

Feast of Mary Mother of Fair Grace
Saint Columba (Saint Columbkille)(d. 597)

Maurice Baring, One of God's Gentlemen, Presents Xantippe:

The Wife of Socrates

Epigraphs

“On the eve of Candlemas 1909, I was **received into the Catholic Church by Father Sebastian Bowden** at the Brompton Oratory [in London and on 1 February]: **the only action in my life which I am quite certain I have never regretted. Father Sebastian** began life as **an officer in the Scots Guards**. He had served as A.D.C. [Aide-de-Camp] under the same chief and at the same time as my uncle, Lord Cromer. **He lived all the rest of his life at the Oratory and died in 1920.** He was **fond even in old age of riding** about London on a cob [his small horse of sturdy build]. **His face was stamped with the victory of character** over all other elements. He was a sensible Conservative, a patriot, **a prime example of an English gentleman in mind and appearance; a prince of courtesy, and a saint;** and **I regard my acquaintance with him and the friendship and sympathy he gave me as the greatest privilege bestowed on me by Providence.**” (Maurice Baring, *The Puppet Show of Memory*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1922), pp. 395-396 —my emphasis added)

“That night [17 May 1915]...there was a rumour that **B.K.** [Major Basil **Barrington-Kennett**] had been killed. The next day the rumour was confirmed.

If ever a man deserved a soldier's death, to die leading his men and the men of his own regiment into battle, it was B.K. But of all the bitter losses one had to bear throughout the war, it was, **with one exception** [*i.e.*, his cherished long-time friend, Auberon “Bron” Herbert, Captain Lord Lucas, d. 3 November 1916 at age 40; and to whom, in 1909, Baring had dedicated his parodic *Dead Letters* (1911)], this particular loss I felt most, minded most, resented most, and found most difficult to accept.

He [“B.K.”] was **not** an old friend of mine. **I had never seen him before the war. But he was bound up with every moment of my life during the first months of the war, and I had got to know him intimately and to admire him more than others and to delight in his company more than in that of others....**But when this particular piece of news [about his death] came **I felt the taste of the war turn bitter** indeed, and apart from any personal feelings, **one rebelled against the waste** which had deprived, first the Flying Corps and then the Army, of the services of **so noble a character. He was the most completely unselfish man I have ever met: a compound of loyalty and generosity** and a gay and keen interest in everything life has to offer.

Not long ago I heard a **little boy of eight years old** asked if he knew **what the word gentleman meant**. He said, 'Yes, of course.' **On being pressed for a definition he said: 'A gentleman is a man who loves God very much and has beautiful manners.' This definition exactly fitted B.K.**" (Maurice Baring, *R.F.C., HQ.--1914-1918* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1920), pp. 92-93—my emphasis added)

“He [General Édouard de Castelnau, 1851-1944] **seemed to belong to a nobler epoch than ours** [circa 1914-1918], **to be [himself] a native of the age of chivalry**, of that time [in the 13th Century] when Louis IX, who is known as Saint Louis, dispensed justice under a spreading oak-tree. **He had the easy familiarity, the slight play of kindly irony, the little ripple of humour, the keen glance, the foresight and forethought, that *politesse du cœur*** [that deep and sincere politeness of heart], **that complete remoteness from what is common, mean, base, self-seeking, which are the foundation and substance of God's gentlemen.**” (Maurice Baring, *R.F.C., HQ.--1914-1918*, p. 273—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original)

This short essay proposes to consider, not only the above-mentioned Major B.K. and General de Castelnau, but also Maurice Baring himself, as “one of God's gentlemen,” as one whose own generous and chivalrous character is marked by a sincere, deep, and guileless *politesse de cœur*, even as he presents to us now the volubly scolding (sometimes shrewish) wife of Socrates, Xantippe. Under her eloquent reproaches Socrates himself is shown to be a man of a few words, maybe for a good reason, inasmuch as he expectantly approaches the end of his earthly life, which is already forebodingly endangered — though seemingly unnoticed by his discouraged and hot-tempered wife. (In 399 B.C., five years after the humiliating defeat and capitulation of Athens in the devastating Peloponnesian War [431-404 B.C.] in which he had earlier been a combatant, Socrates himself, after his trial, was to die.)

Baring first published this charming character portrayal of Xantippe and her husband in 1911, three years before the Great War of 1914-1918 was to break out, and only some two years after he had become a Catholic. The Xantippe portrayal was then again later published in his book's set of 23 short literary presentations, entitled *Diminutive Dramas*,¹ where Baring's characteristic magnanimity

1 Maurice Baring, *Diminutive Dramas* (London: William Heinemann LTD., 1925), 183 pages. The last of the twenty-three dramatic sketches is entitled “Xantippe and Socrates” (Chapter XXIII, pp. 177-183). Although the book was originally published in late December 1910-early January 1911, it was published again in 1919, and then once again in 1925, by W. Heinemann, as part of “*The Works of MAURICE BARING: Collected Uniform Edition.*” All further references will be to that 1925 edition of *Diminutive Dramas*, and the pages quoted will be placed in parentheses above in the main text. In this context, Baring's *Dead Letters*—a charming 1910 set of parodies—should also be savored, especially two of them: “From the Mycenae Papers” and “Lady Macbeth's Trouble.” Maurice Baring, *Dead Letters* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company 1925), pp.1-7 and 95-99. See too Paul Horgan, *Maurice Baring Restored: Selections from His Work* (1970).

recurrently showed itself. And he expressed it often with “a play of kindly irony” and a warmly sustained, flowing “ripple of humour” — as we may soon come to see, especially if we were—with only two reciters—to read with a fittingly swift pace the entire short play **aloud**. (Recently, and in the presence of our two young children at home, my German wife herself expressively read the lines and convincingly played Xantippe — with me as the taciturn, somewhat intimidated Socrates in the background as a foil — and she thereby heartily evoked the joy and smiles of the astounded children!)

Now we should present Baring's own description of the Scene at the opening of the Play:

“A room in SOCRATES' house. XANTIPPE is seated at a table [in Athens], on which an unappetizing meal, consisting of figs, parsley, and some hashed goat's meat, is spread.” (177)

We should remember the goat's meat is, purportedly, one of Socrates' favorite dishes, at least in Xantippe's estimation. As Socrates (S) enters his home, Xantippe (X) has the first comment (177):

X: “You're twenty [sic] minutes late.”

S: “I'm sorry, I was kept—”

X: “**Wasting your time** as usual, I suppose, and **bothering people with questions** who have something better to do than to listen to you. You can't think **what a mistake it is** by going on like that. You can't think how much people dislike it. If people enjoyed it, or admired it, I could understand the waste of time — but they don't. It only makes them angry. Everybody's saying so.”

S: “**Who's everybody?**”

X: “There you are with **your questions again**. Please don't try to catch me out with **those kind of tricks. I'm not a philosopher. I'm not a sophist**. I know I'm not clever — I'm **only** a woman. But I do know the difference between right and wrong and black and white, and **I don't think it's very kind of you, or very generous either**, to be always pointing out my ignorance, and perpetually making me the butt of your sarcasm.”

S: “But I never said a word.”

X: “Oh, please, don't try to **wriggle** out of it. **We all know you're very good at that. I do hate that shuffling so. It's so cowardly. I do like a man you can trust** — and depend on — who when he says Yes means Yes, and when he says No means No.”

S: “I'm sorry I spoke.”

X: “I suppose that's **what you call irony**. I've no doubt it's very clever, but I'm afraid it's **wasted on me**. I should keep those remarks for the market-place and the gymnasium and the workshops. I've no doubt **they'd be highly appreciated there by that clique of young men** who do nothing but admire each other. **I'm afraid I'm old-fashioned. I was brought up to think that a man should treat his wife with decent civility**, and try, **even if** he did think her stupid, **not to be always showing it.**” (177-178—my

emphasis added)

Baring's tonal words show Xantippe to be a more sympathetic figure than we might have originally thought to be so.

In reply to Xantippe's last set of words, Socrates can only say: "Have I by a word or hint ever suggested that you were stupid?" The pathos now grows.

X: "Oh, of course not — never. However, we won't discuss that. We will change the subject, if you don't mind."

S: "But really—"

X: (*ignoring the interruption*). Please give me your plate. I will help you to the goat."

S: "None for me, thank you, to-day"

X: "Why not? I suppose it's not good enough. **I'm afraid I can't provide the food you get at your grand friends' houses, but I do think it's rather cruel of you to sneer at my poor humble efforts.**" (178—my emphasis added)

Socrates goes on to reveal only the fact that he is not very hungry: "I've really got no appetite for meat to-day. I'll have some figs, if you don't mind." (179) And Xantippe immediately responds:

X: "I suppose that's the new fad, not to eat meat. **I assure you people talk quite enough about you as it is without your making yourself more peculiar.** Only yesterday Chrysis was **talking about your clothes. She asked if you made them dirty on purpose.** She said the spots on the back couldn't have got there by accident. Every one notices it — every one says the same thing. **Of course they think it's my fault.** No doubt it's very amusing **for people who don't mind attracting attention and who like being notorious:** but it *is* rather hard on me. And when I hear people saying 'Poor Socrates! it is a shame that **his wife looks after him so badly and doesn't even mend his sandals'** — I admit I **do** feel **rather hurt. However, that would never enter into your head. A philosopher hasn't time to think of other people. I suppose unselfishness doesn't form part of a sophist's training, does it?"**

[SOCRATES *says nothing, but eats first one fig and then another.*]

X: "I think you might **at least** answer when spoken to. **I am far from expecting you to treat me with consideration or respect; but I do expect ordinary civility.**"

[SOCRATES *goes on eating figs in silence.*]

X: "**Oh, I see,** you're going to **sulk. First you browbeat, then you're satirical. Then you sneer at the food, and then you sulk.**" (179—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original)

Baring's presentation now moves on to the specific discussion of food, but only after Socrates shows no larger response to his wife's more capacious comments. The only reply Socrates chooses to make to her is somewhat impersonal, as well as brief: "I never said a word **against the food.**" (180—

my emphasis added) Nor does Socrates ever thank her for being a good cook who tries to please him!

We may now imagine the different emphases and tones of voice that might be fittingly expressed by the actors in this continuing and somewhat one-sidedly animated dialogue, **if** this deftly written little domestic drama were also to be performed on stage. Xantippe now resumes (with a touch of irony) her own more loquacious and more differentiated response to her terse husband:

X: “You **never** said a word **against** the food. You **only** kept me waiting nearly half an hour for dinner — **not that that was anything new** — I'm sure I ought to be used to that by now — and you only **refused** to look at the dish which I had taken pains to cook with my own hands for you.”

S: “All I said was I **wasn't hungry** — that I had **no appetite for meat.**”

X: “**You've eaten all the figs. You've got quite an appetite for those.**”

S: “That's different.”

X: “Oh, that's different, is it? One can be hungry enough to eat all the fruit there is in the house, which I was **especially** keeping for this evening, but not hungry enough to touch a piece of meat. I suppose that's algebra.”

S: “You know I very rarely eat meat.”

X: “Really? I hadn't noticed it. I **always** hear of your eating meat in other people's houses; but **my poor cooking is not good enough for you.** I'm sorry, but I can't afford those spicy messy dishes. **If I had a husband who had a *real* profession, and worked, and did something useful to earn his living and support his house and home, it would be different;** only I think **the least you could do** is not to sneer at one when one is only trying to do one's best.” (180—my emphasis added)

To this cascade of words and spousal reproaches Socrates only says: “I very rarely eat meat anywhere now.” Perceiving this rarity of meat to be a nutritional deficiency in her husband, Xantippe finds new grounds for her sharp solicitousness:

X: “**That's** why you're looking so ill. **All** the doctors say it's a mistake. Some people can do without meat. They don't need it — but **a man who works with his brain like you ought** to eat nourishing food. You ought to force yourself to eat meat, even if you don't feel inclined to.”

S: “I thought you said just now that I did nothing.”

X: “There you are, **cross-examining** me like a lawyer, and tripping me up. I've no doubt it's very amusing for a professional philosopher to catch out a poor ignorant woman like me. It's a pity your audience isn't here. They *would* enjoy it. However, I'm afraid I'm not impressed. You can twist my words into anything you like. You can prove I meant black when I said white, but you know perfectly well what I mean. You know as well as I do that your eccentricity has made you thoroughly unpopular. And what I say is, it's just these little things that matter. Now put all that nonsense away and have some goat.”

S: "No, thank you. I really can't."

X: "It's **excellent goat**, and there's some **garlic in the sauce**. I hate garlic, and it's there **on purpose for you**—"

S: "Oh!"....

X: "I suppose you had dinner before you came here [*i.e.* came home], or you're going to have dinner somewhere else presently."

S: "I haven't touched food since I left the house."

X: "Then it's quite ridiculous your not eating [even if it were, perhaps, on the threshold of death?]. Let me give you some goat at once."

S: "I couldn't, really. Besides, I must go in a minute." (180-182—my emphasis added)

As we approach the end of Maurice Baring's diminutive dramatic depiction, we must also consider now **the implicit presence of dramatic irony and pathos**. For, without Xantippe's adequate knowledge, Socrates may actually be preparing to leave home in order to face his stern Athenian accusers and, perhaps, never to come home again. Let us therefore consider some of Baring's sudden hints, or subtle clues.

S: "...Besides, I must go **in a minute**."

X: "There! I knew it! You're going out to dinner."

S: "You're mistaken, Xantippe."

X: "You'd far better tell me the truth at once. I'm quite certain to find it out sooner or later. You can't think how foolish it is to tell lies and then to be found out afterwards. You can't think how much a woman despises a man for that — you couldn't do anything more foolish."

S: "I promise you by all the gods that **I'm not going to dine elsewhere**. [**A true fact; but what of import are you not telling your wife?!**]

X: "I suppose you don't expect me to fall into that trap! Swearing by all the gods, when **every one** in Athens knows **you are a professed atheist** — when **you do nothing but mock the gods from morning to night** — **and, what's far worse, make other people mock them too**; when I scarcely like to have a slave [a possible informant or spy!] in the house **because of your impiety — and your blasphemy**." (182—my emphasis added)

Maurice Baring, in this last passage, deftly has Xantippe herself make many of the same charges that are later made by Socrates' own three accusers, who then successfully condemn him to death.

Moreover, immediately after Xantippe's grave and bulging charges against her husband, Socrates, in an understated way, merely says to her: "I really think **you are rather unfair**, Xantippe. **You will be sorry for this some day**." (182—my emphasis added)

X: “Then may I ask where you are going?”

S: “I’ve got an important engagement.”

X: “And with whom?”

S: “I would rather not say, **for your sake.**”

X: “That’s **very clever and ingenious** to put **it** on me. **But I’m tired of being bullied. Even a worm** will turn, **and I demand to be treated just for once like a human being, and with** the minimum of **courtesy and frankness**. I don’t ask for your confidence [trust], I know that would be useless. **But I do ask to be treated with a grain of straightforwardness and honesty**. I insist upon it. I have borne your sneers, your sarcasm, and your sulkiness, your irritability, your withering silence, quite long enough. I will not put up with it any longer.” (182-183—my emphasis added)

After this scorching and humiliating indictment of Socrates’ character and the very conduct of his domestic life with her (without even mentioning their three sons), Socrates decides to open up to her a little:

S: “**Very well. Since you will have it**, I have been **impeached** by Lycon, Meletus, and Anytus [Socrates’ three primary Athenian accusers] on some ridiculous [sic] charge, **the result of which, however**, may be **extremely** serious — in fact it may be **a matter of life and death** — and I am **obliged** to appear before them **at once.**”

X: “Oh dear, oh dear! **I always said so. I knew it would come to this!** This is what comes of not eating meat like a decent citizen!” [Xantippe bursts into tears.] — Curtain.—The End (183—my emphasis added)

Socrates was then to face his stern accusers at the public trial in 399 B.C., and he defended himself at some length, but in a not very conciliatory way. He was thus finally condemned to death, and, after thirty days, he drank the hemlock.

After now knowing of, and even having read large portions of, this charming diminutive drama by Maurice Baring, we might also come especially to appreciate and savor a magnificent student “blooper” on an academic test concerning Socrates: “**Socrates died of an overdose of wedlock.**”

Maurice Baring would have cherished this “blooper,” and I like to think that he might even have composed it himself when he was an antic young student. For, even then, he was known for his magnanimous parodies. He also had a keen sense of pathos (as in the case of Xantippe), and it is to be especially seen in his ennobling elegiac verses and in most of his later heart-searching novels.

CODA

Since Maurice Baring especially admired (and desired to imitate) the moral character and chivalrous standards of the French General Édouard de Castelnau (1851-1944), I propose to end this

essay with Baring's own slightly expanded presentation of that great and deeply admired man, part of which has already been revealed in our Epigraphs above, at the beginning of this essay; but it is worthy of our now repeating Baring's memorable articulation of those inspiring interwoven qualities:

May 26, 1918....Headquarters, 8th Brigade [in France]....

We [General Trenchard and I] saw General de Castelnau too, who is charming....Our unique and undefined position [in France] depended, as far as practical results were concerned, entirely on the goodwill of the French. Luckily **this goodwill was given to us in an overflowing measure by General de Castelnau**, the commander of the Group of Armies of the East. **He and the General** [Trenchard, for whom Major Baring was the beloved and trusted Aide-de-Camp] **understood each other at once after their first conversation.**

General de Castelnau's name and exploits need no comment [at least not in 1918 Europe]. They will be written, and are already written in gold, in the history of France, and in the *Gesta Dei per Francos* [the Epic High Deeds of God as Enacted by and through the Franks], as the victor of the Grand Couronné and the restorer of the situation at Verdun. **But it is perhaps permissible to say a word or two about his personality.**

He seemed to belong to a nobler epoch than ours, to be a native of the age of chivalry, of that time when Louis IX [of France], who is known as Saint Louis, dispensed justice under a spreading oak-tree. He has the easy familiarity, the slight play of kindly irony [like Baring with his depiction of Xantippe and Socrates!], the little ripple of humour, the keen glance, the foresight and forethought, that *politesse du cœur*, that complete remoteness from what is common, mean, base, self-seeking, **which are the foundation and substance of God's gentlemen.** His white hair, his keen eyes, his features, which looked as if they had been cut by a master-hand out of a fine block of granite, **radiated goodness and courage and cheerfulness, a salt-like sense, and a twinkling humour. And his smile went straight to your heart,** and made you feel at home, comfortable, easy and happy. When one had luncheon with him and the orderly said luncheon was ready he used to say:

“*A cheval, Messieurs* [To Horse, Gentlemen!],

and **throughout his conversation there was always a rippling current of good-humoured, delicate and keen chaff** [reminding one of Maurice Baring's “Xantippe and Socrates”]. To hear him talk was like reading, was to breathe the atmosphere in which **classic French** was born, racy, natural, idiomatic, and **utterly free from anything shoddy, artificial or pretentious. He was the salt of the earth,** and one felt that if [Edmund] Burke had met him he would have torn up **his dirge of the death of the Age of Chivalry** [to be found in Burke's classic 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*], for there [in May of 1918] it [the chivalry] was alive and enjoying life and making others enjoy it. (Maurice Baring, *R.F.C., H.Q.—1914-1918* (1920), pages 272-274—my emphasis added)

Is it not desirable that we too try to hold ourselves to the chivalrous standards of General de Castelnau?

May we too — like the generous and magnanimous Maurice Baring himself in his own discerningly compassionate (and comic) depiction of Xantippe (and her laconic husband) — show ourselves to be “one of God's gentlemen.” Fittingly, we should thus recall how “a little boy of eight years old” himself memorably defined a gentleman: “**A gentleman is a man who loves God very much and has beautiful manners.**”

Recognizing that courtesy itself is a form of charity, Baring's beloved friend Hilaire Belloc even wrote in one of his short poems entitled “Courtesy” that “**the Grace of God is in Courtesy.**”

Maurice Baring's own deep *politesse du cœur* was so admirably able to encounter and depict with chivalrous compassion — and with “a ripple of good humour” — the challenges of those increasingly isolated and poignantly elegiac characters: voluble Xantippe and her tersely Philosophizing Husband.

--FINIS--

© 2017 Robert D. Hickson