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THE STORY OF THE GREAT OLLAR

Bound by Francis Longinus Sangorski, and its romantic loss.

told by

JOHN HARRISON STONEHOUSE

"The worldly hope men set their hearts upon
Turns ashes - or it prospers; and anon,
Like snow upon the desert's dusty face,
Lighting a little hour or two, is "gone."

Stanza XIV.

PICCADILLY FOUNTAIN PRESS LONDON.

MCM XXCVIII.

Printed in Great Britain for the Piccadilly
Fountain Press, by the University Press
Oxford, in the year of our Lord MCMXXVIII.

Sold by Henry Sotheran Ltd., 43 Piccadilly
London. W.1.

Dedicated to the memory of Francis Longinus

Sangorski Master Craftsman.

Francis Longinus Sangorski, worthy follower in the wake of that illustrious line of master craftsmen which extended from Benvenuto Cellini to William Morris, was born on March 15th. 1875. He was the youngest of four sons of a Polish emigre, and Lydia, his English wife.

At the age of 17 Sangorski was apprenticed to Charles Ferris, book-binder of St. Martins Lane. Four years later in 1896 he joined as a student an Evening Bookbinding class of the London County Council School of Arts and Crafts in Regent Street where he was fortunate enough in having Mr. Douglas Cockerell as his instructor. It was here on the opening evening of the class that he met George Sutcliffe, his future partner. In March 1898 the two students entered the Annual technical competition held by the L.C.C., when they both gained the highest awards - a scholarship consisting of money grants of £20 for three years, together with free evening tuition.

This was a happy augury for future success, for only ten of these scholarships were available in London for all crafts. In April 1898 Sangorski was engaged by Mr. Cockerell as a "forwarder" in his own business, and in the following January Sutcliffe, on finishing his apprenticeship at the binding department of Mudie's Libraray was also engaged by Mr. Cockerell as a "finisher".

In January 1901 both Sangorski and Sutcliffe were appointed by the L.C.C. as instructors at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts. Their scholarships expired in the following April but were renewed for another year in recognition of their remarkable ability. In the October following, the two student workmen left Mr. Cockerell's service and set up for themselves in two small attic rooms at No. 5 Bloomsbury Square. A few months later they removed to larger premises at 2 Vernon Place nearby.

Three years later in 1905, Sangorski and Sutcliffe moved again, and this time to much larger premises at No. 11 Southampton Row. It was here that they started to produce jewelled bindings for which they became famous. The first example being a copy of Spencer's Epithalamion, which was bound in morocco with five pearls set in the centre of a Tudor rose.

Their first peacock binding was a copy of Macmillan's edition of Omar Khayyam in inlaid morocco with 21 opals set in the outstretched tail of the bird. This was exhibited at the international book production exhibition at Frankfurt-en-Main, and was bought by the museum there. During the next year, 1906, Sangorski attended a writing and illuminating class at the Central School of Arts and Crafts under Mr. Edward ^{NEWSTON} ~~NEWSTON~~, and shortly afterwards, not only began himself to practise illuminating, but also taught the art to his elder brother Alberto Sangorski, the most famous of modern illuminators, who died quite recently.

Sangorski left the Camberwell binding class in 1907 to take charge of a new evening class formed at the Northampton Institute, an appointment which he held until his death in 1912. His experience there, and in other evening classes as student and instructor, covered a period of sixteen years.

It was in 1907 that I first met Sangorski, when he brought a letter of introduction from a church dignitary, and asked to be allowed to show me a lectern bible which the Archbishop of Canterbury had commissioned his firm to bind, previous to its presentation by King Edward VII to the United States in commemoration of the tercentenary of the established church in America. I recognised at once the justice of his contention that there was something more in the design and execution of the work than was usually to be found in an ordinary piece of commercial binding, and that the appreciation of it which had been expressed in the press was fully justified.

I met Sangorski at intervals during the next few months, when he showed me other specimens of his work, nearly all of which were set in jewels, each tending to become more ambitious and elaborate than the last, whilst I also began to be influenced by his extraordinary personality, dynamic energy and enthusiasm for his work.

Omar Khayyam was his favourite book for binding, partly because of the subject and nationality of it, and to a small extent its size and shape (crown quarto) were particularly adaptable to his scheme of decoration.

In most of his designs, the peacock and grapevine predominated, and gradually it seemed that the former was becoming his fetish, whilst I used to think that his dreams must have been of oriental lands and colours which he had never seen. I was at first influenced more by Sangorski's use of the grapevine motif than that of the peacock, and whilst he was developing the latter in his designs, my mind was centred on the grapes.

Finally I decided to give him an order to bind a copy of Symond's "Wine Women and Song", with very elaborate arrangements of bunches of grapes formed by groups of amethysts set in gold. This was a small volume about 5½ inches by 3½, and when finished was most exquisitely beautiful modern binding I have ever seen. It would be difficult to compare it with the magnificent "Omar", for that would be like comparing the beauty of Aphrodite to the glory of Juno. The Symonds was sold almost immediately, but fortunately it was photographed before it went away, so that I am able to include an illustration of it on page 12.

At this time "Kismet" was being played at the Garrick Theatre, and Sangorski went to see it several times, and nearly always called at Piccadilly on the following morning, when he would describe the perfect riot of colour in the scenes, which appeared to have an almost intoxicating effect on him; and he would show me his programme, the margins of which he covered with sketches to be used later on as ~~the~~ the basis of designs for binding.

One of Sangorski's personal characteristics which amused and impressed me was the extraordinary bluntness and thickness of his fingers, coupled with his curious manner of gesticulation as we sat talking with each other, when he would tell me of the things he had done and the things he could do "if only he had the chance". His work had received generous recognition at home and abroad, but it always seemed that his ambition outstripped his opportunity. He would talk of this with regret, and I used to watch him with astonishment, whilst he tried to describe to me the masterpiece which he could produce - if only as he said someone would give him a commission to bind the original edition of Vedder's Omar Khayyam which was large enough to carry a very elaborate design, containing a wealth of detail with rich inlays inset with innumerable jewels. As he talked thus, he seemed to lose himself, and waving his great thick forefinger in the air he would say "I would stand three peacocks and surround them with jewelled decoration such as has never been dreamed of before". I would do "this", "that" and "the other", he would declare eagerly, all the time gesticulating with his big forefinger, until bye and bye he would come back to earth, and acknowledge with a sigh that his dream was a futile one.

We had several such conversations until there came a day - and I can see him now in my mind's eye with his great forefinger waving in the air, when I interrupted him by placing my forefinger on his chest and said "STOP!" "All right, Sangorski, go ahead". "What", he said, "do you mean it?" "Yes", I said, "Do it, and do it well. There is no limit. Put what you like in the binding and charge what you like for it. The greater the price, the more I shall be pleased, provided only that it is understood that what you do, and what you charge for, will be justified by the result. And the book when finished is to be The Greatest Modern Binding in the World".

-----"these are the only instructions."

Sangorski was overjoyed at the opportunity to produce what he knew would be a masterpiece. For my part, I had recognised that it would be no use asking Mr. Sotheran to give an open order such as this, but I felt that I was justified by my knowledge that there never had been in the history of the binding trade such an extraordinary genius as Sangorski both as a designer and a craftsman, and that he was capable of producing a binding such as the world had never seen before.

Losing no time Sangorski set to work on his preliminary sketches and designs which he brought at intervals to show me, and it was a delight to witness the joy and enthusiasm with which he entered into every detail of the scheme. His big forefinger was always busy when describing the progress of the work. He told me one day that he would have a skull with a poppy growing out of it in one of the designs, and a few days later he showed me a full-sized drawing of a human skull, together with a letter from an eminent surgeon, pronouncing it to be the finest drawing of its kind he had ever seen. Three days later he brought me in to look at a small model of the skull in white calf and ivory, before it was inserted in the back doublure of the book.

On another occasion he asked if I could show him an illustration of a serpent striking its prey. As I was unable to satisfy him, he rushed off to the Zoo to make enquiries there. Meeting him next day he told me he had found that the public were not allowed to see the snakes fed. "However", he added, "I arranged the matter and succeeded in getting one of the attendants to feed a snake by slipping a rat through a trap door into its cage. The snake sprang at it - thus" Sangorski said, holding up his hand with his great forefinger and thumb extended, "That was just what I wanted to see".—"the angle of its jaws". A few days later he brought me in a snake modelled in different coloured moroccoes all ready to be fitted into its allotted place in the front doublure.

I particularly wanted to have the Omar on view at 43 Piccadilly during the celebrations in connection with the coronation of King George V, but as the front cover was not finished in time, the book was shown in its unfinished state, and was sent back to the workshop for completion afterwards.

I had a little bit of fun with Sangorski before the Omar finally appeared at Piccadilly in its finished state. He was naturally proud of his achievement, and took the book round to show a number of his friends. Meantime I was expecting it daily and had telephoned several times for delivery, beginning at last to lose patience I made up my mind to go and fetch it myself; calling at the workshop at Southampton Row I learned that Sangorski was out and that he had the book with him. It was then midday, but I had a very good idea where to look, and found him in the Holborn Restaurant. The large front hall had a small buffet on the left going in, with a screen across to break the draughts. On entering I could just see the top of Sangorski's head above the screen, and projecting beyond the edge of the screen I saw, resting on a stool, the box I knew must contain the Omar. Dropping on my hands and knees I managed to slip the box off the stool, and was about to escape without Sangorski seeing me, when the girl behind the bar, catching sight of the reflection of the "thief" in the mirrors with which she was surrounded, screamed out "He has got your book!" We had a good laugh together over this, and what a fright poor Sangorski would have got if the girl had not given the alarm, and I had been able to get away with the book.

The original edition of ^{the} Vedder's illustrated Omar Khayyam, as most people know, is a single volume of ^{quarto} size, measuring 16 inches by 13. The binding took nearly two years to complete. The designs were by Sangorski; the book was forwarded by S. Byrnes, and the finishing was done by G. Lovatt. It was in crown morocco, beautifully decorated with thousands of leather inlays, and set with

no less than 1050 jewels. For absolute richness of design and beauty of decoration it is no exaggeration to say that it was the finest and most remarkable specimen of binding ever designed or produced at any period or in any country.

Sangorski made six separate designs for the book; two for each of the outside covers, doublures and the fly leaves. In the front cover, the eyes of the peacocks' feathers were jewelled with 97 topazes, all of which were specially cut to the correct shape of the eye, and the crests of the birds being suggested by 18 turquoises, while rubies were inset to form eyes. The surrounding border and corner pieces were set with 289 garnets, turquoises and olivines, the outer grape-vine border was inlaid in brown and green morocco and set with 250 amethysts arranged so as to form bunches of grapes. The back cover was set with 198 turquoises and olivines, and in the centre ~~of the~~ was inset a model of a Persian mandoline made of mahogany inlaid with silver satinwood and ebony. The front doublure was divided into a number of sunken panels, and in the centre one was a subtle suggestion of stanza 58 - "O thou who man of baser earth didst make, and who with Eden didst devise the snake" - the dominating feature being a snake modelled and inlaid in various coloured leathers, with ivory teeth and an emerald set in as an eye, surrounded by and entwined among conventional arrangements of an apple tree with the sun suggested in solid gold appearing through the foliage.; the whole of the background being closely filled with gold dots, throwing the designs slightly into relief. The panel was also intended to be an emblematical suggestion of "Life".

The designs of the back doublure was intended emblematical suggesting death. In the sunken panel of the doublure appeared a realistic representation of a skull, modelled in leather, with carved ivory teeth, surrounded with a design based on a poppy: the floral symbol of death which appears to be growing out of the eyesocket.

The front fly-leaf was decorated with an intricate strapwork border with an inlaid rose in the corner; the introduction of the rose being intended to further carry out the suggestion of Life at the beginning of the book. The back fly-leaf was similar in appearance to the front one, but the designs in the corners, instead of being based on the rose, suggesting Life, was composed of a conventional treatment of the deadly nightshade, which but to taste is Death.

After the termination of the coronation celebrations, it was decided that I should go to America to exhibit the Omar there. I made my arrangements, engaged rooms in New York, and sent the book forward so that it would be through the customs before my arrival. Two days before I was due to start, I received to my dismay, a cable from our shipping agent stating that the customs authorities had claimed duty on the book. Under the regulations then existing in America, not only were books more than 20 years old duty free, (as they still are) but it was then permissible to put a non-dutiable book in an expensive binding without having to pay duty on the binding. The edition of the Omar which we had used was undated, but knowing that it was published in 1884, we naturally supposed that the customs would accept it as a duty-free book. However, they claimed that the publishers had, or might have, printed off copies from the same plates at a much later date, thus bringing the book within the dutiable period. There was, however, no means by which we could disprove this supposition, and as Mr. Sotheran considered himself justified in refusing to pay duty, the Omar was returned to us.

Fatality seemed to follow the book, for no sooner had the book returned to Piccadilly than a dispute arose between Mr. Sotheran and Sangorski respecting payment for the binding; as a result of which Mr. Sotheran, much to my disgust, decided that he would have nothing more to do with the Omar, and instructed me to send it to Sotheby's to be sold without reserve.

The sale came on at a very bad time, just in the middle of the serious coal strike, and I had the mortification on 29th. March 1912, of seeing the book which was the result of so much thought and enthusiastic workmanship, and for which we had been asking £1000, knocked down to Mr. Gabriel Wells, for the very modest sum of £405.

The White Star SS Titanic, the largest and most magnificent vessel in the world, with a displacement of 60,000 tons, was 883 feet long and 92 feet broad, with a height from the keel to the bridge of 104 feet. She was fitted with 8 steel decks, and was divided into 16 compartments by 15 transverse watertight bulkheads. She carried 2008 passengers and crew. It was claimed that she was the last word in shipbuilding, and was unsinkable. She sailed from Southampton on her maiden voyage to New York on April 10th. 1912. On the following Sunday April 14th. at 11.45 p.m. in latitude 41-46' North, and longitude 50-14' West, she collided with an iceberg and sank 2½ hours later; when 815 of her passengers and 668 of her crew were drowned. 705 of her people were rescued by the SS Carpathia after spending a night in open boats.

Among the valuable property which was lost when the ship foundered, was the Great Omar with 1050 jewels.

Sangorski himself was drowned when bathing at Selsey Bill on the first of July 1912; he was only 37 years of age, and life for him as a great master-craftsman had only just begun.

TAMAN.