

The Countess of Bellarmine

By Quiller-Couch

Few rivers in England are without their "Lovers' Leap"; but the tradition of this one is singular, I believe. It overhangs a dark pool, midway down a west country valley—a sheer escarpment of granite, its lip lying but a stone's throw from the high-road, that here finds its descent broken by a stiff knoll, over which it rises and topples again like a wave.

I had drawn two shining eel out of the pool, and sat eating my lunch on the edge of the Leap, with my back to the road. Forty feet beneath me the water lay black and glossy, behind the dotted foliage of a birch-tree. My rod stuck upright from the turf at my elbow, and, whenever I turned my head, neatly bisected the countenance and upper half of Seth Truscott, an indigenous gentleman of miscellaneous habits and a predatory past, who had followed me that morning to carry the landing-net.

It was he who, after lunch, imparted the story of the rock on which we sat; and as it seemed at the time to gain somewhat by the telling, I will not risk defacing it by meddling with his dialect.

"I reckon, sir," he began, with an upward nod at a belt of larches, the fringe of a great estate, that closed the view at the head of the vale, "you'm too young to mind th' ould Earl o' Bellarmine, that owned Castle Cannick, up yonder, in my growin' days. 'Ould Wounds' he was nicknamed—a cribbage-faced, what-the-blazes kind o' varmint, wi' a gossan wag an a tongue like oil o' vitriol. He'd a-led the fore-half o' his life, I b'lieve, in London church-town, by reason that he an' his father couldn' be left in a room together wi'out comin' to fisticuffs: an' by all accounts was fashion's favourite in the naughty city, doin' his duty in that state o' life an' playing Hamlet's ghost among the Ten Commandments.

"The upshot was that he killed a young gentleman over a game o' whist, an' that was too much even for the Londoners. So he packed up and sailed for furrin' parts, an' didn' show his face in England till th' ould man, his father, was took wi' a seizure an' went dead, bein' palsied down half his face, but workin' away to the end at the most lift-your-hair wickedness wi' the sound side of his mouth.

"Then the new Earl turned up an' settled at Castle Cannick. He was a wifeless man, an', by the look o't, had given up all wish to coax the female eye: for he dressed no better 'n a jockey, an' all his diversion was to ride in to Tregarrick Market o' Saturdays, an' hang round the doorway o' the Pack-Horse Inn, by A. Walters, and glower at the men an' women passin' up and down the Fore Street, an' stand drinkin' brandy an' water while the horse-jockeys there my-lord'ed 'em. Two an' twenty glasses, they say, was his quantum between noon an' nine o'clock; an' then he'd climb into saddle an' ride home to his jewelled four-poster, cursin' an~ mutterin', but sittin' his mare like a man of iron.

"But one o' these fine market-days he did a thing that filled the mouths o' the country-side.

"He was loafin' by the Pack-Horse door, just as usual, at two o'clock, rappin' the head o' his crop on the side o' his ridin' boots, drawin' his brows down an' lookin' out curses from under 'em across the street to the saddler's opposite, when two drover-chaps came up the pavement wi' a woman atween 'em.

"The woman—or maid, to call her by her proper title—was a dark-browed slut, wi' eyes like sloes, an' hair dragged over her face till she looked like an owl in an ivy-bush. As for the gown

o' her, 'twas no better 'n a sack tied round the middle, wi' a brave piece torn away by the shoulder, where one o' the men had clawed her.

"There was a pretty dido goin' on atween the dree, an' all talkin' together—the two men mobbin' each other, an' the girl i' the middle calin' em every name but what they was chris'ened, wi'out distinction o' persons, as the word goes.

"'What's the uproar?' asks Ould Wounds, stoppin' the tap-tap o' his crop, as they comes up.

"'The woman b'longs to me,' says the first. 'I've engaged to make her my lawful wife; an' I won't go from my word under two gallon o' fourpenny.'

"'You agreed to hand her over for one gallon, first along,' says t'other, 'an' a bargain's a bargain.'

"Says the woman, 'You're a pair o' hairsplitting shammicks, the pair of 'ee. An' how much beer be I to have for my weddin' portion?' (says she)—'for that's all I care about, one way or t'other.'

"Now Ould Wounds looked at the woman; an' 'tis to be thought he found her eyeable, for he axed up sharp—

"'Would 'ee kick over these two, an' marry me, for a bottle o' gin?'

"'That would I.'

"'An' to be called My Lady—Countess o' Bellarmine?'

"'Better an' better.'

"'I shall whack 'ee.'

"'I don't care.'

"'I shall kick an' cuff an' flog 'ee like a span'el dog,' says he: 'by my body! I shall make 'ee repent.'

"'Give 'ee leave to try,' says she.

"An' that's how th' Earle' Bellarmine courted his wife. He took her into the bar an' treated her to a bottle o' gin on the spot. At nine o'clock that evenin' she tuk hold of his stirrup-leather an' walked beside 'en, afoot, up to Castle Cannick. Next day, their banns were axed in church, an' in dree weeks she was My Ladyship.

"'Twas a battle-royal that began then. Ould Wounds dressed the woman up to the nines, an' forced all the bettermost folk i' the county to pay their calls an' treat her like one o' the blood; and then, when the proud guests stepped into their chariots an' druv away, he'd fall to, an' lick her across the shoulders wi' his ridin'-whip, to break her sperrit. 'Twas the happiest while o' th' ould curmudgeon's life, I do b'lieve; for he'd found summat he cudn' tame in a hurry. There was a noble pond afore the house, i' those days, wi' urns an' heathen gods around the brim, an' twice he dragged her through it in her night-gown, I've heerd, an' always dined wi' a pistol laid by his plate, alongside the knives an' prongs, to scare her. But not she!

"An' next he tried to burn her in her bed: an' that wasn' no good.

"An' last of all he fell i' love wi' her: an' that broke her.

"One day—the tale goes—she made up her mind an' ordered a shay an' pair from the Pack-Horse. The postillion was to be waitin' by the gate o' the deer-park—the only gate that hadn't a lodge to it—at ten o'clock that night. 'Twas past nine afore dinner was done, an' she got up from her end o' the table an' walked across to kiss th' odd fellow. He, 'pon his side, smiled on her, pleased as Punch; for 'twas little more'n a fortni't since he'd discovered she was the yapple of his eye. She said 'Good night' an' went up-stairs to pack a few things in a bag, he openin' the door and shuttin' it upon her. Then he outs wi' his watch, waits a couple o' minutes, an' slips out o' the house.

“At five minutes to ten comes my ladyship, glidin’ over the short turf o’ the deer-park, an’ glancin’ over her shoulder at the light in his lordship’s libery window. ’Twas burnin’ in true watch-an’-fear-nothin’ style, an’ there, by the gate, was the shay and horses, and postillion, wrapped up and flapping his arms for warmth, who touched his cap and put down the steps for her.

“ ‘Drive through Tregarrick,’ says she, ‘an’ don’t spare whip-cord.’

“Slam went the door, up climbed the postillion, an’ away they went like a house afire. There was half-a-moon up an’ a hoar frost gatherin’, an’ my lady, leanin’ back on the cushions, could see the head and shoulders of the postillion bob-bobbing, till it seemed his head must work loose and tumble out of his collar.

“The road they took, sir, is the same that runs down the valley afore our very eyes. An’ ’pon the brow o’t, just when it comes in sight, the off horse turned restive. In a minute ’twas as much as the post-boy could ha’ done to hold on. But he didn’ try. Instead, he fell to floggin’ harder, workin’ his arm up an’ down like a steam-eflgin’.

“ ‘What the jimmy are ’ee doin’?’ calls out her ladyship—or words to that effec’—clutchin’ at the side o’ the shay, an’ tryin’ to stiddy hersel’.

“ ‘I thought I wasn’ to spare whip-cord,’ calls back the post-boy.

“An’ with that he turned i’ the saddle; an’ ’twas the face o’ her own wedded husband, as ghastly white as if ’t burned a’ready i’ the underground fires.

“Seein’ it, her joints were loosed, an’ she sat back white as he; an’ down over the hill they swung at a breakneck gallop, shay lurchin’ and stones flyin’.

“About thirty yards from where we’m sittin’, sir, Odd Wounds caught the near rein twice round his wrist an’ lean’t back, slowly pullin’ it, till his face was slewed round over his left shoulder an’ grinnin’ in my lady’s face.

“An’ that was the last look that passed atween ’em. For now feeling the wheels on grass and the end near, he loosed the rein and fetched the horse he rode a cut atween the ears—an’ that’s how ’twas,” concluded Seth, lamely.

Like most inferior narrators, he shied at the big fence, flinched before the climax. But as he ended, I flung a short glance downward at the birches and black water, and took up my rod again with a shiver.