

THE LAND OF A LOST LANGUAGE.

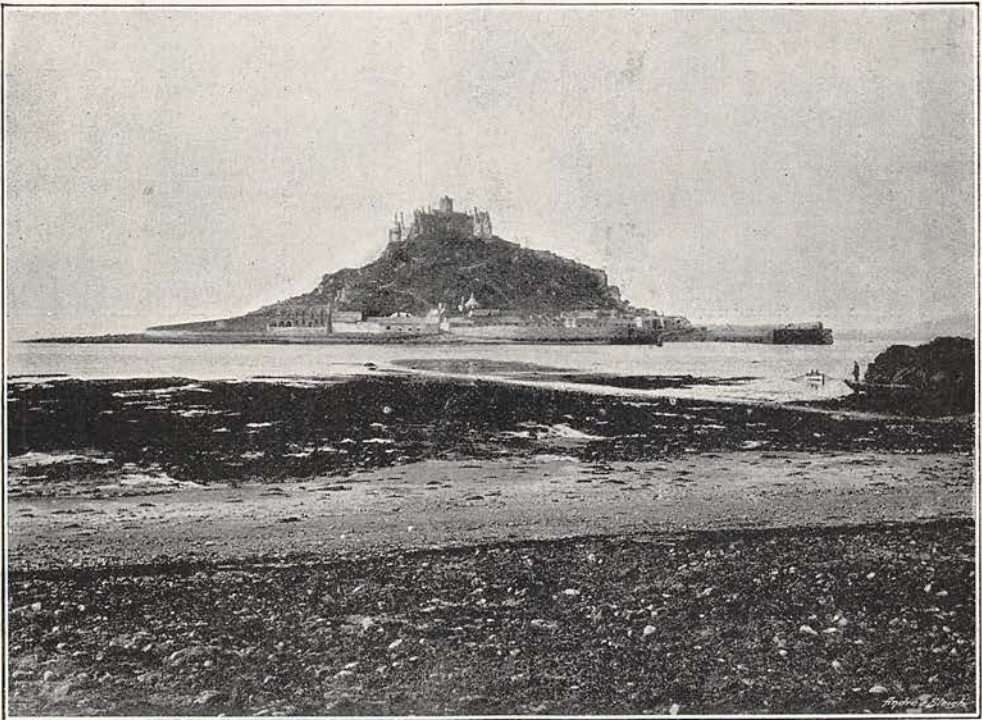
By WILLIAM COPELAND BORLASE.

“A SWEET and a beautiful country,” —to use the epithets applied by Edmund Spenser in his *View of the State of Ireland*, to a land and a people not wholly unconnected nor very dissimilar—is that which lies beyond the vales of Devon and the waters of the Tamar.

A land it is of dolmen and circle and cairn, weird relics of a bygone race of whom it cannot be said that “their memorials have perished with them”; a

pagan sacerdotal system; a land of myth and legend and “droll,” where *piskies* dance in their fairy-rings round the bright green mound *into* which, so said the wise women, their long-lost race had died; a land, in fine, which has lost the very language in which the tale of its forgotten ages might have been told, but in which, for all that, the past seems more present than in any other part of England we could name.

“*Part of England*,” did I say? How



ST. MICHAEL'S MOUNT.

land of holy-well and *beltaine* fire—proofs of the presence in days long gone by of two forms of worship absorbed by Christians, but, in their origin, practised respectively by two distinct orders in a

strangely forgetful of the geography lesson I learnt in childhood in my native land! —“Cornwall is not England;” “Cornwall is Cornwall.” “England lies beyond the river to the east,” that river which the

devil would never dare to leap, for fear of being put into a Cornish pie. As a matter of fact, in the earlier part of the present century old people invariably used the expression "going to England," meaning thereby crossing the Tamar in

craggs, and columnar forms of weathered granite; the sheer slate precipices of Tintagel. So rich, indeed, is Cornwall in this commodity, that artists positively arrive in "schools," just as the welcome pilchards do, and, settling their erratic



OFF THE COAST OF CORNWALL.

the coach, which, after rattling down the slope into Torpoint at a rate of four miles in a quarter of an hour, boarded the ferry and landed its passengers in the English county of Devon. Persons going to London always made their wills before starting on an exploit so perilous, for were there not highwaymen in England (never were such known in Cornwall!), on every hill and every heath from Haldon Hill near Exeter all the way to London?

Rich, too, even to profusion, is that land beyond the river in the picturesque, and that in varied kind—St. Michael's Mount, of which an enthusiastic admirer observed in the last century that "it seemed emblematic of a well-ordered State, its base being devoted to Trade and Commerce, its sides to the service of the country, and its summit to the glory of God"; the Land's End, with its broken

bodies and eccentric souls here and there along the coast, like cuckoos guiltless of a mean intent, in the snug, neat quarters, built by rustic hands for slender needs, transfer to canvas fresh examples, as each year goes by, of some grey rock, maybe, swathed in golden lichen, or, maybe, of some quaint street-corner, where the fisher-people climb and cling about the rough-set granite steps of home.

That for the art-student in Cornwall the homeliest subject has its own peculiar charm, Mr. Whistler has proved to us in the marvellous effect of his *Shop in St. Ives*. Embottled in a tiny window, a mere glazed orifice in a wall of cob, the presence is indicated of a few transparent objects of the genus lollipop and the species "pear-drop," the which, illumined by an unobtrusive dip in the background,

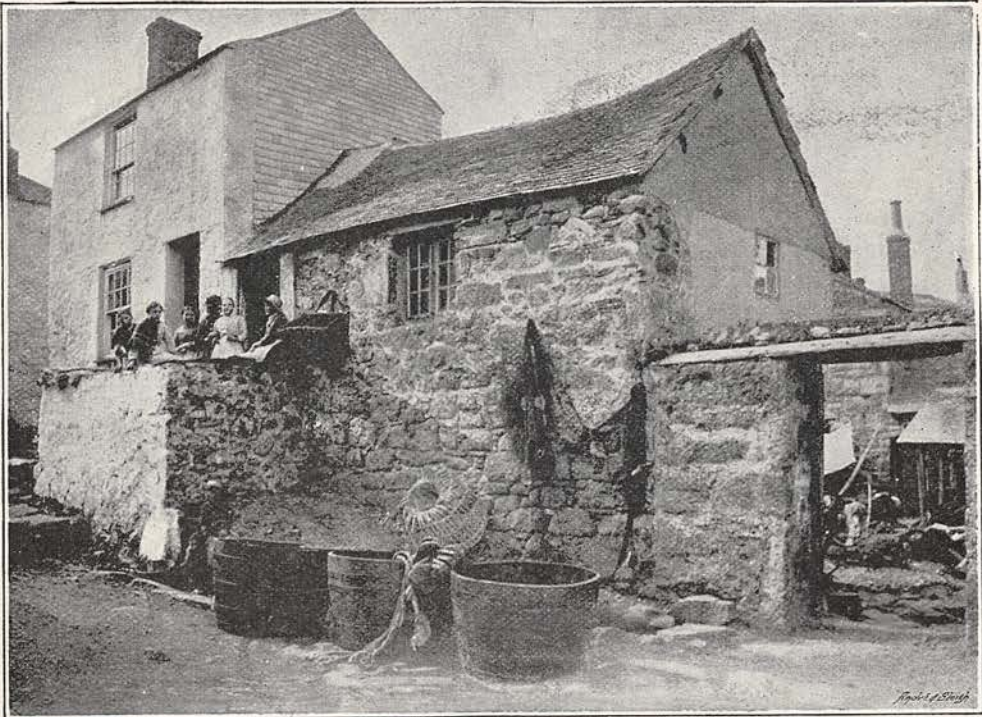
are made, with consummate skill, to scatter with their roseate ray the foggy atmosphere of a dark evening in the street of the little town. That is all; and some might remark, "that need not have been painted in Cornwall; that might be seen anywhere." Not so. That simple touch, that homely study, is as characteristic of a Cornish fisher-town as would have been the rig of the boats drawn up in the harbour.

As to romance, again, Cornwall is a mine of wealth for the novelist, as many a recent experience has shown us, and which calls to mind a story of a lady who, having made a tour of the county by road and rail, expressed herself afterwards as having been most deeply interested in the numerous examples she had encountered of the ruined castles of, as she supposed, the ancient Cornish feudal barons. It turned out that the battered

besides, there is a *pathos* about them, too, though it has not been the Cornish barons so much as the Saxon Londoners whose sufferings the ruins represent.

But from artists and authors turn we to the people of the country and the language they spoke.

Until a year or two ago we should fearlessly have spoken of them as "Celts." Since, however, the works of the eminent French anthropologist, M. Broca, have become known in England, the view that they were so, or indeed that any people of that race or name ever crossed the English Channel at all, has been rudely shaken. To the ancients the whole of northern Europe was occupied by two peoples, the Scyths on the east and the Celts on the west. As time went on and a place for the German peoples had to be found between Scyths and Celts, the Rhine came to be considered the boundary of the



A CORNER IN A CORNISH VILLAGE.

and ivy-covered towers she so enthusiastically described were neither more nor less than the engine-houses of abandoned mines. But no matter! Had there been no romancing there would not have been nearly as many of them as there are; and

Celts on the east, and Celtica came to be roughly synonymous with Gaul. The British Isles, however, were never included in the term, but were distinctly stated to be outside of, and "opposite" to, Celtica. Cæsar, however, mentions

the Celtæ as a definite race or people occupying a broad belt in central France between the Belgæ on the north-east and the Aquitani on the south-west. Their descendants, however, are, as M. Broca shows, the short, round-headed people of Auvergne, with regard to whom there is no evidence whatever that any of them ever came into Britain at all, nor are their peculiar skulls ever found here either in river-bed or barrow. The term "Celtic" as applied to a group of languages, although a merely arbitrary term,

Who, then, were the inhabitants of Cornwall? In the second century they were called Dumnonii or Damnonii, the name of a people also found in Ireland and Scotland, and who may not improbably be rightly associated with the Picts, the earliest known invaders of the British Isles. Besides this people, who, there is reason to believe, were tall, fair, and powerful, there must have been in this part of Britain a short, coarse-haired, swarthy, and probably cunning race, not unlike the Silures of Wales and the inhabitants



THE ANCIENT TOWN OF MOUSEHOLE.

introduced by philologists to designate that branch of Aryan speech which first made its way to the shores and islands of western Europe, has become too deeply fixed and too clearly understood to warrant its dismissal. At the same time, however, it should be restricted to its special and philological meaning. The inhabitants of pre-Roman and pre-Saxon Britain, to whom the Cornish belonged, were not Celts *because* they spoke what philologists term Celtic, any more than a nigger is an Anglo-Saxon *because* he speaks English.

of south-western France. Survivals of each of these types are to be found in the western parts of Cornwall to this day, the former just possibly descended from the *giants* of the legends, the latter from the *dwarfs*. In process of time these races must have combined, and the language they spoke was (*philologicè*) Celtic, closely allied to the living languages of Wales and Brittany, and remotely, but essentially, connected with the dead languages of Old Gaul and Britain. To the only other branch of the same stock belongs the Goidelic of Ireland, the Scotch Gaelic, and the Manx.

Space does not admit of our doing more than adverting to the total destruction wrought by the Saxon on the Celtic language in eastern Britain, nor to the cutting adrift of the Britons of Wales from those of Cornwall, which was effected by the Saxons when they reached the Severn in the seventh century; nor to the pressure which from time to time caused the migration of south-western Britons into Brittany, where a new Dumnonia and a new Cornwall (Cornouaille) were founded.

As a proof of the close connection which existed between the Britons of Brittany and those of Cornwall may be cited the fact of the positive identity of names of persons and places still existing in these localities. When, for example, the French prisoners of war, at the end of the last century, were giving their names on being landed at Falmouth, a Breton gave his as Jean Trevanion de Caerhays, another Caerhays actually owned by one John Trevanion being situated within a few miles of the spot.

Suffice it to say that as the Saxon advance slackened at the Tamar, Cornwall was enabled to preserve her language, which she did down to the reign of Henry VIII., when we learn that "naughty (*i.e.* faulty) Englysshe" was spoken side by side with the "Cornysse speche." In the same reign we find the parson of Menheniot, near Liskeard, pleading for the liturgy to be read in Cornish, since "certain of us understand no English"; and to have the service performed in another tongue than Cornish would be to the people "like a Christmas gone."

The old language, however, was doomed, after having been driven into the promontories of the Lizard and Land's End. In registers of the time of Elizabeth a man who was called John Angove, *i.e.* John the Smith, when the book was begun, had become John Smith before it finished. Similarly Angwin (the white or fair man) became White, and so on.

It was in the fisher villages of Mount's

Bay that it made its last stand. One reason for its lingering among fishermen was that they spoke it in their boats when they went to sea. The town of Mousehole was then an important place on this coast. It was burnt by the Spaniards in



OLD PORTRAIT OF DOLLY PENTREATH.

1595, and at the same time the squire of the place, one Jenkin Keigwin, the porch of whose house forms one of our illustrations, was killed by a cannon ball, still preserved. Old associations clung to this place, and to the parish of Paul in which it was situated. Here, in 1768, Daines Barrington met with the old fishwife Dorothy, or Dolly Pentreath, whose name he made immortal as that of the last person who spoke the Cornish language.

Her portrait, which we append, is copied from an engraving in an old magazine,



THE MONOLITH TO DOLLY PENTREATH.

which shows her surrounded by the implements of her trade—a pipe and jug of ale being, as of necessity, included.

As to the relics of the language, the words current in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were collected by antiquaries dwelling on the spot. Other words have come down to us from as far back as the tenth and twelfth centuries. In the Middle Ages plays were written in it of a sacred character, and performed at stated seasons in enclosures surrounded by vallums of earth, examples of which exist at Perran near Truro, at St. Just, and elsewhere.

A tradition existed that there was a Bible in Cornish, which had been translated into that language in the fourteenth or fifteenth century by one John Trevisa. No sufficient evidence has, however, been adduced in support of this remarkable statement.

Few and far between are the words which have survived the hand of ruin. It is just possible that the tourist might meet with a few when nearing the Land's End. A mother might be heard complaining that "*the cheeld-vean had scat the cloam buzza all to jowds,*" which would mean that "the little child had broken the earthen butter-pan all to pieces"; but only two words in this are Cornish, *vean*, which means little, or dear, for one, and *buzza* (a butter-pan) for the other.

In names of places, and of families derived from them, it still survives, causing us to remember at every turn that the land we are in is the Land of a Lost Language, never to be restored.

[With regard to Dolly Pentreath, the Vicar of Paul

—the village where her grave exists—gives a few additional particulars of this historically interesting personage. "It appears," says he, "that her real name at the time of her death was Dorothy Jefferey, as Pentreath was her maiden name, which is sometimes, however, retained in Cornwall in familiar conversation among neighbours after marriage has actually changed the surname. She was probably the last person known who used Cornish as a language, though there are still many living who have a limited knowledge of old Cornish. She is reputed to have been a woman of commanding appearance, and of a somewhat hasty temper; at the time when her passion would rise to its height it found expression in the old language. Among certain folks in the surrounding neighbourhood she was suspected of being a kind of white witch; she was held in respect and some awe by the people generally, and her funeral was the scene of much heartfelt sorrow. The stone erected to her memory was at first placed in a wrong position, and the present vicar, having eluci-

dated the error, caused the monument to be removed to where it now stands, an object of interest to many visitors. Its former position was in the south wall of the churchyard, almost opposite the south porch, where it was erected by the late Prince Lucien Bonaparte and the Rev. John Garrett, who was then vicar of the parish. It has now been placed at the south-east corner of the churchyard where the remains of Dorothy Pentreath are supposed to be. During the excavation certain human remains were found, and from various particulars which have been handed down regarding this famous woman it seems most probable that these were hers. An archæologist who was present says that the skull was of particular interest, having many differences from the typical skull of the present English race. It was smaller, and had greater depth from back to front; the crown was remarkably flat, the facial angle considerable, the forehead low, but broad and prominent, and the general shape of the head was square.]