RICHARD DODDRIDGE BLACKMORE

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George Bowring – A Tale Of Cader Idris / From «Slain By The Doones» By R. D. Blackmore:

Содержание

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CHAPTER I

When I was a young man, and full of spirits, some forty years ago or more, I lost my best and truest friend in a very sad and mysterious way. The greater part of my life has been darkened by this heavy blow and loss, and the blame which I poured upon myself for my own share in the matter.

George Bowring had been seven years with me at the fine old school of Shrewsbury, and trod on my heels from form to form so closely that, when I became at last the captain of the school, he was second to me. I was his elder by half a year, and "sapped" very hard, while he laboured little; so that it will be plain at a glance, although he never acknowledged it, that he was the better endowed of the two with natural ability. At that time we of Salop always expected to carry everything, so far

as pure scholarship was concerned, at both the universities. But nowadays I am grieved to see that schools of quite a different stamp (such as Rugby and Harrow, and even Marlborough, and worse of all peddling Manchester) have been running our boys hard, and sometimes almost beating them. And how have they done it? Why, by purchasing masters of our prime rank and special style.

George and myself were at one time likely, and pretty well relied upon, to keep up the fame of Sabrina's crown, and hold our own at Oxford. But suddenly it so fell out that both of us were cut short of classics, and flung into this unclassic world. In the course of our last half year at school and when we were both taking final polish to stand for Balliol scholarships, which we were almost sure to win, as all the examiners were Shrewsbury men,—not that they would be partial to us, but because we knew all their questions,—within a week, both George and I were forced to leave the dear old school, the grand old town, the lovely Severn, and everything but one another.

He lost his father; I lost my uncle, a gentleman in Derbyshire, who had well provided my education; but, having a family of his own, could not be expected to leave me much. And he left me even less than could, from his own point of view, have been rational. It is true that he had seven children; but still a man of £15,000 a year might have done, without injustice—or, I might say, with better justice—something more than to leave his nephew a sum which, after much pushing about into divers

insecurities, fetched £72 10s. per annum.

Nevertheless, I am truly grateful; though, perhaps, at the time I had not that knowledge of the world which enlarges the grateful organs. It cannot matter what my feelings were, and I never was mercenary. All my sentiments at that period ran in Greek senarii; and perhaps it would show how good and lofty boys were in that ancient time, though now they are only rude Solecists, if I were to set these verses down—but, after much consideration, I find it wiser to keep them in.

George Bowring's father had some appointment well up in the Treasury. He seems to have been at some time knighted for finding a manuscript of great value that went in the end to the paper mills. How he did it, or what it was, or whether he ever did it at all, were questions for no one to meddle with. People in those days had larger minds than they ever seem to exhibit now. The king might tap a man, and say, "Rise, Sir Joseph," and all the journals of the age, or, at least, the next day, would echo "Sir Joseph!" And really he was worthy of it. A knight he lived, and a knight he died; and his widow found it such a comfort!

And now on his father's sudden death, George Bowring was left not so very well off. Sir Joseph had lived, as a knight should do, in a free-handed, errant, and chivalrous style; and what he left behind him made it lucky that the title dropped. George, however, was better placed, as regards the world, than I was; but not so very much as to make a difference between us. Having always held together, and being started in life together,

we resolved to face the world (as other people are always called) side by side, and with a friendship that should make us as good as one.

This, however, did not come out exactly as it should have done. Many things arose between us—such as diverse occupation, different hours of work and food, and a little split in the taste of trowsers, which, of course, should not have been. He liked the selvage down his legs, while I thought it unartistic, and, going much into the graphic line, I pressed my objections strongly.

But George, in the handsomest manner—as now, looking back on the case, I acknowledge—waived my objections, and insisted as little as he could upon his own.

And again we became as tolerant as any two men, at all alike, can be of one another.

He, by some postern of influence, got into some dry ditch of the Treasury, and there, as in an old castle-moat, began to be at home, and move, gently and after his seniors, as the young ducks follow the old ones. And at every waddle he got more money.

My fortune, however, was not so nice. I had not Sir Joseph, of Treasury cellars, to light me with his name and memory into a snug cell of my own. I had nothing to look to but courage, and youth, and education, and three-quarters of a hundred pounds a year, with some little change to give out of it. Yet why should I have doubted? Now, I wonder at my own misgivings; yet all of them still return upon me, if I ever am persuaded just to try Welsh rabbit. Enough, that I got on at last, to such an extent that

the man at the dairy offered me half a year's milk for a sketch of a cow that had never belonged to him.

George, meanwhile, having something better than a brush for a walking stick and an easel to sit down upon, had taken unto himself a wife—a lady as sweet and bright as could be—by name Emily Atkinson. In truth, she was such a charming person that I myself, in a quiet way, had taken a very great fancy to her before George Bowring saw her; but as soon as I found what a desperate state the heart of poor George was reduced to, and came to remember that he was fitted by money to marry, while I was not, it appeared to me my true duty toward the young lady and him, and even myself, to withdraw from the field, and have nothing to say if they set up their horses together.

So George married Emily, and could not imagine why it was that I strove in vain to appear as his "best man," at the rails where they do it.

For though I had ordered a blue coat and buttons, and a cashmere waistcoat (amber-coloured, with a braid of peonies), yet at the last moment my courage failed me, and I was caught with a shivering in the knees, which the doctor said was ague. This and that shyness of dining at his house (which I thought it expedient to adopt during the years of his married life) created some little reserve between us, though hardly so bad as our first disagreement concerning the stripe down the pantaloons.

However, before that dereliction I had made my friend a wedding present, as was right and proper—a present such as

nothing less than a glorious windfall could have enabled me to buy. For while engaged, some three years back, upon a grand historical painting of "Cour de Lion and Saladin," now to be seen —but let that pass; posterity will always know where to find it— I was harassed in mind perpetually concerning the grain of the fur of a cat. To the dashing young artists of the present day this may seem a trifle; to them, no doubt, a cat is a cat—or would be, if they could make it one. Of course, there are cats enough in London, and sometimes even a few to spare; but I wanted a cat of peculiar order, and of a Saracenic cast. I walked miles and miles; till at last I found him residing in a very old-fashioned house in the Polygon, at Somers Town. Here was a genuine paradise of cats, carefully ministered to and guarded by a maiden lady of Portuguese birth and of advanced maturity. Each of these nine cats possessed his own stool—a mahogany stool, with a velvet cushion, and his name embroidered upon it in beautiful letters of gold. And every day they sat round the fire to digest their dinners, all nine of them, each on his proper stool, some purring, some washing their faces, and some blinking or nodding drowsily. But I need not have spoken of this, except that one of them was called "Saladin." He was the very cat I wanted. I made his acquaintance in the area, and followed it up on the knife-boy's board. And then I had the most happy privilege of saving him from a tail-pipe. Thus my entrance was secured into this feline Eden; and the lady was so well pleased that she gave me an order for nine full-length cat portraits, at the handsome price of ten guineas

apiece. And not only this, but at her demise—which followed, alas! too speedily—she left me £150, as a proof of her esteem and affection.

This sum I divided into three equal parts—fifty pounds for a present for George, another fifty for a duty to myself, and the residue to be put by for any future purposes. I knew that my friend had no gold watch; neither, of course, did I possess one. In those days a gold watch was thought a good deal of, and made an impression in society, as a three-hundred-guinea ring does now. Barwise was then considered the best watchmaker in London, and perhaps in the world. So I went to his shop, and chose two gold watches of good size and substance—none of your trumpery catchpenny things, the size of a gilt pill trodden upon—at the price of fifty guineas each. As I took the pair, the foreman let me have them for a hundred pounds, including also in that figure a handsome gold key for each, of exactly the same pattern, and a guard for the fob of watered black-silk ribbon.

My reason for choosing these two watches, out of a trayful of similar quality, was perhaps a little whimsical—viz., that the numbers they bore happened to be sequents. Each had its number engraved on its white enamel dial, in small but very clear figures, placed a little above the central spindle; also upon the extreme verge, at the nadir below the seconds hand, the name of the maker, "Barwise, London." They were not what are called "hunting watches," but had strong and very clear lunette glasses fixed in rims of substantial gold. And their respective numbers

were 7777 and 7778.

Carrying these in wash-leather bags, I gave George Bowring his choice of the two; and he chose the one with four figures of seven, making some little joke about it, not good enough to repeat, nor even bad enough to laugh at.

CHAPTER II

For six years after this all went smoothly with George Bowring and myself. We met almost daily, although we did not lodge together (as once we had done) nor spend the evening hours together, because, of course, he had now his home and family rising around him. By the summer of 1832 he had three children, and was expecting a fourth at no very distant time. His eldest son was named after me, "Robert Bistre," for such is my name, which I have often thought of changing. Not that the name is at all a bad one, as among friends and relations, but that, when I am addressed by strangers, "Mr. Bistre" has a jingling sound, suggestive of childish levity. "Sir Robert Bistre," however, would sound uncommonly well; and (as some people say) less eminent artists—but perhaps, after all, I am not so very old as to be in a hurry.

In the summer of 1832—as elderly people will call to mind, and the younger sort will have heard or read—the cholera broke over London like a bursting meteor. Such panic had not been known, I believe, since the time of the plague, in the reign of Charles II., as painted (beyond any skill of the brush) by the simple and wonderful pen of Defoe. There had been in the interval many seasons—or at least I am informed so—of sickness more widely spread, and of death more frequent, if not so sudden. But now this new plague, attacking so harshly a man's most

perceptive and valued part, drove rich people out of London faster than horses (not being attacked) could fly. Well, used as I was to a good deal of poison in dealing with my colours, I felt no alarm on my own account, but was anxious about my landlady. This was an excellently honest woman of fifty-five summers at the utmost, but weakly confessing to as much as forty. She had made a point of insisting upon a brisket of beef and a flat-polled cabbage for dinner every Saturday; and the same, with a "cowcumber," cold on Sunday; and for supper a soft-roed herring, ever since her widowhood.

"Mrs. Whitehead," said I—for that was her name, though she said she did not deserve it; and her hair confirmed her in that position by growing darker from year to year—"Madam, allow me to beg you to vary your diet a little at this sad time."

"I varies it every day, Mr. Bistre," she answered somewhat snappishly. "The days of the week is not so many but what they all come round again."

For the moment I did not quite perceive the precision of her argument; but after her death I was able to do more justice to her intellect. And, unhappily, she was removed to a better world on the following Sunday.

To a man in London of quiet habits and regular ways and periods there scarcely can be a more desperate blow than the loss of his landlady. It is not only that his conscience pricks him for all his narrow, plagiaristic, and even irrational suspicions about the low level of his tea caddy, or a neap tide in his brandy bottle,

or any false evidence of the eyes (which ever go spying to lock up the heart), or the ears, which are also wicked organs—these memories truly are grievous to him, and make him yearn now to be robbed again; but what he feels most sadly is the desolation of having nobody who understands his locks. One of the best men I ever knew was so plagued with his sideboard every day for two years, after dinner, that he married a little new maid-of-all-work—because she was a blacksmith's daughter.

Nothing of that sort, however, occurred in my case, I am proud to say. But finding myself in a helpless state, without anyone to be afraid of, I had only two courses before me: either to go back to my former landlady (who was almost too much of a Tartar, perhaps), or else to run away from my rooms till Providence provided a new landlady.

Now, in this dilemma I met George Bowring, who saw my distress, and most kindly pressed me to stay at his house till some female arose to manage my affairs for me. This, of course, I declined to do, especially under present circumstances; and, with mutual pity, we parted. But the very next day he sought me out, in a quiet nook where a few good artists were accustomed to meet and think; and there he told me that really now he saw his way to cut short my troubles as well as his own, and to earn a piece of enjoyment and profit for both of us. And I happen to remember his very words.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.