

NOVELS AND NOVEL WRITERS BY JOSEPH HOCKING

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IV.- S. BARING GOULD

Some two years ago a review appeared in one of our leading daily papers on a historical work by the Rev. S. Baring Gould, in which it was stated that the author in question had produced something like seventy works, and that not one of them was without the stamp of genius. This was surely high praise, and while many will doubtless say that it was rather too strongly worded, none, I think, can deny that the century has produced but few more versatile, more prolific, and more fascinating writers than the squire vicar of Devonshire. In almost every department of literature his name appeared, and never without success. We see him as a writer of Church history and as a fairy storyteller, as a hymn writer and as a romancer, as an antiquarian and as a writer of songs, as one who vividly describes unfrequented parts of the earth and as one who inspires our imagination and causes our pulses to beat faster as we read the weird pages of *Mehalah*. Everywhere he goes to conquer. That his work is unequal all will admit, but no one will deny that his is the hand of a master.

Of Mr. Baring Gould as a man, however, I know but little. It has never been my fortune to meet him. This has been my loss, for those who are acquainted with him speak of him as a delightful companion, and as uniformly kind and courteous. Besides, to talk to such a man must be an education, for, being many-sided in his tastes and sympathies, he possesses a personality which is unique. It would be easy to write of Mr. Baring Gould as a hymn writer, for what modern hymn is more popular, more inspiring, than "Onward Christian Soldiers"? or what children's hymn is more delightful than "Now the day is over"? If he had given nothing else to the world he would have left a legacy which must keep his name fragrant through future generations.

But it is my work to write of Mr. Baring-Gould as Novelist, for after all it is by his novels that he is best known to the world. I have not a list of his works of fiction before me, but I think he must have issued about a dozen, most of which I have had the pleasure of reading. These works are very unequal in merit, one or two being works of genius, several very clever, while three or four are only moderate. His strength as a writer of fiction, as far as I am a judge, lies in his power to conceive strange, unconventional characters, and to surround these characters by fitting scenes and circumstances. Moreover, although his characters are strange, he makes his readers feel their reality. As an example of this, take one of the most curious stories ever written, which, while by no means one of his greatest efforts, will live in my memory, I think, as long as I live. I refer to *Margery of Quether*.

Now, an ordinary writer with this material to work upon, would have produced a story that the world would have laughed at, if they had taken the trouble to read it at all. But Mr. Baring Gould takes us back to a far-off time, and to a far-off place, in spite of constant reference to modern names and customs, and he impresses the reader with the reality of all he writes. When he writes of ordinary characters and ordinary circumstances, his work lacks interest. He has not the power of Bret Harte, who portrays the commonest and poorest

types of character, and shows how they possess elements of strength and beauty, until you love them. But, to atone for this, he has the power of discovering the strange, the uncanny, the wonderful, in life, and describing it with a great vividness. Hence, if you wish to see Mr. Baring Gould at his best, you must get those works in which his characters are altogether unlike the common run of people. These he always treats with great realism, making them remain as distinct personalities in the minds of his readers. Moreover, his genius is revealed in this: he never strains after effect; you never feel that he is labouring to produce a strange work. Rather, all he does is the natural outcome of a grim and weird imagination, which cannot help fastening upon that which is eerie, or, as the Cornish folks would say, "wisht."

The two novels by which Mr. Baring Gould will be known in the next century, and those by which I think he would like to be known, are *Mehalah* and *John Herring*. Both of these are so widely read, that it would be waste of time for me to subject either to anything like a detailed study. *Mehalah* is an Essex story, and is probably among the finest things of the kind ever written.

His other great book is *John Herring*. It is a story of Devonshire and the north of Cornwall. Here, as far as scenery and local colouring are concerned, the author is more at home than in Essex. One feels that he loves Dartmoor and its surroundings; that the customs, the dialect, and the people are dear to him. The book should, I think, have been called *Joyce*, for *Joyce* is the name of the heroine, and is certainly the most fascinating, the greatest, and the most pathetic character in the book. She is a wild, savage moorland lass. Reared among the caves and rocks of Dartmoor, without education, without children to play with, without companionship save that of a mad, savage old man, she immediately fires the imagination of the reader, and at the same time forms a fine central character, around which the author groups his minor characters and his incidents. Her devotion to John Herring is beautiful in the extreme, and, while the author never causes the tear to start to the eye, her figure is always pathetic.

In these two works Mr. Baring Gould has sounded his highest note. Near to them comes *Richard Cable*, and perhaps *The Red Spider*; but these are not works of genius. *Eve* is also a fine story, full of that kind of power for which its author is remarkable; but it falls short of the two which I regard as his greatest works. *Court Royal* is interesting, but the people lack the breath of life; indeed, many of them are more or less paper.

If I may so put it, one of the great things lacking in Mr. Baring Gould's work is what I call, for want of a better word, tenderness. I have never felt that he is truly fond of his characters. Wilkie Collins used to say that he cried because of the sorrows, and laughed because of the joys of those about whom he wrote. You can never fancy the author of *Mehalah* doing this. Indeed, you can fancy him taking a kind of artistic pleasure in the almost tragic ending of his greatest book. In a word, one does not feel that he loves the children of his fancy. He admires them, it may be, and takes a great deal of interest in their doings, but I cannot fancy him becoming distressed for them. Then again he is at times cynical. Take this saying for example, which, I think, appears in *John Herring*: "People say marriages are made in heaven. It is false. They are made in paradise - a fool's paradise." And this spirit is often traceable in his works, keeping them, I think, from rising to the heights to which they would otherwise have risen. Moreover, one has a feeling that he does not truly love his craft. Novel writing with him is a diversion, and he does not think, so he told me, that novels are destined to have any marked effect on the life of the nation. As far as I can judge, he has no feeling that

he has a "call from God," to write novels as much as he has to preach or teach in Lew Trenchard church. This fact, in my judgment, keeps him from being one of our greatest novelists. Another fact may be worth mentioning: he never reads novels. He has no patience to follow the thoughts of his brother writers. Surely this is a serious matter. Our greatest novelists are, as far as I know, readers of the best work of their fellow craftsmen. Just as a preacher is interested in the best books bearing on his work; as a doctor is careful to obtain the medical journals, or as a lawyer reads his Blackstone, so a novelist should be anxious to learn what his brother writers have to say. And it is just this lack of sympathy with his craft which keeps Mr. Baring Gould, especially in his later books, from giving the best he is able to give.

In spite of all this, however, no one can deny his power, and the great wonder is, that, engaged as he is in so many and such various pursuits, he is able to produce each year a novel of such excellence. For although such books as *Cheap Jack Zita* are not worthy to be placed by the side of *Mehalah*, they are still miles ahead of the thousand and one three-deckers with which Mudie's and Smith's shelves are cumbered. Moreover the criticisms I have dared to make, in writing about such a man, are written with hesitation and a feeling almost amounting to pain; for I shall never forget the debt of gratitude I owe him, nor the genuine pleasure I have realised when I have read some of his books, which are in my thinking, unequalled by the works, except a very few, of our contemporary writers.

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