



CHAPTER VI

THE COOMBES OF THE FAR WEST

'Far, far, from hence
The Adriatic breaks in a warm bay
Among the green Illyrian hills, and there
The sunshine in the happy glens is fair,
And by the sea and in the brakes
The grass is cool, the sea-side air
Buoyant and fresh, the mountain flowers
More virginal and sweet than ours.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

AND even such are those delightful glens, which cut the high table-land of the confines of Devon and Cornwall, and opening each through its gorge of down and rock, towards the boundless Western Ocean. Each is like the other, and each is like no other English scenery. Each has its upright walls, inland of rich oak-wood, nearer the sea of dark green furze, then of smooth turf, then of weird black cliffs which range out right and left far into the deep sea, in castles, spires, and wings of jagged ironstone. Each has its narrow strip of fertile meadow, its crystal trout stream winding across and across from one hill-foot to the other; its grey stone mill, with the water sparkling and humming round the dripping wheel; its dark rock pools above the tide-mark,

where the salmon-trout gather in from their Atlantic wanderings, after each autumn flood: its ridge of blown sand, bright with golden trefoil and crimson lady's fingers; its grey bank of polished pebbles, down which the stream rattles toward the sea below. Each has its black field of jagged shark's-tooth rock which paves the cove from side to side, streaked with here and there a pink line of shell sand, and laced with white foam from the eternal surge, stretching in parallel lines out to the westward, in strata set upright on edge, or tilted towards each other at strange angles by primeval earthquakes;—such is the 'Mouth'—as those coves are called; and such the jaw of teeth which they display, one rasp of which would grind abroad the timbers of the stoutest ship. To landward, all richness, softness, and peace; to seaward, a waste and howling wilderness of rock and roller, barren to the fisherman, and hopeless to the shipwrecked mariner.

In only one of these 'Mouths' is a landing for boats, made possible by a long sea-wall of rock, which protects it from the rollers of the Atlantic; and that mouth is Marsland, the abode of the White Witch, Lucy Passmore; whither, as Sir Richard Grenville rightly judged, the Jesuits were gone. But before the Jesuits came, two other persons were standing on that lonely beach, under the bright October moon, namely, Rose Salterne and the White Witch herself; for Rose, fevered with curiosity and superstition, and allured by the very wildness and possible danger of the spell, had kept her appointment; and, a few minutes before midnight, stood on the grey shingle beach with her counsellor.

'You be safe enough here 'o-night, miss. My old man is snoring sound abed, and there's no other soul ever sets foot here o' nights, except it be the mermaids now and then. Goodness, Father, where's our boat? It ought to be up here on the pebbles.'

Rose pointed to a strip of sand some forty yards nearer the sea, where the boat lay.

'Oh, the lazy old villain! he's been round the rocks after pollock this evening, and never taken the trouble to hale the

boat up. I'll trounce him for it when I get home. I only hope he's made her fast where she is, that's all! He's more plague to me than ever my money will be. Oh deary me!'

And the goodwife bustled down toward the boat, with Rose behind her.

'Iss, 'tis fast, sure enough: and the oars aboard too! Well, I never! Oh, the lazy thief, to leave they here to be stole! I'll just sit in the boat, dear, and watch mun, while you go down to the say; for you must be all alone to yourself, you know, or you'll see nothing. There's the looking-glass; now go, and dip your head three times, and mind you don't look to land or sea before you've said the words, and looked upon the glass. Now, be quick, it's just upon midnight.'

And she coiled herself up in the boat, while Rose went faltering down the strip of sand, some twenty yards farther, and there slipping off her clothes, stood shivering and trembling for a moment before she entered the sea.

She was between two walls of rock: that on her left hand, some twenty feet high, hid her in deepest shade; that on her right, though much lower, took the whole blaze of the midnight moon. Great festoons of live and purple seaweed hung from it, shading dark cracks and crevices, fit haunts for all the goblins of the sea. On her left hand, the peaks of the rock frowned down ghastly black; on her right hand, far aloft, the downs slept bright and cold.

The breeze had died away; not even a roller broke the perfect stillness of the cove. The gulls were all asleep upon the ledges. Over all was a true autumn silence; a silence which may be heard. She stood awed, and listened in hope of a sound which might tell her that any living thing beside herself existed.

There was a faint bleat, as of a new-born lamb, high above her head; she started and looked up. Then a wail from the cliffs, as of a child in pain, answered by another from the opposite rocks. They were but the passing snipe, and the otter calling to her brood; but to her they were mysterious, supernatural goblins, come to answer to her call.

Nevertheless, they only quickened her expectation ; and the witch had told her not to fear them. If she performed the rite duly, nothing would harm her : but she could hear the beating of her own heart, as she stepped, mirror in hand, into the cold water, waded hastily, as far as she dare, and then stopped aghast.

A ring of flame was round her waist ; every limb was bathed in lambent light ; all the multitudinous life of the autumn sea, stirred by her approach, had flashed suddenly into glory—

And around her the lamps of the sea nymphs,
Myriad fiery globes, swam heaving and panting, and rainbows,
Crimson and azure and emerald, were broken in star-showers,
 lighting
Far through the wine-dark depths of the crystal, the gardens of
 Nereus,
Coral and sea-fan and tangle, the blooms and the palms of the
 ocean.

She could see every shell which crawled on the white sand at her feet, every rock-fish which played in and out of the crannies, and stared at her with its broad bright eyes ; while the great palmate oarweeds which waved along the chasm, half-seen in the glimmering water, seemed to beckon her down with long brown hands to a grave amid their chilly bowers. She turned to flee : but she had gone too far now to retreat ; hastily dipping her head three times, she hurried out to the sea-marge, and looking through her dripping locks at the magic mirror, pronounced the incantation—

A maiden pure, here I stand,
Neither on sea, nor yet on land ;
Angels watch me on either hand.
If you be landsman, come down the strand ;
If you be sailor, come up the sand ;
If you be angel, come from the sky,
Look in my glass, and pass me by ;
Look in my glass, and go from the shore ;
Leave me, but love me for evermore.

The incantation was hardly finished; her eyes were straining into the mirror, where, as may be supposed, nothing appeared but the sparkle of the drops from her own tresses, when she heard rattling down the pebbles the hasty feet of men and horses.

She darted into a cavern of the high rock, and hastily dressed herself: the steps held on right to the boat. Peeping out, half-dead with terror, she saw there four men, two of whom had just leaped from their horses, and turning them adrift, began to help the other two in running the boat down.

Whereon, out of the stern sheets, arose, like an angry ghost, the portly figure of Lucy Passmore, and shrieked in shrillest treble—

‘Eh! ye villains, ye roogs, what do ye want staling poor folks’ boats by night like this?’

The whole party recoiled in terror, and one turned to run up the beach, shouting at the top of his voice, ‘’Tis a marmaiden—a marmaiden asleep in Willy Passmore’s boat!’

‘I wish it were any sich good luck,’ she could hear Will say; ‘’tis my wife, oh dear!’ and he cowered down, expecting the hearty cuff which he received duly, as the White Witch, leaping out of the boat, dared any man to touch it, and thundered to her husband to go home to bed.

The wily dame, as Rose well guessed, was keeping up this delay chiefly to gain time for her pupil: but she had also more solid reasons for making the fight as hard as possible; for she, as well as Rose, had already discerned in the ungainly figure of one of the party the same suspicious Welsh gentleman, on whose calling she had divined long ago; and she was so loyal a subject as to hold in extreme horror her husband’s meddling with such ‘Popish skulkers’ (as she called the whole party roundly to their face)—unless on consideration of a very handsome sum of money. In vain Parsons thundered, Campian entreated, Mr. Leigh’s groom swore, and her husband danced round in an agony of mingled fear and covetousness.

‘No,’ she cried, ‘as I am an honest woman and loyal!

This is why you left the boat down to the shoore, you old traitor, you, is it? To help off sich noxious trade as this out of the hands of her Majesty's quorum and rotulorum? Eh? Stand back, cowards! Will you strike a woman?

This last speech (as usual) was merely indicative of her intention to strike the men: for, getting out one of the oars, she swung it round and round fiercely, and at last caught Father Parsons such a crack across the shins, that he retreated with a howl.

'Lucy, Lucy!' shrieked her husband, in shrillest Devon falsetto, 'be you mazed? Be you mazed, lass? They promised me two gold nobles before I'd lend them the boot!'

'Tu?' shrieked the matron, with a tone of ineffable scorn. 'And do yu call yourself a man?'

'Tu nobles! tu nobles!' shrieked he again, hopping about at oar's length.

'Tu? And would you sell your soul under ten?'

'Oh, if that is it,' cried poor Campian, 'give her ten, give her ten, brother Pars—Morgans, I mean; and take care of your shins, "Offa Cerbero," you know—O virago! "Furens quid foemina possit!" Certainly she is some Lamia, some Gorgon, some——'

'Take that, for your Lamys and Gorgons to an honest woman!' and in a moment poor Campian's thin legs were cut from under him. while the virago, 'mounting on his trunk astride,' like that more famous one on Hudibras, cried, 'Ten nobles, or I'll kep you here till morning!' And the ten nobles were paid into her hand.

And now the boat, its dragon guardian being pacified, was run down to the sea, and close past the nook where poor little Rose was squeezing herself into the farthest and darkest corner, among wet seaweed and rough barnacles, holding her breath as they approached.

They passed her, and the boat's keel was already in the water; Lucy had followed them close, for reasons of her own, and perceiving close to the water's edge a dark cavern, cunningly surmised that it contained Rose, and planted her ample person right across its mouth, while she grumbled at

her husband, the strangers, and above all at Mr. Leigh's groom, to whom she prophesied pretty plainly Launceston gaol and the gallows; while the wretched serving-man, who would as soon have dared to leap off Welcombe Cliff, as to return railing for railing to the White Witch, in vain entreated her mercy, and tried, by all possible dodging, to keep one of the party between himself and her, lest her redoubted eye should 'overlook' him once more to his ruin.

But the night's adventures were not ended yet; for just as the boat was launched, a faint halloo was heard upon the beach, and a minute after, a horseman plunged down the pebbles, and along the sand, and pulling his horse up on its haunches close to the terrified group, dropped, rather than leaped, from the saddle.

The serving-man, though he dared not tackle a witch, knew well enough how to deal with a swordsman; and drawing, sprang upon the new-comer: and then recoiled—

'God forgive me, it's Mr. Eustace! Oh, dear sir, I took you for one of Sir Richard's men! Oh, sir, you're hurt!'

'A scratch, a scratch!' almost moaned Eustace. 'Help me into the boat, Jack. Gentlemen, I must with you.'

'Not with us, surely, my dear son, vagabonds upon the face of the earth?' said kind-hearted Campian.

'With you, for ever. All is over here. Whither God and the cause lead'—and he staggered toward the boat.

As he passed Rose, she saw his ghastly bleeding face, half bound up with a handkerchief, which could not conceal the convulsions of rage, shame, and despair, which twisted it from all its usual beauty. His eyes glared wildly round—and once, right into the cavern. They met hers, so full, and keen, and dreadful, that forgetting she was utterly invisible, the terrified girl was on the point of shrieking aloud.

'He has overlooked me!' said she, shuddering to herself, as she recollected his threat of yesterday.

'Who has wounded you?' asked Campian.

'My cousin—Amyas—and taken the letter!'

'The devil take him, then!' cried Parsons, stamping up and down upon the sand in fury.

‘Ay, curse him—you may! I dare not! He saved me—sent me here!’—and with a groan, he made an effort to enter the boat.

‘Oh, my dear young gentleman,’ cried Lucy Passmore, her woman’s heart bursting out at the sight of pain, ‘you must not goo forth with a grane wound like to that. Do ye let me just bind mun up—do ye now!’ and she advanced.

Eustace thrust her back.

‘No! better bear it. I deserve it—devils! I deserve it! On board, or we shall all be lost—William Cary is close behind me!’

And at that news the boat was thrust into the sea, faster than ever it went before, and only in time; for it was but just round the rocks, and out of sight, when the rattle or Cary’s horsehoofs was heard above.

‘That rascal of Mr. Leigh’s will catch it now, the Popish villain!’ said Lucy Passmore aloud. ‘You lie still there, dear life, and settle your sperrits; you’m so safe as ever was rabbit to burrow. I’ll see what happens, if I die for it!’ And so saying, she squeezed herself up through a cleft to a higher ledge, from whence she could see what passed in the valley.

‘There mun is! in the meadow, trying to catch the horses! There comes Mr. Cary! Goodness, Father, how a rid’th! he’s over wa’l already! Ron, Jack! ron then! A’ll get to the river! No, a waint! Goodness, Father! There’s Mr. Cary cotched mun! A’s down, a’s down!’

‘Is he dead?’ asked Rose, shuddering.

‘Iss, fegs, dead as nits! and Mr. Cary off his horse, standing overthwart mun! No, a baint! A’s up now. Suppose he was hit wi’ the flat. Whatever is Mr. Cary tu? Telling wi’ mun, a bit. Oh dear, dear, dear!’

‘Has he killed him?’ cried poor Rose.

‘No, fegs, no! kecking mun, kecking mun, so hard as ever was futeball! Goodness, Father, who did ever? If a haven’t kecked mun right into river, and got o.1 mun’s horse and rod away!’

And so saying, down she came again.

‘And now then, my dear life, us be better to goo hoom and get you sommat warm. You’m mortal cold, I rackon, by now. I was cruel fear’d for ye: but I kept mun off clever, didn’t I, now?’

‘I wish—I wish I had not seen Mr. Leigh’s face!’

‘Iss, dreadful, weren’t it, poor young soul; a sad night for his poor mother!’

‘Lucy, I can’t get his face out of my mind. I’m sure he overlooked me.’

‘Oh then! who ever heard the like o’ that? When young gentlemen do overlook young ladies, tain’t thikketheor aways, I knoo. Never you think on it.’

‘But I can’t help thinking of it,’ said Rose. ‘Stop. Shall we go home yet? Where’s that servant?’

‘Never mind, he waint see us, here under the hill. I’d much sooner to know where my old man was. I’ve a sort of a forecasting in my inwards, like, as I always has when aught’s gwain to happen, as though I shuldn’t zee mun again, like, I have, Miss. Well—he was a bedient old soul, after all, he was. Goodness, Father! and all this while us have forgot the very thing us come about! Who did you see?’

‘Only that face!’ said Rose, shuddering.

‘Not in the glass, maid? Say then, not in glass?’

‘Would to heaven it had been! Lucy, what if he were the man I was fated to——’

‘He? Why, he’s a praste, a Popish praste, that can’t marry if he would, poor wratch.’

‘He is none; and I have cause enough to know it!’ And, for want of a better confidante, Rose poured into the willing ears of her companion the whole story of yesterday’s meeting.

‘He’s a pretty wooer!’ said Lucy at last contemptuously. ‘Be a brave maid, then, be a brave maid, and never terrify yourself with his unlucky face. It’s because there was none here worthy of ye, that ye seed none in glass. Maybe he’s to be a foreigner, from over seas, and that’s why his sperrit was so long a coming. A duke, or a prince to the least, I’ll warrant, he’ll be, that carries off the Rose of Bideford.’

But in spite of all the good dame's flattery, Rose could not wipe that fierce face away from her eyeballs. She reached home safely, and crept to bed undiscovered; and when the next morning, as was to be expected, found her laid up with something very like a fever, from excitement, terror, and cold, the phantom grew stronger and stronger before her, and it required all her woman's tact and self-restraint to avoid betraying by her exclamations what had happened on that fantastic night. After a fortnight's weakness, however, she recovered and went back to Bideford: but ere she arrived there, Amyas was far across the seas on his way to Milford Haven, as shall be told in the ensuing chapters.

