

## A MARRIAGE OF OPPOSITES

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Grace Taylor was born in 1852 and from her earliest days she knew poverty and even starvation. One of a large family at Horbury Brigg, Yorkshire, her father was a miner and she was sent to work in the mills at the age of ten. The State offered no education for poor people until 1870 but she learned to read and write at Sunday School. She was a cheerful, lively, pretty girl who was dressed in shawl and clogs.

It was through the church that she met the new curate, Sabine Baring-Gould, a tall, handsome, rather domineering man, just twice her age. His background was very different from hers - he came of

the old, privileged, landowning class. But the pupils at the Sunday School were very fond of him because he knew how to entertain them. They would often cry - "You mun tell us a story afore you go!"

Disraeli had said that England consisted of Two Nations, the Rich and the Poor. The curate was one of the rich whom Disraeli had in mind, whilst Grace Taylor was a product of the lower orders. It was an age of massive class gulfs between people. The Taylors usually served people like the Baring-Goulds as labourers and servants. Grace, the lass from the mill, was an uncultivated working girl who spoke with an impenetrable West Riding dialect. Sabine Baring-Gould was a gentleman, a Cambridge graduate, and a considerable intellectual.

Despite all this, the couple fell in love. Sabine's family were outraged and Grace's parents were equally shocked. In the social climate of that time nobody could see happiness coming of such a union.

Sabine sent Grace to stay with some friends at York. She learned how to speak and behave like an upper-class girl. In a remarkably short time she was transformed into the kind of girl who could make a successful wife for an upper-class gentleman.

They were married in 1868 at Wakefield. It was a modest ceremony 'tacked onto' the end of another service. Such was the hostility to the marriage that none of the relations were present. The couple moved to East Mercia in Essex where Sabine had obtained a living. They were very much in love but Grace discovered that Sabine had a temper. He once became so furious, in trying to paper a room, that Grace fled back to Wakefield and asked the vicar to unmarry them!

Then Sabine became rector of Lewtrenchard in Devon where he was also squire of the family estate. They were to remain there for 40 years until the end of their lives.

Grace had travelled a long way socially since her days at Horbury Brigg. Thirty servants were employed and she was in charge of a great country house. She became accustomed to entertaining

the aristocracy and her role was that of an upper-class lady. But she had always been 'a lady' in the real sense of that word, and she had been trained as Sabine's wife. Her attitude towards people was always the same, whatever their position in life, she was the same with a lord as with a labourer.

Whilst Sabine continued working as an Anglican clergyman (he was a High Churchman when this was not popular), his other activities became so enlarged that he had to employ a curate. Though he is now forgotten as a novelist, he was then very popular and he wrote 50 novels. He wrote biographies, he was a medieval historian, a theologian, and an expert on folk music. The author of several famous hymns, he wrote "Onward Christian Soldiers!" in his Yorkshire days.

Deeply religious and an emotional man, he was a fine preacher. Unusual for those days, he would never preach for more than ten minutes. His sermons were treasured by those who heard them and remembered years later. Sometimes he could not continue because he was amused by something, or moved by an idea that had struck him. If his curate, when preaching, ignored 'the ten minute rule', Sabine would begin moaning and throwing hymn books about.

His writing made him absent-minded. On one occasion he allowed an itinerant butcher to sell him 40 pounds of meat. To get rid of it they had to ask many people to dinner.

Perhaps his most endearing characteristic was his sense of humour. In a scholarly book he added a footnote - "For the details of this, see Treumann's Historic Notices of Collegiate Buildings" No such book exists: it was one of his little jokes.

If he thought a guest at dinner had taken too much wine he used to take two rubber bulbs joined by a tube and place them under the tablecloth. When inflated, this caused the guest's plate to wobble and sometimes such a visitor would run to his room!

At the beginning of the 1914-1918 war Sabine faked 'call-up' papers for his step-mother's fat and aged pony, and sent them to her house in a buff OHMS envelope, greatly to the consternation of the old lady who was quite taken in.

Sabine Baring-Gould was an unusual character, in some respect larger than life. He made many enemies for he detested the bishops and would not mix with the clergy in meetings. Though of well-to-do, conventional background, he was very much a radical politically. Enormously energetic and fanatically punctual, he was a workaholic; he was impulsive and yet reticent about his own feelings. Unlike most of us, he did not care what others thought of him. Though there was an exception to that - he cared what his wife thought and depended on her greatly, indeed, it was through her that he found peace and security. The shrewd advice which Grace gave him saved him from many an error and from problems which arose out of his awkward personality.

Sometimes he would write foolish, angry letters which he would read out to Grace. "Send it tomorrow" she would say. She knew that by the next day he would have the sense to tear the letter up.

She had no sympathy with his extravagance - she knew what it was to be poor. When he planned to build a ballroom, she told him bluntly that it was an absurd idea.

Grace was a cheerful, outgoing, level-headed woman, whilst Sabine had none of those characteristics. At heart he was a solitary, depressed man. His devotion to her was equalled by her love for him and by some paradox these 'opposites' were at one.

The books she read were light and undemanding. Though a highly intelligent woman she was not an intellectual. If he wanted to take her to a play by Shakespeare she would persuade him to take her to a musical comedy instead.

The marriage which had started so unpromisingly lasted for almost fifty years and was most happy. They had fifteen children and Lewtrenchard Manor (now an hotel) was a happy home. Though so much her husband's junior, Grace died in 1923. Sabine, aged 89, had three words carved on the gravestone of his beloved Grace - *Dimidium Animae Meae* - 'Half my life'.

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