

WAS BARING-GOULD'S STORY OF BODY-SNATCHING BILSTON BASED?

Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924) was a prolific writer on Folklore, Myth and Legend. Cambridge educated, he was ordained in 1864 and held several clerical appointments but never allowed his duties as a clergyman to stem his literary flow.

Around the turn of the century he spent many vacations at Kinver, being on very friendly terms with the vicar of this old Staffordshire parish. During such stays his pen was never idle and he wrote romanticised versions of old folklore tales. One of these, entitled *Bladys of Stewponey* (concerning the adventures of a local highwayman) was made into a silent 'movie' during the 1920's which was actually 'shot' in and around Kinver using actual locations from Baring-Gould's book and enlisting villagers as film extras.

Another, from the same period of his writing career dealt with an old body-snatching legend. For the gist of this we are indebted to Cannock reader, Mr. J. Cook, who tells us that it stems from a handwritten manuscript which has been handed down through his family and is inscribed ... 'copied from the writing of the Rev. S. Baring-Gould...'

Mr. Cook also informs us that his maternal grandfather (who he believes copied the Baring-Gould extract), was born in Ettingshall and this leads Wm to wonder if the 'locale' of Baring-Gould's bodysnatching episode was Bilston, pointing out that the town possesses a place called Mount Pleasant with the local Church and burial-grounds close by. Why, else (he wonders) would his grandfather (who was a collier) have taken the trouble to copy out, by hand, Baring-Gould's story - which reads as follows ...

A strong suspicion was entertained that the graves there had been rifled, and were so continually, and it was proposed to the parish authorities to have lamps and organize a night watch. But the officials shrank from the expense, and some people reasoned that it was as well to allow the resurrectionists to get bodies from graves, as bodies the surgeons must have, rather than run the risk of inducing these scoundrels to imitate the proceedings of Burke by killing individuals for the purpose. Within a stone's throw of the church was a commodious residence called Mount Pleasant. A man, apparently well to do, a Mr. Gosling, took this house, and brought in a somewhat mixed party of men and women. Neighbours thought the family peculiar, but as he was a pleasant-spoken man and the ladies of the party were affable and sympathetic, and as he paid his way more than content. The females of the Gosling household attended every funeral, and expressed their tenderest feelings of regard and pity for the mourners, asked all particulars about the deceased, his or her age, and what malady had hurried the lamented one to his grave, as also occasionally whether the deceased had good teeth. At night, immediately after every funeral, the men of the party stole forth, furnished with crowbar and spades, and equipped with a sack or two, and made their way into the graveyard, where they worked by the light of a dark lantern. The sexton had been squared, and he had not made the grave very deep, nor had he heaped the earth thickly over it.

But the gang did not confine operations to the last interment. They opened other graves, and if the corpses were too much decomposed to be of any commercial value they contented themselves with drawing all their teeth.

Neighbours now began to notice that lights were burning in Mount Pleasant at all times of the night. It was also remarked that the grave mounds bore a suspicious look of having been tampered with - not those recently made only, but others more ancient.

In the nearest house was a shrewd, observant servant-girl, and the lights, the way they moved about at night in the rooms of the villa - not in the bedrooms, but down-stairs, at times when every one else was asleep - aroused her suspicions. Her bedroom window commanded the villa of Gosling and Co., and wake at what time she might or however early in the morning before daybreak, there the lights were. She resolved on keeping watch; and she stationed herself where, unseen, she could observe proceedings. Towards midnight she saw dark figures emerge from Mount Pleasant and make their way to the Church. Follow she did not. Her courage was not equal to that; but she waited and watched till the figures stole back, and on this occasion she distinctly saw sacks being carried on the backs of two of the men. In the morning the girl told her master what she had seen, and he at once apprised the police.

These latter now placed themselves behind the wall at night to watch what would happen; they were rewarded one night after there had been a couple of funerals in the churchyard. The constables saw the men dig and shovel for about ten minutes; heard them strike a coffin-lid, and proceed to force it up. Then by the faint light they saw them remove a corpse and put it into a sack. Thereupon one of the men came out of the yard as a scout to see that the coast was clear. After that they hoisted the body over the church-yard wall and made towards Mount Pleasant. As the constables on this occasion were but two they collected a sufficient force of watchmen and special constables, and surrounded the building, where the resurrectionists were enjoying a refreshing sleep after their labours. Scaling the wall by means of a ladder and advancing in their stocking-soles, they entered the various bedrooms, and secured four men and two women, pinioned and gagged them. They were taken completely by surprise.

In the kitchen were found two sacks. In one was the body of a girl of eighteen, in the other that of an elderly man. The cupboards and drawers were stocked with extracted teeth and implements of dentistry for drawing them.

When on the following morning it was noised about that a confederacy of body-snatchers had been captured the greatest excitement prevailed.

Gosling and his confederates were duly brought to trial, confessed their guilt, and were transported ...

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