

THE SOUTH DOWNS.

By D. A. MCGILLIVARY.

Green Sussex fading into blue,
With one grey glimpse of sea.

—Tennyson.

“THOUGH I have now travelled the Sussex Downs upwards of thirty years,” wrote White of Selborne, “yet I still investigate that chain of majestic mountains with fresh admiration year by year; and I think I see new beauties every time I traverse it.” To-day, of course, we read the old naturalist’s enthusiastic tribute with an indulgent smile. The Downs are very beautiful, but they are neither majestic nor mountainous, as we apply the terms to the giants of Deeside, Speyside, or Lochaber. In Downland there are no towering peaks wreathed in mist, no wild deep heather glens, and no brown and foaming Highland burns. To the Northern eye, the Downs present—at first sight—merely a picture of grassy uplands and green valleys, but they have a beauty of their own, and the more you know of them, the more you have to confess their charm.

The South Downs is the term applied to one of the ranges of chalk hills that run from Wiltshire through the Southern counties. This range stretches along the lower part of Sussex like a long undulating rampart, some sixty miles in length, rising on the northern side to a height of between 600 and 800 feet. It is on this side that the Downs may perhaps claim to be regarded as mountains, for they rise from the valleys with surprising steepness. On their wind-swept crests, the climber will find a springy turf, fragrant with wild thyme, that makes walking a sheer delight; and the air has a wonderful purity and freshness. Richard Jefferies, surely the best of judges, writes:—

But the glory of these glorious Downs is the breeze. The least climb, even a hundred feet, puts you on a plane with the atmosphere itself, uninterrupted by so much as the tree-tops. It is air without admixture. Lands of gold have been found, and lands of spices and precious merchandise ; but this is the land of health.

There are few trees on the upper slopes, but along the foot of the Downs is invariably a thick belt of woodland. Scattered along the ranges are the remains of a score of great earthwork camps, built centuries before the Roman set foot on English soil.

The pedestrian who wishes to explore the Downs cannot do better than pitch his camp at Worthing. There he is at the "half-way house" of the South Downs; he is, roughly speaking, midway between Beachy Head and the Isle of Wight; he is within easy reach of two of the most famous camps; and he can tramp miles eastward or westward as the fancy takes him. Worthing itself has an old-world atmosphere, free from the Brighton flavour of Jews and jewellery, and its wooded surroundings are very charming. Within a few miles is, as Swinburne saw it, "sun-bright Lancing;" Shoreham, with its famous bridge beloved of artists; Sompting, whose church has the only authentic Saxon spire in England; Tarring, with its twelfth-century houses and palace of Thomas A' Beckett; Storrington, where Francis Thompson resided for a time; the "Roadmender's" country; and Arundel, where George MacDonald ministered at the Congregational Chapel from 1850 to 1853. But more interesting than all these—to the nature-lover at all events—is Broadwater, just on the outskirts of Worthing, for in the cemetery here a plain white marble cross marks the sleeping-place of Richard Jefferies. A few miles away is Goring, where he spent the last months of his short life.

It is difficult to decide under which weather conditions the Downs look at their best. One recalls a fresh morning of wind, sunshine, and shower in late May, when the cloud-shadows went racing across the slopes; a June evening when the valleys were flooded

with a soft light, and no sound broke the silence but the tinkling of sheep-bells and the calling of the cuckoo from a distant copse; or, again, a day of storm when the Northern Downs loomed up dark and grim against a lowering sky. It was on a May morning such as I have described that a friend and I set off from Worthing to climb to Cissbury Camp. The path led up through leafy lanes, overhung with wild roses and honeysuckle, but we were soon clear of the woodland and out on the open Downs, and an easy ascent took us to the summit. A heavy shower had just passed over, and, looking southward and seaward, the country lay for miles below us in a wonderful radiant light—a panorama of wood and meadow, hidden villages marked by church spires peeping above the trees, red-roofed farm-houses, and, beyond, the blue waters of the Channel. There was a glorious sweep of coastline from the white cliffs of Beachy Head to the Isle of Wight, with town after town along the sea edge. Swinburne has painted the picture:—

Higher and higher to the north aspire the green smooth swelling
unending downs;
East and west on the brave earth's breast glow girdle-jewels of
gleaming towns,
Southward shining, the lands declining subside in peace that the sea's
light crowns.

Cissbury Camp (603 feet) must be a joy to the antiquarian. There are Roman camps—we all know them—where you walk by faith and not by sight and blindly take the guide's assurance that the site of the camp *is* there. But Cissbury does not come within that category. Here is a massive encircling rampart in a wonderful state of preservation, rising in places 40 feet above the surrounding fosse. It encloses an area of 60 acres and the earthworks are believed to be older than Stonehenge. The ancient Britons who built this gigantic fortress knew what they were about; modern engineers could not have selected a site better fitted for defence. The absence of water strikes the observer; there are no streams in the vicinity; and the

occupants of the camp must have obtained their supply from artificial dew-ponds. Here, at least, the dark-browed men, as they peered over the ramparts with fierce eager faces, were safe from any foe. Britons, Romans, and Saxons have vanished, but Cissbury still rears its head in defiance of the centuries.

Two miles and a half north of Cissbury Camp, the equally famous Chanctonbury Ring (814 feet) stands out boldly on the sky-line. We made the ascent by way of the Findon valley, passing through the picturesque village of Findon, so embowered in trees as to be almost invisible from the Downs above; a narrow lane to the right led up to the Ring. The summit is crowned by a dark clump of trees—seen for miles around—planted in 1760 by one of the Gorings of Wiston, who lived to see them flourishing nearly seventy years later. Looking northward, we had a magnificent view of the Sussex Weald, stretching from Kent to Hampshire, with the Surrey Hills on the horizon. The Weald, 800 feet below us, was like a gigantic garden, thus described by a Downland poet:—

Below, to northward, the blue counties lie,
With fold on fold of meadow-land and plough,
Bright water, darkling woods, and shining spires,
With loitering lanes and free adventurous roads;
While south, a dream horizon melts around
The wide blue sea.

It is very lonely on these upper Downs. You may tramp for miles and see no one but a solitary shepherd, as gnarled and weather-beaten as an old thorn tree. If he is of the true Sussex breed, he will carry the famous Pyecombe sheep-crook. In these peaceful solitudes war, or the mere thought of war, ought not to intrude, but as we came down homewards in the evening light, aeroplanes were flying like great birds to their roosting-place at Shoreham, and out at sea a silver airship was keeping watch and ward over the Channel. So that the dark shadow crossed even the happy sunlit Downs.