

## 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 lichenized 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.