

ON THE ART OF STAYING AT THE SEASIDE

A MEDITATION AT EASTBOURNE

To stay at the seaside properly, one should not think. But even in staying at the seaside there are intervals, waking moments when meals come, even if there are no appointed meal-times. Moreover, now and then, one must go to buy tobacco, a matter one can trust to no hireling, lest he get it dry. It cannot be always seaside, even as it cannot be always May, and through the gaps thought creeps in. Going over the cliff and along the parade, and down by the circulating library to the cigar divan, where they sell Parique tobacco, the swinging of one's legs seems to act like a pendulum to the clockwork of one's brain. One meditates all the way, and chiefly on how few people there are who can really--to a critical adept--be said to stay at the seaside.

People seem to think that one can take a ticket to Eastbourne, or Bognor, or Ventnor, and come and stay at the seaside straight away, just as I have known new-hatched undergraduates tell people they were going to play billiards. Thousands and thousands of people think they have stayed at the seaside, and have not, just as thousands of people erroneously imagine they have played whist. For the latter have played not whist, but Bumble-puppy, and the former have only frequented a watering-place for a time. Your true staying at the seaside is an art, demanding not only railway fares but special aptitude, and, moreover,

needing culture, like all worthy arts.

The most insurmountable difficulty of the beginner is the classical simplicity of the whole thing. To stay at the seaside properly you just spread yourself out on the extreme edge of the land and let the sunlight soak in. Your eyes are fixed upon the horizon. Some have it that your head should be towards the sea, but the best authorities think that this determines blood to that region, and so stimulates thought. This is all the positive instruction; the rest is prohibition. You must not think, and you must not move, neither may you go to sleep. In a few minutes the adept becomes as a god, even as a god that sits upon the lotus leaf. New light and colour come into the sky and sea, and the surges chant his praises. But those who are not of the elect get pins and needles all over them.

It must be freely admitted that staying at the seaside such as this, staying at the seaside in its perfection, is a thing for a select few. You want a broad stretch of beach and all the visible sea to yourself. You cannot be disturbed by even the most idyllic children trying to bury you with sand and suchlike playfulness, nor by boatloads of the democracy rowing athwart your sea and sky. And the absence of friend or wife goes without saying. I notice down here a very considerable quantity of evidently married pairs, and the huge majority of the rest of the visitors run in couples, and are to all appearances engaged. If they are not, I would submit that they ought to be. Probably there is a certain satisfaction in sitting by the sea with the girl you are in love

with, or your wife for the matter of that, just as many people undoubtedly find tea with milk and sugar very nice. But the former is no more the way to get the full and perfect pleasure of staying at the seaside than the latter is the way to get the full and perfect flavour of the tea. True staying at the seaside is neither the repetition of old conversations in new surroundings nor the exposure of one's affections to ozone. It is something infinitely higher. It is pure quiescence. It is the experience of a waking inanition savouring of Buddha and the divine.

Now, staying at the seaside is so rarely done well, because of the littleness of man. To do it properly needs many of the elements of greatness. Your common man, while he has life in him, can let neither himself nor the universe alone. He must be asserting himself in some way, even if it is only by flinging pebbles at a stick. That self-forgetfulness which should be a delight is a terror to him. He brings dogs down to the beach to stand between him and the calm of nature, and yelp. He does worse than that.

The meditative man going daily over by the cliff and along the parade, to get his ounce of tobacco, has a sad spectacle of what human beings may be driven to in this way. One sees altogether some hundreds of people there who have heard perhaps that staying at the seaside is good, and who have, anyhow, got thus far towards it, and stopped. They have not the faintest idea how to make themselves happy. The general expression is veiled curiosity. They sit--mostly with their backs to the

sea--talking poorly of indifferent topics and watching one another. Most obviously they want hints of what to do with themselves. Behind them is a bank of flowers like those in Battersea Park, and another parallel parade, and beyond are bathing-machines. The pier completely cuts the horizon out of the background. There is a stout lady, in dark blue, bathing. The only glances directed seaward are furtive ones at her. Many seem to be doubting whether this is not what they came down for. Others lean dubiously to the invitations of the boatmen. Others again listen to vocalists and dramatic outcasts who, for ha'pence, render obvious the reason of their professional degradation. It seems eccentric to travel seventy or eighty miles to hear a man without a voice demonstrate that he is unfit to have one, but they do. Anyone curious in these matters need only go to a watering-place to see and, what is worse, to hear for himself. After an excursion train to Eastbourne, upwards of a thousand people have been seen thus heaped together over an oblong space of a mile long by twenty yards wide. Only three miles away there was a towering white cliff overhanging a practically desert beach; and one seagull circled above one solitary, motionless, supine man, really staying at the seaside.

You cannot walk six miles anywhere along the south coast without coming upon one of these heaps of people, called a watering-place. There will be a town of houses behind wherein the people lodge, until, as they think, they have stayed a sufficient time at the sea, and they return, hot, cross, and mystified, to London. The sea front will be bricked or paved for a mile or so, and there will be rows of boats and

bathing-machines, and other contrivances to screen off the view of the sea. And, as we have indicated, watering-places and staying by the seaside are incompatible things. The true stayer by the seaside goes into the watering-place because he must; because there is little food, and that uncooked, and no tobacco, between the cliffs and the sea. Having purchased what he needs he flees forth again. What time the whole selvage of England becomes watering-place, there will be no more staying by the seaside at all in the land. But this is a gloomy train of thought that we will not pursue.

There have been those who assert that one end of staying at the seaside is bathing; but it is easy to show that this is not so. Your proper bathing-place is up the river, where the trees bend to the green and brown shadows of the water. There the bath is sweet, fresh out of the sky, or but just filtered through the blue hills of the distant water-shed; and it is set about with flowers. But the sea--the sea has stood there since the beginning of things, and with small prospect of change, says Mr. Kipling, to all eternity. The water in the sea, geologists tell us, has not been changed for fifty million years! The same chemist who sets me against all my food with his chemical names speaks of the sea as a weak solution of drowned men. Be that as it may, it leaves the skin harsh with salt, and the hair sticky. Moreover, it is such a promiscuous bathing-place. However, we need scarcely depreciate the sea as a bath, for what need is there of that when the river is clearly better? No one can deny that the river is better. People who bathe in the sea bathe by mistake, because they have come to the side of

the sea, and know not how else to use it.

So, too, with the boating. It is hard to imagine how human beings who have drifted down streams, and watched the brown fish in the shallows, and peered through the tall sedges at the forget-me-nots, and fought with the ropes of the water-lilies, and heard the ripple under the bows, can ever think of going to and fro, pitching spasmodically, in front of a watering-place. And as for fishing--they catch fish at sea, indeed, but it is not fishing at all; neither rods nor flies have they, and there is an end to that matter.

An Eastbourne meditative man returning to where he stays, with his daily ounce of tobacco already afire, sees in the streets what are called by the natives "cherry-bangs," crowded with people, and, further, cabriolets and such vehicles holding parties and families. The good folks are driving away from the sea for the better part of the day, going to Battle and other places inland. The puzzle of what to do with their sea is too much for them, and they are going away for a little to rest their minds. Regarded as a centre of drives one might think an inland place would be preferable to a seaside town, which at best commands but a half-circle. However that may be, the fact remains that one of the chief occupations of your common visitor to the seaside is going away from it. Than this fact there can be nothing more conclusive in support of my argument that ordinary people are absolutely ignorant and incapable of staying by the seaside.