

Summoned by Bells

Sir John Betjeman

(Extract relating to St Ervan)

Dear lanes of Cornwall! With a one-inch map,
A bicycle and well-worn “Little Guide”,
Those were the years I used to ride for miles
To far-off churches. One of them that year
So worked on me that, if my life was changed,
I owe it to St. Ervan and his priest
In their small hollow deep in sycamores.
The time was tea-time, calm free-wheeling
time,
When from slashed tree-tops in thecombe
below
I heard a bell-note floating to the sun;
It gave significance to lichen stone
And large red admirals with outspread wings
Basking on buddleia. So, casting down
In the cool shade of interlacing boughs,
I found St. Ervan’s partly ruined church.
Its bearded Rector, holding in one hand
A gong-stick, in the other hand a book,
Struck, while he read, a heavy-sounding bell,
Hung from an elm bough by the churchyard
gate.
“Better come in. It’s time for Evensong.”

There wasn’t much to see, there wasn’t much
The “Little Guide” could say about the church.
Holy and small and heavily restored,
It held me for the length of Evensong,
Said rapidly among discoloured walls,
Impatient of my diffident response.
“Better come in and have a cup of tea.”
The Rectory was large, uncarpeted;
Books and oil-lamps and papers were about;
The study’s pale green walls were mapped with
damp;
The pitch-pine doors and window-frames were
cracked;
Loose noisy tiles along the passages
Led to a waste of barely furnished rooms:
Clearly the Rector lived here all alone.

He talked of poetry and Cornish saints;
He kept an apiary and a cow;
He asked me which church service I liked best
I told him Evensong... “And I suppose
You think religion’s mostly singing hymns
And feeling warm and comfortable inside?”
And he was right: most certainly I did.
“Borrow this book and come to tea again.”
With Arthur Machen’s “Secret Glory” stuffed
Into my blazer pocket, up the hill
On to St. Merryn, down to Padstow Quay
In time for the last ferry back to Rock,
I bicycled — and found Trebetherick
A worldly contrast with my afternoon.

I would not care to read that book again.
It so exactly mingled with the mood
Of those impressionable years, that now
I might be disillusioned. There were laughs
At public schools, at chapel services,
At masters who were still ‘big boys at heart’ —
While all the time the author’s hero knew
A Secret Glory in the hills of Wales:
Caverns of light revealed the Holy Grail
Exhaling gold upon the mountain-tops;
At “Holy! Holy! Holy!” in the Mass
King Brychan’s sainted children crowded round,
And past and present were enwrapped in one.

In quest of mystical experience
I knelt in darkness at St. Enodoc;
I visited our local Holy Well,
Whereto the native Cornish still resort
For cures for whooping-cough, and drop bent
pins
Into its peaty water . . . Not a sign:
No mystical experience was vouchsafed:
The maidenhair just trembled in the wind
And everything looked as it always looked . . .
But somewhere, somewhere underneath the
dunes,
Somewhere among the cairns or in the caves
The Celtic saints would come to me, the ledge
Of time we walk on, like a thin cliff-path
High in the mist, would show the precipice.