

## V - LOO-POOL

"Now, I think it very much amiss," remarks Sterne, in 'Tristram Shandy,' "that a man cannot go quietly through a town and let it alone, when it does not meddle with him, but that he must be turning about, and drawing his pen at every kennel he crosses over, merely, o' my conscience, for the sake of drawing it." I quote this wise and witty observation on a bad practice of some travel-writers, as containing the best reason that I can give the reader for transporting him at once over some sixty miles of Cornish high-roads and footpaths, without stopping to drop one word of description by the way. Having left off the record of our travels at Liskeard, and taking it up again--as I mean to do here--at Helston, I skip over five intermediate market-towns and two large villages, with a mere dash of the pen. Lostwithiel, Fowey, St. Austell, Grampound, Probus, Truro, Falmouth, are all places of mark and note, and have all certain curiosities and sights of their own to interest the inquisitive tourist; but, nevertheless, not one of them "meddled" with me in the course of my rambles, and acting on Sterne's excellent principle, I purpose "letting them alone" now. In other words, the several towns and villages that I have enumerated, though presenting much that was generally picturesque and attractive in the way of old buildings and pretty scenery, exhibited little that was distinctive or original in character; produced therefore rather pleasant than vivid impressions; and would by no means suggest any very original series of descriptions to fill the pages of a book which is confined to such subjects only as are most exclusively and strikingly Cornish.

The town of Helston, where we now halt for the first time since we left the Cheese-Wring and St. Cleer's Well, might, if tested by its own merits alone, be passed over as unceremoniously as the towns already passed over before it. Its principal recommendation, in the opinion of the inhabitants, appeared to be that it was the residence of several very "genteel families," who have certainly not communicated much of their gentility to the lower orders of the population--a riotous and drunken set, the only bad specimens of Cornish people that I met with in Cornwall. The streets of Helston are a trifle larger and a trifle duller than the streets of Liskeard; the church is comparatively modern in date, and superlatively ugly in design. A miserable altar-piece, daubed in gaudy colours on the window above the communion-table, is the only approach to any attempt at embellishment in the interior. In short, the town has nothing to offer to attract the stranger, but a public festival--a sort of barbarous carnival--held there annually on the 8th of May. This festival is said to be of very ancient origin, and is called "The Furry"--an old Cornish

word, signifying a gathering; and, at Helston particularly, a gathering in celebration of the return of spring. The Furry begins early in the morning with singing, to an accompaniment of drums and kettles. All the people in the town immediately leave off work and scamper into the country; having reached which, they scamper back again, garlanded with leaves and flowers, and caper about hand-in-hand through the streets, and in and out of all the houses, without let or hindrance. Even the "genteel" resident families allow themselves to be infected with the general madness, and wind up the day's capering consistently enough by a night's capering at a grand ball. A full account of these extraordinary absurdities may be found in Polwhele's "History of Cornwall."

But, though thus uninteresting in itself, Helston must be visited by every tourist in Cornwall for the sake of the grand, the almost unrivalled scenery to be met with near it. The town is not only the best starting-point from which to explore the noble line of coast rocks which ends at the Lizard Head; but possesses the further recommendation of lying in the immediate vicinity of the largest lake in Cornwall--Loo Pool.

The banks of Loo Pool stretch on either side to the length of two miles; the lake, which in summer occupies little more than half the space that it covers in winter, is formed by the flow of two or three small streams. You first reach it from Helston, after a walk of half a mile; and then see before you, on either hand, long ranges of hills rising gently from the water's edge, covered with clustering trees, or occupied by wide cornfields and sloping tracts of common land. So far, the scenery around Loo Pool resembles the scenery around other lakes; but as you proceed, the view changes in the most striking and extraordinary manner. Walking on along the winding banks of the pool, you taste the water and find it soft and fresh, you see ducks swimming about in it from the neighbouring farm-houses, you watch the rising of the fine trout for which it is celebrated--every object tends to convince you that you are wandering by the shores of an inland lake--when suddenly at a turn in the hill slope, you are startled by the shrill cry of the gull, and the fierce roar of breakers thunders on your ear--you look over the light grey waters of the lake, and behold, stretching immediately above and beyond them, the expanse of the deep blue ocean, from which they are only separated by a strip of smooth white sand!

You hurry on, and reach this bar of sand which parts the great English Channel and the little Loo Pool--a child might run across it in a minute! You stand in the centre. On one side, close at hand, water is dancing beneath the breeze in glassy, tiny ripples; on the other, equally close, water rolls in mighty waves, precipitated on the ground in dashing, hissing, writhing

floods of the whitest foam--here, children are floating mimic boats on a mimic sea; there, the stateliest ships of England are sailing over the great deep--both scenes visible in one view. Rocky cliffs and arid sands appear in close combination with rounded fertile hills, and long grassy slopes; salt spray leaping over the first, spring-water lying calm beneath the last! No fairy vision of Nature that ever was imagined is more fantastic, or more lovely than this glorious reality, which brings all the most widely contrasted characteristics of a sea view and an inland view into the closest contact, and presents them in one harmonious picture to the eye.

The ridge of sand between Loo Pool and the sea, which, by impeding the flow of the inland streams spreads them in the form of a lake over the valley-ground between two hills, is formed by the action of storms from the southwest. Such, at least, is the modern explanation of the manner in which Loo Bar has been heaped up. But there is an ancient legend in connexion with it, which, tells a widely different story.

It is said that the terrible Cornish giant, or ogre, Tregeagle, was trudging homewards one day, carrying a huge sack of sand on his back, which--being a giant of neat and cleanly habits--he designed should serve him for sprinkling his parlour floor. As he was passing along the top of the hills which now overlook Loo Pool, he heard a sound of scampering footsteps behind him; and, turning round, saw that he was hotly pursued by no less a person than the devil himself. Big as he was, Tregeagle lost heart and ignominiously took to his heels: but the devil ran nimbly, ran steadily, ran without losing breath--ran, in short, like the devil. Tregeagle was fat, short-winded, had a load on his back, and lost ground at every step. At last, just as he reached the seaward extremity of the hills, he determined in despair to lighten himself of his burden, and thus to seize the only chance of escaping his enemy by superior fleetness of foot. Accordingly, he opened his huge sack in a great hurry, shook out all his sand over the precipice, between the sea and the river which then ran into it, and so formed in a moment the Bar of Loo Pool.

In the winter time, the lake is the cause and the scene of an extraordinary ceremony. The heavy incessant rains which then fall (ice is almost unknown in the moist climate of Cornwall), increase day by day the waters of the Pool, until they encroach over the whole of the low flat valley between Helston and the sea. Then, the smooth paths of turf, the little streams that run by their side--so pleasant to look on in the summer time--are hidden by the great overflow. Mill-wheels are stopped; cottages built on the declivities of the hill are threatened with inundation. Out on the bar, at high tide, but two or three feet of sand appear between the stormy sea on the one hand, and the

stagnant swollen lake on the other. If Loo Pool were measured now, it would be found to extend to a circumference of seven miles.

When the flooding of the lake has reached its climax, the millers, who are the principal sufferers by the overflow, prepare to cut a passage through the Bar for the superabundant waters of the Pool. Before they can do this, however, they must conform to a curious old custom which has been practised for centuries, and is retained down to the present day. Procuring two stout leathern purses, they tie up three halfpence in each, and then set off with them in a body to the Lord of the Manor. Presenting him with their purses, they state their case with all due formality, and request permission to cut their trench through the sand. In consideration of the threepenny recognition of his rights, the Lord of the Manor graciously accedes to the petition; and the millers, armed with their spades and shovels, start for the Bar.

Their projected labour is of the slightest kind. A mere ditch suffices to establish the desired communication: and the water does the rest for itself. On one occasion, so high was the tide on one side, and so full the lake on the other, that a man actually scraped away sand enough with his stick, to give vent to the waters of the Pool. Thus, after no very hard work, the millers achieve their object; and the spectators watching on the hill, behold a startling and magnificent scene.

Tearing away the sand on either side, floods of fresh water rush out furiously against floods of salt water leaping in, upheaved into mighty waves by the winter gale. A foaming roaring battle between two opposing forces of the same element takes place. The noise is terrific--it is heard like thunder, at great distances off. At last, the heavy, smooth, continuous flow of the fresh water prevails even over the power of the ocean. Farther and farther out, rushing through a wider and wider channel every minute, pour the great floods from the land, until the salt water is stained with an ochre colour, over a surface of twenty miles. But their force is soon spent: soon, the lake sinks lower and lower away from the slope of the hills. Then, with the high tide, the sea reappears triumphantly, dashing and leaping, in clouds of spray, through the channel in the sand--making the waters of the Pool brackish--now, threatening to swell them anew to overflowing--and now, at the ebb, leaving them to empty themselves again, in the manner of a great tidal river. No new change takes place, until a storm from the southwest comes on; and then, fresh masses of sand and shingle are forced up--the channel is refilled--the bar is reconstructed as if by a miracle. Again, the scene resumes its old features--again, there is a sea on one side, and a lake on the other. But now, the Pool occupies only its ordinary limits--now, the

mill-wheels turn busily once more, and the smooth paths and gliding streams reappear in their former beauty, until the next winter rains shall come round, and the next winter floods shall submerge them again.

At the time when I visited the lake, its waters were unusually low. Here, they ran calm and shallow, into little, glassy, flowery creeks, that looked like fairies' bathing places. There, out in the middle, they hardly afforded depth enough for a duck to swim in. Near to the Bar, however, they spread forth wider and deeper; finely contrasted, in their dun colour and perfect repose, with the flashing foaming breakers on the other side. The surf forbade all hope of swimming; but, standing where the spent waves ran up deepest, and where the spray flew highest before the wind, I could take a natural shower-bath from the sea, in one direction; and the next moment, turning round in the other, could wash the sand off my feet luxuriously in the soft, fresh waters of Loo Pool.