

***JOHN COULSON
TREGARTHEN***



***WILD LIFE
AT THE LAND'S
END***

John Coulson Tregarthen

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PREFACE

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THE sports described have led me to some of the wildest and weirdest spots of West Cornwall. There are few tracts in England more rugged than the northern part of the peninsula that lies between the Land's End and St Ives. It is possible to travel across the moors from Crobben Hill to Chapel Cairn Brea without setting foot on cultivated ground. It is a boulder-strewn waste, void of trees, where the grey of the granite mingles in spring and autumn with the gold of the gorse that, with heather and bracken, clothes the undulating surface.

To the lover of nature the wild aspect of these breezy uplands is not without its charms; but the glory of the promontory is the ocean in which it is set. The great rampart of cliffs that holds back the Atlantic is broken here and there by beaches of white sand or minute shells, or by coves into which fall the trout-streams that rise in the granite hills above. Along the tangled valleys they water, many an interesting picture arrests the eye; but whether it be a holy well, an old mill, a grove, a rustic bridge or fishing-hamlet, all is in tender miniature, like the streams themselves or the modest hills where they bubble to the light.

In these valleys bird-life is rich. On a spit of sand you may chance on the footprints of an otter, whose harbour by day is some rocky holt along the cliffs; where the blackthorns are densest you may come across a badger's earth, and see the paths he has trodden in going to and fro.

This creature is very plentiful—as plentiful indeed as the hare is scarce. Generally he shares the same earth with the fox. On the north coast the seal shows no sign of decrease; thanks to its tireless vigilance, and the inaccessible caves it frequents.

These surviving mammals add to the attractions of a coast and countryside over which broods the silence of a mysterious past. The fascination which these creatures have for me dates from boyhood, when I once caught a glimpse of a badger stealing over a cairn in the grey of early dawn; and the Earthstopper, wandering with dog and lantern over the moors, presents a picture that has often appealed to me.

If the descriptions, however crude, serve to awaken old associations in some readers, or to excite the interest of those who have never visited the sunny “land of the three shores”; above all, if the sketch of the Earthstopper helps to preserve the memory of a master of his craft, my hopes will be fully realised.

ROSMORRAN, SIDCUP.

WILD LIFE AT THE LAND'S END

CHAPTER I

THE EARTHSTOPPER UNDER THE STARS

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IT was an hour after midnight when the Earthstopper of the Penwith Hunt left his cottage on the outskirts of Madron. He carried a lantern and a rough terrier followed at his heels. His track led, by lanes in the heather, over a cairn to the furze-clad downs overlooking the lake.

To the West, sombre hills rose against the jewelled vault where the stars in the depths of the frosty sky kept watch over the slumbering earth. Half-way over the downs, beneath the roots of a stunted pine, was a fox-earth. The old man knelt down and stopped it with faggots of furze. The light of the lantern lit up his strong and kindly face, and fell on the heap of sandy soil at the mouth of the earth.

Leaving the downs he turned towards Penhale, skirting the marshy ground in the trough of the hills, and climbing a steep rise made for a crag—playground of many litters—beneath which lay the next earth. Furze bushes screened the entrance and hung like a pall on the slope. The wind wuthered round the rocks and stirred the rushes in the fen below; but the Earthstopper gave no heed to these whisperings of the night, and paused but for an instant, as he bent over his work, to listen to the bark of a fox in the pitchy darkness beyond. His way now lay across a bleak waste. Rude monuments of a grey past dot its surface and a solitary cottage overlooks its desolation. No path led along

the line he was taking: cromlech and monolith in ghostly outline guided his steps.

The Earthstopper's progress was slow, for the surface was rough and the bogs treacherous, but yet he was getting nearer and nearer to Cairn Galver, which rose like a cliff from the moor, its crest silhouetted against the deep sapphire of the heavens.

"Good God, what's that?" said he, as a fiendish scream awoke the echoes of the rugged hills. "Don't sound like et, but et must a' come from that cottage over there. Iss sure, there's a light in the winder. Semmen to me 'tes uncommon like murder."

He had taken but a few stumbling steps along a track into which he had turned, ere the faint thud of hoofs fell on his ear. More and more distinct through the night came the sound, broken at times by a shout. A rocky hollow lay in front of him; down which rider and horse came at a furious pace, splashing the water as they dashed through the stream below. Breasting the rise at the same frantic speed they were over the brow and almost upon the Earthstopper before he was aware, and scarcely had he jumped aside when they galloped past him.

Merest glimpse though he got of the man, he recognised him, for his face was turned towards the light as it lay over the horse's neck. It was Jago the miner.

"Good Lor', what's the maanin' of et? Why don't eh stop the hoss?"

"Don't take me for a Jack-o-Lantern, s'pose?"

Some distance along the stony track the clatter of the hoofs ceased. The Earthstopper ran towards the spot.

“Where are ee, why don’t ee spaake?”

“Heere, An’rew, quick as you can.”

A minute later the Earthstopper, with one hand resting on the mane of the heaving horse, was looking up at the miner’s blanched face.

“What’s the matter wi’ ee, Jago? you looked skeared.”

“Steve es killed by a faal o’ ground. We brought un hoam an hour agone. Et wor moore nor Mawther could stand. Her rason’s clane gone.”

“Can I help ee?”

“No thank ee, An’rew.”

In breathless haste he spoke, and with a shout he was gone, his path picked out in sparks, as the good horse without bridle or rein covered the ground to the slumbering village.

Andrew stood peering through the night till the tiny fires died away and the beat of the hoofs struck faint as the footfall of a child.

This incident had unnerved the lonely Earthstopper.

More than once as he ascended the Galver he turned his head, though without staying his steps, to see that it was but the terrier that followed him. Panting from the hurried climb he rested on a boulder of the cairn and set the lantern down on the turf at his feet. The bitch nestled between her master and the flickering flame.

The stars shone in all their splendour, but it was the glow-worm light that crept through the gloom below which riveted the Earthstopper’s gaze.

“Well, Vennie me beety, there’s death and worse nor death in thet there cottage, and et’s shook me tar’ble, but

our night's work must be got through somehow or theer'll be no spoart to-day. With this wind a fox es moast sure to make for Zonnor Cliffs.

"Come, me dear, 'tes cold up heere, two mile waan't see us to cliff, and thee must furst run through the radgell on the Little Galver."

So, taking up the lantern, he went to the clitter of rocks and sent the bitch in. He could follow her by the patter of her feet as she ran through the cavernous hollows. On coming out at the far end of the rocks she awaited her master and, when he came up, took her place at his heels. Before leaving the high ground the Earthstopper stood listening for a few moments with his face towards Madron, whither Jago had ridden to summon the doctor. Hearing nothing, he made his way down the slope of the cairn to the rugged waste that stretches away to the Northern coast.

Their work was now done till they reached the cliffs. He seldom spoke to his dog in going from one earth to another, and to-night he had enough to think about.

Thirty years of wandering under the stars had matured the philosopher within him.

"Mine's a wisht kind of a life, mine es; but so long as health and strength do laast 'tes grand to traapse the moors and circumvent the varmints. I know evra inch o' thes eere country, evra patch o' fuzze, and evra pile o' rocks, and the stars be moore to me nor to moast folks. The eearth es beetiful, 'tes a pity to laave et, and when we do wheere do we go to? The ways o' the birds, the enstincts of evra wild crittur, the min'ral s I've blasted in the bal under the saa, the dimants up there, tell me plain enuf there's a Maister-

hand behind et all. All of ee say theree's a God, but why are ee quiate as the grave about the Better Land?"

The distant stars glittered in the silent vault, the wind was heedless as the moor it swept, and there was no answer in the far-off mystic murmur of the sea.

His sinewy strides soon brought him to the edge of the cliff. Two hundred feet below, the Atlantic lashed the rocks and raged in the caverns.

"Well, auld Ocean, I can hear ee ef I caan't see ee. Hope theest heaved up no dead thes tide. Lor', how the gools do scraame, to be sure! but 'tes moosic and 'tes company to thet scraach on the moor"; and he shuddered at the thought. Half trusting to the tussocks of coarse grass but with muscles all alert he clambered down the steep zigzag his own feet had traced, towards the adit of Wheal Stanny situate near the line of the foam. Shrinking from the seething waters below he crept along a narrow ledge and with scanty foothold reached the mouth of the adit, where he brushed the sweat and salt spray from his face.

Then on hands and knees, his finger-marks effacing the footprints of marauding fox, he entered the narrowing chasm and stopped the hole as best he could, with pieces of quartz.

Drippings from the moist roof—retreat of trembling fern—blurred the lantern's light and dimmed the sparkle of the crystals.

Leaving the cliffs he made for the uplands, for a few earths lay in the gullies that seamed them, and here and there a disused mine-work offered a safe retreat to fox and badger. Carefully the Earthstopper picked his way in the

murky hollows, the lantern's light awaking the frown of the granite and falling bright on the gold of the bracken that fringed the treacherous shaft. On the weird countryside above, the array of boulders loomed like phantoms in the sombre heather.

Threading in and out among them as he rose and sank with the undulating surface, the Earthstopper might have been a spy stealing from camp to camp of spectral hosts bivouacking on the dusky slopes.

On the furthest ridge he stood peering into the darkness that shrouded a moor over which he must pass. The level expanse might have seemed to invite him as smooth water invites a swimmer wearied by the waves, but superstitious fear held him there irresolute. For an eerie legend clung to the heart of the moor. Crofters would draw closely round their bright furze-fires as they listened to the harrowing tale. Little wonder that the old man paused in his forward path, for the last earth on his round was near a cairn that partly screened a haunted pool, and the moor compassed it round.

Seeing a light—it was a mere glimmer—in a lone homestead on the low ground between him and the cliff, he resolved to make his way down to it and await the dawn. With difficulty, for the hillside was covered with furze, he reached the byre where a candle burned on the ledge inside a small window. Peeping through a cob-webbed pane, he was able to recognise the farmhand at work inside, though the man's back was turned towards him.

Unfortunately for the labourer, the noise made by the turnip-chopper he was working drowned the sound of the approaching footsteps, and Andrew's voice at the half-open

door was the first intimation he had of the Earthstopper's presence.

"Mornin', 'Gellas."

"Lor', you ded maake me joomp, An'rew.... Wisht news about Steve Jago, edna?"

"Bra' an wisht. I do hear the poor auld woman's gone clane out of her mind. 'Tes foolish like, but her scraachin's thet unnarved me, I'm moast afeered to go and stop thet there eearth touchin' Deadman."

"Laave un be, noathin' eearthly waan't go anight un for thes day. A sinkin' fox would raither die in th' open nor maake for un. They do say when any man or woman o' thes heere parish, and 'tes a bra' big wan too, do die a vilent death like as 'ow" ...

Andrew's upraised palm had checked him.

"Then thee dost know all 'bout un?"

"Iss, iss, worse luck, I've heerd about the wisht auld thing."

"Look here, An'rew," said Tregellas under his breath as he drew close to him, "I don't knaw how fur may be fancy like, for I'd bin thinkin' 'bout un, but semmen to me I heerd a scraach from thet quarter about an hour agone and there—theere edn any housen to moore nor a mile" ...

Andrew had heard more than enough and, before Tregellas could add another word, he hurried through the open doorway, crossed the brook that ran through the mowhay, and was soon breasting the rugged hill leading to the Deadman.

On the edge of the moor he paused to listen. From out the distance came the cry of some bird: the sea called

faintly behind him. He looked towards the East. There was no sign of dawn.

“I’ll faace un, come what may. Be quiate, stop thet there whinin’ will ee.”

Then he trimmed the wick of the lantern, pulled his cap well on to his ears and, stepping from tuft to tuft of the silent heather, set out across the moor. He made straight for the cairn and with trembling hands stopped the earth; but though he heard the wind sighing in the reeds he feared to turn his eyes towards the tarn.

Hurrying from the eerie spot he set out on his way homewards, staying his steps a moment near a pool to look at the clean-cut footprints of a fox. Water was oozing into them, for the ground was very marshy. And so he came to the gaunt ruin of Ding Dong Mine which serves as a mark to the long-line fishermen of Mount’s Bay. Only the walls and end timbers of the lofty roof are left for the gales to whistle through; and in the grey dawn a kestrel perched on the gable was preening its feathers. From the mine-burrows hard by, the wayfarer overlooks headland and harbour, the surf round St Michael’s base and the waters of the sail-flecked bay.

Well might the Earthstopper, whose soul, like that of many a toiler, was far above his lowly work, dwell on the awakening beauty of land and sea below him.

The stars had paled their fires and crimson streaks in the throbbing east heralded the sun. Lighting first the hungry Manacles the gladdening orb rose over the serpentine cliffs of Lizard, bathing with its rays the sea and circling hills, and

touching with gold the battlements of the castle and the pinnacles of the westward churches.

“No wonder that furriners do bow their knees on desert sands and wusshup ee. Don’t know when I’ve seed ee lookin’ so beetiful missel.” The hawk, now hovering over its prey, disturbed his simple reverie. “Come, me dear”—but Vennie had slipped away—“ ’tes nigh breakfast time, and the cheeld will be ’spectin’ us.” So down the hill he hurried, the smoke from his own hearth cheering him and turning his thoughts to his peaceful home. He pictured the little room neat and clean, the breakfast-table with his chair drawn up to it, the sanded floor and the kettle on the brandis amidst the glowing embers. He forgot his fatigue; his steps were lightened as he thought of the child who looked after his few comforts and always welcomed his home-coming. At a turn in the track by some stormbent hawthorns he came suddenly upon her, come out to meet him. What a change comes over the old man’s face at the sight of her! How his eyes brighten as she runs to greet him!

“I knawed thee couldna be fur away, granfer, for Vennie’s been home these ten minits or moore.”

He looked behind him, but the bitch was gone.

“Ah, I can guess what’s drawed her theree.”

The girl took the lantern from his cramped hand and, side by side, her arm linked with his, they made their way towards the cottage. Two minutes later the clatter of hoofs behind them made her look round. “Someone’s comin’ down the Forest Cairn, granfer.”

“Iss, me dear, ’tes Dobbin’s step thee canst hear. Now run home along whilst I have a word with the doctor.”



THE EARTHSTOPPER ON TRENGWANTON CAIRN. [*Face page 12.*

The girl was barely a stone's throw away when the doctor cantered up to where the Earthstopper awaited him.

"Mornin', Andrew, another touch of rheumatism?"

"No, sir, never felt better in my life; no, tedn that: I wanted to ask ee about Mrs Jago."

"You've heard about it?"

The Earthstopper nodded assent.

"It's all over with the poor woman, Andrew."

... "May be 'tes best so, sir."

"Yes, best so," repeated the doctor, as he rode away.

Andrew overtook his grandchild near the cottage, and was following her through the open door, getting a glimpse of Vennie and her puppies on the badger skin before the turf fire, when the bells rang out a joyous peal as if to remind him of the festive day. He turned and listened: the grey tower rose above the patched roofs of the cottages, the notes struck clear through the crisp air.

A smile rose to the weather-beaten face, the lips moved, and cheerily came the words:

"Ring out your best, auld bells, for 'tes Maddern Feasten Monday."

CHAPTER II

THE FOX-HUNT

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BEYOND the memory of Dick Hal, who remembered the home-bringing of two wounded "Church-Town" men after Waterloo, the hounds had met on Feast Days at the Castle. The grounds with their stately terraces and relics of feudal dignity were thrown open for the meet, the protests of old Jenny at the park gate notwithstanding.

Long before the hour appointed a little crowd assembled outside the lodge. Fishermen in blue guernseys were there, miners in their workaday clothes, and a strong force of villagers. It is noteworthy what a motley crowd, from squire to ploughboy, from vigorous youth to crippled old age, will congregate to witness a day's fox-hunting.

And surely the sight of twenty couple of hounds drawing a patch of gorse in an open and wild country, the suspense that follows the first whimper, the find, the thrilling tally-ho, and the hurry and scurry of the field, is a spectacle as pleasant as it is exhilarating.

Looking out of an upper window of one of the little towers that flanked the gateway was old Jenny Trewheela, blind of one eye, whose sharp tongue was more effective than a fifteen-pounder in defence of her charge. Villagers averred that "her main suction ware vinegar," and a candid friend had told her so. As the hour approached the crowd began to press too close to the lodge to please her vigilant eye. "Werta shovin' to? Thee shussen wan of ee come inside the

gates till th' 'ounds 'a gone through. They be Sir Bevil's orders."

"Sober, mawther," said a keen-eyed poacher, "we be all afeard of ee, and thee dost know it; but hows'ever we doan't want none o' your winegar. Custna haand round a bit o' crowse and a drop o' somethin' to drink? 'T'es a dry East wind and bra' an cold."

"Sauce and imprence! I do know thee and the crooked ways of ee, though thee dost skulk behind a honest man," and with that she banged-to the window.

A few minutes before the village clock chimed the hour, the huntsman, hounds, and whippers-in passed through the gate and along the approach to the inner court, and drew up on the far side of the keep near the old culverin. By ones and twos, gentlemen from the country round, tenant farmers and crofters, rode up to the Castle.

This venerable building in the hundred of Penwith in the parish of Madron had been the seat of the Tresillians from the time of Henry the Second. The Castle is quaintly described in an old survey of Cornwall as "very ancient, strong and fayre and appurtenanced with the necessaries of wood, water, parkes, moors, with the devotion of a rich-furnished chapelle and charitie of almshouses."

The terrace is still haunted by the squire who fell on the memorable day when the place was held for the King against the Roundheads. The painting in the hall shows the assault on the outer wall, where a lurid glare lights up helm and pike at the narrow breach; for above battlement and turret, clearly outlined, leap tongues of fire from the beacon on the Cairn.

Dents in the granite walls still mark where the cannonballs struck the building; and it was at that time—I know there are some who dispute the date—that one of the quarterings of the family arms above the entrance was effaced.

Sir Bevil and Lady Tresillian, who were standing on the steps below, gave their guests a hearty welcome. Breakfast was laid in the wainscotted hall, bright with log fires.

Cornish worthies in their gold frames wink at the merry gathering round the table.

Sir Bevil, despite his grey hairs, looks young for his sixty years. Life's work is stamped on his high-bred features. He looks every inch a soldier. The tanned face and parched skin suggest frontier fighting: the scar on the brow confirms it.

Facing the mullioned window, on Sir Bevil's right is Squire Tremenheere of Lanover, the hardest rider of the hunt; next him is the Major of the C.C. battery, whose neighbour is the popular member for the Land's End Division; next him is a shipowner whose vessels are on every sea; the veteran with silvery hair and twinkling eyes has been purser of a tin-mine for nearly half a century; the man with the long black beard is the village doctor, and a kind friend to the poor; below him sit half a score farmers, and a good time they are having.

"This be a good drop o' zider," says the weather-beaten crofter who sits facing a portrait of Sir Richard Grenville. "Gos't home," said the eldest tenant on the estate, "Tedden no zider: but caal 'en what you like, 'tes a drop of the raal auld stingo."

The aristocratic old gentleman, tête-à-tête with Lady Elizabeth, is Sir Lopes Carminowe, who knows every gate, gap and fox-earth in Penwith. Need it be said that the little wizened-face man with laughing eyes, whose wit is as dry as the champagne, is the legal adviser of those whom he is tickling with forensic anecdotes? The parson is the recipient of much chaff and banter; but with eyes sparkling under his shaggy brows and in the best of humour he is cutting about him with his sharp-edged tongue to the discomfiture of his assailants. Says Sir Bevil, "The parson reminds me of the Cavalier in the picture who has brought down half a dozen of the enemy and is looking round for more."

Breakfast over, the gay company passed out of the Castle, mounted their restive horses and rode away to the covert by the lake. The Cairn that overlooked it was covered with pedestrians who, like spectators in a theatre, were waiting for the play to begin. Does any one doubt that the sporting instinct is strong in Englishmen? Observe that poor old man in clean smock-frock and white beaver. This is Dick Hal. He can't see very well, but he would like to hear the cry of the hounds once more. He began earthstopping the year Bonaparte died at St Helena, and this morning a little child has led him to the Cairn that he might perchance hear the music he loved so well. And it seemed probable, so rarely had the brake been found tenantless, that he and the rest, younger and noisier in their expectation of sport, would not be disappointed.

The cry of the huntsman in the bottoms at once hushes the hum of the crowd. Ears strain to catch the first whimper, and eager eyes search every yard of open ground to view