

## *Great Men’s Sons*

BOOTH TARKINGTON

ME. BERNHARDT and M. Coquelin were playing “L’Aiglon.” Toward the end of the second act people began to slide down in their seats, shift their elbows, or casually rub their eyes; by the close of the third, most of the taller gentlemen were sitting on the small of their backs with their knees as high as decorum permitted, and many were openly coughing; but when the fourth came to an end, active resistance ceased, hopelessness prevailed, the attitudes were those of the stricken field, and the over-crowded house was like a college chapel during an interminable compulsory lecture. Here and there—but most rarely—one saw an eager woman with bright eyes, head bent forward and body spellbound, still enchantedly following the course of the play. Between the acts the orchestra pattered ragtime and inanities from the new comic operas, while the audience in general took some heart. When the play was over, we were all enthusiastic; though our admiration, however vehement in the words employed to express it, was somewhat subdued as to the accompanying manner, which consisted, mainly, of sighs and resigned murmurs. In the lobby a thin old man with a grizzled chin-beard dropped his hand lightly on my shoulder, and greeted me in a tone of plaintive inquiry:

“Well, son?”

Turning, I recognized a patron of my early youth, in whose woodshed I had smoked my first cigar, an old friend whom I had not seen for years; and to find him there, with his long, dust-coloured coat, his black string tie and rusty hat, brushed on every side by opera cloaks and feathers, was a rich surprise, warming the cockles of my heart. His name is Tom Martin; he lives in a small country town, where he commands the trade in Dry Goods and Men’s Clothing; his speech is pitched in a high key, is very slow, sometimes whines faintly; and he always calls me “Son.”

“What in the world!” I exclaimed, as we shook hands.

“Well,” he drawled, “I dunno why I shouldn’t be as meetropolitan as anybody. I come over on the afternoon

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accommodation for the show. Let's you and me make a night of it. What say, son?"

"What did you think of the play?" I asked, as we turned up the street toward the club.

"I think they done it about as well as they could."

"That all?"

"Well," he rejoined with solemnity, "there was a heap *of* it, wasn't there!"

We talked of other things, then, until such time as we found ourselves seated by a small table at the club, old Tom somewhat uneasily regarding a twisted cigar he was smoking and plainly confounded by the "carbonated" syphon, for which, indeed, he had no use in the world. We had been joined by little Fiderson, the youngest member of the club, whose whole nervous person jerkily sparkled "L'Aiglon" enthusiasm.

"Such an evening!" he cried, in his little spiky voice. "Mr. Martin, it does one good to realize that our country towns are sending representatives to us when we have such things; that they wish to get in touch with what is greatest in Art. They should do it often. To think that a journey of only seventy miles brings into your life the magnificence of Rostand's point of view made living fire by the genius of a Bernhardt and a Coquelin!"

"Yes," said Mr. Martin, with a curious helplessness, after an ensuing pause, which I refused to break, "yes, sir, they seemed to be doing it about as well as they could."

Fiderson gasped slightly. "It was magnificent! Those two great artists! But over all the play—the play! Romance new-born; poesy marching with victorious banners; a great spirit breathing! Like 'Cyrano'—the birth-mark of immortality on this work!"

There was another pause, after which old Tom turned slowly to me, and said: "Homer Tibbs's opened up a cigar-stand at the deepo. Carries a line of candy, magazines, and fruit, too. Home's a hustler."

Fiderson passed his hand through his hair.

"That death scene!" he exclaimed at me, giving Martin up as a log accidentally rolled in from the woods. "I thought that after 'Wagram' I could feel nothing more; emotion was exhausted; but then came that magnificent death! It was tragedy

made ecstatic; pathos made into music; the grandeur of a gentle spirit, conquered physically but morally unconquerable! Goethe's 'More Light' outshone!"

Old Tom's eyes followed the smoke of his perplexing cigar along its heavy strata in the still air of the room, as he inquired if I remembered Orlando T. Bickner's boy, Mel. I had never heard of him, and said so.

"No, I expect not," rejoined Martin. "Prob'ly you wouldn't; Bickner was governor along in *my* early days, and I reckon he ain't hardly more than jest a name to you two. But *we* kind of thought he was the biggest man this country had ever seen, or was goin' to see, and he *was* a big man. He made one president, and could have been it himself, instead, if he'd be'n willing to do a kind of underhand trick, but I expect without it he was about as big a man as anybody'd care to be; governor, senator, secretary of state—and just owned his party! And, my law!—the whole earth bowin' down to him; torchlight processions and sky-rockets when he come home in the night; bands and cannon if his train got in, daytime; home-folks so proud of him they couldn't see; everybody's hat off; and all the most important men in the country following at his heels—a country, too, that'd put up consider'ble of a comparison with everything Napoleon had when he'd licked 'em all, over there.

"Of course he had enemies, and, of course, year by year, they got to be more of 'em, and they finally downed him for good; and like other public men so fixed, he didn't live long after that. He had a son, Melville, mighty likable young fellow, studyin' law when his paw died. I was livin' in their town then, and I knowed Mel Bickner pretty well; he was consider'ble of a man.

"I don't know as I ever heard him speak of that's bein' the reason, but I expect it may've be'n partly in the hope of carryin' out some of his paw's notions, Mel tried hard to git into politics; but the old man's local enemies jumped on every move he made, and his friends wouldn't help any; you can't tell why, except that it generally *is* thataway. Folks always like to laugh at a great man's son and say *he* can't amount to anything. Of course that comes partly from fellows like that ornery little cuss we saw to-night, thinkin' they're a good deal because somebody else done something, and the somebody else happened

to be their paw; and the women run after 'em, and they git low-down like he was, and so on."

"Mr. Martin," interrupted Fiderson, with indignation, "will you kindly inform me in what way 'L'Aiglon' was 'low-down?'"

"Well, sir, didn't that huntin'-lodge appointment kind of put you in mind of a camp-meetin' scandal?" returned old Tom quietly. "It did me."

"But—"

"Well, sir, I can't say as I understood the French of it, but I read the book in English before I come up, and it seemed to me he was pretty much of a low-down boy; yet I wanted to see how they'd make him out; hearin' it was thought, the country over, to be such a great *play*; though to tell the truth all I could tell about *that* was that every line seemed to end in 'awze'; and 't they all talked in rhyme, and it did strike me as kind of enervatin' to be expected to believe that people could keep it up that long; and that it wasn't only the boy that never quit on the subject of himself and his folks, but pretty near any of 'em, if he'd git the chanst, did the same thing, so't almost I sort of wondered if Rostand wasn't that kind."

"Go on with Melville Bickner," said I.

"What do you expect," retorted Mr. Martin with a vindictive gleam in his eye, "when you give a man one of these here spiral staircase cigars? Old Peter himself couldn't keep straight along one subject if he tackled a cigar like this. Well, sir, I always thought Mel had a mighty mean time of it. He had to take care of his mother and two sisters, his little brother and an aunt that lived with them; and there was mighty little to do it on; big men don't usually leave much but debts, and in this country, of course, a man can't eat and spend long on his paw's reputation, like that little Dook of Reishtod—"

"I beg to tell you, Mr. Martin—" Fiderson began hotly.

Martin waved his bony hand soothingly.

"Oh, I know; they was money in his mother's family, and they give him his vit'als and clothes, and plenty, too. *His* paw didn't leave much either—though he'd stole more than Boss Tweed. I suppose—and, just lookin' at things from the point of what they'd *earned*, his maw's folks had stole a good deal, too; or else you can say they were a kind of public charity; old Metternich, by what I can learn, bein' the only one in the

whole possetucky of 'em that really *did* anything to deserve his salary—" Mr. Martin broke off suddenly, observing that I was about to speak, and continued:

"Mel didn't git much law practice, jest about enough to keep the house goin' and pay taxes. He kept workin' for the party jest the same and jest as cheerfully as if it didn't turn him down hard every time he tried to git anything for himself. They lived some ways out from town; and he sold the horses to keep the little brother in school, one winter, and used to walk in to his office and out again, twice a day, over the worst roads in the State, rain or shine, snow, sleet, or wind, without any overcoat; and he got kind of a skimpy, froze-up look to him that lasted clean through summer. He worked like a mule, that boy did, jest barely makin' ends meet. He had to quit runnin' with the girls and goin' to parties and everything like that; and I expect it may have been some hard to do; for if they ever *was* a boy loved to dance and be gay, and up to anything in the line of fun and junketin' round, it was Mel Bickner. He had a laugh I can hear yet—made you feel friendly to everybody you saw; feel like stoppin' the next man you met and shakin' hands and havin' a joke with him.

"Mel was engaged to Jane Grandis when Governor Bickner died. He had to go and tell her to take somebody else—it was the only thing to do. He couldn't give Jane anything but his poverty, and she wasn't used to it. They say she offered to come to him anyway, but he wouldn't hear of it, and no more would he let her wait for him; told her she mustn't grow into an old maid, lonely, and still waitin' for the lightning to strike him—that is, his luck to come; and actually advised her to take 'Gene Callender, who'd be'n pressin' pretty close to Mel for her before the engagement. The boy didn't talk to her this way with tears in his eyes and mourning and groaning. No, sir! It was done *cheerful*; and so much so that Jane never *was* quite sure *afterwards* whether Mel wasn't kind of glad to git rid of her or not. Fact is, they say she quit speakin' to him. Mel *knowed*; a state of puzzlement or even a good *mad's* a mighty sight better than bein' all harrowed up and grief-stricken. And he never give her—nor any one else—a chanst to be sorry for him. His maw was the only one heard him walk the floor nights, and after he found out she could hear him he walked in his socks.

“Yes, sir! Meet that boy on the street, or go up in his office, you’d think that he was the gayest feller in town. I tell you there wasn’t anything pathetic about Mel Bickner! He didn’t believe in it. And at home he had a funny story every evening of the world, about something ’d happened during the day; and ’d whistle to the guitar, or git his maw into a game of cards with his aunt and the girls. La! that boy didn’t believe in no house of mourning. He’d be up at four in the morning, hoein’ up their old garden; raised garden-truck for their table, sparrow-grass and sweet corn—yes, and roses, too; always had the house full of roses in June-time; never *was* a house sweeter-smellin’ to go into.

“Mel was what I call a useful citizen. As I said, I knowed him well. I don’t recollect I ever heard him speak of himself, nor yet of his father but once—for *that*, I reckon, he jest couldn’t; and for himself; I don’t believe it ever occurred to him.

“And he was a *smart* boy. Now, you take it, all in all, a boy can’t be as smart as Mel was, and work as hard as he did, and not *git* somewhere—in this State, anyway! And so, about the fifth year, things took a sudden change for him; his father’s enemies and his own friends, both, had to jest about own they was beat. The crowd that had been running the conventions and keepin’ their own men in all the offices, had got to be pretty unpopular, and they had the sense to see that they’d have to branch out and connect up with some mighty good men, jest to keep the party in power. Well, sir, Mel had got to be about the most popular and respected man in the county. Then one day I met him on the street; he was on his way to buy an overcoat, and he was lookin’ skimpier and more froze-up and genialer than ever. It was March, and up to jest that time things had be’n hardest of all for Mel. I walked around to the store with him, and he was mighty happy; goin’ to send his mother north in the summer, and the girls were goin’ to have a party, and Bob, his little brother, could go to the best school in the country in the fall. Things had come his way at last, and that very morning the crowd had called him in and told him they were goin’ to run him for county clerk.

“Well, sir, the next evening I heard Mel was sick. Seein’ him only the day before on the street, out and well, I didn’t think anything of it—thought prob’ly a cold or something like that;

but in the morning I heard the doctor said he was likely to die. Of course I couldn't hardly believe it; thing like that never *does* seem possible, but they all said it was true, and there wasn't anybody on the street that day that didn't look blue or talked about anything else. Nobody seemed to know what was the matter with him exactly, and I reckon the doctor did jest the wrong thing for it. Near as I can make out, it was what they call appendicitis nowadays, and had come on him in the night.

"Along in the afternoon I went out there to see if there was anything I could do. You know what a house in that condition is like. Old Fes Bainbridge, who was some sort of a relation, and me sat on the stairs together outside Mel's room. We could hear his voice, clear and strong and hearty as ever. He was out of pain; and he had to die with the full flush of health and strength on him, and he knowed it. Not *wantin'* to go, through the waste and wear of a long sickness, but with all the ties of life clinchin' him here, and success jest comin.' We heard him speak of us, amongst others, old Fes and me; wanted 'em to be sure not fergit to tell me to remember to vote fer Fillmore if the ground-hog saw his shadow election year, which was an old joke I always had with him. He was awful worried about his mother, though he tried not to show it, and when the minister wanted to pray fer him, we heard him say, 'No, sir, you pray fer my mamma!' That was the only thing that was different from his usual way of speakin'; he called his mother 'mamma,' and he wouldn't let 'em pray fer him neither; not once; all the time he could spare for their prayin' was put in fer her.

"He called in old Fes to tell him all about his life insurance. He'd carried a heavy load of it, and it was all paid up; and the sweat it must have took to do it you'd hardly like to think about. He give directions about everything as careful and painstaking as any day of his life. He asked to speak to Fes alone a minute, and later I helped Fes do what he told him. 'Cousin Fes,' he says, 'it's bad weather, but I expect mother'll want all the flowers taken out to the cemetery and you better let her have her way. But there wouldn't be any good of their stayin' there; snowed on, like as not. I wish you'd wait till after she's come away, and git a wagon and take 'em in to the hospital. You can fix up the anchors and so forth so they won't look like funeral flowers.'

“About an hour later his mother broke out with a scream, sobbin’ and cryin’, and he tried to quiet her by tellin’ over one of their old-time family funny stories; it made her worse, so he quit. ‘Oh, Mel,’ she says, ‘you’ll be with your father—’

“I don’t know as Mel had much of a belief in a hereafter; certainly he wasn’t a great church-goer. ‘Well,’ he says, mighty slow, but hearty and smiling, too, ‘if I see father, I—guess—I’ll—be—pretty—well—fixed!’ Then he jest lay still, tryin’ to quiet her and pettin’ her head. And so—that’s the way he went.”

Fiderson made one of his impatient little gestures, but Mr. Martin drowned his first words with a loud fit of coughing.

“Well, sir,” he observed, “I read that ‘Leglong’ book down home; and I heard two or three countries, and especially ourn, had gone middling crazy over it; it seemed kind of funny that *we* should, too, so I thought I better come up and see it for myself, how it *was*, on the stage, where you could *look* at it; and—I expect they done it as well as they could. But when that little boy, that’d always had his board and clothes and education free, saw that he’d jest about talked himself to death, and called for the press notices about his christening to be read to him to soothe his last spasms—why, I wasn’t overly put in mind of Melville Bickner.”

Mr. Martin’s train left for Plattsville at two in the morning. Little Fiderson and I escorted him to the station. As the old fellow waved us good-bye from within the gates, Fiderson turned and said:

“Just the type of sodden-headed old pioneer that you couldn’t hope to make understand a beautiful thing like ‘L’Aiglon’ in a thousand years. I thought it better not to try, didn’t you?”