

CORNWALL

Giuseppe Marco Antonio Baretti (1716–1789)

Falmouth, 22 August 1760

Within pistol-shot of the house where I wrote my last, there is a brook with a plank over it. At the east-end of that plank Devonshire ends, and at the west-end Cornwall begins.

Cornwall is a province frequently mentioned in our ancient books of chivalry. It is represented as a country, where knights-errant often met with strange adventures: With distressed damsels riding about on milk-white palfreys in search of assistance against some giant who had robbed them of their lovers, or against some necromancer who had shut up some beautiful queen in his enchanted tower.

Why Cornwall was oftener named in those books than Devonshire or some other of the adjacent parts, is not easy to say. Perhaps some fashionable description of that country determined their choice, or perhaps in the ages of chivalry Cornwall was better known to the Italians than Devonshire and other adjacent parts on account of the tin with which it abounds. The Italians were then the greatest (perhaps the only) navigators in Europe, and knew one better than the other upon that account. Give a better guess if you can as to the predilection our romancers had for this province whenever they laid the scene in Great Britain.

As Falmouth is little less than three hundred miles from London, I expected to be much puzzled in many parts by variation of speech. But I have found that the same language is very nearly spoken all along the road. The very speech of Falmouth is so like that of London as not to give me the least trouble. This would not have been the case in Italy, where in a much shorter space you meet with dialects quite unintelligible to the Tuscans or the Romans, and, what is still more surprising, with other manners and other tenours of living, which is not perceptibly the case from London to Falmouth.

However it is lucky that I happened not to come this way about a century and half ago; for I am told that a dialect of the Welch language was then spoken throughout this province, which had certainly been utterly unintelligible to me. How the Cornish came to be quite annihilated in so short a time is matter of astonishment, considering that the present inhabitants are not colonists, but lineal descendants from the inhabitants of that age.

As it has rained apace ever since I crossed the small brook above-mentioned, I could see almost nothing these three days but the road and the inns where I alighted. I cannot therefore tell you any very remarkable thing of the country which I left behind. It was my intention to stop at Truro, and go to see the tin-mines in its neighbourhood; but this untimely rain, which still continues, has defeated my scheme, and put me quite out of humour; so that I jogged along to this place, and thus have deprived both you and myself of some entertainment and information.

Truro is the chief town of Cornwall. By what I could see of it, I liked it better than either Exeter or Plymouth. Along one of the streets lie scattered a great many square pieces of tin, each of about three hundred pounds weight, as I am told. They tell me likewise, that tin is dug out of the mine along with a great deal of earth; and not in bits or lumps, but in grains as small as common sand. The tin is separated from the earth by several washings, and, when thus separated, is melted and cast into those square pieces. The pieces are marked with the king's stamp, and a small duty is paid for that mark. Then it is melted again, and cast into ingots about as big as my thumb, and little less than three spans long; and in this form is tin transported wherever it goes. I got one of those ingots, and could as easily bend it as I can a rope. In the bending it gives a successive cracking sound, and yet it is not a sound, properly speaking: it is rather a noise. Nor will an ingot break by bending, except you twist it hard, and contrary-wise. The square pieces look very much like silver unpolished, and emit pretty sound or tinkling when struck with a stick or a stone.

It is a good thing for the Cornish people to have plenty of a commodity like this, which is of general use, and almost peculiar to their province. It makes them ample amends for their soil, which in many places seemed to me very barren. I do not know whether we have any tin in Italy: but I have once seen an English book of travels (whose title or author I cannot now recollect) in which it is said that the hills about Spoleto and Norcia contain much of it. If this is true, our Italians must be considered as less industrious than the English, for not searching into those hills. It is a remark made by many foreigners, that if nature does not place her treasures within the reach of our countrymen, they scarcely deign to have recourse to art in order to get at them. I will not for the present attempt to settle the ballance of industry between ours and other nations. Such a discussion would be endless. This however I will say, that we have coal-mines in several parts of Italy which were never looked into but by some curious naturalists; and that I have myself seen hundreds of poor people searching for gold in some of our rivers, particularly after a heavy shower in a torrent called *Orba*, which runs between the high Monferrat and the Genoese; and was told, that many a one is

often so lucky, as to get in a few hours as much of it as will sell for a crown and more. Yet nobody ever made the least attempt towards discovering the place from which that gold is washed down.

These and several other neglects of this nature have often been censured by strangers, and the character of the Italians for industry is not so great in foreign countries as it ought perhaps to be. But though we do not search for coals and metals, yet I cannot find in my heart peevishness enough to join with these censurers. It is true that to be rich is a most convenient thing; and you will easily believe me when I tell you, that I should not at all be displeased at an income of ten thousand pounds, and even ten thousand times more. But when I consider that Italy fares as well, taken all together, as any other country that can be named; that there are as few real wants amongst us as anywhere else; that very few amongst our poor live in perfect idleness; and that few, very few, are those who can ever be enriched by hard and constant labour: when I consider all this, I cannot indeed wish to see labour much multiplied amongst our poor. And pray, why should they

*Ransack the centre, and with impious hand
Rifle the bowels of their mother earth
For treasures better hid?*

and why should they work harder and harder, to no better purpose than to make the rich still richer?

Italy has been so favoured by providence that it might shift by itself, better perhaps than any other country, if it were put to it. We have a fertile ground that yields with moderate labour not only every necessary of life, but even a great many articles of luxury; nay, we have those articles in such plenty that we can well spare a large share for other nations, and exchange them for what we fancy will do us good. We want nothing really but a succession of good governors careful to see that people may have a share suitable to their several ranks of those blessings which the country yields with great liberality; and let English, Dutch, or other people, born in climates less kind than ours, perpetually contrive new schemes to load their poor with work, and think perpetually how to put them all (if it were feasible) about unbosoming mountains, or plowing the ocean in numberless directions, in order to increase the number of the few who are to enjoy without working. Too much must be endured by those to whose lot it falls to go upon such errands; and I like not to see our poor employed in occupations that kill some and harrass many.

I know that politicians and traders have millions of things ready to offer against reasonings like this. The very dullest amongst them, thinks himself equal to the talk of proving that the Italians, because less industrious, must of course be less happy than the English or the Dutch, who are the modern patterns of industry. But let us take notice that in the dictionary of traders and politicians, riches and happiness are made perfectly synonymous, though they are not strictly so in the lexicon of philosophers; and let us reflect above all, that it is impossible to enrich the hundredth part of the inhabitants of any country, but through the hard and incessant labour of the other ninety nine parts.

Falmouth Still, One o'clock in the afternoon, 23 August 1760

My trunk has been carried this minute on-board; I have already dined; I have paid four guineas for the permission of embarking; and have no further business here but to wait for the signal of departure. The weather is perfectly fair, and the wind as favourable as one can wish, since the streamer on the mast-head points exactly to Lisbon.

It was a most lucky thing that I reached Falmouth last night. Had I tarried four and twenty hours longer on the road, I should have been obliged to pass a week or a fortnight here, waiting for another packet; which had proved somewhat vexatious, as this place affords no other amusement to an unknown stranger, but that of walking about, or looking on the sea.

Last night I supped with some gentlemen just arrived from the place where I am going. They had a very bad passage. Calms and storms alternately; and were full four and forty days about it. If this was to be my case, it would heartily make me curse my curiosity to see Portugal and Spain. However let us hope for the best. I have now advanced too far to retreat, and will take my chance.

So by and by I shall be in England no more! This is no pleasing consideration. By and by I shall be tost up and down the waves. And this other consideration, do you think it pleasing? But what is really not pleasing, I shall have no other company on board, except the people that belong to the packet. What shall I do to employ my time if the passage proves long? Scribble and read. But a man cannot read and scribble forever. I shall want a little talk likewise; and the people of the packet, I suppose, will have other business to mind than my converse. Put all this together, and say whether my present situation can raise your envy. But it is a folly to abandon ourselves to our imaginations when they are of the gloomy kind.

I had not much rest last night, as I went to bed much vexed at the rain that continued pouring without any fort of discretion. But rising with the sun, I was mightily pleased to see it shine in its greatest glory, and not the least speck

of a cloud in the whole horizon. I walked along the shore, waiting for the captain of the packet, with whom I was to go for the passport. In my walk I met with a gentleman, an early riser, it seems, as well as myself. I bowed; he bowed. Going for Lisbon, sir? Yes, sir. I hope you will have a good passage. I thank you kindly. Words beget words. We said something of the war; we made a jest of the French; praised the king of Prussia, prince Ferdinand, and so forth. Then he came to talk of Falmouth. He told me that he traded much in pilchards; and that he sent every year several ship-loads to several parts of Europe, and particularly to Italy.

Pilchards, as I could collect from his discourse, are the chief commodity that the Falmouth people have for trade. The fish comes in this neighbourhood generally three times a year, and always in large shoals. That which is caught in winter proves best and sells best. They take immense quantities of it, salt it, stow it in large barrels, and sell it for the greatest part to the several catholic nations. Should the Pope turn Protestant, and abolish lent and meagre days, or only tell us that it is no sin to eat a good fowl on a Friday, the Falmouthians would have no great temptation to laugh at the jest. Yet, besides this resource, they have money necessarily circulating in the town, in consequence of the many packets here stationed for several parts of the West-Indies, Spain, and Portugal. Nor is this country barren and unpleasant. I like very well what I have seen of it, and Falmouth seems to me one of those innumerable places where a man may live agreeably, provided he has wherewithal to supply all his wants. But hark! It is the signal gun that calls me on board with its resounding voice. So farewell England, farewell again and again.

Giuseppe Marco Antonio Baretti. *A Journey from London to Genoa: Through England, Portugal, Spain, and France* (1770):1:30–39.