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GEORGE BOWRING A TALE OF CADER IDRIS

By R. D. Blackmore

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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 agree. 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-poll’d 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.

"You are cramped in your hand, my dear fellow," said he (for in those days youths did not call each other "old man"—with sad sense of their own decrepitude). "Bob, you are losing your freedom of touch. You must come out of these stony holes, and look at a rocky mountain."

My heart gave a jump at these words; and yet I had been too much laid flat by facts—"sat upon," is the slang of these last twenty years, and in the present dearth of invention must serve, no doubt, for another twenty—I say that I had been used as a cushion by so many landladies and maids-of-all-work (who take not an hour to find out where they need do no work), that I could not fetch my breath to think of ever going up a mountain.

"I will leave you to think of it, Bob," said George, putting his hat on carefully; "I am bound for time, and you seem to be nervous. Consult your pillow, my dear fellow; and peep into your old stocking: and see whether you can afford it."

That last hit settled me. People said, in spite of all my generous acts—and nobody knows, except myself, the frequency and the extent of these—without understanding the merits of the case—perfect (or rather imperfect) strangers said that I was stingy! To prove the contrary, I resolved to launch into great expenditure, and to pay coach fare all the way from London toward the nearest mountain.

Half the inhabitants now were rushing helter-skelter out of London, and very often to seaside towns where the smell of fish destroyed them. And those who could not get away were shuddering at the blinds drawn down, and huddling away from the mutes at the doors, and turning pale at the funeral bells. And some, who had never thought twice before of their latter end, now began to dwell with so much unction upon it, that Providence graciously spared them the waste of perpetual preparation.

Among the rest, George Bowring had been scared, far more than he liked to own, by the sudden death of his butcher, between half a dozen chops for cutlets and the trimming of a wing-bone. George's own cook had gone down with the order, and meant to bring it all back herself, because she knew what butchers do when left to consider their subject. And Mrs. Tompkins was so alarmed that she gave only six hours' notice to leave, though her husband was far on the salt-sea wave, according to her own account, and she had none to make her welcome except her father's second wife. This broke up the household; and hence it was that George tempted me so with the mountains.

For he took his wife and children to an old manor-house in Berkshire, belonging to two maiden aunts of the lady, who promised to see to all that might happen, but wanted no gentleman in the house at a period of such delicacy. George Bowring, therefore, agreed to meet me on the 12th day of September, at the inn in Reading—I forget its name—where the Regulator coach (belonging to the old company, and leaving White Horse Cellars at half-past nine in the morning) allowed an hour to dine, from one o'clock onward, as the roads might be. And here I found him, and we supped at Oxford, and did very well at the Mitre. On the following morning we took coach for Shrewsbury, as we had agreed, and, reaching the town before dark, put up at the Talbot Inn, and sauntered into the dear old school, to see what the lads had been at since our time; for their names and their exploits, at Oxford and Cambridge, are scored in large letters upon the panels, from the year 1806 and onward, so that soon there will be no place to register any more of them; and we found that though we ourselves had done nothing, many fine fellows had been instituted in letters of higher humanity, and were holding up the old standard, so that we longed to invite them to dinner. But discipline must be maintained; and that word means, more than anything else, the difference of men's ages.

Now, at Shrewsbury, we had resolved to cast off all further heed of coaches; and knowing the country pretty well, or recalling it from our childhood, to strike away on foot for some of the mountain wildernesses.

Of these, in those days, nobody knew much more than that they were high and steep, and slippery and dangerous, and much to be shunned by all sensible people who liked a nice fire and the right side of the window. So that when we shouldered staves with knapsacks flapping heavily, all the wiser sort looked on us as marching off to Bedlam.

In the morning, as we were starting, we set our watches by the old school dial, as I have cause to remember well. And we staked half a crown, in a sporting manner, each on his own watch to be the truer by sun upon our way back again. And thus; we left those ancient walls and the glancing of the river, and stoutly took the Welshpool road, dreading nought except starvation.

Although in those days I was not by any means a cripple, George was far stronger of arm and leg, having always been famous, though we made no fuss about such things then, for running and jumping, and lifting weights, and using the boxing-gloves and the foils. A fine, brave fellow as ever lived, with a short, straight nose and a resolute chin, he touched the measuring-bar quite fairly at seventy-four inches, and turned the

scales at fourteen stone and a quarter. And so, as my chattels weighed more than his (by means of a rough old easel and material for rude sketches), he did me a good turn now and then by changing packs for a mile or two. And thus we came in four days' march to Aber-Aydyr, a village lying under Cader Idris.

CHAPTER III.

If any place ever lay out of the world, and was proud of itself for doing so, this little village of Aber-Aydyr must have been very near it. The village was built, as the people expressed it, of thirty cottages, one public-house, one shop universal, and two chapels. The torrent of the Aydyr entered with a roar of rapids, and at the lower end departed in a thunder of cascades. The natives were all so accustomed to live in the thick of this watery uproar that, whenever they left their beloved village to see the inferior outer world, they found themselves as deaf as posts till they came to a weir or a waterfall. And they told us that in the scorching summer of the year 1826 the river had failed them so that for nearly a month they could only discourse by signs; and they used to stand on the bridge and point at the shrunken rapids, and stop their ears to exclude that horrible emptiness. Till a violent thunderstorm broke up the drought, and the river came down roaring; and the next day all Aber-Aydyr was able to gossip again as usual.

Finding these people, who lived altogether upon slate, of a quaint and original turn, George Bowring and I resolved to halt and rest the soles of our feet a little, and sketch and fish the neighbourhood. For George had brought his rod and tackle, and many a time had he wanted to stop and set up his rod and begin to cast; but I said that I would not be cheated so: he had promised me a mountain, and would he put me off with a river? Here, however, we had both delights; the river for him and the mountain for me. As for the fishing, all that he might have, and I would grudge him none of it, if he fairly divided whatever he caught. But he must not expect me to follow him always and watch all his dainty manoeuvring; each was to carry and eat his own dinner, whenever we made a day of it, so that he might keep to his flies and his water, while I worked away with my brush at the mountains. And thus we spent a most pleasant week, though we knew very little of Welsh and the slaters spoke but little English. But—much as they are maligned because they will not have strangers to work with them—we found them a thoroughly civil, obliging, and rather intelligent set of men; most of them also of a respectable and religious turn of mind; and they scarcely ever poach, except on Saturdays and Mondays.

On September 25, as we sat at breakfast in the little sanded parlour of the Cross-Pipes public house, our bedroom being overhead, my dear friend complained to me that he was tired of fishing so long up and down one valley, and asked me to come with him further up, into wilder and rockier districts, where the water ran deeper (as he had been told) and the trout were less worried by quarrymen, because it was such a savage place, deserted by all except evil spirits, that even the Aber-Aydyr slaters could not enjoy the fishing there. I promised him gladly to come, only keeping the old understanding between us, that each should attend to his own pursuits and his own opportunities mainly; so that George might stir most when the trout rose well, and I when the shadows fell properly. And thus we set forth about nine o'clock of a bright and cheerful morning, while the sun, like a courtly perruquier of the reign of George II., was lifting, and shifting, and setting in order the vapoury curls of the mountains.

We trudged along thus at a merry swing, for the freshness of autumnal dew was sparkling in the valley, until we came to a rocky pass, where walking turned to clambering. After an hour of sharpish work among slaty shelves and threatening crags, we got into one of those troughlike hollows hung on each side with precipices, which look as if the earth had sunk for the sake of letting the water through. On our left hand, cliff towered over cliff to the grand height of Pen y Cader, the steepest and most formidable aspect of the mountain. Rock piled on rock, and shingle cast in naked waste disdainfully, and slippery channels scooped by torrents of tempestuous waters, forbade one to desire at all to have anything more to do with them—except, of course, to get them painted at a proper distance, so that they might hang at last in the dining rooms of London, to give people appetite with sense of hungry breezes, and to make them comfortable with the sight of danger.

"This is very grand indeed," said George, as he turned to watch me; for the worst part of our business is to have to give an opinion always upon points of scenery. But I am glad that I was not cross, or even crisp with him that day.

"It is magnificent," I answered; "and I see a piece of soft sward there, where you can set up your rod, old fellow, while I get my sticks in trim. Let us fill our pipes and watch the shadows; they do not fall quite to suit me yet."

"How these things make one think," cried Bowring, as we sat on a stone and smoked, "of the miserable littleness of men like you and me, Bob!"

"Speak for yourself, sir," I said, laughing at his unaccustomed, but by no means novel, reflection. "I am quite contented with my size, although I am smaller than you, George. Dissatisfied mortal! Nature wants no increase of us, or she would have had it."

"In another world we shall be much larger," he said, with his eyes on the tops of the hills. "Last night I dreamed that my wife and children were running to meet me in heaven, Bob."

"Tush! You go and catch fish," I replied; for tears were in his large, soft eyes, and I hated the sentimental. "Would they ever let such a little Turk as Bob Bistre into heaven, do you think? My godson would shout all the angels deaf and outdrum all the cherubim."

"Poor little chap! He is very noisy; but he is not half a bad sort," said George. "If he only comes like his godfather I shall wish no better luck for him."

These were kind words, and I shook his hand to let him know that I felt them; and then, as if he were

ashamed of having talked rather weakly, he took with his strong legs a dangerous leap of some ten or twelve feet downward, and landed on a narrow ledge that overhung the river. Here he put his rod together, and I heard the click of reel as he drew the loop at the end of the line through the rings, and so on; and I heard him cry "Chut!" as he took his flies from his Scotch cap and found a tangle; and I saw the glistening of his rod, as the sunshine pierced the valley, and then his tall, straight figure pass the corner of a crag that stood as upright as a tombstone; and after that no more of any live and bright George Bowring.

CHAPTER IV.

Swift is the flight of Time whenever a man would fain lay hold of him. All created beings, from Behemoth to a butterfly, dread and fly (as best they may) that universal butcher—man. And as nothing is more carefully killed by the upper sort of mankind than Time, how can he help making off for his life when anybody wants to catch him?

Of course, I am not of that upper sort, and make no pretence to be so; but Time, perhaps, may be excused for thinking—having had such a very short turn at my clothes—that I belonged to the aristocracy. At any rate, while I drew, and rubbed, and dubbed, and made hieroglyphics, Time was uneasily shifting and shuffling the lines of the hills, as a fever patient jerks and works the bed-clothes. And, worse than that, he was scurrying westward (frightened, no doubt, by the equinox) at such a pace that I was scared by the huddling together of shadows. Awaking from a long, long dream—through which I had been working hard, and laying the foundations of a thousand pounds hereafter—I felt the invisible damp of evening settling in the valleys. The sun, from over the sea, had still his hand on Cader Idris; but every inferior head and height was gray in the sweep of his mantle.

I threw my hair back—for an artist really should be picturesque; and, having no other beauty, must be firm to long hair, while it lasts—and then I shouted, "George!" until the strata of the mountain (which dip and jag, like veins of oak) began and sluggishly prolonged a slow zig-zag of echoes. No counter-echo came to me; no ring of any sonorous voice made crag, and precipice, and mountain vocal with the sound of "Bob!"

"He must have gone back. What a fool I must be never to remember seeing him! He saw that I was full of rubbish, and he would not disturb me. He is gone back to the Cross-Pipes, no doubt. And yet it does not seem like him."

"To look for a pin in a bundle of hay" would be a job of sense and wisdom rather than to seek a thing so very small as a very big man among the depth, and height, and breadth of river, shingle, stone, and rock, crag, precipice, and mountain. And so I doubled up my things, while the very noise they made in doubling flurried and alarmed me; and I thought it was not like George to leave me to find my way back all alone, among the deep bogs, and the whirlpools, and the trackless tracts of crag.

When I had got my fardel ready, and was about to shoulder it, the sound of brisk, short steps, set sharply upon doubtful footing, struck my ear, through the roar of the banks and stones that shook with waterfall. And before I had time to ask, "Who goes there?"—as in this solitude one might do—a slight, short man, whom I knew by sight as a workman of Aber-Aydyr, named Evan Peters, was close to me, and was swinging a slate-hammer in one hand, and bore in the other a five-foot staff. He seemed to be amazed at sight of me, but touched his hat with his staff, and said: "Good-night, gentleman!" in Welsh; for the natives of this part are very polite. "Good-night, Evan!" I answered, in his own language, of which I had picked up a little; and he looked well pleased, and said in his English: "For why, sir, did you leave your things in that place there? A bad mans come and steal them, it is very likely."

Then he wished me "Good-night" again, and was gone—for he seemed to be in a dreadful hurry—before I had the sense to ask him what he meant about "my things." But as his footfall died away a sudden fear came over me.

"The things he meant must be George Bowring's," I said to myself; and I dropped my own, and set off, with my blood all tingling, for the place toward which he had jerked his staff. How long it took me to force my way among rugged rocks and stubs of oak I cannot tell, for every moment was an hour to me. But a streak of sunset glanced along the lonesome gorge, and cast my shadow further than my voice would go; and by it I saw something long and slender against a scar of rock, and standing far in front of me. Toward this I ran as fast as ever my trembling legs would carry me, for I knew too well that it must be the fishing-rod of George Bowring.

It was stuck in the ground—not carelessly, nor even in any hurry; but as a sportsman makes all snug, when for a time he leaves off casting. For instance, the end fly was fixed in the lowest ring of the butt, and the slack of the line reeled up so that the collar lay close to the rod itself. Moreover, in such a rocky place, a bed to receive the spike could not have been found without some searching. For a moment I was reassured. Most likely George himself was near—perhaps in quest of blueberries (which abound at the foot of the shingles—and are a very delicious fruit), or of some rare fern to send his wife, who was one of the first in England to take much notice of them. And it shows what confidence I had in my friend's activity and strength, that I never feared the likely chance of his falling from some precipice.

But just as I began, with some impatience—for we were to have dined at the Cross-Pipes about sundown, five good (or very bad) miles away, and a brace of ducks was the order—just as I began to shout, "George! Wherever have you got to?" leaping on a little rock, I saw a thing that stopped me. At the further side of this rock, and below my feet, was a fishing basket, and a half-pint mug nearly full of beer, and a crust of the brown, sweet bread of the hills, and a young white onion, half cut through, and a clasp-knife open, and a screw of salt, and a slice of the cheese, just dashed with goat's milk, which George was so fond of, but I disliked; and there may have been a hard-boiled egg. At the sight of these things all my blood rushed to my

head in such a manner that all my power to think was gone. I sat down on the rock where George must have sat while beginning his frugal luncheon, and I put my heels into the marks of his, and, without knowing why, I began to sob like a child who has lost his mother. What train of reasoning went through my brain—if any passed in the obscurity—let metaphysicians or psychologists, as they call themselves, pretend to know. I only know that I kept on whispering, "George is dead! Unless he had been killed, he never would have left his beer so!"

I must have sat, making a fool of myself, a considerable time in this way, thinking of George's poor wife and children, and wondering what would become of them, instead of setting to work at once to know what was become of him. I took up a piece of cheese-rind, showing a perfect impression of his fine front teeth, and I put it in my pocketbook, as the last thing he had touched. And then I examined the place all around and knelt to look for footmarks, though the light was sadly waning.

For the moment I discovered nothing of footsteps or other traces to frighten or to comfort me. A little narrow channel (all of rock and stone and slaty stuff) sloped to the river's brink, which was not more than five yards distant. In this channel I saw no mark except that some of the smaller stones appeared to have been turned over; and then I looked into the river itself, and saw a force of water sliding smoothly into a rocky pool.

"If he had fallen in there," I said, "he would have leaped out again in two seconds; or even if the force of the water had carried him down into that deep pool, he can swim like a duck—of course he can. What river could ever drown you, George?"

And then I remembered how at Salop he used to swim the flooded Severn when most of us feared to approach the banks; and I knew that he could not be drowned, unless something first had stunned him. And after that I looked around, and my heart was full of terror.

"It is a murder!" I cried aloud, though my voice among the rocks might well have brought like fate upon me. "As sure as I stand here, and God is looking down upon me, this is a black murder!" In what way I got back that night to Aber-Aydyr I know not. All I remember is that the people would not come out of their houses to me, according to some superstition, which was not explained till morning; and, being unable to go to bed, I took a blanket and lay down beneath a dry arch of the bridge, and the Aydyr, as swiftly as a spectre gliding, hushed me with a melancholy song.

CHAPTER V.

Now, as sure as ever I lay beneath the third arch of Aber-Aydyr Bridge, in a blanket of Welsh serge or flannel, with a double border, so surely did I see, and not dream, what I am going to tell you.

The river ran from east to west; and the moon, being now the harvest moon, was not very high, but large and full, and just gliding over the crest of the hill that overhangs the quarry-pit; so that, if I can put it plainly, the moon was across the river from me, and striking the turbulent water athwart, so that her face, or a glimmer thereof, must have been lying upon the river if any smooth place had been left for it. But of this there was no chance, because the whole of the river was in a rush, according to its habit, and covered with bubbles, and froth, and furrows, even where it did not splash, and spout, and leap, as it loved to do. In the depth of the night, when even the roar of the water seemed drowsy and indolent, and the calm trees stooped with their heavy limbs over-changing the darkness languidly, and only a few rays of the moon, like the fluttering of a silver bird, moved in and out the mesh-work, I leaned upon, my elbow, and I saw the dead George Bowring.

He came from the pit of the river toward me, quietly and without stride or step, gliding over the water like a mist or the vapour of a calm white frost; and he stopped at the ripple where the shore began, and he looked at me very peacefully. And I felt neither fear nor doubt of him, any more than I do of this pen in my hand.

"George," I said, "I have been uneasy all the day about you and I cannot sleep, and I have had no comfort. What has made you treat me so?"

He seemed to be anxious to explain, having always been so straightforward; but an unknown hand or the power of death held him, so that he could only smile. And then it appeared to me as if he pointed to the water first and then to the sky, with such an import that I understood (as plainly as if he had pronounced it) that his body lay under the one and his soul was soaring on high through the other; and, being forbidden to speak, he spread his hands, as if entrusting me with all that had belonged to him; and then he smiled once more, and faded into the whiteness of the froth and foam.

And then I knew that I had been holding converse, face to face, with Death; and icy fear shook me, and I strove in vain to hide my eyes from everything. And when I awoke in the morning there was a gray trunk of an alder tree, just George Bowring's height and size, on the other side of the water, so that I could have no doubt that himself had been there.

After a search of about three hours we found the body of my dear friend in a deep black pool of the Aydyr—not the first hole below the place in which he sat down to his luncheon, but nearly a hundred yards farther down, where a bold cliff jutted out and bent the water scornfully. Our quarrymen would not search this pool until the sunlight fell on it, because it was a place of dread with a legend hovering over it. "The Giant's Tombstone" was the name of the crag that overhung it; and the story was that the giant Idris, when he grew worn out with age, chose this rock out of many others near the top of the mountain, and laid it under his arm and came down here to drink of the Aydyr. He drank the Aydyr dry because he was feverish and flushed with age; and he set down the crag in a hole he had scooped with the palms of his hands for more water; and then he lay down on his back, and Death (who never could reach to his knee when he stood) took advantage of his posture to drive home the javelin. And thus he lay dead, with the crag for his headstone, and the weight of his

corpse sank a grave for itself in the channel of the river, and the toes of his boots are still to be seen after less than a mile of the valley.

Under this headstone of Idris lay the body of George Bowring, fair and comely, with the clothes all perfect, and even the light cap still on the head. And as we laid it upon the grass, reverently and carefully, the face, although it could smile no more, still appeared to wear a smile, as if the new world were its home, and death a mere trouble left far behind. Even the eyes were open, and their expression was not of fright or pain, but pleasant and bright, with a look of interest such as a man pays to his food.

"Stand back, all of you!" I said sternly; "none shall examine him but myself. Now all of you note what I find here."

I searched all his pockets, one after another; and tears came to my eyes again as I counted not less than eleven of them, for I thought of the fuss we used to make with the Shrewsbury tailor about them. There was something in every pocket, but nothing of any importance at present, except his purse and a letter from his wife, for which he had walked to Dolgelly and back on the last entire day of his life.

"It is a hopeless mystery!" I exclaimed aloud, as the Welshmen gazed with superstitious awe and doubt. "He is dead as if struck by lightning, but there was no storm in the valley!"

"No, no, sure enough; no storm was there. But it is plain to see what has killed him!" This was Evan Peters, the quarryman, and I glanced at him very suspiciously. "Iss, sure, plain enough," said another; and then they all broke into Welsh, with much gesticulation; and "e-ah, e-ah," and "otty, otty," and "hanoool, hanoool," were the sounds they made—at least to an ignorant English ear.

"What do you mean, you fools?" I asked, being vexed at their offhand way of settling things so far beyond them. "Can you pretend to say what it was?"

"Indeed, then, and indeed, my gentleman, it is no use to talk no more. It was the Caroline Morgan."

"Which is the nearest house?" I asked, for I saw that some of them were already girding up their loins to fly, at the mere sound of that fearful name; for the cholera morbus had scared the whole country; and if one were to fly, all the rest would follow, as swiftly as mountain sheep go. "Be quick to the nearest house, my friends, and we will send for the doctor."

This was a lucky hit; for these Cambrians never believed in anyone's death until he had "taken the doctor." And so, with much courage and kindness, "to give the poor gentleman the last chance," they made a rude litter, and, bearing the body upon sturdy shoulders, betook themselves to a track which I had overlooked entirely. Some people have all their wits about them as soon as they are called for, but with me it is mainly otherwise. And this I had shown in two things already; the first of which came to my mind the moment I pulled out my watch to see what the time was. "Good Heavens!" it struck me, "where is George's watch? It was not in any of his pockets; and I did not feel it in his fob."

In an instant I made them set down the bier; and, much as it grieved me to do such a thing, I carefully sought for my dear friend's watch. No watch, no seals, no ribbon, was there! "Go on," I said; and I fell behind them, having much to think about. In this condition, I took little heed of the distance, or of the ground itself; being even astonished when, at last, we stopped; as if we were bound to go on forever.

CHAPTER VI.

We had stopped at the gate of an old farmhouse, built with massive boulder stones, laid dry, and flushed in with mortar. As dreary a place as was ever seen; at the head of a narrow mountain-gorge, with mountains towering over it. There was no sign of life about it, except that a gaunt hog trotted forth, and grunted at us, and showed his tusks, and would perhaps have charged us, if we had not been so many. The house looked just like a low church-tower, and might have been taken for one at a distance if there had been any battlements. It seemed to be four or five hundred years old, and perhaps belonged to some petty chief in the days of Owen Glendower.

"Knock again, Thomas Edwards. Stop, let me knock," said one of our party impatiently. "There, waddow, waddow, waddow!"

Suiting the action to the word, he thumped with a big stone heavily, till a middle-aged woman, with rough black hair, looked out of a window and screamed in Welsh to ask what this terrible noise was. To this they made answer in the same language, pointing to their sad burden, and asking permission to leave it for the doctor's inspection and the inquest, if there was to be one. And I told them to add that I would pay well—anything, whatever she might like to ask. But she screamed out something that sounded like a curse, and closed the lattice violently. Knowing that many superstitions lingered in these mountains—as, indeed, they do elsewhere plentifully—I was not surprised at the woman's stern refusal to admit us, especially at this time of pest; but I thought it strange that her fierce black eyes avoided both me and the poor rude litter on which the body of George lay, covered with some slate-workers' aprons.

"She is not the mistress!" cried Evan Peters, in great excitement, as I thought. "Ask where is Hopkin—Black Hopkin—where is he?"

At this suggestion a general outcry arose in Welsh for "Black Hopkin"; an outcry so loud and prolonged that the woman opened the window again and screamed—as they told me afterward—"He is not at home, you noisy fools; he is gone to Machynlleth. Not long would you dare to make this noise if Hopkin ap Howel was at home."

But while she was speaking the wicket-door of the great arched gate was thrown open, and a gun about six feet long and of very large bore was presented at us. The quarrymen drew aside briskly, and I was about to move somewhat hastily, when the great, swarthy man who was holding the gun withdrew it, and lifted his hat

to me, proudly and as an equal.

"You cannot enter this house," he said in very good English, and by no means rudely. "I am sorry for it, but it cannot be. My little daughter is very ill, the last of seven. You must go elsewhere."

With these words he bowed again to me, while his sad eyes seemed to pierce my soul; and then he quietly closed the wicket and fastened it with a heavy bolt, and I knew that we must indeed go further.

This was no easy thing to do; for our useless walk to "Crug y Dwlith" (the Dewless Hills), as this farm was called, had taken us further at every step from the place we must strive for after all—the good little Aber-Aydyr. The gallant quarrymen were now growing both weary and uneasy; and in justice to them I must say that no temptation of money, nor even any appeal to their sympathies, but only a challenge of their patriotism held them to the sad duties owing from the living to the dead. But knowing how proud all Welshmen are of the fame of their race and country, happily I exclaimed at last, when fear was getting the mastery, "What will be said of this in England, this low cowardice of the Cymro?" Upon that they looked at one another and did their best right gallantly.

Now, I need not go into any further sad details of this most sad time, except to say that Dr. Jones, who came the next day from Dolgelly, made a brief examination by order of the coroner. Of course, he had too much sense to suppose that the case was one of cholera; but to my surprise he pronounced that death was the result of "asphyxia, caused by too long immersion in the water." And knowing nothing of George Bowring's activity, vigour, and cultivated power in the water, perhaps he was not to be blamed for dreaming that a little mountain stream could drown him. I, on the other hand, felt as sure that my dear friend was foully murdered as I did that I should meet him in heaven—if I lived well for the rest of my life, which I resolved at once to do—and there have the whole thing explained, and perhaps be permitted to glance at the man who did it, as Lazarus did at Dives.

In spite of the doctor's evidence and the coroner's own persuasion, the jury found that "George Bowring died of the Caroline Morgan"—which the clerk corrected to cholera morbus—"brought on by wetting his feet and eating too many fish of his own catching." And so you may see it entered now in the records of the court of the coroners of the king for Merioneth.

And now I was occupied with a trouble, which, after all, was more urgent than the enquiry how it came to pass. When a man is dead, it must be taken as a done thing, not to be undone; and, happily, all near relatives are inclined to see it in that light. They are grieved, of course, and they put on hatbands and give no dinner parties; and they even think of their latter ends more than they might have desired to do. But after a little while all comes round. Such things must be happening always, and it seems so unchristian to repine; and if any money has been left them, truly they must attend to it. On the other hand, if there has been no money, they scarcely see why they should mourn for nothing; and, as a duty, they begin to allow themselves to be roused up.

But when a wife becomes a widow, it is wholly different. No money can ever make up to her the utter loss of the love-time and the loneliness of the remaining years; the little turns, and thoughts, and touches—wherever she goes and whatever she does—which at every corner meet her with a deep, perpetual want. She tries to fetch her spirit up and to think of her duties to all around—to her children, or to the guests whom trouble forces upon her for business' sake, or even the friends who call to comfort (though the call can fetch her none); but all the while how deeply aches her sense that all these duties are as different as a thing can be from her love-work to her husband!

What could I do? I had heard from George, but could not for my life remember, the name of that old house in Berkshire where poor Mrs. Bowring was on a visit to two of her aunts, as I said before. I ventured to open her letter to her husband, found in his left-hand side breast-pocket, and, having dried it, endeavoured only to make out whence she wrote; but there was nothing. Ladies scarcely ever date a letter both with time and place, for they seem to think that everybody must know it, because they do. So the best I could do was to write to poor George's house in London, and beg that the letter might be forwarded at once. It came, however, too late to hand. For, although the newspapers of that time were respectably slow and steady, compared with the rush they all make nowadays, they generally managed to outrun the post, especially in the nutting season. They told me at Dolgelly, and they confirmed it at Machynlleth, that nobody must desire to get his letters at any particular time, in the months of September and October, when the nuts were ripe. For the postmen never would come along until they had filled their bags with nuts, for the pleasure of their families. And I dare say they do the same thing now, but without being free to declare it so.

CHAPTER VII.

The body of my dear friend was borne round the mountain slopes to Dolgelly and buried there, with no relative near, nor any mourner except myself; for his wife, or rather his widow, was taken with sudden illness (as might be expected), and for weeks it was doubtful whether she would stay behind to mourn for him. But youth and strength at last restored her to dreary duties and worldly troubles.

Of the latter, a great part fell on me; and I did my best—though you might not think so, after the fuss I made of my own—to intercept all that I could, and quit myself manfully of the trust which George had returned from the dead to enjoin. And, what with one thing and another, and a sudden dearth of money which fell on me (when my cat-fund was all spent, and my gold watch gone up a gargoyle), I had such a job to feed the living that I never was able to follow up the dead.

The magistrates held some enquiry, of course, and I had to give my evidence; but nothing came of it, except that the quarryman, Evan Peters, clearly proved his innocence. Being a very clever fellow, and dabbling a bit in geology, he had taken his hammer up the mountains, as his practice was when he could spare the time, to

seek for new veins of slate, or lead, or even gold, which is said to be there. He was able to show that he had been at Tal y Llyn at the time of day when George would be having his luncheon; and the people who knew Evan Peters were much more inclined to suspect me than him. But why should they suspect anybody, when anyone but a fool could see "how plain it was of the cholera?"

Twenty years slipped by (like a rope paid out on the seashore, "hand over hand," chafing as it goes, but gone as soon as one looks after it), and my hair was gray, and my fame was growing (slowly, as it appeared to me, but as all my friends said "rapidly"; as if I could never have earned it!) when the mystery of George Bowring's death was solved without an effort.

I had been so taken up with the three dear children, and working for them as hard as if they were my own (for the treasury of our British empire was bankrupt to these little ones—"no provision had been made for such a case," and so we had to make it)—I say that these children had grown to me and I to them in such degree that they all of them called me "Uncle!"

This is the most endearing word that one human being can use to another. A fellow is certain to fight with his brothers and sisters, his father, and perhaps even his mother. Tenfold thus with his wife; but whoever did fight with his uncle? Of course I mean unless he was his heir. And the tenderness of this relation has not escaped *vox populi*, that keen discriminator.

Who is the most reliable, cordial, indispensable of mankind—especially to artists—in every sense of the word the dearest? A pawnbroker; he is our uncle.

Under my care, these three children grew to be splendid "members of society." They used to come and kick over my easel with legs that were quite Titanic; and I could not scold them when I thought of George. Bob Bistre, the eldest, was my apprentice, and must become famous in consequence; and when he was twenty-five years old, and money became no object to me (through the purchase by a great art critic of the very worst picture I ever painted; half of it, in fact, was Bob's!), I gave the boy choice of our autumn trip to California, or the antipodes.

"I would rather go to North Wales, dear uncle," he answered, and then dropped his eyes, as his father used when he had provoked me. That settled the matter. He must have his way; though as for myself, I must confess that I have begun, for a long time now, upon principle, to shun melancholy.

The whole of the district is opened up so by those desperate railways that we positively dined at the Cross-Pipes Hotel the very day after we left Euston Square. Our landlady did not remember me, which was anything but flattering. But she jumped at Bob as if she would have kissed him; for he was the image of his father, whose handsome face had charmed her.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Aydyr was making as much noise as ever, for the summer had been a wet one; and of course all the people of Aber-Aydyr had their ears wide open. I showed Bob the bridge and the place of my vision, but did not explain its meaning, lest my love for him should seem fiduciary; and the next morning, at his most urgent request, we started afoot for that dark, sad valley. It was a long walk, and I did not find that twenty years had shortened it.

"Here we are at last," I said, "and the place looks the same as ever. There is the grand old Pen y cada, with the white cloud rolling as usual; to the left and right are the two other summits, the arms of the chair of Idris; and over the shoulder of that crag you can catch a glassy light in the air—that is the reflection of Tal y Llyn."

"Yes, yes!" he answered impatiently. "I know all that from your picture, uncle. But show me the place where my father died."

"It lies immediately under our feet. You see that gray stone down in the hollow, a few yards from the river brink. There he sat, as I have often told you, twenty years ago this day. There he was taking his food, when someone— Well, well! God knows, but we never shall. My boy, I am stiff in the knees; go on."

He went on alone, as I wished him to do, with exactly his father's step, and glance, figure, face, and stature. Even his dress was of the silver-gray which his father had been so fond of, and which the kind young fellow chose to please his widowed mother. I could almost believe (as a cloudy mantle stole in long folds over the highland, reproducing the lights, and shades, and gloom of that mysterious day) that the twenty years were all a dream, and that here was poor George Bowring going to his murder and his watery grave.

My nerves are good and strong, I trow; and that much must have long been evident. But I did not know what young Bob's might be, and therefore I left him to himself. No man should be watched as he stands at the grave of his wife or mother: neither should a young fellow who sits on the spot where his father was murdered. Therefore, as soon as our Bob had descended into the gray stone-pit, in which his dear father must have breathed his last, I took good care to be out of sight, after observing that he sat down exactly as his father must have sat, except that his attitude, of course, was sad, and his face pale and reproachful. Then, leaving the poor young fellow to his thoughts, I also sat down to collect myself.

But before I had time to do more than wonder at the mysterious ways of the world, or of Providence in guiding it; at the manner in which great wrong lies hidden, and great woe falls unrecompensed; at the dark, uncertain laws which cover (like an indiscriminate mountain cloud) the good and the bad, the kind and the cruel, the murdered and the murderer—a loud shriek rang through the rocky ravine, and up the dark folds of the mountain.

I started with terror, and rushed forward, and heard myself called, and saw young Bowring leap up, and stand erect and firm, although with a gesture of horror. At his feet lay the body of a man struck dead, flung on its back, with great hands spread on the eyes, and white hair over them.

No need to ask what it meant. At last the justice of God was manifest. The murderer lay, a rigid corpse, before the son of the murdered.

"Did you strike him?" I asked.

"Is it likely," said the youth, "that I would strike an aged man like that? I assure you I never had such a fright in my life. This poor old fellow came on me quite suddenly, from behind a rock, when all my mind was full of my father; and his eyes met mine, and down he fell, as if I had shot him through the heart!"

"You have done no less," I answered; and then I stooped over the corpse (as I had stooped over the corpse of its victim), and the whole of my strength was required to draw the great knotted hands from the eyes, upon which they were cramped with a spasm not yet relaxed.

"It is Hopkin ap Howel!" I cried, as the great eyes, glaring with the horror of death, stood forth. "Black Hopkin once, white Hopkin now! Robert Bowring, you have slain the man who slew your father."

"You know that I never meant to do it," said Bob. "Surely, uncle, it was his own fault!"

"How did he come? I see no way. He was not here when I showed you the place, or else we must have seen him."

"He came round the corner of that rock, that stands in front of the furze-bush."

Now that we had the clue, a little examination showed the track. Behind the furze-bush, a natural tunnel of rock, not more than a few yards long, led into a narrow gorge covered with brushwood, and winding into the valley below the farmhouse of the Dewless Crags. Thither we hurried to obtain assistance, and there the whole mystery was explained.

Black Hopkin (who stole behind George Bowring and stunned, or, perhaps, slew him with one vile blow) has this and this only to say at the Bar—that he did it through love of his daughter.

Gwenthlian, the last of seven, lay dying on the day when my friend and myself came up the valley of the Agydr. Her father, a man of enormous power of will and passion, as well as muscle, rushed forth of the house like a madman, when the doctor from Dolgelly told him that nothing more remained except to await the good time of heaven. It was the same deadly decline which had slain every one of his children at that same age, and now must extinguish a long descended and slowly impoverished family.

"If I had but a gold watch I could save her!" he cried in his agony, as he left the house. "Ever since the old gold watch was sold, they have died—they have died! They are gone, one after one, the last of all my children!"

In these lonely valleys lurks a strange old superstition that even Death must listen to the voice of Time in gold; that, when the scanty numbered moments of the sick are fleeting, a gold watch laid in the wasted palm, and pointing the earthly hours, compels the scythe of Death to pause, the timeless power to bow before the two great gods of the human race—time and gold.

Poor George in the valley must have shown his watch. The despairing father must have been struck with crafty madness at the sight. The watch was placed in his daughter's palm; but Death had no regard for it. Thenceforth Black Hopkin was a blasted man, racked with remorse and heart-disease, sometimes raving, always roving, but finding no place of repentance. And it must have been a happy stroke—if he had made his peace above, which none of us can deal with—when the throb of his long-worn heart stood still at the vision of his victim, and his soul took flight to realms that have no gold and no chronometer.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GEORGE BOWRING - A TALE OF CADER IDRIS ***

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