

CHAPTER VII

I stay in a garden by the Sea of Galilee, discover the ruined church of the Loaves and Fishes, try to reconstruct the life of the lake-side as Jesus knew it, visit all that remains of Capernaum and the desolation that is now Bethsaida.

1

THERE is a state of mind for which there is, so far as I know, no name. It is not happiness, which is an active appreciation of things, neither is it contentment, which is placid and might be termed the evening of happiness. The only words I can think of are both so worn-out, debased and generally ill-used that they will probably make you smile. One is "well-being" and the other is our old friend, "love."

Everyone can, I hope, remember a time in childhood when this state of mind lasted not for seconds but for days and weeks on end. Sometimes by an effort of the imagination one attempts to project oneself back into those shining moments of life when the mind, untarnished by sin and undaunted by Eternity, lived as the butterfly lives, searching for, and finding, only sweetness everywhere.

In those days the earth and the flowers smelt more richly and the sun seemed brighter than it is today; the rain, the snow and the mist were enchantments, and we were unconsciously a part of the visible beauties which surrounded us. Life is to most of us a gradual growing-away from this enchantment. But amid the million trials and difficulties of life that can harden and embitter it is possible now and again to recapture fractional seconds of this earlier world: so momentary are they that one is left wondering whether they ever happened, or whether they may be a stray memory of

some other existence.

When I awakened in Tabgha on the first morning and looked at the Sea of Galilee, I felt such an unutterable sense of peace and so great a detachment from the world that I might have been Adam gazing with wonder at the Garden of Eden. My room was set in a tropical jungle of trees. Huge sweet flowers, whose name I do not know, climbed over the little iron balcony and twisted themselves round the windows. Although the sun had only just risen, the blossoms shook with the weight of bees; and down below the blue lake was calm in the first light of the sun. It was so still, so silent, so lovely.

I remembered my arrival on the previous evening. Father Tapper, a big square-bearded Rhinelander, wearing a white sun helmet and a priestly suit of black with an alpaca jacket, came striding forward with a great crunching of feet over the path of white lake pebbles. Above his head were bowers of hibiscus blossoms; behind him shone and glowed his incredible garden.

"Ah, you have come, my friend!" he cried, placing a great hand on my shoulder, and I looked at his blue eyes, his apple-pink cheeks, his square, brown beard and his broad shoulders, and thought that the Crusaders must have looked just like Father Tapper. "Let us talk."

We went into a room where the blinds were down against the heat, where doors and windows were blue with mosquito netting. As Father Tapper lit his pipe, I noticed his large, brown gardener's hands. The garden in which the Tabgha Hospice stands is the only patch of cultivated beauty round the Sea of Galilee. From Tiberias it looks like a little dark spot on the lake-side, but when you are there the palm trees, the eucalyptus wood, the walls of purple bougainvillea, the lemon and the orange trees, the carnations, the geraniums, the Persian lilac, the nasturtiums and the banks of hibiscus

flowers, form a little world of their own, a sanctuary made more precious by the bleak, bare hills and the wilderness that lie all round. This garden overflowing with flowers, musical with water, is the only spot round the shores of Galilee in which it is possible to dream for a little of the once luxuriant glory that ringed the western shore in ancient times. The lake as Jesus knew it must have been something like Tabgha.

Father Täpper and his predecessors have, like good Rhinelanders, tried to bring to the shores of the Sea of Galilee a little turreted castle copied from those that stand on the headlands from St. Goar to Mannheim. But the lake of Galilee said "No!" And the flowers have flung their richness over the walls and the creepers have climbed them like a storming party, so that it is only from a certain place in the garden that you can still detect beneath the coloured bowers the crenellated outline of a little toy castle.

We talked until the sun had almost set. We spoke of Jesus, of Bethsaida (which many people think is Tabgha), of Capernaum, of Magdala, where Mary Magdalene was born, of Peter, of Andrew and of Philip; and of the customs house where Matthew once took toll of the lakeside traffic. Father Täpper's pipe went out. He drew his chair a bit nearer. Above the long square beard the blue eyes of a German boy of about ten years of age gazed at me, wide with enthusiasm as he described his gardening and the strange things that a gardener finds under the soil on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Not long since he and his Bedouin had been digging on the property near the lake-side and suddenly—Ach wunderbar!—they saw in the brown earth a gleam of blue and then a flash of gold and then a touch of green.

Then they flung down their spades and worked with their bare hands so that nothing should be hurt, for they had discovered the long lost mosaic pavement of the little Roman

church of the Loaves and Fishes. It had been lost since Aetheria of Aquitaine came to pray in Galilee in the year 386, and now there it was with the sunlight shining on it once again. And when they went on scraping and digging they found the stone on which legend says our Lord blessed the bread and the fish. It had been used as an altar and lay there under the soil poised on four little Roman pillars. . . .

"I will take you there," said Father Tapper, "and you shall see. It is covered with sand and soil to keep the sun from hurting it, but someday I wish to build a roof over it and make it safe for ever."

Now I stood in the stillness of the morning looking down on the garden. The sun, rising from behind the Gergesene Hills, was climbing into the cloudless sky, and the garden was a network of sunlight and shade and full of the little early morning noises, the squeakings, the rustlings, the sound of wings, the cooing of pigeons and, from a fountain buried under trailing flowers, the falling of water.

The years fell shivering away from me and I was at that moment a small boy again, up and awake before anyone, looking out on the lovely world. I seemed to be a part of it and it seemed to be a part of me. The blue kingfisher, balancing himself on the very top of a fir tree, had come to say good-morning to me, and the little black lizard on the path who, seeing me move, had stopped dead in his tracks with his head lifted, he also, sharing this moment, shared fellowship. The same joy in life that used to send me running over the meadows at sun-rise, that would draw me to the corner of woods where the rabbits played, and to the edge of streams where the trout lay, drove me now to feel and to touch the morning, and to hold it in my arms. I flung a towel over my shoulder and went down the garden to a path cut through rocks at the edge of the lake. It ran south into a

dark wood of eucalyptus trees that melted into the broad deserted Plain of Gennesaret.

There was not a soul to be seen. At the edge of the wood a stream of fresh water flowed from a pool overhung by precipitous crags. The pool was very still and deep. I flattened myself against a tree trunk and watched two kingfishers diving. They flew in circles over the pool and would suddenly begin to flutter in the air, at the same time pointing their long beaks towards the water until they looked like poised darts. Then they would drop like stones. They would touch the water swiftly and lightly and rise again; and, as they wheeled, the sun would shine a moment on the little silver fish in their beaks. The stones were covered with water tortoises. They looked like mud puddings, some dark from the water, others light and sun-dried. When I moved, they slid softly from their rocks into the pool.

The edge of the wood near the lake was a narrow half-moon of shingle. I stepped from my clothes and walked into the Sea of Galilee. The water was painfully cold, but I liked it. The stones underfoot were hard, but I did not mind them. I walked on and on into the shallow water. The sun was warm on my body but my knees were in ice. Soon it was deep enough to swim. I hugged myself in cowardice for a moment and then went in. The water was no longer cold and I struck out towards the Gergesene hills, which rose up from the lake with the morning shadows dark and clear on their sides. I swam back slowly. To the left I could see the shore curving south to Tiberias. I could see the little cluster of white boxes that was the town. In front of me was the green Plain of Genesaret and the dark belt of the eucalyptus trees. The sensuous, satisfying touch of the water, the beautiful blue water, was ecstasy on this enchanted morning. I heard a clapping in the air and, lying on my back, watched the flock of white pigeons from Tabgha wheeling against the sky. And

there was a little silver moon that I had not noticed until then, lying on its back against the blue.

I ran back to Tabgha. And there was honey for breakfast.

2

I went with Father Tapper to see the ruins of the Church of the Loaves and Fishes. It is only five minutes' walk from the hospice.

No one knows when this church was built. It was probably erected in late Roman times and rebuilt. All that is left is the pavement and the stumps of a few pillars. The old Bedouin who guards the precious relic took up a broom and swept away the covering of earth, and with each sweep exquisite little pictures flashed into the sunlight. The floor was formed of small, delicately tinted mosaics in which blue and green predominated. The artist, whoever he was, knew and loved the bird life of the Sea of Galilee and rendered it in his little coloured stones in a most affectionate way. The pavement is divided into a number of squares about the size of an average carpet, and each square is a design of decorative birds and animals, but so lovingly done, and with a sly sense of humour too, that one can imagine the creator of this pavement hiding in the lakeside reeds, smiling to himself as he watched the often absurd movements of ducks and cranes and the self-assured twittering little birds that hung to the rushes.

I liked his picture of an extraordinarily smug goose pulling a lotus flower. There was another spirited picture, a fight between a heron and a serpent. There were also plump quail. And I admired the astonishing skill he showed in capturing, in what one would imagine to be an intractable material, that sudden moment when a water-fowl stands up in the water and flaps its wings once or twice, like a man yawning and

stretching his arms. It is just a flash, and is gone. But this man who centuries ago watched the water-fowl on the Sea of Galilee has managed to pin down this moment in his little tinted stones, for among his triumphs is a bird rather like a crane that is about to flap and stretch, chest out, tail up, and one wing just slightly higher than the other.

The only four-legged animal in the designs of this great but unknown artist is a funny little fellow rather like a rabbit. There is a red ribbon round his neck. I like to think that this was the artist's pet, for a man who observed Nature so accurately and so humorously must have loved animals. I also like to think that he put this little creature into his design in the confident hope that it would please God.

The central theme of the mosaic is a basket containing loaves of bread on each side of which is a fish.

There was something appealing about this pavement because, I suppose, unlike the usual relics of antiquity, a broken pillar or the plinth of a column, it had come out of its grave with a message that conquered time and language. If a voice had suddenly spoken to us from the earth, saying, "I think the wild duck on the lake are very amusing, don't you? Have you noticed how they turn upside down? And have you observed their expressions when they bob up again? Then the fatness of quails and the thinness of storks, how amusing they are!"—if, as I say, a voice had spoken to us in those words, we could not have felt nearer to the artist.

The Miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand did not, of course, take place on this side of the lake at all, but the little church must have been a memorial to it.

Standing on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, it is easy to visualize the details of this miracle. News had just been brought to Jesus that Herod Antipas had murdered John the Baptist in order to gratify the injured vanity of Herodias. Our Lord is advised, or perhaps He considers it wise, to with-

draw from the territory of Antipas. In order to do so it was necessary only to cross the lake, for the desert mountains of the eastern shore were in the tetrarchy of Philip. Accordingly, says St. Matthew, "he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart." In other words, He crossed over to the deserted eastern banks of the lake.

Now, while the little boat was crossing the six or seven miles of water, a great multitude carrying their sick with them "followed him on foot out of the cities." When you know the shape of the Sea of Galilee, this incident becomes very vivid. Evidently the crowds had converged, as usual, on Capernaum, but when they discovered that the Master had gone, they looked over the water to follow the direction of His boat. They saw with joy that He was going only to the opposite shore, probably to the little fishing port of Bethsaida Julias at the inlet of the Jordan. This meant that if they lost no time and, racing round the northern end of the lake, waded over the shallow Jordan, they would reach Bethsaida Julias almost as soon as Jesus. We can therefore place the Miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand more or less accurately as happening on the brown hills nearly opposite Capernaum, for if Jesus had taken a southerly course down the lake the multitudes could not have caught up with Him on foot, and in fact would not have attempted to do so.

As Jesus crossed the water He would see this great race of over five thousand round the north end of the lake, and He would know that whatever thoughts He may have had, of praying in a desert place apart and of meditation on the death of the Forerunner, were fated to be given up in service to the crowds. No sooner had He landed than the crowds came to Him, and we learn that He "was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd."

With the approach of sunset and the swift coming of night

the disciples became anxious for the multitude, hungry and in a desert place. They advised Jesus to disband them and send them home.

"Give ye them to eat," answered Jesus.

They returned to say that only five loaves and two fishes could be found. St. John, whose account of the miracle is remarkable and detailed, says that the loaves and fishes belonged to a boy. The exact words are: "There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?"

Commentators have imagined that this lad was one of the bread boys who are still to be seen in Arab towns, sometimes with strips of dried fish which they sell with the bread.

"And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would. When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost."

There is one point in St. John's account of the miracle which is extremely interesting. In describing the fish eaten on this occasion he uses the Greek word *opsarion*, which our translators render as "small fish." St. John is the only evangelist to use this word, and the real meaning is not "small fish" but "a savoury dish" or, as we might say, hors d'œuvres. This is exactly what the small pickled fish of Galilee were in the time of Christ.

This is a wonderful instance of the vivid local colour which has been detected in the Fourth Gospel, because no one unacquainted with the life and speech of Galilee could have employed this word.

Again, so it seems to me, St. John conclusively proves his Galilean origin in his account of our Lord's appearance to the disciples in the dawn, when they are fishing near the shore. Who except a fisherman would have worried about

the condition of his net at such a moment? The Master who had been crucified was standing in the greyness of the dawn, calling to them from the shore, but St. John says that when they drew the great haul of fish to land "yet was not the net broken."

It would never occur to a man of any other occupation, and certainly never to a student writing in a study, to note such a detail. But the Galilean fisherman who nets a heavy catch is always anxious about the net, because the bottom of the lake is covered with sharp stones for perhaps twenty or thirty feet before the sand begins. What a shouting goes up today as a heavy net is drawn out of the deep water towards the sharp stones, with what care the fishermen run thigh-deep into the lake to lift the precious burden clear of rocks!

In revealing details like this, and in the use of the word *opsarion*, St. John proclaims his origin. If one came across the word "smokie" or "ling" used as St. John uses the word *opsarion*, one would have very good reason to conclude that the writer was a Scot.

I have tried not to bore the reader with the learned scholastic battles that are waged round the Gospels, but I would like to suggest that, while it is perfectly simple to sit in a study and argue about Matthew, Mark and Luke, no man ought to presume to write about John until he has lived for some time in Galilee.

3

I awakened at sunrise. The feathery pink clouds high in the sky above the Gergesene Hills, and the great fan of light that rayed downwards on the water, were so lovely that I flung on my dressing-gown and ran through the garden with a camera. I might with luck capture something of that beautiful dawn over Galilee before it passed away. And the