A singular love of walls is mine. Perhaps because of childish association with mountain-climbing roads narrow in the bright shadows of grey stone, hiding olive trees whereof the topmost leaves prick above into the blue; or perhaps because of subsequent living in London, with its too many windows and too few walls, the city which of all capitals takes least visible hold upon the ground; or for the sake of some other attraction or aversion, walls, blank and strong, reaching outward at the base, are a satisfaction to the eyes teased by the inexpressive peering of windows, by that weak lapse and shuffling which is the London "area," and by the helpless hollows of shop-fronts.

I would rather have a wall than any rail but a very good one of wrought-iron. A wall is the safeguard of simplicity. It lays a long level line among the indefinite chances of the landscape. But never more majestic than in face of the wild sea, the wall, steadying its slanting foot upon the rock, builds in the serried ilex-wood and builds out the wave. The sea-wall is the wall at its best. And fine as it is on the strong coast, it is beautiful on the weak littoral and the imperilled levels of a northern beach.

That sea wall is low and long; sea-pinks grow on the salt grass that passes away into shingle at its foot. It is at close quarters with the winter sea, when, from the low coast with its low horizon, the sky-line of sea is jagged. Never from any height does the ocean-horizon show thus broken and battered at its very verge, but from the flat coast and the narrow world you can see the wave as far as you can see the water; and the stormy light of a clear horizon is seen to be mobile and shifting with the buoyant hillocks and their restless line.

Nowhere in Holland does there seem to be such a low sea-wall as secures many a mile of gentle English coast to the east. The Dutch dyke has not that aspect of a lowly parapet against a tide; it springs with a look of haste and of height; and when you first run upstairs from the encumbered Dutch fields to look at the sea, there is nothing in the least like England; and even the Englishman of to-day is apt to share something of the old perversity that was minded to cast derision upon the Dutch in their encounters with the tides.

There has been some fault in the Dutch, making them subject to the slight derision of the nations who hold themselves to be more romantic, and, as it were, more slender. We English, once upon a time, did especially flout the little nation then acting a history that proved worth the writing. It may be no more than a brief perversity that has set a number of our writers to cheer the memory of Charles II. Perhaps, even, it is no more than another rehearsal of that untiring success at the expense of the bourgeois. The bourgeois would be more simple than, in fact, he is were he to stand up every time to be shocked; but, perhaps, the image of his dismay is enough to reward the fancy of those who practise the wanton art. And, when all is done, who performs for any but an imaginary audience? Surely those companies of spectators and of auditors are not the least of the makings of an author. A few men and women he achieves within his books; but others does he create without, and to those figures of all illusion makes the appeal of his art. More candid is the author who has no world, but turns that appeal inwards to his own heart. He has at least a living hearer.

This is by the way. Charles II has been cheered; the feat is done, the dismay is imagined with joy. And yet the Merry Monarch's was a dismal time. Plague, fire, the arrears of pension from the French King remembered and claimed by
the restored throne of England, and the Dutch in the Medway—all this was disaster. None the less, having the vanity of new clothes and a pretty figure, did we—especially by the mouth of Andrew Marvell—deride our victors, making sport of the Philistines with a proper national sense of enjoyment of such physical disabilities, or such natural difficulties, or such misfavour of fortune, as may beset the alien.

Especially were the denials of fortune matter for merriment. They are so still; or they were so certainly in the day when a great novelist found the smallness of some South German States to be the subject of unsating banter. The German scenes at the end of "Vanity Fair," for example, may prove how much the ridicule of mere smallness, fewness, poverty (and not even real poverty, privation, but the poverty that shows in comparison with the gold of great States, and is properly in proportion) rejoiced the sense of humour in a writer and moralist who intended to teach mankind to be less worldly. In Andrew Marvell's day they were even more candid. The poverty of privation itself was provocative of the sincere laughter of the inmost man, the true, infrequent laughter of the heart. Marvell, the Puritan, laughed that very laughter—at leanness, at hunger, cold, and solitude—in the face of the world, and in the name of literature, in one memorable satire. I speak of "Flecno, an English Priest in Rome," wherein nothing is spared—not the smallness of the lodging, nor the lack of a bed, nor the scantiness of clothing, nor the fast.

"This basso-riilevo of a man—"

personal meagreness is the first joke and the last.

It is not to be wondered at that he should find in the smallness of the country of Holland matter for a cordial jest. But, besides the smallness, there was that accidental and natural disadvantage in regard to the sea. In the Venetians, commerce with the sea, conflict with the sea, a victory over the sea, and the ensuing peace—albeit a less instant battle and a more languid victory—were confessed to be noble; in the Dutch they were grotesque. "With mad labour," says Andrew Marvell, with the spirited consciousness of the citizen of a country well above ground and free to watch the labour at leisure, "with mad labour" did the Dutch "fish the land to shore."

How did they rivet with gigantic piles, Thorough the centre, their new-catched miles, And to the stake a struggling country bound, Where barking waves still bait the forced ground; Building their watery Babel far more high To reach the sea than those to scale the sky!

It is done with a jolly wit, and in what admirable couplets!

The fish oft-times the burgher dispossessed, And sat, not as a meat, but as a guest.

And it is even better sport that the astonished tritons and sea-nymphs should find themselves provided with a capital _cabillau_ of shoals of pickled Dutchmen (heeren for herring, says Marvell); and it must be allowed that he rhymes with the enjoyment of irony. There is not a smile for us in "Flecno," but it is more than possible to smile over this "Character of Holland"; at the excluded ocean returning to play at leap-frog over the steeple; at the rise of government and authority in Holland, which belonged of right to the man who could best invent a shovel or a pump, the country being so leaky:—

Not who first sees the rising sun commands, But who could first discern the rising lands.

We have lost something more than the delighted laughter of Marvell, more than his practical joke, and more than the heart that was light in so burly a frame—we have lost with these the wild humour that wore so well the bonds of two
equal lines, and was wild with so much order, invention, malice, gaiety, polish, equilibrium, and vitality--in a word, the Couplet, the couplet of the past. We who cannot stand firm within two lines, but must slip beyond and between the boundaries, who tolerate the couplets of Keats and imitate them, should praise the day of Charles II because of Marvell's art, and not for love of the sorry reign. We had plague, fire, and the Dutch in the Medway, but we had the couplet; and there were also the measures of those more poetic poets, hitherto called somewhat slightingly the Cavalier poets, who matched the wit of the Puritan with a spirit simpler and less mocking.

It was against an English fortress, profoundly walled, that some remembered winter storms lately turned their great artillery. It was a time of resounding nights; the sky was so clamorous and so close, up in the towers of the seaside stronghold, that one seemed to be indeed admitted to the perturbed counsels of the winds. The gale came with an indescribable haste, hooting as it flew; it seemed to break itself upon the heights, yet passed unbroken out to sea; in the voice of the sea there were pauses, but none in that of the urgent gale with its hoo-hoo- hoo all night, that clamoured down the calling of the waves. That lack of pauses was the strangest thing in the tempest, because the increase of sound seemed to imply a lull before. The lull was never perceptible, but the lift was always an alarm. The onslaught was instant, where would it stop? What was the secret extreme to which this hurry and force were tending? You asked less what thing was driving the flocks of the storm than what was drawing them. The attraction seemed the greater violence, the more irresistible, and the more unknown. And there were moments when the end seemed about to be attained.

The wind struck us hasty blows, and unawares we borrowed, to describe it, words fit for the sharp strokes of material things; but the fierce gale is soft. Along the short grass, trembling and cowering flat on the scarped hill-side, against the staggering horse, against the flint walls, one with the rock they grasp, the battery of the tempest is a quick and enormous softness. What down, what sand, what deep moss, what elastic wave could match the bed and cushion of the gale?

This storm tossed the wave and the stones of the sea-wall up together. The next day it left the waters white with the thrilling whiteness of foam in sunshine. It was only the Channel; and in such narrow waters you do not see the distances, the wide levels of fleeting and floating foam, that lie light between long wave and long wave on a Mediterranean coast, regions of delicate and transitory brightness so far out that all the waves, near and far, seem to be breaking at the same moment, one beyond the other, and league beyond league, into foam. But the Channel has its own strong, short curl that catches the rushing shingle up with the freshest of all noises and runs up with sudden curves, white upon the white sea-wall, under the random shadow of sea-gulls and the light of a shining cloud.

(The end)

Alice Meynell's essay: The Sea Wall

**By Alice Meynell**