

## II - A CORNISH FISHING TOWN.

The time is ten o'clock at night--the scene, a bank by the roadside, crested with young fir-trees, and affording a temporary place of repose to two travellers, who are enjoying the cool night air, picturesquely extended flat on their backs--or rather, on their knapsacks, which now form part and parcel of their backs. These two travellers are, the writer of this book, and an artist friend who is the companion of his rambles. They have long desired to explore Cornwall together, on foot; and the object of their aspirations has been at last accomplished, in the summer-time of the year eighteen hundred and fifty.

In their present position, the travellers are (to speak geographically) bounded towards the east by a long road winding down the side of a rocky hill; towards the west, by the broad half-dry channel of a tidal river; towards the north, by trees, hills, and upland valleys; and towards the south, by an old bridge and some houses near it, with lights in their windows faintly reflected in shallow water. In plainer words, the southern boundary of the prospect around them represents a place called Looe--a fishing-town on the south coast of Cornwall, which is their destination for the night.

They had, by this time, accomplished their initiation into the process of walking under a knapsack, with the most complete and encouraging success. You, who in these days of vehement bustle, business, and competition, can still find time to travel for pleasure alone--you, who have yet to become emancipated from the thralldom of railways, carriages, and saddle-horses--patronize, I exhort you, that first and oldest-established of all conveyances, your own legs! Think on your tender partings nipped in the bud by the railway bell; think of crabbed cross-roads, and broken carriage-springs; think of luggage confided to extortionate porters, of horses casting shoes and catching colds, of cramped legs and numbed feet, of vain longings to get down for a moment here, and to delay for a pleasant half hour there--think of all these manifold hardships of riding at your ease; and the next time you leave home, strap your luggage on your shoulders, take your stick in your hand, set forth delivered from a perfect paraphernalia of incumbrances, to go where you will, how you will--the free citizen of the whole travelling world! Thus independent, what may you not accomplish?--what pleasure is there that you cannot enjoy? Are you an artist?--you can stop to sketch every point of view that strikes your eye. Are you a philanthropist?--you can go into every cottage and talk to every human being you pass. Are you a botanist, or geologist?--you may pick up leaves

and chip rocks wherever you please, the live-long day. Are you a valetudinarian?--you may physic yourself by Nature's own simple prescription, walking in fresh air. Are you dilatory and irresolute?--you may dawdle to your heart's content; you may change all your plans a dozen times in a dozen hours; you may tell "Boots" at the inn to call you at six o'clock, may fall asleep again (ecstatic sensation!) five minutes after he has knocked at the door, and may get up two hours later, to pursue your journey, with perfect impunity and satisfaction. For, to you, what is a time-table but waste-paper?--and a "booked place" but a relic of the dark ages? You dread, perhaps, blisters on your feet--sponge your feet with cold vinegar and water, change your socks every ten miles, and show me blisters after that, if you can! You strap on your knapsack for the first time, and five minutes afterwards feel an aching pain in the muscles at the back of your neck--walk on, and the aching will walk off! How do we overcome our first painful cuticular reminiscences of first getting on horseback?--by riding again. Apply the same rule to carrying the knapsack, and be assured of the same successful result. Again I say it, therefore--walk, and be merry; walk, and be healthy; walk, and be your own master!--walk, to enjoy, to observe, to improve, as no riders can!--walk, and you are the best peripatetic impersonation of holiday enjoyment that is to be met with on the surface of this work-a-day world!

How much more could I not say in praise of travelling on our own neglected legs? But it is getting late; dark night-clouds are marching slowly over the sky, to the whistling music of the wind; we must leave our bank by the roadside, pass one end of the old bridge, walk along a narrow winding street, and enter our hospitable little inn, where we are welcomed by the kindest of landladies, and waited on by the fairest of chambermaids. If Looe prove not to be a little sea-shore paradise to-morrow, then is there no virtue in the good omens of to-night.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first point for which we made in the morning, was the old bridge; and a most picturesque and singular structure we found it to be. Its construction dates back as far as the beginning of the fifteenth century. It is three hundred and eighty-four feet long, and has fourteen arches, no two of which are on the same scale. The stout buttresses built between each arch, are hollowed at the top into curious triangular places of refuge for pedestrians, the roughly paved roadway being just wide enough to allow the passage of one cart at a time. On some of these buttresses, towards the middle, once stood an oratory, or chapel, dedicated to St. Anne; but no vestiges of it now remain. The old bridge however, still rises sturdily enough on its ancient

foundations; and, whatever the point from which its silver-grey stones and quaint arches of all shapes and sizes may be beheld, forms no mean adjunct to the charming landscape around it.

Looe is known to have existed as a town in the reign of Edward I.; and it remains to this day one of the prettiest and most primitive places in England. The river divides it into East and West Looe; and the view from the bridge, looking towards the two little colonies of houses thus separated, is in some respects almost unique.

At each side of you rise high ranges of beautifully wooded hills; here and there a cottage peeps out among the trees, the winding path that leads to it being now lost to sight in the thick foliage, now visible again as a thin serpentine line of soft grey. Midway on the slopes appear the gardens of Looe, built up the acclivity on stone terraces one above another; thus displaying the veritable garden architecture of the mountains of Palestine magically transplanted to the side of an English hill. Here, in this soft and genial atmosphere, the hydrangea is a common flower-bed ornament, the fuchsia grows lofty and luxuriant in the poorest cottage garden, the myrtle flourishes close to the sea-shore, and the tender tamarisk is the wild plant of every farmer's hedge. Looking lower down the hills yet, you see the houses of the town straggling out towards the sea along each bank of the river, in mazes of little narrow streets; curious old quays project over the water at different points; coast-trade vessels are being loaded and unloaded, built in one place and repaired in another, all within view; while the prospect of hills, harbour, and houses thus quaintly combined together, is beautifully closed by the English Channel, just visible as a small strip of blue water, pent in between the ridges of two promontories which stretch out on either side to the beach.

Such is Looe as beheld from a distance; and it loses none of its attractions when you look at it more closely. There is no such thing as a straight street in the place. No martinet of an architect has been here, to drill the old stone houses into regimental regularity. Sometimes you go down steps into the ground floor, sometimes you mount an outside staircase to get to the bedrooms. Never were such places devised for hide and seek since that exciting nursery pastime was first invented. No house has fewer than two doors leading into two different lanes; some have three, opening at once into a court, a street, and a wharf, all situated at different points of the compass. The shops, too, have their diverting irregularities, as well as the town. Here you might call a man a Jack of all trades, as the best and truest compliment you could pay him--for here one shop combines in itself a drug-mongering, cheese-mongering, stationery, grocery, and oil and Italian line of business;

to say nothing of such cosmopolitan miscellanies as wrinkled apples, dusty nuts, cracked slate pencils and fly-blown mock jewellery. The moral good which you derive, in the first pane of a window, from the contemplation of memoirs of murdered missionaries and serious tracts against intemperance and tight-lacing, you lose in the second, before such worldly temptations as gingerbread, shirt-studs, and fascinating white hats for Sunday wear, at two and ninepence apiece. Let no man rashly say he has seen all that British enterprise can do for the extension of British commerce, until he has carefully studied the shop-fronts of the tradesmen of Looe.

Then, when you have at last threaded your way successfully through the streets, and have got out on the beach, you see a pretty miniature bay, formed by the extremity of a green hill on the right, and by fine jagged slate-rocks on the left. Before this seaward quarter of the town is erected a strong bulwark of rough stones, to resist the incursion of high tides. Here, the idlers of the place assemble to lounge and gossip, to look out for any outward-bound ships that are to be seen in the Channel, and to criticise the appearance and glorify the capabilities of the little fleet of Looe fishing-boats, riding snugly at anchor before them at the entrance of the bay.

The inhabitants number some fourteen hundred; and are as good-humoured and unsophisticated a set of people as you will meet with anywhere. The Fisheries and the Coast Trade form their principal means of subsistence. The women take a very fair share of the hard work out of the men's hands. You constantly see them carrying coals from the vessels to the quay in curious hand-barrows: they laugh, scream, and run in each other's way incessantly: but these little irregularities seem to assist, rather than impede them, in the prosecution of their tasks. As to the men, one absorbing interest appears to govern them all. The whole day long they are mending boats, painting boats, cleaning boats, rowing boats, or, standing with their hands in their pockets, looking at boats. The children seem to be children in size, and children in nothing else. They congregate together in sober little groups, and hold mysterious conversations, in a dialect which we cannot understand. If they ever do tumble down, soil their pinafores, throw stones, or make mud pies, they practise these juvenile vices in a midnight secrecy which no stranger's eye can penetrate.

In that second period of the dark ages, when there were High Tories and rotten boroughs in the land, Looe (containing at that time nothing like the number of inhabitants which it now possesses) sent Four Members to Parliament! The ceremony by which two of these members were elected, as it was described to me by a man who remembered witnessing it, must have been an impressive sight indeed to any foreigner interested in studying the

representative system of this country. On the morning of the "Poll," one division of the borough sent six electors, and another four, to record their imposing aggregate of votes in favour of any two smiling civil gentlemen, who came, properly recommended, to ask for them. This done, the ten electors walked quietly home in one direction, and the two members walked quietly off in another, to perform the fatiguing duty of representing their constituents' interests in Imperial Parliament. The election was quite a snug little family affair, in these "good old times." The ten gentlemen who voted, and the other two gentlemen who took their votes, just made up a comfortable compact dozen, all together!

But this state of things was too harmonious to last in such a world of discord as ours. The day of innovation came: turbulent Whigs and Radicals laid uncivil hands on the Looe polling-booth, and politically annihilated the pleasant party of twelve. Since that disastrous period the town has sent no members to Parliament at all; and very little, indeed, do the townspeople appear to care about so serious a deprivation. In case the reader should be disposed to attribute this indifference to municipal privileges to the supineness rather than the philosophy of the inhabitants, I think it necessary to establish their just claims to be considered as possessing public spirit, prompt decision, and wise fertility of resource in cases of emergency, by relating in this place the true story of how the people of Looe got rid of the rats.

About a mile out at sea, to the southward of the town, rises a green triangular shaped eminence, called Looe Island. Here, many years ago, a ship was wrecked. Not only were the sailors saved, but several free passengers of the rat species, who had got on board, nobody knew how, where, or when, were also preserved by their own strenuous exertions, and wisely took up permanent quarters for the future on the terra firma of Looe Island. In process of time, and in obedience to the laws of nature, these rats increased and multiplied exceedingly; and, being confined all round within certain limits by the sea, soon became a palpable and dangerous nuisance. Destruction was threatened to the agricultural produce of all the small patches of cultivated land on the island--it seemed doubtful whether any man who ventured there by himself, might not share the fate of Bishop Hatto, and be devoured by rats. Under these pressing circumstances, the people of Looe determined to make one united and vehement effort to extirpate the whole colony of invaders. Ordinary means of destruction had been tried already, and without effect. It was said that rats left for dead on the ground had mysteriously revived faster than they could be picked up and skinned, or flung into the sea. Rats desperately wounded had got away into their holes, and become convalescent, and increased and multiplied

again more productively than ever. The great problem was, not how to kill the rats, but how to annihilate them so effectually as to place the re-appearance even of one of them altogether out of the question. This was the problem, and it was solved in the following manner:--

All the available inhabitants of the town were called to join in a great hunt. The rats were caught by every conceivable artifice; and, once taken, were instantly and ferociously smothered in onions; the corpses were then decently laid out on clean china dishes, and straightway eaten with vindictive relish by the people of Looe. Never was any invention for destroying rats so complete and so successful as this! Every man, woman, and child, who could eat, could swear to the extirpation of all the rats they had eaten. The local returns of dead rats were not made by the bills of mortality, but by the bills of fare: it was getting rid of a nuisance by the unheard-of process of stomaching a nuisance! Day after day passed on, and rats disappeared by hundreds, never to return. What could all their cunning and resolution avail them now? They had resisted before, and could have resisted still, the ordinary force of dogs, ferrets, traps, sticks, stones, and guns, arrayed against them; but when to these engines of assault were added, as auxiliaries, smothering onions, scalding stew-pans, hungry mouths, sharp teeth, good digestions, and the gastric juice, what could they do but give in? Swift and sure was the destruction that now overwhelmed them--everybody who wanted a dinner had a strong personal interest in hunting them down to the very last. In a short space of time the island was cleared of the usurpers. Cheeses remained entire: ricks rose uninjured. And this is the true story of how the people of Looe got rid of the rats!

It will not much surprise any reader who has been good-natured enough to peruse the preceding pages with some attention, to hear that we idly delayed the day of departure from the pleasant fishing-town on the south coast, which was now the place of our sojourn. The smiles of our fair chambermaid and the cookery of our excellent hostess, addressed us in Siren tones of allurements which we had not the virtue to resist. Then, it was difficult to leave unexplored any of the numerous walks in the neighbourhood--all delightfully varied in character, and each possessing its own attractive point of view. Even when we had made our determination and fixed our farewell day, a great boat-race and a great tea-drinking, which everybody declared was something that everybody else ought to see, interfered to detain us. We delayed yet once more, to partake in the festivities, and found that they supplied us with all the necessary resolution to quit Looe which we had hitherto wanted. We had remained to take part in a social failure on a very large scale.

As, in addition to the boat-race, there was to be a bazaar on the beach; and as fine weather was therefore an essential requisite on the occasion, it is scarcely necessary to premise that we had an unusually large quantity of rain. In the forenoon, however, the sun shone with treacherous brilliancy; and all the women in the neighbourhood fluttered out in his beams, gay as butterflies. What dazzling gowns, what flaring parasols, what joyous cavalcades on cart-horses, did we see on the road that led to the town! What a mixture of excitement, confusion, anxiety, and importance, possessed everybody! What frolic and felicity attended the popular gatherings on the beach, until the fatal moment when the gun fired for the first race! Then, as if at that signal, the clouds began to muster in ominous blackness; the deceitful sunlight disappeared; the rain came down for the day--a steady, noiseless, malicious rain, that at once forbade all hope of clear weather. Dire was the discomfiture of the poor ladies of Looe. They ran hither and thither for shelter, in lank wet muslin and under dripping parasols, displaying, in the lamentable emergency of the moment, all sorts of interior contrivances for expanding around them the exterior magnificence of their gowns, which we never ought to have seen. Deserted were the stalls of the bazaar for the parlours of the alehouses; unapplauded and unobserved, strained at the oar the stout rowers in the boat-race. Everybody ran to cover, except some seafaring men who cared nothing for weather, some inveterate loungers who would wander up and down in spite of the rain, and three unhappy German musicians, who had been caught on their travels, and pinned up tight against the outer wall of a house, in a sort of cage of canvas, boards, and evergreens, which hid every part of them but their heads and shoulders. Nobody interfered to release these unfortunates. There they sat, hemmed in all round by dripping leaves, blowing grimly and incessantly through instruments of brass. If the reader can imagine the effect of three phlegmatic men with long bottle noses, looking out of a circle of green bushes, and playing waltzes unintermittingly on long horns, in a heavy shower--he will be able to form a tolerably correct estimate of the large extra proportion of gloom which the German musicians succeeded in infusing into the disastrous proceedings of the day.

The tea-drinking was rather more successful. The room in which it was held was filled to the corners, and exhaled such an odour of wet garments and bread and butter (to say nothing of an incessant clatter of china and bawling of voices) that we found ourselves, as uninitiated strangers, unequal to the task of remaining in it to witness the proceedings. Descending the steps which led into the street from the door--to the great confusion of a string of smartly dressed ladies who encountered us, rushing up with steaming teakettles and craggy lumps of plumcake--we left the inhabitants to conclude their festivities by themselves, and went out to take a farewell walk

on the cliffs of Looe.

We ascended the heights to the westward, losing sight of the town among the trees as we went; and then, walking in a southerly direction through some cornfields, approached within a few hundred yards of the edge of the cliffs, and looked out on the sea. The sky had partially cleared, and the rain had ceased; but huge fantastic masses of cloud, tinged with lurid copper-colour by the setting sun, still towered afar off over the horizon, and were reflected in a deeper hue on the calm surface of the sea, with a perfectness and grandeur that I never remember to have witnessed before. Not a ship was in sight; but out on the extreme line of the wilderness of grey waters there shone one red, fiery spark--the beacon of the Eddystone Lighthouse. Before us, the green fields of Looe Island rose high out of the ocean--here, partaking the red light on the clouds; there, half lost in cold shadow. Closer yet, on the mainland, a few cattle were feeding quietly on a long strip of meadow bordering the edge of the cliff; and, now and then, a gull soared up from the sea, and wheeled screaming over our heads. The faint sound of the small shore-waves (invisible to us in the position we occupied) beating dull and at long intervals on the beach, augmented the dreary solemnity of the evening prospect. Light, shade, and colour, were all before us, arranged in the grandest combinations, and expressed by the simplest forms. If Michael Angelo had painted landscape, he might have represented such a scene as we now beheld.

This was our last excursion at Looe. The next morning we were again on the road, walking inland on our way to the town of Liskeard.