

## **VI - THE LIZARD.**

We had waited throughout one long rainy day at Helston--"remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow"--for a chance of finer weather before we started to explore the Lizard promontory. But our patience availed us little. The next morning, there was the soft, thick, misty Cornish rain still falling, just as it had already fallen without cessation for twenty-four hours. To wait longer, in perfect inactivity, and in the dullest of towns--doubtful whether the sky would clear even in a week's time--was beyond mortal endurance. We shouldered our knapsacks, and started for the Lizard in defiance of rain, and in defiance of our landlady's reiterated assertions that we should lose our way in the mist, when we walked inland; and should slip into invisible holes, and fall over fog-veiled precipices among the rocks, if we ventured to approach the coast.

What sort of scenery we walked through, I am unable to say. The rain was above--the mud was below--the mist was all around us. The few objects, near at hand, that we did now and then see, dripped with wet, and had a shadowy visionary look. Sometimes, we met a forlorn cow steaming composedly by the roadside--or an old horse, standing up to his fetlocks in mire, and sneezing vociferously--or a good-humoured peasant, who directed us on our road, and informed us with a grin, that this sort of "fine rain" often lasted for a fortnight. Sometimes we passed little villages built in damp holes, where trees, cottages, women scampering backwards and forwards peevishly on domestic errands, big boys with empty sacks over their heads and shoulders, gossiping gloomily against barn walls, and ill-conditioned pigs grunting for admission at closed kitchen doors, all looked soaked through and through together. Nothing, in short, could be more dreary and comfortless than our walk for the first two hours. But, after that, as we approached "Lizard Town," the clouds began to part to seaward; layer after layer of mist drove past us, rolling before the wind; peeps of faint greenish-blue sky appeared and enlarged apace. By the time we had arrived at our destination, a white, watery sunlight was falling over the wet landscape. The prognostications of our Cornish friends were pleasantly falsified. A fine day was in store for us after all.

The man who first distinguished the little group of cottages that we now looked on, by the denomination of Lizard Town, must have possessed magnificent ideas indeed on the subject of nomenclature. If the place looked like anything in the world, it looked like a large collection of farm out-buildings without a farm-house. Muddy little lanes intersecting each other

at every possible angle; rickety little cottages turned about to all the points of the compass; ducks, geese, cocks, hens, pigs, cows, horses, dunghills, puddles, sheds, peat-stacks, timber, nets, seemed to be all indiscriminately huddled together where there was little or no room for them. To find the inn amid this confusion of animate and inanimate objects, was no easy matter; and when we at length discovered it, pushed our way through the live stock in the garden, and opened the kitchen door, this was the scene which burst instantaneously on our view:--

We beheld a small room literally full of babies, and babies' mothers. Interesting infants of the tenderest possible age, draped in long clothes and short clothes, and shawls and blankets, met the eye wherever it turned. We saw babies propped up uncomfortably on the dresser, babies rocking snugly in wicker cradles, babies stretched out flat on their backs on women's knees, babies prone on the floor toasting before a slow fire. Every one of these Cornish cherubs was crying in every variety of vocal key. Every one of their affectionate parents was talking at the top of her voice. Every one of their little elder brothers was screaming, squabbling, and tumbling down in the passage with prodigious energy and spirit. The mothers of England--and they only--can imagine the deafening and composite character of the noise which this large family party produced. To describe it is impossible.

Ere long, while we looked on it, the domestic scene began to change. Even as porters, policemen, and workmen of all sorts, gathered together on the line of rails at a station, move aside quickly and with one accord out of the way of the heavy engine slowly starting on its journey--so did the congregated mothers in the inn kitchen now move back on either hand with their babies, and clear a path for the great bulk of the hostess leisurely advancing from the fireside, to greet us at the door. From this most corpulent and complaisant of women, we received a hearty welcome, and a full explanation of the family orgies that were taking place under her roof. The great public meeting of all the babies in Lizard Town and the neighbouring villages, on which we had intruded, had been convened by the local doctor, who had got down from London, what the landlady termed a "lot of fine fresh matter," and was now about to strike a decisive blow at the small-pox, by vaccinating all the babies he could lay his hands on at "one fell swoop." The surgical ceremonies were expected to begin in a few minutes.

This last piece of information sent us out of the house without a moment's delay. The sunlight had brightened gloriously since we had last beheld it--the rain was over--the mist was gone. But a short distance before us, rose the cliffs at the Lizard Head--the southernmost land in England--and to this

point we now hastened, as the fittest spot from which to start on our rambles along the coast.

On our way thither, short as it was, we observed a novelty. In the South and West of Cornwall, the footpaths, instead of leading through or round the fields, are all on the top of the thick stone walls--some four feet high--which divide them. This curious arrangement for walking gives a startling and picturesque character to the figures of the country people, when you see them at a distance, striding along, not on the earth but above it, and often relieved throughout the whole length of their bodies against the sky. Preserving our equilibrium, on these elevated pathways, with some difficulty against the strong south-west wind that was now blowing in our faces, we soon reached the topmost rocks that crown the Lizard Head: and then, the whole noble line of coast and the wild stormy ocean opened grandly into view.

On each side of us, precipice over precipice, cavern within cavern, rose the great cliffs protecting the land against the raging sea. Three hundred feet beneath, the foam was boiling far out over a reef of black rocks. Above and around, flocks of sea-birds flew in ever lengthening circles, or perched flapping their wings and sunning their plumage, on ledges of riven stone below us. Every object forming the wide sweep of the view was on the vastest and most majestic scale. The wild varieties of form in the jagged line of rocks stretched away eastward and westward, as far as the eye could reach; black shapeless masses of mist scowled over the whole landward horizon; the bright blue sky at the opposite point was covered with towering white clouds which moved and changed magnificently; the tossing and raging of the great bright sea was sublimely contrasted by the solitude and tranquillity of the desert, overshadowed land--while ever and ever, sounding as they first sounded when the morning stars sang together, the rolling waves and the rushing wind pealed out their primeval music over the whole scene!

And now, when we began to examine the coast more in detail, inquiring the names of remarkable objects as we proceeded, we found ourselves in a country where each succeeding spot that the traveller visited, was memorable for some mighty convulsion of Nature, or tragically associated with some gloomy story of shipwreck and death. Turning from the Lizard Head towards a cliff at some little distance, we passed through a field on our way, overgrown with sweet-smelling wild flowers, and broken up into low grassy mounds. This place is called "Pistol Meadow," and is connected with a terrible event which is still spoken of by the country people with superstitious awe.

Some hundred years since, a transport-ship, filled with troops, was wrecked on the reef off the Lizard Head. Two men only were washed ashore alive. Out of the fearful number that perished, two hundred corpses were driven up on the beach below Pistol Meadow; and there they were buried by tens and twenties together in great pits, the position of which is still revealed by the low irregular mounds that chequer the surface of the field. The place was named, in remembrance of the quantity of fire-arms,--especially pistols--found about the wreck of the ill-fated ship, at low tide, on the reef below the cliffs. To this day, the peasantry continue to regard Pistol Meadow with feelings of awe and horror, and fear to walk near the graves of the drowned men at night. Nor have many of the inhabitants yet forgotten a revolting circumstance connected by traditional report with the burial of the corpses after the shipwreck. It is said, that when dead bodies were first washed ashore, troops of ferocious, half-starved dogs suddenly appeared from the surrounding country, and could with difficulty be driven from preying on the mangled remains that were cast up on the beach. Ever since that period, the peasantry have been reported as holding the dog in abhorrence. Whether this be true or not, it is certainly a rare adventure to meet with a dog in the Lizard district. You may walk through farm-yard after farm-yard, you may enter cottage after cottage, and never hear any barking at your heels;--you may pass, on the road, labourer after labourer, and yet never find one of them accompanied, as in other parts of the country, by his favourite attendant cur.

Leaving Pistol Meadow, after gathering a few of the wild herbs growing fragrant and plentiful over the graves of the dead, we turned our steps towards the Lizard Lighthouse. As we passed before the front of the large and massive building, our progress was suddenly and startlingly checked by a hideous chasm in the cliff, sunk to a perpendicular depth of seventy feet, and measuring more than a hundred in circumference. Nothing prepares the stranger for this great gulf; no railing is placed about it; it lies hidden by rising land, and the earth all around is treacherously smooth. The first moment when you see it, is the moment when you start back instinctively from its edge, doubtful whether the hole has not yawned open in that very instant before your feet.

This chasm--melodramatically entitled by the people, "The Lion's Den"--was formed in an extraordinary manner, not many years since. In the evening the whole surface of the down above the cliff was smooth to the eye, and firm to the foot--in the morning it had opened into an enormous hole. The men who kept watch at the Lighthouse, heard no sounds beyond the moaning of the sea--felt no shock--looked out on the night, and saw that all was apparently still and quiet. Nature suffered her convulsion and effected

her change in silence. Hundreds on hundreds of tons of soil had sunk down into depths beneath them, none knew in how long, or how short a time; but there the Lion's Den was in the morning, where the firm earth had been the evening before.

The explanation of the manner in which this curious landslip occurred, is to be found by descending the face of the cliff, beyond the Lion's Den, and entering a cavern in the rocks, called "Daw's Hugo" (or Cave). The place is only accessible at low water. Passing from the beach through the opening of the cavern, you find yourself in a lofty, tortuous recess, into the farthest extremity of which, a stream of light pours down from some eighty or a hundred feet above. This light is admitted through the Lion's Den, and thus explains by itself the nature of the accident by which that chasm was formed. Here, the weight of the upper soil broke through the roof of the cave; and the earth which then fell into it, was subsequently washed away by the sea, which fills Daw's Hugo at every flow of the tide. It has lately been noticed that the loose particles of ground at the bottom of the Lion's Den, still continue to sink gradually through the narrow, slanting passage into the cave already formed; and it is expected that in no very long time the lower extremity of the chasm will widen so far, as to make the sea plainly visible through it from above. At present, the effect of the two streams of light pouring into Daw's Hugo from two opposite directions--one from the Lion's Den, the other from the seaward opening in the rocks--and falling together, in cross directions on the black rugged walls of the cave and the beautiful marine ferns growing from them, is supernaturally striking and grand. Here, Rembrandt would have loved to study; for here, even his sublime perception of the poetry of light and shade might have received a new impulse, and learned from the teaching of Nature one immortal lesson more.

Daw's Hugo and the Lion's Den may be fairly taken as characteristic types of the whole coast scenery about the Lizard Head, in its general aspects. Great caves and greater landslips are to be seen both eastward and westward. In calm weather you may behold the long prospects of riven rock, in their finest combination, from a boat. At such times, you may row into vast caverns, always filled by the sea, and only to be approached when the waves ripple as calmly as the waters of a lake. Then, you may see the naturally arched roof high above you, adorned in the loveliest manner by marine plants waving to and fro gently in the wind. Rocky walls are at each side of you, variegated in dark red and dark green colours--now advancing, now receding, now winding in and out, now rising straight and lofty, until their termination is hid in a pitch-dark obscurity which no man has ever ventured to fathom to its end. Beneath, is the emerald-green sea, so still and clear that you can

behold the white sand far below, and can watch the fish gliding swiftly and stealthily out and in: while, all around, thin drops of moisture are dripping from above, like rain, into the deep quiet water below, with a monotonous echoing sound which half oppresses and half soothes the ear, at the same time.

On stormy days your course is different. Then, you wander along the summits of the cliffs; and looking down, through the hedges of tamarisk and myrtle that skirt the ends of the fields, see the rocks suddenly broken away beneath you into an immense shelving amphitheatre, on the floor of which the sea boils in fury, rushing through natural archways and narrow rifts. Beyond them, at intervals as the waves fall, you catch glimpses of the brilliant blue main ocean, and the outer reefs stretching into it. Often, such wild views as these are relieved from monotony by the prospect of smooth cornfields and pasture-lands, or by pretty little fishing villages perched among the rocks--each with its small group of boats drawn up on a slip of sandy beach, and its modest, tiny gardens rising one above another, wherever the slope is gentle, and the cliff beyond rises high to shelter them from the winter winds.

But the place at which the coast scenery of the Lizard district arrives at its climax of grandeur is Kynance Cove. Here, such gigantic specimens are to be seen of the most beautiful of all varieties of rock--the "serpentine"--as are unrivalled in Cornwall; perhaps, unrivalled anywhere. A walk of two miles along the westward cliffs from Lizard Town, brought us to the top of a precipice of three hundred feet. Looking forward from this, we saw the white sand of Kynance Cove stretching out in a half circle into the sea.

What a scene was now presented to us! It was a perfect palace of rocks! Some rose perpendicularly and separate from each other, in the shapes of pyramids and steeples--some were overhanging at the top and pierced with dark caverns at the bottom--some were stretched horizontally on the sand, here studded with pools of water, there broken into natural archways. No one of these rocks resembled another in shape, size, or position--and all, at the moment when we looked on them, were wrapped in the solemn obscurity of a deep mist; a mist which shadowed without concealing them, which exaggerated their size, and, hiding all the cliffs beyond, presented them sublimely as separate and solitary objects in the sea-view.

It was now necessary, however, to occupy as little time as possible in contemplating Kynance Cove from a distance; for if we desired to explore it, immediate advantage was to be taken of the state of the tide, which was already rapidly ebbing. Hurriedly descending the cliffs, therefore, we soon

reached the sand: and here, leaving my companion to sketch, I set forth to wander among the rocks, doubtful whither to turn my steps first. While still hesitating, I was fortunate enough to meet with a guide, whose intelligence and skill well deserve such record as I can give of them here; for, to the former I was indebted for much local information and anecdote, and to the latter, for quitting Kynance Cove with all my limbs in as sound a condition as when I first approached it.

The guide introduced himself to me by propounding a sort of stranger's catechism. 1st. "Did I want to see everything?"--"Certainly." 2nd. "Was I giddy on the tops of high places?"--"No." 3rd. "Would I be so good, if I got into a difficulty anywhere, as to take it easy, and catch hold of him tight?"--"Yes, very tight!" With these answers the guide appeared to be satisfied. He gave his hat a smart knock with one hand, to fix it on his head; and pointing upwards with the other, said, "We'll try that rock first, to look into the gulls' nests, and get some wild asparagus." And away we went accordingly.

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We mount the side of an immense rock which projects far out into the sea, and is the largest of the surrounding group. It is called Asparagus Island, from the quantity of wild asparagus growing among the long grass on its summit. Half way up, we cross an ugly chasm. The guide points to a small chink or crevice, barely discernible in one side of it, and says "Devil's Bellows!" Then, first courteously putting my toes for me into a comfortable little hole in the perpendicular rock side, which just fits them, he proceeds to explain himself. Through the base of the opposite extremity of the island there is a natural channel, into which the sea rushes furiously at high tide: and finding no other vent but the little crevice we now look down on, is expelled through it in long, thin jets of spray, with a roaring noise resembling the sound of a gigantic bellows at work. But the sea is not yet high enough to exhibit this phenomenon, so the guide takes my toes out of the hole again for me, just as politely as he put them in; and forthwith leads the way up higher still--expounding as he goes, the whole art and mystery of climbing, which he condenses into this axiom:--"Never loose one hand, till you've got a grip with the other; and never scramble your toes about, where toes have no business to be."

At last we reach the topmost ridge of the island, and look down upon the white restless water far beneath, and peep into one or two deserted gulls' nests, and gather wild asparagus--which I can only describe as bearing no resemblance at all, that I could discover, to the garden species. Then, the guide points to another perpendicular rock, farther out at sea, looming dark

and phantom-like in the mist, and tells me that he was the man who built the cairn of stones on its top: and then he proposes that we shall go to the opposite extremity of the ridge on which we stand, and look down into "The Devil's Throat."

This desirable journey is accomplished with the greatest ease on his part, and with considerable difficulty and delay on mine--for the wind blows fiercely over us on the height; our rock track is narrow, rugged, and slippery; the sea roars bewilderingly below; and a single false step would not be attended with agreeable consequences. Soon, however, we begin to descend a little from our "bad eminence," and come to a halt before a wide, tunnelled opening, slanting sharply downwards in the very middle of the island--a black, gaping hole, into the bottom of which the sea is driven through some unknown subterranean channel, roaring and thundering with a fearful noise, which rises in hollow echoes through the aptly-named "Devil's Throat." About this hole no grass grew: the rocks rose wild, jagged, and precipitous, all around it. If ever the ghastly imagery of Dante's terrible "Vision" was realized on earth, it was realized here.

At this place, close to the mouth of the hole, the guide suggests that we shall sit down and have a little talk!--and very impressive talk it is, when he begins the conversation by bawling into my ear (and down the Devil's Throat at the same time) to make himself heard above the fierce roaring beneath us. Now, his tale is of tremendous jets of water which he has seen, during the storms of winter, shot out of the hole before which we sit, into the creek of the sea below--now, he tells me of a shipwreck off Asparagus Island, of half-drowned sailors floating ashore on pieces of timber, and dashed out to sea again just as they touched the strand, by a jet from the Devil's Throat--now, he points away in the opposite direction, under one of the steeple-shaped rocks, and speaks of a chase after smugglers that began from this place; a desperate chase, in which some of the smugglers' cargo, but not one of the smugglers themselves, was seized--now, he talks of another great hole in the landward rocks, where the sea may be seen boiling within: a hole into which a man who was fishing for fragments of a wreck fell and was drowned; his body being sucked away through some invisible channel, never to be seen again by mortal eyes.

Anon, the guide's talk changes from tragedy to comedy. He begins to recount odd adventures of his own with strangers. He tells me of a huge fat woman who was got up to the top of Asparagus Island, by the easiest path, and by the exertions of several guides; who, left to herself, gasped, reeled, and fell down immediately; and was just rolling off, with all the momentum of sixteen stone, over the precipice below her, when she was adroitly caught,



and anchored fast to the ground, by the ankle of one leg and the calf of the other. Then he speaks of an elderly gentleman, who, while descending the rocks with him, suddenly stopped short at the most dangerous point, giddy and panic-stricken, pouring forth death-bed confessions of all his sins, and wildly refusing to move another inch in any direction. Even this man the guide got down in safety at last, by making stepping places of his hands, on which the elderly gentleman lowered himself as on a ladder, ejaculating incoherently all the way, and trembling in great agony long after he had been safely landed on the sands.

This last story ended, it is settled that we shall descend again to the beach. Stimulated by the ease with which my worthy leader goes down beneath me, I get over-confident in my dexterity, and begin to slip here, and slide there, and come to awkward pauses at precipitous places, in what would be rather an alarming manner, but for the potent presence of the guide, who is always beneath me, ready to be fallen upon. Sometimes, when I am holding on with all the necessary tenacity of grip, as regards my hands, but, "scrambling my toes about" in a very disorderly and unworkmanlike fashion, he pops his head up from below for me to sit on; and puts my feet into crevices for me, with many apologies for taking the liberty! Sometimes, I fancy myself treading on what feels like soft turf; I look down, and find that I am standing like an acrobat on his shoulders, and hear him civilly entreating me to take hold of his jacket next, and let myself down over his body to the ledge where he is waiting for me. He never makes a false step, never stumbles, scrambles, hesitates, or fails to have a hand always at my service. The nautical metaphor of "holding on by your eyelids" becomes a fact in his case. He really views his employer, as porters are expected to view a package labelled "glass with care." I am firmly persuaded that he could take a drunken man up and down Asparagus Island, without the slightest risk either to himself or his charge; and I hold him in no small admiration, when, after landing on the sand with something between a tumble and a jump, I find him raising me to my perpendicular almost before I have touched the ground, and politely hoping that I feel quite satisfied, hitherto, with his conduct as a guide.

We now go across the beach to explore some caves--dry at low water--on the opposite side. Some of these are wide, lofty, and well-lighted from without. We walk in and out and around them, as if in great, irregular, Gothic halls. Some are narrow and dark. Now, we crawl into them on hands and knees; now, we wriggle onward a few feet, serpent-like, flat on our bellies; now, we are suddenly able to stand upright in pitch darkness, hearing faint moaning sounds of pent-up winds, when we are silent, and long reverberations of our own voices, when we speak. Then, as we turn and crawl out again, we soon

see before us one bright speck of light that may be fancied miles and miles away--a star shining in the earth--a diamond sparkling in the bosom of the rock. This guides us out again pleasantly; and, on gaining the open air, we find that while we have been groping in the darkness, a change has been taking place in the regions of light, which has altered and is still altering the aspect of the whole scene.

It is now two o'clock. The tide is rising fast; the sea dashes, in higher and higher waves, on the narrowing beach. Rain and mist are both gone. Overhead, the clouds are falling asunder in every direction, assuming strange momentary shapes, quaint airy resemblances of the forms of the great rocks among which we stand. Height after height along the distant cliffs dawns on us gently; great golden rays shoot down over them; far out on the ocean, the waters flash into a streak of fire; the sails of ships passing there, glitter bright; yet a moment more, and the glorious sunlight bursts out over the whole view. The sea changes soon from dull grey to bright blue, embroidered thickly with golden specks, as it rolls and rushes and dances in the wind. The sand at our feet grows brighter and purer to the eye; the sea-birds flying and swooping above us, look like flashes of white light against the blue firmament; and, most beautiful of all, the wet serpentine rocks now shine forth in full splendour beneath the sun; every one of their exquisite varieties of colour becomes plainly visible--silver grey and bright yellow, dark red, deep brown, and malachite green appear, here combined in thin intertwined streaks, there outspread in separate irregular patches--glorious ornaments of the sea-shore, fashioned by no human art!--Nature's own home-made jewellery, which the wear of centuries has failed to tarnish, and the rage of tempests has been powerless to destroy!

But the hour wanes while we stand and admire; the surf dashes nearer and nearer to our feet; soon, the sea will cover the sand, and rush swiftly into the caves where we have slowly crawled. Already the Devil's Bellows is at work--the jets of spray spout forth from it with a roar. The sea thunders louder and louder in the Devil's Throat--we must gain the cliffs while we have yet time. The guide takes his leave; my companion unwillingly closes his sketch-book; and we slowly ascend on our inland way together--looking back often and often, with no feigned regret, on all that we are leaving behind us at KYNANCE COVE.