

THE MANOR HOUSE

A CHAT WITH THE REV. S. BARING-GOULD.



THE Manor House, Lew Trenchard, is an ancestral home which many people of high degree might well envy the Rev. S. Baring-Gould. The novelist is squire as well as parson of this little parish on the borders of Dartmoor, and the picturesque, ivy-covered building has been in the possession of his family for nearly three centuries. Although it has been his home for only a few years, it is easy to see that Mr. Baring-Gould has an affection for every granite in its solid masonry, every lattice in its quaint, old-fashioned windows.

As I drive into the grounds in his dog-cart from the Great Western Railway station at Coryton, about three miles distant, the reverend gentleman is engaged with hatchet and hook in "thinning out" the luxuriant Devonshire vegetation. For the moment, however, I do not recognise my host—his upright figure and ruddy, clean-shaven face so clearly contradict the sixty years of age which his biographers, correctly enough, attribute to him. The cordiality of his welcome soon reassures me on this point.

Five minutes later Mr. Baring-Gould is dispensing tea in his drawing-room—in the absence of his wife and daughter, the one on an errand of mercy, the other for an hour's fishing with a friend—with the same skill that he showed in wielding the axe. We sit by

an enormous stone fireplace, with finely-carved oak fittings. In the winter-time one could have there an enormous blaze; at the present moment it is filled with a mass of bright roses from the gardens. A question or two on my part and Mr. Baring-Gould is soon chatting gaily.

"Having finished two books a fortnight ago I am taking a holiday," he says, as if in explanation of his exuberantly good spirits. "Nearly all my days just now are spent on Dartmoor, where we are excavating an ancient village. The existence of this village has long been known, and at last three or four of us formed a committee to discover the epoch to which it belonged. We have had three men at work there for six weeks, and we are supposed to take it in turn to supervise their work. So far we have been very successful, and the interesting arrangements of the neolithic dwellings reward us well for the trouble. I am afraid, when we have finished, everything will have to be covered up again, as that was one of the conditions on which we obtained the permission of the owner of the land."

"So antiquarianism is your recreation. I imagined it was novel-writing which you found a recreation in the midst of your parish work and your literary research."

"On the contrary, to sit down to begin a new novel is always a bore, and I have put off the evil day till Monday week. Once the

book is started, however, I stick to it with inflexible determination—a chapter a day on the average, and two chapters if I miss a day, to make up for the loss. At times, of course, I get very interested in my story or my characters—then the work becomes a pleasure; I am always happy, too, when I feel that what I am writing is throwing some fresh light on the life and character of any class or section of people.

"At the present moment it is my ambition to write a set of novels that shall illustrate the different types of character among the common people in different parts of the country. As regards Devonshire, of course, I have already done 'John Herring.' I may say the same in respect to Essex, and my last published book, 'The Queen of Love,' is a picture of life in the salt districts of Cheshire. In the book I am about to begin I have taken the Hindhead district of Surrey for my scene; some of the principal incidents occur on the Punch-bowl."

"You have been staying in that district, I suppose?"

"Yes, for a few weeks. I became well acquainted with the Weald, when I was a master for eight years after leaving Cambridge, at Hurstpierpoint School, Sussex. Do you know, when I am giving 'local colour' to a novel I like to be away from the scenes I am describing. I think I have written best of Dartmoor in 'Urith,' and where do you suppose that book was written? At Rome. I was wintering at Rome, disgusted with all my surroundings, and longing for a breath of the fresh Devonshire air. In my longing to see Dartmoor once more I believe I was more successful in giving the novel its 'local colour' than I should have been sitting in my own study with Dartmoor only four miles away."

"What other localities have you in view, Mr. Gould, for future novels?"

"I have a friend at Durham, who is constantly urging me to come up and explore the Roman Wall. You know how enthusiasts go mad over this subject. Still, I should think in the neighbourhood of the Roman Wall there must be a great number of legends and stories that would serve my purpose, so the probability is that one of these days I shall be accepting my friend's invitation."

At this point a diversion was created by the arrival of Miss Baring-Gould and her friends from "the lake." The "lake" is only about a couple of hundred yards from the house, and when the ladies have had their tea we all go to it, in the hope of recovering a fine trout which had broken Miss Gould's line and so escaped his doom.

It is a fine sheet of water, with high cliffs covered with foliage—to be explained by the fact that it was a limestone quarry till the cost of keeping back the water led to the abandonment of the industry. Assuredly it is a pleasant place on a warm afternoon, and one can well imagine that the author spends many happy hours here watching the sport of his children, if not handling a rod himself.

Our conversation is resumed at the dinner-table. I happen to make some allusion to Thomas Hardy's last book and ask Mr. Baring-Gould if he agrees with me. To my surprise he replies—

"I never read novels, and—to my shame be it spoken, for I know we have the same love of the English peasant in common—I must confess myself ignorant even of Mr. Hardy's. In my library there is scarcely any fiction beyond Dickens's work. Somehow or other, I never seem to have any desire to read a novel: my imagination is sufficiently at work as it is. A friend of mine, on the other hand, a ripe scholar, a man who is acquainted with pretty well all the languages of Europe, is always reading novels. Yet he tells me he has absolutely no imagination—only once was he ever able to work out a 'plot,' and that



THE REV. S. BARING-GOULD.

(From a photograph by W. & D. Downey, Ebury Street, S.W.)

was in a dream, and he had forgotten it in the morning."

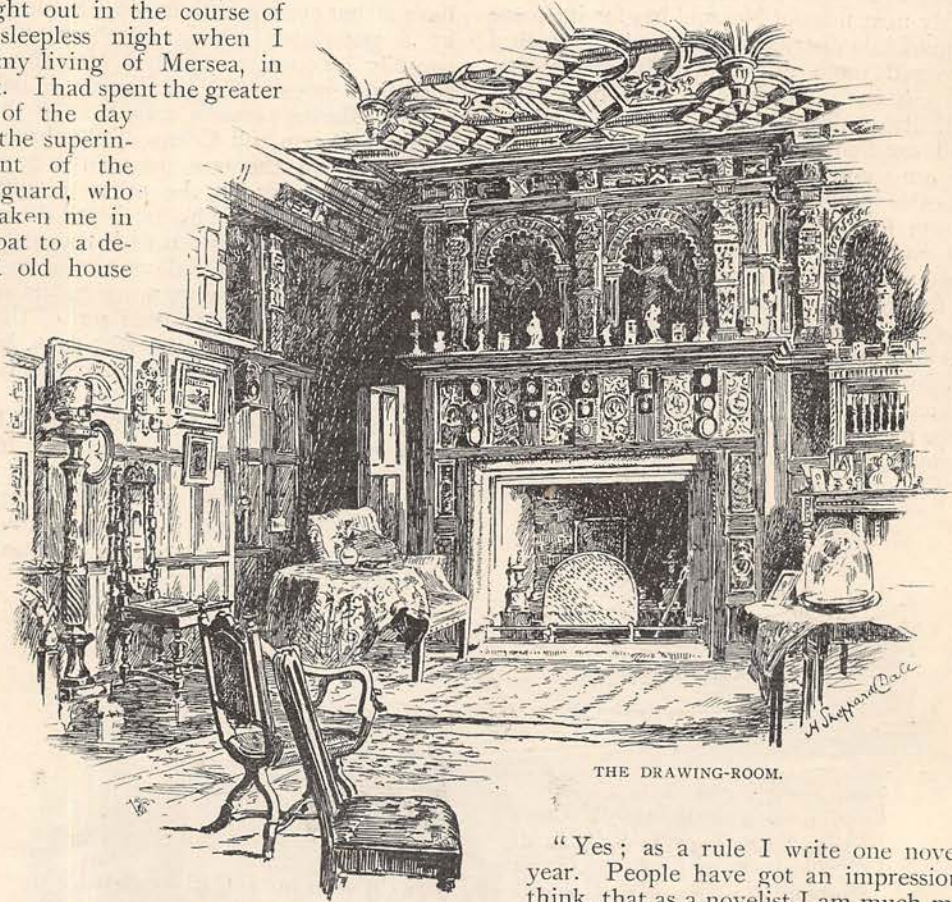
"How do you think out your own plots, Mr. Gould?"

"Well, I have done a good deal of that work myself in bed. If I have reached any

crucial point in a story, if I am embarrassed as to which of several courses to adopt, I can practically think of nothing else till it is settled: it is the last thing I can think of on going to sleep at night and the first on wakening in the morning. The story of 'Mehalah,' I remember, was thought out in the course of one sleepless night when I had my living of Mersea, in Essex. I had spent the greater part of the day with the superintendent of the coast-guard, who had taken me in his boat to a deserted old house

likely to have any success because its end was so unsatisfactory. Then Smith and Elder offered me £50 for all rights, and this sum I was only too happy to accept."

"And you have written a dozen works of fiction since?"



THE DRAWING-ROOM.

on the dreary marshes. In this uncanny place, in fact, we had eaten a frugal lunch. When I went to bed the spot haunted me, and almost unconsciously I began to make it the scene of a story. The very next day I started writing out the story, and gave all my leisure to it till the book was finished."

"'Mehalah' was your first novel?"

"No; I had published a novel some dozen years before—a story of the French revolution; but it was a miserable failure. I used to think it failed because it was published in the midst of the Franco-German war, but I know better now—the book quite deserved its fate. At one time, however, I was afraid that 'Mehalah' would have no better success. It was refused by three publishers in succession, the third saying that the book was not

"Yes; as a rule I write one novel a year. People have got an impression, I think, that as a novelist I am much more prolific; this is probably because two or three books of mine have happened to appear simultaneously, owing to publishing arrangements with which you are doubtless familiar. As I have told you, I work hard at a book when once it is begun; but its preparation occupies me not a little time. I do not keep note-books, but trust entirely to my memory for incidents, impressions, etc. I think out my plot and my characters without having recourse to paper, and, before actually beginning the MS., merely make a *précis* of the contents of each chapter. Occasionally I take a character from real life, considerably modifying it, however, in doing so. No, I had never met Mehalah in my walks about Essex. But in a certain neighbourhood in which I once was there was just such a man as Elijah Rebow—a man who, although not a criminal

in the sense of having been in prison, was full of wickedness and was the terror of all who knew him."

After dinner, Mr. Baring-Gould took me into his library, which, as may be supposed, is rich in historical and antiquarian lore.

"My next novel, 'Noemi,' has for its scene a remarkable district in Périgord in which I discovered some extraordinarily old habitations cut in the rocks. In this neighbourhood, little known as it is to the tourist, I found excellent material for a novel. See, here are some sketches I made for the purpose of helping me to realise its scenes."

From looking at these sketches I passed to the volumes of old songs and ballads which, to my mind, were much the most interesting things to be seen in Mr. Baring-Gould's library. This hobby of his has indirectly been of help to him in his work as a novelist. It has led him to make the acquaintance of many old Devonshire labourers whose memories are the chief repositories of the songs of the West Country.

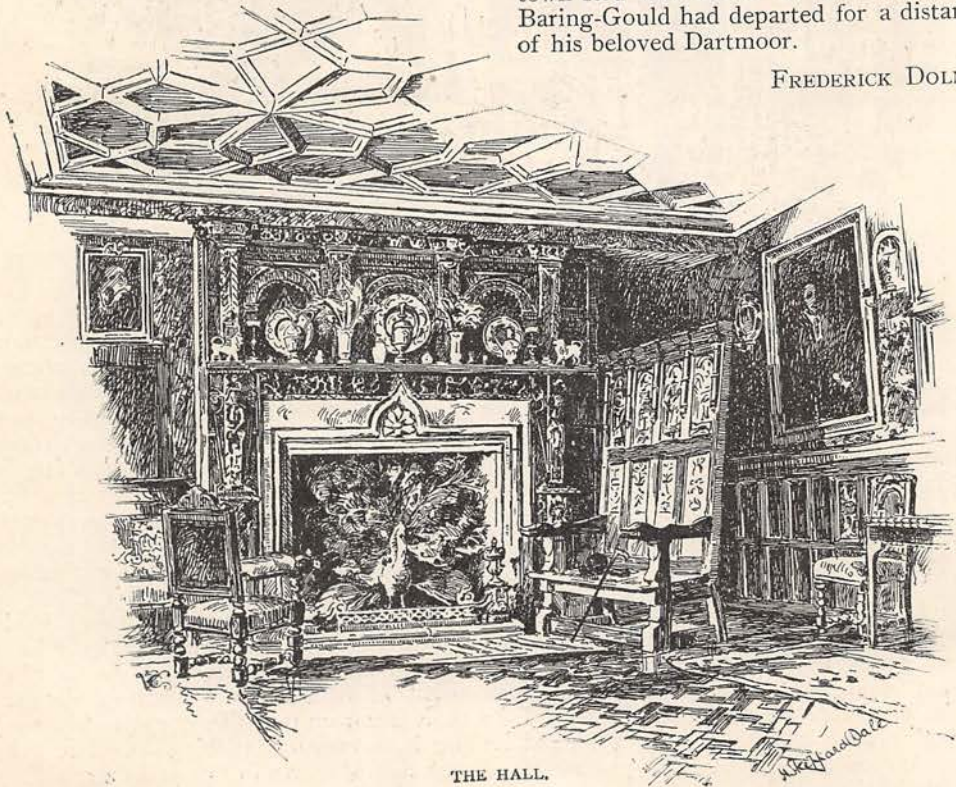
"The old fellows were only too delighted,"

Mr. Baring-Gould says with a ring of sympathy, "to have someone who appreciated their old ballads and was really anxious to hear them sing. At one time, of course, these songs made them welcome visitors in the tap-rooms of the village; but now their voices have all but gone, and their songs are forgotten by a generation which, somehow or other, speedily becomes acquainted with the latest successful songs in the London music-halls."

Mr. Baring-Gould's collection of the old songs of Devon and Cornwall fills three stout volumes; on the one side of the pages he writes the words, on the other the different versions of the music he has heard it sung to. The music he has written with the assistance of a friend, who jotted down the score whilst the song was being sung, much to the amazement of many an untutored son of the soil. When this friend was not with him, he had to ask the old men to sing the ballad to him as he sat at a piano.

At about half-past ten Mr. Baring-Gould took his candle and retired to rest, leaving me to enjoy his books for another hour. I had to say good-bye, for long before the town-bird was about in the morning Mr. Baring-Gould had departed for a distant part of his beloved Dartmoor.

FREDERICK DOLMAN.



THE HALL.