

# New Brooms

by F.W. Boreham

New brooms, they say, sweep clean. The statement is scarcely worth challenging. It is ridiculous upon the face of it. How can new brooms sweep clean? New brooms do not sweep at all. If they sweep, they are not new brooms: they have been used; the dealer will not receive them back into stock; they are obviously second-hand. But I need not stress that point. My antagonism to the ancient saw rests on other grounds.

New brooms, they say, sweep clean. It is invariably a cynic who says it. He seizes the proverb as he would seize a bludgeon; and, with it, he makes a murderous attack on the first young enthusiast he happens to meet. It is a barbarous weapon, and can be wielded by an expert with deadly effect. It is a thousand times worse than a shillalah, a tomahawk, a baton, or a club; with either of these a man can break your head; but with the saying about the new brooms he can break your heart. I well remember the public meeting at which I was formally welcomed to Mosgiel. Among the speakers was an old minister of the severely conservative type, with whom I subsequently grew very intimate. But at that stage, as he himself told me afterwards, he deeply resented my coming. He regarded it as an intrusion. He said, in the course of his speech, that he confidently expected to hear, during the next few months, the most glowing accounts of the work at the Mosgiel Church. That, he cruelly observed, was the usual thing. A young minister's first year among his people is, he remarked, a year of *admiration*; the second is a year of *toleration*; and the third, a year of *abomination*. New brooms, he said, sweep clean. The jest, I dare say, rolled from the memories of the people like water from a duck's back. I doubt if they gave it a second thought. They probably remarked to one another as they drove back to their farms that the old gentleman was in a droll humour. But, to me, his words were like the thrust of a sword; he stabbed me to the quick. There was never a day during those first three years at Mosgiel, but the wound ached and smarted. Long afterwards, I reminded the old gentleman for his jest; and he most solemnly assured me that he had not the slightest recollection of ever having uttered it. Which only proves that our thoughtless thrusts are often just as painful as our malicious ones. I have long since forgiven my old friend. Indeed, I do not know that I have much to forgive. For, after all, his stinging jibe only made me resolve to prove its falsity. For more than a thousand mornings I rose from my bed vowing that at the end of three years, and at the end of thirty, the broom should be sweeping as cleanly as ever. The old minister has been in his grave for many years now; and I have nothing but benedictions to heap upon his honoured name.

The cult of the new broom is a most pernicious one. No heresy has done more harm. The woman who really believes that new brooms sweep clean will endeavor to keep the broom new

as long as she possible can. And that is not what brooms are for. Brooms are to use; and, as soon as you begin to use them, they cease to be *new* brooms. The point is a vital one. About three hundred years ago, one of the choicest spirits in English history was passing away. George MacDonald says of him that one of the keenest delights of the life to come will be the joy of seeing the face of George Herbert ‘with whom to talk humbly will be in bliss a higher bliss.’ As George Herbert lay dying, he drew from beneath his pillow the roll of manuscripts that contained the poems that are now so famous. ‘Deliver this,’ he said, ‘to my dear brother, Nicholas Ferrar, and tell him that he will find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that passed between God and my soul before I could subject my will to the will of Jesus my Master.’ The verses were published, and have come to be esteemed as one of the priceless possessions of the Church universal. And among them, strangely enough, I find a striking reference to this matter of new brooms. ‘What wretchedness,’ George Herbert asks,

‘What wretchedness can give him any room  
Whose house is foul while he adores the broom?’

And here is George Herbert telling us on his deathbed that this reflects some deep spiritual conflict between God and his own soul! What can he mean? He means, of course, that it is possible to be so much in love with your new dress that you are afraid to wear it. You may be so enamoured of your new spade that you shrink from soiling it. You may—to return to the poet’s imagery—so adore your new broom that you allow all your floors to become dusty and foul.

And herein lies one of life’s cardinal sins. In his lecture on *The Valley of Diamonds*, John Ruskin discusses the nature of covetousness. What is covetousness? Wherein does it differ from the legitimate desire for wealth? Up to a certain point the desire for riches is admirable. It develops intellectual alertness in the individual, and, in the aggregate, builds up our national prosperity. If nobody wished to be rich, the resources of the country would never be exploited. Why should men trouble to clear the bush or sink mines or erect factories or cultivate farms? Apart from the lure of wealth we should be a people of sluggish wit and savage habits. Viewed in this light, the desire for wealth is not only pardonable; it is admirable. At what point does it curdle into covetousness and threaten our undoing? Ruskin draws the line sharply. The desire for wealth is good, he argues, as long as we have *some use* for the riches that we acquire; it deteriorates into mere covetousness as soon as we crave to possess it for the sheer sake of possessing it and apart from any *use* to which we propose to put it. ‘Fix your desire on anything useless,’ he says, ‘and all the pride and folly of your heart will mix with that desire; and you will become at last wholly inhuman, a mere, ugly lump of stomach and suckers, like a cuttlefish.’ John Ruskin’s vigorous prose throws a flood of light on George Herbert’s cryptic poetry. So far

as I have in my heart to use my new broom for the cleansing of my home and the comfort of my fellows, my new broom may be a means of grace to me and them; but, so far as I view the new broom merely as a possession, and irrespective of the service in which it should be worn out, my pride in it is bad as bad can be.

John Ruskin reminds me of Le Sage. 'Before reading the story of my life,' he makes Gil Blas to say, 'Listen to a tale I am about to tell thee!' And then he tells of the two tired and thirsty students who, traveling together from Pennafiel to Salamanca, sat down by a roadside spring. Near the spring they noticed a flat stone, and on the stone they soon detected some letters. The inscription was almost effaced, partly by the teeth of time and partly by the feet of the flocks that came to water at the fountain. But, after washing it well, they were able to make out the words '*Here is interred the soul of the Licentiate Peter Garcias.*' The first of the students roared with laughter and treated the affair as purely a joke. 'Here lies *a soul!*'—what an idea! A soul under a stone! The second, however, took it more seriously and began to dig. He at length came upon a leather purse containing a hundred ducats, and a card, on which was written in Latin the following sentence: '*Thou who hast had wit enough to discover the meaning of the inscription, inherit my money, and make a better use of it than I have!*'

'The *soul* of the Licentiate Peter Garcias!'

'Make *a better use* of it than I have!'

Poor Peter Garcias felt that his shining ducats had been a curse and not a blessing, because he had loved them for their own sake instead of for the sake of the use to which they could be put. 'Make *a better use* of them than I have!' he implored. Peter Garcias would have understood exactly what George Herbert meant by the worship of the new broom.

But I need not have gone abroad for my illustration. It is a far cry from George Herbert to George Eliot; yet George Eliot has furnished us with the most telling exposition of George Herbert's recondite remark. For George Eliot has given us *Silas Marner*. Indeed, she has given us two Silas Marners. We have Silas Marner the miser, gloating greedily over the guineas that he afterwards lost; and, later on, we have Silas Marner, strong, unselfish, tender-hearted, rejoicing in the wealth that he has now regained. Let us glance, first at the one and then at the other.

We peep at him as he appears in the second chapter. 'So year after year, Silas Marner had lived in this solitude, his guineas rising in the iron pot, and his life narrowing and hardening itself more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being. His life had reduced itself to the functions of weaving and hoarding, *without any contemplation of an end towards which the functions tended.* Marner's face shrank; his eyes, that used to look trusting and dreamy, now looked as if they had been made to see only one kind of thing for which they hunted everywhere; and he was so withered and yellow that, although he was not yet forty, the children always called him 'Old Master Marner.'

This was Silas Marner the miser! Then followed the loss of the money; the hoarded guineas were all stolen, and Silas was like a man demented! Then little Eppie stole into his home and heart. When he saw her for the first time, curled up on the hearth, the flickering firelight playing on her riot of golden hair, he thought his long-lost guineas had come back in this new form, and he loved *her* as he had once loved *them*. He would take her on his knee and tell her wonderful stories, and, in the long summer evenings, would stroll out into the meadows, thick with buttercups, and would make garlands for her hair and teach her to distinguish the songs of the birds. And so the years go by till Eppie is a bonny girl of eighteen—always in trouble about her golden hair, for no other girl of her acquaintance has hair like it, and, smooth it as she may, it will not be hidden under her pretty brown bonnet. And then comes the great discovery. The pond in the Stone Pit runs dry, and in its slimy bed are found the skeleton of the thief and—the long-lost guineas! That evening Silas and Eppie sat together in the cottage. George Eliot describes the transfiguration which his love for Eppie had effected in the countenance of Silas. ‘She drew her chair towards his knees, and leaned forward, holding both his hands, while she looked up at him.’ On the table near them, lit by a candle, lay the recovered gold—the old long-loved gold, ranged in orderly heaps, as Silas used to range it in the days when it was his only joy. He had been telling her how he used to count it every night, and how his soul was utterly desolate till she was sent to him.

‘Eh, my precious child,’ he cried, ‘if you hadn’t been sent to save me, I should have gone to the grave in my misery. The money was taken away from me in time; and you see it’s been kept—kept till it was wanted for you. It’s wonderful—our life is wonderful!’

It is indeed! But the wonderful thing for us at this moment is the contrast between these two Silas Marners. They are both rich. But the first is rich and wretched; the second is rich and happy. And the secret! The secret is that, in his first possession of the guineas, he loved them for their own sake, irrespective of any use to which they could be put; in his subsequent possessions of the self-same guineas he loved them for the sake of the happiness that they could purchase for Eppie.

The *first* Silas Marner knew the wretchedness that George Herbert describes—the wretchedness of the man ‘whose house is foul while he adores his broom’: the *second* Silas Marner was willing that the broom should be worn out in sweeping all the obstacles and difficulties out of Eppie’s path.

In telling her story, George Eliot remarks incidentally that wiser men than Silas Marner often repeat his mistake. The only difference is that, whilst Silas Marner amassed *money* without considering the uses which it could be put, these wiser misers accumulate *knowledge* in the same aimless way. They abandon themselves to some erudite research, some ingenious project or some well-knit theory; and it brings them little joy because it stands related to no actual need. It is a

new broom and will remain a new broom; it will never brush away any of the world's sorrows or sweep together any of its long-lost treasures. Knowledge, like money, is a noble thing. But, as with money, so with knowledge, it derives its nobleness from the ends which it is designed to compass. Every nation has a right to rejoice in its universities. The university is the glory of civilization. But, unless we keep both eyes wide open, the university may come to resemble the hole in the cottage floor in which Silas Marner hoarded his gold. Let the student of engineering remember that he is accumulating knowledge, not that he may possess more of it than his rivals and competitors, but that he may do more than they towards surmounting the obstacles that block the path of human progress. Let the medical student remember that he is amassing knowledge, not that he may flourish the academic distinctions he has won, but that he may lessen the sum of human anguish and save human life. And let the theological student reflect that he is winning for himself a scholarly renown, not that he may rejoice in his attainments and distinctions for their own sake, but that, by means of them, he may the more effectively and skillfully lead all kinds and conditions of men into the kingdom and service of his Lord.

And so I come back to my starting-point. The broom that sweeps clean is not a new broom. After commencing this chapter I happened to pick up a report of the British and Foreign Bible Society. On one of its pages I find a story told by the society's colporteur at Port Said. He boarded an incoming steamer, and, on the lower deck, found a German sailor sweeping out a cabin. The man was greatly depressed. In the course of conversation, each claimed to be a greater sinner than the other.

'What!' exclaimed the sailor, 'why, you are the first man to tell me that he is a greater sinner than I am!'

He took a Gospel from the colporteur's hands and began to read.

'Ah,' he sighed, 'that I were a little child again and could read it with a clean heart!'

The remark was overheard by some of his shipmates.

'Is that *you*, Jansen?' they asked; 'what wonder has happened to you?'

'No wonder at all,' the man replied. '*I want to sweep out my hear, and I am buying a broom!*'

The broom that he bought is by no means a new one, but it sweeps wonderfully clean for all that!