

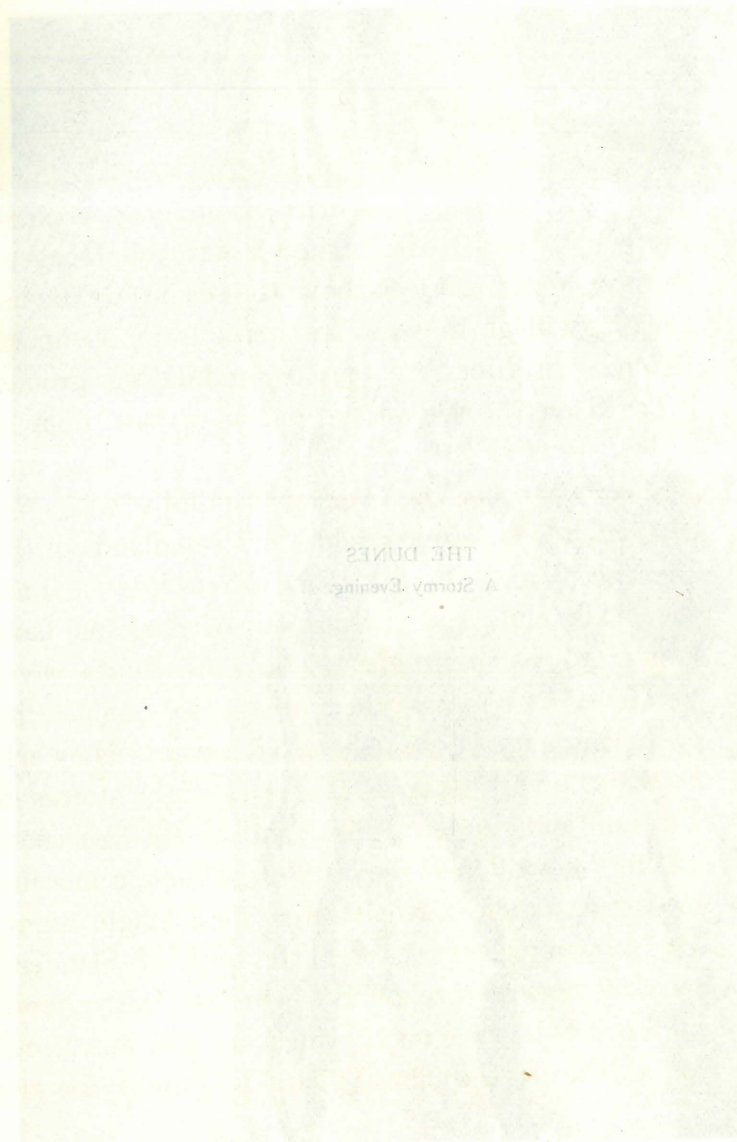
## CHAPTER X

### THE COAST OF FLANDERS

To walk from Nieuport Ville to the Digue de Mer at Nieuport-Bains is to pass in a few minutes from the old Flanders, the home of so much romance, the scene of so many stirring deeds, from the market-places with the narrow gables heaped up in piles around them, from the belfries soaring to the sky, from the winding streets and the narrow lanes, in which the houses almost touch each other, from the tumble-down old hostelries, from the solemn aisles where the candles glimmer and the dim red light glows before the altar, from the land of Bras-de-Fer, and Thierry d'Alsace, and Memlinc, and Van Eyck, and Rubens, the land which was at once the Temple and the Golgotha of Europe, into the clear, broad light of modern days.

The Flemish coast, from the frontiers of France to the frontiers of Holland, is throughout the same in appearance. The sea rolls in and breaks upon the yellow beach, which extends from east to west

for some seventy kilometres in an irregular line, unbroken by rocks or cliffs. Above the beach are the dunes, a long range of sandhills, tossed into all sorts of queer shapes by the wind, on which nothing grows but rushes or stunted Lombardy poplars, and which reach their highest point, the Hoogen-Blekker, about 100 feet above the sea, near Coxyde, a fishing village four or five miles from Nieuport. Behind the dunes a strip of undulating ground ('Ter Streep'), seldom more than a bare mile in width, covered with scanty vegetation, moss, and bushes, connects the barren sandhills with the cultivated farms, green fields, and woodlands of the Flemish plain. On the other side of the Channel the chalk cliffs and rocky coast of England have kept the waves in check; but the dunes were, for many long years, the only barrier against the encroachments of the sea on Flanders. They are, however, a very weak defence against the storms of autumn and winter. The sand drifts like snow before the wind, and the outlines of these miniature mountain ranges change often in a single night. At one time, centuries ago, this part of Flanders, which is now so bare, was, it is pretty clear, covered by forests, the remains of which are still sometimes found beneath the subsoil inland and under the sea.

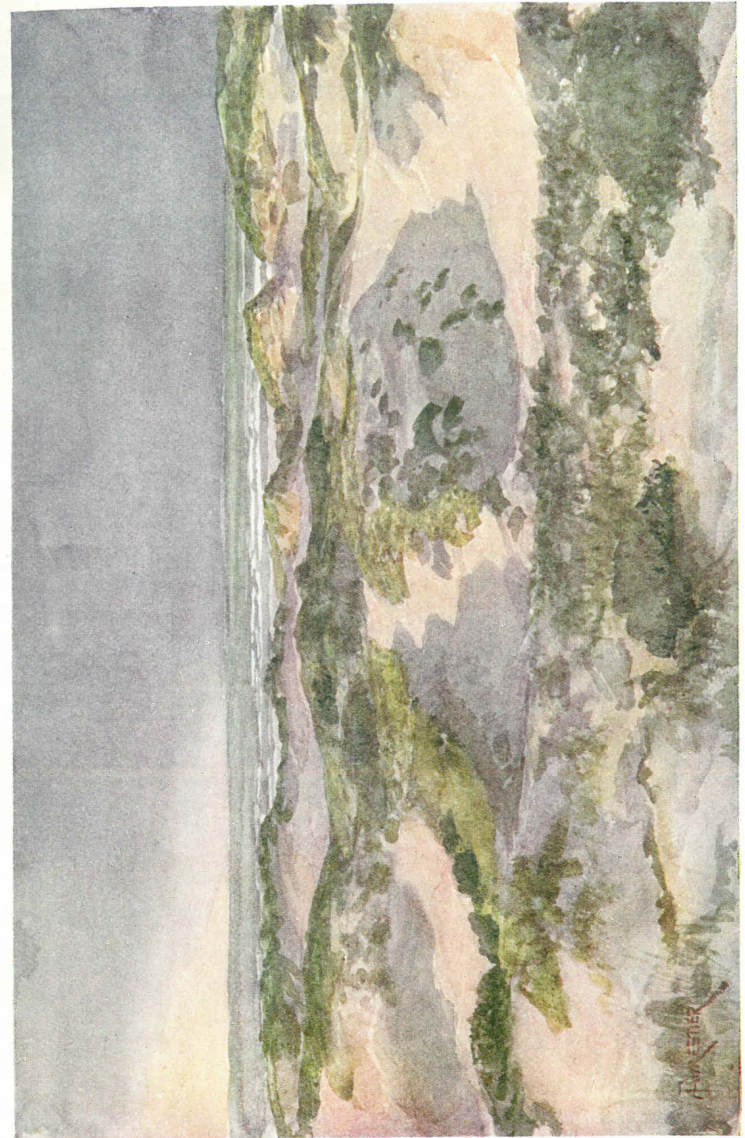




## THE DUNES AND WEST FLANDERS

for some seventy kilometers in an irregular line, bounded by rocks or cliffs. Above the beach are the dunes, a long range of sandhills, tossed into all sorts of queer shapes by the wind, on which nothing grows but grass or stunted Lombardy poplars. The highest point, the Hoogen, is about 200 feet above the sea, near Coxyde, a town lying four or five miles from Nieuport. From the dunes a strip of undulating ground extends inland some three or four miles, with scanty vegetation, moss, and ferns, which the bottom imparts with the character of a greenish-grey wash. The dunes of the English coast and rocky coast of England have kept the waves in check; but the dunes were, for many long years, the only barrier against the encroachments of the sea on Flanders. They are, however, a very weak defence against the storms of autumn and winter. The sand drifts like snow before the wind, and the outlines of these miniature mountain ranges change often in a single night. At one time, centuries ago, this part of Flanders, which is now so bare, was, it is pretty clear, covered by forests, the remains of which are still sometimes found beneath the surface inland and under the sea.

### THE DUNES A Stormy Evening.



When the great change came is unknown, but the process was probably gradual. At an early period, here, as in Holland, the fight against the invasions of the sea began, and the first dykes are said to have been constructed in the tenth century. The first was known as the Evendyck, and ran from Heyst to Wenduyne. Others followed, but they were swept away, and now only a few traces of them are to be found, buried beneath the sand and moss.\*

The wild storms of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries changed the aspect of the coast of Flanders. Nieuport rose in consequence of one of these convulsions of Nature, when the inhabitants of Lombaerdzyde, which was then a seaport, were driven by the tempests to the inland village of Santhoven, the name of which they changed to 'Neoportus'—the new harbour. This was in the beginning of the twelfth century, and thenceforth the struggle against the waves went on incessantly. Lands were granted by Thierry d'Alsace on condition that the owner should construct dykes, and Baldwin of Constantinople appointed guardians of the shore, charged with the duty of watching the

\* Bortier, *Le Littoral de la Flandre au IX<sup>e</sup> et au XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècles.*



sea and constructing defensive works. But the struggle was carried on under the utmost difficulties. In the twelfth century the sea burst in with resistless force upon the low-lying ground, washing away the dunes and swallowing up whole towns. The inroads of the waves, the heavy rains, and the earthquakes, made life so unendurable that there were thousands who left their homes and emigrated to Germany.

Later, in the thirteenth century, there was a catastrophe of appalling dimensions, long known as the 'Great Storm,' when 40,000 Flemish men and women perished. This was the same tempest which overran the Dutch coast, and formed the Zuyder Zee, those 1,400 square miles of water which the Dutch are about to reclaim and form again into dry land. In the following century the town of Scarphout, in West Flanders, was overwhelmed, and the inhabitants built a new town for themselves on higher ground, and called it Blankenberghe, which is now one of the most important watering-places on the coast.

Ever since those days this constant warfare against the storms has continued, and the sea appears to be bridled; but anyone who has watched the North Sea at high tide on a stormy day beating

on the shores of Flanders, and observed how the dunes yield to the pressure of the wind and waves, and crumble away before his eyes, must come to the conclusion that the peril of the ocean is not yet averted, and can understand the meaning of the great modern works, the *digues de mer*, or sea-fronts, as they would be called in England, which are being gradually constructed at such immense cost all along the coast.

A most interesting and, indeed, wonderful thing in the recent history of the Netherlands is the rapid development of the Flemish littoral from a waste of sand, with here and there a paltry fishing hamlet and two or three small towns, into a great cosmopolitan pleasure resort. Seventy-five years ago, when Belgium became an independent country, and King Leopold I. ascended the throne, Ostend and Nieuport were the only towns upon the coast which were of any size; but Ostend was then a small fortified place, with a harbour wholly unsuited for modern commerce, and Nieuport, in a state of decadence, though it possessed a harbour, was a place of no importance. To-day the whole coast is studded with busy watering-places, about twenty of them, most of which have come into existence within the last fifteen years, with a resi-



dent population of about 60,000, which is raised by visitors in summer to, it is said, nearly 125,000. The dunes, which the old Counts of Flanders fought so hard to preserve from the waves, and which were at the beginning of the present century mere wastes of sand, a sort of 'no man's land, of little or no use except for rabbit-shooting, are now valuable properties, the price of which is rising every year.

The work of turning the sand into gold, for that is what the development of the Flemish coast comes to, has been carried out partly by the State and partly by private persons. In early times this belt of land upon the margin of the sea was held by the Counts of Flanders, who treated the ridge of sandhills above high-water mark as a natural rampart against the waves, and granted large tracts of the flat ground which lay behind to various religious houses. At the French Revolution these lands were sold as Church property at a very low figure, and were afterwards allowed, in many cases, to fall out of cultivation by the purchasers. So great a portion of the district was sold that at the present time only a small portion of the dune land is the property of the State—the narrow strip between Mariakerke and Middelkerke on the west of

AN OLD FARMER



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Ostend, and that which lies between Ostend and Blankenberghe on the east. The larger portions, which are possessed by private owners, are partly the property of the descendants of those who bought them at the Revolution, and partly of building societies, incorporated for the purpose of developing what Mr. Hall Caine once termed the 'Visiting Industry'—that is to say, the trade in tourists and seaside visitors.\*

Plage de Westende, Le Coq, and Duinbergen—three charming summer resorts—have been created by building societies. Nieuport-Bains and La Panne have been developed by the owners of the adjoining lands, the families of Crombez and Calmeyn. Wenduyn, on the other hand, which lies between Le Coq and Blankenberghe, has been made by the State, while the management of Blankenberghe, Heyst, and Middelkerke, as bathing stations, is in the hands of their communal councils.

On the coast of Flanders, Ostend—'La Reine des Plages'—is, it need hardly be said, the most important place, and its rise has been very remarkable. Less than fifty years ago the population was in all about 15,000. During the last fifteen years it has increased by nearly 15,000, and now amounts

\* Letter to the Manx Reform League, November, 1903.



to about 40,000 in round numbers. The increase in the number of summer visitors has been equally remarkable. In the year 1860 the list of strangers contained 9,700 names; three years ago it contained no less than 42,000. This floating population of foreign visitors who come to Ostend is cosmopolitan to an extent unknown at any watering-place in England. In 1902 11,000 English, 8,000 French, 5,000 Germans, and 2,000 Americans helped to swell the crowds who walked on the sea-front, frequented the luxurious and expensive hotels, or left their money on the gaming-tables at the Kursaal. On one day—August 15, 1902—7,000 persons bathed.\*

Blankenberghe, with its 30,000 summer visitors, comes next in importance to Ostend, while both Heyst and Middelkerke are crowded during the season. But the life at these towns is not so agreeable as at the smaller watering-places. The hotels are too full, and have, as a rule, very little except their cheapness to recommend them. There is usually a body calling itself the *comité des fêtes*,

\* I give these figures on the authority of M. Paul Otlet, Advocate, of Brussels, to whom I am indebted for much information regarding the development of the coast of Flanders. See also an article by M. Otlet in *Le Cottage*, May 15 to June 15, 1904.

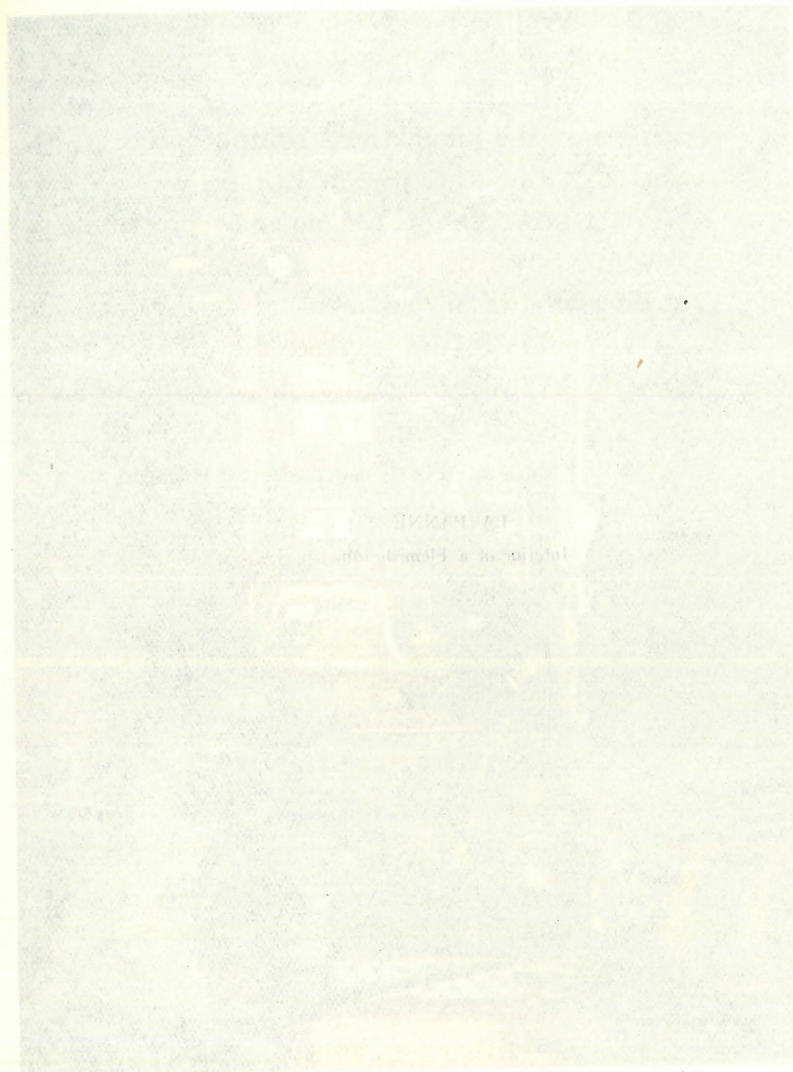
the members of which devote themselves for two months every summer to devising amusements, sports, and competitions of various kinds, instead of leaving people to amuse themselves in their own way, so that hardly a day passes on which the strains of a second-rate band are not heard in the local Kursaal, or a night which is not made hideous by a barrel-organ, to which the crowd is dancing on the *digue*. At the smaller places, however, though these also have their *comités des fêtes*, one escapes to a great extent from these disagreeable surroundings.

May, June, and September are the pleasantest months upon the coast of Flanders, for the visitors are not so numerous, and even in mid-winter the dunes are worth a visit. Then the hotels and villas fronting the sea are closed, and their windows boarded up. The bathing-machines are removed from the beach, and stand in rows in some sheltered spot. The *digue*, a broad extent of level brickwork, is deserted, and the wind sweeps along it, scattering foam and covering it with sand and sprays of tangled seaweed. The mossy surface of the dunes is frozen hard as iron, and often the hailstones rush in furious blasts before the wind. For league after league there is not a sign of life, except the sea-



birds flying low near the shore, or the ships rising and falling in the waves far out to sea. In the winter months the coast of Flanders is bleak and stormy, but the air in these solitudes is as health-giving as in any other part of Europe.

Of late years the Government, represented by Comte de Smet de Naeyer, has bestowed much attention on the development of the littoral, and King Leopold II. has applied his great business talents to the subject. Large sums of money have been voted by the Belgian Parliament for the construction of public works and the extension of the means of communication from place to place. There is a light railway, the 'Vicinal,' which runs along the whole coast, at a short distance from the shore, from Knocke, on the east, to La Panne in the extreme west, and which is connected with the system of State railways at various points. From Ostend, through Middelkerke, to Plage de Westende, an electric railway has been constructed, close to the beach and parallel to the Vicinal (which is about a mile inland), on which trains run every ten minutes during the summer season. As an instance of the speed and energy with which these works for the convenience of the public are carried out, when once they have been decided upon, it may be





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For many years the Government, represented by King and King of Prussia, has bestowed much attention on the fishing aspect of the littoral, and since 1880 it has directed its great business efforts to the subject. Large sums of money have been voted by the Belgian Parliament for the construction of public works and the extension of the means of communication from place to place.

#### LA PANNE

Interior of a Flemish Inn.

There is a high 'Grand Canal,' which runs along the whole coast, at a short distance from the shore, from Knokke, on the east, to La Panne in the extreme west, and which is connected with the system of State railways at various points. From Ostend, through Middelkerke, to Plage de Westende, an electric railway has been constructed, close to the beach and parallel to the Vieinal (which is about a mile inland), on which trains run every ten minutes during the summer season. As an instance of the speed and energy with which these works for the convenience of the public are carried out, when once they have been decided upon, it may be





mentioned that the contract for the portion of the electric line between Middelkerke and Plage de Westende, a distance of about a mile and a half, was signed on May 9, that five days later 200 workmen began to cut through the dunes, embank and lay the permanent way, and that on June 25, in spite of several interruptions owing to drifting sand and heavy rains, the first train of the regular service arrived at Plage de Westende.

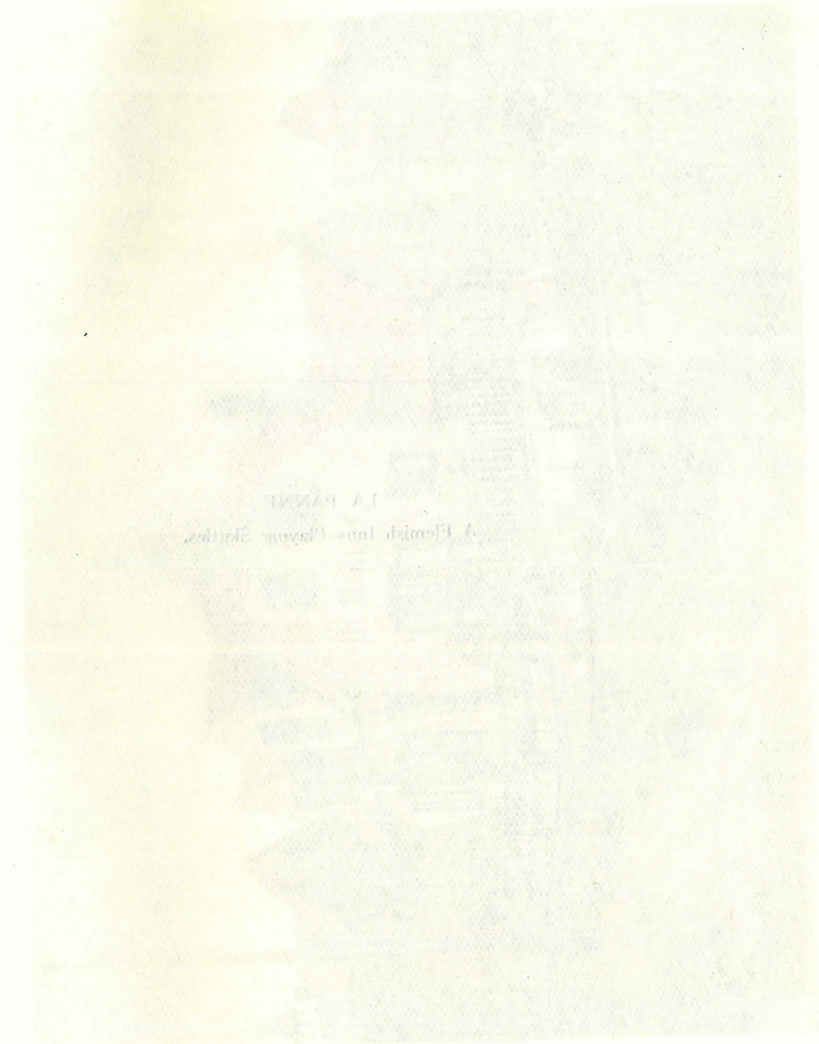
A large sum, amounting to several millions of francs, is voted every year for the protection of the shores of Flanders against the encroachments of the sea, by the construction of these solid embankments of brickwork and masonry, which will, in the course of a few years, extend in an unbroken line along the whole coast from end to end. The building of these massive sea-walls is a work of great labour and expense, for what seems to be an impregnable embankment, perhaps 30 feet high and 90 feet broad, solid and strong enough to resist the most violent breakers, will be undermined and fall to pieces in a few hours, if not made in the proper way. A *digue*, no matter how thick, which rests on the sand alone will not last. A thick bed of green branches bound together must first be laid down as a foundation : this is strengthened by posts



driven through it into the sand. Heavy timbers, resting on bundles of branches lashed together, are wedged into the foundations, and slope inwards and upwards to within a few feet of the height to which it is intended to carry the *digue*. On the top another solid bed of branches is laid down, and the whole is first covered with concrete, and then with bricks or tiles, while the edge of the *digue*, at the top of the seaward slope, is composed of heavy blocks of stone cemented together and bound by iron rivets.

*Digues* made in this solid fashion, all of them higher above the shore than the Thames Embankment is above the river, and some of them broader than the Embankment, will, before very many years have passed, stretch along the whole coast of Flanders without a break, and will form not only a defence against the tides, but a huge level promenade, with the dunes on one side and the sea on the other. This is a gigantic undertaking, but it will be completed during the lifetime of the present generation.

Another grandiose idea, which is actually being carried into effect, is to connect all the seaside resorts on the coast of Flanders by a great boulevard, 40 yards wide, with a road for carriages and





drives straight it into the sand. Heavy timbers, made of bundles of branches lashed together, are used for the foundations, and slope inwards very gradually to within a few feet of the height to which it is intended to carry the *digue*. On the top of this solid bed of branches is laid down, and the whole is first covered with concrete, and then with a layer of stone, while the edge of the *digue*, at the top of the concrete, is composed of heavy blocks of stone, and is finished with a row of iron nails.

Another grandiose idea, which is actually being carried into effect, is to connect all the seaside resorts on the coast of Flanders by a great boulevard, 40 yards wide with a walk for carriages and

LA PANNE  
A Flemish Inn—Playing Skittles.





pedestrians, a track for motor-cars and bicycles, and an electric railway, all side by side. Large portions of this magnificent roadway, which is to be known as the 'Route Royale,' have already been completed between Blankenberghe and Ostend, and from Ostend to Plage de Westende. From Westende it will be continued to Nieuport-Bains, crossing the Yser by movable bridges, and thence to La Panne, and so onwards, winding through the dunes, over the French borders, and perhaps as far as Paris!

A single day's journey through the district which this 'Route Royale' is to traverse will lead the traveller through the most interesting part of the dunes, and introduce him to most of the favourite *plages* on the coast of Flanders, and thus give him an insight into many characteristic Flemish scenes. La Panne, for instance, and Adinkerque, in the west and on the confines of France, are villages inhabited by fishermen who have built their dwellings in sheltered places amongst the dunes. The low white cottages of La Panne, with the strings of dried fish hanging on the walls, nestle in the little valley from which the place takes its name (for *panne* in Flemish means 'a hollow'), surrounded by trees and hedges, gay with wild roses in the summer-time. Each cottage stands in



its small plot of garden ground, and most of the families own fishing-boats of their own, and farm a holding which supplies them with potatoes and other vegetables.

For a long time these cottages were the only houses at La Panne, which was seldom visited, except by a few artists; but about fifteen years ago the surveyors and the architects made their appearance, paths and roads were laid out, and, as if by magic, cottages and villas and the inevitable *digue de mer* have sprung up on the dunes near the sea, and not very far from the original village. The chief feature of the new La Panne is that the houses are, except those on the sea-front, built on the natural levels of the ground, some perched on the tops of the dunes, and others in the hollows which separate them. The effect is extremely picturesque, and the example of the builders of La Panne is being followed at other places, notably at Duinbergen, one of the very latest bathing stations, which has risen during the last three years about a mile to the east of Heyst.

Another very interesting place is the Plage de Westende, the present terminus of the electric railway from Ostend. The old village of Westende lies a mile inland on the highway between Nieuport

and Ostend, close to the scene of the Battle of the Dunes. This Plage is, indeed, a model seaside resort, with a *digue* which looks down upon a shore of the finest sand, and from which, of an evening, one sees the lights of Ostend in the east, and the revolving beacon at Dunkirk shining far away to the west. The houses which front the sea, all different from each other, are in singularly good taste; and behind them are a number of detached cottages and villas, large and small, in every variety of design. Ten years ago the site of this little town was a rabbit warren; now everything is up to date: electric light in every house, perfect drainage, a good water-supply, tennis courts, and an admirable hotel, where even the passing stranger feels at home. Though only three-quarters of an hour from noisy, crowded, bustling Ostend by the railway, it is one of the quietest and most comfortable places on the coast of Flanders, and can be reached by travellers from England in a few hours.

Some years hence the lovely, peaceful Plage de Westende may have grown too big, but when the sand has all been turned into gold, and when the contractors and builders have grown rich, those who have known Westende in its earlier days will think of it as the quiet spot about which at one



time only a few people used to stroll ; where perhaps the poet Verhaeren found something to inspire him ; where many a long summer's evening was spent in pleasant talk on history, and painting, and music by a little society of men and women who spoke French, or German, or English, as the fancy took them, and laughed, and quoted, and exchanged ideas on every subject under the sun ; where the professor of music once argued, and sprang up to prove his point by playing—but that is an allusion, or, as Mr. Kipling would say, ' another story.'

The district in which Westende lies, with Lombaerdzyde, Nieupart, Furnes, and Coxyde close together, is the most interesting on the coast of Flanders. Le Coq, on the other hand, is in that part of the dune country which has least historical interest, and is chiefly known as the place where the Royal Golf Club de Belgique has its course. It is only twenty minutes from Ostend on the Vicinal railway, which has a special station for golfers near the Club House. There is no *digue*, and the houses are dotted about in a valley behind the dunes. This place has a curious resemblance to a Swiss village.

A few years ago the owners of lands upon the Flemish littoral began to grasp the fact that there

was a sport called golf, on which Englishmen were in the habit of spending money, and that it would be an addition to the attractions of Ostend if, beside the racecourse, there was a golf-course. King Leopold, who is said to contemplate using all the land between the outskirts of Ostend and Le Coq for sporting purposes, paid a large sum, very many thousands of francs, out of his own pocket, and the golf-links at Le Coq were laid out. The Club House is handsome and commodious, but, unfortunately, the course itself, which is the main thing, is not very satisfactory, being far too artificial. The natural 'bunkers' were filled up, and replaced by ramparts and ditches like those on some inland courses in England. On the putting greens the natural undulations of the ground have been levelled, and the greens are all as flat and smooth as billiard-tables. There are clumps of ornamental wood, flower-beds, and artificial ponds with goldfish swimming in them. It is all very pretty, but it is hardly golf. What with the 'Grand Prix d'Ostende,' the 'Prix des Roses,' the 'Prix des Ombrelles, handicap libre, réservé aux Dames,' the 'Grand Prix des Dames,' and a number of other *objets d'art*, which are offered for competition on almost every day from the be-



ginning of June to the end of September, this is a perfect paradise for the pot-hunter and his familiar friend Colonel Bogey. Real golf, the strenuous game, which demands patience and steady nerves, perhaps, more than any other outdoor game, is not yet quite understood by many Belgians; but the bag of clubs is every year becoming more common on the Dover mail-boats.

Most of these golf-bags find their way to Knocke, where many of the English colony at Bruges spend the summer, and which, as the coast of Flanders becomes better known, is visited every year by increasing numbers of travellers from the other side of the Channel. Knocke is in itself one of the least attractive places on the Flemish littoral. The old village, a nondescript collection of houses, lies on the Vicinal railway about a mile from the sea, which is reached by a straight roadway, and where there is a *digue*, numerous hotels, pensions, and villas, all of which are filled to overflowing in the season. The air, indeed, is perfect, and there are fine views from the *digue* and the dunes of the island of Walcheren, Flushing, and the estuary of the Scheldt; but the place was evidently begun with no definite plan: the dunes were ruthlessly levelled, and the result is a few unlovely streets,

and a number of detached houses standing in disorder amidst surroundings from which everything that was picturesque has long since departed.

But the dunes to the east are wide, and enclose a large space of undulating ground; and here the Bruges Golf and Sports Club has its links, which present a very complete contrast to the Belgian course at Le Coq. The links at Knocke, if somewhat rough and ready, are certainly sporting in the highest degree. Some of the holes, those in what is known as the Green Valley, are rather featureless; but in the other parts of the course there are numerous natural hazards, bunkers, and hillocks thick with sand and rushes. It has no pretensions to be a 'first-class' course (for one thing, it is too short), but in laying out the eighteen holes the ground has been utilized to the best advantage, and the Royal and Ancient game flourishes more at Knocke than at any other place in Belgium. The owners of the soil and the hotel-keepers, with a keen eye to business, and knowing that the golfing alone brings the English, from whom they reap a golden harvest, to Knocke, do all in their power to encourage the game, and it is quite possible that before long other links may be established along the coast. The soil of the strip behind



the dunes is not so suitable for golf as the close turf of St. Andrews, North Berwick, or Prestwick, for in many places it consists of sand with a slight covering of moss; but with proper treatment it could probably be improved and hardened. It is merely a question of money, and money will certainly be forthcoming if the Government, the communes, and the private owners once see that this form of amusement will add to the popularity of the littoral.

A short mile's walk to the west of Knocke brings us to Duinbergen, one of the newest of the Flemish *plages*, founded in the year 1901 by the Société Anonyme de Duinbergen, a company in which some members of the Royal Family are said to hold shares. At Knocke and others of the older watering-places everything was sacrificed to the purpose of making money speedily out of every available square inch of sand, and the first thing done was to destroy the dunes. But at Duinbergen the good example set by the founders of La Panne has been followed and improved upon, and nothing could be more *chic* than this charming little place, which was planned by Herr Stübben, of Cologne, an architect often employed by the King of the Belgians, whose idea was to create a small garden

city among the dunes. The dunes have been carefully preserved; the roads and pathways wind round them; most of the villas and cottages have been erected in places from which a view of the sea can be obtained; and even the *digue* has been built in a curve in order to avoid the straight line, which is apt to give an air of monotony to the rows of villas, however picturesque they may be in themselves, which face the sea at other places. So artistic is the appearance of the houses that the term 'Style Duinbergen' is used by architects to describe it. Electric lighting, a copious supply of water rising by gravitation to the highest houses, and a complete system of drainage, add to the luxuries and comforts of this *plage*, which is one of the best illustrations of the wonders which have been wrought among the dunes by that spirit of enterprise which has done so much for modern Flanders during the last few years.