

A Queer Cicerone

By Bernard Capes

I had paid my sixpence at the little informal 'box-office,' and received in exchange my printed permit to visit the Castle. It was one of those lordly 'show places' whose owners take a plain business view of the attractions at their disposal, while ostensibly exploiting them on behalf of this or that charity. How the exclusive spirits of old, represented on their walls in the numerous pictured forms they once inhabited, regard this converting of their pride and panoply to practical ends, is a matter for their descendants to judge; but no doubt the most of them owed, and still owe, a debt to humanity, any liquidation of which in terms of charity would be enough to reconcile them to the indignity of being regarded like a waxworks. For my part, I am free to confess that, did I see any profit in an ancestor, I should apply it unequivocally to the charity that begins at home.

I discovered, when I entered, quite a little party waiting to be personally conducted round the rooms. Obviously trippers of the most commonplace type (and what was I better?), they stood herded together in a sort of gelid ante-chamber, pending the arrival of the housekeeper who was to act as cicerone. A hovering menial, in the nature of a commissionaire, had just disappeared in quest of the errant lady, and for the moment we were left unshepherded.

Assuming the nonchalant air of a chance visitor of distinction to whom palaces were familiar, I casually, while sauntering aloof from it, took the measure of my company. It was not in the least unusual or interesting. It comprised a couple of rather sickly 'gents' of the haberdashery type; two flat ladies in pince-nez, patently in search of culture and instruction; a huge German tourist, all bush and spectacles, with a mighty sandwich-box slung over his shoulder, and a voice of guttural ferocity; an ample but diffident matron, accompanied by a small youth in clumping boots and a new ready-made Norfolk suit a size too large for him, and, finally, a pair of tittering hobble-skirted young ladies, of the class that parades pavements arm-in-arm. All whispered in their separate groups, each suspicious of the other, but with voices universally hushed to the sacred solemnity of the occasion. Only the German showed a disposition to truculent neighbourliness, proffering some advances to the hobble-skirted damsels, which were first haughtily, and then gigglingly, ignored. Whereat the flat ladies, though intellectually addicted to his race, showed their sense of his unflattering preference by turning their back on him.

The room in which we were delayed was the first of a suite, and very chill and melancholy in its few appointments. There were some arms, I remember, on the walls, and a sprinkling of antlers—of all mural decorations the most petrifyingly depressing. They offered no scope to my assumption of critical ease, and—conscious of an inquisition, a little derisive, I thought, in its quality, on the part of the company—I was gravitating towards the general group, when we were all galvanized into animation by hearing the sound of a light, quick footfall approaching us from the direction of the room we were about to traverse. It tripped on, awakening innumerable small echoes in its advance, and suddenly materialized before us in the form of a very elegant gentleman, of young middle-age and distinguished appearance.

'Permit me,' he said, halting, hand on heart, with an inimitable bow. 'I make it my pleasure to represent for the nonce the admirable but unctuous Mrs Somerset, our valued housekeeper, who is unfortunately indisposed for the moment.'

I could flatter myself at least that my manner had so far impressed the party as to cause it to constitute me by mute agreement its spokesman. I accepted, as they all looked towards me, the compliment for what it implied, though with a certain stiffness which was due as much to surprise as to embarrassment. For surely courtesy, in the person of this distinguished stranger, was taking a course as unusual as the clothes he inhabited were strange. They consisted of a dark blue, swallow-tailed coat, with a high velvet collar and brass buttons, a voluminous stock, a buff waistcoat, and mouse-coloured tights, having a bunch of seals pendent from their fob and ending in smart pumps. His hair, ample and dusty golden, was brushed high from his forehead in a sort of ordered mane; the face underneath was an ironically handsome one, but so startlingly pale that the blue eyes fixed in it suggested nothing so much as the 'antique jewels set in Parian marble stone' of a once famous poem. He bowed again, and to me, accepting the general verdict.

'It is most good of you,' I said. 'Of course, if we had known, if we had had any idea—'

He interrupted me, I thought, with a little impatience:

'Not at all. It is, as I informed you, a pleasure—a rare opportunity. I fancy I may promise you a fuller approximation to the truth, regarding certain of our family traditions, than you would ever be likely to attain through the lips of the meritorious but diplomatic Somerset.'

He turned, inviting us, with an incomparable gesture, into the next room. He was certainly an anachronism, a marvel; yet I was willing to admit to myself that eccentrics, sartorial and otherwise, were not confined to the inner circle of society. As to the others, I perceived that they were self-defensively prepared to accept this oddity as part of the mysterious ritual appertaining to the sacred obscurities of the life patrician.

'The first two rooms,' said our guide, halting us on the threshold, are, as you will perceive, appropriated to family portraits. The little furniture that remains is inconsiderable and baroque. It is what survives from the time of the fourth marquis. We observe his portrait here' (he signified a canvas on the wall, representing a dull, arrogant-looking old gentleman in an embroidered coat and a bob-wig), 'and can readily associate with it the tasteless ostentation which characterized his reign. He was really what we should call now a complete aristocratic bounder.'

His tone suggested a mixture of flippancy and malice, which was none the less emphatic because his voice was a peculiarly soft and secret one. Somehow, hearing it, I thought of slanders sniggered from behind a covering hand. The young ladies tittered, as if a little shamefaced and uneasy, drawing his attention to them. He was obviously attracted at once. Their smart modernity, piquant in its way, proved a charm to him that he made no pretence of discounting. He addressed himself instantly to the two:

'Sacred truth, ladies, upon my honour. He was a "throw-back," as we say of dogs. The mark of the prosperous cheesemonger was all over him.'

'Ach!' said the German, vibrantly asserting himself, 'a dror-back? Vot is dart?'

'A Teutonic reaction,' said the stranger, taking the speaker's measure insolently, with his chin a little lifted, and his eyes narrowed; 'or rather a recrudescence of barbarism in a race or line that has emerged from it. Your countrymen, from what I hear, should afford many illustrations of the process.'

The flat ladies exchanged a little scornful laugh, which they repeated less disguisedly as the German responded: 'I do not ondorrstand.'

The common little boy, holding to his mother's skirts, urged her on to the next picture, a full-length portrait of a grim Elizabethan warrior in armour.

'Look at his long sword, mother!' he whispered.

'He didn't wear corsets—not much,' said one of the haberdashery youths facetiously, in an audible voice to the other; and the nearest spinster, with a sidelong stare of indignation at him, edged away.

'A crusader?' said the second flat lady, as if putting it to herself. 'I wonder, now.'

The stranger smiled ironically to the hobble-skirts, one of whom was emboldened to ask him:

'Was he one of the family, sir?'

'By Heraldry out of Wardour Street,' answered our guide. 'Very dark horses, both of them.' And then he added, going a few steps: 'You do us too much honour, sweet charmer—positively you do.' He tapped the portrait of a ponderous patrician: 'The first marquis,' he said, 'created in 1784 out of nothing. The King represented the Almighty in that stupendous achievement. God save the King!'

'Let's go, mother,' whispered the small common boy, pressing suddenly against the ample skirts. 'I don't like it.'

'Hush, 'Enery dear,' she returned, in a whispered panic. 'There ain't nothing to be afraid of.'

'Wasn't there none of you before that, sir?' asked the second haberdashery youth.

The stranger sniggered.

'I'll let you all into a little secret,' he said confidently. 'The antiquity of the family, despite our ingenious Mrs Somerset, is mere hocus-pocus. The first marquis's grandfather was a Huntingdonshire dairy-farmer, who amassed a considerable fortune over cheeses. He came to London, speculated in South Sea stock, and sold out at top prices just before the crash. We don't like it talked about, you know; but it was his grandson who was the real founder of the house. He was in the Newcastle administration of '57, and was ennobled for the owlish part he took in opposing the reconquest of India under Clive. And, after that, the more fatheaded he became, the higher they foisted him to get him out of the way. Fact, I assure you. Our crest should be by rights a Stilton rampant, our arms a cheese-scoop, silver on a trencher powdered mites, and our motto, in your own admirable vernacular, "Ain't I the cheese!"'

The young ladies tittered, sharing a little protesting wriggle between him. Then one urged the other, who responded *solo voce*: 'Ask him yourself, stupid.'

'Charmed,' said the stranger. 'Those roguish lips have only to command.'

'We only wanted to know,' said number two blushfully, 'which is the wicked lord—don't push so, Dolly!'

'Ah!' The stranger showed his teeth in a stiffly creased smile, and shook a long forefinger remonstrantly at the speaker. 'You have been studying that outrageous guide-book, I perceive. What is the passage— eh? "Reputed to have been painted by a mysterious travelling artist of sinister appearance, who, being invited in one night to play with his lordship, subsequently liquidated the debt he incurred by painting his host's portrait."'

He turned on his heel and pointed into the next room. Full in our view opposite the door appeared a glazed frame, but black and empty in seeming—an effect I supposed to be due to the refraction of light upon its surface.

'A most calumniated individual,' he protested, wheeling round again. 'There is his place; we shall come to it presently; but only, I regret, to find it vacant. A matter of restoration, you see, and much to be deplored at the moment. I should have liked to challenge your verdict, face to face with him. These libels die hard—and when given the authority of a guide-book! Take my word for it, he was a most estimable creature, morally worth dozens of the sanctimonious humbugs glorified in the Somerset hagiology. Pah! I am weary, I tell you, of hearing their false virtues extolled. But wait a minute, and you shall learn. The "wicked lord," young misses? And

so he is the flattered siderite of your regard. Well, it is well to be sought by such eyes on any count; but I think his would win your leniency Only excess of love proved his undoing; and I am sure you would not consider that a crime.'

We were all struck a little dumb, I think, by this outburst. The two girls had linked together again, both silent and somewhat white; the gaunt spinsters, rigid and upright, exchanged petrified glances; the fat woman was mopping her face, a tremulous sigh fluttering the hem of her handkerchief; the two young shopmen dwelt slack-jawed; even the German tourist, glaring through his spectacles, shook a little in his breathing, as if a sudden asthma had caught him. But our host, as though unconscious of the effect he had produced, motioned us on smilingly; and so, mechanically obeying, we paused at the next canvas—the uncompleted full-length of a beautiful young woman with haunting eyes.

'The Lady Betty,' he said, 'as she sat for "Innocence" to Schleimhitz. The portrait was only finished, as you see, as far as the waist. He was a slow worker, and not good at drapery.'

The German cleared his throat, and pushing his way past the flat ladies (I thought for the moment one was near furiously hooking at him with her umbrella), glanced with an air of amorous appropriation at the hobble-skirts, and spoke:

'Schleimhitz wass fery goot at drapery. There wass a reason berhaps—'

'Ah—tut—tut!' exclaimed the stranger, with a little hurried smile; and led us on.

'Portrait,' he said, 'by Gainsborough, of a boy—unidentified. There was a story of his having been mislaid by his father, the second marquis, on the occasion of that gentleman's first marriage, and never discovered again.'

'Poor little chap,' murmured one of the hobble-skirts. 'I wonder what became of him? Isn't he pretty?'

'An ancestress,' said our cicerone, at the next canvas, 'who married an actor. He played first gentleman on the stage, and first cad off it. I believe he broke her heart—or her spirit; I forget which. She kept them both in one decanter.' He sniggered round at the two girls. 'No, 'pon honour,' he said, 'I vow to the truth of it. You must trust me above Mrs Somerset.'

'A collateral branch this,' he said, passing on. 'He buried three wives, who lie and whisper together in the family vault. He himself was buried, by his own direction, at sea. They say the coffin hissed as it touched the water.'

The little common boy suddenly began to cry loudly.

'I'm frightened, mother!' he wailed. 'Take me away'

The stranger, bending to look for him, made as if to claw through the group. I saw a most diabolical expression on his face.

'Ah!' he said, 'I'll have you yet!'

The child screamed violently, and beat in frantic terror against his mother. I interposed, an odd damp on my forehead.

'Look here,' I said; 'leave the boy alone, will you?'

They were all backing, startled and scared, when there came a hurried, loud step into the room from behind us, and we turned in a panic huddle. It was the commissionaire, very flustered and irate.

'Now, then, you know,' he said, 'you'd no right to take it upon yourselves to go round like this unattended.'

'Pardon me,' I said, resuming my charge of spokesman; 'we did nothing of the sort. This gentleman offered himself to escort us.'

I turned, as did all the others, and my voice died in my throat. There was no gentleman at all—the room was empty. As I stood stupidly staring, I was conscious of the voice of the commissionaire, aggrieved, expostulatory, but with a curious note of distress in it:

‘What gentleman? There’s nobody has the right but Mrs Somerset, and she’s ill—she’s had a stroke. We’ve just found her in her room, with a face like the horrors on her.’

Suddenly one of the women shrieked hysterically: ‘O look! He’s there! O come away!’

And, as she screamed, I saw. The empty picture frame in the next room was empty no longer. It was filled by the form of him, handsome and smiling, he who had just been conducting us round the walls.

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