you a forest-dweller, could back your modest pony-cart against the stage and take your load; this evening's fire upon the hearth would be of fuel which, when the morning dawned, was lying fast bedded in the spot where it had lain for untold years.

A little farther is the scattered hamlet of Edge

End where the road forks. Were we not bound for the High Beeches the branch upon the right—the Monmouth road—would be the one to take; but as it is we keep the Coleford road upon the left for some three hundred yards till the great trees come into view; one within the inclosure railings on the left, the others on the broad and open strip of sward beside the road.

There are stately beeches clustered about Danby Lodge, and others on the slopes of the Blaise Bailey; none perhaps which rival these. Alas, that they are falling into evil case. One has been broken off by wind, and only a few yards of jagged trunk remain. Another, at the time of our last visit, had lost a giant limb and looked a semi-ruin. The four that still remain are splendid trees, especially in height. All seasons of the year alike, bare tops or leafy crowns tower high up above surrounding growth and can be seen from far.

There is no need to return to where the two roads forked. A few yards beyond the trees we turn into the open wood of Coleford Meend beside some cinderheaps upon the right; then cross a stile in a stone wall and follow the main path through the encircled wood. This brings us once again, but only for a moment, to the Monmouth road; we cross the road and follow the common into that scattered and unlovely hamlet, Berry Hill. The paths here are many and somewhat confusing; we must avoid descending to the hollow on the right, and make for higher ground upon the left. Scattered and whitewashed cottages compose the place; and there is this redeeming feature—that the air we breathe in passing down

the straggling street blows pure and unimpeded from the clearly seen but distant hills of Central Wales. At the far end of Berry Hill we come to the rather pleasanter surroundings of the little church—the second of those erected in the early years of the last century.

A church built ninety-five years since scarcely attracts the antiquarian ; but Christ Church is yet not unbeautiful. Its tower, pinnacled and embattled, and rising from amid surrounding trees, presents an air of greater age than it can really boast. Inside there is a low-browed gallery. The western portion of the nave is seated with pews far straighter in the back than any it has been our lot to occupy elsewhere ; at the same time they are so slight and spider-like in construction that we should fear to form one of a crowded congregation or to share some stout churchwarden's seat !

We often chance to pass through Christ Church early in the afternoon, when pupils at the village school enjoy an interval of play. Colliery village as it is, modern and not always lovely though the most part of its dwellings are, we know no better setting for a swarm of laughing children than the uninclosed tree-shaded space beside the church, few prettier sights than the long ranks drawn up in line to drill.

The road for Symonds Yat leaves the post office on the right, and the west wind blows freely past us as we take this high-lying route. Eastward beyond the village and the fields we see the Forest's western edge, a dark and undulating line of trees. Immediately upon our left there lie the great High-meadow Woods, formerly a portion of the Forest

and once again Crown property since 1817. To enter them would be to descend; for from the road they slope directly to the Wye. These lovely, and, to the forester, most interesting woods will claim a visit on no distant day. This afternoon we keep the road upon the ridge, content to let our eyes range over the dense mass of tree-tops to the hills beyond the river, and onwards to the farther heights of Monmouthshire and Central Wales.

For some two miles Highmeadow Woods are on our left, now falling back a little, and again closely bordering the road. The way undulates slightly, but a general height of full four hundred feet above sea-level is maintained. Did we need to cycle or drive to Symonds Yat station there is presently a new and very welcome road of Crown construction on the left, which leads down through the woods and up beside the river and the railway to the station and the Royal Hotel. But the famous Yat rock with its "double view" is our last goal, and so we keep the ridge. When presently a Crown inclosure appears upon the *right* and the road begins visibly to descend, we take a gate upon the right, and in a few minutes reach the flagstaff marking the summit of the towering rock.

Personally we own to having doubts as to the intrinsic beauty of the "double views" so frequent on the lower reaches of the Wye, that of the Yat being one of the best known. It is very fine, no doubt, and calculated to tickle the fancy, to stand, as now upon this May-Day afternoon, and without moving half a dozen steps, look down on one side upon Symonds Yat village, with its river-side

station and its island in mid-stream ; then with a mere turn of the head, to scan a reach of water, . . . exactly parallel with and only a few hundred yards away from that just viewed, yet between two or three miles farther up the stream. Wonderful; but, to our poor mind, somewhat spectacular and forced. However, as the late George Robins said of the house, "for any gentleman who likes that sort of thing, it is exactly the sort of thing he will like."

The road we have been following for some two miles lies on one edge of the high-lying triangular peninsular between two converging reaches of the Wye. This high-lying ridge ends quite abruptly where we stand this afternoon. The rocky elbow plunges downwards some three hundred feet or more, to where the flat alluvial fields and meadows taper on between the river boundaries for another mile. This level plain between the reaches of the river shut in by hills on either bank is somewhat featureless till the eye passes onwards to far distant hills.

Matchless in beauty is the range of shade and colour in the woods which clothe the slopes upon the crest of which we stand, and those across the Wye. The budding beeches must perhaps bear the palm for palest and most tender green. Larches, so pale when seen alone to-day, have by the side of beech a darker and maturer hue. Dark are the scattered spruces, dark as black night the sombre yews. Wild cherries dot the hill-sides with a mass of snowy foam.

To reach this famous and frequented view-point we have crossed—unseen of course upon the road, still faintly discernible within the woods—a triple



VIEW FROM THE YAT ROCK.

line of ancient earthworks lying a little to the south. They are almost certainly of British construction, and were probably raised as a rampart against Saxon aggressors; for they lie facing England, and not the dangerous land of Wales across the Wye.

Below the crest, above the reach of river stretching upstream on our right, stand Coldwell Rocks—long-ranked grey giant pinnacles of stone. They are best viewed either from a boat upon the river or from the farther bank. A pleasant walk to English Bicknor follows the cliff-crest above the rocks. To-day, urged by a rigid time-table and need of tea, we take the rough and downhill road again; a steeper path upon the left will bring us to the station and hotel. A horse once ridden down the path had an alarming fall; a cycle can be wheeled with reasonable care.

CHAPTER X

A WALK WITH A WOODMAN

THREE of the older forest lodges we have seen—those of Worcester, Herbert and Danby—each have a keeper for their occupant. Of the remainder all but a few are inhabited by "woodmen."

The Forest labour, felling and barkstripping, planting and cleaning, is done by "workmen," such as our stalwart friend of the Spruce Drive and Beechenhurst. Set in a measure of authority over these workmen are the woodmen, to each of whom there is allotted a particular "beat," for the well-being and general maintenance of which he is responsible. Above the woodmen are the three keepers.

These Forest woodmen are, without exception to our knowledge, intelligent and most agreeable men; the fault lies with the visitor if he should meet, chat with, and part from one, yet add no fact of interest to his store. A walk with such a man, especially if he has held his post for many years, and perhaps changed more than once from lodge to lodge, is perhaps as pleasant a way of spending a few hours as can well be planned.

So on this cloudless morning of July we loiter on the turf before the Speech House door awaiting the arrival of our friend from Staple Edge. To



LOADING TIMBER.

follow him upon his round of daily supervision would be of course to keep ourselves almost entirely within the limits of his special beat. He, thinking that we may prefer a wider range, has applied for a "day off," and presently appears from the direction of the Spruce Drive with a certain air of leisure in his gait. We choosing to resign all choice of route to one who knows the woods so well, he soon decides upon a ramble through New Beechenhurst to Crabtreehill, for an inspection of the Crabtreehill Lodge garden and a gossip with his fellow woodman should he chance to be at home. Later we plan to cross the Cinderford and Soudley road to Abbot's Wood; then down to Sutton Ponds and Upper Soudley, and so home by Staple Edge.

At once we enter on the Sundial Drive and presently turn up another on the right. The path, although knee-deep with grasses in an infinite variety of bloom, we soon find to be roughly laid with stones; a work the Crown is undertaking to make easier the hauling of the timber from this portion of the woods. And as we ramble side by side and leisurely, the woodman seldom fails to give a lucid answer to the many questions asked.

Our thoughts have turned to-day to Forest natural history, and it is in this direction that the questions chiefly tend. Adders? Well, some there are undoubtedly, but they are far from plentiful—a scantiness in which tourists perhaps will find relief. It is some time since the woodman saw and killed one himself. He thinks that the gradual planting up of bare spaces tends to their elimination from the woods; increase of shade is little to the adder's taste.

A snake we speak of having seen a few days back in Russell's Wood the woodman has no hesitation in announcing as a harmless grass-snake—ring-snake the more correct and scientific term. Size, at a casual glance, is the sure guide; the snake we saw was nearly three feet long, whereas an adder rarely reaches two. The shape of the latter end of a ring-snake's body, often more easily seen than is its neck-ring or the adder's V-marked head, is another clue. The ring-snake tapers gradually to the extreme point of its tail; the thickness of an adder does not vary much until the short and pointed tail is reached.

The visitor to the Forest of Dean cannot fail to be struck by the almost complete absence of the rabbit from the woods. He may walk through them, not for days only, but for weeks, without seeing one; and when present, rabbits come not in battalions, but as single spies. The presence of a large mining population is, as may be readily supposed, a great check upon the flourishing of ground game; it is only now and then, and generally in certain spots, that rabbits call for the attention of the woodman and his gun. Hares, on the other hand, are fairly numerous; we see the traces of them in the Drive to-day, and every now and then a systematic "shoot" is organized, when eight or perhaps a dozen guns turn out to "drive" the hares. Foxes are here too; but the badger is almost unknown, except indeed among the cliffs and rocky slopes of Highmeadow.

In the matter of birds the balance of nature is not permitted by the forester to hold its course entirely unchecked. Both hawks and owls are

well protected by the strictest orders, for the birds prey upon the mice. The plague of these small foes of forestry, on which an opening chapter commented, has been repeated later on a smaller scale. Our guide can tell of sapling oaks, the stems of which, an inch and more in thickness, have been gnawed clean through. Weasels and stoats, like hawks and owls, and for like reasons, are allowed to breed and multiply. But jays and magpies, on the contrary, are shot, as otherwise their unchecked numbers would injuriously reduce small insect-eating birds. Yet both are far from rare, as we can see and hear to-day. We flush young pheasants too, and hear at times the cock-bird's call; for the pheasant is at home within these woods, though not preserved.

A walk of perhaps a mile and half through Beechenhurst has brought us to the little lodge of Crabtreehill. The woodman proves to be from home; but his wife, after her quiet welcome, turns us loose in what is perhaps the fairest little garden on the Crown estate. Whether the kitchen garden or the little lawn before the house be more attractive it is difficult to say. Gooseberries the size of plums, black currants large as cherries, load the trees; and every vegetable bed is bordered by a line of standard roses, with their crowns of blossom ranging through every shade from purest paper white to deepest red. Ferns—hartstongue, oak, beech and many more—make patches of the coolest softest green in every shady nook; while round the little lawn gnarled logs of wood of twisted and fantastic shapes are placed as seats—the gathering of the woodman in his daily walks for many a year.

Foxes Bridge Colliery is close at hand; then, skirting a mineral line, we cross the Cinderford to Speech House road at Cinderford Bridge, and enter on an eastern spur of Staple Edge which bears a mingled growth of oak and beech, with chestnut and Scotch fir. Presently the keen eyes of the woodman bring us to a sudden halt, and he points out upon the cinder-path the sinuous traces of a ring-snake on his way to drink. There is a small stream of water in the hollow on our right, with whispering white poplars on its banks. The woodman thinks these trees might with advantage be more freely grown beside the forest water-courses, as by Blackpool Brook and other streams; for there are purposes for which their wood is excellent. It makes good blocks for brakes of railway trucks; its temporary replacement by steel has been found unsuccessful, and poplar blocks are once more coming into use.

When within a few hundred yards of the great Lightmoor Colliery upon our right we cross the Cinderford to Blakeney road and enter Abbot's Wood. So far we have but seen this wood from Sutton Bottom on the day we tracked the Roman road.

There are some "scowle-holes" here—the ancient workings dug in years long past for iron ore. Some are mere shallow pits of conical or basin shape; others extend far down into deep workings long disused. But, later on, at Clearwell, Bream and Coleford, we shall have an opportunity of visiting far more impressive scowles than these, and so to-day we pass them with no more than a mere glance. Crossing the ridge of hill



WOODCUTTERS, NEAR HERBERT LODGE.

and now descending the steep slope towards Sutton Bottom with its ponds we are among fine beech. Two or three trees are a good object-lesson of the havoc wrought by rabbits in the woods; the woodman points out several where the bark has, during hard winters in years past, been gnawed through to the depth of a full inch, the damage reaching to a height of two feet from the ground. Clearly Brer Rabbit fairly earns his banishment from the great woods.

But with another mission of extermination we are less in sympathy. We find ourselves in sight of Sutton fish-ponds now, the surface of the water broken in a score of places by the leaping trout. Some years ago these ponds attracted herons to the neighbourhood; doubtless to the joy of every lover of wild nature in the district, but much to the dismay of the enthusiastic angler who had leased the ponds. He made prompt complaints to head-quarters, and, acting on peremptory instructions thence, our guide of to-day commenced the work of extermination. All the more murderous it seems to us because the herons, finding the district to their taste, with such an ample food supply at hand, had set about the building of a heronry in some tall spruce still towering above the beech. Some twenty of the noble birds were shot, their nests and young destroyed.

Here again we are "up against" the fact which, however difficult, is ever necessary to be borne in mind—that Dean Forest is no mere pleasure-garden for the joy of happy idlers like ourselves, but a commercial undertaking which must needs be made to pay.

Strolling beside the ponds we understand the advent of the herons and the fishery lessee's dismay. The water swarms with lusty trout; the fish, their leaping ended at our close approach, dart to and fro below the surface in shoals of twenty at a time. A beech beside the road gives us a welcome shade in which to lunch, and then we turn towards Upper Soudley and from there once more to Staple Edge. Our guide, just before entering Soudley, points to an "ornamental patch" beside the road—an acre each of Douglas, spruce, Scotch fir, and other trees.

Has any reader cause to rue the once much-talked-of Chastian Syndicate, formed to discover English gold? We are within hail of one at least of the imagined seams; digging was for some time carried on within our woodman's "beat" on Staple Edge—much to his wonder and amusement, his local knowledge not disposing him to sink his savings in the enterprise. But he understands that "many ladies in London put a heap of money into it"—a statement doubtless true.

Cleaning is the chief summer work throughout the woods, and, unlike the felling of timber and the stripping of the bark, is paid for by a fixed and certain daily wage. The woodman has a gang of men at work to-day on the south slope of Staple Edge, for whom he is responsible. Indeed, to-day and every day throughout the year each woodman has in charge the general maintenance of his "beat."

He is of course upon his guard against encroachments on the woods. These nowadays are rare; they are most likely to occur when fresh in-

closures have been made, the forest-dwellers, as in days gone by, resenting more or less all innovations of this kind. The Crown is still far from having inclosed its full legal limit of eleven thousand acres, and from time to time fresh portions of the woods are fenced. A new inclosure is always watched by the officials with some anxiety for a time, for fence-destroying is still not quite unknown. The limit of eleven thousand acres reached, areas inclosed will be once more thrown open in compensation for whatever land is taken in.

The woodmen keep an eye, moreover, on the sheep at pasture in the open woods, arresting any that from time to time are found—of course quite unaccountably !—on the wrong side of an inclosure fence.

When timber-felling is the work in hand the woodman is again responsible to see that all goes well ; that fences, if broken by a falling tree, are put in order by the felling gang ; that careless damage be not done to standing trees. On Staple Edge to-day it is the gang of cleaners that we stroll to overlook.

Hot is the cleaner's work, for the great hill lies towards the sun, and the hot rays of a record summer make on this July afternoon a veritable furnace of the earth. This portion of the hill has recently been cleared of much of its large timber and replanted, and the young growth—mixed oak and chestnut, beech and fir—varies from good-sized bushes to young plants scarce visible among the fern and grass. It is to clear these latter from too close surrounding growth that cleaners are at work, stooping low down with billhooks in their hands.

The summer growth of fern and grass may perhaps protect and shade the tiny trees ; but winter snow would have disastrous results, weighing the fern-fronds and tall grass tussocks down upon the slender stem and breaking it. So, while the hot sun beats fiercely down on head and neck, the cleaner plies his hook. Away on Blakeney Hill, across the hollow in which runs the Roman road, the woodman points out our old friend of the Spruce Drive.

On all uncultivated Forest ground birch springs indigenous—even on ancient cinder-heaps and rubbish-tips. Though never planted here the tree yet has its value. It is good material for the beds of carts used for such work as stone-hauling ; surpassing deal for wear and tear, nor splitting with the sudden crash upon it of a ton of stone.

And so once more we climb the mighty hill. Again there is a cool, sweet glass of cider at the lodge ; and then the evening walk between the long-drawn ranks of the Spruce Drive, breathing the aromatic needle-scented air.



A TIMBER TROLLEY.

CHAPTER XI

RUARDEAN HILL

LOFTY altitudes not seldom have their drawbacks; and it must be confessed that the immediate surroundings of the flagstaff marking the summit of Ruardean Hill as the highest point in the Forest—932 feet above the sea—are not of the most attractive kind. For rough waste land, vast cinder-heaps, and cottages bare and far from picturesque lie all around. But there, behind them, lies the forest cool and green; westward, far off, there is a tumbled mass of distant peaks. The view from the great hill is one which cries aloud against neglect.

The most direct route from the Speech House is to take the train to Drybrook Road station, whence a walk of half an hour through the woods and up past Herbert Lodge would bring us to the summit of the hill. But it is worth while to take a more circuitous route and make Upper Lydbrook our starting-point, a course which will exhibit splendid scenery both from rail and road.

Certainly the railway journey is leisurely in the extreme. From Speech House Road station we pass through Drybrook Road and reach Cinderford. Thence, after several bustling manœuvres on the part of the little engine, we travel back to Drybrook Road and past Trafalgar Colliery. At Serridge Junction the train, hitherto running south-

west, now leaves the Speech House line and bends sharply round by Speculation Colliery, heading due north towards Upper and Lower Lydbrook, thence to reach Lydbrook Junction far down beside the Wye. At first the line keeps on high ground and gives us glorious views across the stretch of forest on our left. A tunnel is traversed and the Lydbrook valley entered.

From the station at Upper Lydbrook the most direct route to the top of Ruardean Hill is to climb the steep slope to the east of the line. To reach the flagstaff will for most people be at least an hour's walk. But so innumerable and confusing are the paths that it is impossible to give exact directions, and it is a fair assumption that the traveller will swiftly lose his way. Bearing unduly north he will probably find himself at Readings, Horse Lea or Jay's Green. Southward lies Astonbridge Hill Inclosure, beautiful but riddled with bewildering paths. The correct route lies past the hamlet of The Pluds ; and one should ask the way again and yet again. Let us remember that it is not—at first—Ruardean church and village proper that we seek ; these lie considerably below the summit of the hill. The goal is Ruardean Woodside with its large and conspicuous block of schools perched on the summit of a thickly wooded ridge.

Some may prefer a longer, more varied and less steep ascent, and such, we think, will have the better part. Passing the modern church which stands beside the line we descend from Upper Lydbrook station to the valley with its many smoky works. Then, following the road upwards for a mile and half or more, skirting the active Waterloo



RUARDEAN.

Colliery where the highway passes beneath the lofty "creeper" with its endless trams descending empty and ascending full, we shall presently strike, at a place called Mirystock, the Micheldean road leading east. This road is to be followed on to Herbert Lodge.

At Mirystock we have Barnedge Hill upon our left, giving fine forest views all round. The Micheldean road once entered we have on our left the wide range of Astonbridge Hill Inclosure, in which lofty ridge and valley bottom alternate. On the right the inclosed woods have various names: Little God Meadow is succeeded by Great God Meadow, and that in its turn by the Delves Inclosures, numbers 1 and 2. The hamlet of Brierley will be seen upon the left—that is, if we have kept the road and have not rather left it for the cool and pleasant drive which threads the inclosures on our right.

Few fern-fronds now are left unopened, and the foxgloves raise their crimson pyramids on every side. An almost cloudless May and early June have brought forth other and less pleasant features of a forest walk; the flies buzz ceaselessly about our heads, and almost force us to an emulation of that editor whose habit was, "Only one pipe a day —but then I never let it out." But let us heed the safe disposal of our matches and tobacco ash; dead leaves and last year's fern fronds are like tinder underfoot.

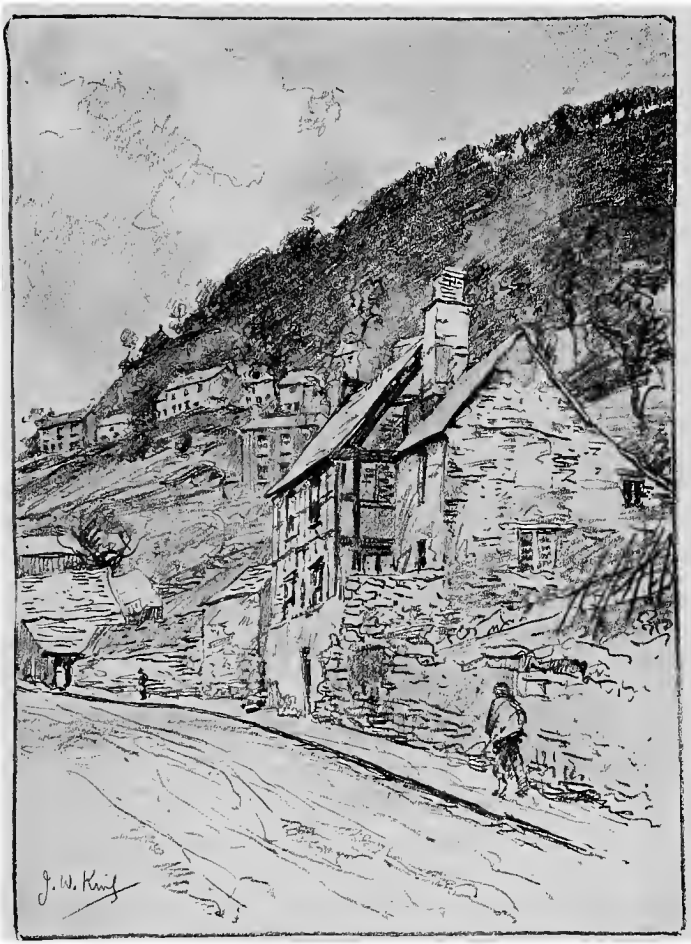
The road is undulating here and there, but rises in the main; and presently, when Herbert Lodge is seen upon the left, we are just on six hundred feet above the sea. The lodge, with its small

meadows bordering the road, its nursery of young trees behind, is somewhat more imposing and at the same time perhaps less picturesque, than other of the seventeenth century forest homes. But, like nearly all the lodges, it commands a noble and extensive woodland view.

So far we have been travelling north-east; but now we turn up by the lodge, heading north-west, Astonbridge Hill Inclosure on our left, Ruardean Hill Plantation on the right. The route to follow is quite plain—a disused tramway track which leads straight as an arrow through the woods and debouches at the melancholy cinder-heaps of East Slade Colliery, close to the school at Ruardean Woodside. Thence it is little more than five minutes' walk, at first across the common to the right, then up the new and well-made road to where the flagstaff on the left points out our goal.

We warned the tourist not to look for beauty in the immediate foreground of the view. True the dark woods are close behind us, with Ruardean Hill Lodge lying just within their shade. Upon the three remaining sides the open hill is bleak and bare, with unattractive cottages and little fields. But, even on the hottest summer day, the breeze blows freshly to us from the distant hills; and it is towards those distant hills we turn our gaze.

Useless to name them perhaps, with any hope of the unguided traveller being able to identify each peak and ridge. But to the north-east bare May Hill, its summit crowned by a large clump of firs, is easily distinguished; and the more distant Malvern range, jagged and blue, once known is always recognized. Ross on the north is hidden by The



UPPER LYDBROOK.

Chase and Penyard Hills. So the eye travels westward, and we lose ourselves among the tumbled masses marking the borderland of South and Central Wales.

Beautiful as are those distant hills to rest the eye upon, their names are hardly less attractive to the ear. Garway, the Graig ; these on this side of Abergavenny—eliminate the "av" as you repeat the name, for thus it will sound better, and moreover be in keeping with the local use and wont. About it and beyond are piled the Blorenge, the Great Skerrid and the Sugarloaf. Far off against the sky the triple line of the Black Mountains, with their sudden and precipitous dip towards Hay, their peak of Pen-y-Cader-Fawr—no petty border hill, but a true mountain not far off three thousand feet in height. Beyond, the Brecknock Beacons and the heights of Radnorshire.

Given a fresh wind from the west and recent rain you will linger many a minute with your eyes upon the distant scene. The bare uncouthness of this Gloucestershire hill upon whose top we stand is all forgotten ; it lies beneath our feet, a standing-point from which to view the land of hill and stream. So strong is the enchantment that we can hardly tear our gaze from it to note the noble mass of forest lying south-west and south. Yet it will call for more than a mere glance, that sweep of greenery over the length and breadth of which we search the soaring tops of the High Beeches some five miles away.

The road winds on, leaving the summit and the flagstaff on the left, the wood upon the right, and presently descends the hill upon its eastern slope.

Ruardean church and the main portion of the village still lie hidden from our view upon the north ; and leaving the road at right angles we follow a steep path, cross a field, and turning to the left when a road is reached follow it as far as the church ; or perhaps to one of the small village inns close by, according as bodily or mental appetite may have the upper hand. The air of Ruardean Hill is provocative of hunger.

The first point which strikes one on approaching the twelfth century church of Ruardean—1111 is supposed to be the date—is the fine tower, its size decreasing in four stages upwards, its turret with the belfry stair, its pinnacles and crockets, and its lofty spire forming a landmark to the valley far below. Next comes the low and ancient porch leaning far out of plumb. Above the entrance to the porch itself, below a dripstone, is a sculptured female face ; that of the Virgin Mary according to some, while others hold it for the representation of a legendary saint. More magnificent, but equally surrounded by controversy, is the splendid tympanum above the church's entrance door. Whether the well-preserved figures of this fine piece of Norman work represent—as would at first appear most probable—St. George and the Dragon ; or, as some insist, St. Michael vanquishing the fiend, we will not undertake to say. Both theories have the support of experts. In either case, this Norman tympanum of Ruardean is one not easily matched.

Inside there are Early English arches, a west window with fine tracery, a good piscina, and—specially interesting if only from its unusual date—



THE "CREEPER," WATERLOO COLLIERY.

a quaintly shaped and wholly unornamented font dated 1657. There is also the oft-told tale of an underground passage leading from the church to the earthwork in the field lying a few hundred yards to the north ; an earthwork which was probably thrown up in the time of the Civil War to serve as a look-out fort towards Herefordshire.

Our road runs through the village past the church and presently bends sharply to the right. From here until we gain the level ground beside the Wye is a delightful walk of perhaps a mile and half, with a deep and fertile valley on our right and views which change at every step. Presently, at a disused and ruinous turnpike house, the road runs through a cutting in the rock, and a few hundred yards below joins the Ross and Lydbrook highway. The creeper-covered, gabled and bargeboarded house high up upon the bank just where the two roads join is the vicarage to the Herefordshire church of Bishopswood which lies beyond the park and mansion to our right. For we are close to the county boundary, which here, crossing the park and road, runs down the middle of the Wye for some few miles.

Our route is round the corner to the left ; but some five minutes' walk towards Ross will not be time or labour thrown away. For, from a bend not more than a few hundred yards up-stream, we get a fine view down the reach of river as it ripples over shallows, where, on this sultry afternoon, the cattle stand in groups beneath the shadow of the stream-side elms.

Returning to the junction of the roads, a walk of little more than half a mile will bring us to the

Courtfield Arms hotel, a pleasant place at which to halt for tea. Across the river, only to be reached from Gloucestershire by ferry or by ford, lies the house and park of Courtfield, seat of the well-known Roman Catholic family of Vaughan. It was perhaps to this pleasant house's predecessor that Henry V was, as an infant, sent from Monmouth to be nursed.

This is a favourite point for artist and photographer upon the lower waters of the Wye ; and well the spot deserves its fame. The river, half in shadow of the tall elms on either bank, half sparkling on the sunlit shallows of its bed, makes a bold curve beneath the hills a short half-mile up stream. Across the ford, a team of horses, just released from timber-hauling in the park, comes slowly and leisurely, the great limbs dashing showers of silver spray at every step.

The hotel stands in Lower Lydbrook, just at the stream-side entrance of that valley from the head of which we made our start to-day. A lofty viaduct here carries the little forest railway towards its junction with the Wye Valley line farther on. But the dense cloud of smoke which hovers thickly between the lofty hills is not to be accounted for by the occasional trains, but rather by the busy chemical and tinplate works. It is their presence which has indeed caused us to avoid the descent of this otherwise delightful vale. The church of Lower Lydbrook, like that of the Upper village which we have already seen, is modern—mid-nineteenth-century.

Tradition has it that John Kemble's father once inhabited a house by the brook-side. The stream



THE "CREEPER," WATERLOO COLLIERY.

to-day conveys to us something less pleasing than this memory ; it pours into the Wye a ruddy and polluted flood, the product of the tin-works on its bank.

The mile which still lies between us and Lydbrook Junction, whence a return can be made to the Speech House, may be travelled either by road or through the fields beside the Wye. A short and not very distinguishable strip of Offa's Dyke lies somewhat to the left. Presently, nestling beneath high wooded cliffs upon the river's farther bank, a church, modern but picturesque, and pleasant rectory come into sight—those of Welsh Bicknor in Herefordshire. With half an hour to wait for a train, the church, built on the site of a former one, is worth visiting, partly for its own beauty of design, still more, as some may think, for the recumbent effigy which it contains ; almost certainly that of Margaret, Lady de Montacute, great granddaughter of Edward I. The former belief that it represented the Countess of Salisbury, nurse of Henry V., is now generally discredited.

To reach this isolated little church we must either attract the attention of some friendly owner of a boat upon the farther side, or else trespass upon the property and forbearance of the railway company by stealing across the bridge which carries the line over the river and into the adjoining county. As we stand waiting on the Lydbrook Junction platform English Bicknor lies among the hills upon our left, and will be visited another day.

CHAPTER XII

CINDERFORD TO THE SEVERN

CINDERFORD conveys a warning in its very name, nor are our fears allayed by an inspection of the little town itself. None should travel the three miles of road lying eastward of the Speech House in the hope of finding beauty at their journey's end.

Much of the Cinderford road indeed is delightful, leading as it does first through the Speech House Wood, then skirting Yewtreebrake Inclosure, with the roadside lodge of the same name upon the right. But onward from Ruspidge there are few attractions, and at Cinderford one perhaps sees the Forest at its worst.

The hill on which the town lies rises steeply to the east, and the place is a network of unlovely dwellings, mostly small, with shops of the co-operative class, where boots and bacon jostle each other side by side. The town is bleak and bare, scorching upon a cloudless summer afternoon, wind-swept in winter by the nipping blasts. Looking down one of the steep roads that cross at intervals the town's main street, and lifting the eyes from contemplation of the waste strip of moorland at the bottom of the hill, Crump Meadow, Foxes Bridge, and Lightmoor Collieries raise their tall chimney-shafts and towering "tips" to view.



THE WYE AT LYDBROOK.

But even in Cinderford there is the hope of the "beyond." For past the chimney-shafts and rubbish-tips there lies the Forest cool and green. And there are even pleasant spots in Cinderford itself. The Lion Hotel is unpretending at first sight, showing little more than broad bar-window and an entrance door. Behind there are cool panelled rooms, welcome, quick service, and tea of a quality that passes praise.

High above the town a line of trees is seen. Climb towards it, keeping to the southern end. Thus you will, in a few minutes, come to Latimer Lodge, internally, perhaps, far the most charming of the seventeenth century homes. Standing more than five hundred feet above the sea, it looks across the valley to the Chestnuts Wood and Little Dean, and to the Severn and the hills beyond. And from its northern corner you can enter on the long, broad drive of Latimer Walk, leading some mile and more towards Micheldean, with Edgehills plantation on the east and Haywoods to the west, each with its lodge. This walk should not be missed, and should include due exploration of the woods on either side.

Cinderford is but a starting-point for us to-day; the head of that valley down which the Cinderford brook winds between steep and wooded hills, through Ruspidge, Soudley and Blakeney to the Severn shore. Unpromising this valley may appear for the first mile or so; but persevere, and vale and brook will in the end repay the traveller for a walk of some six miles.

From Cinderford we journey south, keeping well up on the hill-side and following the Ruspidge

road. Ruspidge, little but a suburb of more important Cinderford, gives us no cause to halt. The place once passed, the valley narrows, and on our right the woods of Staple Edge come down to the roadside, and any of the now familiar ruddy-painted stiles would lead us to the Forest's heart once more. Beeches are conspicuous here, and, if the time is summer and the afternoon, cast their dense shadows half across the road, with wafts of cool air floating in the semi-gloom. Across the brook and valley there is natural birch-wood here and there upon the farther slopes ; a welcome sight in winter with the purple glow of its young shoots, but destined probably to give place in time to timber of a greater economic worth.

About three miles from Cinderford Upper Soudley is reached. Our valley is here crossed by that through which we tracked the Roman road ; and here, for the pedestrian, lies a choice of routes to the Severn, each one delightful of its kind. The cyclist or automobilist is of course fettered to the valley road, which crosses to the western side of the brook at Lower Soudley, half a mile below the White Horse inn, and runs under the shade of Blakeney Hill woods which cast a welcome shadow sheltering him from the evening sun. The ride is a fine one ; for there are noble beech at intervals, and the view below us of the fertile valley meadows and the winding Soudley brook is most enchanting. Even the pedestrian misses something if he choose to shun this road.

But he is fronted with a tempting "other way" ; with two, indeed. One course is to climb the steep end of the Blaise Bailey hill, and then descend its

easy eastern slope to Newnham. Blaise Bailey is, as the intelligent reader may already have discovered for himself, to be identified with Bleyght's Bailey, one of the original Forest bailiwicks.

To follow the route thus suggested we leave the road immediately beyond the pool which lies below the little camp. Crossing the stile which leads into the wood we climb the path, keeping the steep hill-side upon our left. The top once reached a cottage stands before us; here the path turns sharply to the left. Two or three hundred yards beyond the little house we have another choice to make. Either we keep the drive which follows the top of the ridge, and which will bring us out in time at a farm called the Temple, and at Pleasant Stile by Little Dean, with Newnham two miles below; or we may branch of to the right shortly after leaving the hill-top cottage, following the soft fern-bordered path which leads us gently down the slope. Upon the whole, this route perhaps affords the richest pleasure to the eye; and Pleasant Stile can well be visited from Newnham on another day.

The path down the Blaise Bailey slope is charming, with the swiftly opening bracken growing thick and high beneath the stately beech trees standing here and there; for, next perhaps to Danby Lodge and the High Beeches, the Blaise Bailey is the place where we shall best admire these lovely trees. Looking over our right shoulder we may catch glimpses of the neighbouring mansions of Oaklands and The Haie upon the slope below; but it is to the shining Severn, with the level country on its farther bank, and to the distant Cotswolds that our eyes most often turn.

Half a mile or rather over brings us to comparatively level ground, where a small farmhouse lies upon the right. A narrow field is crossed, giving us entrance to the wood beyond. Crossing the wood, keeping the path along its lower side, we skirt a field once more, and then enter upon woodlands thick and dark. The winding path seems almost endless, but a sure rule to find our way is never to take an uphill turn. Finally, crossing a brook, we shall emerge upon the Little Dean and Newnham road, hardly more than a mile from the latter place. From Newnham, if we are returning to the Speech House, there is the railway motor-car which sets us down at Ruspidge just two miles from home.

This pleasant walk down the Blaise Bailey slopes should not be missed by Forest visitors. But we to-day elect to follow faithfully the valley of the brook that bears a changing name. For, starting as the Cinderford Brook, the stream takes the name of Soudley when that place is reached; becomes the Forge Brook before arriving at Blakeney, and there, mingling its waters with the Blackpool Brook, adopts the title Bideford Brook before it loses its identity upon the Severn's brink.

So, passing beneath the towering end of the Blaise Bailey hill, we follow the road. First past a small factory which stands below the millpond on our right—a factory which, starting existence ten or twelve years since as a paper mill, now proclaims its devotion to the manufacture of "leather board." This—or so at least it is suggested to us in a conversation in the White Horse bar—is a delicate euphemism for a boot-soling material which has

brown paper as its chief ingredient! Then past the hamlet of Lower Soudley, with the great dams and ruined buildings of its former furnaces. The talk of the "throwing" of the twin chimney-shafts by dynamite one Sunday afternoon, and of how they came down at the same moment and collided in their fall, is still a fruitful topic at the little hostelry just named.

The driving way to Blakeney crosses the brook just here and follows the right bank. We, with a little care, may find a footway upon either side. The unattractive hamlet left behind, we travel through long narrow meadows where the grass stands high to-day, and where the orchis raises pyramids of bloom. Another month and the whole valley will be fragrant with the scent of hay. In early spring it is a land of snow—the sheep below, the snowy pear-tree bloom above. For we are entering on the country of the "Blakeney Red," a famous perry pear of Gloucestershire.

We might forget the Forest but for the great slope of Blakeney Hill upon our right; but ever and anon the knowledge comes upon us as we raise our eyes from dwelling on the winding peace and quiet of this orchard vale. Each curve reveals some new delight, some fresh and stately posing of the great outstanding beeches on the lower slopes. And yet again we lapse into forgetfulness of the great hill as some fresh scene of tranquil beauty opens out in front beside the brook itself—some rippling ford, some worn and shaking footbridge, leading to a stream-side cottage homestead on the farther bank. The three miles

—more or less—beside this pleasant stream are all too short.

We follow elbows of the stream, skirt long triangular peninsulas, and startle here and there cattle that stand knee-deep beneath the shadow of the alder trees. At times a still more pleasing figure may be by good luck revealed. Not soon shall we forget the sight of a small maiden, splashing white feet among the shallows one June afternoon, or the rare picture that she made as seen against the ancient footbridge and the crumbling bank.

The brook has trout within it when it has received the purer waters of the Sutton ponds which flow into it at Soudley, and the fishing is preserved. Once there were otters too ; but now we understand that these are seldom seen, owing to a thorough visitation of the valley by the Chepstow otter-hounds a few years since—a visit organized partly in favour of the followers of the pack, and partly also in the interests of the fishery lessees.

The otter is a pleasant beast to startle from his slumber unawares, and we are not without some qualms of conscience in the matter of his disappearance from the stream. It may be that we helped to kill the last ; if so, it was a "kill" to be remembered. All the long autumn morning, from the hour when we had assembled at Awre Mill, we followed conscientiously the many windings of the stream. Only an occasional whimper from the pack told of any trace of scent ; and by midday all signs of coming sport had long since died away. We lunched in and around the Blakeney inn, the

details of the meal inspected by an interested local crowd. Then, following the Master and the pack across the road, we took the meadow path down which we wander now.

It seemed to be a pleasant picnic—nothing more. Hopes of a find had long since disappeared, and we were sauntering in inattentive groups of twos and threes not far from Soudley furnaces, when, sudden and loud, a burst of wholly unexpected music rent the air. Of the few stirring moments that ensued some scenes still stand out clear to memory; of suddenly finding ourselves, after a breathless run of two minutes, upon the bank of the brook in time to see, for one brief moment, the struggling pack in mid-stream. Then came a vision of a dark form shooting up the farther bank: the yell of the frantic hounds following as best they might; the cool embrace of swiftly flowing water reaching to our waist, a panting struggle through the impeding thorn-brakes of the cliff beyond; then an open space at the top, wherein there stood the well-known "John," his horn just rising to his lips, a limp form swinging in his hand, the circling pack. The greater portion of the field was still a quarter of a mile or more away before the laggards had well realized that the swift, fierce struggle was being fought and won. One of the otter's pads, mounted and dated, serves now to clip the contents of the morning's letter-bag.

Blakeney, if not particularly interesting, is yet far from unpicturesque. The church is a modern building; for Blakeney, though now far larger than its Severn-side neighbour Awre, is a mere offshoot from the older parish, two miles or more

away. But Blakeney church, modern and comparatively unlovely as it is, conspicuous externally only by the extreme smallness of its tower, is yet worth entering. The visitor may not perhaps go farther than the door, beside which stands the quaint thirteenth century font. Its shape—square and two-sided as regards one half, a semicircle on the other—at once betrays its origin ; it was in fact a holy-water stoup, and evidently occupied the corner of a porch. Faint traces of some "tadpole" pattern carving still remain ; one panel has been mutilated. The present vicar looks upon this relic with affection and some pride, having rescued it from a local garden where it had long been serving as a flower-pot.

Awre station is a mile and half away by road, or rather less across the fields. A waggonette can be obtained from the inn, in front of which the Forge and Blackpool Brooks mingle their waters and pursue their journey towards the Severn and the sea. In the inn parlour, over a lunch of bread and cheese, the writer remembers to have passed one day an interesting half-hour ; listening, as he sat behind the half-closed door, to the wiles by which a pedlar, his speech betraying him for a German Jew, disposed of two watches to a pair of countrymen engaged upon their midday glass. The travelling salesman has a fine field in the Forest.

CHAPTER XIII

COLEFORD AND DANBY LODGE

DENIZENS of the Forest may perhaps raise their eyebrows at the combination chosen for our walk to-day, for Coleford town and Danby Lodge lie wide apart. But there is method in this seeming madness. The trip makes a good round of some ten miles—perhaps rather more ; and following the stir and bustle of the little forest town, the solitude and woodland peace of Danby Lodge will make a pleasing contrast for the wanderer.

Even if not lovely, Coleford is yet less sordid and unpicturesque than Cinderford ; moreover, the place has some shreds of ancient history clinging to it still. Nor is it undeserving of consideration from the Speech House guest, if only as the place from which the hotel mostly draws its food supply. The Speech House pony makes the trip to Coleford almost daily, and the visitor may often count upon a lift. To-day we choose to walk.

The way, when once the railway level crossing at the station, and the long steep hill beyond are passed, is hardly beautiful. Scattered cinder-heaps and unattractive cottages are much in evidence ; the road on a May day is bare and hot ; and it is odds that, after traversing Broadwell Lane End and descending the steep hill to Coleford, the traveller

will share our pleasure in the cool retreat that lies behind the creeper-covered window of the Angel bar.

Outside the hotel courtyard stands the market-house and small town hall, erected in the seventeenth century. Modern improvements and additions have largely shorn it of its interest from an antiquarian point of view. More pleasing is the tower just beyond it in the centre of the town ; all that remains of the church built in 1820, now replaced by a more modern structure on the hill above. When we have seen these, and have remembered too that in the early spring of 1642 the Parliamentarians were driven out of Coleford by the Royalists, in spite of the possession of "a gun and an artillery-man to serve it" ; and that Sir Richard Lawley, Royalist, was shot, according to tradition, by a silver bullet fired from the window of the King's Head inn ; we have seen all that Coleford has to show. The forest-lover is impatient for the woods again, and fortunately they are not far off.

We leave the town by the hill passing the police station and the grammar school, and a mile of road will bring us to the hamlet of Coalway Lane End—Lane End a frequent Forest name. The Parkend road here bends round sharply to the right ; but we have had enough of roads to-day, and, turning across the greensward to the left beneath the spreading branches of a roadside oak, enter the great Nagshead Plantation which from here slopes down to the Cinderford and Lydney line, and faces Russell's Wood upon the farther side. Once here we are within the shadow of the woods until we reach Parkend.



COLEFORD.

The path is broad and well-trodden, with woods of oak and scattered firs on either hand. After about a mile the pleasant little woodman's house of Nagshead Lodge is passed upon the left. The young oak planted by the lodge's occupant of fourteen years ago for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, hardly does justice to the woodman's loyalty. The tree—or is it a descendant perhaps—hardly appears above the ground.

Beyond the lodge the path grows steeper, and presently, reaching a point but a short distance from the line, we pass among some fine old oaks. Stag-headed perhaps they mostly are; but the old boles are massive and of goodly girth. "Stag-headedness," we may perhaps note for those who are not learned in the woodman's craft, is, though usually a conspicuous feature of an aged tree, not by any means confined to mere antiquity. An oak becomes stag-headed when, through lack of shade or dryness of the soil, the stores of water which the roots supply have failed to reach the topmost boughs.

York Lodge, the least attractive perhaps of any of the forest lodges so far as situation is concerned, is just above us on the right. Behind it, scattered on the open hill above Parkend, are many ancient oaks—survivors of the last great "fall."

We cross the Cannop Brook, its babbling waters musical though anything but clear; and then, a few yards farther on, the line. A new Crown road, not yet included on the ordnance survey maps, leads up the Cannop Valley, past the Speech House station, on to Sallow Vallets, where it joins the road from Coleford and Monmouth to Lydbrook and Micheldean. A few days since we crossed it just

below old Jack o' the Yat. We turn at present to the right to reach Parkend.

Not that, at first sight, the picturesque attractions of Parkend are great, for there are collieries in the place, and stone works. At the latter, belonging to the same firm whose grinding greets us at the Speech House station, a lorry is being loaded with a five-ton block, the workmen busy chipping crevices in which to place the "dogs" that dangle from the mighty crane. But the Dean Forest with Parkend left out, would be a woodland waste bereft of all attention and control. For here the deputy-surveyor has his seat; and from the offices which lie behind the house every inclosure and plantation, each woodland "patch" and individual tree, are cared for and controlled.

The deputy-surveyor may be in that office dictating orders to some Scotch or Continental firm for seeds; more often perhaps he may be absent making a long inspection-round among the woods. Absent or present, the wide low house of Whitemead Park is there; a pleasing home enough, did it not lie, as its occupant will tell you, in one of the worst "frost-holes" in the forest; a pronouncement often only too well justified by the fatalities occurring in the nursery across the road, or by destruction of the garden wallflowers in early spring. But the house itself, of some antiquity, though modernized, is very pleasant to the eye. So is the little "park" which gives the place its name—tree-studded meadowland; and there are several stately conifers within the grounds. One garden ornament might perhaps be spared—the massive block of stone conspicuous from the drawing-room window open-

ing on the lawn. It bears a sundial, together with a somewhat wordy tribute of affection from a former deputy-surveyor to the memory of his favourite dachshund "Satan," otherwise "Tappy-tappy." He was an excellent animal, no doubt, but one whose many virtues and strong love of sunshine are recorded at a length perhaps somewhat wearisome to those who, having this memorial ever in the foreground of their view, lacked the advantage of acquaintance with the subject of the lines.

Parkend, moreover, is the centre of another influence—one far more widely reaching than the limits of Dean Forest, as it was or as it is to-day. Here stands the School of Forestry at which the scientific modern forester is trained, his destiny to revolutionize the culture not only of our English woodlands, but likewise of those far off upon the other side of the world.

At this School of Forestry, the only one as yet established in England by the Government, a limited number of young working-men receive a two years' course of thorough instruction in the woodman's craft. Preference is given first to those already in the Crown's employ ; but vacancies for those outside are usually available. Thus the son of a well-known duke's head forester is now a pupil in the school.

An obvious and very necessary advantage of the school is that the pupils perform, throughout the two years' course, a modicum of labour in the forest at remunerative pay, working under skilled supervision at their various tasks. About two afternoons weekly are spent in the school class-room, theoretical instruction being given by an instructor

of wide experience. Since the school was opened a building has been utilized for boarding and lodging some of the pupils, the rest finding accommodation in the village at a rate within their means.

Hardly one of the pupils who have as yet passed through the school has failed to find some remunerative post. One recently left to take up work in Uganda, at a commencing salary perhaps treble what he could have hoped for all his life, if left unaided by the school.

The little museum contains some specimens of interest: blocks of timber, freaks of nature, cases of moths and beetles, either friends or foes—the latter mostly—to the woodman's work.

Passing the upper of the two level crossings—not the one immediately adjoining the station—we climb the steep and dusty road for about half a mile. By now it is most likely afternoon, and the June sun beats fiercely down upon our backs. Courage, however, yet a few moments, and we shall be once more within the welcome shelter of the woods. Meanwhile let us pause and cast a look behind. Save for its smoke-wreaths, Parkend has now wholly disappeared from sight; beyond the valley the Nagshead Plantation and the Parkend woods spread out to the view their wide unbroken stretch of tree-tops.

We follow on once more to where the fine oaks stand—those we visited a few days back; three on our left, and one, a far more stately woodland monarch, standing in solitude and dignity upon the right. Once more, and not too soon, we pass into the woods, gaining the Churchill Inclosure by the

stile beside the solitary oak. The paths within the wood soon branch, but there is little difficulty in following the main one which bears slightly to the left. There are fine spruce-trees here—in one place almost enough to call an avenue—and presently some more fine oaks upon our left beside the path. Later a garden hedge appears upon the right, and pleasant little Churchill Lodge is reached; turning its back, as do so many of the Forest lodges, to the drive by which we reach it, and looking away across a sunny little meadow to the woods beyond.

A sheep-dog greets us noisily, and if the woodman chances to be near he will point out the route for Danby Lodge. Failing his presence and still following the drive, another hundred yards or so will bring us to a gate. Crossing it, turning at once to the left, and following the inclosure boundary, we reach a clearing with a public-house and several cottages—a colliery as well. Bearing across the clearing to the right we traverse first a by-road and then a mineral railway. Finally we enter the Patches and make for Cockshoot Wood, with Danby Lodge a mile or more away.

If, as is likely, we should meet a passing collier homeward bound, or children dawdling from school, it will be well to ask the way. Otherwise we follow the main well-trodden path for some three-quarters of a mile or more; then, bearing to the left, we shall come out either at Danby Lodge itself, or on the Speech House to Blakeney road at no great distance from the house.

For loveliness of situation, perhaps, not one of the secluded homes within the great Crown woodlands

can presume to rival Danby Lodge. Perched on the edge of a steep slope—down which five minutes' walk would bring us to the Roman road at Blackpool Bridge—with stately beeches standing all around, the lodge's terrace gives us glimpses of the Severn and the land and hills beyond. The little house itself, if not exactly beautiful, is pleasant to the eye, with great projecting porch and low wide windows facing every way. The lodge is one of those erected in the seventeenth century, and stoutly built of the grey forest stone.

Up to the present Danby Lodge has been well-known to Forest picnic-parties as a place at which to make a halt for tea. But changes are at hand within its solid ancient walls. The lodge's mistress greets us clad in widow's weeds ; not a month back her husband—a Crown woodman—passed to his grave with deputy-surveyor, gaveller and a great company of fellow servants of the Crown following behind. The widow's aged father lies to-day helpless and bedridden upstairs ; and in a few months she is yielding—not unwillingly—the house to some fresh occupant. To-day we drink the cheering and refreshing cup, perhaps for the last time, within a room all corners, cupboards, and old panelling. But if in future tea should by chance prove unattainable at Danby Lodge, the thirsty traveller may count at least upon a draught of ice-cold water drawn from the deep well beside the porch.



At Danby Lodge

CHAPTER XIV

HIGHMEADOW WOODS

SEEN from the road by which we travelled from the Speech House past the High Beeches and through Berry Hill to Symonds Yat, that portion of Highmeadow Woods which slopes so steeply from the highway to the river hides its choicest beauties from the passer-by. He only catches hasty glimpses of some vista down a drive and goes his way, unwitting perhaps that portions of the Forest's fairest woodland scenery lie within. And not fair scenery alone is there, but also much of the best grown timber of the great Crown woods.

The Highmeadow Woods were once, and are again, part of the Forest of Dean ; but, during a long interval, the Highmeadow Estate was private property, until, early in the last century, it was purchased by the Crown from Viscount Gage. Some was then meadow, other portions carried timber, but nearly the whole is once more woodland. From the high ground at Staunton, from near Coleford, and from the Yat rock already visited, the great woods cover the steep slopes descending to the Wye, along the left bank of which they extend from Symonds Yat station to near Monmouth. A small portion of the whole, amounting to some three hundred acres, is in Herefordshire on the Wye's right bank.

Pleasant it is to wander at random in these lovely

woods, passing long hours alone and undisturbed; for the ordinary Forest visitor comes not here, and even in the immediate neighbourhood of Symonds Yat it is only on some fine bank holiday that we shall find the tripper in their lonely depths. To-day we choose to visit the Highmeadow Woods in well-instructed company. More than one scientist would be right welcome at our side, his presence well repaying any guidance we might give. The botanist would find rare orchids and wild columbine; the entomologist would have good chance of being rewarded by a purple emperor, comma, wood white, or other butterfly of note; the cavern-hunter could explore the caves on either side the Wye. We have the welfare of our English woodlands most in mind, and the Instructor from the Parkend School of Forestry, with his class, shall be our guide to-day. For, in addition to the woodland labour and the class-room work, the pupils are led on a day's ramble in the woods at frequent intervals, receiving information on such points of interest as present themselves.

Coleford is the rendezvous to-day, and we can gain it as we please—afoot, by cycle, or by railway through Parkend. Our friend the Instructor joins us there by train, together with a member of the class; seven more await us just by Marian's Lodge, a mile due north of Coleford by the road that leads through Berry Hill. Eight well-set-up intelligent young working-men in all, ranging in age from twenty to five-and-twenty. The school, when founded, admitted pupils of a younger age, but the results were not found satisfactory, and the limit has since been raised.

Attached to Marian's Lodge, as to most other of the Forest lodges, is a nursery, and a short pause is made beside the fence while we inspect its infant occupants. Larches six inches high are growing somewhat brown and sickly from the long May drought. The class, being one for beginners, is invited to note the difference between the "green" and "blue" varieties of Douglas fir, and is enlightened as to the superior merits of the former tree.

Then, as we stroll along the drive, the Instructor gives his information in an easy undidactic style. Lines of young larches bordering the plantations on each side supply an opening theme only too well. Here and there among the sprays of tender needles sobering from their first spring brilliance to full summer hue, are pointed out twigs dead and bare—the work of the caterpillar of the larch-shoot moth which bores into the shoot. Presently the marauder—*Argyresthia lævigatella* is the scientific name—is discovered at the junction of a dead twig with the parent stem, and is examined critically by our curious eyes. Dead brown spots on the needles are explained to be the result of attentions from another insect, the larch-aphis, *Chermes laricis*, whose pleasure is to suck the chlorophyll. The mode of attack followed by a third foe, *Coleophora laricella*, the larch miner-moth, is that of boring the needles.

Evidences of canker also are not far to seek ; the larch, in short, is prey to enemies varied and well-nigh numberless. Nevertheless, this Alpine denizen, imported first to England less than two centuries ago, and treated as a hot-house shrub by

its first guardians, is of such rapid growth and wide utility, that it is better to grow it and to bear the thousand ills from which it suffers than to grow it not at all; at least where soil and aspect are reasonably suited to its requirements.

Portions of these Highmeadow Woods suit the larch well, and the trees are in general free from disease. The soil is stony and the aspect north, and in some dark and gloomy ravines we shall presently see grand specimens, of which both height and girth will be worth measuring. Meanwhile we have our notice drawn to a comparatively new experiment—the substitution of larch in the open spaces between the oaks, in place of the hazel coppice grown in that portion we have just passed through. Though the larch needles will return but little humus to the soil, the trees keep the ground cool and moist. Moreover, a crop of larch —not grown *directly underneath* the oaks, but in the intervening spaces where it has the needful light —will, cut in rotation of perhaps five-and-thirty years, yield a far better revenue than coppice wood in the same length of time. Coppice, indeed, shrinks painfully in value year by year; the Crown is, however, about to establish acetate works close to the Speech House road station, where it is hoped to consume the forest undergrowth to better advantage.

From Marian's Lodge we have been following a course north-west, and now are skirting Bracelands, the lonely wood-embosomed residence of a Forest official. And here we enter on a portion of the woods, not only most picturesque, but also of considerable scientific interest, and one on

which the Forest management can look with satisfaction and with pride. The oaks are older and larger—older than any in the forest proper save those few time-honoured veterans we have seen. These lower-lying portions of Highmeadow Woods were under timber at the time of purchase by the Crown; unlike the sections first passed through, which were then meadowland—always productive of an inferior timber crop for many years.

Each oak that we pass here seems finer than its fellows left behind—possessing a straight bole, clean branchless run of trunk for forty, fifty, sixty feet, and with a spreading crown forming a dense unbroken "canopy" high overhead. The reason is not far to seek. The undergrowth is beech, a tree which, patient of shade itself, is well content to let the oak outstrip it in the race for light, and to maintain the goodness of the soil by the rich humus of its falling leaves. Those leaves of many an autumn past are crisp beneath our feet; but kick away the surface covering, and below there is a layer, knee-high and ever-growing, of rich leaf-mould.

Old records seem to prove the ancient Forest to have grown two beech to every oak; now groups of beech, as we have seen, are far apart. Here, in Highmeadow Woods, the ancient plan, ideal for growing oaks, is being reproduced once more.

"Then of course your Highmeadow Woods cannot be beautiful; science is always ugly, and doubtless scientific forestry no less." Is that the case? Highmeadow Woods shall answer to the charge. Ask them to answer on this early summer day, the stately stems of oak standing at intervals

among a waving whispering sea of beechen undergrowth. Ask them again on some late autumn day, when winds are up and the brown beech-leaves whirl in clouds along the drives, and drift like ruddy snowflakes through the air. Much as we love the forest proper, we are fain to own these woods have scenes it cannot match.

We thought them tenantless to-day of all but our small group; but presently some distant sounds are heard, and rounding the bend of a long grassy drive we come upon a scene of desolation which at first sight must strike us like a blow. Felling and bark-stripping are going on at the same time, and side by side; on every hand gaunt trees lying prone are stripped and bare; the bark, propped against poles laid on crossed uprights, is spread out to dry, with women ever stacking more in place.

Our guide surveys the scene with little comment—it is in the natural course of economic woodland work. Better that the stately oak should fall by the woodman's axe and enter on its period of utility, than rust out by decay. Nor need the lover of the woodlands feel too great dismay. The worst-grown portions of the woods are felled the first, the finer left for many a year to come. The stateliest oaks growing here to-day will keep their place long after we are dust.

But presently the Instructor's cool indifference changes to alarm; not for the prostrate oaks, but for a giant larch—a special favourite—which this wide-spreading "cut" has perhaps too much exposed and left in danger from the autumn gales.

No tree is more deceptive than the larch as

regards estimation of its height and girth. Viewed in comparison with a neighbouring oak this towering tree tapers so subtly, looks so slim, that we most likely hazard six or eight feet as its girth at five feet from the ground. The measuring-tape proclaims it ten feet three. And then the class is given practice with Weise's hypsometer, an accurate and convenient little instrument which hails from Germany. This registers the larch's height as ninety-seven feet, a dimension which presently seems less incredible when we gaze through surrounding foliage at the slender top which sways with every passing breath of wind. More larches, only a few degrees less stately, we shall meet with lower down, and all look slimmer than they really are, so gently graduated is the decrease of the stem from base to top.

Wander along the drives and pathways of this lovely woodland as you will—through Mailscot, Lady Park and Reddings Wood ; you are as free of them, with reasonable restrictions, as of the Forest itself ; yet little is the use the local public makes of such a privilege. But, should your time be precious, do not lose the way. Even our guide to-day, who almost knows each individual tree by sight, is once a little puzzled by the change of scene caused by a recent "cut" ; but he can consult the large-scale folding map of the estate carried by a member of the class, on which a multitude of mystic figures correspond with those on short white posts which stand to mark the corners of each "compartment" or block of forest.

True that, without a map, a persevering and laborious climb must always bring you in the end

to Staunton, Coleford or the adjacent road, just as descent will lead you out beside the silver hill-surrounded Wye. Yet more than one benighted tourist or stray reveller has on Bank Holidays been known to knock long after dark at Bracelands door, pour out the story of his wanderings and beg refreshment and a guide upon his way.

We have been gradually descending for some little time, and come at last to a small stream—the brook called Whippington, which, rising high up in Ellis Reddings Wood, not far from Marian's Lodge, seeks earth again, and, running underground, issues once more where now we stand, but a few hundred yards above the Wye. Its murmur is the luncheon signal, and it is a spot we shall do well to note for future use; for it is one, and perhaps the best, of the few places in Highmeadow where a cool clear draught may be obtained.

The timber-track by which the streamlet issues from a jumble of huge limestone boulders where wild garlic grows in odorous profusion, brings us in two minutes to the river and the railway line beside it, just below "Slaughter Siding" where Highmeadow timber can be put on rail. Not far away—but we refrain from pointing out the spot more clearly—a full half-acre of sweet lilies of the valley flourish untended, and, to many happily, unknown. Across the rippling current of the Wye, which here holds many a lusty salmon and so gives the Crown a handsome revenue, are the steep wooded cliffs of the Great Doward. There lies King Arthur's Cave which in its day has yielded human bones and other relics of a long-gone past. Lady Park Cave upon this side the Wye, just opposite

to Biblings Lodge upon the farther bank, might too be visited. For this cave a key must first be obtained from the hotel at Symonds Yat ; for King Arthur's Cave and others on the farther bank the Crown workman at Biblings Lodge is a reliable guide.

To-day we turn up-stream and pass the "Slaughter," named from a legendary battle between Welsh and English on this spot. But first we pause to view, across the Wye, a stately elm growing in a meadow just below the cliffs ; the tree is one of a short row of four or five. To realize its towering height we must remember that the oaks behind it, their tops showing level with the elm-tree's crown, are perched upon a cliff of sixty feet. The elm, the girth of which is close upon twelve feet, has a recorded height of one hundred and thirty-two feet, and is believed to be the tallest tree of any species in the Forest. To boast of it as being the great woodland's tallest elm would not say much, elms being comparatively rare on the Crown property.

A walk of rather more than half a mile along the river bank will bring us to Symonds Yat station. On either side of the third pathway passed after leaving Slaughter Siding will be found larches which are worth a short detour and a steep climb to see. Though of smaller girth than the monarch viewed just now, they are fine trees, some ranging from a hundred to a hundred and ten feet high ; and like all well-grown larch they are deceptive to the eye. The guesses of all but one shrewd member of the class to-day fall short of facts.

CHAPTER XV

CHARCOAL-BURNERS AT ENGLISH BICKNOR

ONLY eighteen months or more ago charcoal-burners haunted the Forest for many weeks, a thing unknown for several years before. The price of charcoal had risen sharply, and the smoke of the "pits" curled up once more among the great Crown woods.

None are at work within the Forest now, but a timely word sends us this morning to the slopes of a copse which, close to English Bicknor and within the ancient Forest boundary, falls steeply to the Wye. The news from a friend is that when, a few days since, he plied his rod on a stretch of Crown water between Lydbrook Junction and Symonds Yat, the charcoal-burners' smoke was evident to sight and scent.

Our quickest route will be by train to Lydbrook Junction, where the station porter puts us on the charcoal-burners' track. A walk of twenty minutes from the little station, partly beside the line and partly through the meadows on the river bank, soon brings us to the spot.

No living figure is in sight, but we know that, when once the pits are "set" and burning, the men in charge are never far to seek. Crossing the fence of wire which divides the coppice from

the line, we mount the hill; not without difficulty, for the slope is very steep, and strewn with brushwood, sticks and fallen trees; while "stoles," half hidden by the litter on the ground, make frequent snares for the unwary foot. Dodging to windward of the smoking pits we pass above them, till, on the hill's crest, a cone-shaped hut comes into view. It is an hour after noon, and we shall doubtless find the charcoal-burners at their midday meal within.

The railway which runs along the level ground immediately below the slope describes a great half-moon, following the curve of the river, from which it is only separated by a narrow strip of meadow-land. Beyond the Wye a strip of meadow slightly wider; then a ridge of steep and thinly-wooded fields, with fern in scattered patches here and there. One distant cottage only on the far bank of the river is in sight. From the clear water of the stream, radiant to-day beneath the sun, there comes at intervals the fluttering splash and call of coot or moorhen swimming and diving in the shelter of the banks. No sound beside; only the smoking pits below seem pregnant with a sinister and hidden life.

The little hut—their "cabin" as the charcoal-burners call it—perched just below the hill's long crest, is formed of larch poles fifteen feet or more in length. The poles, placed closely together on the ground to form a circle some ten feet in diameter, are drawn together at the top and fastened firmly. From top to bottom the outside is plastered thickly with a coat of turf and mud. A picturesque dwelling enough, and well suited to

its surroundings; were it not that the whole has received an outer covering of tarpaulin sheets, which somewhat mars it to a critical eye! But the charcoal-burner's life while in the woods is rough, and few would grudge him such small additional comfort as he can devise.

A low and narrow doorway facing towards the river and the slope gives entrance; peering within, we just discern two dim and smoke-grimed figures at their meal. It only needs a word or two to draw the hoped-for invitation of "Come in, sir, if ye will, and sit ye down," from the elder man. Bending nearly double we are within the charcoal-burners' temporary home.

The available floor-space is perhaps three feet by five, in the middle of which a handful of wood embers smoulders pleasantly. All round, except at the small space occupied by the narrow doorway, is a rough dais raised a foot or so above the ground on logs and stones, and formed of boughs and young tree-trunks. Spread on this platform on each side of the doorway, a litter of straw proclaims itself the charcoal-burner's nightly couch. The remaining space seems devoted to matters of the commissariat; a chunk of bacon and a kettle, a saucepan and a bowl, a mug or two, are on the logs.

Hunks of bread and cheese are in the charcoal-burners' hands, and a bowl of hot broth smokes at the elbow of each man. A pull from our flask meets with a hearty reception, and a pipeful of our own particular "flake" appears to be a not unwelcome change from "twist."

Both men have been at their work for life. We



THE CHARCOAL-BURNER'S HUT.

set the elder down at fifty-five, but he laughs; "nigher seventy." The lad half sitting, half reclining, opposite us is his son. The father has just been bemoaning the hardness of the labour and the poorness of the pay, as is the habit of workers of all classes, from barristers to charcoal-burners; but he loses sight of this for a moment to remark that the boy will have a good trade if he will only stick to it! The faces and hands of both men are black with smoke and soot; we might be many fathoms underground and lunching with some collier in his "stall" rather than on this sunlit Gloucestershire hill-side.

The charcoal-burners have been here for six or seven weeks, and there is at least another month of work before them ere they shift their camp. The old man has a wife and family in a distant Herefordshire village, the name of which is all familiar in our ears; but a charcoal-burner's home is by his pits. Herefordshire and Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire and Shropshire; sometimes Denbigh and Cheshire; Leicestershire, he says, was a good county once; and names of villages, estates and well-known woodlands pass his grimy lips.

A pretty spot. Yes, the old man admits it willingly, seemingly not as oblivious to the picturesque as rural workers often are. But he goes on to call attention to the drawbacks of the scene. "Why, even you was apt to lose yer footin', comin' up the hill, the sun a-shinin' too and broad day." And then he paints what is doubtless no overdrawn picture of work on this hill-side at night; of slipping, tumbling down the slope, not one but many times between the gloam-

ing and the dawn, in inky darkness or in rain or wind, to tend the pits.

The narrow valley too, he says, draws even light winds up it like a chimney flue. To-day, still as it seemed to us, the wind is veering now this way, now that, as gusts drift fitfully along the slope, or puffs blow over from the crest above the hut. All that, as he will presently show us, means extra work for those who tend the burning pits. "The wind do play Old Harry with the pits ; all yesterday 'twere cruel, and night afore, us never laid down, not a single hour on end."

The frugal meal came to its end some twenty minutes since. The pipes are out ; and stuffing his into his pocket the old man "must be getting to that little 'cob' o' mine down there." We cast our eyes round for something in the shape of a horse, not at first associating the word with one of the smoking heaps below.

The "little cob" is a comparatively insignificant heap, in which odds and ends of wood, too small for a full-sized pit, are being burnt. Upon a space of ground dug out on the hill-side and accurately levelled—a most important point—stands an earth-covered tump about the size of those that may be seen in any winter swede- or mangold-field. Near it are ranged full bags of charcoal ; while on one side empty bags are stretched on stakes to form a makeshift screen. The charcoal-burner bemoans the fact that he has no hurdles.

We are not long in appreciating his abhorrence of a wind. Even the light and fitful airs that blow to-day have their effect upon the burning "pit." Ever and again the smoke puffs out more strongly



BUILDING THE "PIT."

from one side or another; and forthwith the charcoal-burner takes his spade. Spreading a shovelful or two of ashes on the weak spot he pats them down to stop the vent. We can well imagine the effect of a lashing gale, and the ceaseless vigilance required to counteract the damage it may do.

In spite of the alleged poor pay and arduous work involved, the charcoal-burner evidently has a pride in his profession, and is gratified that we should wish to learn its ins and outs. He begs, indeed, that we will pay him another visit. Let us only send him word a day or two beforehand, and he will exhibit the details of his craft in all its stages; will have a pit "set"—that is, ready for firing; others burning, as we see them here to-day; and yet another "drawn"—uncovered, and the fire quenched. Still, failing this, he leads us to the second larger pit and explains the *modus operandi* as best he can.

The lengths of wood to be burnt are stacked upright on the level ground in a circle fifteen to eighteen feet across. The charcoal-burner builds from the middle, leaving a small central space to serve as flue. As he builds he draws the upright sticks downwards and towards him, so that all have a slight inward slope, and the whole pit assumes a rounded form.

The "pit" thus built is then covered with litter—dirty straw or old and worthless hay. This keeps the resulting charcoal clean, or comparatively so, from the final outer covering of earth and ashes which excludes the air, and which is laid on several inches thick. The pit is then fired in the centre, and the work begins—to last, according to

the size of the pit and the quality and nature of the contents, from two or three to six or seven days.

All round the pit, a foot or so from the ground and at intervals of about a yard apart, are vent-holes which can be opened or closed as needed with an iron bar. The wood burnt is, to employ the old man's own phrase, "just as it comes"—ash, hazel, alder, all the cuttings of the copse; the size varies in like manner. The son shows us his "mare" or carrier; a wooden frame, in shape like a mason's hod, in which the lengths of wood are carried to the pit.

The pit once alight there is more to do than merely to wait the progress of the hidden fire, and counteract the ill effects of wind. The great heap must be "dressed." The centre burns more fiercely and is consumed far sooner than the sides; it must therefore be frequently opened and more wood put in—a hot and stifling job, and not without its dangers from the thick smoke pouring forth around the "dresser" as he works. An iron cover is at hand, which can be placed over the central hole in the intervals of putting in fresh wood, until the space is once more full and the covering of litter and ashes can again be piled upon it.

Nor is the "drawing" of a finished pit a simple matter. There is an elaborate process of uncovering, cooling with water, and re-covering before the contents can be ready for the sacks. It is a mere detail of locality that here there is no water available except the crystal current of the Wye. The son now takes up the tale and speaks with feeling of the labour of carrying many gallons across the



"DRAWING" THE CHARCOAL.

strip of meadow by the river side, over two wire fences and the railway line, and up some fifty yards or more of steep ascent. Our own suggestion of a pump and length of hose awakes a sigh of longing in his breast.

Although his produce is thus hidden from sight during the process of manufacture, the charcoal-burner knows what is going forward in that fiercely smouldering heap. The little that his fifty years' experience does not tell him he has other ways to learn. Watching the larger pit, we notice that the smoke emerging here and there, and circling round in eddying whirls, is changing hue. From thick and cloudy white it has become a pale ethereal blue, a colour infinitely beautiful and delicate. That change of colour is a signal that the work is in its final stage. The old man tells us that he knows in all three variations in the colour of the smoke, each carrying its special message to his brain.

It is the time for riddling the great heap of dust that lies beside the smaller pit. Much of the charcoal is sacked in the form of the original sticks, with little or no breakage, and in that state commands the highest price. But there are many smaller pieces, and these must unavoidably get mixed with dust and ashes from the covering of the pit. The son plies the shovel while his father riddles, and in a moment the pair have disappeared from view in a dense drifting cloud of coal-black powdery dust. During the fitful moments when they emerge to sight we see the old man scanning the contents of his riddle with a careful eye; picking out an extra large lump and placing it with others of its size, while the general contents find a

place within another sack. He deplores the large quantity of fine and excellent charcoal which is so mixed with dirt as to be wholly unavailable for any purpose.

It is probable that the old fellow has never heard of charcoal biscuits; but in presenting us with a stick of charcoal as a memento of the visit, he reminds us that "'tis a rare good thing for the stummick, look you."

When once the charcoal is bagged the charcoal-burner's work is done. With the carrying of the half hundredweight bags up the steep and slippery hill-side to the nearest cart-track, or with the struggles of the woodland waggon-team in miry and deep-rutted ways, he has no concern. But he recalls the fact that, many years ago and five-and-twenty miles from where we stand, there were men who maintained large teams of donkeys—twenty and thirty in a team; and that the patient little beasts would daily travel some twelve miles or more, threading the woodland paths between the charcoal-burners and the nearest railway station, each with a bag of charcoal on its back. A pretty sight, and one worth seeing to-day.

And indeed we hope that this revival in the rural charcoal-burner's trade is one that may be permanent. Such workers make most pleasing figures in their woodland frame; licensed wanderers with something of the wild freedom of the poacher or the tramp, yet lawfully and usefully employed, working and making work. Shrewd are they too, and skilled, and with that knowledge that the untravelled local labourer lacks—acquaintance with the ways and speech of distant parts.

Hard doubtless is the work, and not without its dangers too; but healthy, for it keeps the worker in the open air, and charcoal is itself a wholesome thing with which to dwell. Screened from the sky, sunny or overcast, by nothing but the rude camp-shelter his own hands have made, the charcoal-burner lives in close touch with all around. He sees the nightly march of stars across the heavens, he notes each hourly change of wind. As he scrambles along the slope to tend his pits, or lays him down for a brief hour of fitful sleep upon his bed of straw, he hears the fox bark, and the otter whistle from the river bank. Surely there are worse lives than this. Long may the pit-smoke curl and drift along the hill, and rise in shimmering wayward wreaths among the woods.

The hill on the west slope of which the charcoal-burners' temporary camp is pitched bears the picturesque name of Rosemary Topping. The village of English Bicknor lies just across the ridge a short half mile away. It is one which demands a visit, and an hour will be ample for the purpose.

The little Norman church is sadly marred by a new roof of ruddy tiles, and by the drastic alterations to the eastern end. But, in spite of the restorer's hand, it is still interesting. It contains two recumbent effigies of unknown origin.

Adjoining the churchyard is a small camp surrounded by a triple ditch. Like many other earthworks in the neighbourhood, it is most probably of British origin. Bicknor House, close by, contains some ancient carved beams in the cellar.

Bicknor Court, just outside the village, is of interest in more ways than one. Originally built in

Tudor times, the present building, with the exception of the kitchen and a room above, is of comparatively modern date. Both house and lawn stand on a cinder-heap ; for Bicknor, which to-day has no signs of industrial labour other than the smoke from Lower Lydbrook just across the hill, had in former times forges of its own. Bicknor Court was the home of the Forest family of Wyrrall, a name which we shall meet again.

CHAPTER XVI

NEWNHAM AND WESTBURY

THUS far we have explored the Forest from within, taking the Speech House as the nominal, approximately accurate, and most convenient centre for our task. Let it not be imagined for a moment that the expeditions we have sketched out for the tourist's guidance are exhaustive ; far from it. Between the radial excursions we have made the wanderer may discover for himself, not by the score but by the hundred, walks and rides little if at all inferior in attraction to the routes already sketched. Fettered by time and space we have selected from the Forest's bewildering infinitude of loveliness such expeditions as seemed most to call for note.

But we are concerned not only with the Forest as it is to-day ; we also have its ancient limits in our mind. These limits, as already pointed out, are roughly bounded by the railway from Grange Court to Ross, thence to Monmouth and Chepstow, and from Chepstow by the Severn to Grange Court. Both as regards the ancient and the modern Forest, however, this statement calls for some qualification. The line from Grange Court to Ross just skirts the Forest's modern boundary ; so closely that the traveller by rail has the great woodlands almost constantly in sight. A tract of

former Forest on the right hand of the line is thus omitted from the circuit made.

On the contrary, the converging lines from Ross to Chepstow and from Grange Court to Chepstow, though following the ancient boundary formed by the Severn and the Wye, include at the south end much land now long since disafforested.

It will be worth while to follow, more or less—afoot by preference—the railway route just named. We shall omit entering the long disafforested area to the north, which now contains no woodland tracts nor aught else of prime interest to reward our quest. The upper portion of the western boundary formed by the Wye we have already touched on more than once—at Symonds Yat, at English Bicknor, and at Highmeadow. There still remain to us the lower Wye waters and the Severn shore.

For the cyclist or automobilist who chooses to rest faithful to the Speech House, each place we name can easily be reached in a few hours' ride or less from the hotel. We propose, however, to take them in an orderly line, with the small Severn-side town of Newnham as our starting-point. We will first travel east and north, visiting Westbury, and then striking inland from the Severn to Flaxley, Abenhall, and Micheldean. Southward from Newnham we shall skirt the Severn closely all the way to Chepstow ; it is a coast-line far too little visited, with interests and beauties peculiarly its own. From Chepstow we shall make north-west, diverging at an acute angle from the Severn and following the Wye ; not by the valley in which lies the direct Monmouth road, with Tintern Abbey upon the river's farther bank, and thus outside the



GIPSIES BY THE SEVERN AT NEWNHAM.

Forest's ancient boundary ; but by a road lying high above the river on the Forest side. True we shall here but rarely have the modern forest in our view, and then at best far off; but to visit Dean Forest with any purpose of completeness, and yet ignore St. Briavel's Castle, not to speak of Newland church, would be almost to leave the part of Hamlet out.

Nor need the tourist fear that he is bidding the great woods a long farewell. From Newnham itself, from Flaxley, and yet again from Lydney, we shall stray within the Forest more than once, and every such divergence will reveal fresh scenes of beauty to our eyes. So, without further parley, to our "beating of the bounds."

A pleasanter small town than Newnham it has seldom been our lot to see. Its one main street slopes gently from the church upon the cliff at the south end down to the level of the Severn shore again ; and in that street shopkeepers, cottagers, and occupants of fine old houses dwell side by side in seeming social amity and content. Moreover, the town holds in the foreground that for which, according to a traveller of materialistic views, the finest scenery is not one whit the worse —a good hotel. It stands at the top of the main street exactly opposite the church, and for many years shared with the Speech House the entertainment of the late Sir Charles Dilke, when visiting his Gloucestershire constituency. The landlord will show to favoured guests some curious tapestry. The tiny stained glass lozenge in the staircase window, and the glorious stairs we are not likely to delay discovering for ourselves.

The piece of glass depicts the fable of the Grasshopper and Ants, and has the following legend underneath :

> The grasshopper came unto the aunts and demanded part of theer Corne whereupon they did aske What hee had done in the sommer, and he saide he had song, and they sayde if you song in the sommer then daunce in the winter. Anno 1622

It is more than probable that the hotel was formerly the manor-house of Newnham. The coffee-room is lofty and has a handsome mantelpiece. Whether, as some think, the small garden behind the house occupies the site of a Roman camp is doubtful.

The fine church fronting the hotel is almost a facsimile of that destroyed by fire in 1881, only six years after having undergone expensive restoration. Newnham's churches have suffered alike from fire and water ; a former church, which stood somewhere below the site upon the river bank now occupied by a most excellent preparatory school for boys, having been undermined and rendered useless by the Severn tides. Handsome as is the present church, and interesting as is its fine late-Norman font, the visitor will probably linger most willingly beside the churchyard railings on the steep cliff's edge. At the right moment here, two senses may be gratified at once ; for while the mellow bells high overhead play "Drink to me only with thine eyes," the eye, ranging across the broad horseshoe of the Severn's bend, takes in a scene of wondrous charm.



THE SEVERN AT NEWNHAM, LOW TIDE.

True the peninsula encircled by that horseshoe bend is flat, with Arlingham church tower rising directly opposite, conspicuous to the view. But beyond that level and well-wooded stretch of pasture land there lies the long ridge of the Cotswold Hills. Behind Arlingham, and still on the level, are quaint old-world villages that lie beside the pleasant waters of the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal; Frampton-on-Severn is of this number, with its eleventh century manor-house and its wide pond-studded village green. To those who have the time and will to leave the Forest for a while and cross the Severn stream, a ferry at the bottom of a cross street of the town offers the way. At low tide a small portion only of the journey will be made by boat; the remaining area of tenacious mud-flats stretching from the farther shore must needs be traversed in the ferryman's strong arms.

Newnham, now so peaceful on this summer afternoon, was once a stirring place—a place of war at times. The salmon-fishers' boats lying mirrored in the placid water underneath the churchyard cliff are perhaps the largest vessels Newnham knows to-day; and probably it was in no very great leviathan that Strongbow embarked here for Ireland. But up to the middle and end of the eighteenth century vessels of five and six hundred tons were Newnham-built and owned. The water-borne traffic to and from the port of Gloucester now leaves the river at the Sharpness docks below the Severn railway bridge some miles down-stream, and enters the canal already spoken of.

The pleasant promenade which, from the church-yard, stretches westward towards the Forest's rising

ground, was once a rampart for defensive ends. It was about this spot that Newnham saw a stirring fight upon the 8th of May in 1644. Let us hear Corbet, chronicler of these events. Massey had arrived from Westbury, a place where he had had complete success. He found at Newnham "a strong party of Sir John Winter's forces keeping garrison in the church, and the fort adjoining, of considerable strength, who at that instant were much daunted and distracted by the losse of Congrave their governour." Congrave (otherwise Congreve) had fallen, under circumstances soon to be narrated, at Little Dean two miles inland. Meanwhile, let Corbet continue :—

"Our men were possest of the town without opposition, and recovered the houses, by which they got nere the workes. The Governour (Massy)" —that is, governor of Gloucester for the Parliament— "commanded a blind of faggots to be made athwart the street, drew up two pieces of ordnance within pistoll shot, and observing a place not well flanked where he might lead up his men to the best advantage, himself marched before them, and found that part of the work fortified with double pallisadoes; the souldiers being provided with swaees [*sic*] to cut them down, and having drawn them close within a dead angle, and secure from their shot, and drawing the rest of his forces for a storme, the enemy forthwith desires a parley, and to speake with the governour, which he refused, and commanded a sudden surrender. In this interim some of the enemy jumpt over the workes, and so our men broke in upon the rest, who ranne from the out worke into the churche, hoping to cleare the



NEWNHAM.

mount which we had gained. But our men were too nimble, who had no sooner entred the mount, but rushed upon them before they could reach home, and tumbled into the church altogether. Then they cryed for quarter, when, in the very point of victory, a disaster was like to befall us; a barrell of gunpowder was fired in the church, undoubtedly of set purpose, and was conceived to be done by one Tipper, a most virulent Papist, and Sir John Winter's servant, despairing withall of his redemption, being a prisoner before, and having falsified his engagement. The powderblast blew many out of the church, and sorely singed a greater number, but killed none. The souldiers, enraged, fell upon them, and in the heat of blood slew 20, and amongst others this Tipper. All the rest had quarter for their lives (save one Captaine Butler, an Irish rebell, who was knocked down by a common souldier) and an hundred prisoners taken. The service was performed without the losse of a man on our side."

Altogether a very stirring little fight, and brightly told, though Mr. Corbet's somewhat excessive use of the comma may perhaps leave the modern reader scant of breath.

After this it is not inappropriate to learn that Newnham was—and in a sense, is still—possessor of an ancient and historic sword, said to be the longest in England save one. It was presented to the town by King John, and acquired the following inscribed legend at a later date—

JOHN MORSE BEING MAIER
THIS SORD DID REPAIER.
1594.

—for Newnham had a mayor in those and even later days. A century or more ago the Newnham corporation was abolished, the town being now ruled by an Urban Council. The sword was presented by the last mayor to the then lord of the manor, and later still was parted with again, passing into the hands of a well-known artist, a collector of ancient arms. But a new lord of the manor presently arose whose soul was justly vexed at such an alienation of this ancient relic from the town. He, at the artist's death, acquired the sword, which is now in the safe keeping of his son at The Haie, a pleasant mansion lying on the slopes of the Blaise Bailey, and some mile or more outside the town.

By the courtesy of the owner we were recently allowed to see the sword. It is a massive double-edged weapon, with a total length—including handle—of six feet; most probably a sword intended, not for battle, but for merely ceremonial use. John Morse's record of repair is now scarce legible. If, as some say, the chasing of the blade was once enriched with gold, that too has long since disappeared—a fault not seldom found with gold!

Westbury, north of Newnham, can be reached by road in some three miles; but after passing the half mile or more of highway open to the river bank Broad Oak is reached, and here the pedestrian will prefer to take a footpath on the right and follow it through fields upon the edge of the low cliffs until the spire of Westbury church guides him again inland. The walk, if taken on some bright afternoon, will show us sunlit Garden Cliff, made up of Rhaetic beds dear to the fossil-hunter and geologist; behind it are the hills up-stream.

But morning is the time to climb the summit of the cliff itself. Then, seated on the short dry turf and looking back over the broad sweep of Severn, here swelling almost to the semblance of a lake, we have the rounded masses of the Forest at their best; Blaise Bailey and Popeshill stand foremost, with the gaunt ridge above the town of Cinderford lying farther back, but clearly visible between; while Newnham nestles snugly between wood and stream.

Drawing near the church the tower is soon seen to be detached and standing fifty feet away. Attached to it was once the former church, or rather chantry chapel, the roof-line of which can still be seen against the tower wall. For the tower, dating from about 1270, was in all likelihood erected as a "pele" or fort, to which the chapel was added, if not exactly as an afterthought, at least as a matter of minor importance.

And it is perhaps the tower, with its fine soaring spire roofed with wooden shingles that attracts us most. The spire was once re-roofed entirely with staves from cider casks, though few may now remain in place. Fine as this spire is when viewed externally, it is yet far more wonderful within. Mount to the tower-top by the steep winding stair, and view the spire's tapering skeleton from below. Mount, if your head and nerves are good, the ladders which will lead you to the spire's summit and a peephole just below the crest; in either case we cannot fail of admiration for that mass of oaken framing, mortised together and secured with wooden pegs, with scarce a nail throughout the structure. It is a piece of antique workmanship such as is seldom to be seen.

The church itself is a medley of architectural styles from 1300 onward. Though the fact is, as we have seen, not mentioned in *Domesday*, there is good reason to believe that a church existed here even prior to those of which the earliest traces can be found to-day. The "rights of the rector of the church of Westbury" are mentioned as early as 1100, and the place was probably the ecclesiastical, as it was the civil, centre of the immediate neighbourhood. Even to-day it possesses a large and imposing workhouse, a building if anything too conspicuous in the landscape. Leaving the churchyard for the road it will be rather towards the pleasant house of Westbury Court, with its delightful gardens, that we shall elect to turn.

The man who built the high brick wall that shuts those old-world gardens from the traveller on the road was either proud or generous, or perhaps both. For at brief intervals the wall has oblong openings cut to show the lovely scene within. This gives a double pleasure; for the spaces thus cut out are filled with old wrought-iron railings of fine workmanship. So, although Westbury Court is not, save on occasion, a show-place of Gloucestershire, no small a portion of its gardens' beauty may be garnered even by the casual passer-by.

Alas! that motor-cars to-day should, through these gracious gaps, powder the long terraces of turf, the old square-cut yew hedges, with a smirching coat of summer dust. "Drive slowly" should be the notice posted at each end of the great garden wall; and no less in the interest of the motorist himself than of the garden's growth, for few would willingly sweep unobservant past a scene so fair.



WESTBURY COURT.

The gardens, laid out in the days of William and Mary, retain to-day their quaint but fair Dutch form. The stream which, freed from the narrow Flaxley valley, hurries Severnwards across the fields, hushes its voice as it is carried underneath the road, and, entering the gardens, silently keeps fresh and pure the water in the canals which stretch surrounded by broad paths of turf. A statue rises from the middle of the long canal beside the road-side wall; a punt swings moored beneath the old-world gazebo that overlooks the road. A pair of rampant bears surmount the pillars of the entrance gates; giant pomegranates carved in stone are reared on either side an opening in the wall; while here and there quaint forms in clay, modelled from some which caught the eye of Westbury's present owner when he was visiting a Normandy château, appear upon the walls. Farther within the garden's depths there stands a cherished ilex or holm-oak, surely unmatched for girth and signs of age.

Square-cut yew hedges, trim and straight, raise their dark outlines from the sunlit grass. Square as may be his angles, rigid and symmetrical his lines, there was yet something worthy in the methods of the seventeenth-century Dutch gardener after all. His methods seem to make for leisure and peace. Westbury Court gardens point the truth beyond all possibility of doubt.

Only a small portion of the former house, a sort of summer parlour, stands to-day. A predecessor of that former house stood a short distance off among the fields; digging revealed old spurs and other relics on the site. Most probably it was

in this forerunner of the present mansion that a hard fight took place in May of the year 1644. The Royalists held the church—or perhaps the tower—and a "strong house" adjoining. Massey, the governor of Gloucester, marched to attack these strongholds of the King. The church was first stormed, "stooles and ladders" being placed against the windows, grenades thrown in, and the little garrison ejected. The house fell next, eighty prisoners being taken, and twenty slain. Massey then passed to Newnham with results we have already seen.

The present owner of Westbury, a member of the ancient local family of Colchester, is perhaps linked as closely with the Forest and its ancient history as a man may be. He is, to begin with, one of the four elected Verderers, sitting—when there is business upon which to sit—at the forty-day Attachment Courts, and dealing justice there; not indeed, as formerly, deliberating upon damage done to vert or venison, but upon the rare encroachments that occur. He is, moreover, an hereditary Woodward, and as such entitled to mysterious dues of "top and lop," of no great value perhaps to-day.

From Newnham, Westbury, and the neighbourhood the Severn "bore" is to be seen; that tidal wave which, ordinarily of about a foot in height, rises at certain times and seasons to a swift on-rushing wall of water of imposing size.

From Westbury we can, if so inclined, proceed direct to Flaxley some two miles away; or, better perhaps, return to Newnham, leaving Flaxley and the scenes that lie beyond it for another day.

CHAPTER XVII

FLAXLEY ABBEY

THE lovely valley in which Flaxley lies may possibly—though we should greatly doubt it —take at other seasons of the year an even fairer aspect than it wore on the late April afternoon when last we visited the place. After a lengthened spell of cold north winds which held the waiting buds fast closed there had been welcome rain; and as we took the pleasant walk of some two miles or less across the fields from Newnham there was bright sun, a sky of deepest blue, a soft west wind and high white rolling clouds. In the broad meadows emerald grass, long sighed for by the farmers, was at last springing thickly for the scattered flocks; beech leaves were opening, and the chestnuts were in their first display of leaf. Over the orchard land and cottage gardens and upon the woodlands of the forest rising on our left, there spread that web of faint elusive green, at once so fair, so cherished, and alas! so fleeting in its stay.

And when, descending the steep slope of the last meadow to the road that skirts the park, the Abbey lies in view, it is in springtime that it most appears a sweet desirable dwelling-place. Beautiful of situation it must always be; but, backed by the bare leaflessness of winter woods, it might perhaps

wear a sense of isolation and of chill. Autumn perchance suggests the not unfounded supposition that the house is damp ; in the full tide of summer's glory one might wish for hill-side breezes and a spot less wholly circled by surrounding woods. April is undoubtedly the magic moment to see Flaxley at its best.

The modern builder would, of course, have chosen a more elevated site—the slopes that lead up to the Forest on the west, or, on the east, the sharply rising ridge that shuts the deerpark from the house and grounds. But the Cistercians of eight hundred years ago had other views. They chose "a place fit for habitation, fertile, good for fruit, suitable for grain, buried in woods, abounding in springs, a horn of plenty, a place apart from the haunts of men." All these conditions are fulfilled at Flaxley. Of three Cistercian abbeys in three neighbouring counties—Tintern in Monmouthshire, Dore in Herefordshire, Flaxley in Gloucestershire—all are beautiful for situation, but none more exquisitely so than that which lies before our eyes to-day.

Even although the greater portion of the present mansion dates only from the destruction of the ancient house by fire nearly a century and half ago, the antique spirit of the place remains. Yet Flaxley is essentially a snug and habitable home. The dining-room and drawing-room, placed on either side the entrance hall, have perhaps a somewhat formal rigid air ; not so the bright "bow parlour" looking towards the lawn. Upstairs boudoirs and bedrooms form a pleasant home-like medley. Only one ancient first-floor chamber,

now the library, takes a more stately tone. But of that more presently ; we need a word of history first.

There is still some doubt as to the precise date of the founding of Flaxley Abbey, or the Abbey of St. Mary at Dene ; but the best authorities have now narrowed down the possible limits to the six years between 1148 and 1154. Its builder was Roger, son of Milo Fitzwalter, Constable of St. Briavels ; he founded it in memory of the death of his father from an arrow-shot received while hunting on Christmas Eve 1143 or 1144, the former date being the most probable. One old writer, indeed, has it that the accident thus commemorated occurred to Roger's *brother*, but there is no record of any of the sons of Milo meeting that swift death. Tradition, as is usual in such cases, has it that the abbey stands upon the spot where Milo fell. The truth of this is doubtless possible, but no more. The Constable's death-place was indeed happily chosen if it occurred on a spot in every respect so well suited to the well-known Cistercian tastes.

The well-being of Flaxley was not called on to consist solely in the beauty of its situation and the valley's fertile soil. Henry II granted it many privileges by charter. It possessed free pasturage throughout the forest, within the bounds of which its site then lay ; even to-day, it lies, outside indeed, but only just across the road. The pannage of the forest acorns, mast and chestnuts formed no trifling boon. It had firewood, and timber both for building and repairs. It had forges, it had Severn fisheries ; of the forges one was fixed and one itinerant. The toll of trees once allotted to

the abbey from the forest for the service of these forges was, as we saw, exchanged in time for the possession of the Abbot's Wood.

The ponds, now drained and green with grass, but with their banks still clearly visible within the pleasant meadows to the north, may have been first fashioned for the better preservation of those trout for which the valley's stream was famed; but they also served as a store of water-power for the iron-works. Even as late as in the early eighteenth century a furnace and a forge were working here. But Flaxley's manufactures have since disappeared, and nothing now remains to mar the sylvan peace.

It must be mentioned here that the abbey is not a "show place," it being only by the kindness of the present owner that we were allowed a sight of what is here to be described. Nevertheless we were not the first stranger to receive Sir Thomas Crawley-Boevey's hospitality; and we doubt whether others, if really taking an intelligent interest in the place, would be by him refused a sight of the so-called refectory and abbot's room.

To find the sole remaining portions of the former building we must leave the family portraits in the sitting-rooms and the long hall, the tapestries which hang upon the bedroom walls, and pass into the servants' offices. Three rooms—the kitchen, servants' hall, and a third—have by partition walls been formed from one great chamber, sixty-five feet long by twenty-five in breadth. One cannot view the whole without a wish that these dividing walls had not been built to meet the modern household needs; for the old chamber was a glorious one indeed.

The architecture is of true Cistercian style, massive and plain ; the roof is of circular vaulting, with ribs which rest upon plain capitals raised some five feet above the floor. In each of the five bays there is a window, now much modernized, which opens to the west. Upon the east the ancient doorways still remain. The wall on the east side is eight feet thick.

The ancient refectory it has been called until quite recent years—always a pleasant and convenient name, suggesting comfort and good cheer, to be applied to the remaining portion of an old religious house. Then comes the expert on the scene ; upsets time-honoured theories and nomenclature, pointing out that the refectory of a Cistercian abbey was upon the cloister's southern side, while this is on the west.

So we must needs reform our views. The range of buildings extending along the west side of a Cistercian cloister was the cellarium—not to be rashly assimilated to our modern notion of a cellar. Nor was the cellarius, in whose charge this portion of an abbey lay, a man of cask and spigot, a mere tapster to the house. Under the abbot he was a person of standing and importance in the community, managing its secular affairs, paying and receiving money, ruling the lay brothers, and presiding over the reception of the abbey's passing guests.

This room was, then, at any rate a portion of the cellarium buildings ; the central portion, with the hospitium or guests' quarters on the south, while the cellarer with the lay brethren most likely occupied the northern portion towards the church.

The exact purpose of the room cannot be decided offhand. It may, indeed, have been the refectory for the *conversi* or lay brothers—a different place from the refectory proper ; or it may have formed a workroom. The smaller barrel-roofed chambers opening from it to the south were doubtless lavatories, a stream of water flowing conveniently below, as in so many another abbey of this order.

We pass up the back stairs, not without glancing at the fine arched doorway at their foot. Over the great vaulted chamber stands to-day comparatively modern work ; but over the two smaller rooms we find the so-called abbot's room. More probably it was a chamber for the reception of some specially distinguished guests. Earlier Cistercian abbots had no special room, but passed their days and nights in brotherly companionship with their monks, sleeping in the common dormitory. It was only in degenerate times that the abbots withdrew themselves to a dignified solitude, and then their special apartments were usually to the east of the church, among the buildings of the infirmary.

Whatever was the chamber's use it is a noble room, with a fine fourteenth century roof of timberwork. The wall-pieces are placed on small stone corbels in the walls, and there is a good cornice. The fine pointed west window has long since lost its tracery ; but the room, now used as a library, is dignified with family portraits, and with long rows of volumes leather-bound.

Having seen these chambers, one upstairs and one below, we have seen all of ancient date that now remains in place. Nevertheless, all is not yet visited that is worth seeing. Under the morning

shadow of the noble beech that stands upon the lawn—a beech which successfully rivals any in the Forest itself, if not in height, at any rate by reason of its mighty girth and singularly perfect shape—there lies the site of Flaxley's chapter-house. Modern care has marked it out upon the sward with stones, an oblong measuring forty-five by five-and-twenty feet. Within its bounds lie three stone coffin-lids unearthed from below. One, in a remarkably good state of preservation, shows a right hand and arm holding a crozier, and is without doubt the cover of some bygone abbot's grave. The chapter-house would be his natural resting-place, only bishops being entitled to a tomb within the church itself. Cistercian monks were buried, not as has generally and picturesquely been supposed, within the cloister-garth, but in the cemetery eastward of the church. The church itself would probably stand in the present orchard north of the gardens. Flaxley was a small abbey, and was not ruled by a mitred abbot.

We cross the little stream and breast the sharp ascent formed by the crest of hill which shelters Flaxley from the east. Instantly the solitary and self-contained seclusion of the house itself is changed for a far-reaching view. North-east there lies May Hill, with other and more distant points. More to the right rises the spire of Westbury church, with Gloucester's old cathedral and the distant Cotswolds lying beyond. In the foreground the windings of the Severn, resembling less a river than a chain of lakes, light up the scene.

The present church of Flaxley, standing in its sunny graveyard at the entrance to the park,

appears to be at least the third the place has known. A successor of the abbey church had a site which may still be traced in the churchyard a little to the east of the present building. This latter was erected in 1856 from designs by Sir Gilbert Scott, and is, both within and without, an elegant but not too ornate little building. Externally its spire roofed with wooden shingles takes our eye; especially when we learn that the present shingling is the work of one man, an estate carpenter still in Sir Thomas's employ.

Inside, the stone font has a marble basin, which the vicar points out as a combination probably unique in England. In the vestry we read—that is if time is of no special value—a lengthy memorial tablet to one Catherine Boevey, who died in 1726.

Curious coincidence that a dwelling from which for many centuries all women were excluded as a snare, should in due time have come to bear the sole sway of a chatelaine. For this was Flaxley's fate; and she who ruled the abbey for some forty years is not unworthy of a place in local fame.

The abbey, as a lesser monastery, was dissolved in 1536, and granted in the following year to Sir William Kingston, constable of the Tower of London, and formerly constable of St. Briavels. After remaining in this family for a hundred years the abbey passed in 1647 into the hands of the two brothers Boeve, whose father, a native of Flanders, had fled from the persecutions under the Duke of Alva. A William Boeve, Bovey, or Boevey, died here in 1692 after some seven years of married life. It is the epitaph of William Boevey's relict, widowed at the age of twenty-one, we read to-day.

We will not stay to quote the long and highly laudatory lines upon the tablet in the church; nor those beside it, copied from another tablet in Westminster Abbey. We may refer the visitor to Nicholls, who has faithfully set forth the widow's many benefactions to the Flaxley poor; showing how, among other of her many acts of grace, the children from the village school were once admitted to her presence, to see the dame arrayed in white and silver, and to be further dazzled with her many jewels. It is perhaps no great matter now to us to know her as possessor of a "handsome house and pleasant gardens and a great estate." What stirs us deeper is the legend that she was in her own person that "perverse widow" who so marred the good Sir Roger's life.

There is some foundation for this supposition, for the lady knew both Addison and Steele; the latter perhaps the more intimately, for as he journeyed from London to his house at Llangunnor, near Carmarthen, Flaxley would lie at no great distance from the road—unless indeed he was wont to travel by Bristol and to cross the Severn at Aust Cliff, a route not without perils as will presently be seen. Moreover, Sir Roger de Coverley was, as we know, a gentleman of Worcestershire, while the widow lived in an adjoining county. And might not the "confidant" by whom the widow was so assiduously attended, be that same Mrs. Mary Pope, who coming ostensibly to Flaxley for a visit of three weeks or so, stayed forty years and made her name almost immortal by her affection for Popeshill close by?

All this, like other legends of the Forest neigh-

bourhood, is surely well invented if not true. The portraits of good Mrs. Boevey in the Abbey hall show features comely if not strictly beautiful. It surely lends an added charm to this fair place if we believe some worthy prototype of old Sir Roger to have paid his persevering, wholly unsuccessful court beside the brook, or underneath the stately beech upon the lawn.

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM FLAXLEY TO THE LEA

THE Forest holds few vales more lovely than that threaded by the road which leads us north from Flaxley's ancient abbey and its modern church. In spring the wooded slopes of Welshbury Hill upon our left are lighted by an azure carpet of wild hyacinths; while through the meadows on the right the Flaxley brook sings gaily on its Severnward way. This is the lovely vale of Castiard, named from the chestnuts which grew so freely here in ancient days. In Chestnuts Wood they flourish still; but that lies slightly off our route to-day, and will be better taken in another walk.

But Welshbury Hill upon our left, immediately beyond the church, should be ascended, crowned as it is by a large British camp. The camp is oblong, measuring some five hundred by three hundred feet, and guarded by a triple rampart on the west and south.

For something like a mile from Flaxley we pursue our way towards Abenhall and Micheldean; passing first Flaxley Mill upon our right, then Gunns Mills on the left. This latter was a paper-mill, worked till some thirty years ago. Here we shall find a road to Little Dean turn off upon the left. Immediately beyond, a gate leads past the ample mill-house with its now useless pond.

Following the stream above the pond, six or eight minutes' walk will bring us to St. Anthony's Well.

It is not a drinking fountain only, but a bathing-place as well, and no more fitting setting could well be found in which to startle some fair wood-nymph at her morning bath. The open Edgehills Wood, in which the stream springs in a gushing torrent from its source, is rich in beech; and though the ancient tree in whose broad shade the well and bathing-pool once lay is gone, others are rising in its place, and still in early June the flickering shadow of a million whispering beech-leaves plays upon the water dancing in the pool—an oblong, not unpicturesque, stone tank, in which the bather might have water to his shoulders, and perhaps even space wherein to swim a stroke or two.

Not only has the well long held a local reputation for the cure of skin diseases, but it is a wishing-well. A more practical service of the strong stream of water pouring through the bathing-cistern, is that it feeds, aided by one or two small affluents, the Flaxley stream. Whatever may be its true virtues as regards the human skin, it evidently suited well the health of the once famous Flaxley trout, until the refuse from the paper-mills destroyed them for a time. Nowadays restocking of the stream with fish is generally followed by the prompt arrival of the poaching heron on the scene.

No nymph is here to-day, essaying either cure or fortune at the ancient spring; Actæon would steal upon the spot in vain. We eat our lunch with nought but whispering leaf-voices and the rushing of the silver rill below the pool for com-



SAINT ANTHONY'S WELL.

pany. The water from the well is clear and cool, nor is it injured by a judicious diluent from a pocket flask. A gipsy family pass by us as we rest beneath the beech, picturesque brown-skinned figures seen in the dancing shadows of the half-lit wood. Bark-strippers perhaps ; for gipsies sometimes take a contract for this Forest work, the women stacking the long rows of bark to dry. So presently we take the dusty road again.

Another mile we travel, with the high ridges of the Forest ever on our left ; ascending Edgehill we should find ourselves in Latimer Walk and close to Cinderford. Later the woods are broken up by common land, with houses clinging to the slopes. The little church of Abenhall is seen upon the right ; some quarter of a mile of road may be cut off by crossing a stile and following a path through fields to the Church Farm.

The church is interesting in many ways. It dates from, say, 1300, with a small tower of from one to two centuries later at its western end. Within the church, and in the churchyard too, as we shall see, there will be something for us all. An ancient hour-glass stand is fixed beside the pulpit, but the glass it once contained is gone, and priests of Abenhall to-day are free to lengthen their discourse unnoticed and unchecked—officially at least. Some remains of ancient glass are in the tracery of a small window at the east end of the north chancel wall ; and the glass in the larger east and west windows, though modern, is good in tone. The signs of the zodiac are upon the floor within the altar-rails ; and turning back the chancel matting we shall find a tombstone attributed to members

of the ancient family of Pyrke. Attached are brasses in good preservation, and giving an excellent rendering of Jacobean costume.

Whether these brasses belonged originally to the stone, or either stone or brasses to the family just named—the Pyrkes of Little Dean—is held in doubt by some. Great, it must be remembered, was the power of a wealthy country squire some few centuries since. Lord of his little kingdom, of the church and village at his door, how easy, by an ancient date carved on a modern stone, a brass moved here, to give an undeserved importance to his family and kin. And who shall say this was not often done?

Lovers of woodwork will admire the fine roofing of the Abenhall nave. But it is the fifteenth century octagonal font, standing unfortunately in deep gloom beside the entrance door, that most detains us here to-day. For it was a gift to the church in 1450 of the Guild of Free Miners of the Forest. On the eight panels of the octagon were carved respectively the eight devices given below :—

1. The Cross of St. George.
2. Arms of Stafford, dukes of Buckingham.
3. Device of the Free Smiths (horseshoe and tongs).
4. Device of the Free Miners (picks and spades).
5. Arms of Beauchamp, earls of Warwick.
6. Arms of Abbenhall of Abbenhall.
7. Arms of Serjeaunt of Longhope.
8. Arms of Beauchamp (repeated, as on panel 5).

The presence, among emblems of Free Smiths and Miners, of the arms of local families can

readily be understood ; but what brought Stafford and Beauchamp in this company is not so readily explained. It does not appear that either noble house was connected with the Forest or held land therein. Trade-marks and ancestral arms alike are now wellnigh illegible ; only the Free Smiths' tongs and horseshoe still show clear and well defined upon one panel of the stone.

Obliterated too is the shield of the Free Miners carved on an outer stone built in the tower's west wall. But we can still admire the ancient yews. Collectors of quaint epitaphs will need their notebooks too ; for the following example will be easily found upon an upright stone between the tower and the churchyard gate. It keeps green the memory of an unfortunate young man named Yem, who met an early death under the circumstances narrated as follows :—

> As I was riding on the road,
> Not knowing what was coming,
> A Bull that was loggered and pressed,
> After me came a running.
> He with his logger did me strike,
> He being sore offended,
> I from my horse was forced to fall,
> And thus my days were ended.

"Logger," it may be noted, is a block of wood attached to an animal to prevent it breaking through hedges ; such may be often seen worn round the neck of an old ewe. There seems a fairly obvious connection with "loggerheads."

Before entering Micheldean from Abenhall it is worth while for the active walker to strike across to the left, and, climbing the steep slope of Plump Common, reach the boundary wall of The Wilder-

ness, a house perched among fine trees upon the very summit of the hill. By following the boundary upon its southern, west, and northern sides, a splendid view can be obtained of all the country round, for Plump Hill rises some eight hundred feet and more above the sea. Northward we look towards the woods of the Lee Bailey on the left, with those of Lower Lee Bailey on the right—both part of the old bailiwick of Le Lee.

Beeches are in profusion here, growing in scattered groups of twos and threes. Micheldean may be reached from the north side of the hill by a path through a meadow, on the left of which are three old yew-trees standing in a hollow of the field.

The Wilderness has a not uninteresting history. It was long the property of the Colchester family now represented by the owner of Westbury Court. An heir of the Colchesters, coming into his own after a long minority, found that the old house at Westbury had been pulled down by his guardians, and a modern one erected in its place. Disgusted at this change he enlarged the Wilderness, an old farmhouse, and made of it his home. In still later years the family sold the house to a new owner, who in his turn leased it to a large private asylum near Gloucester. Used as a convalescent home its lofty situation and fine air proved so effective in promoting the recovery of patients that it was purchased from the owner for this purpose at a handsome price.

We might think Micheldean a large and not especially attractive village, were it not that a conspicuous advertisement announces some forth-

coming fête at the town hall. A former market town it is, and now a not unthriving place, with cement works and other industries. But it holds little to detain us save the church. The visitor will doubtless notice for himself the four-centred nave arches, the fine oak roofing of the aisles, and especially the very uncommon wooden panelling which reaches to the roof above the level of the former screen, and is adorned with paintings dating from the fifteenth century.

From Micheldean, Cinderford and the Speech House could easily be reached by road ; but we prefer to follow the Ross road as far as Micheldean road station, about a mile and half away. If there is a worse road in England on a dusty summer afternoon we have no wish to travel it. Sixty tons of cement, as the station-master tells us presently, are now being hauled each weekday to the station from the works at Micheldean ; and the traction-engine with its rumbling train of trucks has long ago reduced the road macadam to a chaos of loose stones, lying hidden underneath some inches of white choking dust.

Pleasanter is the sight of the bark-loaded waggons creeping towards the station from the slopes of Lower Lee Bailey, which we pass upon our left. Trees stripped and prone lie scattered all along the hill, while bark is propped in rows to dry. We cross the county boundary upon this mile and half of dusty road, and thus the day's walk has its end in Herefordshire.

Not half a mile away beyond the station and the line the little spire of the small Herefordshire church of Lea shows from above the vicarage garden trees ;

with time to spare, it would, in the Micawber phrase, be "rash" to pass it by. The building is transition Norman, and we are at once attracted by the small and grotesque heads upon the capitals of the pillars which divide the nave from the north aisle. On the aisle wall there is a fresco—modern, but very beautiful—depicting John the Baptist pointing out the Christ. The church holds, too, an ancient chest; but even were these various features lacking, the beautiful and curious font would be worth walking many a mile to see.

For this small Herefordshire church contains—a recent gift—a white marble font, probably of the eleventh or twelfth century, and certainly of South Italian work. Standing upon the stone which forms the base, a small but massive elephant supports upon its back a slender shaft. The shaft's upper end carries the shallow-basined font itself—a former holy water stoup. Round this are sculptured figures in eight groups, somewhat grotesque perhaps at first sight, yet surely with some hidden meaning in them when the old Italian craftsman did his work.

The groups comprise :—

A boat with mast and sail, rowed by a man.
An ass and dragon.
A serpent and lion.
A man and fish.
A dog attacking a ram.
A bird pecking a fish.
Mermaids holding each other by the hand.
A merman holding his own tail.

Above this circling sculpture runs a narrow ribbon of mosaic work, in diamond shapes of

crimson, blue and gold ; and the cloth thrown over the back of the elephant has borders ornamented with the same. It has been said by sceptics that the shaft and elephant are of more modern date than is the holy-water stoup itself. But this is doubtful ; the elephant appears in many specimens of Italian art coeval with the font, and it is hardly likely that the border of mosaic could have been so closely copied later as to accurately match the ribbon which surrounds the font itself. However that may be, this stranger from a far-off southern country, viewed with the sunlight pouring through the church's western window on the snowy stone, is of a marvellous grace.

CHAPTER XIX

PLEASANT STILE AND LITTLE DEAN

THE Newnham visitor will not rest long contented with the town and Severn shore, but will cast longing eyes at the great ridge of hill which shuts them from the forest on the west; believing rightly that, the hill-top gained, he will be granted a still wider, fairer view than meets him from the churchyard wall. The point of vantage to be reached is Pleasant Stile, some mile and half away.

The road to Pleasant Stile and Little Dean is reached from the main street by roads both north and south of the hotel. It runs irregularly, first downhill, then up, then down again, until the foot of the high ridge, having the long and lovely slopes of the Blaise Bailey on the left, is gained, and we climb slowly to an altitude of some five hundred feet. But here, as in so many districts of our tour, footpaths abound; and from the far side of Newnham station the whole walk may be across the fields.

Near the roadside New Zealand inn there were, not many years ago, traces of Roman pavement to be seen; for the road follows an old Roman way.

Upon our right, whether we follow road or fields, there stands, when the deep hollow threaded by a tiny brook is crossed, an old farmhouse—the house

of Steers. Unwarned, the antiquarian traveller might pass it by, for its appearance has nothing that particularly strikes him from the path. But to neglect it would be to lose the sight of what an antiquarian friend has described as "the finest house in the Forest"—the ancient Forest, that is, for the house stands now outside the modern boundaries.

Even if we shall hardly dare affirm the present house of Steers—formerly Store or Stores—to have served King John as a hunting-box, it is most obviously of great antiquity—not later than Elizabethan certainly. The side which looks across the meadows to the Little Dean and Newnham road is least attractive; it is the foldyard and garden fronts which best proclaim its age externally. A modern porch of brick by which we enter contains two small windows seemingly appropriated from a church. Just opposite this porch there is a weeping ash of splendid size, having such curiously contorted branches springing from the summit of its trunk as may remind us of the twisted and eccentric growths of far Japan.

Inside the house the marks of age are even clearer than those seen without. Each ancient door has massive latch and hinges many centuries old; oak beams are overhead in every room, their lower edges bevelled as in many other houses of the neighbourhood; the upper portion of the panelled walls is richly carved. All these are fine, if hardly to be called distinctive features of the place. Steers is more curious still above. Each bedchamber is or has been connected with its neighbour by a tiny window in the party-wall, as though for purposes of safeguard, or perhaps espionage. Small chambers

not unlike to sentry-boxes lead from several rooms. Doorways in outer walls, long since walled up, opened on stairways which have disappeared. And over all there is a ghostly range of attics with cemented floors, hardly accessible to-day.

Did we cast probabilities aside we might perhaps picture John as resting here when hunting on the Forest's edge; with sentinel guards within the narrow chamber opening from his room of state; while outer staircases and doorways gave promise of swift flight if need arose. But such a flight of fancy will not stand the expert's scrutiny. Steers may more probably have been in later days a smuggler's hold, where goods landed in pitchy darkness on the Severn shore were stored till they could be distributed inland. An air of mystery, the shadow of a past we cannot wholly penetrate, seems brooding over Steers.

Fail though he may to penetrate this past the casual visitor is welcomed to the house. The hostess leaves the two-and-twenty haymakers filling the wide kitchen at their evening meal—leaves, if need be, the guests about the table on the pleasant lawn—to show, upstairs and down, the glories of the house she loves so well.

On again up the fields, the June sun beating fiercely down upon us as we climb, and making us full ready for a rest upon the Pleasant Stile which leads us once again into the road upon the summit of the ridge. There, half a thousand feet below, lies Newnham with its church; there, farther north, is Westbury with the Garden Cliff, and, somewhat too prominent, the workhouse with its many windows twinkling in the sun. Across the Severn stream stretches the



THE HOUSE OF STEERS.

great peninsula, surrounded on three sides by the wide sweeping horseshoe which the river makes. It is the view from Newnham church again, but infinitely wider, fuller, than before.

Late afternoon, be it remembered, is the best time to visit Pleasant Stile. Then the long sunbeams fall upon the distant Cotswolds and the Garden Cliff, and morning haze has cleared alike from river and from hills.

The by-road on the left leads past the Temple, follows the ridge of the Blaise Bailey, and would bring us down to Soudley. A few yards down the hill upon the right stand the entrance gates and the cool shady avenue of Dean Hall. Were we more kind than conscientious we might perhaps spare the reader any mention of this house's beauties, and pass by without a word; for like other tempting Forest mansions it is not on show. Still, greatly daring, we will offer to the wayfarer a word of hope; the present owner is an antiquarian, and, though not himself of Gloucestershire descent, proud of his house and of the neighbourhood.

The house, with the exception of the second story of the front, dates from the seventeenth century's opening years. But there is pretty clear evidence of a far older house—in the cellars, for instance, where there are fireplaces, as though the level of the house, standing as it does upon the ridge of the slope northward towards the village, had been raised. There is indeed great likelihood that a dwelling-place stood here in Roman times. The present house was once the manor; the old stone balls which topped the pillars of the entrance-gates, and now stand on the lawn, are evidence of

this—in Gloucestershire at least. The present manor is a tall house opposite the church below.

For us the historic interest of Dean Hall perhaps centres in the Civil War; for Little Dean saw fighting, just as Westbury and Newnham did, and had an even greater share of tragedy. One pleasant panelled room here is, according to Nicholls, the scene of two unfortunate and needless deaths. The date of this occurrence is that of the affair at Westbury already spoken of—May 7th, 1644.

The Parliamentary troops had come in conflict with the Royalists in the "towne" of Little Dean, and had speedily overcome them. Lieutenant-Colonel Congrave, the governor of Newnham, and a Captain Wigmore, with some private soldiers, had accepted quarter, when a shot from a house killed a Parliamentary trooper. In the confusion and anger which followed, the quarter granted was forgotten or ignored, and every Royalist perished by the sword.

Familiar to the local ear is the grim tale of how the brother officers met death with strikingly contrasted exclamations on their lips. "Lord, receive my soul," cried Congrave as he fell; "Damme more, damme more," roared Wigmore with his final breath. Nicholls speaks of their being surrounded in "houses"; but the Hall, standing as it does upon the hill, and being thus a place of natural strength, is certainly the not unlikely scene. The usual bloodstains were, till lately, pointed out upon the polished floor!

Two stately limes, an ancient cedar, and that now too rare and most delightful thing, a nut-



THE SEVERN FROM PLEASANT STILE.

walk, are part of the attractions of the pleasant garden of Dean Hall; nor did the modern addition of a croquet-lawn, where two short-skirted, bright-eyed girls played "single wicket," make the old place less pleasing when we saw it last. The house on every side has some quaint "bit" or architectural feature which will set the intruding artist fingering his pencil and his sketching-block. And even should the house and garden prove unapproachable, there will be little difficulty in viewing the small but very perfect Roman camp, standing some few hundred yards away upon the east.

Though wonderfully undisturbed and perfect, it is so small that it can never have been other than a mere look-out; not improbably of an earlier date than the Roman occupation, and adapted by the invaders to their use. As a watch-camp its utility is obvious; banish the trees which to-day hide the Cotswolds from our view, and the range of view is wide indeed—a dozen distant beacon signals from the farther side of Severn could be seen.

Of the "castle" which some believe to have existed here there is no evidence; but that the Severn, now so far away below, once lapped against the summit of the lofty ridge on which we stand there are clear signs. Fossils, some well known and others less familiar, have been unearthed here by the present owner of the Hall.

Braynes, Bridgemans, Pyrkes—all well-known Forest names—these in their turn have occupied and owned Dean Hall. Indeed, a Brayne should still be seen there now—a ghostly figure said to

haunt the drive, besom in hand, to sweep away the autumn leaves. The present owner rather deplores this figure's absence, both from the utilitarian and the psychic points of view.

The portrait of a black boy wearing a silver collar formerly hung within the house. That sable figure too should haunt the place; for man and master quarrelled—over a love affair as it is said; the master's death was the result, and the voice of the guilty and repentant black boy is reputed to be heard. Further, two brothers quarrelled in the panelled room one evening as they sat over their wine; fought, and the duel ended in the death of both. Dean Hall should be by right a treasure-house of ghostly sights and sounds.

Descending the road a few yards farther than the entrance to the Hall, Little Dean village lies spread out below; beyond it is the ridge which shuts off Cinderford. Before visiting Little Dean let us take a green lane on the left, leading us towards a house which stands alone outside the village and a little to the west. Lightly-shod visitors will perhaps do well to reach it by the village street; for the lane is sodden and muddy with land-springs even after a long summer's drought. But, whether by doubtful lane or by circuitous road, we must not fail to visit the Old Grange—the grange of Flaxley Abbey some two miles away.

Here at least there is no bell to ring, no doubt of entry, no permission to obtain. Nothing will say us nay—save prudence and a wholesome fear of falling beams or stones. For this fine old two-storied Tudor house is now a prey to ever-growing decay. Not without difficulty do we even gain the



THE OLD GRANGE, LITTLE DEAN.

garden ; the entrance gates indeed are long since gone ; but a tangled growth of brambles and of trees and shrubs untrimmed for countless years usurp their place.

A mass of ivy shrouds one side and corner of the house, and floats in streamers from the chimney-top. Save for one small low wing covered with modern slates, the roof is gone, and the old house lies open to the sky. Great joists and gable-beams have crashed their way through intervening floors and lie athwart the lower rooms. You might have ventured to ascend the staircase not so long ago ; but now it hangs in sections here and there. Doors swing and creak uncannily upon a single hinge.

A former vicar lived here for some time within the present generation's memory ; a doctor too. Then came a labourer and his family and dwelt in the low wing. Now even the humblest human tenancy has fled the growing desolation of the place. If, something daring, you should penetrate inside, feathers and rotting coops and nesting-boxes speak of the place's latest occupants. A farmer's poultry were the last successors of some Tudor squire.

Why such neglect of what was once a stately house ? The answer can be given in two words—a non-repairing lease. Let at the end of the sixteenth century for a term of nearly three hundred and ninety years, that lease has still some forty years or more to run ; then the Old Grange reverts again to Flaxley property. Perhaps it may yet take a new lease of life, and be once more a pleasant, if a somewhat low-lying, English home. But this is doubtful ; for the race is one between decay and

storm and the still unexpired years of the long lease. Before that document becomes waste paper, the Old Grange most probably will be no more ; a few more years of heavy ivy-growth upon the gable-end, a furious autumn gale beating upon it from the Blaise Bailey ridge, or sweeping up the narrow valley from the west, and the old house must yield and fall. If so Dean Forest will have lost a jewel from its crown.

There is a good gabled house in Little Dean's main street, and in another house close by a well-carved mantelpiece of oak. The church is noticeable for its Norman chancel arch and for some well-worked stones placed on the churchyard wall. The tower lost its spire in a great November gale some twenty years ago.

Following the road beyond the church a quite imposing building is in view upon the left. It is merely the village police station, but was formerly a gaol, with chapel, treadmill, and every other necessary accommodation for the spiritual and temporal well-being of its indwellers! It is not too attractive, and our eyes soon leave it for the wood which lies before us as we travel east—the famous Chestnuts Wood which forms Crown property.

We could enter it at once from a rough lane upon our left ; but for the moment we prefer to wander down the road which skirts its southern slope and leads towards Flaxley and Westbury. A stream runs down this pleasant valley ; the slope upon the brooklet's farther bank is covered by orcharding and cottage farms. There is an inn if we have need of one ; and after leaving it we take a sharp turn to the left across a footbridge



FARMHOUSE AT RUDDLE.

and a ford, and climb the slippery fern-clad slopes which lead us to Popeshill.

The summit gives us a fine view over Westbury, up the reaches of the Severn, and past Gloucester to the Cotswold Hills. But the June sun is hot ; already here and there the opening foxgloves are breast-high ; and it is pleasanter to seek the cool retreat of Chestnuts Wood so close at hand.

Here the ranked oaks are mingled thickly with the trees which give the wood its name. In general England plants few chestnuts now, though we are glad to say that they are not neglected by the Forest management to-day. Chestnut wood has its uses, one of which we chanced to learn just now. Into the little brook-side inn at which we rested half an hour ago, there followed close upon our heels an ancient, thickly-bearded man, who answered, not to his own, but to his calling's name ; "Cooper" the hostess greeted him. Three fresh-shaped ladder rungs were in his hand, all three of chestnut wood. "Look you," he said, his horny hands touching the staves caressingly, "chestnut won't cut nor fray with your nailed boots ; I'll warrant you as staves of chestnut 'll outlive the sides of most all other sorts. Then, too, 'tis light."

The knowledge of these virtues gives an added pleasure, were such needed, to the cool shadow of the trees. Wandering almost at hazard up a grassy drive we come upon a massive wooden bench, beside a stone which bears the legend "Morpeth Point," the favourite spot of a former Chief Commissioner. An opening in the trees reveals once more the Severn and the distant hills. Seek-

ing the summit of the wood we come upon quaint little Chestnuts Lodge, surely the smallest of the Forest homes, and just a century old this year.

At the east end of Chestnuts Wood a narrow field divides us from the camp-crowned hill of Welshbury on the Flaxley property. This we have seen ; so, turning round, let us wind back in the cool shadow of the Chestnuts Wood's north side, and come again to Little Dean and the Old Grange, and so to Newnham. Or, if our objection to the "same way back" is strong, we can descend the slope of Welshbury to Gunns Mills, thence up through the Edgehills Woods to Latimer Walk and Cinderford.



In the Devil's Chapel, Bream.

CHAPTER XX

NEWNHAM TO LYDNEY

NOW, having skirted the modern Forest's northern bounds from Westbury to the Lea, and having sampled rather than exhausted the charms of Newnham and its neighbourhood, we will, turning our faces southward, follow the Severn shore. Our goal will be that river's junction with the Wye at Beachley Point, some sixteen miles away. Thence, returning north-west by the Wye's left bank, we come at last to Staunton, almost within the limits of the woods again.

The last-named portion of the route holds relics of the past by far too closely linked with forest history to be overlooked. The Severn shore, apart from the mere beauty of the estuary and of the land upon the farther side, possesses likewise scenes of history and of legend well worth visiting. Yet much must needs receive but a mere glance. By many a church we shall be forced to pass with scarce a word ; so much of greater interest from our Forest standpoint is there to be viewed.

We say farewell to Newnham by the steep and curving Lydney road sunk deeply in a cutting just beyond the church and the hotel. Almost immediately a path which we are free to follow leads on the left to Bullo with its "pill" and tiny dock, and further still to Awre. But we shall per-

haps prefer to keep the road and pass through Ruddle, where a gabled farmhouse will be noticed on the right. This fine old house, though standing amid rather bare surroundings, may possibly delay the artist or photographer. The drive-gate to The Haie, where Newnham's sword hangs in safe keeping now, is just beyond. Farther on still is the lodge-gate and drive to Oaklands, and, opposite, the lane to Awre turns off upon the left. The scattered village is another mile away.

Awre roads have turnings almost innumerable, but it is with little difficulty that we find the church. Just before reaching it we pass the Red Hart inn, a rather quaint old house, though suffering somewhat from a dose of restoration and new paint. The church, too, has been restored, though with good taste. Inside is a fine font; and, below the belfry tower, an enormous chest, the iron-clamped lid of which might, from its weight, be made of solid stone.

For those who love old trees the greatest interest of the church may lie outside; for in the graveyard on the northern side stands a most ancient yew. The trunk is quite hollow, with an opening through which a full-grown man may pass. The old tree surely must have been familiar to that "priest at Awre" who was, as *Domesday Book* records, the halfway point of spiritual aid between the churches of Dymock and Tidenham. But *Domesday Book* ignored the church of Westbury as we saw just now; in the same way it may have lightly passed a church at Awre.

By the church gate there is a second yew, far from contemptible in size; a stripling not ill fitted



FARMHOUSE AT AWRE.

to take up the burden of its ancient neighbour, and to carry down to a remote posterity traditions of the yews of Awre.

Winding round to the left we come presently to Awre mill, its wheel now hanging motionless like those of nearly all its fellows in the neighbourhood. When last passing we were greeted by a notice on the drive gate proclaiming it the "Moulin d'Awre." Wild visions of some smiling miller from across the Channel, with perhaps French bread, and, better still, French conversation at our service, rose in our minds and led us swiftly to the house; only, alas, to disappointment, and a dwelling empty of all tenants but farm implements and calves. This hope-inspiring notice did not appear to strike an elderly roadman at work hard by as in any way remarkable, nor could he offer any explanation of the board. The mill belonged to Mr. ——, and *he* was from Somersetshire.

But later on we heard elsewhere the inner meaning of this foreign sign. The French consul at Gloucester rented or bought the house a few years back; young ladies of the family spent summer weeks at Awre, and graduated as sign-painters with results we see! Wearied most likely of this somewhat flat and isolated neighbourhood the gay French party comes no more; but the old mill still figures as the "Moulin d'Awre."

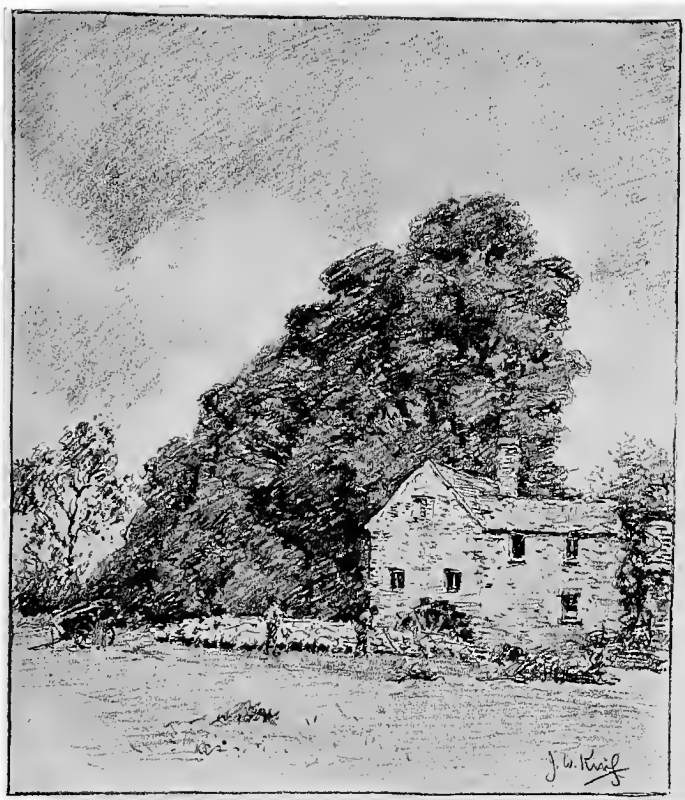
The mill owed its former activity to the Bideford Brook, which flows into the Severn a short half mile below, and is formed by the junction at Blakeney of the Forge and Blackpool Brooks. It was from Awre mill we started on that long to be remembered otter-hunting day already spoken of.

Half a mile or less from the mill the road crosses the line at Awre station. For those who plan a day's excursion which includes the use of trains, it may be well to point out two matters in connection with Awre. First, that only slower trains stop here, the better sort not calling between Newnham and Lydney. Secondly, that though locally known as Awre Junction, the branch line to Blakeney and beyond is for mineral traffic only. Blakeney, two miles away, has to be reached by road, or by a shorter path across the fields. As we have said, a wagonette from the hotel sometimes meets trains.

Some few hundred yards beyond the station we will turn into a field-road on the left beside a cottage, and thence follow it to Poulton Court. The house will soon be seen upon the summit of the ridge between the river and the line.

Externally it looks a fairly ancient house, but its chief beauties lie within. Built in above the doorway of the modern porch is a carved stone with two initials—C. B.—and a section of armorial bearings. A section only; for this stone, found some years since built in the wall of a farm building, has without doubt a fellow in a similar seclusion still, but with its sculptured face turned inwards and thus hidden from sight.

Before we reach the house we are arrested by the small, still perfect, moat. Undoubtedly this moat enclosed a former house, some of the beams of which are doing service in the present Court; for many, as the tenant tells us, show clear signs of previous use. There is a theory that a monastery —or if not perhaps a monastery, at least the outlying branch of some religious house—stood here.



AWRE MILL.

Extremely small it must have been if placed within the moat.

The present house has panelled rooms, a fine old spiral staircase, and a glorious piece of carving placed in the corner of a small upstairs room. An overmantel now, it probably once held the same position in some larger room ; but it is thought by some to be an altar-piece, and this lends colour to the theory of the Court's connection with some monastic house now wholly lost to sight.

The present occupants rent Poulton from the Crown, for it is on the Hagloe property. The holding includes not only the farm, but also the fishing of a pair of " putchers " on the Severn bank close by. As " putcher " may well be a word of mystery to ordinary ears, it is worth while to view a specimen of this local salmon-trap which seems to be entirely peculiar to the Severn shore.

A frame of stakes and cross-bars stretches at right angles from the bank into the muddy stream. Viewed during eight months of the year it calls to mind a giant wine-rack—empty. But during the four summer months from May Day on we see the wine-rack full—of empty bottles five feet long and made of basket-work. These basket-bottles—for very like a champagne bottle they are in shape—have their necks firmly closed, the broad ends wholly open ; and they are placed upon the frame of stakes so that the open ends are turned up-stream. In these the salmon swimming down with the ebb-tide are caught ; once in, the fish's struggles only serve to wedge it fast.

These Severn salmon-traps are, of course, like other fisheries, governed by strict laws. Not only

is the number of wicker traps to be placed in a "putcher" limited—the Poulton tenant has about six hundred here; but the season is shorter than that for fishing with the nets. The obvious reason is that while "stop," "push," and other nets cease work for thirty-six hours from each Saturday at noon, the owner of a "putcher" cannot be expected to remove five or six hundred baskets from the stand each week.

Here, in a little shore-side hut, by day or night according to the service of the tide, the owner of the Poulton putcher keeps his watch. Did he neglect such vigil there are those about the neighbourhood who would not leave a captured salmon long when once the falling tide had laid it bare to view. A book or newspaper must serve to while the tedious hours away; a gun stands by in the hut corner should a rabbit raise his head too near. In winter all spare moments go in fashioning fresh traps and mending old ones, in preparation for the coming first of May.

Just behind Poulton, lying between the railway and the road, is Hagloe Farm. From here a path leads down to Gatcombe, our next halt. Or, for the cyclist's sake, we take once more the Blakeney road, and follow it as far as to a finger-post which points to Etloe on the left. Until the turn is reached we have the stream winding through level meadows on our right; and should our ramble be in early spring these meadows will be bright with yellow daffodils. Then, following the Etloe lane, we turn to the right at the summit of the hill. Bearing to the left, Etloe, with several good old-fashioned houses, is soon reached. Again a



A SALMON-FISHER'S HUT.

finger-post upon the left points out the Gatcombe lane.

We now descend for half a mile between high banks. Then, as the shining estuary comes into view, the gully widens out to give a standing-place to perhaps a dozen dwellings perched upon the slope on either side. A little stream has joined us from the left, and, flowing down the village street, forms Gatcombe "pill"—the local name for any little watercourse and muddy creek upon the Severn shore.

The hamlet street—for the place is but a hamlet in the parish of Blakeney—is a tideway too, for Severn mud lies thickly at the lower end, and fishing-boats are moored on either side. The railway here runs for a mile or two between the estuary and the low red cliffs, and from the little street the river is only accessible by arches which, through the embankment, give an access to the shore.

A good-sized house, the lowest on the left-hand side, is that which brings us here to-day. For, if we are willing to accept the local story, it has often sheltered no less famed an indweller than Francis Drake. To-day its shoreward gable almost overhangs the line. Its little garden and its low and ancient porch are reached by crossing a high well-cemented stile of solid stone; a mode of entrance rendered needful by the high spring-tides. Its back against the wooded cliff which shuts off north-east winds; its unassuming front of yellow-washed stone facing the broadening river and the westering sun, the house beams forth a welcome to us, and we pass the stile.

The pleasant-faced woman who interviews us in

the sunny porch speaks with the tongue of Somerset, and bore before her marriage two-and-twenty years ago a Somersetshire name. Her husband, a Severn pilot in the winter months, a Severn salmon-fisher in the summer season, is from home, but not far off. For present conversational purposes he might, however, be a hundred miles away. We are within the house by this time, and upstairs, being shown a pleasant double-windowed room which overlooks the Severn stream. "You can see him from here," the wife remarks; and points to where, some hundred yards from shore, two boats are moored, lying broadside to the stream. From each projects, stretched on a rough triangle of poles, the "stop-net" in such common Severn use. The fisher, sitting for long hours patiently within his boat, raises it for inspection ever and anon. "My husband's father—the old gentleman that died here—was no fisherman, nor pilot neither; *he* was a master mariner," she tells us with a touch of pride.

No; she never lets lodgings—there is but the single narrow stair, and visitors would not perhaps "fancy" that. Personally we are inclined to think the prospect from this pleasant upper chamber would outweigh the doubtful inconvenience of a chance encounter on the stair; the more so as that stair, like every bit of woodwork in the ancient rambling house, is all of solid oak. Pity that so much of it is hidden from view, the beams and party-walls disguised by paper and whitewash. But still the antique hinges on the doors betray their age; the walls are three feet thick.

Oh, yes, our hostess tells us, this is where Drake lived—or so they say. "You see, he used to come



A HOUSE AT ETLOE.

and stay here to keep his eye on the Forest." Well, the present age has swallowed more unlikely tales than this. What is more natural than that the greatest seaman of his day should take sufficient interest in the oak of which his ships were built to make from time to time a sojourn at this forest port, and overlook the "sticks" that rumbled down the steep and miry lane.

For Gatcombe, sleepy and deserted on this summer afternoon, was in its day a locally important place. The memory of the last "big stick" shipped from its shore has only lately vanished into haze. In years gone by it owned a pier and bark-house; vessels lay at anchor in the river to receive their loads of Forest oak. The house which possibly has harboured Drake, the cliff and woods behind it on the left bank of the "pill," are now Crown property, being a portion of the Hagloe estate.

Sad that the story of Drake's visits here, a tale which is at once so probable, so picturesque, lacks any shred of confirmation of a documentary kind. Oral tradition is indeed persistent on the point; any dweller in the neighbourhood will say that Drake once lived at Gatcombe or was often there. Besides his visits to inspect and superintend the shipment of the Forest oak, he came, they say, at the Armada time to see that the invading Spaniards did not burn the woods.

A third cause for his rumoured visits to the Forest borders is less dwelt upon—is, indeed, almost entirely ignored. It seems to be but little known that the English Government of 1588 were for a long time in doubt of the Armada's destined

course—whether its purpose was to steer for Severn or for Thames. The certainty or likelihood of its deciding on the former course would be indeed good cause for Drake to hurry west.

But then come Drake's biographers, including the most recent, Lady Eliot-Drake, and one and all deny the existence in his correspondence of any allusion to Gatcombe, much more of any letter dated thence. If we would fain retain the legend it must be by strong belief in stories handed down by word of mouth. And with such faith we might perhaps see at dusk the ghostly figure of Elizabeth's great seaman, seated—so a legend has it—in an elbow-chair within the pleasant chamber we have left, and gazing westward down the Severn tide.

From Gatcombe the cyclist must return along the lane, keeping to the left when he has reached the finger-post again, and following the road to Purton with its little "pill." A more attractive route for the pedestrian is the path which leads under the cliff beside the line for some few hundred yards, then turns into the fields beyond a solitary cottage nestling underneath the wooded bank. Here, as so frequently elsewhere, pedestrians have the better part, for the view of the Severn and the farther shore is beautiful. But it must be owned that the path is, in places, almost impassable after bad weather.

Facing the river and the long Severn Bridge at Purton there is a snug little inn where teas and other light refreshments may be had. Just across the road is the farmhouse of Purton Manor where once more history—or is it legend?—faces us. Local tradition has it—and the story is persistent



DRAKE'S HOUSE, GATCOMBE.

and of long standing—that Raleigh once dwelt here, and smoked his pipe and planted the "earliest" English potatoes on record in the quaint old garden perched upon the Severn cliff.

As with Drake's house at Gatcombe, the story is at any rate "well found," for of a more fitting dwelling for the great adventurer it would be difficult to dream. The Manor has two entrance doors, each sheltered by a massive porch. These doors, with heavy latches, iron knockers, and great hinges of a yard in length, are perhaps coeval with the quaint old house itself. Below the garden railing is the ceaseless voice of Severn's rushing tide that ebbs and flows at the cliff foot.

There is some fine old panelling within, and a mantelpiece—more modern than the house itself—bearing the date 1618, together with the carved initials D.T.M. Raleigh, as we know, married into the family of the Throckmortons, and the initials are said to be those of a daughter of that ancient house—one Dorothy. It is, perhaps, not unlikely that the visitor will have to take the mantelpiece and the interior of the house on trust. The present occupants, wearied perchance by too persistent antiquarians, do not greatly care to show the place.

From Purton there is a road of some two miles to Lydney, or we can find a pleasant path across the fields. A third alternative will be to take some passing train at the little station of Severn Bridge. At any rate, it is worth mounting to the platform perched high on the great viaduct's north end, if only to enjoy the glorious view.

The bridge itself almost repays the climb ; its

length is nearly fourteen hundred yards, made up of one-and-twenty towering spans, giving a headway beneath of seventy feet at high water. Round the great piers the muddy Severn tide, troubled by conflicting currents, swirls and eddies furiously, whether at ebb or flood. Three hundred yards below the bridge there lies the Wheel Rock and the Fiddlers' Pool; the latter with its story of returning Berkeley merrymakers engulfed in the seething tide, and still on stormy nights producing ghostly strains.

Across the river, just below the viaduct, lie Sharpness Docks, nestling beneath a wooded hill. Upon our side is Lydney, with our goal of Beachley farther down. Then turning to the left, upstream we have the long line of the Cotswold Hills, with Painswick Camp, Robin's Wood Hill, and other lesser heights in the foreground. Behind us are well-wooded fields and meadows rising to the darker background of the Forest's slope.



PURTON MANOR.

CHAPTER XXI

NASS, LYDNEY PARK, AND BREAM

LYDNEY will give us temporary pause in our perambulation of the Forest's ancient eastern border-line. The place itself is not specially attractive ; it is ever over-shadowed by dense smoke-clouds from the tin-plate works beside the Junction station. But these same lowering smoke-clouds spell a measure of prosperity to the little town ; nor do they seem obnoxious to a little colony of rooks established in a single ancient tree standing beneath the very shadow of the chimney-shafts. At any rate, the birds still build there year by year.

If we arrive at Lydney by a main-line train we may, before going up into the town a full half mile away, turn eastward from the Junction station and go towards the Severn shore ; not only for a glance at the small docks which do their share of export trade in tin-plates and in Forest coal, but also to visit the old Tudor house of Nass. This, standing in fields a mile away, was really on our route of yesterday ; but Poulton Court, Gatcombe, and Purton Manor would perhaps be, for most, sufficient ancient houses in an afternoon.

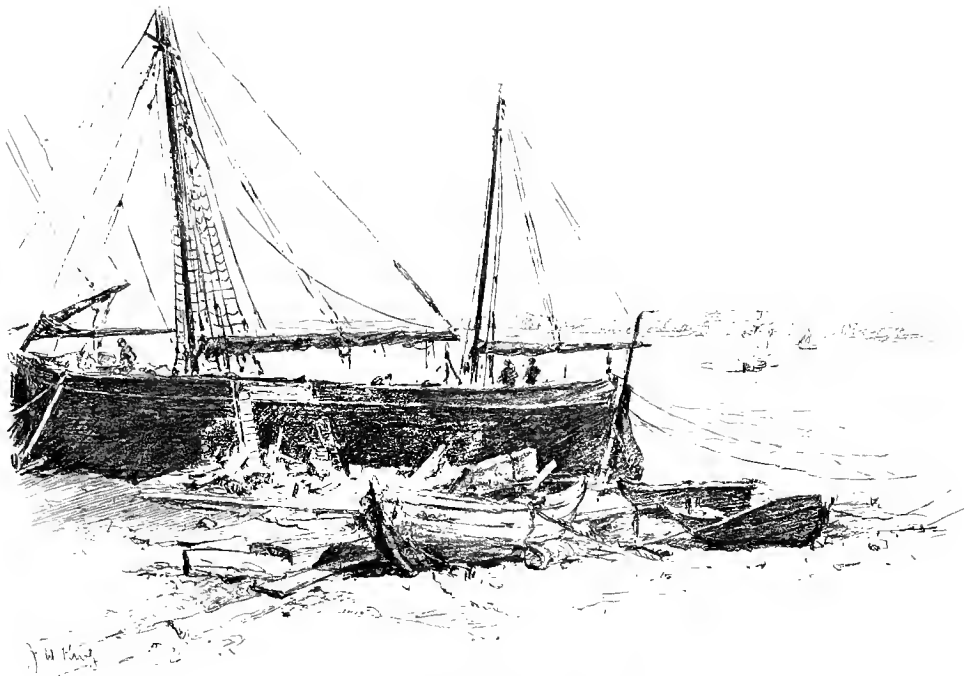
Nass House can be reached in an easy walk of twenty minutes across the fields from Lydney Junction, leaving the little harbour with its coasting colliers on our right. Or from the town we can

approach it by another route. Beyond the level crossing at the *town* station a finger-post points out a lane upon the right, and Nass House is about a mile and half from here.

We pass Crump Farm upon our left, then cross the Severn and Wye railway, and, a few yards beyond, the South Wales line; the two run parallel as far as Severn Bridge. Beyond them, on the right, is the Court Farm, now used as cottages. There is an ancient window over the front door; but even more attractive is the great tithe-barn, with massive buttresses, which stands beside the road. A small lower portion of the old barn's high-pitched roof still remains covered with the ancient roofing-slabs of stone; but the greater part has been, as is Nass House itself, re-roofed with modern tiles.

Just on our left is the fine avenue of limes which formed in earlier days the entrance drive to Nass. Indeed, the house has, so to speak, been turned round bodily. The ancient entrance gateway, flanked by tall pillars on the top of which stone balls proclaim the manor house, admits us only to the rear to-day; and the ponderous front door now opens on the kitchen yard. This door can still at night be fastened by the oaken bar, slipped back by day into a long hollow in the wall, and bearing the date 1573.

On either side this doorway, and above, are ranked tall windows, somewhat modernized to-day but with the stone jambs at their sides still bearing marks of ancient work. The original rear of the house—the present front—is gabled and looks out across the meadows to the Severn stream. Within,



REPAIRING-YARD AT LYDNEY DOCK.

the crowning glory of the place is perhaps the splendid stair of massive oak, simple and plain, but still magnificent. Even the back kitchen, with its roof of barrel shape, is not to be despised ; nor are the attics, with a small quaint lantern tower above, through which a door will lead us to the roof.

Some portion of the glory of Nass House has been withdrawn from it in recent years—its pictures of which we have a word to say anon. A melancholy history too attaches to the place. It was for long the home, as it is still the property, of a well-known local family owning a pedigree traced to the Conqueror's days, in which the names of d'Oyly and of Cholmeley frequently appear. In the year 1771 a daughter of the house—Mary Jones—had, with a friend, been dining at the vicarage of Lydney, not far off across the fields. Returning home to Nass the two girls were attacked by a young labourer who coveted Miss Jones's jewels. Mary Jones was murdered and her friend was stunned.

A hue and cry was raised, and it was presently noticed that only one villager was missing from the search ; the murderer, a young man named Morgan, stayed at home in bed. Then came the discovery of bloodstains on his clothes, and finally of the jewels hidden in the cottage thatch. His conviction and execution followed in due course.

Nass was distasteful to the family after this, and Hay Hill, now called The Haie, already visited by us, was built. The present representative of the family now occupies a house not far away. Here are to-day the family pictures, removed not long since from the pile in a garret of Nass House.

Chief local interest centres in a portrait of the murdered girl and of her friend; and there is more than one fine Lely and Van Dyke. Another picture, wonderfully soft and beautiful in colouring, represents the family of the eighth Henry.

The King is seated, while upon his right stand Mary and her husband Philip of Spain. Over their shoulders peer the gloomy allegoric forms of Tyranny and War. Upon the King's left hand is little Edward, and beyond him stands Elizabeth, her foot upon a fiery sword, while Peace and Plenty wait behind. Such a picture was obviously painted after the death of Mary, and it has been attributed, though with some element of doubt, to Lucas De Heere.

Lydney itself will be unlikely to detain us long. But here, before pursuing the route we have mapped out to Beachley Point, we will first turn aside to view what lies at the town's very door—Lydney Park, the special sights of which enchanting spot may usually be seen on application being made. Then, striking inland towards the Forest, we will see the famous "scowles" at Bream.

Though Lydney church has suffered at the hands of the restorer, the tower and spire form a stately landmark from whichever side approached. The churchyard has a lych-gate, plain but quaint, surmounted by a sundial. In the small recreation ground close by there is an ancient oak worth seeing. Then, at the south end of the main street, we find the Cross.

Lydney Cross, like some others of its kind which we shall see upon the route that lies ahead, dates from the early portion of the fourteenth century



THE COURT FARM, NASS.

and is built of grey Forest stone. On the summit of a square base of eight steps, the lowest one of which is over twenty-four feet long, is placed a shrine which has on each of its four sides an arched niche to contain a figure. Although this Lydney shrine is somewhat plainer in design than others we shall see elsewhere, the whole erection is imposing, if only by reason of its most unusual size. The shaft now towering above the shrine is of course a modern addition.

Leaving the Cross we turn our backs upon the town and take the Chepstow road. Beside it, somewhere on our right, stood White Cross manor house, the "den," to quote a Roundhead writer, of Sir John Winter of Dean Forest fame. Winter was active for the Royalist party, both at White Cross and in the Forest generally, and also farther south, as we shall see, until the month of May in 1645; when, being hard pressed, he burnt his mansion to the ground rather than let it fall into the Roundheads' hands.

Massey had indeed marched against it after his successes at Westbury, Little Dean and Newnham in the spring of 1644. Winter himself was absent, but had left an able representative—his wife. Massey's summons to surrender met the following prompt reply:

"Sir,—Mr. Winter's unalterable allegiance to his King and Sovereign, and his particular interest to this place, hath by his Majesty's commission put it into this condition, which cannot be pernicious to any but such as oppose the one and invade the other; wherefore rest assured that in these re-

lations we are, by God's assistance, resolved to maintain it, all extremities notwithstanding. This much in Mr. Winter's absence you shall receive from

"MARY WINTER."

The house was well fortified and provisioned, and Massey, whether moved by gallantry or prudence, merely burned all Winter's iron-furnaces and forthwith marched away.

The modern Lydney House stands on high ground half hidden by trees. Never, to our knowledge, was a more misleading park, or one which better hid its many beauties from the passer-by. Seen from the road it is a mere expanse of finely-timbered meadow land which rises gently towards the west. But gain permission, as we have to-day, to enter and approach the house by the long drive on either side of which the daffodils are fading and narcissi swiftly opening snowy petals to the hot May sun. Below the house the brown deer graze beside the railings of the drive, the dark herd brightened by a white coat here and there.

And at the house itself the scene is wholly changed ; the hall door opens on a most enchanting view. Before us are the rounded summits of two hills, on each of which the waving beech boughs shade a Roman camp. The smaller hill, an outpost, stands upon our left ; the larger, the main fortress, is divided from the mansion by a deep ravine. The Roman camps are indeed our chief excuse for begging entrance to this lovely park to-day ; and we first see a piece of tesselated pavement in the hall ; then, in the library, a fine collection of coins,



NASS HOUSE.

women's ornaments, with quaint bronze figures, some tools and other treasure-trove which have from time to time been yielded to the pick and spade.

Descending now to the ravine before the house, the climb which brings us to the summit of the larger hill is steep. Among the infinite variety of trees the beauty of the beeches takes first place to-day. Their pale green foliage is unfolded just sufficiently to give us that soft murmuring whisper which will be their song all summer through, yet not enough to hide the graceful majesty of the tall shining trunks and upward-pointing limbs.

Within the limits of this larger camp lies what is left of a fine Roman villa, with its baths and hypocausts—the residence of a pro-Consul probably. There is a temple too, the latter dedicated to Nodens, god of the Deep, a parallel deity to the Greek Glaucus. Traces of fire in the long ruined floors and walls suggest the agency by which it was destroyed, perhaps on the final retirement from the country of its builders.

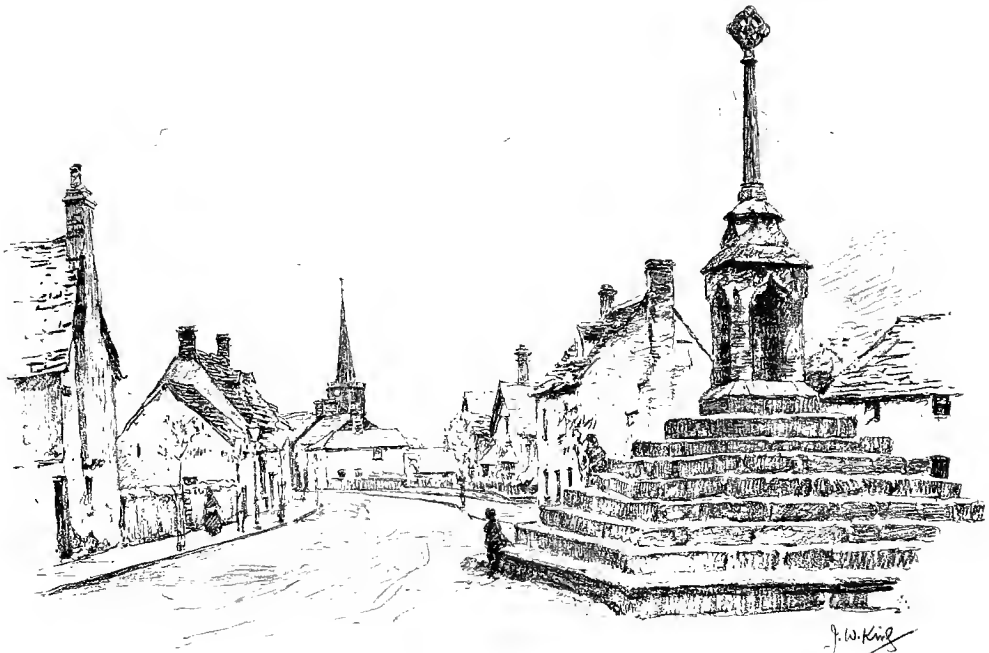
The camp upon the smaller hill is nearly semi-circular and is no more than fifty yards across. Similar in size and in position to the camp at Little Dean, it served most likely as a mere outpost and look-out to the larger camp on which we stand. This latter measures some eight hundred and fifty by three hundred and seventy feet, and is protected by a fosse and mound.

But on this Forest ramble it is perhaps, above all, the woodlands that we love; and woodland in perfection is the leading note of Lydney Park. Each jutting knoll is clothed with foliage opening

swiftly to its summer dress. Beside the stream upon the larger camp's far side the birch hangs its soft canopy, together with the sycamore and larch. Bare roots of giant beech trees overarch the brook. In shadow and in sun, its waters, fretted by the moss-grown rocks which break their course, flow Severnwards to the soft music of their ceaseless song.

We leave the lovely park reluctantly at last, and join the road near Aylburton. Our next objective is a grimmer scene—the Devil's Chapel in the "scowles" at Bream. To reach that weird place by a pleasant route we turn off to the right at Aylburton and pass the little church upon the left. After about a mile a farm is seen upon our right; a few yards farther on there is a solitary cottage on the left. Opposite this a gate and stile give access, through a meadow, to a wood beyond. The main path must be followed up and down its windings for about three-quarters of a mile; then once again the music of that brook beside which we were fain to linger in the park salutes our ears, and by some stepping-stones the pleasant little watercourse is crossed. It is a not unfitting place to eat a frugal lunch. The clear brown water is untainted at its source; the copse affords a welcome shelter from the sun; and in the shadow of the saplings springing upwards from the "stools," spreads everywhere the azure of wild hyacinths.

Crossing the stream the path to the right will take us up to the wood on the farther slope of the hill, and thence, keeping the hedge-side, to the scowles. This same word "scowles" is an unmeaning one to some as yet. Its probable derivation is from



THE CROSS, LYDNEY.

the Celtic "crowll," a cavern or hollow; and it is applied in this district to the workings whence the Romans certainly—and in all probability an earlier race of Forest-dwellers too—dug from among the intervening rocks their iron ore. How cavernous and weird these ancient workings are, not only in these scowles of Bream, but elsewhere in the Forest district, we have yet to see.

The signs of past activity greet us immediately upon our entrance to the wood. Trenches, round pits, and other excavations of all shapes and forms meet us on every hand. But in one spot, close to the north-west corner of the wood, they lie in a thick labyrinth among the trees; and, penetrating deeper into the dim shadowy place, we find the hollows growing in size and weird impressiveness. It is the Devil's Chapel we are entering here.

It seems as though a race of giants had once delved and excavated here; surely no lesser hands have left these massive buttresses and pinnacles of rock. And on these pinnacles and buttresses, left standing in a hundred curious and fantastic forms, seeds, self-sown or scattered by a passing bird, have grown and flourished in a scanty minimum of soil. A moss-grown rock, perhaps thirty feet or more from top to base, is the foundation-stone on which is posed the pillar of a mighty beech. Spreading and twining round the rock, in nakedness so startling as to seem wellnigh indecent, the great roots hold it firm. A dozen yards away a similar stone is shadowed by a sombre yew; on the one side the roots have grown into an arch through which a man may creep with ease.

And the rocks' bases; ah, they stand in dim

dark places of the earth, far down in narrowing slits and hollows, where in the long-gone past men delved with pick and shovel for the precious ruddy ore. Here and there in these dim haunts of everlasting shadow there are abandoned subterranean tunnels, into which, even if they were not mostly half filled by subsidence, we should feel no great desire to pry.

It is a place in which to move with caution, warily. The beech leaves of uncounted years lie thick upon the ground ; and underneath are loose and scattered stones ready to slip beneath unwary feet and plunge far down into the gloom. Climbing and slipping among roots and moss-grown rocks you come unwittingly upon the edge of some black pit from which escape would be a task of doubtful possibility, even were the solitary wanderer uninjured by the fall.

The farther that we penetrate into this silent place so much the weirder is its ghostly spell. For any sign of light and life and joy one must look up. There, far above, with its leaf-tracery outlined against the brilliant sky of May, the beechen foliage shines in radiant green. There, undismayed and unconcerned with these dim mysteries below their leafy haunts, the wood-pigeons are cooing to their mates. From somewhere in the woods, far off the approaching cuckoo calls ; a minute more and the cry comes with startling clearness as he passes overhead. But where we stand, below the beauty and the freshness of the world of May and coming June, the bluebell's azure patches form the only signs of happiness and light.

We leave the scowles by a gate in the north-east



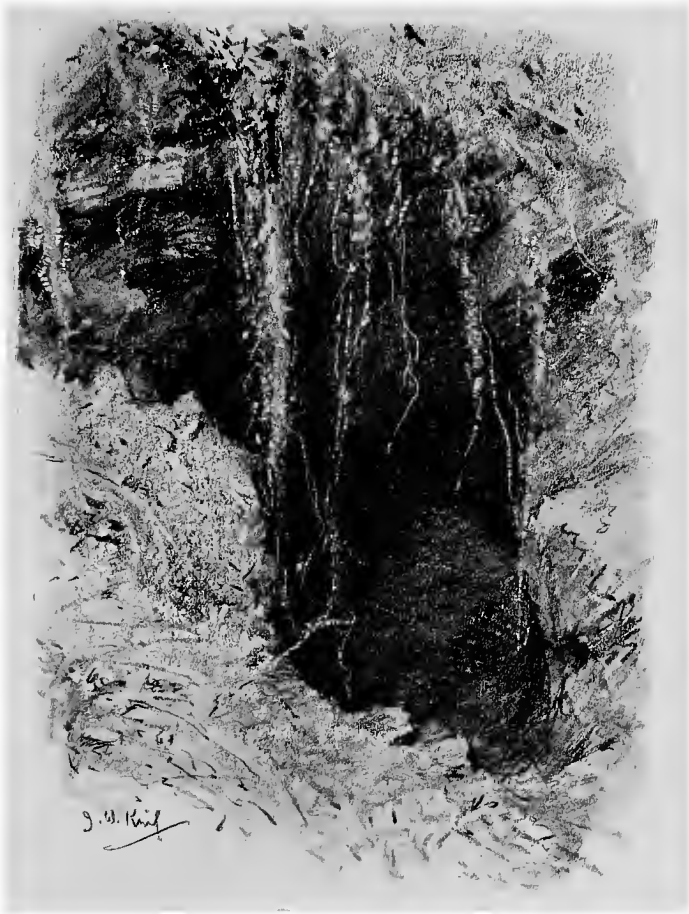
THE DEVIL'S CHAPEL, BREAM.

CHAPTER XXII

LYDNEY TO CHEPSTOW

FOLLOWING the main street of Lydney southward from the Cross we pass again by Lydney Park and come to Aylburton. The little village church is perhaps chiefly curious as having, in the middle of the last century, been removed from the former site higher up the hill and re-erected in its present place. By the roadside in the village is again a cross, similar in design to that at Lydney, and of the same period—of the early fourteenth century. Its five steps are surmounted by a square shrine—in technical language a "calvary," a niche for figures being in each of the four sides. Here the upper portion of the calvary is of a more elaborate design than that of Lydney, and adds greatly to the beauty of the cross.

Another mile and half brings us to Alvington. To tourists who already may have passed this way by rail the road will come as some surprise. The railway, running beside the estuary, keeps upon level ground. So for the most part would the highway, had it not to cross at intervals the streams which, descending from the ridge of hills on our right, have hollowed out deep gullies before they reach their "pills" among the level "saltings" by the Severn shore. These gullies mean a steep and often somewhat dangerous hill on either side the stream.



THE SCOWLES, BREAM.

Always as we walk the Severn is in full view a mile or so away upon the left; a timber-laden Baltic steamer making perhaps for Sharpness docks, a train of barges or a "trow," tacking up-stream. At lowest ebb the channel is scarce visible among the maze of mud-banks shining in the sun; but with the flowing tide the muddy waters pour across the shoals tumultuously. Never, whether at ebb or flood, is the broad estuary unbeautiful.

Alvington church lies to the left behind the village street. A lane, also on the left as we enter the village, leads down in half a mile to Alvington Court, a fine old farm; the road on the right to the mansion of Clanna, famous throughout the district for its lovely gardens and its stream.

Beyond the village, at the bottom of the long steep hill, there is a large mill-pond on the right. Following the mill-race towards the river for some few hundred yards we come upon a sight which nowadays is all too rare. In spite of steel-crushed flour and other innovations of the time, Cone Mill still grinds its daily task, with three good pairs of ancient mill-stones rumbling within. Of the many water-mills in the district, this, turned by the Cone Brook, is one of very few that have not fallen to silence and disuse. The quaint old house and mill are quite worth visiting.

Returning from the mill-house to the road once more, we make a pause; this Cone Brook calls for further notice. In an opening chapter we described the ancient Forest of Dean as extending at one time to Beachley Point at the extreme south end of the peninsula we have been visiting; as a parliamentary division this is even true to-day. But the

district we are entering now requires some explanatory comment here.

Four centuries ago we should, crossing this Cone Brook to its western side, have found ourselves no longer in Gloucestershire. Towards the end of the sixth century, when the Welsh were driven finally across the Wye, that stream became the boundary of Wales. A portion of what is now Gloucestershire, extending from Cone Brook to Chepstow Bridge, became part of the Marches of Wales. Later it formed part of the lordship of Striguil or Chepstow, and it was not until the reign of Henry VIII that it became a part of Gloucestershire.

The exact limits of these Marches of Wales which lay between the Severn and the Wye would be found by ascending the Cone Brook for some distance, then following the high ground above to the source of another brook which falls into the Wye at Brockweir, a village a mile or so above Tintern.

Within these bounds the Earl Marshal—or Lord Marcher—had, as we have seen, his Chase of Tidenham. But the whole district was at one time certainly afforested, though perhaps but for a time, and subsequently freed. At any rate, our statement of an earlier chapter stands to all intents and purposes correct. "Cone," be it added, is equivalent to "king." The name itself therefore denotes a royal boundary and proves a once acknowledged limit to the king's prerogative.

Farther still a finger-post upon the left points us to the hamlet of Plusterwine on the way to Woolaston station—where, be it noted, only slow



THE "NEW INN," BREAM.

trains stop—and down the lane thus indicated we will turn. For Plusterwine shows traces of a Roman camp; a spring which gives the place its name—Plwy-y-starwain, the hamlet of the gushing-forth—and lastly yet another and most interesting Severn-side farmhouse.

It is the first farmhouse upon the right, and happily for us the present tenant loves to show the place. It is a former grange of Tintern Abbey, which held four in the immediate neighbourhood; a second we shall come to in another mile. Even the present house is old; the drawing-room, in a comparatively modern wing, exhibiting a charming mantelpiece dating apparently from the time of Anne. The other portion of the house shows greater age and has a winding stair of solid oak.

Outside we see the traces of a now almost obliterated moat. Then, opening a cow-house door, our host reveals a splendid carven chimney-breast of stone built in the wall, a remnant, not improbably, of the original grange. In the fold-yard an open cow-shed has its roof supported by a row of tall and tapered circular stone props, more common on the Cotswolds than in this part of Gloucestershire.

Returning now to the main road we shall pass clear of the main portion of the scattered village of Woolaston before we see the little church upon our right. There is a good gargoyle at one corner of the northern tower, but the Norman doorways of the porch and church show obvious signs of the restorer's hand. The arches which divide the nave from the south aisle have marble shafts—modern, but beautiful.

Again to the main road, and on our right, just at the bottom of a little hill, there is a pool fed by a stream—the Wyvern's Pool, a name clearly not given yesterday. Opposite is the turn to Woolaston Grange, the second grange of Tintern Abbey that we see to-day.

The house itself is not exceptionally old. Many of the farm buildings are so, however, and more especially that portion of them which once formed the chapel of the place. For this chapel, with its two small lancet windows in the northern wall, a large and handsome one upon the east, with tracery approaching the flamboyant, has met with scant respect from agriculturists. It now does duty as a granary with loft above; while in what evidently formed the crypt, reached by a deep arched doorway in the southern wall, the farmer's cider-casks now stand in double ranks.

Forward once more, with the high ground of Tidenham Chase upon the right. Two miles from Chepstow Tidenham is reached. The church—dating, as regards the greater portion of its fabric, from the fourteenth century—stands boldly out upon the slope, its great square tower a beacon-mark for many a mile down stream. On a clear day it is well worth while to climb the tower's time-worn stairs; for from the summit we can see the windings of the river far towards the Channel broadening out to the south-west.

On such a day it is not difficult to believe a current local tradition; namely, that the Gloucester Harbour Commissioners once approached the vicar and churchwardens and begged permission to white-wash the tower and maintain it henceforth in that



CONE MILL.

state ; pointing out that such treatment would greatly enhance its utility as a landmark to vessels homeward-bound !

But the great glory of Tidenham is the ancient leaden font, with little doubt at least eight centuries old. Some twenty or more of these lead fonts exist in Gloucestershire, six of them being from the same mould. One we see here ; a second will be found not far away.

Tidenham font is ornamented with twelve panels in relief, six of which have foliage for their subject. The alternate six contain a figure which cannot well be looked upon as other than the Deity. These six figures also are alternate. In three the Person, richly clothed and seated on a throne, holds a closed book ; in the remaining three a seal upon the book is broken and a hand is raised in benediction. The detail, both of the foliage and the figure-panels, is extremely fine.

We should, however, view the font with greater pleasure if a former vicar had not applied to it a course of treatment usually reserved for grates—covering it with a liberal coating of blacklead !

The church contains two "faculty pews" commodiously placed in a corner apparently chosen to remove their occupants from all possible danger of hearing the sermon. There is another curiosity of a more modern date. A memorial window in the south wall of the nave illustrates the story of the Good Samaritan. He who fell among thieves lies by the roadside with clean-shaven face ; riding away upon his benefactor's mule he wears a well-grown beard ! The porch has that chamber often called a "parvise," on the floor above.

The main road leads straight to Chepstow, but we take the first turn on the left beyond the railway bridge, which leads to Sedbury and Beachley, the last-named village occupying the point of the peninsula between the Severn and the Wye. Sedbury Park is on our left; the house is of interest to entomologists as the birthplace and childhood's home of Eleanor Ormerod, the "farmers' friend." Not the least pleasing chapters of her *Autobiography* are those which give her early recollections of the house and neighbourhood.

Some rare and curious trees are in the gardens, and there is a glorious view of the Severn from the top of the high cliffs that bound the park upon its eastern side. The house contains a leaden font like that at Tidenham—free from blacklead, and smaller, having two panels less, but clearly cast from the same mould. It was rescued by Sir William Marling from the ruined church of Lancaut which we shall shortly see. There was a Roman station in the Park and pottery has been discovered there.

The present Squire of Sedbury, Colonel Marling, V.C., has other curiosities to show besides the Lancaut font which he now shelters in his hall. The drawing-room contains another font—brass and of Flemish work. Most curiously this font, picked up by chance upon the Continent some few years back, bears on its side the arms of Mrs. Marling's ancestors, a family of foreign origin. There is a Stuart cradle and a fine monk's chair, a collection of caricatures of Napoleon, a toss-pot, and a host of other curious things. Many are ancient; but of no less interest are the



PLUSTERWINE HOUSE.

Colonel's relics of the siege of Ladysmith and of other scenes of the Boer War, in which he bore his part.

Of greatest local interest perhaps is a large drawing of what was never seen on land or sea—the great barrage projected for the Severn in the earlier half of the last century. It was to reach from Beachley to the cliffs of Aust upon the river's farther shore, and would have made its stream, now so attenuated at low tide, a brimming basin in which ships would ride with ease at any hour of the day or night.

Sedbury Park ends with a bank and ditch well marked upon each side of the road. On the right hand of the road is Buttington Tump, the most probable site of the siege and defeat of the Danes by Alfred. And here at last upon the Severn shore we have something more than a mere legend; for later history clings about the narrow tapering strip of land beyond the ditch and bank.

The entrenchment as we see it to-day undoubtedly forms part of Offa's Dyke. The bank and ditch are very plain in the park, and may—with permission—be followed for some half mile to where a large stone marks their southern end upon the summit of the cliffs above the Severn shore. But the Dyke was here altered and renovated by the Royalist party in the Civil War; and on the flat and narrow tongue of land beyond were fought two stubborn combats of that time.

So remote and apparently unimportant a corner of the county might seem a curious field for combat till we consider carefully the situation of the place. A mile farther we shall be at Beachley

Point, the junction of the Wye and Severn streams. Two miles up the Wye is Chepstow ; farther still is Monmouth, with Raglan, held by the Marquis of Worcester for the King, a few miles off the river bank. The Wye was thus the line of communication with Monmouthshire and Wales.

Across the Severn, here about a mile and half in breadth, lie the Aust Cliffs ; behind is Bristol, some ten miles inland. With Rupert holding Bristol as a storehouse and arsenal ; with the King's ships lying in the Severn and at the mouth of the Wye, Beachley clearly becomes a position of importance.

Rupert saw this, and in the autumn of 1644 ordered the place to be entrenched and occupied by some five hundred horse and foot. The renovation of only half of Offa's ancient earthwork was completed when Massey came down upon the Royalist party with a somewhat larger force. All one night he faced the Royalists, deferring his attack until the morning for one excellent reason among others.

The land from the Dyke to Beachley Point is absolutely level. The rise and fall of the tide in both the Wye and Severn is of an abnormal range. Massey cunningly waited for the lowest ebb. The King's ships slowly dropped below the level of the land, and their guns were thus rendered powerless to rake the field of fight.

Massey forthwith attacked, forced the works, killed many and took a hundred and eleven prisoners; others gained the vessels in the estuary, while others still were drowned. From the summit of the cliffs facing us on the Wye's farther shore



WOOLASTON INN.

large numbers of the neighbouring Monmouthshire's inhabitants looked on and viewed the combat at their ease. A better scene for a spectacular display could hardly have been found.

Massey, however, soon abandoned Beachley, and, early in October, Winter of Lydney House was busy fortifying it once again, this time in a more efficient manner. Palisades strengthened and pointed with iron were employed; and mindful of the lack of help from armed vessels at low tide Winter placed guns upon the heights above the Wye's west bank.

At midnight on the thirteenth of October, Massey, with a hundred musketeers, eight troops of horse, and the Newnham garrison, was again at hand. Waiting once more for ebb of tide and break of day he stormed. His personal escapes were many; in passing the earthwork his horse unseated its rider; a musket was fired at him without effect, and his helmet knocked off with the butt end. But the attack was again successful; thirty Royalists fell, and more than two hundred were made prisoners. Prince Rupert was expected in the Royalist camp that night; his tent, erected to await him, fell into the Roundheads' hands.

Winter meanwhile had kept his ground on the summit of a cliff which overhung the Wye; being at last assailed there he forced his horse down the bank and into the river. The horse was taken, but the intrepid Royalist escaped. Though it is clear that the scene of "Winter's Leap" must be in the immediate neighbourhood of Beachley, local tradition has placed it at a point on the Wye a mile

and more above Chepstow—far from the fight and on the summit of precipitous cliffs nearly three hundred feet above the stream.

Beachley to-day is peaceful, not to say sleepy. We may turn aside at the Three Salmons inn to loiter for half an hour on the shore—pleasant though muddy—and to admire from below the Sedbury Cliffs. These are of sandstone, with a band of lias, and marls over all. Many fossil forms are to be found ; but in searching the beach below the cliffs for these, regard should be had to the state of the tide. Beachley owns a "putcher," perhaps the largest we have seen as yet upon the Severn shore.

We need not seek for very ancient buildings on this shore ; for the Parliamentarians, after their second capture of the place, ordered the destruction of all dwellings and the levelling of every hedge, realizing the uselessness of Beachley to those who were not in possession of the neighbouring tides. The little church upon the right, not yet a century old, is merely quaint. Half a mile farther is the "slip" or landing-stage where the road ends.

This "slip," unlikely as it seems to-day, was not so long since on the main route from London to South Wales. Coaches ran through Bristol to Old Passage beneath the glowing cliffs of Aust across the stream ; a ferryboat transported the passengers to the South Wales coach awaiting them where now we stand.

Memories of tragedy, if not of battle, linger about the "slip." On a September evening many years ago the boat, loaded with human passengers, some horses, and more sporting dogs, was overset



THE CHAPEL, WOOLASTON GRANGE.

when crossing with its freight. No explanation of the accident was ever to be had; for not a soul escaped the racing currents of this dangerous spot. Old Passage ferry was in due course succeeded by a steamer plying between Newpassage and Portskewitt, a few miles below; then both were swept into oblivion by the Severn Tunnel, of which we see the pumping station farther down the Monmouth shore.

The road ends here, but a path leads through fields for nearly half a mile to Beachley Point. And even then, the ruined watch-tower standing upon the final jutting point of cliff is not the actual end. At high water there is a little island some two hundred yards from shore; by those who pick their way with care and do not mind a little Severn mud it can be reached on foot during an hour and more at the low tide.

The light upon it shines at night far down the broadening stream; a strong west wind this evening brings us thoughts of Lundy and the open sea. And there is other interest at our very feet. These low ruined walls, mossy and bramble-grown, once formed the cell and chapel of a hermit or recluse—whether a man or woman it seems difficult to say.

The "Rok Seynt Tryakle" an ancient writer called the place; "Treacle Island" say the Beachley villagers to-day! Tecla, Teraclius, Terendica—these among others are the varying versions of the name. A virgin and the first English martyr, say some, murdered by Norse pirates on her island rock. The hermit consulted by the Welsh bishops, say others, at such time as those prelates crossed

the Severn to Aust for a conference with Augustine; if indeed Aust was the spot, which some dispute. In any case the ruined hermitage is a pleasant resting-place to-day. Another hazy legend has it that the first Crusaders sailed from this small island rock.

To reach Chepstow, fully four miles off by road, though partly visible when looking up the Wye from Beachley Point, we must return past Sedbury Park, and keep thenceforward to the left. Or there is a path, not, indeed, very definite nor always clean, along the Wye's left bank. Of Chepstow and its castle, lying as they do beyond the Wye, and therefore quite outside the ancient Forest bounds, we shall not speak.



A HOUSE AT WOOLASTON.

CHAPTER XXIII

ST. BRIAVELS

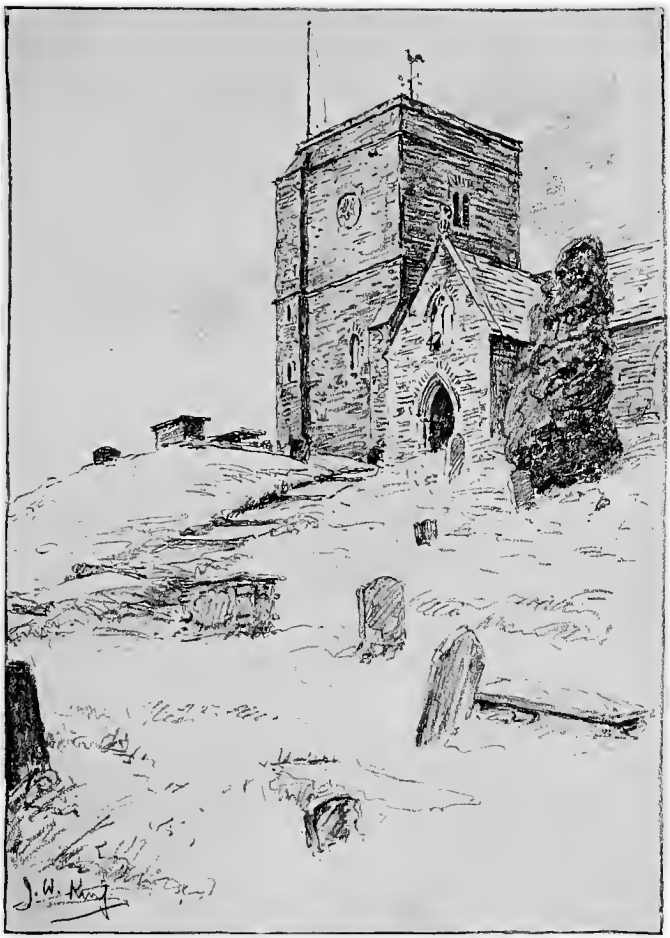
HAVING now followed the west bank of the Severn from Newnham down to Beachley Point we will conclude our beating of the Forest bounds by visiting four villages which lie above the Wye—St. Briavels, Clearwell, Newland and Staunton. Although these villages now lie outside the limits of Crown property, each has its points of interest, and not one can be omitted from our present tour. All four are within easy journey of the Speech House, but to-day we reach them by a walk or ride along the twenty miles of road which stretches high above the Wye, and leads from Chepstow to Monmouth. The direct road between these two places is four miles shorter, lying in the valley and closely following the river and the rail.

Leaving Chepstow we cross the so-called "footbridge" at the bottom of the town's main street—the bridge a joint possession shared by the counties of Gloucester and Monmouth. For here, and to within a few miles of Monmouth town, the river forms the county boundary. Below it is the tubular iron railway bridge of Isambard Brunel; above, the stately pile of Chepstow Castle stands upon the Wye's right bank. A few yards higher still a Roman bridge once crossed the river; and

near this spot, just as we write these lines, the search of the Wye mud for Bacon's hidden manuscript goes on. For Bacon, be it known to such as ask why he should choose this spot as hiding-place, had, early in the seventeenth century, some wire-works at Tintern and elsewhere, and was at times a Beachley resident.

The bridge once crossed, we either take the sweeping curve of the long hill, or follow the steep footpath opposite the bridge, which, almost impossible as it may seem, was once the old coach road. In either case the turn to the left from the main road has to be taken at the path's upper end, and the pedestrian will do well to leave this lane in turn at the first stile on his left, and cross the hilly field beyond. From here the view of Piercefield house and park across the Wye is fine. Upon our right there is an old ruined tower—a watch-tower probably; and at the field's far end we come to a short strip of Offa's Dyke.

The Mercian monarch and his dyke are topics which we touch with diffidence, for controversy hangs about the subject like a veiling cloud. But it is not improbable that there will be those who, standing here, ask why the comparatively weak protection of a ditch and bank should have been raised immediately upon the summit of precipitous cliffs two hundred feet in height. The answer is that probably Offa's Dyke was not intended as a defence, but merely as a boundary line. The Welsh might cross the river, land upon the narrow strip of meadow at the bottom of the cliff and carry on a peaceable exchange and barter with their neighbours from the great dyke's English side. If



TIDENHAM CHURCH.

we accept this theory the dyke's existence in positions where it otherwise seems useless and uncalled-for is at once explained. An opinion for which there also seems good ground is that the dyke was not uninterruptedly continuous in this neighbourhood, being constructed only here and there.

The footpath leads us to the road again, and just beyond the second milestone from the town we make a further pause. The cliffs above the Wye, at this point little short of some three hundred feet in height, have here been quarried until the fall is sheer to the river from the road-wall upon our left. The Wye here makes the double bend of Tidenham Reach, inclosing within one elbow the farm and small roofless church of Lancaut—whence comes the leaden font at Sedbury Park. Within the lower bend lies Piercefield, with its sloping woods rich in old yews. It is just here that, by an obvious error, John Winter's leap is placed.

Lancaut was defined by the late Mr. Ormerod as meaning the "church in the wood"; but while sparing the reader a disquisition on Welsh and English etymologies, we may venture to agree with a later writer who translates it as the "gate in the dyke." It is obvious that this is just the point at which the dyke would cross the neck of the peninsula, thus shutting off the low ground of Lancaut.

A few years back the limestone cliffs upon the top of which we stand swarmed all day long with busy workers, for much stone was quarried here for the new docks at Avonmouth. Even to-day small "trows" are often loading at the shore below, the little vessels fitted with hinged masts that bow as they pass under Chepstow bridge. Upon the

Piercefield side stand ranked the Twelve Apostles—grey stone pillars rising from the water's edge.

A mile farther on another fine view of the river may be obtained from a quarry on the left; or better still, from a quaint summerhouse perched just above in private grounds. Nor are the woods and fields below upon our right, the Severn shining some three miles away, less beautiful.

Half a mile farther on a strip of level road is reached, and we begin to pass on either hand the common known as Tidenham Chase—the former warren, or a part of it, owned by the Earl Marshal, and as such exempted from the forest laws. It is worth while to leave the road and stroll across the gorse and heather-covered common on the right, if only to enjoy the fine view of the Severn estuary stretched out five hundred feet below. Southward are Avonmouth and Clevedon, and the ever-broadening river flowing towards the Bristol Channel and the western sea.

At the hours of full tide the Severn here appears an ample waterway. But the repeated tackings of a steamer or a tug-towed string of trows or barges shows how tortuous is the course. And at low tide the broad flats of mud and sand tell their own tale.

At the fourth milestone, just before we reach the little modern church of Tidenham Chase—for we are still in Tidenham parish—there is a grass-grown lane upon the left. Following this, and taking a further turn to the left through fields, we should come to the Devil's Pulpit and a bird's-eye view of Tintern Abbey several hundred feet below. The pulpit is a rock of limestone jutting from the steep



THE "SLIP," BEACHLEY.

side of the wooded ridge, and shadowed by an aged yew. For those who wish to embrace Tintern in the present tour a path leads downward through the woods, and crosses, first the railway, then the river by a private bridge. This latter has become Crown property and is now always open for foot passengers except on Christmas Day.

Tintern, however, lies outside our plan to-day. At the Devil's Pulpit we are again on the line of the Dyke, and some faint traces of it may be found elsewhere among the neighbouring woods.

Beyond the sixth milestone there is a cross-road, and an inn upon the left. We may here turn for a few hundred yards down the lane to the right and admire the picturesque little church of Hewelsfield. The road on the left leads to Brockweir, where a bridge—possibly the very ugliest in the world—has replaced an ancient ferry and would bring us to Tintern. The proprietor of the said ferry did not abandon his monopoly without a struggle, carrying his plea against the building of the bridge from court to court and losing every time.

Two miles beyond the inn St. Briavels will be reached. It may be mentioned here that very few districts known to the writer are richer in the matter of pedestrian rights of way than this part of Gloucestershire. From Chepstow bridge to the top of Tidenham Chase, a good five miles, the man who knows or asks his way may pass through fields and woods with but a scant few hundred yards of high road here and there. It is obviously impossible, within a limited space, to direct fully both the pedestrian and those who, from their mode of travelling, are compelled to keep the road. To

the pedestrian with the bump of locality well developed and a good map in his pocket, the short and shady cuts will not be difficult to find.

"That is the great drawback of our position—we are so isolated." Such, or words to that effect, was the remark of the King to his brother monarch in that charming little play, *The Royal Family*. St. Briavels, too, might in its lofty isolation make the same complaint. Not for this village—formerly a market town, and the judicial centre of the Forest—is the sheltered solitude of some sweet valley such as Flaxley, but the aloof and cold austerity of the hill-top. It stands eight hundred feet above the sea; still more, the village street slopes slightly towards the north, and very bitter are the winds which sweep it from the vast expanse of Forest lying to the east, or those that swirl upon it from the hills across the Wye. Raised thus above the level of its fellow villages for many a mile round—for only Ruardean and Buckstone Hills can boast a loftier altitude—St. Briavels cannot be described as anything but bare and bleak.

Such a position was undoubtedly well suited to the building of the Border stronghold erected here eight centuries ago; although the castle, lying as it does just at the foot of the sloping village, and commanded by the rising ground upon the south, must, with the invention and improvement of artillery, have soon become incapable of making any sure defence. Perched as it is upon the very edge of the steep slope below which runs the Wye, and commanding a wide outlook upon every side except the south, the fortress stands in an ideal spot for guarding Gloucestershire against incursions



THE ENTRANCE GATE, ST. BRIAVELS CASTLE.

by the Welsh. The village stands to-day outside the sphere of Forest industry. It was not always thus; St. Briavels was once famous for its "quarrels"—arrow-heads; Henry III used some six thousand of them in the year 1223.

The church, perhaps even older than its neighbour the castle, stands opposite the latter's entrance door; and though along this road we shall find others more historically interesting and far more beautiful, we cannot pass it by without a glance. It has suffered at the hands of the restorer; noticeably the upper portion of the central tower has been taken down, and a new tower erected on the southern side, the northern buttresses of which project into the aisle with most unbeautiful effect. But the old round-headed Norman arches of the south aisle still remain, with their "billet" and other plain and simple ornaments. On the east side of each of the two arches leading to the transepts from the aisles we find the serpent's head.

As for so many centuries past, the Crown is lord of the manor of St. Briavels and owner of the castle and of other houses in the place. Till towards the end of the last century the castle was in a truly lamentable state; it has now been repaired, converted into a habitable residence, and let.

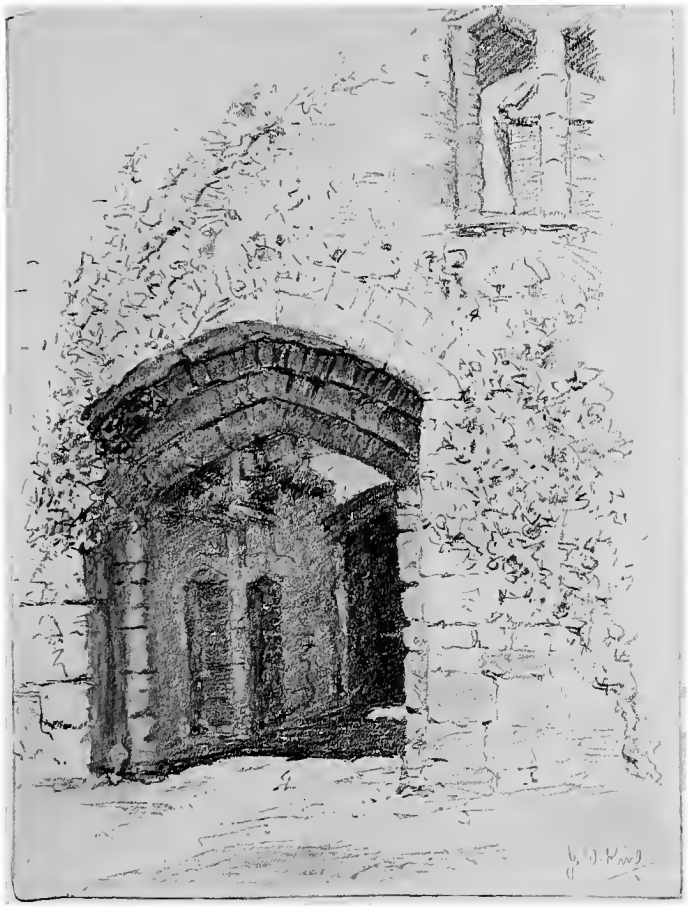
The present tenant proves herself a worthy chatelaine, keeping up the old custom of permitting her home to be visited by the public at certain hours of the day; the small fee charged is handed over to a well-known charity. Nor are the castle's indwellers too frequently disturbed by such a courtesy; St. Briavels, from the east, lies at some distance from the beaten tourist track; and though

its little station on the Wye Valley railway is but two miles away, the long zigzagging hill which looms between the station and the village is a great discouragement to cyclists and to those who go in cars.

The present name of the village is comparatively modern; at least as late as 1164 it was known as Little Lydney, being regarded as a kind of off-shoot from the larger town six miles away. We, indeed, have travelled nearly twenty since leaving that smoke-wreathed and not too attractive place; but a glance at the map will show the very acute angle made when turning from the Severn to the Wye at Beachley Point, and the comparatively short though ever widening distance which now separates us from the Severn shore.

At the hamlet of Stow, a mile north and presently to be visited, it is said that there once was a hermit, one St. Briavel—perhaps a corruption of the Breton name of Brieux—and also the ancient British fortress of a prince of Gwent, of which remains are visible to-day. It seems probable that when Milo Fitzwalter of Gloucester built the present castle somewhere about 1131 he appropriated this name, and that the ancient one of Little Lydney fell gradually into disuse and disappeared.

Of Milo's work only a shapeless block of masonry remains; the mass which lies upon the turf within the castle grounds, and which is the sole remnant of the original keep. The tower fell in 1752 and has since been carried off at intervals and used for building purposes. It would seem to have been about a hundred feet high, and square in



THE INNER COURT, ST. BRIAVELS CASTLE.

shape, with walls some eight feet thick. It stood upon a mound; but whether this was a natural configuration of the ground, was made by Milo, or was a former British camp, is still unknown.

But we anticipate, for we are not as yet within the castle walls. The entrance gateway stands between two towers, of which the lower part of the front walls is seven feet thick. These were added about 1275, and, as is the case with other portions of the castle of comparatively recent date, their walls are ashlar, while the keep and ancient portions were of rubble-work.

The gate admits us to an entrance court; beyond it is a second and again a third, all being well guarded by portcullises. A doorway in the second court gives access to the present residence.

The room we enter, now the hall, was formerly the kitchen, and above us hangs a turnspit wheel, said to be one of only two in England now in their original place. There is a fine fireplace dating from the days of Charles I. Our hostess apologizes for the somewhat marring presence of a modern draught-plate, an innovation rendered needful by the winds that sweep the eminence on which the castle stands.

We pass again across the court to view the western tower by the entrance gate. Below it is a dungeon, while above are pleasant rooms. Then to the fellow tower on the other side. The room on the first floor was in the castle's later days the debtors' prison. Many a long-enduring debtor must have watched the little world that passed between the castle and the church, seated in weariness of hope deferred upon the bench of stone within the deeply recessed window reached by steps.

Here, legible to-day upon the wall, is graven what was passing in the mind of such a watcher more than two centuries ago :

ROBIN BELCHER, THE DAY WILL COME THAT THOU SHALT ANSWER FOR THOU HAST SWORN AGAINST ME.
1671.

Fifty years later John Howard visited this among other prisons. There were no prisoners at the moment in the place, but one had just been released after a year's detention ; the philanthropist notes this man's debt to have been three shillings, while the costs had swelled to thirty times as much. In this room there is a good Early English fireplace.

A still finer fireplace of the same period is in the modern drawing-room, once a portion of the state apartment, and having recessed windows which give glorious views across the valley of the Wye. The carving of the supports to this chimney differ both in design and quality of work, while the shafts below them are of later date. It is, moreover, questionable if the fireplace now occupies its original position.

At last we mount a winding flight of stairs of solid oak, and through a low-arched doorway gain the roof. Before us, crowning the chimney of the drawing-room fireplace below, is a reminder, did we need one, of who for so many centuries was the ruler here. Surmounting the beautiful chimney, of ancient date though transferred from another portion of the house, is a carved hunting-horn of stone, the symbol of the Warden of that Forest whose dark mass of tree-tops lies on the horizon to the east.



CHURCH FARM, ST. BRIAVELS.

CHAPTER XXIV

CLEARWELL

CLEARWELL, when the interest of St. Briavels is exhausted, will be our next halting-place along this road; but before reaching it a detour should be made to Stow. We may either descend the steep zigzagging road which leads to St. Briavels station by the Wye, as far as the pretty little hamlet of Mork; then, turning up-hill again to the right, Stow will be reached in little over half a mile. Or we may pursue the main road from St. Briavels till within half a mile of Clearwell, where a finger-post upon the left points out the way. A short distance may be saved by taking a footpath to the left across the fields.

Electing to keep to our road we leave St. Briavels in a north-easterly direction by the Coleford road, and are soon passing through the district of Bearse and Bearse Common, which, as will be remembered, gave a name to one of the old Forest bailiwicks. A bleak half-mile of high-lying road is followed when we turn aside to Stow. Then we begin to descend and soon reach two farms—Stow Hall upon the right, and Stow Grange opposite.

Stow Hall, a comparatively modern house, is built upon the supposed, but probably mythical site of the hermitage of some St. Margaret. So at least it is marked upon the ordnance maps; but,

as we know, St. Briavel or St. Brieux is said to have resided here. St. Margaret's Well, which gives a stream of water to this pleasant valley, will be noticed just below the house. The great farm buildings lying on the hill behind are fairly venerable; but it is opposite, on the road's farther side, that greater interest lies.

Stow Grange is obviously a house of far more ancient date. Upon our left as we ascend the cart-track leading to the foldyard on the summit of the hill, is a small building with a good arched doorway; and when the rickyard at the top is reached we are rewarded with a sight of the four walls—only a foot or two in height to-day—of what is said to be the chapel of St. Margaret.

Grave doubts are thrown by experts on the sacred nature of the little ruin; it may perhaps even fail to be the chapel which was wont to serve the grange of a religious house. At any rate, the veneration paid the little ruin by the present tenant of Grange Farm is small; he, freely giving us permission to pass through his yards, tells us the chapel will be recognized by being full of mangolds, as indeed we find to be the case! Standing just beyond the chapel's western wall there is a very ancient yew. North-east across a field there lies the camp already spoken of as being perhaps the dwelling of a prince of Gwent.

Stow Grange itself is well worth looking at, and so too is Stow Farm a few yards down the road upon the right, the old house hidden by the buildings of the farm. Still lower down the road Mork Farm, a small but very fine old house, is worth the half-mile of descent and re-ascent to see.



TIDENHAM REACH.

Returning to the Clearwell road the village is reached in half a mile from the finger-post. A small oblong block of farm-buildings should be noticed as we enter, also a small cottage, both upon the right and both of ancient date. Clearwell itself contains several good cottages, too many of which are now, unfortunately, falling to decay.

Not so the church; neither antiquity nor yet decay are met with there. To the antiquarian the fact that the building dates from the middle of the last century will perhaps suffice. But it must be admitted that, viewed externally, the spire and the church's general form are elegant; while within, the fine east window and the highly ornate font, pulpit and pillar capitals may have admirers. For us, with St. Briavels behind, Newland and Staunton before us, and steeped as is this road with memories of the past, the church of Clearwell seems perhaps hardly "in the scheme."

Rather let us turn to the Cross at the bottom of the street—though the restorer has been busy here. But the soaring shaft with its surmounting finial is the only modern part; the steps and shrine are old. The Cross is of the same period and design as those of Aylburton and Lydney; the shrine having, like them, a niche, once sheltering a figure, recessed in each of its four sides.

The imposing fortress-like entrance to Clearwell Court—or Clearwell Castle as they love to call it locally—was on our left before we reached the church. If, as has now for some time been the case, the house is void, the visitor can pass the gates, stroll up the short avenue of lofty elms, and through the stable court attain the house—to our

mind a gloomy, uninviting place. But there are fine cedars on the lawn, and elms whose tops afford that greatest of delights—a rookery. When last at Clearwell Court that rookery's inhabitants were all at home and busy with the cares of hatching-time. Alas, though a bright April sun shone warmly through the showers, a furious west wind swept across the park ; and on the turf below the trees was more than one small shapeless and grey-feathered form. The gardener who accompanied us loved the birds, and was as much concerned as we could be ; but he was likewise a philosopher and added a consolatory word. "After all, it's so many less for the farmers to scare."

Crosses like that of Clearwell we have seen elsewhere ; and neither empty mansions nor modern churches are uncommon sights in England of to-day. But Clearwell holds a greater curiosity in store ; a further set of "scowles" like those at Bream.

To reach them we turn to the right at the Cross and follow the road which leads south-east as far as a steep narrow cart-track on the right. It leads us past some cottages, and finally to the small homestead known as Dean Pool Farm. The house is on the right, a duck-pond on the left of the cart-road, and immediately beyond the garden is a gate which gives access to the scowles. Permission to visit them, always readily accorded, should, however, first be obtained from the shop at the top of the hill beyond the farm. The shop-keeper who owns the land can from his window view to-day the raising of ore for "colour" from a modern pit.


J. W. King

Entering the gate by Dean Pool Farm, a few score paces in the field will bring us to what is perhaps the best of several entrances to this rocky and yew-shaded labyrinth of trenches and of circular half filled-up pits. Though occupying an area much less extensive than the scowles we have already seen at Bream, those here are in some ways more impressive still. There is nothing here perhaps so theatrical, so awe-inspiring, as the Devil's Chapel with its lofty pulpit rock at Bream; but the clefts from which the ore was won in years gone by descend far deeper, and the workings are more thickly hidden underneath a dense dark growth of bramble and of yew.

It may be, too, that the explorer here enjoys a better chance to lose his way. On our first visit we employed the services of a local guide. On a subsequent occasion we had gained sufficient confidence to thread the place alone—with the result that a train was missed in the valley below, a consequence of inability to extricate ourselves at the appointed time. While perhaps hardly to be called dangerous, these scowles should be explored with care, especially by anyone who visits them alone: a nasty fall is not impossible, and though houses are not far off few voices would succeed in drawing attention from these lonely silent depths.

The most impressive portion of the workings is a single crevice, hardly more than some three feet in width, which can be traced from end to end—some sixty yards or more; that is unless the path, as on our last visit, is still blocked by the fallen branch of a great yew. Slipping and sliding down the steep slope, and careful of our footing in

the loose and shifting red-brown soil, we are, when at the bottom of the cleft, some seventy feet below the level of the ground. Between the towering walls of rock there gleams a narrow strip of sky, crossed here and there by thickly clustering brambles or by still more sombre boughs of yew. Around us there is all the quiet of the grave; but from above there come disquieting and mysterious sounds—difficult to regard as but the chafing of the scarred and twisted branches of the yew trees overhead.

These yews which shroud the place beneath their shadow have strange ghostly and disturbing shapes. Their roots sometimes lie naked to the view for many feet from where they leave the stem; the earth that covered them has slipped away into the yawning chasms spread below—as it slips now, with rustling pattering sounds that make us start. The brooding branches have an almost sentient movement; are they lulling us to an eternal sleep within the windings of this deep and roofless tomb? The whole place is uncanny—"unked" to use the expressive language of a shepherd friend. As we climb painfully between the steep sides of the chasm, at the farther end there is a sudden rustling on the edge, and a brown-coated sheep-dog peers down upon us from a bramble-bush. We have a welcome ready for such company; but this dog greets us neither with the bark of angry indignation at a trespasser nor with the wagging tail of proffered friendliness. Silently he gazes down upon us for a few brief seconds, and then as silently is gone. Such stealth, such silence, may proclaim the poacher and no more; yet there is that about the creature

which suggests the *revenant* from a still more ghostly hunting-ground than this.

Wandering to and fro in the old workings, taking a turning now to this side, now to that, brought up at times by some sheer precipice, we get a notion of the general scheme by which such scowles were worked. Some ore was found in pits or "pockets," their shape clearly visible to-day, even though much filled up; but more was followed where it lay within the narrow clefts we have been traversing. Some ancient spades and other tools of wood found here a few years since were at first thought to be of Roman origin, but are most probably of Cromwell's time.

Everywhere among the loose red soil there grows wild garlic, and as our footsteps crush the leaves the scent is heavy on the close still air. For in these narrow vault-like passages the match by which we light a cheerful and companionable pipe burns without flicker; yet above our heads the wind is blowing half a gale, and the great yew-boughs creak and toss in seeming agony. It is these ceaseless voices, this wild tumult overhead, that give an added ghostliness to the weird place to-day.

CHAPTER XXV

NEWLAND

NEWLAND, like other villages which we are visiting along this road, now lies outside the Forest's bounds; but it is a place linked closely with the great Crown woodland, and is in many ways of special interest, even apart from its great beauty of situation. Until the beginning of the last century it embraced within the limits of its parish practically the whole of the Forest; eastwards there was no other church between it and Flaxley Abbey, some twelve miles away. Just outside the village stands by far the largest and probably the oldest oak of the district—the true patriarch of the Forest and one of England's largest trees. Within the beautiful churchyard are the tomb and effigy of a fifteenth century forester-of-fee, as well as that of a king's bowbearer; while the church itself contains a small and curious brass representing a Forest Free Miner in his working dress and equipment. Were it only for these records of the past the village is a place in which we linger willingly.

Newland church and village stand four hundred feet above the sea, just where the high-lying valley running north and south drops southward to a lower level. Leaving the windings of the Valley Brook a sharp and curving hill will bring us into



NEWLAND CHURCH.

Newland from the Clearwell road, and we are at the churchyard gate; but the fine tower has been before our eyes ere this, rendered more distinctive by the fifth and taller pinnacle which terminates the stairway in its south-east angle. This church, one of the finest in the county, took at last forty years to build, and the tower, beginning as Decorated, finished its height as Perpendicular.

Entering the graveyard by the south-east gate the churchyard cross first claims our notice. The cross itself, the shaft, and the socket into which the latter is fixed, are of small interest to the antiquarian, being a modern erection of some fifty years ago. But the five steps which form the base, although rebuilt, are of the fourteenth century. So too is the original socket which lies upon the grass close by; the one in present use is a fairly accurate copy.

Several of the memorial stones in the churchyard are enriched with really fine carving; a specially handsome one, the sides and ends carved with Norman arches, stands near the cross. Close by is the tomb which bears the now somewhat indistinct figure of a king's bowbearer, wearing a broad-brimmed hat. But the monumental effigy of greatest interest is that upon the Wyrall tomb on the north side of the churchyard. It is said to have been formerly within the church itself; but this is doubtful, and the present vicar has—we think wisely—resisted the proposal of antiquarians to undertake the dangerous task of moving from their present place these weather-worn and ancient stones.

The carven effigy of the old forester-of-fee lies with its feet upon a crouching hound. Slung from

the right side is still discernible the horn, while on the left the figure bears a short stout hunting-sword. The inscription, now almost illegible, runs as follows :

HERE : LYTHE : ION : WYRALL : FORSTER :
OF : FEE : THE : WHYCHE : DYSESYD : ON :
THE : VIII : DAY : OF : SEPTEMBER : IN : YE :
YEARE OF OUR : LORDE : M,CCCC,LVIII. ON :
HYS : SOULE : GOD : HAVE : MERCY : AMEN.

" Ion " is generally rendered as Jenkin or Junkin in modern accounts of this highly interesting relic. Mr. Nicholls has, however, pointed out that there are no records of any Jenkin in the Wyrall family, and he is therefore probably correct in naming the recumbent forester as *John* Wyrall or de Yrall.

Entering the comparatively modern porch we notice the curious small mutilated figures built into its walls. A partially built-up doorway above that of the church itself proclaims the former existence of a parvise or priest's chamber above. There may or may not have been a priest's house in Newland ; such accommodation was not invariably provided. In any case a church of which the nominal worshippers were scattered over so wide an area would need to be well staffed, and Newland probably had several priests. To-day the vicar works practically single-handed, and is responsible for the modern church at Redbrook with its tin-plate works in the Wye Valley two miles off. In the care of sixteen of his Newland parishioners, however, he has official aid. These are the occupants of the somewhat gloomy three-century-old almshouses which stand upon the churchyard's southern side.

Founded early in the seventeenth century by a London haberdasher they are administered by the Company of that name, and their inmates have a Lecturer alloted to their spiritual needs. The Lecturage, his official residence, adjoins the cottages.

Opening from the south aisle is the former chantry, now filled with memorials of the Probyns, a family which chiefly interests us to-day as having in its time furnished the Forest with verderers. A fine altar-tomb with figures of Sir John Jose and his wife of the time of Edward III stands before the chantry door. But it is in the chapel at the east end of the aisle that we shall find what is of greater and more curious interest than these memorials of the more or less illustrious dead. Turning back a strip of matting which covers one of the many tombstones with which the church is paved, we discover the small and beautifully preserved brass—about eight by twelve inches in size—which depicts for us a Dean Forest iron-miner of the fifteenth century.

The little figure is represented standing on a head-plate and shoulder-piece of armour, and is without doubt a crest; but whether that of the Christopher Baynham whose name appears on the stone to which the brass is now attached is doubtful. More probably the brass has been removed from its place. No matter; it accurately figures forth for us the iron-miner of five centuries ago.

His visible garb consists of a cap, jacket, stockings, and breeches plainly tied with strings below the knees. The feet are hidden behind the head-piece of the armour on which the figure stands. The right arm is raised in the act of wielding the

small pick or mattock with which the ore was loosened from its bed. On the miner's back is a hod or carrier which his left hand holds in place by a strap passed over the shoulder. That such a miner worked not only in the shallow trenches such as we have seen at Bream, but also in a deeper darkness, we here have ample proof; he of the brass carries a lighted candle fixed in a candlestick held fast between his teeth! The modern miner's method of carrying lamp or candle hooked to the peak of his cap was then apparently unknown.

Newland church has other points of interest which the visitor may well be left to notice for himself. The former ancient roof-beams were, it is said, of chestnut. The supposed chestnut of Westminster and the Louvre is now known to be but durmast oak; but it is possible that the chestnut plantations of Flaxley neighbourhood and of the Forest generally give a more solid foundation for the supposition as regards Newland.

In the pillar behind the pulpit is a narrow doorway leading to a winding stair within. The former entrance to the pulpit, says the casual visitor. No; almost certainly the way to the former rood-screen with its probably existing altar. Of altar-stones the church holds five. Three are in present use, that in the chancel being a notably fine slab of Forest stone. Two others stand against the walls, and might be taken for gravestones were it not that the five small crosses graven on them place their real use beyond a doubt. One, indeed, has at some date been appropriated as a memorial stone and bears an inscription; a fact which probably saved it from iconoclastic hands.

The font is dated 1661, and is an unusually fine one for that period. In the chapel which contains the miner's brass are some fine pieces of tesselated pavement. The vicar is also the happy possessor of a beautiful piece of workmanship the date and origin of which are unknown. It is a brass processional cross of great beauty, and well worth inspection. It came to the church as a gift some few years since, and any expert who can identify its period and maker will be a welcome visitor. The vicarage is the modern but picturesque house east of the church, with a fine cedar on the lawn.

Newland House, the mansion of the village, is close by, west of the church. More interesting is the smaller and far older building, with mullioned windows and a venerable roof, which opens on the churchyard. This is the former grammar school, the scholars having been now removed from Newland to its more populous, if less picturesque, neighbour, Coleford. Two new brick chimneys somewhat mar its beauty from the north, and the interior contains nothing of great interest.

We leave the churchyard by the stone-roofed lych-gate opposite the Ostrich inn—the only hostelry of that name, by the way, with which we happen to be acquainted. The lych-gate, though modern, is beautiful by reason of its well-shaped ample roof of stone : and from it too we gain the best view of the church. Stones similar to those which cover it appear on most of the village houses, though here and there they have, alas, made way for modern tiles, and even slates. Moreover, a pestilent epidemic in the form of a garish red wash for outside walls has lately broken out. But many

of the houses are good, and there are some excellent doorways to be seen in garden walls.

A lane on the right beyond the inn gradually becomes deeply sunk between the fields on either side. If followed it will lead past some of the outlying Highmeadow woods, and finally to the site of the former mansion of Highmeadow, the materials of which were removed early in the last century by its then owner, Lord Gage. The Highmeadow estate is said to have been offered to the Duke of Wellington as the nation's gift before Strathfield-saye was decided upon. But—so runs the local story—the views of the steep wooded hills all round were little to his taste. "The Pyrenees, the Pyrenees!" he is said to have exclaimed, and the proposal came to nothing.

Leaving this lane to Highmeadow unexplored for the present we pass through the northern end of the village. Directly we are clear of the farm-house upon the right hand side, the famous Newland Oak—to some perhaps the chief reason of our visit here—is full in view. It stands, not three hundred yards away, in a meadow on the left of the road, and can be reached by a path across the fields. Pilgrims to this patriarch may, however, be reminded that there is no right of way to the tree itself, and that they visit it by courtesy.

The feeling at first sight, and more especially when standing close beside the massive trunk, may be of disappointment, for the great tree has long been little but a giant ruin. The girth is generally given as slightly over forty-four feet at a height of five feet from the ground; but it is difficult to see exactly how this is arrived at, so burr-incrusted,



THE NEWLAND OAK.

warped and twisted is the trunk, that it is impossible to pass a measuring tape around it with any degree of regularity. The gigantic bole stands ten or twelve feet high. Mount to the summit—not a task of difficulty, for the projecting burrs give ample and secure support—and it will be found entirely hollow within. But still the sap flows upwards yearly through the outer shell, and green leaves open on the boughs above.

Ten or twelve branches only spread from the trunk's crest, and these are all "stag-headed"—permanently bare and leafless at their farther ends. Others have fallen and left nothing but the jagged stumps to mark their place. At any time this tree, whose age must be at least nine hundred or a thousand years, may fall to pieces, leaving nothing but a pile of rotten wood. Such at least is the ominous forecast of the Deputy-Surveyor.

Yet year by year the patriarch dons its scanty summer garb, and casts a thin and flickering shadow in which cattle rest at summer noon. Or when, on some midday of early spring, the wind blows down the high-lying valley from the north, its gnarled and bossy trunk has many crevices in which the lambs are wont to shelter from the blast. Even in this last stage of decay the veteran passes to its end in usefulness.

Ruin though it be, it is impossible to look upon the mighty tree without a feeling of respect for its long past. How many a crop of fertile acorns has it scattered on the autumn wind, and to what varied uses have its seedling sons to countless generations grown. Houses have risen from the scions of the tree, carved chests have hoarded treasure sacred

and secular. But, thinking of the Forest as the growing-ground of England's former navy, what brave descendants has the Oak of Newland sired!

Was it on planks sawn from some stately tree descended from this veteran that Nelson fell? Did some descendant of the oak carry Napoleon to his exile at St. Helena? Or did it furnish forth the wooden walls between which lay the man of whom a modern poet has sung, when

> Low on the field of his fame, past hope lay the Admiral triumphant,
> And fain to rest him after all his pain?

No lover of Dean Forest could be other than glad to think that oak from distant Gloucestershire was in the *George* as, with the dying Blake on board, she bore up for Plymouth, and

> There lay the Sound and the Island with green leaves down beside the water;
> The town, the Hoe, the masts with sunset fired—

All these things are possible; unknown, unnumbered are the triumphs, victories and tragedies in which the Great Oak of Newland may have borne its part.

The site of Highmeadow should now be viewed. To reach it we may take the lane before alluded to, or, following the road as far as Newland station, turn there to the right uphill. The mansion stood just at the junction of the road and lane.

Nothing is left now but a section of foundation, together with some grass-grown mounds which give a notion of the terrace and the mansion's size and shape. Benedict Hall, its Roman Catholic owner, fortified it strongly for the King during the

winter 1642–3. Behind the house, across the lane, some fine carved stone supports are still protruding from a building once a range of stabling, but now used as cottages.

If the dismantled site is little in itself, the fragrance of the line of ancient hawthorns in the field below is pleasant on the air in May. And, gazing on the glorious western view, we easily believe in Wellington's traditional exclamation of "The Pyrenees" when viewing the spot; so steep the vales in front, so dark the spruce-woods to the right.

A hamlet called the Scowles lies just beyond us, named from the old iron-workings in a wood a few yards off the road. Though interesting, they are less weird and ghostly perhaps than those at Clearwell and at Bream, and may be left unvisited by tourists who are pressed for time.

There are several ways of leaving Newland. From the little station trains run—at infrequent intervals—to Coleford and Monmouth respectively. Through Coleford to the Speech House the road is some five miles or less; to Monmouth through Staunton six miles. Or, if the day's end being near the traveller wishes to gain the valley of the Wye and a train to either Monmouth or Chepstow, he has a choice of routes to Redbrook two miles away on the Wye Valley line. The Staunton road can be followed as far as Newland station; then turn downhill to the left. This is a glorious walk through a lovely valley with the Highmeadow woods and Staunton on the right. Or a footpath through the field adjoining that in which the great Oak stands will bring the pedestrian into the same

road just above a large mill-pond. Or again, descending the steep footpath by the side of Newland House and climbing the narrow stony lane to the right, he will find himself upon a path leading through a fine wood, and will emerge at Redbrook, just above the tin-plate works.

A third route, a mile longer but eminently delightful, may be recommended to the man who goes afoot; to the cyclist only if he be prepared for a dubious surface and the opening of many gates. Descend again the path by Newland House, but, instead of following the ascending lane, pass through the gate beside the little lodge and follow the field-road and the circuitous course of the Valley Brook. The cart-track is often rough and loose, but the brook sings beside us all the way, now crossed by a footbridge or a ford, now tumbling over some small waterfall. We pass close below the walls of a fine old farmhouse upon our left, within which is a wealth of ancient oak. There are traces of mill-ponds here and there, drained now and forming rich green pasturage; but two large pools still exist at the valley's lower end.

Beyond the second we must be prepared to meet a sudden and not over-welcome transformation scene. A sight other than that of the blue wood-smoke issuing from the lonely farms and cottages upon the way appears upon the air—the dense dark clouds from tin-plate works established more than fifty years ago, and rarely idle—often working, as when last we saw them, night and day. The works are open to the cinder-covered road, and we exchange the sylvan peace and beauty of the valley not five hundred yards above for sound and sight

of clanking roller-mills, the glow of furnaces, and red-hot plates of iron drawn from the rolls by bare and brawny arms. Below the works the stream is anything but good to look upon; happily its further course is short. Crossing the Monmouth and Chepstow road below the little modern church, its ruddy and polluted waters meet the cleansing current of the Wye.

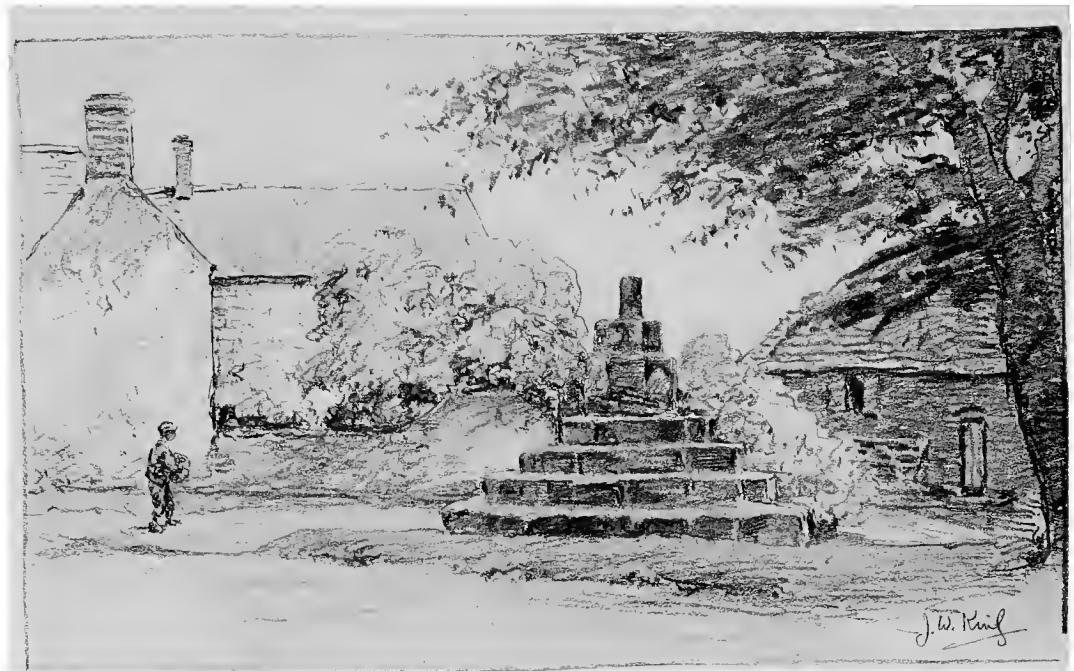
CHAPTER XXVI

STAUNTON

FROM Newland station the road turning downhill on the left is that to Redbrook, to which we have already alluded ; the hill we have ascended to Highmeadow and the Scowles would, if still followed, lead to Coleford and the Forest. Crossing the line we take to-day the turning to the left, beside which runs the railway for some quarter of a mile. The road soon enters thick woods, and is presently joined by the little used and grass-grown Redbrook and Staunton road. The pinnacled and embattled tower of Staunton church, perched high upon its seven hundred feet of hill, is soon in sight. The distance from Newland is about two miles.

High as it is, Staunton is wholly free from that bleakness of aspect which surrounds St. Briavels ; it nestles underneath the Buckstone hill, and all around lie glorious woods. The little church, most beautiful externally and still more interesting within, attracts us first ; but at the churchyard gate we pause to spare a minute for the ancient village cross.

Some may even prefer it to that of Newland, for the restorer's touch is absent here ; only the lower of the four steps has been now disencumbered of the soil which formerly half buried it from sight. These steps form an eight-sided base and are sur-



THE CROSS, STAUNTON.

mounted by a massive socket, square at the base but chamfered to an octagon above. On this again is an octagonal plinth in which is socketed the foot or so of the old shaft which still remains. Like other crosses we have seen, the cross is of Dean Forest stone ; its date is probably the early fifteenth century.

Within the church let not the antiquarian be dismayed by what at first sight seems to be a modern font. Though scraped and renovated when remounted on its present steps, it is of fifteenth century work. Still we may safely call it modern as compared with that old block of stone, two feet or more in height—the famous Staunton font which stands within the semi-darkness of the old tower in the centre of the church. The basin is a square or nearly so, and has a depth of perhaps a foot. A few inches below the basin edge the font externally has a tooled border, very plain in style, on each of its four sides. Four plain diagonal lines which, starting from the corners of each side, do not quite reach the centre, form the only other decoration of the whole.

Is it a Roman altar, long converted to the service of the Christian church ? Or is it Anglo-Saxon ? Both these theories have been, and are perhaps even still, upheld by some. But opponents of the first point out that Roman altars were rarely if ever of this form, and the theory of a Saxon origin has now but small support. The font is most likely one of early Norman times, dating, like the oldest portion of the church itself, from about 1100.

After the not infrequent fashion of the unhurried

and deliberate builders of those times, the church grew slowly, changing its architectural character as it grew. The two round-headed and unornamented Norman arches in the north-west corner, with their simple capitals, have seemed to some to mark the starting-point; though here again we are upon the perilous ground where experts differ in their views. At any rate, the arches were built up and wholly hidden from sight about 1500 and were only rendered visible again early in the last century. The three adjoining bays have pointed arches; one capital—that near the pulpit—has a grotesque face on two of its corners.

The stairs which lead to the ancient stone pulpit —now once more in place after a period of supercession by a wooden "three-decker"—served formerly two further purposes; by them the rood-loft, and higher still the belfry, were approached.

From 1190, when the original church was probably finished, additions were made at intervals. First came the tower and transepts, the east wall of the nave being used as that of the lower part of the tower's west wall, as is fairly evident from its being much thinner than the other three. This economy of material and labour was most likely due to lack of funds. To the same cause we may set down the fact that, of the belfry windows, only the two most conspicuous are ornamented, while only the southern of the four tower arches has a plain chamfer.

The church as it stands to-day was, after intervening alterations which we must pass over, completed in the fifteenth century by the building of the present chancel. The line of the chancel is

not mathematically straight with that of the nave, but has a northward trend. Here, as in some not infrequent instances elsewhere, we may either attribute this to a deliberate purpose on the builders' part, alluding to the drooping head of Christ upon the cross; or we may prefer to accept the more matter-of-fact theory of error in the setting-out.

The tower, and also—as is indeed plain at a glance—the wall and arches of the south arcade are out of plumb, having a marked bend towards the south. The pillars of the arches are, however, vertical, having been removed one by one during repairs in the last century, and replaced in an upright position. This deviation from the perpendicular is believed to have started in the fifteenth century owing to a settling of the foundations.

The church was built upon an eastward sloping site, and the floor levels were made to follow the natural fall of the ground. At least the higher levels of the pillar bases at the north-west end are thus accounted for by some.

But with regard to Staunton church it is unsafe to a degree to dogmatize. Perhaps no building met with in our tour is of more interest; and none assuredly has been the subject of more general doubt, or of more widely differing expert theories. Those best entitled to be heard are slowest to pronounce with any certainty upon the many doubtful points of Staunton church. Especially the earlier date attributed to the north-western arches of the nave has been much called in question by some skilled authorities.

The pinnacles which crown the tower now are merely modern replicas; two of their predecessors

stand beside the doorway of the porch. But the four figures just below the tower parapet are old. One, bearing a shield with the armorial bearings of "three hogs passant," has been held by some to represent the founder of the church. But John Waldyn possessed the manor of Staunton in 1339, and the original church, as we have seen, stood far before his day.

Outside the church there are no very ancient buildings in the village; a rather quaint eight-sided pound stands just below the Cross. We need not fear to find the smoke of the ten forges which in 1282 were busy here. But, although Staunton's trade and population have declined in the six centuries which have passed over it since then, the rolling woodlands of the Crown estate of Highmeadow have only raised its beauties to a height equalled by few if any places on the Forest's skirts.

A path beside the west wall of the churchyard leads us past the rectory and through a gate into a wood. Within a distance of a hundred yards or so we find a seat. Spread out below us are steep wooded slopes; and through them, flowing down from Symonds Yat, the silver streak of Wye is seen. The view, though exquisite, no longer justifies its name of "double"; the growth of timber has shut out all sight of the river to the left. Later the course of timber thinning may perhaps once more throw it open to the gaze.

The broad sunk path which leads downhill to the left of this seat soon shows traces of paving, generally reputed to be Roman, though Mr. Codrington has thrown some doubt upon an origin of such antiquity. The path, leading first downhill and then

up, will bring us presently into the Monmouth road north of the village, and is undoubtedly on or near the course of a Roman road from Gloucester to Monmouth.

Even if we are not returning to Coleford or the Forest it is worth while to pursue the Coleford road a little way. A splendid yew spreads its dark boughs more than half-way across the highway's breadth, and a short distance beyond, just within the hedge on the left, will be found the Long Stone. Its present height of some six feet above the ground was probably once greater, while its extent below the soil has never been explored.

A similar stone once stood between Bream and St. Briavels; till the utilitarian tenant of the field, weary of ploughing round it and of the waste of serviceable soil, had the temerity to blow it up. Three even larger stones still stand a few miles off across the Wye, in the Monmouthshire village which the inhabitants call Trelleck Town. Whether it be a gravestone or memorial of some great event, a Roman signpost or an ancient mustering-place, the Long Stone gives no sign. The credulous may care to visit it at midnight when, if the exact moment is selected, the prick of a pin is said to yield a flow of blood.

But, apart from the church, the great sight of Staunton lies two hundred feet above the village on the summit of the Buckstone Hill. From the Cross and church we follow the Monmouth road past the inn just to the point where it begins to turn downhill. Here, on our left, a gate leads into the common or meend. Before the gate is passed the curious Toad's Mouth claims a pause.

It is a huge outcropping piece of rock, the shape of which well justifies its name. Legend proclaims it as a place of execution in far distant prehistoric days; and we can trace, if so inclined, the groove in which the victim of the axe was made to lay his head.

We climb the meend, keeping the worn and rocky footpath by the wall upon our right. At the hill-top a wicket gate leads us beneath the shadow of a group of deodars. Immediately at our feet on the steep slope is the great logan called the Buckstone; formerly, but now, alas! no more, a rocking-stone.

Here some may think it no more safe to dogmatize than when within the church. We are not prepared with a flat denial of the theory, still perhaps held by some, that the Druids not only used, but even poised and perhaps shaped the Buckstone. But we may at least allow ourselves to think geologists on safer ground. This block of old red sandstone conglomerate, with the slab on which it rests, is, as usual, of varying durability. A soft stratum has in all probability worn away until the stone was poised on a point comparatively small.

Even during the nineteenth century its tendency to rock was gradually increasing. In 1804 it could be tilted slightly by several men, but always returned to its original position. Fifty years later two or three men could produce movement, and in 1881 a single person could rock it.

Unhappily such progress had its all too likely end. In the summer of 1885 five touring actors, aided by their Monmouth host who at least might

have known better, overset the stone, which rolled some distance down the hill and split into four pieces. The Crown authorities, with a most praiseworthy reverence for this relic, spent money, time and labour in returning it to its original place. It is now not only well cemented to its pedestal but further secured with a strong iron pin.

The rock as it appeared before its fall was an irregularly shaped mass of conglomerate, with an extreme length of nineteen and a greatest breadth of thirteen feet, standing on a base two feet in diameter. Viewed from above to-day it presents the aspect of a flat and tapering wedge, and, though somewhat patched and mended with cement, is still a most imposing mass.

Great slabs of rock are bedded in the hill immediately above the stone. The thirsty traveller will rarely fail to find a drink of clear rain-water in a basin formed in one of these. Whether the theory that the Druids used these slabs for sacrificial purposes will spoil his drink he must himself decide. It is hardly likely that a block upon the summit of a hill so unique and noticeable as the Buckstone would have escaped the notice of an altar-raising race.

The Buckstone Hill is 915 feet in height, thus dominating the Forest, save for the hill of Ruardean, its master by some twenty feet. The views on all sides, as we stand immediately above the Stone, are magnificent, but most extensive towards the north. Beyond the sweep of woods immediately below rise the Little and Great Dowards, Symonds Yat, and Coppet Hill, the Chase. Ross spire forms a landmark beyond which, in the far distance, stand the Mal-

vern and the Shropshire Hills. Across the Kymin Hill to the left rises the bulky mass of the Blorenge near Abergavenny; the peaks of Skirrid, Graig, and Sugar Loaf, the Brecknock Beacons and the long line of the Black Mountains. To our right the Forest, with May Hill beyond. Behind us, past the Severn, lie the Cotswold Hills.

We last stood beside the Buckstone on a day in early spring; wind blowing north by east. For half an hour at a stretch great masses of grey clouds shut out the sun; but we had time and patience to await the spreading of the strip of blue far off. First a gleam lit the distant Malvern Hills. Onward it swept, striking the "heaven-directed" spire of Ross; then, sweeping down-stream towards Symonds Yat, it crowned Great Doward's top with light. Nearer yet and the dark sweep of woods below us were lit up; another moment and it swept across the Monmouth road, flashed on the Buckstone's block of sombre grey and bathed us in a sudden warmth.

For those returning to the Forest, Coleford is two miles away by road. To Monmouth the cyclist has a magnificent downhill ride of about four miles, passing for nearly half the way through woods on either hand. Or he can return to Redbrook, following at first the road by which we came from Newland, and then turning to the right at the fork, the Redbrook-Newland and Redbrook-Staunton roads thus forming a Y. This road is pretty, even before the Redbrook valley is reached; a brawling stream adding to the beauty of the road.

The pedestrian bound from the Buckstone to

Redbrook need not again descend into the village. Let him follow the boundary wall of the inclosure, descending by the pleasant little Buckstone Lodge, beyond which is a Forest nursery, where seedlings, destined one day to take their place as stately trees within the woods, now stand in close lines in garden plots. At the end of the high breezy common—Staunton Meend—by bearing slightly to the right we pass in front of Knockalls Lodge. From here the path through Knockalls Wood is all downhill; at a point where a holly-bush stands at the forking of the paths our way is to the right. Steep as a house-side now the path descends to the level crossing by which we pass the Monmouth and Coleford line; beyond this point a tiny meadow only intervenes between us and an ancient mill-house on the Redbrook road.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CAVES ON THE WYE

THE caverns in the cliffs on both sides of the river above which we stand at Staunton are most usually included in a "tour upon the Wye"; but they fall equally within our range to-day. True, some of them, and those perhaps the most interesting, are on the Wye's right bank, and therefore lay outside the Forest's ancient boundary; but with the purchase of the Highmeadow Estate they passed into Crown ownership, as some three hundred acres of the woods are on the river's Herefordshire side. From Staunton all the caves of note, as well as much fine river scenery, can be reached with ease; moreover, we shall have the joy of another ramble through Highmeadow Woods, as yet but meagrely explored.

Almost due north from Staunton "double view" a rough cart-track leads us in half a mile to Reddings Lodge. Leaving the cottage on our right we pass a nursery on the left and so descend the drive. The first small pathway on the left brings us in a few yards to the "Near Hearkening Rock," a massive wall of stone which ends the path and yields us lovely views of the Great Doward woods across the Wye.

The name clings to it from a legend that the



THE MOUTH OF THE WYE.

faintest whisper in these Doward woods could here be heard. It is undoubtedly a vantage point from which the slightest movement in large areas of the woods, when bare in winter, would be visible—a keeper's watching-place. But on this July afternoon the summer foliage forms a canopy impervious to the keenest eyes.

There comes a rustling whisper certainly which makes us for a moment wonder if the "Near Hearkening Rock" deserves its name; but the sound is from below our feet, and, looking down, we find ourselves black to the knees with swarms of great wood-ants. It is within the very centre of their heaped-up nest that we have placed ourselves to view the scene! Not till a vigorous *pas seul* of some five minutes has been executed are we well rid of the invading host; and then all interest in the landscape and the legend are dispelled and we retrace our steps with speed. Another watching-point—Far Hearkening Rock—lies some way off below.

No farther than the drive do we return; descending which the opening of the path next reached upon the left gives us a glimpse of the great Suck Stone. We are soon beside this giant slab—by far the largest detached rock in all the Forest, and most probably in England too.

It lies aslant in a small clearing, with its table-like flat top tipped at an angle to the steep hill-slope; a block of conglomerate beside which the Buckstone would appear as a mere pebble. The rock is estimated to contain some fourteen thousand tons. The Forest workmen cutting grass along the drive close by can give no explanation of the

name. Long since perchance it was the meeting-place of some old "soccage" court.

And now, the Hearkening Rock and Suck Stone seen, our thoughts are on the caves. Lady Park Cave is on this side the river, and to reach it we wander, more or less at hazard, in a direction east by north; till, by descending, we shall strike the timber track which leads us to the Slaughter Siding near our lunching-place one day last May.

The Slaughter reached, Lady Park Cave is close at hand; not so, as yet, the key. This is at present kept by the proprietress of the Royal Hotel at Symonds Yat more than a mile away. Negotiations are just now in train by which the occupant of Biblings Lodge may some day have a duplicate. To-day we either have ourselves to fetch the key—and guide—from the hotel, or make arrangements for a meeting here.

The cave is in the face of a tall cliff exactly facing Biblings Lodge across the Wye. First comes a long and steep but perfectly safe climb up five successive flights of well-kept and substantial wooden steps, until we find ourselves at the cave entrance, twenty feet or so below the summit of the cliff and about a hundred and fifty above the level of the Wye. The low and narrow entrance is inclosed by railings and galvanized iron sheets, one of which our guide forthwith unlocks. Then, crouching low, we pass into a welcome change from the July drought and glare outside; Lady Park Cave is not cool only, but the drip of falling water greets our ears.

Once well within the entrance we can stand upright; in many parts the roof is far above our

heads. Even a novice in cave exploration soon feels himself in a position to oppose the theory long held—and which, for all we know, may even yet be entertained by some—that the great cave is prehistoric in its origin. For this long winding cavern which extends three hundred yards or more into the rock from the cliff face, with here and there a high-roofed chamber opening from it on this side or that, is clearly an old iron working. Pick-marks are visible, and in some few places are still left small patches of the soft red iron ore.

A ceaseless percolation of lime water drips around us, and the floor is wet and slimy with red mud. The walls are sparkling in the dim light of our candles with the incrustations of the lime, and in some parts small stalactites hang down. We wander far into the place, now entering a chamber on this side or the other, now climbing up, now dipping slightly down. So many are the turnings and side workings of this gloomy labyrinth that it is hardly well for strangers to attempt to visit it without a guide. No practicable opening has been found into the wood above, and it seems probable that the ore worked was tipped down the cliff face to vessels in the Wye below.

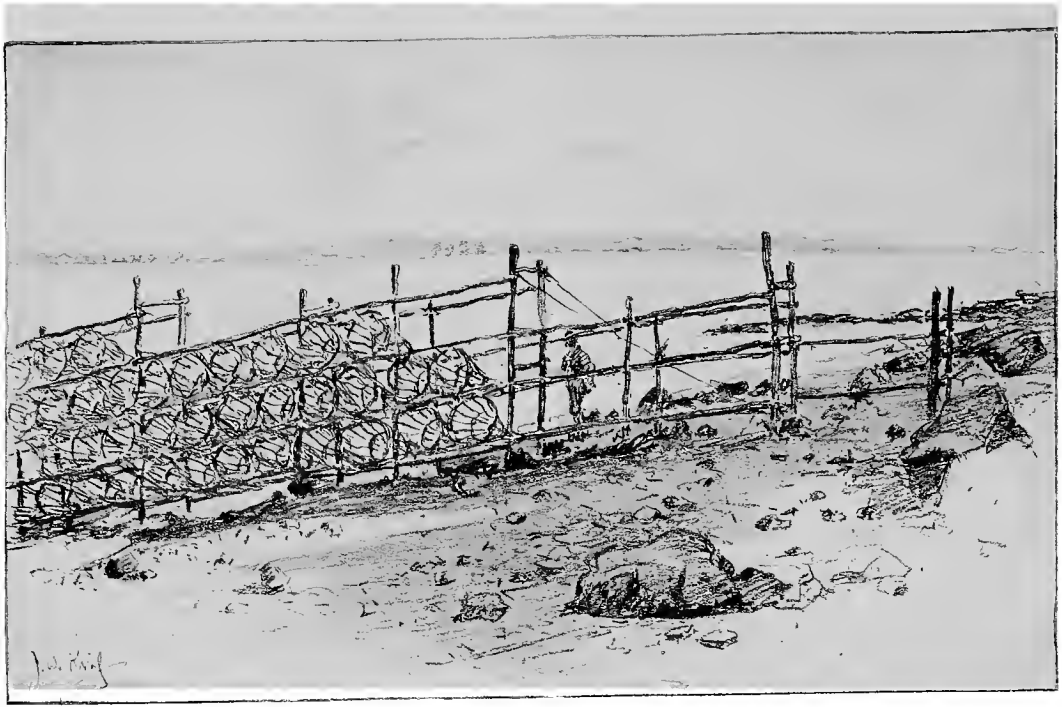
There are some other smaller iron workings on this left bank of the Wye ; one cave is just behind the tall rock towering far above the station and hotel at Symonds Yat.

Beneath the shelter of the bank the cattle of the occupant of Biblings Lodge stand knee-deep in the stream. Boats pass at frequent intervals ; downwards to Monmouth with a party bound from Ross

or Symonds Yat ; or being poled slowly upwards by returning boatmen, with a progress scarcely visible against the rapid current of the shallow "streams." About the herbage on the bank are fluttering peacock butterflies, brown speckled fritillaries, and a dozen more.

The Wye here makes an elbow-bend, inclosing the high wooded cliffs of the Great Doward Hill. Downstream, across the river, are the Seven Sisters Rocks, tall jutting pinnacles of limestone, growing lighter in their hue from base to top. Far down below, the river rushes swiftly past a wooded island and slumbers in the depths of Martin's Pool. The beauty of the river and its cliffs in the immediate neighbourhood of Biblings Lodge will rival even Coldwell Rocks above the Yat.

We shall most probably find one of the lodge boats moored on our side of the Wye ; if not, a vigorous call or two will bring one—not impossibly with a fair oarswoman to ferry us across. But we shall have done wisely to announce our coming to the lodge's occupant a day or two before, he being a man of avocations not a few. To some extent a Crown employee and the occupant of a Crown lodge, he undertakes much work besides. No little portion of his time goes in attendance on the "rods" which fish the stretch of salmon-water forming part of the Crown property. He is a man well versed in fishing lore ; perhaps even greater as an entomologist ; and is, to all his many visitors, good company. From early spring to autumn's closing days the little lodge is seldom void of guests. If neither moth-hunters nor anglers are in possession of the two snug sitting-rooms, at least



A " PUTCHER."

there will be campers-out upon the meadow-bank beside the Wye.

Both moths and butterflies, as we have hinted previously, abound in the Highmeadow Woods. The vision of the gaudy "peacocks" seen while waiting on the river bank brings up the subject now, and so we pass within the lodge to view the occupants of many a case. All save a few from the New Forest have been gathered here; the district yields some six-and-thirty of the sixty British kinds. Upon the table in the sitting-room stand jars in which are caterpillars waiting metamorphosis. When, as occasionally happens, our friend can net a curious and unusual "freak," a handsome guerdon from some eager purchaser is seldom far to seek.

Then, with a brace of candles in the pocket of our guide, we thread the steep and winding woodland paths behind the house. First to the summit of the Seven Sisters Rocks and to King Arthur's Cave. Here, as in Highmeadow Woods upon the Wye's left bank, the timber is of a high quality; oak, mostly with beech undergrowth. The steepness of the slope makes the removal of felled timber something of an arduous task. From the woods' upper portions the great "sticks" will seek a Herefordshire road; from lower down they have to cross the river to the Slaughter Siding on the farther bank.

Iron was worked here up to forty years ago by the then owner of the mansion of Wyaston Leys, which stands above the Wye some mile below the lodge. Another Forest product on this side the river is a bed of silver sand; almost unsaleable for

lack of transport, and on which a young plantation grows with but indifferent success.

Perched on the summit of a "Sisters" rock we have once more a "double view"; but untheatrical, unforced, a scene of placid beauty infinitely lovely to behold. The rails and signal-posts of the Wye Valley railway, following the Wye's curves and windings, form the only blot upon the scene. Save for the line and rarely passing trains, the only signs of life and occupancy in this quiet valley are the cattle in the stream or underneath the elms, and a small flock of snowy geese upon the river bank.

From Seven Sisters Rocks we reach with little toil King Arthur's Cave, perhaps, from the showman point of view, the doyen of the caverns on the Wye. It is a comparatively small cave with a double entrance, and truth to tell is not unapt to disappoint the visitor. But, very different from the cave in Lady Park, it yielded forty years ago a goodly treasure-trove of prehistoric bones—not human relics only, but the bones of mammoth and rhinoceros, cave bear, cave lion, bison, Irish deer and horse, were all discovered here.

So far we have no more than "done the civil thing" to the more famous caves, leaving a card on those best known which every passing tourist sees. But there are others, not seen every day, and known indeed to few or none beside our guide. Rightly and carefully he guards the secret of these less known caves; unwilling that the curious local world should trample heedless through the woodland growth he has in charge, or spoil the caves of any prehistoric treasures they may still contain. Only to such persons as he knows, or those who

come commended by the Forest's Crown authorities and give security against a furtive and unauthorized return, he acts as guide.

Without him it is probable all quest would be in vain; even if lighted on by chance the caves could scarce be reached without a wellnigh endless wandering through the woods, much break-neck scrambling, and, in one case at least, no little danger to the would-be spy. We follow him, now downhill and now up; through undergrowth where not a trace of path is seen, and thorn-brakes where we can but guard our faces and push blindly on; to come at last to a steep slippery slope, where on one hand loose leaf-mould of uncounted years slides down beneath our feet, while on the other side huge limestone cliffs rise like a giant wall. Then come some minutes of a not unperilous rock climb. Following implicitly the orders of the man in front, searching a hand-hold overhead, a half-inch breadth of lodging for our feet below, we land at last, with faces scratched, barked shins, hatless and breathless at the goal.

On hands and knees we enter the low archway that looks out upon the tree-tops far below. Candles are lighted, and we creep, bent double or on hands and knees, till standing-room is reached. Even in dim and flickering candlelight the little cave is beautiful; for stalactites hang glittering from the roof, some white as coral, others stained with infiltrations of the iron ore. Strange are the forms they take. On one part of the cavern roof the model of a set of human upper teeth is seen, so perfect that we seem to gaze upon the portion of a petrified and grinning skull.

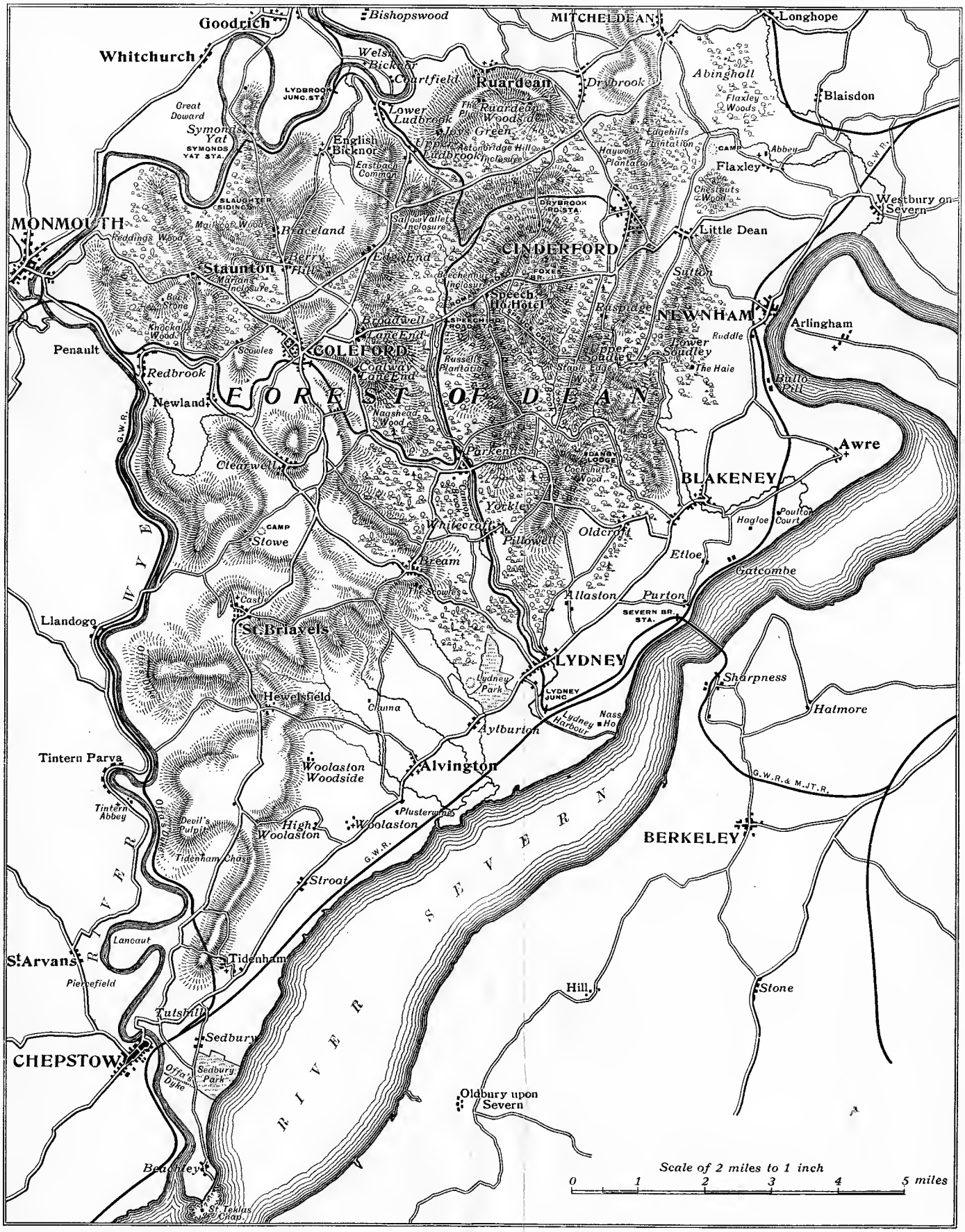
One of the party gives an exclamation of surprise upon discovering a half torpid feebly fluttering moth ; not knowing that the moths of many caterpillars seek at once a place of hibernation upon issuing from the chrysalis, and rest there till the following year. This being the case the presence of a sinister and mighty spider not far distant is no great matter for surprise.

Another and a somewhat similar cave is visited—reached with less trouble, though, to the unguided, no less difficult to find. Like Arthur's Cave, these and still others in the cliffs known to our guide and to but few besides, have yielded clear proofs of prehistoric origin and indwellers. One of those visited by us to-day was thoroughly investigated some years since. A foot of the floor's thickness was removed ; beneath it lay five skeletons. Our guide will show us at the lodge a four-inch long bone needle found beside the bones ; and here upon the rock within the cave are visible to-day the blackened charcoal ashes of a fire lighted who shall say what ages since ?

From their cave-dwelling entrance those poor skeletons, when endowed with life and breath, looked forth upon a different scene from what we view to-day. The rounded pebbles of a river bed may be discovered in the banks immediately below this perpendicular cliff face. The waters of the Wye once lapped at the cave door, and wife and children listened for the plash of paddles and the return of the house-master in his rough dug-out canoe.

Luncheon or tea are soon forthcoming from the hostess of the lodge ; she is no novice as a caterer.

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Symonds Yat
Lower Ludbrook
The Ruardean Woods
Joys Green
English Bicknor
Eastbach Common
Upper Ashbridge Hill
Ludbrook Inclosure
Cagehills Plantation
Haywood Plantation
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