WAKEMAN'S WANDERINGS

AT THE SHRINE AND HAUNTS OF THE POET GRAY—I.

Stoke Pogus, Where the Accidents of Rural Retirement Gave Our Tongue Its Most Matchless Elegy—William Penn's Descendants as Lords of the Ancient Manor—Sylvan Scenes with Splendid Historic Environment.

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STOKE POGES, England, Oct. 12.—I once knew a little old bookworm who haunted the New York libraries, and whose manner, ways and character bore a most striking resemblance to that poet who wrote the most perfect elegy in the English tongue—Thomas Gray.

He was a little, dainty man, with silvered hair and a crooked paunch—his most striking physical characteristic if his fine, pensive blue eyes were not banning upon you. His clothing was faultless. His manners were courtly. His very pensiveness was benignant and restful. He seemed to exhale an odor of musk and mignonette, and as I used to look at him for an Eighteenth century remainder, the grotesque notion always came that his melancholy sighs of pleasure or disapproval as he fed upon the musty tomes before him, could they be given physical aspect, would conform to the pearly lavender of his ample stock and spotless trousers.

By and by I missed him. His little paunch had gone riot and overcome his stomach with gout or something, and the dainty and learned little bookworm had turned from the tomes of the Astor and Mercantile to the outlines tome of eternity. I was sure that here was another Gray. Yes, he had been, I found, supported in academy, college, university and in travel by the thrift and trade of two women, who blindly believed that in time he would astonish the world with the product of his genius. Like Gray, he never earned a penny; his unconscious winsomeness conquered all; his learning was vast, and his indolence was astounding. He had spent a lifetime in exhausting the historic, scientific and philosophic researches and product of others. He left tons of beginnings of great endeavors. If he had been forced into country environment, as was Gray at Stoke Pogus, he might have given the world an idyl or an elegy, and then the likeness would have been complete.

The very accident of rural retirement compelled or inclined Thomas Gray to create the one bit of verse which gave him a place among the immortals. From 1742, at the age of ten, when his mother placed him in Eton, and where, tradition has it, he at once began to versify until he enjoyed of inertia and gout in the arms of Dr. James Brown, Master of picturesque old Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, on the 30th of July, 1771—a period of forty-four years—he was as continuously in an atmosphere of books as any man who ever lived. For his day and time he was the most variously and penetratingly learned man in Europe.

He practically read for and from book knowledge. His devotion to research seemed an endless fascination of acquirement for the thing or fact encompassed, rather than that healthful acquisition of knowledge for the uses to which it may be wisely put.

It is no doubt also true that had he not written the "Elegy" his place in the biographies would have been no more than "Thomas Gray, erudite annotator, accomplished translator and sometime companion of Horace Walpole." Because his surpassing genius, through the blessed incident of rural inspiration, for once burst the fetters of sodden booklap enslavement and its consequent physical indolence, he attained fame and left us our most perfect revelation of tenderest emotions and introspections to the universal human heart. The malignancy of Johnson is quite forgiven for the one honest sentence he ever wrote about Gray. "Had Gray written another thing," said the cantankerous master of words, "it had been vain to blame and useless to praise him."

For these and other reasons the one place in all the world—Stoke Pogus—which prompted a single, incomparable example of what Gray might have been to literature had he been shut away from the deadening influence of Cambridge books, and perhaps compelled to earn his own living, becomes doubly interesting. Besides the poet resided here for frequent intervals from 1749 to 1758. His grave is here. A stupendous monument stands almost within sight of his old home. The very church in which he worshiped, and the churchyard rendered dear to the hearts of all men by his melodious, mournful elegy, remain today just as he saw and knew them in life. The place, too, has some historic importance, and the manor of Stoke Park was once the home of the descendants of William Penn, many of whom are buried in the family vault in the nave of the mossy old church.

But better than all else, you will find the place a marvelous revelation of the elegy, as you have already felt the elegy to be perfect interpretation of those exquisite emotions which only the rarest scene and associative condition can impart. Our New World affections cling very tenderly to certain Old World shrines. They fold about them a filmy glamour of loving idolatry, and cradle them in the soft and misty memories of the heart. I can recall but few which are not better for the distant sightless lullaby, and this is one.

Stoke Pogus is a thinly settled village or a blankly settled township in Buckinghamshire, not over twenty-five miles west of London and about two miles north of the railway station of Slough, which is in turn the same distance north of Windsor and Eton. It derives its unique name from Aumin de Stoke, who brought the manor in marriage to a certain Robert Pogeis, a knight of the shire in the Twelfth century. In the time of Edward III the estate passed into the possession of Sir John Molyns. He had a license from the king to fortify and embattle a mansion here, and it was he who built the picturesque old church made famous by Gray's "Elegy." The manor descended through female heirs to the great earls of Nanning ton, one of whose rebuilt the manor house early in the reign of Elizabeth. Then Sir Edward Coke possessed it and sumptuously entertained Elizabeth here. Remains of this splendid manor house are still standing a few rods north west of the old church.

Aside from its poetic associations, the manor came to have peculiar interest to Americans when, in 1760, it was purchased from the noble family of Cobham by Thomas Penn, second son of the great founder of Pennsylvania by his second wife, Hannah Callowhill. The grave of William Penn is but nine miles distant, beside the quaint old Quaker meeting house at Jordan's, and all of Penn's descendants through the male line of this son, Thomas, who have since deceased are lying in the Penn family vault in the old Stoke Pogis church. Thomas Penn's eldest son, the last John Penn and grandson of the founder, was "a virtuous, builder and ornamentor of fine residences" and also an author. He built the great house in Kensington Gardens, and in 1789 the present noble mansion of Stoke Hall, which stands a few hundred yards to the south of the church and the old Stoke manor house. At the time of Gray's residence at Stoke Pogus old Stoke Hall was the home of Lady Cobham, whose suites to secure acquaintance and subsequent friendly intercourse with the shy poet, who then lived with his mother and aunt in West End cottage, about a mile distant, are "preserved in the romantic incidents so felicitously related in Gray's facetious poem of the "Long Story."

The new Stoke Hall was built by John Penn from designs by Wyatt. It is chiefly of brick, stuccoed, and comprises a large quadrangle and two wings. The entrance front is ornamented by a colonnade of ten Doric columns, approached by imposing flights of steps, leading to the immense oval central Marble Hall. The south front, also adorned with a colonnade, has wings flanked Doric columns, and is 180 feet in length. Many visitors here mistake the old manor house at the north of the church for Gray's former home. It is a beautiful and picturesque half ruin, occupied by the keeper of Stoke Park. Parklands are the largest I have seen in any old English manor house, and there are undoubtedly today many beeches in them by avowed invention of old time since them were originally planted in the entire construction of the walls.

John Penn built the modest yet noted mansion of Solitude, still standing on the bank of the Schuylkill, opposite Fairmount, in Philadelphia. Many of the seven forest remaining Pennsylvania "Proprietary" licenses was expended here. Vast sums were used upon new Stoke Hall and its library, stationary and paintings. He also erected from oblivion the actual burial place of Gray by placing the massive slab against the church wall beneath the vestry window, and erected at his own expense the huge monument to the poet which dominates all the slumberous scene.

On the death of John Penn, Stoke Manor was inherited by his younger brother, Granville Penn, who died at Stoke in 1811. He was an author and was admitted to be one of the most learned English laymen of his time. His eldest son, Granville John Penn, not only "restored" but practically rebuilt Gray's home, West End Cottage, on the West End Road. It was converted into a sumptuous Elizabethan mansion, with every accessory of ornament and beauty. In 1849 it was sold to a gentleman named Darby, but was afterward purchased by A. Allingham, Esq., whose family and heirs still possess it, and with it the right of use of the Gray family pew in the southwest corner of the south aisle of the old Stoke Pogus church.

A curious illustration of the decadence of great families, as well as of vast fortunes even in England, is found in the final extinction of this the most eminent branch of the Penn family, and the diversion of their one great estate. Every one is familiar with the archestrig of William Penn's American possessions, in which the "estate of the late proprietaries was vested in the Commonwealth," the payment by Pennsylvania of £130,000 sterling to the devisees and legatees, "in remembrance of the affectionate spirit of the Founder," and the granting by the English parliament, in 1790, of an annuity of £4,000 to his heirs and descendants. All this was in addition to the rich English possessions of the Penns, which included the manor of Stoke. And yet on March 20, 1887, Granville John Penn, last of the manor of Stoke, died in his chair with an unsigned will in his hands. All his properties were inherited by his brother, Thomas. They had been left to the clerical orders and a man of extraordinary learning, was subsequently declared insane and incapable of managing his estates.

These passed into the tentacles of that great English octopus, the chancery court, and finally, after the death of the unfortunate Thomas, got into the possession of William Stuart, gentleman, of Aldenham Abbey, in the shire of Herts. Today the Penns of Stoke Pogus are no more. The sweeping children of a country squire have banished the tender wraiths that peopled the home and haunts of Gray at West End Cottage, while the lord of the manor—whose parkkeeper now toss as a farmhouse the ancient home of the Cobhams, the Cokes and the lordly house of Hastings, where Queen Elizabeth was royally entertained, and whose own present princely habitation was once the palatial seat of the Penns—is a maker of matches in London!

Still no one can come to the sweet old place without being touched by the tender spirit of repose which broods not alone upon Stoke Pogus Church and churchyard, upon the entire Stoke manor, where, half hidden beneath sylvan shades, appear the very place where the poet lived and sang, the picturesque old ruin where once disported lords and ladies, and even royalty itself, and the grander seat of the Penns, but upon the entire historic parish.

All its environment strangely stirs the heart and memory. Over to the south is royal Windsor, through whose successive epochs the whole vast book of English history may be written, from the Victorian era to the time of Arthur, his knights and the Table Round. Milton wrote his "L'Allegro" at Horton, just below. Cooper's Hill, consecrated to the muse of Denham, is nearer still. Herschel made his first great discoveries in astronomy in that old red brick manor house beyond Slough on the highway to Windsor. Edmund Burke and Edmund Waller lived at near Beaconsfield. Not two hours' walk distant is the grave of William Penn, and quite as near are the famous Burnham Beeches so discovered by Gray himself when upon his first visit to the region which his genius was destined to make one of the best loved spots of earth. I visited these, as will all who come to this spot where the "Elegy" was written. But no pen can again so delightfully tell of Burnham Beeches, and the languid, lazy, easy going Gray himself, as did Gray's in this bit from one of his charming letters to his friend Horace Walpole:

"My scene is a great hunter in imagination; his dogs take up every chair in the house, so I am forced to stand as the present writing; and though the gout forbids his galloping after them in the field, yet he continues still to ingulfe his eyes and nose with their countenable noises and scrub. He holds me mighty cheap, I perceive, for walking when I should ride and reading when I should hunt. My comfort amidst all this is that I have not a thousand of half a mile through a green lane a farmer the vulgar call it a common) all my own, at least as good as so, for I pay no homage thing in it but myself. It is a little chain of mountains and precipices, mountains it is true, that will exceed your modest ideas of the chalk, nor are the declivities quite so amusing as Dover Cliff, but just such sides as people who love their necks as well as I do may venture to climb, and scraps that give the eye as much pleasure as if they were more dangerous."

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No. 6—For Ogden, Provo, Manti, &c. ..... 8:45 a.m.
No. 8—For Ogden and West ..... 11:59 p.m.
No. 4—For Ogden and the West ..... 11:59 a.m.

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No. 3—From Provo, Grand Junction and the East ..... 11:59 p.m.
No. 7—From Provo, Parson, Eureka and all points East ..... 10:30 a.m.
No. 6—From Ogden, Provo, Manti, and the West ..... 7:30 p.m.
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