

**Wafted Away**  
**By Sabine Baring-Gould**  
**Published as a pamphlet in London 1876 by G J Palmer**

**Introduction**

by Ron Wawman © February 2010

A few years ago Roger Bristow<sup>1</sup> carried out an analysis of Sabine's lifetime publications and identified well over 1000 articles and books published in a steady stream from 1850 until 1925. One very surprising finding by Roger was a break in that steady stream in the years 1878 – when Sabine published nothing at all – and the following year, 1879, when he published very little. The absence of any obvious reason for this hiatus has led to a search for possible significant life events around this time that might have affected Sabine's emotional well-being to such an extent that it had an adverse effect on his literary output. It is postulated that the death of his 2-year-old daughter Beatrice on 25 March 1876 could have been just such an event, possibly by triggering a prolonged bereavement reaction. Sabine's publications around this time give some support for this suggestion.

Presumably most of the publications that came out in 1876 and 1877 were of books and articles Sabine had written prior to Beatrice's death and which were in the process of being published. However one significant publication in 1877 was *The Mystery of Suffering*.<sup>2</sup> This was based on a series of lectures given some years previously but it is reasonable to conclude that it was the bereavement that led Sabine to turn to them again and try to gain comfort from them. Having done so it is not surprising that he then decided to publish them. Some of the lectures are pertinent to bereavement.

Similarly one of Sabine's few publications in 1879 was *Sermons to Children*,<sup>3</sup> some of which also addressed bereavement. Finally in 1880 *Mehalah*<sup>4</sup> was published, having been written mostly during 1879. *Mehalah* is especially noted for the unpleasantness of its characters and the bitterness of the story, so much so that whilst the novel has generally been acclaimed as his best, many contemporary critics were troubled by the unpleasantness, which some regarded as gratuitous. In response to these criticisms, Sabine wrote in his diary on 12 December 1880

*I wrote it when greatly depressed.*

Sabine then proceeded to attribute being depressed onto the unfavourable reviews of his book *Germany, Past And Present*<sup>5</sup> that had been published in 1879 when he was writing *Mehalah*. This is an unconvincing explanation. He continued:

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<sup>1</sup> Bristow R. *Sabine Baring-Gould's Literary Output*, Newsletter SBGAS No.50, 2006 Feb, p 6-10

<sup>2</sup> Baring-Gould S. *Mystery of Suffering*, 1877, London, Skeffington.

<sup>3</sup> Baring-Gould S, *Sermons to Children*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, 1879, London, Skeffington. Sermon 10 suggests a path to the resolution of grief.

<sup>4</sup> Baring-Gould S. *Mehalah*, 1880, London, Smith, Elder.

<sup>5</sup> Baring-Gould S, *Germany, Past and Present*, 1879, London, Kegan Paul.

*In the bitterness of my spirit I wrote Mehalah very quickly in a month, without a pause, and poured out in it my wrath and bile. Then I was better*

It is much more likely that, although the *wrath and bile* that marked *Mehalah* out as a novel of some renown, akin to *Wuthering Heights*, may have been **triggered** by the criticisms of his *Germany*, these emotions had their true origins in the last throes of the morbid reaction to the loss of Beatrice that had also led directly to *Wafted Away*. The description of feeling better after the cathartic experience of writing *Mehalah* is suggestive of the resolution of a depressive reaction

Certainly there were other significant influences on Sabine's life around this time including the serious illness of his brother Willy who had been committed to the lunatic asylum in 1875 and died there 5 years later, but whilst Sabine seemed reconciled that he had done all he could for Willy, the account of Beatrice's death suggests that both he and his wife, Grace, might have partly blamed themselves (and – who knows – each other?) for failing to recognise the seriousness of her condition. These are common reactions to bereavement. It is also possible that the commissioning by Sabine of the painting *The Viaticum to the Dying* by Edouard Tyck, during a visit by the artist to East Mersea, could have reflected Sabine's concern that the death of Beatrice was so sudden and unexpected that the family were not spiritually prepared for it.

It has been suggested that Victorian parents of large families were not particularly affected by the loss of a child but such a claim has dubious validity. Human nature has not changed fundamentally and neither has the nature of loss and grief. Sabine revealed little of his personal feelings in his published work but there is ample evidence from both diary and family letters that he was much troubled by the serious illnesses of family members and distressed by the death of significant others. The death of his life-long friend, Lloyd Worth in 1884 invoked the comment in the diary *Life is one series of bitter disappointments* and there is much to suggest that his emotional well-being was adversely and permanently affected by the death of his wife, Grace in 1916.

Where does *Wafted Away* fit into this? According to Sabine's very precise entries in his family Bible for 1876, *Wafted Away* was written a mere twenty-one days after the death of Beatrice. As such the reader might be forgiven for expecting that this story would perhaps be a moving account of the death of a little child. Not a bit of it! What flowed from Sabine's pen at this time of grief was an exceptionally vicious and fantastical satire that seems to target the whole of humanity apart from the poor and the helpless. Ostensibly this was a wide sweeping and ruthless assault on the Established Church, which was then tearing itself apart over the Public Worship Regulation Act, that was passed in 1874 and came into force in 1875. This Act forbade the use of ritual and the Cross in worship and led to prosecution and imprisonment of clergymen through a so-called Ecclesiastical Court especially created and maintained by the government not the Church. But Sabine's story is so bitter that, although one would have expected him at times have been troubled and angry over the antics of such as Bishop Claughton, then presiding over Sabine's own diocese of Rochester, much of the intense feeling invested in the story probably reflected his state of mind in a far more personal way. Perhaps his decision to write at this particular time was made to provide a diversion from the grief he was

experiencing but it could well also have been driven by a need to find an outlet for his pent up feelings. Loss of a loved one commonly involves a bewildering mixture of emotions including anger against self, against others, including loved ones and possibly God. Sabine, who was undoubtedly a devout Christian, would have found difficulty coming to terms with such thoughts and feelings and would have had a strong unconscious need to project such un-Christian feelings elsewhere and especially away from his family and away from God.

Why should an emotional reaction to bereavement affect the literary output of a writer? The most common explanation is the loss of motivation, ideation and confidence associated with depression; but there are other possibilities, such as a pre-occupation with other matters, e.g. having to give attention to other grieving family members and attending to an estate. Another possibility is the adverse influence of mood on the content of what is being written. *Mehalah* and *Wafted Away* could well be instances of this. It is by no means impossible that much of an author's output under these influences would end up either in a waste paper basket or in a publisher's reject tray. Perhaps Sabine was lucky with *Mehalah*.

Chapter X, *Sturm und Drang* in Sabine's book *The Church Revival*<sup>6</sup> in some ways points to the possibility that the Bishop who featured in the story was based on Bishop Claughton of Rochester, with his 'maggie' sleeves, who led the first prosecutions under the Act. However taking into account presence, in chapter II of *Wafted Away*, of a *Renaissance dome*, the cockney accents of some the characters and the references to *Jo of Tom-Allone's*<sup>7</sup> and to *Holywell Lane*,<sup>8</sup> it seems much more likely that this was the City of London and that the City Church the Bishop was trying to enter using the wrong keys, was that of St Alban's the Martyr, in the slums of Holborn near Chancery Lane, where the incumbent, the Rev. A H Mackonochie, was persecuted by Bishop A C Tait of London, later Archbishop of Canterbury and about whom Sabine wrote four disparaging pages in his *Church Revival*.<sup>9</sup>

*Wafted Away* is the most extraordinary story packed with wry metaphors and clever puns. Totally absurd and funny at one level but bitter and destructive at another. But then the extraordinary antics of politicians such as Disraeli, Shaftsbury who were behind the Act, Lord Penzance who presided over the Ecclesiastical Court and those Bishops who persecuted members of the clergy were also destructive and, at times, not a little absurd.

The reader will note that the transcriber has included a small number of references to this introduction. Sabine inserted a number of explanatory references throughout the story. The transcriber has added his own to these. The transcriber's references are differentiated by the use of Roman numerals and by appearing at the end of the story as endnotes rather than at the bottom of the page, where Sabine's references are to be found.

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<sup>6</sup> Baring-Gould S. *The Church Revival*, 1914, London, Methuen

<sup>7</sup> Dickens C. *Bleak House*, 1853, London, Bradbury and Evans. In instalments

<sup>8</sup> Holywell Lane: Just north of Liverpool Station and a mile away from St Alban's Church

<sup>9</sup> Baring-Gould S. *The Church Revival*, chapter 8, *The Victorian Bishops*, pp 189-92

## Wafted Away

### I

On the first of April the Voltigeur<sup>i</sup>—Woolly Tiger in popular parlance<sup>10</sup>—a magnificent balloon, the property of Messrs Walter and John Cowell, was advertised to rise from the cathedral close at Norwich, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon.

An immense crowd assembled in the close from the moment in the morning when the gates were unbarred. Every window was occupied, rank on rank of boys' faces peered out of the exquisite gothic windows of the grammar-school; and the masters stood on their desks, in cap and gown, looking over the heads of their pupils, enveloped in that doggy atmosphere exhaled by boys between the ages of ten and nineteen,

At eleven o'clock precisely the connexions with earth were severed. The day was bright, the blue sky dappled with a few faint clouds, a light wind breathed from the north.

As the balloon mounted, containing Messrs Cowell, deafening cheers pealed from the crowd in the close, and pursued the Voltigeur.

The balloon, sailing majestically over the city of churches, bearing S. by S.W., was seen crossing the zenith by the workmen in the iron foundries situated near the river.

“Go it, old Woolly Tiger!” shouted the foreman.

“Hooray!” roared the others, straining their eyes heavenwards. At that moment Messrs Cowell threw out ballast, consisting of sand, from a bag; it fell, as a shower of dust, into the eyes of these intelligent, self-restrained British artisans. But this did not in the least disturb their equanimity. They rather liked it. There was no novelty in the incident. They were accustomed to having dust thrown daily into their eyes by the delegates and local officials of their Trade Union.<sup>11</sup>

The balloon rose three thousand feet. Messrs. Cowell had no intention of taking a long trip. It was their lively wish and expectation to effect a landing before nightfall in one of the southern counties of England. For some time the wind was favourable, and the sky clear. But towards two o'clock in the afternoon a thin white mist began to spread over the surface of the country and to obscure its features, so that the aeronauts lapsed into uncertainty as to their whereabouts, and deemed it prudent to release a small quantity of gas and approach the earth.

“From the direction of the wind, I am apprehensive that we shall drift out to sea,” said Mr. Walter Cowell. “Had we not better let down the grapnel, and catch in the soil or in some tree, to arrest our progress?”

“I agree with you,” answered Mr. John Cowell; and he proceeded to run out the grapnel.

“Steady!” almost shrieked Mr. Walter. “The fog assumes the consistency and complexion of pea soup. I see an early English church steeple looming above it, here

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#### Baring-Gould's references

<sup>10</sup> The vulgar tongue is liable to mispronounce foreign names. Thus artichaut giroflé has become “Jerusalem artichoke,” asparagus has been transmuted to “sparrow-grass,” and bufetier into “beefeater.”

<sup>11</sup> With Dicæopolis may the British artisan of the present decennium well exclaim: “Never since I began to wash, have my eyes been so filled with dust as now”

a perpendicular tower, there a Renaissance dome. Merciful heavens! We are over a city!"

In fear lest the grapnel should rip off a house roof or wreck a church window, the brothers instantly emptied a sack of ballast, and the Voltigeur bounded upwards, like a lark, but without its song, high above the mist into the clear golden sunlight, under a canopy of exquisite unchequered azure. As the end of the grapnel emerged from the vapour, the brothers, looking over the edge of the car, observed that it had brought up something mundane adhering to it.

"What is it?" asked Mr. John Cowell.

Mr. Walter adjusted his opera-glasses, took a leisurely survey of the object hanging at the end of the line, and said, "Brother John, I believe yonder object to be only an old clothes-bag."

"Shall I wind it up?" asked the younger aeronaut. "No," answered the elder, "I think not. It will act as the tuft at the tail of a kite, and steady us in our career. Let it depend where it is, brother John."

## II

On the first of April, in a large city suburb, a considerable crowd was assembled before the door of Christ's Church.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. A fog had risen with the tide, and had rolled over the city, brown, obscure, odorous; and the cross on the church spire had disappeared in the vapour. Above the portal stood a figure in a niche indicative of the dedication of the edifice; a veil of soot and vapour hung over it, as though draping the form in the crape of mourning.

On the church step stood the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of the diocese, in somewhat perturbed condition, fumbling at the lock of the door of the church with first one key and then with another, from the bunch in his hands, hampering the lock by his hasty efforts to twist his keys in wards they were never designed to fit. His actions were likewise impeded by the observations of the mob, and the necessity under which he laboured of replying to these observations with courtesy.

From within the church issued the sound of chant and prayer; through the windows could be distinguished the glimmer of lights shining forth before men, and when the prelate applied his nose to the keyhole, he became distinctly conscious of the odour of sanctity.

In spite of the tumult of the crowd; in spite of the kicks at the door from the episcopal boots, and the hammering of pastoral knuckles; in spite of the ineffectual rattling of the ineffectual keys in the antique lock, the service proceeded with the utmost calmness, as though those within were sublimely indifferent to the uproar without, or absolutely confident in the security of their locks, and the unassailability of their position.

The Right Reverend the Lord Bishop had been buttoned and laced up in his intricate episcopal vesture by his apparitor general<sup>ii</sup>, he was therefore very tight about the body in black satin, and very puffy about the arms in white lawn. That he was also somewhat woolly about the head was not attributable to the apparitor, but was the result of congenital causes.

"Look here, my Lord," said a taverner, stepping forward from the throng, "I will not endure these fellows in the Church. They spoil my trade in licker and wice. I have not got arf the trade I had afore they comed here. Some of my best customers they have converted into psalm-singing praying Christians. And they educate the

young to discountenance the attractions I purwides for the entertainment and demoralisation of the British public. So, says I, the likes of them should never receive state pay to injure the trade of taxpayers in a Church which is national and established.”

“Certainly not, my dear Christian brother,” said the Bishop straightening himself. “The State derives a large revenue from duty on malt and spirits. One branch of the State should not interfere with the advantages of the whole. I will abate the enthusiasm of these fanatics if I can but get at them with the assistance of your sturdy Conservative arms.”

“Look you here, my Lord,” said a picture-dealer from Holywell Street, “I don’t approve of none of those graven images yonder.” And he pointed to the solemn statue that stood above the door with outspread arms, and a text beneath the feet invitatory to the weary and burdened. “My Lord, if we are to have imagery and art, let us have the nude or none at all.”

“Certainly, certainly, my Christian friend,” said the Bishop. “It shall come down and its place filled by St. Erastus or the Impenitent Thief, figures to which no gentlemen present can object.”

“My Lord,” said a paper-man; “The Times as I ‘old in my ‘and——”

The Bishop at that awful name removed his shovel-hat and bowed.

“Look you here!” interrupted a Dissenting preacher, “these men are emptying our chapels, and drawing over all our young people to the Church. In the name of the true Liberty is this to be tolerated?”

“My dear associate and brother in the ministry,” said the Bishop, “I will use my utmost endeavours with your Liberal aid to obliterate every attractive feature in the Church, so as to induce none to remain within it whom you may desire to secure for your ministrations.”

“Doctor,” said a Romish priest advancing cautiously and speaking in a whisper, these men have infringed on the prerogatives of St. Peter. Other apostles have let down their nets, swimming in an established smack, and drawn off the draft that should have fallen to the share of Peter. There are soles, Doctor, which no contrivances of Protestantism can secure, fish which will break through such nets and shun such bait. Mackerel is not caught in lobster pots, and whales do not bite at earth-worms. Keep for your own fishing the flounders and common plaice, and leave to us the whiting and John Dorées. The refined taste, the delicate sensibility, the exalted spirit, the self-sacrificing enthusiast, the lofty contemplative are fish to swim in the Holy Sea. Why has this shoal been arrested in its course and diverted into established fish-ponds? Instead of drawing our thousands we harvest now by tens. Lend us your assistance for recovering our exclusive right to this fry. Do you put your fingers through the bars and deliver over to us the baked chestnuts for our eating. Doctor! There are children who ask for bread and cannot digest stones. Why should the servants of your Establishment satisfy them with cakes of finest wheat flour, when we have baked for them our bread of bran and bone-dust? Give these men notice to quit your service. Restore to us our monopoly over the nobler fish, and let the alternative for consumption for the future be, bone-dust or gravel-stones.”

“It shall be so, certainly, son of the scarlet woman,” said the Bishop.

“What I object to,” said a country squire, who found himself accidentally in the crowd, “is that these fellows should turn up their noses at my boots, which I expect them to lick.”

“They shall be reduced to subserviency,” said the Bishop, “if you will kindly place your robust shoulder to the door and force it open. In olden times, before I translated, we dressed like waiters and we demeaned ourselves like waiters.”

Then there crept to the fore poor Joe from Tom-Allalone<sup>iii</sup>, ragged, haggard, impecunious. From his hollow eye-sockets he looked up at the Prelate, and with hoarse voice from rotten lungs he stammered, “Can’t you let ‘em be, sir? Sez they to me, Joe, me and you get plenty of kicks and werry few ha’pence, and we never hurted a fly. Silver and gold we have none, Joe, sez they, but such as we have, give we thee. Ah, sir, they’s been werry kind to me.”

“He’s no ratepayer, he has no voice!” roared the crowd. “Move on!” said the constable with dignity, pointing to the burial ground.

“They was werry kind to me,” repeated poor Joe with a sob as he disappeared down an alley with his broom.

“Who,” cried the Bishop, “will help me to turn these men out—these traitors to the cause of irreligion, immorality, inhumanity and despotism? I invoke the majesty of the law!”

There stepped forward a man in uniform. “I, my Lord,” he said, “am ex-constable of the common sewers”

“There is an odour of the same adhering to you, my brother,” said the Prelate, drawing a sigh of relief. “Let me look at your hands. Ha! Very dirty. Couldn’t be dirtier. You are the very man for me. Turn these men out, bid them move on after poor Joe, to starve and die in Tom-Allalone. My study is at your disposal for an office. And now”—he looked to the right, he looked to the left, with a bland smile, and added,—“Let us pray.”

At this instant the grapnel of the Voltigeur fell through the clouds, and the hook penetrating the epidermis of black satin at the Bishop’s back, caught in the laces and buttons it concealed. He was off his feet in an instant. In another he was wafted upwards through the vapour, over the telegraph wires, above the chimney-pots, and lost to sight.

A Frenchman present, with that delicate tact and happy promptitude so characteristic of his nation, waved his hand after the ascending form, and said, “Montez aux cieux, fils de Saint Augustin.”<sup>12</sup>

The mob stood aghast

Then one said, “Blowed if the old chap ain’t ewaporated into fog,” and the crowd dispersed singing Sankey and Moody’s hymns.<sup>iv</sup>

### III

As the Bishop went up, the last words that reached his ears were those of the Frenchman: “Montez aux cieux, fils de Saint Augustin!”

Is he to be blamed for believing that, in very truth, he was being translated to the seventh heavens, a second Enoch?<sup>v</sup> Surely not. Let us deal gently with him. As far as possible let us put ourselves in the same position.

How it happened that he was being wafted away from earth he knew not. He could not turn his head and look, his cravat was too tight. Conjecture took the place of certainty. He had seen the picture of St. Catherine borne aloft in angels’ arms. He had heard of Marguerite’s translation in the last scene of Faust. But both had been turned

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<sup>12</sup> An adaptation evidently of the address of the abbé Edgeworth to King Louis XVI, when on the scaffold.

t'other way. They lay with their heads on angels' bosoms, fanned by angels' wings', accompanied by celestial psalmody. He hung with head and fingers and toes downwards, and was conscious only of a determination of blood to his extremities, of a tightness across his stomach, a tingling in his finger-ends, and a singing—not angelic—in his ears. He remembered Trygæus ascending to heaven on the back of a dung beetle, but he was astride a vacuum; the chief constable of public sewers was left on earth.

No other mode of accounting for his condition offered itself to his mind, save that of translation to a better and brighter sphere. His bump of self-esteem was far to highly developed to allow the conjecture to present itself for his acceptance, that there was another sphere neither better nor brighter to which he might possibly be transported.

“I have read of the place to which I am going,” he murmured to himself, “in the new Lectionary.” His mouth wet down at the corners. “I was very comfortable down below,” he sighed, “on seven thousand a year. The only fly in my cup, the only thorn in my rose, was Ritualism.”

He hung limp and depressed, watching with filming eyes the receding earth, and dropping a tear after it. Suddenly a convulsion passed through his frame. He writhed and curled like a sole just landed.

“Mercy on me!” he gasped; “I have got the Public Worship Act in my pocket!<sup>vi</sup> I shall never be admitted to heaven with that in my possession.”<sup>13</sup>

He stole his hand into his pocket, drew the paper forth, and proceeded to tear it into the minutest particles, which he snowed over the earth as he went up, with the thought on him that it would thus fall into every parish, to produce what is the grand object of Christianity—peace on earth and goodwill among men. As the last fragment left his fingers he felt relieved. He could now, with rapt ecstatic look, walk through the portals, and smile with affected satisfaction, and without the danger of detection, at the infringements of Privy Council law he would there see perpetrated through eternity.

#### IV

Messrs. Cowell, well satisfied with the steadiness of the car, now that it was weighted with such an efficient tail, deemed it expedient to descend. The wind had freshened, and was drifting them rapidly over France: it was too violent to permit a safe landing.

But towards sunset the wind subsided, and the balloon descended within a sufficient distance of the earth to enable the aeronauts to judge the expediency of anchoring and terminating their voyage. The grapnel descended with the car, and for a moment rested on a rock. A dead calm had supervened in these lower regions. Mr. Walter Cowell took observations through his glasses. He became speedily aware that the balloon was over the Pyrenees, and that the valleys and passes on the Spanish side were occupied by troops in deadly conflict. The puffs of smoke, the roar of musketry,

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<sup>13</sup> It is not always possible to follow the thread of ideas through the sinuosities of a human mind. Perhaps Trygæus having occurred to the Bishop, he may have associated a recently proposed bill for the maintenance of an ecclesiastical magistrate [*In manuscript SBG has crossed out magistrate in his copy of this article and substituted judge*] with the first scene in the *Irene* of Aristophanes, where Trygæus obliges his ministers to provide food for the dung-beetle, by means of which he hopes to establish tranquillity in the land. And then, when Trygæus appears at the gates of heaven, he is threatened with exclusion by Hermes because contaminated by his association with the beetle, he had pampered and fed

the shrill clamour of trumpets, and the groans of the dying men, proclaimed to the aeronauts the impossibility of their coming to ground in those quarters; while the Alpine character of the surface on the French side also debarred a landing. Mr. Cowell would not run the risk of precipitating himself and his brother down a gorge from which was no exit, or impaling himself and John on the cruel spikes of glacial ice.

Aeronauts are obliged to arrive at conclusions with promptitude. Mr. Walter Cowell did not require two minutes for grasping the situation in all its bearings. Two sand-bags were decanted, and instantly the balloon leaped upwards several thousand feet, and sailed over the top of the Maladetta.<sup>vii</sup> As the sun set in the distant Atlantic, a ball of ruby flame, and as old Homer says, "all the paths were darkened," the Voltigeur and its tail were being wafted by a gentle breeze over the spurs of Pyrenees towards the plains of Aragon. The stars came out in a purple sky, and from below shone yellow sparks from village and town. Saragossa appeared like a cluster of fire-flies on the sombre plain. From above, the glorious lamp of Jupiter cast a soft and silvery ray on the dependent figure, swaying like a pendulum between heaven and earth.

Messrs Cowell waited anxiously for the morning.

## V

As has been said, for a moment the grapnel, and with it necessarily the Bishop, rested on a rock. The moment was a remarkable one, and one which led to remarkable results.

A little shepherdess was seated knitting on a slope, beneath a rock, strewn with gentian and the yellow stars of vernal anemones. The air was fragrant with the rich scent of the low-growing carmine daphne. Here and there a pale crocus traced the retiring footsteps of the snow.

As the sun declined, and the blue shadows of evening filled the valleys, the village steeple tolled the vesper hour. The damsel at once fell on her knees, and drew forth a well-worn rosary. She had scarcely concluded the first decade, when a sound from the top of the rock arrested her attention.

Looking up, she saw, with amazement and veneration, a human form standing just where a wild rose-bush grew out of a cleft. It was clothed in a long black satin gown, but the sleeves were of lawn and greatly inflated. The apparition was very red about the hands and face, and proceeded to rub the pit of the stomach, whilst addressing the shepherdess in French, with an eminently insular intonation, "O mong enfang, mes entrailles song déchirées."

The words were hardly uttered before the apparition was caught up, and vanished in the evening sky, green with the yellow light suffused over it from the declining orb, and sailed majestically out of sight over the snows of the Maladetta; the sleeves, steeped in that transient glory, seemed to the maiden's eyes like the outstretched wings of some colossal cabbage-butterfly flitting over the celestial fields. Nicolette, the shepherdess, on recovering from her stupefaction, deserted her flock, and rushing down the mountain, burst into the parsonage upon the curé, and told him what she had seen and heard. In ten minutes the entire village resounded with the news that the Holy Virgin had appeared to little Nicolette, dressed in black and white. The mayor took down her deposition, and then the curé, his vicaire, the mayor and the magnates of the village streamed up the mountain to examine the spot where the vision had been vouchsafed. The rock was reached. Nicolette's rosary lay at its base. On the top of the rock the bruised grass and crunched soldanellas revealed the impress

of feet. More remarkable still was the fact that in the rose-bush hung a fragment of black satin. It was particularly noticed that the tear had been directed downward, not lateral or upward, so that the dress must have been riven whilst the wearer was being lifted into the air. An awe fell on the assembly. Their breasts were agitated with mingled emotions. The curé saw in this vision the triumph of religion, the mayor advantage to the commune.

Candles were lighted, and the censer swung. On his knees the curé detached the fragment of black satin from the briar, and bore it down the mountain to the village church, there to be deposited, till the Bishop should have been informed of the circumstances, and infallible Rome should have sanctioned the worship of the “Virgin in Magpie” and allowed the faithful to venerate the tatter of her satin robe.

The *Univers* contained an article on this apparition attributed to the indefatigable pen of M. Veuillot:

“Miracles have already been wrought by that fragment of satin. It has been applied to cases of scarlet fever, and has been found effectual.

“Why was the Holy Virgin so red in the face? It has been asked. Why? Because she blushed at the outrages, the insolences of the Liberals—she has heard the speeches of a Gambetta. Why was she in widow’s weeds, in black and white? Because she mourned for the Holy Father couched on straw, chained in the loathsome dungeon of the Vatican. Why were her entrails rent? We look across the Rhine for an answer, and we find it in the proscription, the massacre, of prelates and religious orders. Why was she seen sailing in the sky across, beyond, the mountains? Surely to proclaim that she too is ultramontane.”<sup>viii</sup>

“Let a church be erected on that hallowed rock, an altar be reared over the impress of those sacred boots; and in characters of gold let that precipice bear a message, not to a poor shepherd girl only, but to the whole of suffering Catholic France, ‘O mon enfant, mes entrailles sont déchirées.’”

## VI

On the morning of April 2<sup>nd</sup> the Voltigeur was sailing above a vast arid tract. The wind had veered a point to the West, was steady and of moderate force.

Messrs. Cowell became uneasy. They resolved on approaching earth again to investigate their position. The plains around Madrid they had heard were barren, but hardly as much so as these appeared on which their eyes now rested. Presently a more smiling region was visible, and the aeronauts descended. As they went down so did the grapnel.

Little did Messrs. Cowell dream that the arid tract they had seen was the great Desert of Sahara, and that the verdant region they now stood over was the kingdom of Urangi, hitherto unvisited by a white face, inhabited by the cannibal negro race of Warangi.

The Bishop had enjoyed a refreshing sleep and dreams of innocence. He woke at the moment the grapnel began to sink. He saw beneath him a village of conical huts, surrounded by tropical vegetation. Tall trees of uncouth shape and novel foliage, palms of various descriptions met his astonished eyes. But what especially arrested his attention was a vast thatched edifice directly beneath him, with a circular orifice in the roof, like the crater of a lunar volcano. Towards the orifice the grapnel and the Bishop rapidly approached, and through it he finally found himself

descending. Little was the Bishop aware that he was invading, unsolicited, the wife-kraal or harem of King Tanga of Urangi

The moment at which he descended through the skylight was one well calculated to excite the interest and stimulate the curiosity of an intelligent and thoughtful traveller. The moment was exceptionally propitious for his arrival. King Tanga in his royal accoutrements, with brass curtain rings round his wrists and ankles, bead chains about his neck, and a copper crown encircling his brows, was dancing vigorously before his three hundred and sixty five wives, seated on benches around the hall. They contemplated his antics with admiration, and applauded all without discrimination.<sup>14ix</sup> The least lukewarmness in appreciation would have consigned one of these ladies first to a prison and then to the bowels of her lord.

It was at the moment when the King of Urangi was capering on one toe, with the other elevated perpendicularly above his head, his anklets clashing in rhythm, that the aperture above him suddenly darkened, and the Bishop descended upon him in all majesty and grace, hitherto undreamt of by the barbarian mind, of Anglican episcopal attire.

The Bishop's faculties had been singularly sharpened by his transit. In an instant he was master of the situation. The one object in the whole world to which he could fly, and to which cling for security, was before him—the crown. Without a moment's hesitation, a supreme instant, an instant which determined the whole current of his after career, he made a grab with both hands at the crown, as the mediæval felon would have grasped for safety the sanctuary ring, or a Jewish rebel would have clung to the horns of the altar.

It was at this moment that the aeronauts, having ascertained their position, threw out ballast, resolving on a dash to the Cape of Good Hope, so as to descend in a seat of civilization. Consequently, no sooner had the Bishop laid hold of the crown, than he began again to soar through the roof. The king, unwilling to relinquish his diadem, clutched it with both hands, and was instantly lifted off his feet.

The three hundred and sixty five wives, seeing their sovereign and spouse about to leave them through the roof, moved by affection or interest—the death or disappearance of King Tanga would have involved the holocaust of his widows—precipitated themselves upon him, and clinging to his extremities in a mass, arrested him in his flight, and through him the Bishop, and through the Bishop the balloon, which was brought up with a jerk. "What is to be done?" asked Mr. John Cowell, "the Voltigeur is fast. To descend in the heart of Equatorial Africa would be madness." "Cut the cable," said Mr. Walter Cowell. A blow from an axe severed the cord. The balloon soared into space. The grapnel, the Bishop, the king and the three hundred and sixty five wives fell in a wriggling black mass, and scattered over the floor of the kraal. The Bishop's voyage was ended. He was landed in the region which was henceforth destined to be his domicile and diocese.

## VII

It was reasonable that the manner of the Prelate's late arrival, so unexpected and so inexplicable, should invest the Prelate to the ideas of a savage in attributes of mystery, it was natural that the aspect of his Lordship in black satin and lawn should strike awe and inspire admiration in the untaught but ingenuous mind of a cannibal. If the words of the poet, "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever," did not recur to his Majesty, an

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<sup>14</sup> Dr. Schweinfurt witnessed a very similar scene among the Niam-Niams, and has illustrated it.

analogous thought evolved itself in his brain, and he determined to secure the Anglican Bishop for the adornment and enlightenment of his realm in perpetuity. He constituted his lordship chief fetish, and oracle; appointed him his conscience keeper, and treated him with profound respect.

On the very day of his arrival, the Bishop was installed in a thatched hovel near the royal kraal. Baked maize and jerked meat were sent to him in profusion from his Majesty's table, and somewhat later, two wives were delegated from the royal harem to lighten his solitude and to grace his hearth. The arrival of these ladies perplexed the prelate. The officer commissioned to deliver them over to him did so with profuse apologies from his sovereign for sending such an inadequate supply, but promised shortly to quadruple the number, when his warriors should return with captives from a distant expedition against the Niam-Niams. When the messenger had departed, the Bishop sat down on a mat spread upon the floor of kneaded cow-dung; he extended his legs straight before him in their envelope of black satin, placed his frilled wrists on his knees, and his head sank and disappeared between the clouds of white lawn that enveloped his shoulders. Thus has the full moon been seen on a summer's night to set behind vaporous piles, and thus also does the timid tortoise, when alarmed, withdraw its head within its shell.

The two squaws (we may perhaps be allowed to introduce into the heart of Africa an American term) came and sat on the mat by him, one on each side, as close as they were able to squeeze without rumpling his sleeves. The one was obese, the other emaciated. One had the lower lip perforated and extended by means of an ivory dinner napkin ring; the other had a ring passing through the cartilage of her nose, and resting on her chin, so that should the Bishop venture on familiarities, he would be reverting to the innocent frolics of his youth, and reiterating in advanced age the pleasant pastime of kiss-in-the-ring.

The situation was not one in which an Anglican Bishop, eminent for his respectability, had been placed before. No precedent recurred to his Lordship's mind as a guidance for his future conduct. He was unable under the circumstances to feel wholly at his ease. He cast about for a compromise. "To oppose the wishes of the sovereign," mused the Bishop, "would be at once reprehensible and dangerous. The crown should be supreme in matters spiritual as well as temporal, in morals as well as in religion. Yet marriage is to me an impossibility as at present circumstanced. There is no surrogate within ten thousand miles from whom a licence could be obtained, and there is no legally constituted parish here in which banns could be called on three consecutive Sundays. What then is to be done with these ladies? They cannot be my wives, I will not ask them to be my slaves. I will adopt an intermediate course, which can give offence to none. I will ordain them deaconesses. This will be a protest against vows of celibacy, and leave it optional for me to marry one or both at a future day. In the institution of deaconesses there is this advantage over that of sisters; that everyone knows what a sister is, and nobody knows what a deaconess may be. In our Church it is indispensable to have institutions undefined as to their character and objects. Mesdames, bow, that I may pat the swarthy backs of deaconesses."

### VIII

On the following morning, the Bishop presented himself before King Tanga, and after making his obeisance, proceeded to open to him the subject which was uppermost in his mind. "Sire," said the Bishop, "I have come to make your Majesty a momentous proposal. I would have you constitute, approve, endow, and establish a Church in

your enlightened realm.” “What Church?” asked King Tanga, who viewed all forms of faith with equal indifference. “The Church, your Majesty, of Vasty Vagueness.” “And what should I have to do with it?” Asked the monarch carelessly.

“You, sire, would be the chief corner-stone and apex of the whole building. All would rest on you, and all lead up to you. You would be its supreme head, your will its law, your convictions its creed. I would impose on myself the most solemn oath binding me to your Majesty’s throne, to render unto Caesar the things that be Caesar’s, and to deliver up cheerfully into his hands also the things that be God’s.”

“This would suit my views,” said King Tanga, some interest awakening in his languid brain, and manifesting itself in his dull eyes. “But of what besides myself and you would this Church consist?”

“Sire,” said the Bishop, drawing a paper from his pocket, “this is a list of the administrations in the Establishment whence I came, drawn up by my Primate:

- Dean of Arches
- Vice Dean
- Registrar of the Arches Court
- Registrar of the Office of Faculties
- Commissary General of the Process
- Official Principal of the Consistory Court
- Official Registrar of the Consistory Court
- Commissary
- Secretary
- Record-keeper
- Sealer
- Seal-keeper
- Apparitor
- Apparitor-General
- Deputy-Apparitor
- Sub-Apparitor
- Clerk of the Court
- Crier of the Court
- Diocesan Surveyor of Ecclesiastical Dilapidations

This, sire, constitutes an Established Church such as I would fain see founded in the favoured kingdom of Urangi.”

“And what functions do these officers discharge?” asked the king, relapsing into indifference.

“Sire, they exist for the purpose of preying on the clergy. They are the white ants of the edifice, the mites in the cheese, the maggots in the meat. There is a good deal of flesh, sire, to be picked off clerical bones in an Established Church.” “Ha!” said the cannibal king, his eyes glittering, his nose dilating, his flesh quivering, his mouth watering, “Ha!” and as he brought down his sceptre with a crash on the Bishop’s head, he observed with an oath, “instantly the Church of Vasty Vagueness shall be Established in Urangi, with me as its supreme head.”

## IX

The Bishop picked himself up after half an hour’s insensibility, grateful for the honour conferred on him. To be knocked head over heels by a royal hand is a privilege accorded to the select few. Having adjusted his cravat, and shaken out his sleeves, he said with an inward chuckle: “In the Church of Vasty Vagueness, I can

promise you sport, sire, exceptionally entertaining. In my favoured land, I and my compeers have revived the bear-gardens of ancient times, and erected a court for the gratification of the public, into which we hale our clergy to be bated by a pack of hounds we keep for the purpose. I know few scenes more conducive to hilarity than the doublings, shifting, and standing at bay of some beggared, harassed parson, till he falls and is torn to pieces and is devoured.”

King Tanga applauded vociferously. “In my benighted land,” said he, “we only hunt and consume our enemies, but with the march of civilization we still learn with zest to bite and devour those of our own household. But,” he added, his countenance falling, “there must be great difficulty in inducing persons to enter a state of life exposing them to such ignominy and ruin.”

“Sire,” said the Bishop, “God be thanked; in a population of thirty millions there must be many fools.”

“And what are the functions of these clergy?”

“Their function is, sire, to assure the sick how excellent, salutary, and conducive to amendment medicine is.”

“And do they examine the sick, ascertain the nature of their complaints, and apply for their healing the appropriate drugs?”

“No, sire; to acquire a diagnosis of disease, and a knowledge of the pharmacopoeia might lead to practical results; and in the Church of Vasty Vagueness results are to be deprecated, and the practical eschewed. Effort must be desultory, advice must be general, direction must be vague, instruction evasive. No statement must be made without eviscerating it of meaning, nothing asserted without qualifications voiding it of force. To give a literal signification to the plainest wording, and to translate it into action, will be made a penal offence.”

“What ceremonial will be adopted?” asked King Tanga.

“Ceremonial,” answered the Bishop, “has in these days assumed an exceptional and undeserved importance. I shall order the ritual so as to convey no ideas to the mind, and to be wholly unmeaning. As illustration, sire, let us imagine yonder table in my church. I go round to the north end of it——”

“Why the north end?” enquired the king.

“That is the beauty of it,” answered the Prelate. “it means nothing; and under favourable circumstances, an Archdeacon shall hob-nob with me from the other end.”

“What is an Archdeacon?”

“An ecclesiastical dignitary who wears strings to his hat, gaiters on his calves, and an apron on his stomach.”

“And what does he do?”

“That is the pre-eminent beauty, sire; nothing, save extort money, by means of synodals and procurations.”

“What are synodals and procurations?”

“There, sire, you touch on an exceptional beauty—nobody knows.”

“And what will be said and done in your church?” asked the monarch.

“Sire, I hope to introduce with your approval an incomparable liturgy which shall breath hot and cold simultaneously, and couple every dogmatic assertion with its neutralising antidote, leading to inextricable confusion and insoluble bewilderment. And should an order therein seem precise, you will have at once to obtain a judgement from the Privy Council to establish the maxim that, like morning dreams, rubrics read by contraries.”

“And what will your religious services be like?”

“Ah, sire!” said the Bishop enthusiastically, “I should like you to see worship as performed in the Church of Vasty Vagueness! The clergy, the choir, the beadles, the clerks, the pew openers, the people, bowed before——”

“Before what?”

“A blank wall, the symbol expressive and pathetic of the vagueness of our belief, and the indefiniteness of our worship.” After a pause he proceeded, “It will be a proud day in my life when I can introduce in Equatorial Africa perhaps the most exquisitely unmeaning performance of public worship contrived in the Church of Vasty Vagueness. The minister will advance to the sound of solemn music to the table, and there commence a function——”

“Why will he go to the table?”

“There’s the beauty of it. For no earthly purpose save to walk away from it again.”

“But he will complete what he has begun before he leaves”

“There lies the whole charm of the performance. No. This is the adaptation to public worship of the classic fable of the Bear and the Fiddle.”<sup>x</sup>

“What will be your belief?” asked King Tanga.

“Undefined, uncertain, unascertainable,” answered the Bishop. “He who embraces the tenets of Vasty Vagueness, like Diomedes, will embrace a cloud; like the disciples of Socrates in the Clouds of Aristophanes, will learn to worship Void, Vortex, and Talkee-Talkee.”

“The Church shall be established,” said the king who was getting weary of the interview.

“Sire, give me sand, impalpable and fluctuating on which to lay my foundations.”

“The Desert of Sahara is before you,” said the cannibal king magnificently, “take it in the name of Vasty Vagueness;” and he disappeared behind a curtain to execute a hornpipe before his expectant and impatient wives.

## XI

At this point terminates all that is authentic and verifiable in the narrative of the Bishop who was wafted from England to Central Africa. Our authority for the remainder is unreliable.

Dr. Windishman, in his recent travels in Africa, met a native of Urangi, and took down from his lips what follows. But it is impossible to read the relation without feeling that it is not wholly trustworthy. In the first place the dialect of the Urangi differs in many important particulars from those of the Makalolo, Makariki, M’gogo and M’roli with which the doctor was familiar. He was therefore liable to misunderstand the communication. But in the second place the communication bears unmistakable traces of outline blurred and colour heightened, by the glowing imagination of the tropics, always prone to melt fact into fantastic fiction and treat fiction as solid fact.<sup>xi</sup>

With this warning to our readers, we give the story as it has reached us.

The Bishop erected his Church of wattles and clay on an uncertain surface of the desert sand. When completed he sat in the midst of it in bland expectancy, smiling on the naked walls, and babbling generalities. His deaconesses had eloped with two seductive gorillas. He was left quite solitary, for nobody exhibited any enthusiasm to enter an establishment where nothing was to be seen, and absolutely nothing was to be got.

After a while the wet season set in. The rain descended, and the floods came over that level tract, from which rise promiscuously the Lualaba, the White Nile, the Bahr el Ghazal, and the Congo.<sup>xii</sup> The rain dissolved the roof, the floods sapped the walls, the entire edifice melted into mud. The steady downpour on the Prelate's head reduced the skull to the consistency of wet papier maché. The brain was diluted to a pulp. The saccharine matter in the Bishop's system absorbed the moisture and liquefied. Presently nothing remained of the Bishop and his Establishment but a turbid rill which, after meandering purposeless for a little while over the desert, sank into the sand, and was absorbed without having conducted to the smallest degree to its fertilization. When the golden sun burst gloriously over the desert through the departing clouds, it shone on the untenanted relics of black satin and lawn, alone on the mighty waste.

Such is the story, manifestly tinged with myth. It is to be hoped that the next adventurous expedition of Lieut. Cameron to the heart of Africa will reveal some more stable memorial of the Establishment of Vasty Vagueness than a paltry puddle or a thread of drivel, and of the Prelate than the empty case of an acephalous mollusc.

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### **Transcriber's Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> Voltigeur: A lightly armed company of picked men in the French army used in skirmishes.

<sup>ii</sup> Apparitor general: An officer in an Ecclesiastical Court

<sup>iii</sup> Joe and Tom-Allalone: Tom-Allalone's, the *ruinous place where dwelt Jo* the crossing sweeper in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* published 1852/53

<sup>iv</sup> Sankey and Moody: Ira Sankey, the American composer and singer, and his associate and evangelist, the Rev. Dwight Moody, promoted American Gospel music in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>v</sup> Enoch: Genesis, 5, 21-24. A righteous man who *walked with God for 300 years* and was taken up to heaven.

<sup>vi</sup> Public Worship Regulation Act, passed in 1874, came into force in 1875. This forbade the use of ritual and the Cross in worship and led to prosecution and imprisonment of clergymen.

<sup>vii</sup> Maladeta: A Spanish mountain peak in the Pyrenees close to the French border.

<sup>viii</sup> Ultramontane: In this context probably referred less to being 'over the mountains' and more to the extreme Roman Catholic faction favouring Papal supremacy.

<sup>ix</sup> Georg August Schweinfurth: German traveller and ethnologist, travelled in East Africa through the regions inhabited by the Dinka, Bongo and Niam-Niam peoples. *Im Herzen von Afrika*, Leipzig, 1874. English edition *The Heart of Africa* 1873

<sup>x</sup> The Bear and Fiddle: Sabine was probably referring to the story of the *Clever Little Tailor*, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Vol II Tale 114, first published 1814

<sup>xi</sup> It has not been possible to trace a Dr Windishmann in association with travels in Africa. Urangi is a location in Zanzibar; Makalolo Plain is to be found in the Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe; Makariki is in Indonesia. No trace has been found of the M'gogo and M'roli tribes. Presumably Sabine simply fabricated or used existing exotic but unconnected names in this part of his story.

<sup>xii</sup> The Lualaba is a tributary of the Congo. Bahr el Ghazâl is a tributary of the White Nile. The area between these great rivers is well south of the Sahara Desert and more than 2500 miles from the Pyrenees.