

Le Cap-Sizun par une voyageuse anglaise (extrait)

Fanny Bury Palliser — 1869

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On our way home we passed, on the left, at Kerscaven, two menhirs, one curiously furrowed and shaped like a half-opened fan. We had a pretty drive from Pont l'Abbé, with occasional views of the Bay of Audierne, extending from Penmarch to the Pointe du Raz. Midway the horse, going down a steep hill, fell, and we all found ourselves upon the road, but happily unhurt. We met numbers of peasants returning from the fair at Pontcroix; and our driver, a butcher by trade, coolly stopped the vehicle, to discourse with them on the price of stock, and to handle the sheep they had bought. Our drive was enlivened with occasional peeps of the Bay of Audierne till we reached the little port of that name, the view of which is very pretty. Audierne is approached by a bridge across the river or estuary. At its entrance is a lighthouse, and on the right a sandy bay, with bathing-machines in the season. 56. Pointe du Raz. The town consists of three streets of cut granite houses, with the name of the builder and the date of their construction inscribed over the door. Fishing is the occupation of the inhabitants, and the table-d'hôte at our comfortable, clean, little inn was plentifully supplied with magnificent john dorys, large red mullet, langoustes, and fish of every description. From Audierne we took a carriage to visit the Pointe du Raz, a promontory so famous for its rocks and wrecks. We went through a treeless country; near a pretty bay, on the left, is the chapel of Notre Dame-de-Bon-Voyage, destined chiefly for sailors, after which the country becomes more wild, barren, and cheerless. We passed over a bridge which no Breton would dare to cross at night, for fear of being flung by the spirits into the river. According to their belief, a hare appears on the bridge, and terrifies the horses, who throw their rider, and the traveller is dragged by the phantom into the muddy river, where he is kept till morning's dawn, when he is allowed to pursue his way, exhausted with cold, and half dead with fright. They are very superstitious here, as in all Cornouaille. A writer says, "every nation of the earth has its superstitions and absurdities, but Brittany has those of all other nations united." An old woman in a village hard by, said our driver, has never been seen inside the walls of a church; the people say she has sold herself to the evil one, and no one dares go near or speak to her. On the left is the pretty steeple of the church of Plogoff, situated on an eminence, and dedicated to Saint Collédoc, a Welsh bishop of the sixth century, contemporary of King Arthur, and associated with many of the doings of Queen Guinevre and the knights of the Round Table. Lescoff is the last village we passed through before—after driving over a barren plain—we arrived at the lighthouse, built thirty years back at the Pointe. We walked thence to the Pointe, a gigantic and magnificent mass of rocks, eighty feet above the level of the sea. We met with a good-natured woman, who led the young people over the rocks to look down the "Enfer de Plogoff." They had a slippery scramble to reach the hole, a kind of tunnel through which the sea rushes with great violence, so much more terrible than that of Penmarch, that the noise has been compared to the distant roaring of some thousands of wild beasts issuing from the depths of a forest.

In the mean time, we remained seated on the bank enjoying the view. On the south lay the Bay of Audierne, extending in the form of a crescent, the promontories of Penmarch and Raz forming the extreme points. The currents, and the numerous rocks of the bay, render it a dangerous coast, formerly peopled by barbarous wreckers, who despoiled the shipwrecked mariners as our Cornish men of old. Opposite the Raz, about seven miles distant, is the Island of Sein, and to the right, the Baie des Trépassés. The island of Sein was anciently the seat of an oracle, interpreted by nine Druidesses, who were versed in every art and science. Moreover, they appear to have been accomplished needlewomen; for a Breton chronicler, giving an account of the coronation of an early king (Erech) at Nantes, describes his mantle as embroidered by these priestesses with figures of Arithmetic, Astronomy, and Music. Their skill in divination caused them to be associated with the fairies; and Morgan— i.e. "born of the sea"—one of these priestesses, who lived in the first century of the Christian era, was famous among the British fairies. " Avec succès cultivait la magie, Morgan de plus, était assez jolie. " Chateaubriand celebrates Velleda, the last of the Druidesses of Sein, tall in stature, her eyes blue, with long fair floating hair, dressed in a short black tunic, without sleeves, bearing a golden sickle suspended from a brazen girdle, and crowned with a branch of oak. Here King Arthur was brought by Merlin to recover of his wounds. The inhabitants of the island were celebrated for their ferocity as wreckers. The passage between the island and the point or Bec du Raz—"qu'aucun n'a passé sans mal ou sans crainte"—is very dangerous, owing to the number of rocks and the violence of the currents; hence the well-known prayer of the Breton sailor, "Mon Dieu, secourez-moi pour traverser le Raz, car mon navire est petit et la mer est grande." Having no wish to run the risk of being detained at the island by rough weather, we did not attempt the passage. The Baie des Trépassés, over which we looked on the right, is so called from the Celtic legend that the Druids embarked in this bay after their death, to be buried in the island of Sein:— " Autrefois, un esprit venait, d'une voix forte; Appeler chaque nuit un pêcheur sur sa porte; Arrivé dans la baie, on trouvait un bateau Si lourd et si chargé de morts qu'il faisait eau, Et pourtant il fallait, malgré vent et marée, Les mener jusqu'à Sein, jusqu'à l'île sacrée. " Brizeux . The bay also derives its name from the numerous shipwrecks that have taken place on its rocks, and from the number of corpses that have been floated there by the currents from ships foundered in the gulf comprised between the entrance of Brest, the Ouëssant Islands, and Sein. The whole extent of the coast of Brittany is one long wall of rocks, placed as it were to protect it from the inroads of the sea and from foreign invasion. Heaped one over the other, they resemble the bastions of a citadel, the advanced rocks extending out to sea, jutting up in every direction in endless reefs. Or its line of coast may be compared to the jagged teeth of a comb, with a second line of defence in the rocks further out to sea. On the desolate shore of the Baie des Trépassés is a piece of water, the étang de Laoual, site of the city of Is—submerged by Divine vengeance, according to popular tradition, in the fifth century—a place of great commerce, arts, riches, and also of luxury. Gradlon, or Grallo, the king, alone attempted to stem the torrent. Built in the vast basin which now forms the Bay of Douarnenez, it was protected from the ocean by a strong dyke, the sluices only admitting sufficient water to supply the town. King Gradlon kept the silver key (which opened, at the same time, the great sluice and the city gates) suspended round his neck. His palace was of marble, cedar, and gold; in the midst of a brilliant Court sat

enthroned his daughter Dahut, a princess who "had made a crown of her vices, and had taken for her pages the seven capital sins." Taking advantage of the sleep of her father, Dahut one night stole the silver key, and instead of opening the city gate, by mistake unlocked the sluices. The King was awakened by St. Guenolé, who commanded him to flee, as the torrent was reaching the palace. He mounted his horse, taking his worthless daughter behind him. The torrent was gaining upon him fast, when a voice from behind called out, "Throw the demon thou carriest into the sea, if thou dost not desire to perish." Dahut felt her strength failing her; the hands that convulsively grasped her father's waist relaxed their hold; she rolled into the water, disappeared, and the torrent immediately stopped its course. The King reached Quimper safe and sound, and that town became afterwards the capital of Cornouaille. So runs the legend. That a great city once existed in the Bay of Douarnenez admits of no doubt. Besides the religious chronicles of the country, which have preserved the memory of its existence, in the sixteenth century, remains of old edifices were standing at the entrance of the bay, old paved roads have been traced, and walls found under water near the Pointe du Raz. The tradition of a town thus swallowed up is common among the Celtic race. In Wales, the site of the submerged city is in Cardigan Bay; in Ireland, in Lough Neagh:— "On Lough Neagh's banks, where the fisherman strays, At the hour of eve's declining, He sees the round towers of other days Beneath the waters shining. " — Moore . One of our party went out fishing to the Pointe, and returned well laden with his spoils. 57. Front of the Church, Pontcroix. The road from Audierne to Douarnenez passes by Pontcroix, a little town on the same river (Goazien) as Audierne, along which the road runs—a charming drive. It has a magnificent Romanesque church of the twelfth (probably of the fifteenth) century, with a remarkable porch, richly embroidered in quatrefoils and trefoils. A tower in the centre, with octagonal spire is second to none in Cornouaille, except that of Quimper. The arches of the nave are horseshoe, the transepts very narrow. Under the altar of the Lady Chapel is a "Cène," half the size of nature, sculptured in ivory and marble, of marvellous workmanship. 58. Wheel of Sacring Bells, Notre Dame de-Comfort, near