

A CASTLE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

The Strangest Corner of England

BY ROBERT SHACKLETON

IT is fantastic, impossible England, romantic, preposterous England. Also, it is practically an unknown England. Rarely has an American come here except when wrecked. To most of the English it is equally unknown. Add to this that it is tropical England, and even then the enumeration of its peculiarities is not complete. For, most of all, it is a place of contradictions and contrasts, of incongruities.

And it is an unscen England. Come to where the sentinel rocks of Land's End watch over the sea, and it is still undiscovered, for it is a region thirty miles beyond: a score of little islands, only five of them inhabited, and innumerable reefs and rocks.

It is the Scilly Isles, and they are all that is left of vanished Lyonesse. And the people set here in the midst of the sea, within barriers of bleakness, within these naked shores of windy desolation,

are not principally followers of the sea. They are tillers of the soil! In the Scillys it is the unexpected that one must always come to expect.

The government may be termed an absolute despotism. So the people consider it, and they like it, and they love to refer to their ruler as "the King." And this beneficent despot, this lord of the isles, this ruler who saith unto one man Come, and he cometh, and to another, Do this, and he doeth it, is plain Mr. Smith! It is the glorification, the apotheosis of Smith. In a land where rank is worshipped, no marquis or duke wields such unqualified power as does this simple "Mister."

And, marvels on marvel's head accumulating, he does not even own the islands. He is but lessee, from the English government, and while lessee is looked upon as their lord proprietor.

He pays all the taxes, and thereby his

people are inordinately pleased. True, they pay "rates" for roads and schools, but they draw a distinction, perhaps not always discernible by strangers, and for that very reason the more delightful, between these payments and taxes.

"What power does Mr. Smith possess?" I asked an islander.

"Oh, he has all power," was the reply.

"But what can he do to you?"

"We'd better be good, for he can do *anything* to us," came, in awed sincerity.

As a matter of fact, he can punish, as chief of the justices of the peace, to the limit of a few months' imprisonment, and if there is any right of appeal from his decisions the islanders have neglected to learn it.

But that is only a small part of his power. He wields absolute control over rents, leases, steamer-landings, all the pleasures and all the business of the islands. He is not reticent in expressing his will, and everywhere his will is supreme.

The people bitterly resent being called "islanders"—as if this were not pre-eminently what they are! "Scillonians" is their name. Yet they equally resent all reference to their islands as "rocks."

In the old days the Scillonians were not a farmer folk. They were, in order of importance, wreckers, smugglers, sailors, pilots, fishermen. Well may wrecking be considered the principal industry of the past, for the wrecks of the Scillys are numbered in thousands.

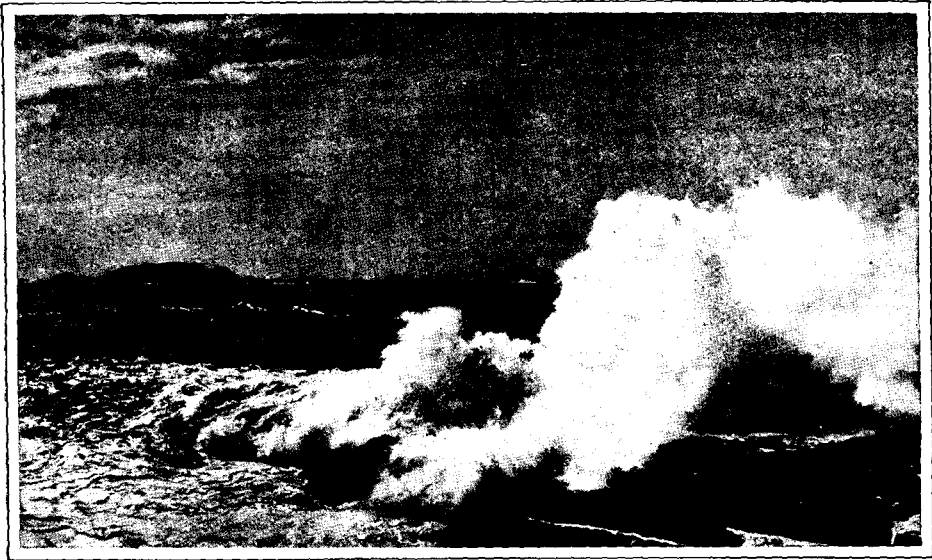
Steam changed the Scillys. Wrecks grew fewer. Steam fishing-boats competed too successfully with sails and oars. Few ships sought refuge in the roadstead. Poverty impended. And then, three-quarters of a century ago, came the advent of the first Mr. Smith, Augustus Smith, an uncle of the present lessee.

Augustus Smith was a wise, farseeing, arbitrary man; a beneficent tyrant. He instituted an iron rule, and exerted vigorous oversight. He ordained compulsory education forty years before it became the law of England. And education was needed. It was only a century ago, so old men say, that there was no book upon the islands except a Bible and a *Doctor Faustus*. The people decided to secure a new library—and sent to Penzance for another copy of *Faustus*.

Augustus Smith saw that here and there in sheltered nooks the primrose and the violet grew wild and the wall-flower tossed its perfume to the winds, while snow fell swirling in London streets. But to him it was more than a phenomenon: it was an inspiration. He instituted the growing of early flowers for the London market. He showed his amazed people how to make the almost desert islands to blossom with narcissus and jonquil and daffodil and lily.



CASTLE GATE OF THE TIME OF ELIZABETH



HOW THE SURF COMES IN AT SCILLY

He divided the arable ground into little holdings, and taught the protective virtues of hedges and stone walls. And he decreed that no family should keep more than one son at home, to make his living from the tiny patch, nor more than one daughter to assist with the flowers and with the household tasks. Surplus sons and daughters were to go to sea, or the army, or the mainland, or find definite employment, or marry and secure little holdings of their own. Many were banished; but the grief and rage of the islanders gradually turned to devoted love. Now, from early January and throughout February and March, the shipments of flowers are estimated only in tons.

And Despot Smith did more. He planted trees and plants where there was but wind-swept heath. And what trees and what plants! Giant palms of the tropics; rhododendrons twenty feet in height; camellias flowering gloriously. There are bamboo and aloe and magnolia. Within his private estate, on Tresco, where he has wrought all this, are the crumbling arches of an ancient abbey, now tropically embowered where anciently monks prayed in an infinite bleakness.

The present Mr. Smith carries out the ideas of his predecessor and wields a

similar power. He does nothing illegal, and all is for his people's good, but in practice it is an anomaly. And as if with intent to accentuate the glorification of the family name, his forbears doubled his cognomen, he being not only a Smith, but a Smith-Dorrien-Smith!

For centuries, islands predominantly of wreckers and smugglers, they are now islands of the law-abiding. Schools and lighthouses, churches and wireless telegraphy have come, but wrecks have decreased, and crime is rare. Yet there are no lawyers, the people having inherited deep-grained dislike of all legal procedure. The four subjustices, seldom disturbed by official duty, foregather every Saturday evening for friendly confabulation. The police force of the islands is never overworked.

That force consists, to be precise, of part of one entire man. The sole policeman is contrived more than a double debt to pay, for by day he winds the town clock, inspects sundry school and sanitary matters, sweeps the council-chamber, busies himself diversitively, and not until nightfall does he assume the simple insignia of his rank. "A man must live," he says, with a futile attempt to veil his pride as cap is assumed and baton grasped. Proudly he



MAY-DAY IN THE CAPITAL

parades; and when, once a year or so, he goes to the mainland with a prisoner requiring more than the simple restraint of the Scilly lock-up, it is with apprehension, for he realizes that he leaves an archipelago unprotected.

There is a town-crier, too. He labors with hands more than voice, for it is seldom that there is forthcoming the needful shilling. As with the policeman, there is no pomp or panoply. A cap, a bell (diverting juxtaposition), and he is translated indeed. The thatched roof of his cottage caught fire recently, and, while neighbors worked to save it, his own distress was deep, perplexed as he was as to whether to join the fire-fighters or for once go through the town shouting news that was worth while.

Seen from the ocean-liners the Scillys are but naked shore and wind-swept reef. But the liners are of vast interest to the islanders! They are far nearer to Scillonian life than is the nearest land. These sons of the sea not only differentiate line from line, but often ship from ship, and have come to know pecu-

liarities of course steered by different captains—uncanny, this silent watch by these people who have the blood of countless generations of wreckers in their veins.

A taciturn, reticent folk; yet, coming to know them, you will be told that but a few months ago one of the islanders saw, looming out of the close-clinging mist, a giant liner bearing straight upon his little patch of flowers. There was no opportunity for warning—but, by some miracle of swift reversing, the great steamer quivered and stopped, then slowly vanished into the deep, shivering grayness.

They point out, gravely and quietly, these folk, where they expect the next great wreck to be. Not by that flower garden; that was of the aberrant. Nor on the rocks beside that most exposed of all the lighthouses of the world, the Bishop; although there, years ago, a steamer lost more than three hundred of its passengers. No, it is upon a certain obscure reef that the islanders expect some twentieth-century racer to rush.

The talk one evening turned to tales of that great Bishop wreck. "The islands were covered with American money," croaked an old man who had dodderingly listened. My silence, thinking of what this vivid indirectness implied, seemed to them to imply criticism. "Why should we not have what we find?" said one, defensively. "It would only go to the government!"

As far back as the time of Henry the First there were royal grants of "the islands and their wrecks," and frequent was the phrase in centuries following. With royal encouragement, why should they not be wreckers!

One Sunday, long ago, service was in progress when there came the cry of "Wreck!" The men started from their seats. In a moment there would have been a stampede. But they cowered back as the minister sternly thundered a warning. He strode to the door. Again his voice arose. "Let's all start fair!" he shouted, throwing off impeding cassock as he ran, while his congregation labored at his heels.

Most curious of all wrecks was that of a bark, with a cargo of beads, that went ashore two hundred years ago. So generous has been the ocean with this treasure, that throughout these two centuries

it has intermittently been tossing beads ashore, yet so frugally that the supply is not yet exhausted, for in a few minutes' search I found that some had been thrown there since the last search of the islanders.

Dire tales cling grimly to these reefs: of false lights, of lights extinguished at most bitter need, of shipwrecked men fighting off apparent rescuers and deeming the sea the less ferocious foe.

Upon St. Agnes there is a frightful cove which bears St. Warna's name; rock-hemmed, with merciless rock covering what ought to be a beach, and with nothing to relieve the rocky savagery. At the edge of the rocky shore is a well; and beside that well, in ancient days, islanders gathered, once a year, to pray to St. Warna to send them plethora of wrecks. They prayed for wrecks, those men, as the inhabitants of happier regions pray for harvests. They were sincere; and they deemed that the answers justified their faith. St. Warna, St. Mary, St. Agnes, St. Martin—such are names which the old-time devoutness applied.

A ship was sailing home from the Indies. The night was tempestuous and fog crept over the sea. The captain feared the Scilllys. "Is there any one



MIDWINTER FLOWER-GROWING

who knows the rocks?" said he. A Scillonian responded and was given the helm—and suddenly there came a crash. "You said you knew the Scillys!" cried the captain, furious and aghast. "Yes; and this is one of them."

And the tale of Sir Cloudesley Shovel is still told; of how, with a gallant fleet, he was sailing home from the Mediterranean and, nearing these reefs, was warned by a Scillonian of his crew. The man became impetuous when Shovel paid no heed, and so was instantly hanged for mutiny. It was evil and foggy weather, typically Scillonian. The admiral arrogantly held his course; his ships were dashed to pieces; and he and two thousand of his men were drowned.

The admiral's body was tossed ashore, high in a grassy cove; but never afterwards did grass grow on the spot where the body lay. A punishment, this—such is the naïve view-point of the true Scillonian—not for losing two thousand lives but for cruelty to one of the islanders.

Alas, poor admiral! As if all this were not enough, he is commemorated in Westminster Abbey with so absurd a

monument as moved Horace Walpole to the jibe that it made men of taste dread such honors.

Behind the ragged-tempered sea, the wrinkled rocks, are long slopes covered thick with yellow gorse, with furze, with sturdy grass, with tossing fern. Rocks are gay with fungi and lichens in innumerable hues, and seaweed clings in endless variety. There are puffins and shags and terns, there are the kingfisher and the giant cormorant. And gulls love to whiten the rocks like snow.

Inside the roadstead, where great war-ships have lain at anchor, are wimpling waves and stretches of white-gleaming sand; yet even this roadstead is often rough for small craft, and the people watch anxiously when the doctor is rowed over by twelve sturdy volunteers. As to dentists, there is none; although the teeth of the islanders give way early, owing, so they believe, to the preserved rain-water which they perforce drink.

Less than two hundred feet is the greatest height upon the islands, and yet from many a headland there is a far-reaching and delectable view.



MODERN TROPICAL GROWTH ON WIND-BLOWN SCILLY



A STREET IN THE CAPITAL

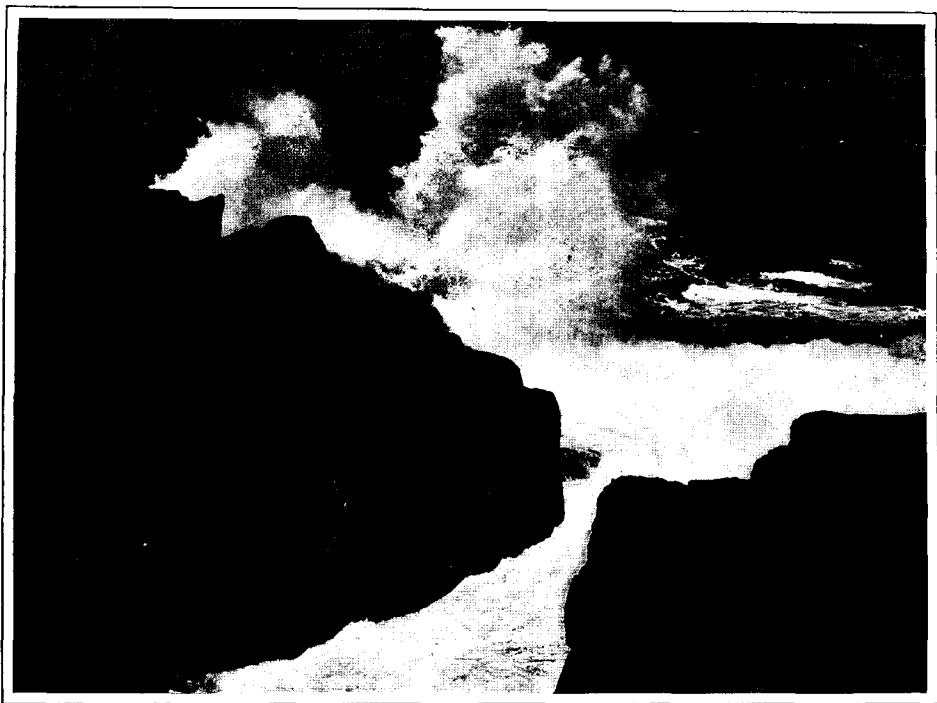
Right brave blood there is in these island folk. Charles, afterward king, found for six long weeks a refuge here from the Parliamentarians. Later, the islanders gallantly but vainly fought for royalty against a powerful fleet, and a stone fort of that period frowns over one of the channels. Another stone fort was built in the time of Elizabeth.

It was natural that this fragment of Lyonesse should stand for the king. Lyonesse! the land that stretched out from Cornwall, and of which the Scillys were the projecting headlands or islands at its very end. Within the land that sank in the turbulent sea were a hundred and forty parishes, so the old chroniclers aver, and one tells of seeing ruins far beneath the water. Seen with the eye of faith? Perhaps. And what a touch! Yet when mists of the mighty Atlantic close between Land's End and Scilly, even the meagre imagination may be touched with venturesome insight, and even the dullest ear may hear

the vague echoing of ancient parish bells. Curious, too, that from time immemorial the island folk have called the intervening sea the "Lioness," and that tradition has insistently pointed out the reef of Seven Stones as the site of the principal city of the kingdom. Where there is so much smoke of legend shall there not be some fire of truth?

It is as unscientific as it is unjust to demand that an ancient legend shall absolutely prove itself. Justice and science alike demand that a legend of a respectable appearance should be considered innocent unless it be proved guilty, and this more especially when it has so charming a savor of the saltiness of time.

From Lyonesse King Arthur came; it was across the dales of Lyonesse that his followers fled when he was slain; and Lyonesse is inseparably connected with the story of Tristram and Ysolte, for Tristram was the son of its king. It is more logical to believe in the essential existence of a Lyonesse than to doubt.



SCILLY CLIFFS IN A STORM

Geology notes the similarity between the granite of Cornwall and that of the Scilly rocks; and there are so many Druidical remains, so many rude stone crosses, as to point out the unlikeliness of these islands always having been so far from the mainland as now. And for some centuries historical records are scanty. There are also ruins of ancient castles and churches, but of these few vestiges remain. Fishermen and wreckers, finding blocks of stone ready to their hands, built these seats of the mighty into huddled huts.

One feels the fascination of what may have happened many and many a year ago in this kingdom by the sea. Walking at random, I came to a pathway on the top of a wall. Below me lay an ancient moat, long since dry. The pathway led me to a flight of stone steps, at the foot of which, in solid rock, were ancient grooves for the oaken doors and chain of a portcullis. An underground passage led from this sally-port, and opened upon a charming little garden, where the ladies of the vanished castle

whiled away the hours till their knights returned. In a shadowed corner is an old stone bench, narcissus and jonquil grow rich and lush, and the enclosing wall dips straight down to the rocks and the restless sea.

Tennyson wrote feelingly of Lyonesse; of its "trackless realms," of its gleus, all "grey boulder and black tarn." And he visited Lyonesse. But local tradition retains only the memory of a bitter dispute with his landlady as to the cost of some broken china. It is a pleasanter literary memory that fixes the home of Besant's Armored.

There is no middle class in Scilly, and the good policy of this is evident from the standpoint of an absolute ruler. To compensate for the littleness of public power, there are many to wield it. Almost every man is councillor or justice, alderman or health officer, or has to do with rates, schools, police, or other department Lilliputian. And it keeps the people contented and proud.

With such a subdivision of honors one should expect the pluralist to be un-



A GROUP OF FIGURE-HEADS FROM WRECKS

known. But herein lies another of the delightful contradictions. Not only does the policeman perform duties multifarious, but there is one man who is clerk to the guardians of the poor, clerk to the magistrates, clerk to the council, registrar of births, marriages, and deaths, clerk to the education committee, and officer to the coroner. Yet time often hangs heavy on his hands.

For centuries there has been a curious cosmopolitanism in this place of accessible seclusion. In the blood of the islanders there are strains from every maritime nation. The reefs took their toll of the Armada. Wounded British were landed here from the battle of Bunker's Hill. And the wrecked and the refugee often remained.

But the cosmopolitanism of the living is as nothing to that of those who came so far to drown. They that went down into the sea in wrecks were of every nationality, of every variety of wealth and power, fame and obscurity.

Some of the old-fashioned headstones of the islanders carry the very flavor of the sea; such as the one which piously tells that, "Though he's been where

billows roar, still, by God's help, he's safe on shore," and which concludes with the asseveration that "Now he's safe among the fleet, waiting for Jesus Christ to meet."

Ever, at Scilly, the thoughts return to wrecks. And frightful as are the waves in great storms, when deep calls unto deep, it is not from storm, but fog, that the greatest disasters have come. Scillonians themselves, before they became flower-growers, paid with usury the ocean's claims, and it used to be said that for one Scillonian who died a natural death nine were drowned. And so fierce and treacherous are the currents that the strongest swimmer may be carried away before the eyes of the stoutest rowers. Recently, two boats, returning in company to the roadstead, chose different courses to pass one of the islands. One was never heard of again, neither men nor boat; for the wild current that had capsized and seized the craft had borne it far out to sea.

These people, some two thousand in all, huddle upon these rocks like seabirds in a storm. Their very capital, Hugh Town, has been inundatingly



FIGURE-HEADS FROM WRECKS SET UP IN A GARDEN

driven from its location, and even now is so exposed that it will infallibly be driven to move uneasily anew.

It is only those who love water who should go to Scilly. One is not permitted to shoot the birds; but one may fish and float and dream. It is over a tossing sea that one goes there; forty miles distant is the nearest port, Penzance. Often an icy wind sweeps over the flower-patches, and often, at night, a bitter chill creeps stingingly in from the sea. And, oddly enough—except that it is another of the expected incongruities—the picturesqueness of fact is not reflected in picturesqueness of appearance. One would expect at least a Maarken folk; but they look only commonplace. Yet their very commonplaceness makes it possible that men and women are here who have never travelled so far as the mainland.

The shouting wind calls out its secrets in unintelligible cries, the sinister fog glides in, the waves raven for this fragment of Lyonesse—and one thinks again how delectable a land must Lyonesse have been. There are indications of the tropical in Cornwall; and

Lyonesse must have been far more tropical than Cornwall without the windy desolation of Scilly. And one would like to trace back to the days of Lyonesse the beginning of the celebration of May, for the queen still holds in Scilly her little annual court.

Much has suffered a land change. Ships' planking has been eagerly seized upon for fences. Now and then a prow becomes a gate-post. Ships' bells that sounded the knell of sailors now ring gayly for these dwellers on rock. And many a figure-head which erstwhile stood at the prow of some stately ship sentinels a gateway or stares impassively over a field of narcissus. For these people love figure-heads, and describe them with uncanny pride. This was from a Spanish ship; that, a Dutch; this one, a saint, bore to safety the sole survivor from a Portuguese bark. Thus the long list goes on. The estate on Tresco is particularly rich in this spoil of the sea. And, final incongruity of all, a noble Neptune watches patiently in the garden of that beneficent untitled ruler, Mr. Smith.

Editor's Easy Chair

ONE of the few absolute advantages of living at all is that you can live now and then in several worlds at once. You can, by virtue of sympathy, dwell with somebody much your junior or senior in a world much younger or older than your own; and if you happen to be a modern you can, by force of imagination, consort with the ancients in a pleasing contemporaneity. Of course this must be managed by a touch of nature on both sides; but there is more nature in other people than they are apt to suppose, and the thing is not so very difficult if you have some nature in yourself. A touch of ill nature even will do, but it had better be good nature.

At the Greek play given by the Harvard students, the other day (or week, or month), you needed as many touches of good nature as possible for the realization of your affinity with the ancients, if you went to the first performance. The weather, which had unprofitably lavished long hours of sunshine on your railroad run to Boston, and then with the moment of your starting on your drive to Cambridge, began to rain mean small spiteful drops, like the tears of a woman working herself into a temper, was so dramatically disappointing that if the rain had not eventually made itself part of the play, it would have soured the sweetest expectation. But if you loosed your fancy to the work, and figured the shower as a sort of larger chorus, it was by no means an antipathetic condition. The lowering heavens, the pale gloom of the day, the gusts that fitfully came and went, were in a rich accord with the sombre tragedy of *Agamemnon*, such as, no doubt, the home weather of Æschylus sometimes effected at Athens. You could regret the want of shadow-making sunshine, but the action had a sublimity the more statuesque and absolute from the absence of the contrasting lights and darks. The wet green grass, the long low façade of the palace at Argos,

with its varitinted pillars and capitals and frieze and pediment, and its brown-red roof, and the snow-white dark-garlanded marble altar before it, formed a color scheme incomparably heightened in its vividness by the dim rainy air. The eye noted these facts of the entourage with a solemn joy to the beholder at the first glance, and his heart thrilled with a high impatience for the impending action. What he had read of that far wonderworld of the Greeks who outran us long ago in the race of civilization mixed with a glad reminiscence of the circuses of his barbaric boyhood. When the scene, so elemental and so constant, filled itself from time to time with the bold blues and purples, the pinks and whites and browns of the tunics and chitons and peplons and scarfs and fillets, there was a beauty in the setting of the piece which a brighter atmosphere could not have enhanced and might have lessened.

That, at least, was what we presently said, crouching beneath our umbrellas, and looking round to right and left over and under the rounding tops of our fellow spectators' umbrellas and insensately rejoicing in the anomaly of umbrellas at a play of Æschylus. Was it wholly an anomaly? Not unless we were the more deceived by the remembrance of that lady with an umbrella in a fresco at Herculaneum; though, to be sure, the Greeks might not have been allowed to put up their umbrellas in the theatre. Still, there was no proof that they were not, and we gave ourselves the benefit of the doubt on the damp gradines of the Stadium on the Soldiers' Field at Cambridge. Very likely the Athenians who first saw the *Agamemnon* at Athens had not thought to bring rugs with them to spread on the cold seats, but they might very probably have brought grass cushions, as some of us had, and we chose to find a greater parity than disparity with them in our thoughtfulness.

At the actual distance of time, much