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A CORNISH HAVEN

Come away with me to the sea! Let us go to Cornwall, where sea and air are of the purest and most exhilarating. Jumping into the train and proceeding westward until we come to Launceston, there we will leave the little quiet old-world town behind. So anxious are we to get to the sea, that we will not even stop to climb the hill and inspect the old castle which frowns down on us; but we will mount to the box-seat of the three-horse coach which stands waiting at the station, and drive away – still westward. Away, over the breezy uplands, where the cattle chew the cud sleepily beneath the August sun, between hedges set with brilliant jewels, which we call flowers, past undulating downs in whose hollows the purple shadows lie dreaming.

We stop presently at a little roadside inn, to give the horses

a rest and a feed; and I climb down from my elevated position and partake of a cup of tea in the inn kitchen – a primitive flagged kitchen, with a great high-backed wooden settle by the fire, and pewter bowls and cups shining on the walls. They pour out my bohea from a teapot which a fancier of old china would pronounce to be priceless. Genuine old 'Plymouth' it is, I see, and ask if they would be willing to part with it. But no; 'It was granny's;' and they would rather not sell it; so I turn my covetous eyes away, and clamber back to my seat beside the coachman.

Off we go again, along a fairly level road. The country is but thinly inhabited, and there are long intervals between the houses. By-and-by we begin to descend a hill, and enter a little sleepy town, where at first sight it seems to me that there are an inn and one or two shops, but no inhabitants. Only at first sight; for as we draw up before the *Hotel* (such is the proud boast I see over the doorway), and the driver descends and walks away to deposit a parcel or two and to gossip awhile with his acquaintances, we are delivered over to the tender mercies of the whole juvenile population, who surround the coach, climb on to the wheels, and make audible comments in very broad vernacular on our personal appearance and on our apparel. This time we move off slowly, for we have a very steep hill to encounter, and the tired horses plod somewhat wearily up it. As we reach the top, and they stop panting to rest, I see far away on the horizon a silver streak, and my heart gives a throb of delight; for I have in its intensest form all an islander's love for the ocean, and I know what that silver

streak is on which the sun shines so gaily. On rolls the coach merrily; the horses sniff the air, and seem to know that they are nearing home. Yes; here are the breezes we have come to look for. They peer familiarly under my hat; they blow my veil aside, and rudely kiss my cheeks; and their breath is fresh and salt, and whispers of new strength to the tired mind and body. On we hurry towards the setting sun, who is now mounting the chariot in which he drives away to the other side of the world. We have lost sight of the faint line of silver again, and our view is almost bounded by the dusky hedges. Presently we turn a corner abruptly, and there, apparently at our feet, lies the blue Atlantic, smiling bright welcoming smiles at us in the last rays of departing Sol. The active young breezes, which seem so glad to see us again, revive us with sweet aromatic odours, which they gather from the weed-strewn rocks. They evidently think we are wise people to have left those weak-minded little zephyrs coquetting with the flowers on the lawn at home, and to have followed them to their sporting place beside the restless ever-changing sea.

In another moment we stop, and all the tired travellers dismount and stretch their cramped limbs. I hear many around me inquiring for hotels or lodgings; but we are expected, and here is our landlady's husband come to meet us; so we hand over our luggage to him, and wend our way to Cliff Cottage. Here we find a smiling hostess, who tells us how glad she is to see us; and after we have removed some of the dust of our journey, we sit down to a well-spread tea-table, on which a noble Cornish

pasty holds the post of honour. We draw the table into the bow-window, which faces not directly seawards, but towards the bay, which has been a haven of safety to so many. But it is growing dark already, and we are weary with our long drive; so, soon we seek our fragrant chamber, in which the lavender scents struggle faintly to overpower the pungent aroma of the sea; and it is not long before we are lulled to sleep by the monotonous thunder of the waves on the rocks below.

In the morning we peep out at the colliers which ride safely in the little sunny bay, at the white houses which are dotted here and there over the cliffs, and at the little village itself lying snugly in the hollow. To right and left, sweeping far away, stand the great eternal sea-walls of sombre iron-stone crags, and the grassy downs rolling away inland, unbroken except by a lonely stone or a patch of golden gorse; and beneath us lie ancient gray boulders and stretches of yellow sand. Away on the hill opposite stands the little church, in whose quiet graveyard rests many a sailor who has found his death in the pitiless sea. Eleven graves mark the resting-place of the crew of one vessel, whose figure-head forms an appropriate headstone to the sad group.

The first thing to be done after breakfast is to bathe. It is not enough to be *by* the sea; we must be *in* it, if we wish to rob it of all the strength and vigour we can; so we start off over the downs to where a sudden depression in the cliff leads to the bathing beach. Here we find old Harriet the bathing-woman, browner than ever, who gives us a cordial welcome. The bathing

is primitive in the extreme. Harriet possesses two tents, which she pitches daily on a smooth spot of sand. For the use of one in which to disrobe you pay a ridiculously small sum, which also includes old Harriet's watchful 'surveillance' while you are in the water. As the number of tents is so limited and the bathers many, not a few avail themselves of the shelter of a friendly rock behind which to perform their toilet; but I am squeamish, and wait my turn for the tent. And oh! how reviving the plunge into the surf, which comes rolling in frothing and seething like champagne, and which knocks me over and plays at ball with me as if I were a cork! The cool waves curl and cling round me, and kiss my arms and hands lovingly with their wet lips. I let them break over my bowed head, and clasp them tenderly to my breast; but they slip away from me, and riot and tumble round me with joyous laughter, sprinkling eternal freshness from their bounteous hands. I sniff the keen salt air with delight, and let the foam toss me to and fro at its own sweet will, until Harriet, who watches me anxiously (she thinks me a somewhat rash young person, I know), orders me authoritatively to come in, saying I have had enough of it – for the first time. Very reluctantly I obey; but it would require a braver person than I am to contradict the withered old sea-nymph, and soon I emerge from the tent with streaming locks, feeling like a giant refreshed.

Thank goodness, here are no brass bands, no esplanade; a circulating library of such modest pretensions that it does not circulate, and shops in which it is next to impossible to spend

any money! At the chemist's we buy our groceries as well as our drugs, and he is the only wine-merchant the dear primitive little place can boast. But we get mutton which transcends Southdown; capital poultry and vegetables; butter such as I have never tasted before or since; rich cream, which you must call Cornish (not 'Devonshire'), to please the buxom farmer's wife who supplies it to you; and plenty of good fruit. And what do you want more, with such a sky above you, such a glorious sea at your feet, such a wall of ironstone crags behind you? Down on the beach we go, and dawdle away the hot summer afternoon. We stretch ourselves on the tawny sand, where great barriers of rock jut out on each side of us, beneath the shadow of a dreadful scarp'd cliff, to which no scrap of weed or herbage seems able to cling. We look up at it with a sense of awe. We think of the many ships, nearing home after a weary journey, which have been driven by the storm's pitiless whip straight into its terrible arms, there to meet a dread destruction. We think of the many struggling drowning wretches on whom it has gazed down with its stony eyes during all the ages it has stood there. The great billows in their winter's fury have beaten and lashed it until it is scarred all over; but still it gazes calmly down at them, as if defying their malicious rage. And yet, cruel as it is, how picturesque the colouring as it ranges from the intense purple black of the tide-line, through warm green and brown shadows, to the bright high lights far away above our heads.

Dark rock-pools lie behind us, lined with queer zoophytes and

delicate sea-anemones; beside us are the crimson lady's finger and the golden trefoil; the dainty scents of the sea-weed and the fresh wet sand are in the air, and before us is the smiling sea. Yes; he smiles at us to-day, though here – with a restless surf breaking eternally on the beach – he is never calm and rippling, as we see him in more southern climes.

Presently the sun sinks lower in the heavens; a breeze awakes, and the day turns cooler; so we go for a walk along the smooth firm sand, which the ebbing sea has left bare; through a wilderness of weird black cliffs, which, when the tide is high, range far out into the sea in castles and turrets and spires of jagged rock; an iron-bound coast indeed, hopeless to the shipwrecked mariner, save for our friendly little haven. Far away on the warm horizon hangs Lundy Island, like a shapely gray ghost; very faint by day, and at night telling us only by its revolving light where it is. We walk on to a gorge up which we can make our way to the top of the cliff, and homeward over the undulating downs and by the banks of golden broom. We pass through a little village, where the myrtles and fuchsias are all abloom in the cottage-gardens, and where the great yews brood silently over the old gray church. The door stands open, and we go in. What a dear old church, with its quaintly carved oaken pews, and tender-hued stained glass windows! Evidently the restoration-fiend has not reached here yet. Let us hope that he will stay away, along with the esplanade and the brass bands.

Sometimes we spend our afternoon or evening out at the end

of the breakwater, which forms one side of this little mariner's refuge. It connects a rock which stands right out at sea, with the shore, and occasionally in spring-tides is quite under water. One evening, while standing on the far end watching the glorious setting sun, we forget to look behind us, and turning suddenly, find the breakwater submerged. A man could still cross it perhaps, but a not over-strong woman might easily be carried over and drowned by the on-coming surf. I am not brave enough to face it; so we remain where we are, and enter into conversation with a stalwart Cornishman, who, with the instinct of a true gentleman, volunteers – as the lady seems nervous, and as he knows all about the tides, and exactly how high the sea will rise to-night – to remain with us until we are released by the ebbing waters. I rather resent the imputation of timidity, but am very glad he has imprisoned himself with us, as the night turns darker and darker, and the waves creep higher and higher, and wheel and foam and thunder around, as if in impotent rage at their inability to reach their prey.

Our Cornish hero reassures and consoles me, telling me that they cannot possibly reach to where we sit; and he whiles away the time with stories of wrecks which he has seen, and also of many hair-breadth escapes. He tells us how a ship driving straight on to the cruel rocks, was lifted by one giant wave over the breakwater and 'landed safely in the harbour beyond;' and I steal a glance behind me, and see with thankfulness that the waters are abating. In a little while longer, with the help of our pleasant

companion, I am able to get over dry-shod, and it is with a feeling of relief that I find myself once more on mainland.

From this breakwater too, on a stormy day we watch the life-boat go out for practice. How gallantly she breasts the breakers, which seize her and whirl her backwards, as if defying her to leave the shore. The seamen tell us that in the great storms which arise here during the winter she is perfectly useless. No life-boat could live in the seas which beat upon this heartless coast. Often the coast-guardsmen have to creep on hands and knees to their signal-station, as, standing erect, they cannot face the wind. But the rocket apparatus has saved many and many a life; and we also one night see that fiery messenger of life and hope speed away into the darkness over an imaginary wreck; and a fictitious shipwrecked mariner comes on shore in the frail-looking apparatus, which slides along the rope, swaying to and fro in the angry wind, looking like a frail thread, suspended as it is in mid-air over the vexed and tumbling waters below.

Sometimes we make excursions – to Tintagel Castle, where King Arthur dwelt with his knights; or away to wooded Clovelly, where Will Carey lived, and Amyas Leigh suffered, and Rose Salterne loved. Or to Stratton, in the neighbourhood of which a great battle was fought, in 1643, between the Parliamentary and Royalist troops, in which the former, under Waller, were defeated. A cannon found on the field marks the site of the combat; and in the High Street of the town, a slab let into the wall of an old house bears a legend telling how Sir Bevil Grenvil,

the victorious general, rested there after the fight.

But we like best to spend our days wandering over the sands and the ancient mussel-clad boulders, or straying across the breezy downs into the rich smiling corn-country beyond, where in the hedges the pale wild roses are transforming themselves into brilliant scarlet hips, and the sun is beginning to dye the blackberries a luscious purple. Then as the day begins to tire, and prepares to go in royal state to her rest, we love to sit out on the rocks listening to the weary surges which sing her a sweet monotonous requiem, and watching the scarlet flames in the west steeping the wet sands in a crimson stain as of blood. A great belt of iron-gray clouds encircles the horizon. Slowly the sun sinks behind it, gilding its edges with a rich luminous glow, which faintly shadows forth the glories the clouds veil from our eyes. Lower and lower he droops his head, heavier and still heavier with sleep, until one brilliant flaming eye is all that we can see. Then the lid drops over that too, and he is gone. Spell-bound, we sit on, listening to the sea's mournful dirges, while night swoops down over earth and ocean with dusky wings. We watch the moon, like a vain lady attiring herself magnificently in the east before she issues forth on her evening pilgrimage. She sends her handmaidens, the stars, before her, and they light up her pathway with their brilliant lamps. Then she comes forth robed in a filmy veil of pearly lace, and mounts silently into the sky, until she sits enthroned far above our heads. She kisses the white crests of the waves, and crowns them with silver, and peers with gentle

eyes at the solemn gigantic black cliffs, until they seem to lay aside something of their stony harshness in the light of those poetic orbs. The long oar-weeds waving in the water seem to beckon to her with inky fingers, and a few giddy young stars obey the summons, for some of them have fallen into the quiet rock-pools, and gaze up at us out of their calm depths. The phosphorus awakes and shoots out tongues of lambent flame, as if seeking to outvie the splendour of the queen of night. The waters glow as if they were on fire, and the great dark billows rush in and cast sparkling jewels at our feet.

How shall we resolve to leave all these delights? Wild ocean is so kind to those who love him and do him homage. He gives them back the strength of which the struggle and turmoil of the world have robbed them, and refreshes the weary spirit with his gracious sights and sounds. Nature is no step-mother, and for those who look at her most tenderly and love her best, she paints her fairest pictures and sings her sweetest songs.

But soon, too soon, the day comes when we must bid good-bye to the kindly folks we have grown to love so well; when we rest for the last time in our sea-odoured chamber; when we take our last walk over the downs, and loiter for the last time beneath the shadow of the time-worn cliffs. We leave the dear quiet little place, where we have for a time hidden from the busy world, and rested on our march; we leave it to the winds, which grow ruder and more boisterous day by day, and which soon will drive many a mariner to take refuge in its friendly haven. We shall find our

own little zephyrs at home quite grown up, and strong enough to give us many a blow during the winter.

But if there be any who, like me, would love to linger on its quiet beach, to make acquaintance with its giant wall of rocks, to drink its keen life-giving breezes, to watch its gorgeous sunsets, or dream beneath its silver stars – then, let them take coach at Launceston, and following the declining sun, drive westward away to – Budehaven.

THE LAST OF THE HADDONS

CHAPTER XXXIII. – 'A WOMAN'S ERRAND.'

After making two or three attempts to obtain a private interview with me, and finding that it was not to be, Philip did not stay very long, explaining that he had only come down for the papers, and had business in town for the remainder of the day. Somewhat more gravely and quietly than usual, he shook hands with Mrs Tipper and Lilian; and then, in a matter-of-course way, said: 'Come, Mary.'

I knew that I must not refuse. Murmuring an excuse for a moment, I ran up to my room and fell upon my knees, asking for the strength I so sorely needed for the coming trial; then joined him again, and we went out together. As we walked down the lane, I felt that he too was nerving himself; and presently he asked, in a low grave voice: 'What made you talk in the way you did just now, Mary?'

I was in a difficult position. If I attempted to justify myself, he would take alarm at once, and bind me and himself still closer to our bond. I could only treat it as a jest.

'We all talk nonsense sometimes, Philip.'

'I suppose so; but that is a kind of nonsense you have not taught

me to expect from you.'

'I am afraid you expect too much from me.'

'I certainly expect a great deal.'

Fortunately, I had something to say which would keep off love-speeches; and without any attempt to smooth the way, I said it.

'Philip, I want to ask you to give me ten pounds. I have spent all my money.'

Oddly enough, he did not know that I was entirely without money. I had thought it sufficient to tell him only that my dear mother's income died with her, not wishing to pain him with the knowledge that I had been so nearly destitute. I think he imagined that I had a small income of my own, and as I avoided the subject, did not like to appear curious about it. Even now, I believe that he did not suspect me to be entirely penniless, merely supposing that I had spent all that I had in hand. The five-and-twenty pounds had been expended to the last shilling in furbishing up my modest wardrobe, and for small incidental expenses in the way of my share towards the cottages, &c. I had shrunk from the idea of making him acquainted with the state of my finances; knowing how large-hearted he was, and how much would be forced upon me if he once guessed my need. Mrs Tipper was always protesting against the value and number of the offerings which found their way to the cottage, whilst Lilian and I were afraid of expressing a wish in his presence.

It was all very different now. It would cheer and comfort him

by-and-by to reflect that I was able to ask a favour of him just at this crisis. Had I not been so sorely pressed as I was, it would still have been as well to ask him.

'Ten pounds!' he ejaculated, stopping short in his walk to gaze at me in the greatest astonishment; asking himself, I think, if *this* was the explanation of the change which he had observed in me. 'I am utterly ashamed of my stupidity in allowing you to name such a thing; though I am sure you will do me the justice to attribute it solely to want of thought!'

'You see I do not mind asking you, Philip.'

'Mind indeed; of course you do not! I will run back at once and write a cheque.'

'No; please do not – not if you have as much as ten pounds with you. Just now, I want only that.'

'Ten pounds! Take what I have about me!' hastily taking out his purse, and putting it into my hand.

'But indeed I could not take all this!' I returned, seeing that the purse contained several notes as well as gold. 'I do not want any more than ten pounds.'

'Nonsense; don't make a fuss over such a trifle.'

But I separated two five-pound notes from the rest, and was very decided about his taking back the purse.

'Then I shall of course send a cheque as soon as I get back. By the way, Mary, I am making arrangements for the settlement of three hundred a year upon you; and of course all is yours, absolutely, in the event of' —

I broke down for a few moments, leaning against the stile where we were standing.

'Nay, Mary' – Then I think that he saw something more in my face than even the allusion to his death seemed to warrant. He went on with grave anxiety: 'I fear you are not well. Is your hand painful?'

Ah, my hand – how thankful I was for the suggestion! I slipped it under my cloak, dragged away the bandage, which again opened the wound.

'Bleeding afresh! You must really have it seen to, Mary.'

'O no; it is really a very trifling affair.' In my misery and despair, I almost laughed at the idea of being able to feel any physical pain.

He assisted me to tighten the bandage again. But I presently knew that it would not do to have his hands touching me and his face close to mine in this way; so, with a little brusque remark about his want of skill (ah Philip, had you known what it cost me!), I declared that my hand required no more fussing over. I had the parting to go through, and needed all my nerve. First, I must make sure of his not coming down to the cottage for two or three days.

'You said you expect to be very much engaged; and therefore I suppose we shall not see you again until the end of the week – Friday or Saturday, perhaps?'

This was Tuesday, and I wanted to make sure of two clear days.

'I will contrive to run down before that, if you wish it, Mary.'

'No; I too have much to do. Do not come before Friday.'

'Very well. You will tell me then which day you have decided upon, since you will not say now.'

I had waived the decision as to which day the wedding was to take place; and I did so again, merely repeating 'Friday.'

'All right; take care of yourself; and be sure to have the hand seen to.' He was stooping down to give me the customary kiss before crossing the stile; but I took his two hands in mine, and looked up into his face, I think as calmly and steadily as I had prayed for strength to do.

'God bless you, Philip.' Then I put my arms about his neck, lifted up my face to his, and kissed him. 'Good-bye, dear Philip.'

I saw an expression of surprise, a slight doubt and hesitation in his eyes. He had not found me so demonstrative as this before, and was for the moment puzzled to account for it. But I contrived to get up a smile, which I think satisfied him. Then with a last wrench, I turned away, hearing as though from another world his answering 'Good-bye' as he vaulted the stile.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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