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TOM SAINT-AUBYN'S FREAK, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

A TALE OF MYSTERY.

When Rubini, the famous tenor, was at the summit of his celebrity and the full maturity of his powers, a time in which all the musical amateurs and cognoscenti of the provinces esteemed it a point of duty to make a pilgrimage to the metropolis, solely to hear him warble some of his great songs of melody and passion, three gentlemen set out from Bath one morning in May for the express purpose of following the mode, and procuring the ability to say during the remainder of their lives, 'We have heard the great Rubini.'

It was on Tuesday night that our three dilettanti—Charles Virian, Henri Coleraine, and Frederic Burgess—arrived in London. Rubini was to sing in Bellini's 'Purita,' on Thursday evening, so they had a clear day before them to spend as they pleased. This interval they employed in visiting several old friends and cronies, among whom was one especial favorite, a person having several little peculiarities and eccentricities of character, who was regarded with that interest which most of us are ready to accord to the decidedly 'original.' Tom Saint-Aubyn was a strange fellow, with talent and genius in him, buried in the depths of a cynical, intractable, and somewhat slothful disposition.

'Friends and countrymen!' said Tom Saint-Aubyn solemnly, a mirthful sneer fast gathering on his trenchant lip. 'Fired by the universal frenzy, you have travelled upwards of a hundred miles, and incurred many pounds' expense, each of you, for the sake of hearing a man squall.—May I inquire if you have paid your subscription to the Bath hospital this year?'

'No, by Jove,' was the careless reply.

The next evening found all the four seated together in a box on the second tier at the Opera. The house was crowded; all the rank and fashion of London were there, full dressed and bejewelled, and making, amidst the gorgeous trappings and thousand lights of the theatre, a very imposing and brilliant show. The entrance of Rubini was the signal for a tremendous ovation, the popular favorite being obliged to stand bowing and pressing his breast for several minutes, whilst handkerchiefs and hats were waved, and thousands of bravos shouted.

'It is all mere bravo-work,' remarked the sarcastic Saint-Aubyn. 'The singer imposes upon society, and society upon the singer; they make a god of him, and he, poor fellow, is driven to believe himself a god.'

As the opera proceeded, however, our moralist became better pleased; and as he heard the superb vocalization and beheld the highly dramatic acting of the singer, he acknowledged that 'the man was a genius, and was able to prove himself such in the midst of anomalies and monstrosities, which nothing but supreme civilization could enable human nature to tolerate.'

The last act was in progress, and Rubini was singing in his best style the beautiful 'The vedrai la scintillata'; all the house was listening with entranced attention and delight, and here and there with tears of pallid ecstasy, when, even in that moment of general prepossession, our friends became aware that their box—in a very slight degree, it is true, but still sufficiently to surprise them—seemed to divide with the singer the observation of several individuals around and above them. On looking about them, the immediately perceived the cause. There was Tom Saint-Aubyn, standing up behind them, in a position which rendered him visible to a considerable portion of the audience, with a human skull in his hand. Holding up the ghastly object in a quaint, careful manner, he regarded it with abstracted, melancholy seriousness.

The incorrigible moralist was immediately 'nudged,' but without effect; his mind was too powerfully engaged to be diverted. As the cavatina was concluded, and the harmonies of applause arose, and bouquets rained upon the stage:

'How like you this entertainment?' asked Saint-Aubyn of the piteous fragment in his hand. 'How do their scenas, corales, trumpets, drums, and fiddles, their finery and perfumes, please your fancy, old friend? Had you not a heart and lute once, as well as the best of them, as gay a laugh, as sharp a wit, ruddy lips, sparkling

eyes, clustering locks, and wholesome, comely flesh? How do you like to be in here, amidst music, beauty, silks, satins, jewels, and all the vanities, now thou hast gotten so grave a face? Really, but thy clenched teeth are frightful now thy lips are gone! Oh, the horrors close beneath our pretty veils of flesh and skin!'

'Come, Tom Saint-Aubyn, put that filthy thing away,' whispered his friends, nudging him again, and more peremptorily than before.—'The people are looking at you as if you were a something dangerous.'

'Filthy thing,' they call thee now,' continued he, still regarding the skull. 'They had not dared to do that at one time—when thou hadst blood to rush, cheeks to glow, eyes to flash, and tongue to threaten. 'Filthy thing!'

A jerk at the elbow, sportively administered by Charles Virian, sent the skull tripping from the hand of Saint-Aubyn down towards the front of the box, where two ladies and a gentleman occupied the foremost seats. Its trundling was stopped by the gentleman's foot. He, supposing, perhaps, that an opera-glass had fallen, stooped, and picked it up. At first he could not see what it was. As he raised it before his face, the jaw suddenly dropped, and, being wide open, some lingering integument only prevented its falling on the floor. The ladies, uttering expressions of disgust and affright, looked back at the quartette of friends in angry surprise; but the gentleman, letting the skull fall from his hand with a groan of horror, sank back in a state of insensibility. A great deal of confusion immediately ensued; and poor Saint-Aubyn, who was much shocked at the consequence of his indulgence in a caprice, assiduously exerted himself in endeavoring to restore the gentleman, and in assisting him out of the box. The ladies plied their fans and vinaigrettes, the box-opener brought water, and by the combined influence of these and the cooler atmosphere of the lobby, the gentleman speedily revived. The frightened, cowering expression of his features as he looked around him when he recovered, shuddering and trembling, produced much alarm amongst the bystanders, especially to the unintentional producer of the emotion, who feared that a serious shock had been inflicted upon the nervous system, perhaps to the extent of mental aberration. The ladies were greatly distressed, and their agitation added to the agony of Saint-Aubyn.—He presently rose, however, from the seat on which they had placed him, stampered, shook himself, and smoothed his attire.

'Let us go home. Will some one be good enough to call Mr. Berrill's carriage?' exclaimed he, in a tone of great asperity and impatience, when he seemed to have collected his faculties to remember where he was, and the nature of the accident which had befallen him. 'Put your shawls around you; we will go instantly,' said he to the ladies, who were his wife and only daughter.

They had left their shawls in the box. Saint-Aubyn hurried in to fetch them. Miss Berrill followed and took them from his hand; there was an expression of anxiety and vexation upon her handsome face which smote him to the heart; and made him repent still more deeply his thoughtless whim. Mr. Berrill's opera hat was also there; he took that up, and, on handing it to the owner, made a profound and regretful apology for the discomfort and even danger which, by an inconsiderate freak, he had unintentionally caused.

'What! was it you?' exclaimed Mr. Berrill eagerly, the whole expression of his features changing, as if his mind had experienced a sudden relief. 'You brought that thing here in a freak, do you say? You are a strange fellow! Well, I did not regard the matter in that light at all; hardly to be wondered at, though, that one's nerves were shaken a bit. Never play such a trick again, young gentleman; it is very dangerous, to say the least of it; such a sudden panic as possessed me would have killed many a delicate lady. A freak, you say; well, well, let us have no more words about it. Where is the skull? I will purchase it, if you'll part with it, as a memento of to-night. There's my card;—let me see you to-morrow. A freak—ah, ha!—bringing a skull to bear Rubini! A skull with a hole in the back of it, too. Ah, ah!'

There was something not altogether pleasing in this return to self-possession and sudden outburst of hilarity. It required but little penetration to trace beneath the superficial cheerfulness an undercurrent of hurried anxiety and disquiet. He shook Saint-Aubyn's hand nearly all the while he was speaking to him, with a degree of warmth and heartiness which appeared unreasonable, and when he had finished, turning to his wife and daughter, said, 'After all, why should we go? It was only the fancy of the moment that overpowered me; I am quite well again now. Let us return and see the ballet.'

Accordingly, the coach was counter-ordered, and the whole party took their places in the box again—the skull being now securely cramp-

med into the tail pocket of Saint-Aubyn's coat, by no means to the improvement of his figure when he stood or walked. Mr. Berrill was extremely companionable during the remainder of the performance, and chatted and laughed with our friends as if he were well pleased to be acquainted with them, and rather the more than the less from the singular manner in which the acquaintanceship was commenced. A general interchange of cards took place. Mr. Berrill seemed to recognize, with respect, the gentlemanly manners and indubitable signs of education and breeding in the behavior of the friends, and, with a show of frank carelessness as of one desiring to enter into the feelings and fashions of young men, invited them to accompany him home and take supper with him. Observing an expression of cold surprise depicted upon the face of Mrs. Berrill, however, they declined the invitation, on the score that the pleasure would be purchased by too much incivility at so late an hour, and after an evening of so much excitement.

'Come, come; don't tell me!' cried Mr. Berrill, with a roguish laugh. 'Inconvenience, eh? Whose convenience did you ever study, Mr. Saint-Aubyn—with your pet skull at the Opera? From that trait I judge you, young friend—ex pede Herculem. You shall come home with me I say. I demand compliance, in return for the trick you have played me.'

In the end Mr. Berrill triumphed. 'But where's that skull?' asked he as they were leaving the Opera: 'you have that, I hope; don't leave it behind on any account.'

Saint-Aubyn told him he had it safely ensconced in his pocket, and assured him so again and again in reply to his repeated remark that 'hoped it was not left behind.'

The ladies proceeded home in the carriage; the gentleman followed on foot, Virian and Burgess walking together, and Mr. Berrill, Saint-Aubyn, and Coleraine, forming the extreme rear of the thrice divided party. Mr. Berrill talked incessantly; joked, laughed, and appeared in the best possible spirits. He detailed all the odds and gossip of the political and fashionable worlds, criticized Rubini, the music of the opera, the dancing, recounted the people of rank he had recognized in the house, and for awhile, by his animation and eagerness in talking, rendered the conversation little more than a continuous monologue. While Saint-Aubyn and Coleraine were amused, they could not resist the impression that there was something unreasonable in this excessive gaiety, especially considering the brevity of their acquaintance. The humor of their new companion appeared forced, his laughter hollow and unreal. Saint-Aubyn, to whom the study of character was naturally attractive, observed this behavior with interest and curiosity. Though Coleraine saw nothing very extraordinary in the rattling talk and continuous bursts of laughter—deeming them merely such as might be affected by one who was desirous of making himself sociable, and of destroying any impression likely to arise from such an exhibition of nervousness as that caused by the sight of the skull—Saint-Aubyn's keener penetration and more speculative mind invested them with deeper significance. As he replied briefly to the remarks addressed to him, and smiled with every fresh outbreak of merriment, he noted each look, word, and tone, and ruminated busily over the various tokens of agitation and secret perturbation he had remarked since the accident of the skull first directed his attention to the individual who walked with so cheery an air by his side. The deep groan; the real overpowering horror of the first shock; the covering and shuddering upon recovery, so excessive, and so unlike the effects of any merely transient emotion; the defiant manner in which he afterwards looked around and angrily ordered his carriage; the remarkable relief manifested when the apology accounted for the affair as an entire accident, in which there could not, by any possibility, be a preconcerted object; the immediate change of demeanor, the laughter, and hearty shaking of the hand, and the rollicking extravagant mood since displayed; the strange questions about the skull, the desire to purchase it, the anxiety lest it should be left behind; the fact that he had barely caught sight of it before he swooned; and the remark that it was fractured—all these particulars Saint-Aubyn turned over in his mind with the strong deep interest of one whose imagines he has suddenly fallen upon a mystery—and a mystery which appears to involve some of the darker shades of human life—passion, crime, guilt, fear.

'Ah, ah! What a meeting is this! I shall remember you young roysters as long as I live. And who wouldn't, I should like to know, after our introduction at the opera—above all places—and in this time of the Rubini farce—above all seasons—over a dead man's skull!'

'Ah, ha! it is an experience few can boast of—of indeed such a thing ever happened before or will happen again.'

'It was reserved for you,' remarked Coleraine, innocently, 'the very one individual who knows how properly to appreciate it.'

Saint-Aubyn himself could hardly repress a start at the directness with which these few carelessly spoken words chimed in with the train of thought presented to his mind by what he had seen and heard. Mr. Berrill looked sharply round at Coleraine, as a man might who imagines something of importance has been said which he has not heard aright.

'What?' asked he, in a lower tone than in which he had been speaking for some time.

'It is a sort of providential thing, I say,' explained Coleraine, with a laugh, 'that this completely unique and unparalleled experience should fall to your lot, seeing that you know so well how to relish the humor of it—which is what few would be equal to.'

'You think so, eh?' still looking at him with rather closer attention; then turning suddenly to Saint-Aubyn, he continued, in his former manner of hearty good humor, 'It is quite true.—Very few would relish the humor of your joke—I did not at first, I can assure you; but now I like the fancy, and it will be a joke to me for the rest of my days, and will be, no doubt, to whomsoever it is recounted. Good things become immortal. But *adieu!* we will celebrate our meeting to-night—indeed, I would not have separated from you without doing so for a thousand pounds. I have some passable claret, of which I must have your opinion.'

They had arrived at a house of fashionable exterior in the vicinity of Hyde Park. Mr. Berrill ushered them in, and in a handsomely furnished apartment they found supper already prepared.

'Be seated,' exclaimed the host. 'Make yourselves quite at home, pray. But about that skull! It smells rather earthy. I should prefer to have it placed in another room if you have no objection.'

'Certainly, here it is,' said Saint-Aubyn, drawing it with some difficulty from his pocket.

'Robert,' cried Mr. Berrill, 'carry that into the study, and place it carefully on the table.'

The footman, with much surprise, received the unsavory relic, and bore it off.

'Dead men make a stir in the world, now and then,' said Saint-Aubyn rather amorously, for ere the remark was half-uttered he bethought himself that possibly it might be dangerous.

'Ha!' said Mr. Berrill. 'We are all liable to fancies, eh, Mr. Saint-Aubyn? We make ourselves and other people the victims of our flights. I have been your victim to-night, eh?'

'And now the dead man, banished from the supper-table and from pleasant company, is yours. Who will be his, I wonder?' returned Saint-Aubyn, with something like a flash of his accustomed smile. 'But, alas! we shall have no more flights of fancy from him, poor fellow; he is past all that—serious and sad for ever.'

'Sad as an empty bottle,' said Virian.

'Aye, aye; joke away!' cried Mr. Berrill, 'but supper waits, and we had best set to.'

'The ladies!' ejaculated Virian.

'I doubt whether they will join us,' said Mr. Berrill; 'but we will see. Robert, send Anne to inquire if Mrs. Berrill is ready for supper.—Mr. Saint-Aubyn, come here. You, who have done me a mischief, shall sit at my right hand; it is always my desire to set a good example.—Ah, ha! But hark to the siffen rustle. Here comes our ladies.'

At this moment Mrs. Berrill and her daughter entered the room, bowed with easy politeness to the strangers, and instantly took their seats at a table. The conversation now, of course, assumed a different character. The mistress of the house had much to say respecting the performances of the evening, and upon this theme there was much pleasant and animated talking—the great musicians, singers, actors, dancers, and theatres of the world, affording abundant material for gossip and criticism. Mrs. Berrill was very lady-like and complaisant, Miss Berrill very beautiful, and Mr. Berrill hearty and hilarious. After a pleasant half-hour supper was concluded, the ladies withdrew, and the gentlemen were by themselves again. The claret was pronounced excellent, and the host took care that it should not be wanting. It was some time past three o'clock in the morning when this curiously-met party broke up; when they did so, all were in a very merry and good-humored condition, and Virian and Coleraine, after shaking hands with their host and bidding him good-night for the sixth or seventh time, meandered solemnly into the back parlor instead of into the street. As the footman returned the skull to Saint-Aubyn, and whilst the latter was replacing it in his much-abused pocket, Mr. Berrill observed, 'I asked if you would part with that just now. I felt a strong desire to possess it and keep it as a curiosity; but my second thoughts have taken another turn. I wouldn't have the ghastly, frightful, horrible thing in the house. It would make a complete

hypocondriac of me. Return it to its proper resting-place, the tomb, I entreat you; it is mere morbid wantonness, an insult to the dead, and an offence to the living, to carry it about with you and parade it where people assemble for enjoyment. Where did you get it?'

A congenial friend forwarded it from the country, a few days ago,' said Saint-Aubyn, laughing, as if amused at the repugnance which had just been so severely expressed.

'From the country—what part may I ask?' inquired Mr. Berrill.

'He lives in Gloucestershire, but where he found the bald pate I don't exactly know. I'll write and ask.'

'Nonsense, nonsense; send it back to him, and bid him restore it to its proper home, the churchyard. Well,' continued he, resuming his gaiety, when within the last minute or two had given place to a severe and irascible manner, which, however, appeared more natural to him, 'good-night! We shall meet again, for I don't feel inclined to allow an acquaintance commenced in such marvellous fashion to drop. *Adieu!* I shall search you out, and make a descent on your tub, young Diogenes; I have your card, and so am not promising more than I can perform. *Adieu!*'

When Virian, Coleraine, and Burgess called upon Saint-Aubyn the next day, some time after noon, they found him lounging over his chocolate, apparently in a contemplative mood. On the table by his side was the dumb, unconscious 'lion' of the preceding night.

'There is something about the adventure we met with last night that I cannot comprehend,' said he, after an interchange of remarks and jokes upon the unexpected manner in which their evening's enjoyment had been brought to a termination. Then, holding the skull for the inspection of his companions, he directed their attention to a small jagged hole on the back of the head, from which various minute cracks radiated, as if the perforation had been effected by the crashing blow of a bullet. 'Is it not strange,' said he, 'that in a merely momentary view of this piece of *manus*, this hole, above all the other strong features of it, should attract a person's observation. Even I did not know there was such a distinguishing mark upon it, till a few random words induced me to examine it more curiously than I had previously done.'

Coleraine and Burgess both agreed that it appeared strange, but evinced a decided distaste to entering into any contemplation of the matter, while Virian, with strong disgust, counselled Saint-Aubyn to throw the heastly thing away; it had caused annoyance enough already, though he was by no means sorry, altogether, for the turn which matters had taken under its auspices.

'There is a mystery here, depend upon it,' persisted Saint-Aubyn, with the strong relish of a romancer. 'My curiosity has never been so strangely excited as by the adventure of last night. A skull with a hole in it,' said he, immediately after he had recovered his panic, though he seemed perturbed enough then. Mark my words: we shall hear something more of this.'

Here, without keeping the reader waiting a second, an interval of four years is passed over. During that period, Burgess and Coleraine have remained at Bath, with the exception of occasional continental trips of two or three months at a time; Virian had taken up his residence in London, wooed and won the beautiful Miss Berrill, and became a happy husband and father; and Saint-Aubyn has consistently kept himself to himself, eccentric and original as ever. The latter, however, could not forget the adventure of the Rubini night at the opera; suspicion haunted his mind; and though Mr. Berrill had called upon him many times, and appeared anxious to cultivate his acquaintance, he never could endure the idea of reckoning him among his friends. He was one of that class of characters who cannot simulate. His behaviour always testified how he thought or felt. He had conceived a deep distrust and dislike of Mr. Berrill—believed him, in his inmost mind, to have committed some crime, or to have had some connection with crime—as being a hypocrite haunted by qualms and fears, and constantly assuming an air of piety and bravado to set suspicion and detection at bay; and so believing, shunned and repelled his advances with all the force of his odd, sarcastic nature. Mr. Berrill bore this for a time, twitted him upon his peculiarities, his spleen, his unsociability—called him a rough diamond, the modern Diogenes, the Japanese Prince; but at last, fairly tired out, humiliated, and irritated, he bade him adieu as an ill-conditioned fellow, unendurable, and undeserving of friendship. The connection with his ingenuous and light-hearted friend Virian had formed with the Berrills excited a sort of horror in the mind of Saint-Aubyn. He never saw Virian, with his charming young wife and his promising little boy, without a sudden sensation