

UNCLE SABINE & AUNT GRACE

by the late Irene Widdicombe

As we grow older, events and people in our memories of earlier years seem to take on a lustre which is missing in our present close-up view. Maybe the fact that life today is too hurried to allow of people growing to their full capabilities and developing along their own true lines. It seems as one looks back to the turn of the century that there were many more unharrassed characters, even what might be called eccentrics. Delightful people who added a great richness to life. Such a person was my uncle, Sabine Baring-Gould.

It was said of this antiquarian, archaeologist and hymnologist and the last of the Devonshire 'Squarsons', that he had a 'magpie mind', perpetually searching for and picking up jewels of information and knowledge.

There was something Celtic and even elfish about him, and he had an ever-ready wit. My memory of him sees him perpetually darting ahead in urgency, his keen intelligence and understanding working all the time very impatient of hindrances, collecting and sorting and assessing in his mind all that came within his grasp. This impatience made him trust too much to a rather faulty memory, and even his documentary writings on early church history and the Lives of the Saints are well interlaced with fiction culled from his agile imagination.

Sabine was a prolific writer. His religious themes as well as his entry into Holy Orders, were sparked off by his involvement with the Oxford Movement, while he was at Cambridge. The fact that he reached Cambridge, when one considers the present day qualifications necessary for entry, seems quite a miracle, for up to that time this most unusual lad had received very little organised education.

Sabine's irascible father, and my grandfather, having been invalided out of a cavalry regiment, following an accident to his foot, found the life of a country squire and the company of the bucolic gentry very far from his taste. So, following the fashion of those days, he frequently forced his family into becoming what were known as the "gentile gipsies". Lumbering all over Europe in clumsy carriages, families would spend months complete with coachman, footman, nannies and governesses to take care of the children - if there happened to be a baby in the party it was strapped to the roof of the carriage in its cot. On these frequent sorties young Sabine had an attendant tutor, whenever one could be found to endure the hardships of such a nomadic life.

It was a very hard life and Sabine's mother, who was Edward's first wife, hated it. She was constantly ill and it does not require much imagination to picture the misery of being jolted along rough roads in a probably ill-sprung carriage, when one is feeling sick and exhausted, with nothing to hope for at the end of the day than the problematic comfort of a wayside inn. On the very last of these terrible journeys taken by the family they were accompanied by a friend called Mrs. Snow of Exeter, with her daughter, Lavinia. This Lavinia, later, after the death of the first Mrs. Edward, became his second wife. She was my grandmother, and from her I have heard such descriptions of the rigours of that pilgrimage that I am in no doubt that it would be very difficult in these days for a man to find so docile a wife as the first Mrs. Edward.

It was during one of these last journeys that the tutor decamped. Sabine, a handsome and very wide-awake lad of 15 now left to his own devices, was scratching up the earth in a field near Pau where they were then staying, when he found he had come upon a beautiful Roman mosaic floor. From this incident sprang his lifelong interest in archaeology.

Sabine's first curacy was in the West Riding of Yorkshire. There he saw and fell in love with a beautiful mill girl. It seemed hard to believe when one knew her later as the gracious lady of the manor, with her quiet dignity and pawky humour, or listened to her well modulated, mellow voice, that when Sabine first saw her, a girl of sixteen, she was clattering along to work at the mill, early one morning, clogs, an apron over cotton frock and a shawl about her shoulders. He, fourteen years her senior, sent her to a parson's family for a couple of years where she received some education and was initiated into the ways of sophisticated and polite living. They were subsequently married and started upon a truly happy union.

Very aptly named Grace, she was at ease in any background. I have seen her happily sitting by a cottage fireside chatting with the family, toasting her toes on the fender and a small child upon her knee - equally happy and exactly right, I have seen her entertaining at a large dinner party, sitting with friends in her drawing-room, being entertained in the country houses around; and managing her brood of nine daughters and five sons. A large rollicking family. Above all, Grace was a perfect foil for her unique husband.

In spite of the house full of children and later swarms of visiting grandchildren, Sabine managed to live the life of a near hermit. Standing long hours at his desk he wrote page after page in his neat handwriting. Oddly enough, it his hymns which brought him fame. His novels were merely money-spinners, and having no particular style, they did not live. One feels that if he had taken them more seriously he might have been more successful with them as one comes across brilliant passages, colourful drama and plenty of humour.

My Uncle's daily routine followed a similar pattern during his long life as 'squarson' of Lew Trenchard. After breakfast, faithful Charley Davey, son of the travelling coachman of his youth, would come to the door with the dog-cart, "the carriage be ready, zurr", he would announce, and he was never kept waiting, his master was eager to be off, never a moment to be wasted in useless dallying. So they set off on the daily airing, always with some object in view. Often there would be some invalid in the village to be enquired after. Later in the day one might overhear some remark such as - "Old Squire, 'e put us in a proper tizzy 'smornin, 'e come up along afore us was vitty". This would refer to his refusal to wait for an answer to his rat-tat on the door; one of his own was sick or in trouble, there was no time to wait upon ceremony - he would push open the door, climb up the stairs, often ladder-like stairs which, as he grew older, he had to take on all fours, and into the patient's bedroom. A few quick words of enquiry, down on his knees for a prayer, then a little joke to provide healing laughter, and before anyone could catch their breath, he was gone.

When there was no such visit to be paid, he loved to call on his step-mother and my grandfather, at Ardoch, on top of the hill above Lew Trenchard. She, so little older than her stepson, had become his very great friend. When staying with her, I have so often been at breakfast when we have heard a quick footstep in the hall and in he would dart, greet her and any of the visitors around the table, usually say something quite fantastic to shock her, and dart off again chuckling at her, "Hocus-pocus, Sabine, you naughty boy!"

Once his duty airing was accomplished he settled down for the rest of the day in his study from where it was difficult to dislodge him even for meals.

All during my childhood I was at many meals in this delightful old Manor house - rather a doubtful joy sometimes as my sister and I were fair game for the teasings of our rather terrifying and boisterous older cousins. "Uncle Arthur's brats" was their name for us. However, I would not have missed the memory of those meals and the cousins were a challenge to try to live up to. In the low-ceilinged dining-room a place was always laid halfway down the side of the refectory table for Sabine and Grace to sit side by side. At tea-time Sabine's place remained empty until all the family were settled; then his swift shuffling footsteps were to be heard, and he would make his appearance, head thrust forward, hands behind his back. After a pat on Grace's shoulder, or a quick kiss on the top of her head, he would sit and eat with great rapidity, sometimes in complete silence as though unaware of all the talk and laughter going on around him. His mind probably left behind in the study. As soon as he had finished eating, he was up. Perhaps he would say a few words, sometimes take a piercing look at each one sitting round the table, then shuffle off, often with shoulders shaking, as though he found his family excruciatingly funny.

This routine was interrupted only when he felt a sudden urge to go off onto the moors or further afield on archaeological pursuits, or when, with his friend, Rev. Fleetwood Shepherd, he went around visiting the villages and hamlets in search of the old folk songs of the countryside. On these jaunts they persuaded the old gaffers to sing the songs they had sung as boys and while Sabine jotted down the words, Mr. Shepherd took the tunes. In this way they rescued "Widdicombe Fair" and other treasures from the past.

The Sunday services were quite special. While following the usual Church of England pattern there were several unique differences. The one which pleased us children was the shortness of the sermons. Uncle Sabine made one point and one point only and it was difficult to forget that point. To add to this commendable virtue there was always the excitement of not knowing quite what turn things might take. My Uncle was very emotional and could easily be carried away by his own pathos or his humour. It was quite a usual occurrence for him to have to make a speedy descent from the pulpit when a sad illustration he was giving to emphasise his point would send the tears coursing down his cheeks, or on the other hand an amusing picture he might conjure up, set his shoulders heaving in his characteristic way. Gilbert Arundel, his faithful curate was always quick to save the situation, by breaking into the psalms, giving his beloved Rector time to recover his decorum.

Another interesting feature of the services was the usual singing of the psalms. I suppose it was a quirk of his irrepressible humour which made Sabine decree that he should sing the verses turn and turn about with the choir. The contrast between his rich baritone and the coarse Devonshire voices singing in strong dialect was remarkable, in fact the effect on visitors to the church who were not prepared for it, was quite startling. Alas that it all happened before the times of easy recordings, so that the unrepeatable sound only remains in the memories of the diminishing number of people who heard it!

As a final memory, it must be recorded that Sabine's wit could be cruel, but only, I think, when confronted by hypocrisy or any sort of bunkum. Thus the last book he wrote of his memoirs, largely concerned with people he had known and which, he said, was not to be published until ten years after his death, was thought to be too offensive to relatives of the victims of his satire. It was therefore doomed to definite and final suppression.

Sabine lived his ninety years from 1834 to 1924 to the full, yet except for a few of us who knew him so well, all he is remembered by is the hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers", composed in haste to meet some sudden need.

SBGAS Newsletter 1994/95, No. 17, p. 11