THE T
SATURDAY

The singular affair of the Reverend Mr. Barham

by Richard Holmes

The case of the Reverend Richard Harris Barham, a minor canon of St Paul's and the pseudonymous author of the once universally popular *Ingoldsby Legends,* is in every respect a most singular affair.

The curious reader may possibly recall a tale told by M. R. James entitled "The Stalls of Barchester" in which an apparently pious and exemplary cleric is revealed in his private diaries to have been the victim of a series of appalling visitations which lead to his eventual destruction. Though Barham was to hold, in real life, a Divinity Lectureship and the honorary position of Senior Cardinal's stall, there can be naturally no evidence that the late Provost of Eton intended anything like a personal reference in his fiction. Nonetheless certain uncomfortable resemblances between the romance and the reality are not altogether easy to shake off. In the course of my researches nalism, contributing to *John Bull* and *Blackwood's*. In 1831 he was a founder member of the Garrick Club, and soon his squat, humorous figure, with its curious drooping left eyelid and pale, almost white eyelashes, was a regular feature of the literary dining tables, along with Hook, Sydney Smith, young Boz, Cruickshank and Harrison Ainsworth. In 1837, Bentley asked him to contribute a comic series to the newly founded "Miscellany", and the first issues saw *Oliver Twist* running at the front, and what were to become the opening numbers of *The Ingoldsby Legends*—verse and prose stories form "Tom Ingoldsby's" family chest—bringing up the rear.

Barham's existence, now comfortably established at Amen Corner, seemed to be settled in an unalterable rotundity of good works, good humour and good living. But mortality shadowed him in the terrible, ineluctable death of five of his beloved children, until in 1840, on the loss of his favourite son Ned, he went

lone pilgrim may still sip a port at the Jackdaw at Denton and meditate upon the Cruickshanks. I have walked in the graveyard at Warehorne, where the west wind moans across the Marsh from Rye, and climbed the shadowy timbers of Snargate belfry, where the smugglers once stacked Dutch tobacco in the eves, and in the failing afternoon light heard the rattle of ash leaves on the slates, and the scuff of what I took to be sheep against the chancel door.

But I first definitely began to suspect something of the truth on examination in the British Museum of the now very rare 3 volume definitive edition, annotated by Barham's daughter Fanny (Mrs Francis Bond), of 1894. It became clear from this that many of the "Legends", especially the "Lays" which were lifted by Barham from the *Legenda Aureaa* as a convenient mode of attacking the monkish wing of the Tracterians—"pale" Pusey and the Newmanites—are not essential to the collection, and indeed disguise its true nature.

have been continually and not always agreeably reminded of them.

The external facts of Barham's life are, except for a number of odd *lacunae*, a charming picture of the buoyant, clubable Anglican life of Regency and Early Victorian England. Barham was born in the cathedral city of Canterbury in December, 1788, only son of Alderman Barham, a local worthy who lived a few yards away from the Precint Gates at 61 Burgate Street. The Alderman was a great drinker of port, and on his decease he weighed 27 stone and his front door had to be especially widened for the exit of his coffin. Of Barham's mother, little was at first known except for contradictory rumours of high spirits and low health.

Barham was sent to St Paul's School, Westminster, where he successfully combined the roles of inveterate hoaxer and head boy, and then to Brasenose, Oxford, where he joined a crack dining and debating club, the Phoenix, and ran somewhat wildly into debt and dissipation, but survived to collect a degree in 1811. Among his friends were Bentley, the future publisher, and Hook, the bohemian novelist. Back at Canterbury, he came into the estate of Tappington Everard, was articled to an attorney, and pursued a frolicsome life among the theatrical set, forming another club—the Wigs—where on at least one occasion port and eloquence degenerated into swords and prejudice.

Then abruptly, at the age of 25, Barham reformed. He took clerical orders, and moved to a series of somnolent rural curacies at Ashford, Westwell, and finally at Warehorne on the very edge of the hills overlooking Romney Marsh—that "recondite region", as he later wrote, productive only of sheep, eels, smuggling, witchcraft and pestiferous mildews. He married a local girl, kept a gun, a dog, and a vegetable patch, and resolutely bred children. For four years, between 1817 and 1821 he lived in this remote seclusion, keeping a diary, composing certain literary papers, and riding between the stout Georgian brick church of Warehorne on the knoll, and the low, flint, Early English chapel of Snargate in the misty depths of the Marsh below, where, through the genial plurality of the Anglican Establishment, he also occupied the incumbency as parson. Warehorne, it might have seemed, was the last outpost of the civilized world: Snargate, with the baleful invitation of its name, the first outpost of an altogether different region.

In Barham's 34th year came another abrupt transformation. Through the unexpected intervention of a friend in London, he captured a minor canonry at St Paul's, moved to Lincoln's Inn Fields, rose to an appointment in the Chapel Royal, and made a rapid path in gentlemanly jour-

The Ingoldsby Legends however achieved a spectacular life of their own. In the next half century Bentley produced no less than 88 separate editions; the Popular Edition of 1881 sold more than 60,000 copies on the first day of publication, and by 1900 more than half a million "Ingoldsby's" were in circulation. They became a favourite with illustrators—Cruickshank, Tenniel, Leech, and perhaps finest of all, in 1907, Arthur Rackham who released a cobwebby thermal of witches and goblins from their pages. One poem, "The Jackdaw of Rheims", became a classroom classic, while the whole volume received that *imprimatur* of good literature, an entry in the Papal *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

With Pickwick, Ingoldsby became a byword for Victorian amiability, the apogee of hearthside fun and Christmas good cheer. Comparisons bounced roisterously between Chaucer and W. S. Gilbert, and the virtuosity of the sprinting, cartwheeling verse—with its smart slang, outrageous rhymes and riproaring metres designed specifically for parlour recitation—was universally acclaimed. Moreover the "Legends" were strictly, or rather jovially moral in intention, as Thomas Ingoldsby himself wrote (one almost forgot the Rev B.) in the envoy to "The Witches' Frolic":

Don't flirt with young ladies;
don't practise soft speeches;
Avoid waltzes, quadrilles,
pumps, silk hose, and
knee-breeches;—
Frequent not grey Ruins—
shun riot and revelry,
Hocus Pocus, and Conjuring,
and all sorts of devilry;—
Don't meddle with broomsticks,—
they're Beelzebub's switches;
Of cellars keep clear—they're
the devil's own ditches;
And beware of balls,
banqueting, brandy and—
witches!
Above all! don't run after
black eyes!—if you do,—
Depend on't you'll find what I
say will come true
Old Nick, some fine morning,
will 'hey after you'!

Only one early critic drew back from the convivial glow into the surrounding shadow: how was it, asked Richard Hengist Horne in 1844, that Barham seemed obsessed by certain bestial themes which he "systematically *ripped up* for amusement?"; why was it that the canon seemed sometimes deliberately "to gambol and slide in crimson horror"? No one wanted to know.

Public reputations are frail, and fame is only one of the more transient forms of visitation. The house at Burgate Street no longer stands, and no complete edition of *The Ingoldsby Legends* is currently in print, though old ones may be found brooding in coffined rows in the darker corners of seaside secondhand bookshops. The Ingoldsby Club, which once junketed at the Freemason's Arms off Great Queen Street, is long since defunct, though the

of Canterbury, Rye and Dover forms a sort of hermetic map or chart of Barham's spiritual geography. It is a haunted landscape, across which many grim apparitions move. Moreover the "Legends", far from being an anthology of *Myth and Marvels* (Bentley's, not Barham's, reassuring subtitle) are of the darkest kind of black comedy, packed with obsessionally repeated acts of violence and supernatural revenge, and redolent with a kind of succulent bawdy, in which the pleasures of feasting constantly substitute for those of lovemaking. The central stories, both prose and verse, contain a brand of tortured autobiography, and furtively connect with some of the more curious entries in his Diaries, and some of the forgotten details of the Rev Barham's life.

Barham's Diaries, extant between 1803 and 1844, are filled primarily with genealogical and antiquarian notes, records of after-dinner conversations—and ghost stories. The fascination with genealogy was the symptom of a profound doubt about his own identity. In later life, with ironic bravado, he traced his tree to William FitzUrse, one of the knights who murdered Becket at Canterbury Cathedral; but the real roots of uncertainty lay close in childhood, not safely in history. Inspection of Alderman Barham's Will, and the obituary columns of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, reveal that his father sired not one but two children, by different women, and neither was immediately legitimate. The first a girl, Sarah Bolden, died after a long illness in 1798 aged 21. The second, Barham himself, was the child not of a Kentish Harris, but of the Alderman's humble housekeeper, Elizabeth Fox.

Moreover Barham's father died when the boy was only six, and he was removed from his mother's care (unsuitable rather than unhealthy one suspects), and fostered out to maiden aunts called Dix. The effect of this early separation from his true mother, and the apparent banishment and eventual loss of his elder half-sister Sarah, may be imagined. A Kentish authority (S. M. Ellis, 1917) says—without realizing the significance—that he found "Sara" together with Barham's initials scratched on a window at Burgate House, a mute appeal. Or perhaps an early incantation?

Barham grew up with a sense of banished or suppressed being, a double identity, emphasized by a crisis over his inheritance (£8,000 of the estate was misappropriated), and clearly expressed in the wild fluctuations between the persona of the Oxford buck and the rustic cleric. All these themes duly appeared in two early and long-forgotten novels, *Baldwin* (a Minerva Press blue-back thriller of 1819), and *My Cousin Nicholas* (1836, but largely drafted at Warehorne), during that strange but crucial period of self-exile by Romney Marsh. Disinheritance, hoaxes, double identities,

patricide and fratricide, a loved one haunting her half-brother, even the first hint of demonic possession—all are set forth in shadowy, uncertain form. The haunted Fortescue, from the latter book, vividly recalls one part of Barham's youth:

The tales of (his mother), herself a mine of legendary lore, had not, even in his childhood, tended to diminish his propensity to the sombre and the marvellous; Fetches and Banshees, the warnings of good angels and the shrieking of bad ones, "black spirits and white, blue spirits and grey", omens, prognostications, and presentiments of death or desolation, with all the mysterious machinery of an invisible world, formed no slight portion of her creed. The very act that drove her and her foster-child from the paternal hearth, had been as plainly predicted to her as death-watches, dreams and candle-snuffs could shadow it forth. . . .

By maturity, Barham's mind had developed a deeply macabre twist, which is resonant in the sick humour of his casually recorded jokes. He loved collecting epitaphs, and an early gem reads, "On a Man with a Remarkably Large Mouth":

Reader! tread lightly o'er this sod
For if he gapes you're gone by G-d

Asked once if he liked children (six altogether had died), "Yes, Ma'am", he replied, "boiled with greens". He adored cats, and preferred to write after midnight with one perched, like some familiar gargoyle, on his shoulder. His daughter Fanny was encouraged to treat them as people: one disguised as a baby, leapt out of its cradle and savaged an innocently cooing Bentley; while his son Dalton recalled that in Jacobean times it would have brought them "in disagreeable communication with his Majesty's Witch Finder General". When planning to move house, Barham announced: "Your mother . . . is to be moved tomorrow, taking care to preserve as much of the earth about her roots as possible, across the Churchyard into Amen Corner, under a hot wall with a southern aspect." Of an absent friend, Barham mused that he was probably still alive somewhere since "none of the vergers have yet seen his ghost in the gloaming wandering about the north aisle". It was wit, but it had quicklime on it.

Barham was also strangely fascinated by forensic matters. He was befriended by Sir

Jumbo Crossword Competition

TIMES
REVIEW

Tenniel's illustration to the lesser-known Ingoldsby legend, "The Smuggler's Leap".

Richard Birnie, chief magistrate of Bow Street, and the two celebrated "runners" Ruthven and Townshend. He attended the trial of the Cato Street conspirators in 1820, probably that of Cephas Quested the Marsh smuggler the following year, and was conducted by Ruthven round the still fresh scene of the notorious Donatty stabbing off Gray's Inn Road in 1822. His Diaries are packed with other descriptions of weird cases of suicides, mesmerism, hauntings, houndings and visitations—many eventually transmuted into the raw material of the "Legends".

Barham's first serious attempt to grapple with the phantasmagoria that occupied the dark underside of his mind, was a fantastic precursor of Edgar Allen Poe's tales, *The Trance*. Conceived at Warehorne, later published in *Blackwood's* and finally in *The Legends*, it was inspired by a story of Kentish witchcraft and "ventriloquism" from Scott's "*Discovery of Witchcraft* (1654), compounded with Barham's own experience (so he said) of the bedside confession of an adolescent girl. *The Trance* tells of a wild and degenerate Oxford student "Frederick S—" who lives a double life and discovers the satanic power of "summoning" the spirits of sleeping people. While away studying in the Low Countries, Frederick practises on his innocent 17-year-old lover, transports her, and forces her to perform acts of horror and "damning pollutions". Ultimately, all are destroyed, except the Reverend narrator, who is left appalled by his own unspeakable discoveries. The tale is brilliantly and intricately unfolded, through several frames of ironically bewildered narration, and points eventually towards R. L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. With a painful gesture of autobiography, Barham eventually entitled the story, *A Singular Passage in the Life of the Late Henry Harris, Doctor in Divinity*. In what sense Barham himself believed he had witnessed these powers, one hesitates to speculate.

He finally succeeded in harnessing the *doppel-gänger* theme in the Kentish "Legend" of *The Leech of Folkestone*. (Barham first used the word "double-goer" in a letter of 1828, two years before the OED first registers the appearance of "double-ganger" in English.) This story provides the key to the symbolic geography of *Ingoldsby*. It tells of a country gentleman, Master Marston, who is being poisoned and bewitched (wax doll and steel hatpins) by a Folkestone doctor—the Leech. Marston is met by a second, and far more mysterious "leech", who appears with a travelling fair on the edge of Romney Marsh and offers to save him, if he will accompany him into the wilderness at the rising of the moon. The black magic combat for Marston's life is a combat between mainland and marshland forces. Mainland represents civilization, rationality, domestic government (though it is evil); while the Marsh represents a dark, unconscious region of disorder, hallucination and drunken violent comedy (which can be used for good). The Marsh wins, and Master Marston is saved. It is the old opposition between Warehorne and Snargate, but drawn large, to express a whole spiritual state.

Barham's sly, grimly humorous introduction of the Marsh, is one of his justly famous regional passages and is still quoted in local literature:

Reader, were you ever bewitched?—I do not mean by a 'white wench's black eye', or by love-potions imbibed from a ruby lip;—but, were you ever really and bona fide bewitched in the true Matthew Hopkin's sense of the word? . . . . The world, according to the best geographers, is divided into Europe, Asia, Africa, America, and Romney Marsh. In this last named, and fifth quarter of the globe, a Witch may still be occasionally discovered in favourable, ie, stormy, seasons, weathering Dungeness Point, in an eggshell, or careering on her broomstick over Dymchurch wall. . . .

The whole story, with its fine Breughel like description of the gingerbread fair at Aldington, is a masterly combination of black humour, folklore, and parapsychology.

After the "Leech" (1837, his sixth "Legend"), Barham was able to break free from the artificial, rather Pickwickian formula of the "Ingoldsby" household at Tappington, and ran deliriously through the folk mythology of Canterbury, Dover, Reculver, Barham Down, St Romwold's, Sandwich and other Kentish locations. The old symbolic oppositions and identities frequently occur (see *Smuggler's Leap*, or *The Brothers of Birchington*, or *The Witches' Frolic*), but other themes and obsessions were now entangled.

One, *Nell Cook!!* returns to the losses and humiliations of Canterbury, with particular poetic force and psychological insight. It is a tale of the "Dark Entry", a haunted gateway in the Cathedral Precincts. Nell is the servant and lover of a libidinous Canon, a situation with obvious autobiographic undertones. Her charms are described with typical appreciation in terms of the delicacies of her *haute cuisine*: "Her manchets fine were quite divine, her cakes were nicely browned" &c. All goes sweetly until Nell is jilted, when in vengeance she kills her master and his new lady, with a poisoned warden pie. "The Canon's head lies on the bed—his 'Niece' lies on the floor! They are as dead as any nail that is in any door." Nell's punishment is to be entombed under the flagstones of the gateway, with a piece of the fatal "kissing-crust" (*viz* the "soft part of the pie or loaf where it has touched another in baking", a fiendish resolution of the culinary and erotic metaphor). Nell's murderous ghost, with "eyes askew", ever after guards the Dark Entry at dusk, to the terror of the schoolboy narrator, for she breathes death. By the end of the poem, the "Dark Entry" seems to command a mass of childhood symbolism, the gateway to memory, the gateway to sexual experience, the gateway to the Inferno.

But perhaps the wildest and most horrifying of all Barham's visitations are those of dismemberment. They feature notably in *The Hand of Glory*, *St Gengulphus*, and *Bloudie Jacke*. As a boy, Barham's arm had been crippled in a coach crash on the way to London, and a surgeon had threatened him with amputation, though in the event an instrument of catgut and silver rings was substituted. But the memory, itself perhaps a metaphor of disintegration and disinheritance, stayed with him. In *Bloudie Jacke* (1840)—an English bluebeard who murders eight wives, the ninth called Fanny—it reaches a grotesque climax when the villain is himself dismantled by a vengeful mob:

"They have pulled off your arms
and your legs, Bloudie Jacke!
As the naughty boys serve the blue flies;
And they've torn from their sockets,
And put in their pockets
Your fingers and thumbs for a prize!
And your eyes
A Doctor has bottled—from Guy's.

Judiciously annotating these stories in her edition of 1894, Fanny Barham observed that many images were taken from her father's Bow Street interests, particularly the ghastly Greenacre murder involving a professional "resurrectionist". They lead ultimately to those two most beloved figures of late Victorian horror mythology, Count Dracula and Jack the Ripper. No doubt it was a blessed release that Barham never lived to encounter these last grim incarnations of his private world, stalking the north aisle of St Paul's or rising from the mists around Old Romney. At least I hope he did not, though there is the question of the very late story, softly entitled *Jerry Jervis's Wig*.

Barham, and it would appear his *Ingoldsby Legends*, for the present lie at peace. Most of his papers slumber in transatlantic libraries, his volumes doze on dusty shelves. But when I walk under the bare woods of Aldington Fright, and hear the rooks calling in the gathering gloom, it is difficult to dismiss from my mind the small, hurrying figure of that singular canon, and the poor cursed Jackdaw that the world half-remembers him by:

"He cursed him in sleeping, that every night
He should dream of the devil, and wake in a fright;
He cursed him in eating, he cursed him in drinking,
He cursed him in coughing, in sneezing, in winking;
He cursed him in sitting, in standing, in lying;
He cursed him in walking, in riding, in flying,
He cursed him in living, he cursed him in dying!—
Never was heard such a terrible curse!!
But what gave rise To no little surprise,
Nobody seem'd one penny the worse!"

...n, Travel, Drink, Bridge, p 9