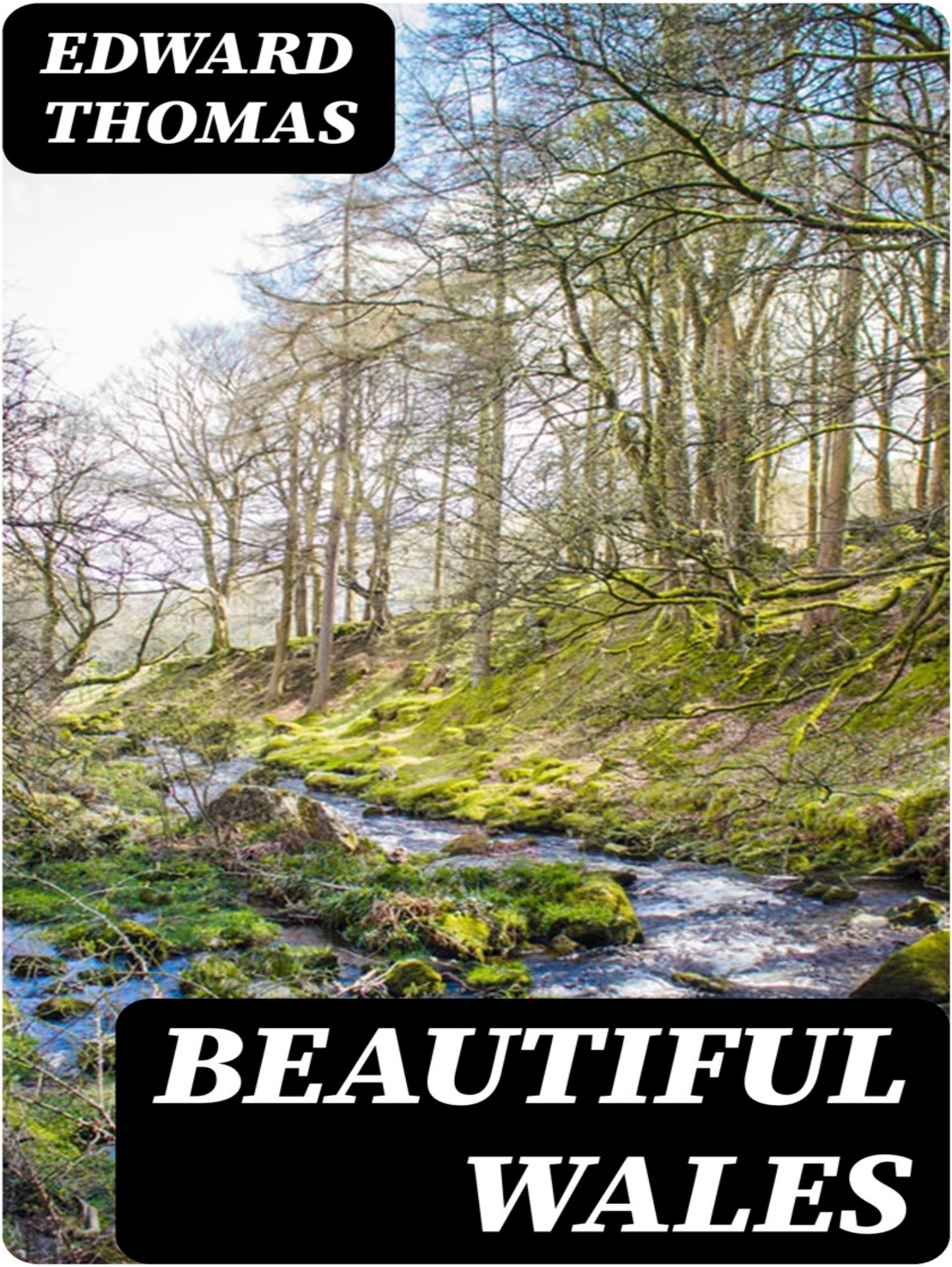
EDWARD THOMAS



BEAUTIFUL WALES

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Beautiful Wales

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PREFACE

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A few of my jests, impressions of scenery, and portraits in this book have already been printed in *The Daily Chronicle*, *The World*, *The Week's Survey*, *The Outlook*, and *The Illustrated London News*. I have only to add that the line of verse on p. 34 is by Mr. Ernest Rhys; the lines on p. 71 are by Mr. T. Sturge Moore; and those on pp. 130 and 178 by Mr. Gordon Bottomley: and to confess, chiefly for the benefit of the solemn reviewer, that I know nothing of the Welsh language.

EDWARD THOMAS.

CHAPTER I
PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON MEN, AUTHORS, AND THINGS IN WALES

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Among friends and acquaintances and authors, I have met many men who have seen and read more of Wales than I can ever do. But I am somewhat less fearful in writing about the country, inasmuch as few of them seem to know the things which I know, and fewer still in the same way. When I read their books or hear them speak, I am interested, pleased, amazed, but seldom am I quite sure that we mean the same thing by Wales; sometimes I am sure that we do not. One man writes of the country as the home of legends, whose irresponsibility puzzles him, whose naïveté shocks him. Another, and his name is legion, regards it as littered with dead men's bones, among which a few shepherds and miners pick their way without caring for the lover of bones. Another, of the same venerable and numerous family as the last, has admired the silver lake of Llanberis or blue Plynlimmon; has been pestered by the pronunciation of Machynlleth, and has carried away a low opinion of the whole language because his own attempts at uttering it are unmelodious and even disgusting; has fallen entirely in love with the fragrant Welsh ham, preferring it, in fact, to the curer and the cook. Others, who have not, as a rule, gone the length of visiting the persons they condemn, call the Welshmen thieving, lying, religious, and rebellious knaves. Others would repeat with fervour the verse which

Evan sings in Ben Jonson's masque, *For the Honour of Wales*:

And once but taste o' the Welsh mutton,
Your English seep's not worth a button:

and so they would conclude, admitting that the trout are good when caught. Some think, and are not afraid of saying, that Wales will be quite a good place (in the season) when it has been chastened a little by English enterprise: and I should not be surprised were they to begin by introducing English sheep, though I hardly see what would be done with them, should they be cut up and exposed for sale. The great disadvantage of Wales seems to be that it is not England, and the only solution is for the malcontents to divide their bodies, and, leaving one part in their native land, to have the rest sent to Wales, as they used to send Welsh princes to enjoy the air of two, three, and even four English towns, at the same time and in an elevated position.

SUMMER EVENING, ANGLESEY COAST

Then also there are the benevolent writers of books, who have for a century repeated, sometimes not unmusically, the words of a fellow who wrote in 1798, that the beauty of Llangollen "has been universally allowed by gentlemen of distinguished taste," and that, in short, many parts of Wales "have excited the applause of tourists and poets." Would that many of them had been provided with pens like those at the catalogue desks of the British Museum! Admirable pens! that may be put to so many uses and should be put into so many hands to-day and to-morrow. Admirable pens! and yet no one has praised them before. Admirable pens that will not write; and, by the way, how unlike those which wrote this:—

"Caldecot Castle, a grand and spacious edifice of high antiquity, occurs to arrest the observation of the passing stranger about two miles beyond the new passage; appearing at no great distance across the meadows that lie to the left of the Newport road. The shattered remnants of this curious example of early military architecture are still so far considerable as to be much more interesting than we could possibly have been at first aware, and amply repaid the trouble of a visit we bestowed upon it, in our return through Monmouthshire by the way of Caldecot village. In the distance truly it does not fail to impress the mind with some idea of its ancient splendour, for it assumes an aspect of no common dignity: a friendly mantling of luxuriant ivy improves, in an eminent degree, the picturesque effect of its venerable mouldering turrets; and, upon the whole, the ruin altogether would appear unquestionably to great advantage, were it, fortunately for the admirers of artless beauty, stationed in a more conspicuous situation, like the greater number of edifices of a similar nature in other parts of the country."

The decency, the dignity, the gentlemanliness (*circa* 1778), the fatuity of it, whether they tickle or affront, are more fascinating than many better but less portentous things. There was, too, a Fellow of the Royal Society who said in the last century that, in the Middle Ages, St. Winifred's Well and Chapel, and the river, and Basingwerk, must have been "worthy of a photograph."

YACHTS, ANGLESEY COAST

Yet there are two others who might make any crowd respectable—the lively, the keen-eyed, the versatile Mr. A. G. Bradley, and George Borrow, whose very name has by this time absorbed and come to imply more epithets than I have room to give. From the former, a contemporary, it would be effrontery to quote. From the latter I allow myself the pleasure of quoting at least this, and with the more readiness because hereafter it cannot justly be said that this book does not contain a fine thing about Wales. Borrow had just been sitting (bareheaded) in the outdoor chair of Huw Morus, whose songs he had read "in the most distant part of Lloegr, when he was a brown-haired boy"; and on his way back to Llangollen, he had gone into a little inn, where the Tarw joins the Ceiriog brook. "'We have been to Pont-y-

Meibion,' said Jones, 'to see the chair of Huw Morus,' adding, that the Gwr Boneddig was a great admirer of the songs of the Eos Ceiriog. He had no sooner said these words than the intoxicated militiaman started up, and, striking the table with his fist, said: 'I am a poor stone-cutter—this is a rainy day and I have come here to pass it in the best way I can. I am somewhat drunk, but though I am a poor stone-mason, a private in the militia, and not so sober as I should be, I can repeat more of the songs of the Eos than any man alive, however great a gentleman, however sober—more than Sir Watkin, more than Colonel Biddulph himself.'

"He then began to repeat what appeared to be poetry, for I could distinguish the rhymes occasionally, though owing to his broken utterance it was impossible for me to make out the sense of the words. Feeling a great desire to know what verses of Huw Morus the intoxicated youth would repeat, I took out my pocket-book and requested Jones, who was much better acquainted with Welsh pronunciation, under any circumstances, than myself, to endeavour to write down from the mouth of the young fellow any verses uppermost in his mind. Jones took the pocket-book and pencil and went to the window, followed by the young man, scarcely able to support himself. Here a curious scene took place, the drinker hiccuping up verses, and Jones dotting them down, in the best manner he could, though he had evidently great difficulty to distinguish what was said to him. At last methought the young man said, 'There they are, the verses of the Nightingale (Eos), on his deathbed....'

BEAUMARIS—MOONLIGHT

"... A scene in a public-house, yes! but in a Welsh public-house. Only think of a Suffolk toper repeating the deathbed verses of a poet; surely there is a considerable difference between the Celt and the Saxon?"

But the number is so great of sensible, educated men who have written on Wales, or would have written if business or pleasure or indolence or dislike of fame had not prevented them, that either I find it impossible to visit the

famous places (and if I visit them, my predecessors fetter my capacity and actually put in abeyance the powers of the places), or, very rarely, I see that they were imperfect tellers of the truth, and yet feel myself unwilling to say an unpleasant new thing of village or mountain because it will not be believed, and a pleasant one because it puts so many excellent people in the wrong. Of Wales, therefore, as a place consisting of Llandudno, Llangammarch, Llanwrtyd, Builth, Barmouth, Penmaenmawr, Llanberis, Tenby, ... and the adjacent streams and mountains, I cannot speak. At ——, indeed, I ate poached salmon and found it better than any preserver of rivers would admit; it was dressed and served by an Eluned (Lynette), with a complexion so like a rose that I missed the fragrance, and movements like those of a fountain when the south wind blows; and all the evening they sang, or when they did not sing, their delicate voices made "llech" and "llawr" lovely words: but I remember nothing else. At —— I heard some one playing *La ci darem la mano*: and I remember nothing else. Then, too, there was ——, with its castle and cross and the memory of the anger of a king: and I remember that the rain outside my door was the only real thing in the world except the book in my hand; for the trees were as the dreams of one who does not care for dreams; the mountains were as things on a map; and the men and women passing were but as words unspoken and without melody. All I remember of —— is that, as I drew near to it on a glorious wet Sunday in winter, on the stony roads, the soles began to leave my boots. I knew no one there; I was to reach a place twelve miles ahead among the mountains; I was assured that

nobody in the town would cobble on Sunday: and I began to doubt whether, after all, I had been wise in steadily preferring football boots to good-looking things at four times the price; when, finally, I had the honour of meeting a Baptist—a Christian—a man—who, for threepence, fixed my soles so firmly that he assured me they would last until I reached the fiery place to which he believed I was travelling, and serve me well there. I distrusted his theology, and have yet to try them on "burning marl," but they have taken me some hundreds of miles on earth since then.

THE BEACH, BEAUMARIS

It would be an impertinence to tell the reader what Llangollen is like, especially as he probably knows and I do not. Also, I confess that its very notoriety stupefies me, and

I see it through a cloud of newspapers and books, and amid a din of applausive voices, above which towers a tremendous female form "like Teneriffe or Atlas unremoved," which I suppose to be Lady Eleanor Butler.

Nevertheless, I will please myself and the discerning reader by repeating the names of a few of the places to which I have never been, or of which I will not speak, namely, Llangollen, Aberglaslyn, Bettws-y-Coed, the Fairy Glen, Capel Curig, Colwyn, Tintern, Bethesda, Llanfairfechan, Llanrhaiadr, Llanynys, Tenby (a beautiful flower with a beetle in it), Mostyn, Glyder Fach and Glyder Fawr, Penmaenmawr, Pen-y-Gader, Pen-y-Gwryd, Prestatyn, Tremadoc, the Swallow Falls, the Devil's Bridge, the Mumbles, Harlech, Portmadoc, Towyn, and Aberdovey (with its song and still a poet there). I have read many lyrics worse than that inventory.

But there is another kind of human being—to use a comprehensive term—of which I stand in almost as much awe as of authors and those who know the famous things of Wales. I mean the lovers of the Celt. They do not, of course, confine their love—which in its extent and its tenuity reminds one of a very great personage indeed—to the Celt; but more perhaps than the Japanese or the Chinese or the Sandwich Islander the Celt has their hearts; and I know of one who not only learned to speak Welsh badly, but had the courage to rise at a public meeting and exhort the (Welsh-speaking) audience to learn their "grand mother tongue." Their aim and ideal is to go about the world in a state of self-satisfied dejection, interrupted, and perhaps sustained,

by days when they consume strange mixed liquors to the tune of all the fine old Celtic songs which are fashionable. If you can discover a possible Celtic great-grandmother, you are at once among the chosen. I cannot avoid the opinion that to boast of the Celtic spirit is to confess you have it not. But, however that may be, and speaking as one who is afraid of definitions, I should be inclined to call these lovers of the Celt a class of "decadents," not unrelated to Mallarmé, and of æsthetes, not unrelated to Postlethwaite. They are sophisticated, neurotic—the fine flower of sounding cities—often producing exquisite verse and prose; preferring *crême de menthe* and *opal hush* to metheglin or stout, and Kensington to Eryri and Connemara; and perplexed in the extreme by the Demetian with his taste in wall-papers quite untrained. Probably it all came from Macpherson's words, "They went forth to battle and they always fell"; just as much of their writing is to be traced to the vague, unobservant things in Ossian, or in the proud, anonymous Irishman who wrote *Fingal* in six cantos in 1813. The latter is excellent in this vein. "Let none then despise," he writes, "the endeavour, however humble, now made, even by the aid of fiction, to throw light upon the former manners and customs of *one of the oldest and noblest nations of the earth*. That *once we were*, is all we have left to boast of; that *once we were*, we have record upon record.... We yet can show the stately pharos where waved the chieftain's banner, and the wide ruin where the palace stood—the palace once the pride of ages and the theme of song—once *Emuin a luin Aras Ullah*." The reader feels that it is a baseness to exist. Mr. John Davidson, who, of course, is

as far removed from the professional Celt as a battle-axe from a toothpick, has put something like the fashionable view majestically into the mouth of his "Prime Minister":

... That offscouring of the Eastern world,
The melancholy Celt, whom Latin, Greek,
And Teuton drove through Europe to the rocks,
The utmost isles and precincts of the sea;
Who fight for fighting's sake, and understand
No meaning in defeat, having no cause
At heart, no depth of purpose, no profound
Desire, no inspiration, no belief;—
A twilight people living in a dream,
A withered dream they never had themselves,
A faded heirloom that their fathers dreamt:
How much more happy these had they destroyed
The spell of life at once, and so escaped
An unregarded martyrdom, the consciousness
Of inefficience and the world's contempt.

THE TROUT STREAM

"An Earth-born coolness

Coloured with the sky."

But it is probably true that when one has said that the typical Celt is seldom an Imperialist, a great landowner, a brewer, a cabinet minister, or (in Wales, at least) a member of the Salvation Army, one has exhausted the list of his weaknesses; and that not greatly wanting to be one of these things, he has endeared himself to those to-day who have set their hearts on gold and applause and have not gained them, and those few others who never sought them. I heard of a pathetic, plausible stockbroker's clerk the other day, who, having spent his wife's money and been at last discovered by his tailor, took comfort in studying his pedigree, which included a possibly Welsh Lewis high upon the extreme right. He was sufficiently advanced in philology to find traces of an Ap' in his name, which was Piper, and he could repeat some of Ossian by heart with great emotion and less effect. I prefer the kind of Celt whom I met in Wales one August night. It was a roaring wet night, and I stepped into the shelter of a bridge to light a pipe. As I paused to see if it was dawn yet, I heard a noise which I supposed to be the breathing of a cow. My fishing-rod struck the bridge; the noise ceased, and I heard something move in the darkness close by. I confess that my pipe went out when, without warning, a joyous, fighting baritone voice rose and shook the bridge with the words.

Through all the changing scenes of life,
In trouble and in joy,
The praises of my God shall still
My heart and tongue employ.

The voice sang all the verses of the hymn, and then laughed loudly, yet with a wonderful serenity. Then a man

stood up heavily with a sound like a flock of starlings suddenly taking flight. I lit a match and held it to his face and looked at him, and saw a fair-skinned, high-cheek-boned face, wizened like a walnut, with much black hair about it, that yet did not conceal the flat, straight, eloquent mouth. He lit a match and held it to my face, and looked at me and laughed again. Finding that I could pronounce Bwlch-y-Rhiw, he was willing to talk and to share the beer in my satchel. And he told me that he had played many parts —he was always playing—before he took to the road: he had been a booking-office clerk, a soldier, a policeman, a gamekeeper, and put down what he called his variability to "the feminine gender." He would not confess where he had been to school, and his one touch of melancholy came when, to show that he had once known Latin, he began to repeat, in vaguely divided hexameters, the passage in the *Aeneid* which begins *Est in conspectu Tenedos*. For he could not go on after *At Capys* and was angry with himself. But he recalled being caned for the same inability, and laughed once more. Every other incident remembered only fed his cheerfulness. Everything human had his praise,—General Buller in particular. I cannot say the same of his attitude towards the divine. His conversation raised my spirits, and I suppose that the bleared and dripping dawn can have peered on few less melancholy men than we. "Life," said he, "is a plaguey thing: only I don't often remember it." And as he left me, he remarked, apologetically, that he "always had been a cheerful ——, and couldn't be miserable," and did me the honour of supposing that in this he resembled me.

NEAR MENAI STRAITS

He went off singing, in Welsh, something not in the least like a hymn to a fine victorious hymn tune, but had changed, before I was out of hearing, to the plaintive, adoring "Ar hyd y nos." And I remembered the proverbial saying of the Welsh, that "the three strong ones of the world" are "a lord, a headstrong man, and a pauper."

Having heard and read the aforesaid authors, tourists, higher philatelists, and lovers of the Celt, I need hardly say, firstly, that I have come under their influence; secondly, that I have tried to avoid it; and thirdly, that I am not equal to the task of apportioning the blame between them and myself for what I write.