

The Young Man With the Red Hair

How Uncle Bilomar Czernowitz Conducted Himself as a Rustic Diplomat

By ARNOLD GOLSWORTHY

Author of "Death and the Woman," "The Cry in the Night," "Hands in the Darkness," etc.

MELICK'S farm occupied a corner of the village of Barngate in Surrey. Old Mellick had been dead some years, but his widow, with the help of her son, now a youth of twenty-five or so, still contrived to make a sort of living out of the place, in spite of the bad weather, indifferent crops and interest on mortgage, that go to make up the farmer's year. The farmhouse was a long, one-storied building, and by the side of it was a small cottage of four rooms which had been let for a long time past to Uncle Bill.

Everybody in Barngate knew Uncle Bill. Some thirty years before, he had come to the village and had taken the cottage from old Mellick. He had been at the time a tall, white-haired, white-bearded man of fifty, handsome and erect; and though he had now turned eighty he seemed to have changed very little except that perhaps his step was not so light, and he stooped a little.

Uncle Bill had acquired his name under stress of circumstances. He was known in the village to be a foreigner of some sort, and for this reason he had been regarded with a good deal of suspicion in Barngate, many of the inhabitants having decided long since that foreigners are always up to some kind of mischief. As, however, time went on and nobody missed any of his property, and no one was found to have been murdered in his bed, Uncle Bill began to inspire more confidence, especially as he seemed to be an old gentleman who knew everything, and had clearly, in his time, mingled with more exalted society than that which Barngate had to offer him. When he had first approached the late Mr. Mellick with a view to renting the small cottage, he had given his name as Bilomar Czernowitz, but as Mr. Mellick had said at the time, it wasn't reasonable to expect anyone to remember a name that sounded like a suppressed sneeze, and the stranger had been renamed Uncle Bill from that hour.

Some of the people in the village would have it that Uncle Bill was a rich man. It was true that he lived in a very modest style in his cottage, doing little else except reading books, and writing letters, and taking quiet walks through the village; but on one occasion, when there had been a question of repairing the old church, Uncle Bill's name had undoubtedly figured in the subscription list as the donor of no less a sum than one hundred pounds, his appeal to the vicar to allow him to remain anonymous having been so rare a phenomenon that it had not been taken seriously.

Uncle Bill was at his gate, setting out for his afternoon walk, when young Josiah Mellick came hurrying out of the farmhouse. He was a sturdy young fellow, fresh-coloured and not unhandsome in spite of the fact that his hair was extremely red. Upon this last point Josiah was rather foolishly sensitive. He lived as a rule in peace and harmony with all men; but if ever news went through the village that young Mellick had been fighting with somebody, it was safe to assume that the cause of the trouble had been an uncomplimentary reference to the colour of Josiah's hair.

Josiah paused to greet the old man, and Uncle Bill could not help observing that although it was a weekday, and during working hours as well, Josiah had got his Sunday coat on, and likewise a stiff and apparently very uncomfortable collar.

"Good afternoon, Uncle Bill," said Josiah, as he passed.

"Good afternoon, Josiah," said the old man. "What's the matter? Are you going courting?"

Josiah turned so red all at once that what with his flushed features and his very red hair, he seemed to be on fire from his shoulders upwards. "Going to have a try," he replied, shyly; "if I don't get there too late!"

Uncle Bill began to reply that he wished the young fellow good luck; but the words were lost on Josiah, who was already half-way down the road. If Uncle Bill had followed him he would have seen Josiah turn off from the highway across the meadow of Mr. Wilkins, and stop under the wall of Mrs. Tegg's back garden. Further observation would have elicited the fact that he had then given a peculiar whistle, which was at once answered by the appearance of Mary Tegg's pretty face, which peeped at him over the top rung of a ladder, and that he had thereupon scrambled over the wall with a promptitude that did not promise to improve the condition of his Sunday coat, and joined her in her mother's garden.

IF, however, Uncle Bill followed the young man, it was at a more leisurely pace. Even in his younger days Uncle Bill had never been known to hurry, and one does not change one's habits at eighty. All who passed him had a kindly greeting for the old man, for the village had long since recognized that in spite of his modest life and unassuming ways, Uncle Bill was a man of great parts. Indeed, he enjoyed a reputation for unusual sagacity in all things; but this was merely due to the fact that he had learned diplomacy as his lesson in life. If a man asked his advice as to a certain line of conduct to be pursued, Uncle Bill, by an adroit question would

ascertain the line his questioner wanted to follow, and would offer no objection to it. Most of us always intend to follow our own inclinations, even when we have asked for other advice; and therefore Uncle Bill's reputation for great wisdom arose simply from the fact that he knew when to hold his tongue. And as this accomplishment is rather a rare one, it may be that the villagers were right in their estimate of his quality.

Mrs. Tegg was standing at her garden gate, as the old man came by. She was looking up the road as if in search of someone, but she answered Uncle Bill's salutation readily enough, saying that she was quite well, but dreadfully worried.

"There's my daughter Mary," she went on in reply to Uncle Bill's conventional expression of regret. "She's had an offer from Mr. Wilkins, whose place is at the back here, and the girl won't hear of it. What would you advise me to do?"

"Mr. Wilkins is a widower, isn't he?" asked Uncle Bill, adroitly fencing the question. "I suppose you would call him middle-aged."

"Oh, hardly that," protested Mrs. Tegg. "He's only forty-five and he's got that fine grocery business, to say nothing of a good bit of land besides. And my Mary's twenty-two. I was younger than her when I married Tegg. I jumped at the idea when Mr. Wilkins spoke of it, because it'll give Mary a comfortable home from the start, and she won't have to rough it. I think it's very hard that she should go against me and prefer a younger man who won't be able to give her a comfortable home for many a year. Don't you?"

"Yes," said Uncle Bill, sympathetically. "It is hard to have our efforts thwarted when we are trying to do good, isn't it? There is a young man in the field, then?"

"Well, now you come to mention it," said Mrs. Tegg. "I wouldn't say but what young Josiah Mellick ain't after the girl. Maybe you've heard something about it, seeing you've been living with them for so long."

UNCLE BILL shook his head with a quiet smile. "Young men, Mrs. Tegg," he said, "don't consult old men about their love affairs. They are too much afraid of receiving good advice."

"Ah," said Mrs. Tegg, "I knew you wouldn't approve of his behaviour. Why, Mr. Wilkins has got a nice home all ready for Mary to drop into, whereas young Mellick has only got that farm, and I'm told that he won't have that for long, owing to the mortgages that there are on it."

"Mr. Wilkins has three very pretty children, hasn't he?" said Uncle Bill, diplomatically.

"Yes, indeed," replied the lady. "Such sweet faces. I was sure you'd agree with me about it all. I shall tell Mary I've had a chat with you. Besides, look at young Josiah Mellick's dreadfully red hair. We don't want that sort of thing in our family!"

Uncle Bill shook his head lightly, leaving Mrs. Tegg to interpret the movement as she pleased, and then he passed on his way.

Meanwhile Mrs. Tegg continued to gaze up the road, her patience being at length rewarded by the appearance of a stout little man, who came hurrying along, wiping his very bald head with a coloured cotton handkerchief as he walked. He seemed rather agitated, but as soon as he caught sight of Mrs. Tegg at the gate he put his hat back on his head and assumed a beaming smile.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wilkins," said Mrs. Tegg. "I've been looking out for you for some time."

"Sorry I'm late, ma'am," replied Wilkins, casting an anxious eye behind as he spoke. "The fact is there's been a little unpleasantness with Mrs. Dreece. Most tiresome woman that. I told you all about her the other day, you remember. Wants to make out that I said I was going to marry her, if you ever heard such nonsense! As I came past her place just now she was positively rude to me, and even went so far as to threaten to sue me!"

"Dear, dear, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Tegg, sympathetically.

Mr. Wilkins expressed his gratitude for this timely and welcome sympathy. As it happened Mrs. Dreece's charge was not unfounded. Mr. Wilkins had been paying court to her for some time, and all Barngate had come to the conclusion that the two were about to make a match of it. It was only by the merest accident that Mr. Wilkins learned that the independent income which the lady apparently enjoyed did not arise from interest on her own investments, but was merely the charitable support of a wealthier relative, which would naturally cease on her re-marriage. And as he had told Mrs. Tegg if he was going to marry a wife that was portionless, he might as well follow his own inclinations, instead of those which his natural cupidity had suggested.

"Come inside, Mr. Wilkins," said Mrs. Tegg, at length. "I dessay we shall find Mary in the garden. She's nearly always there in the afternoon."

Mr. Wilkins, still a little out of breath, followed his hostess, arranging his necktie as he went. He was fully alive to the necessity of care in respect to personal appearance at such times, especially as he had the kind of appearance that required a good deal of decoration to make it at all acceptable. Most people would have come to the conclusion that when he had claimed that his age was only forty-five he must have been standing in the half-light, and must have been trusting a good deal to the defective eyesight of the spectators.

ALL at once Mrs. Tegg gave a little scream. Mr. Wilkins hurrying after her, more out of curiosity than as a probable defender of the fair, was shocked as he observed the cause of Mrs. Tegg's perturbation. Mary Tegg was crouching in a corner of the garden seat under the pear tree, with her face hidden in her hands, while that horribly assertive youth, Josiah Mellick, stood defiantly beside her; having doubtless sprung to his feet on hearing Mrs. Tegg's exclamation. Mr. Wilkins's first impulse was to say he would call again another day, but suddenly remembering that, if it came to that, he could buy up a dozen people like the Mellicks, he stood his ground, fortified by the additional fact that he had left the door open behind him as a convenient way of retreat if it should be needed.

"If you want to come to my house, Josiah Mellick," said Mrs. Tegg, angrily, "you'll please to come in by the front door, same as respectable people does!"

"Meaning Mr. Wilkins, I s'pose," returned Josiah, defiantly. "Well, I wanted to see Mary particularly, and I didn't suppose you'd let me in. So I came the way I wanted."

"The impudence of it!" gasped Mrs. Tegg. "And, before Mr. Wilkins, too!"

"Well, I never was given to saying behind a man's back what I'm afraid to say to his face," returned Josiah, boldly.

Mr. Wilkins, keeping prudently behind Mrs. Tegg, smiled in a conciliatory way, as these young men are apt to be so dreadfully unruly if they should happen to be crossed in an exciting moment.

"I'm not going to argue with you, Josiah Mellick," said Mrs. Tegg. "You'll please oblige me by going back home at once. The idea of a young man like you coming and interfering with the plans of a gentleman like Mr. Wilkins, that's well-established in life. And you with that dreadful red hair, too!"

Josiah's eyes had a dangerous light in them for the moment. "Never you mind my hair!" he said, angrily. "I'd sooner have red hair than be a snappy old hippofagus like what you are!"

It was the turn of Mrs. Tegg's eyes to flash fire. "Well, that's done it!" she spluttered, at length. "No one has ever took the liberty of calling me a hippo-hippy—what you said—before, in all my life. You get out o' this at once, Josiah Mellick, or I'll get some of the neighbours in to shift ye!"

"You better go now, Jo," said Mary, in a soft, appealing voice, as she looked up at him with her large, brown eyes full of tears. "You'll only make matters worse by staying."

Mary rose and held out her hand as she finished speaking. Josiah took it in his, and then, with a look of direct challenge to Mrs. Tegg and his elderly rival, he took Mary in his arms and kissed her twice. Then he strode out by the front door as he had been requested to do, Mr. Wilkins walking some distance away so that he could not reasonably be charged with having done anything to delay the fiery man's exit.

The same evening, as Uncle Bill sat in the porch of his cottage with a book on his knee, he was surprised to see young Mellick enter the gate and come awkwardly up the garden path. The old man smiled a welcome, and raised his eyebrows by way of inviting Josiah to explain the reason of his visit.

"Could I have a word with you, Uncle Bill?" asked Josiah, with a meekness that was in striking contrast to his defiant attitude of an hour or two previously.

UNCLE BILL indicated the opposite seat of the porch, and put his book down. He took a case of cigarettes from his pocket and offered it to Josiah. For the next moment or so the two were busy lighting their cigarettes, while each waited for the other to commence the conversation; but in Josiah's case it was so unusual that it could only be attributed to the natural reluctance he had always exhibited to trouble Uncle Bill with his private business. Therefore by way of offering a little welcome encouragement Uncle Bill observed quietly:

"Well, Josiah?"

"Well, you see, it's like this, Uncle Bill," said Josiah, unburdening his soul with a rush; "Mary Tegg's promised to marry me, and when you saw me going down to her place this afternoon I was going to talk it over with her mother. And when I got to their place, hang me if they hadn't got old Wilkins there, talking about him marrying Mary; and the old woman she was rude to me—made

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