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The Patriot & Union.

THURSDAY MORNING, OCT. 25, 1860. A PRACTICAL JOKE.

I have heard it said that "all the world and his wife" were in London in 1851 to see the Crystal Palace; of course I was there, and, after spending most of my mornings in the wonderful structure, systematically examining, catalogue in hand, one thing at a time.

The family physician, who was spending the afternoon with the Mortons, also witnessed the caning, and, no doubt, seeing the astonishment depicted upon my face, referred to the subject a day or two afterward as we were driving to town together, assuring me that I would not wonder at Mr. Morton's horror of practical jokes if I knew the great family affliction which was brought about by one in the very house in which they were then living.

"Although it is a sad story," said he "I will relate the circumstances if you would like to hear them." As I confessed my interest, and hoped that the narration would not be too painful, he began:

"You may have noticed that although you have been shown through the rest of the house, there is one room which is kept carefully locked, and no direct reference is made to it. It is said that at least once every year a goblin, or ghost, or whatever you might choose to call it, makes its appearance there in shape even more ghastly than the conventional sheet; in short, it assumed the form of a human skeleton.

"Soon after leaving college, Lennox obtained an ensignship in the Indian army, and, after an affectionate parting, left England to join his regiment and accompany it in its short and disastrous campaign in Afghanistan. After the war, during which he was twice wounded, he would not say that he had appeared on the scene of his absence, and that, on his return, which would be in a few weeks, he would claim Lucy for a bride, she having by this time attained the age which the parents thought suitable. The whole household was delighted, both at George's safety and at his son's expected return, and perhaps, though less demonstrative, none felt more intense though calmer joy than Lucy, whose heart as well as prayers had followed George through all his perils.

"It is unnecessary to describe the meeting when George, somewhat named and formally unattached, returned from his campaign. Lucy, the dear girl, began her preparations for the wedding and George meanwhile took up his abode at Bellevue, as did also some other young friends of the family.

"With books, chess, fencing and more athletic sports, several days were spent most happily, till unfortunately one morning the conversation happened to turn on courage, and, in the course of the argument, one of the visitors, named Forbes, addressing George, said, with some appearance of warmth, that there were situations, as for instance, where supernatural sights and sounds were supposed, in which no man on earth could retain courage and coolness. Now, both these qualities George was known to possess to an eminent degree; indeed, on one occasion he had, single-handed, saved the regimental colors when in imminent danger of being captured; he smiled, therefore, as he said that, never having had the pleasure of meeting a ghost, he could not declare what he had done on the occasion; but, as he did not believe that disembodied spirits walked the earth, he had no doubt he would act upon the belief that some imposture was being practiced upon him, and would treat the ghost as he believed the appearance really was, in most if not in all cases, a person in disguise. Forbes, then, with some eagerness, asked him if he would pass a night in the haunted chamber; George replied that undoubtedly he would, and that moreover he would take a pistol on watch with him, and try the effect of a bullet on the phantom.

"Forbes told Stephen Morton of George's resolution, and asked his assistance in a project which he had in view. Morton replied, that as far as tradition went, any one might sleep in the haunted chamber with impunity, except on a certain night in November; but Forbes said his scheme was to disguise some person as the skeleton, and for this purpose he thought Stephen was well qualified, as he was tall and thin. Stephen had no objection in the world to play ghost, but said he had several reasons for not wishing to be a target for George, who was a dead shot—one of his objections being based on the decided unwholesomeness of lead when violently introduced into the system. But Forbes quieted his fears by declaring that of course the experiment should not be tried unless he could, unknown to George, extract the bullet from his pistol. It was therefore decided that Morton should be dressed in this black tights, which their amateur-theatrical wardrobe would provide, and should have the ribs and all the bones chalked or painted on this black surface, trusting to the dim light afforded by one candle, and also to the trepidation which it was promised George would experience to hide the imposture.

"Poor Morton was delighted, and was very much in favor of making a terrific speech, beginning with 'unhappy mortal,' or something to the same effect, and making his appearance in a flash of lightning, or at least of leopoldine. However, Forbes declaimed strongly against the likelihood of a skeleton speaking, for, as he forcibly put it, 'where would he keep his wind?' and thought it would be much more dignified for the phantom, after he was discovered, merely to move forward slowly, receive the supposed shot from George, and if the latter had neither yelled, run away, nor fainted—and one of these contingencies Forbes thought likely—then the imposture was to be acknowledged, those on the look out at the door would enter, and they would all enjoy a hearty laugh at their want of success.

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"Of course, as it was likely that a pistol would be fired in the house at or about midnight, it was necessary that all the family should know as much about the affair as George did, namely, that he had received and accepted a challenge to pass a night in the haunted chamber, the young man having been let into the secret. The manner in which George's resolution was communicated upon was characteristic; the father, who was a disbeliever in ghosts, said 'Consense,' in the most decided manner; the mother, more doubtful, said, 'I hope no harm will come of it;' while Lucy, who was startled at the proposal, seemed anxious; her English common sense, which told her that ghosts could not, or rather do not appear, struggling in her mind with tradition, which vouched for so many appearances of them; and, as upon retiring, she bade George 'Good-night,' perhaps she had a presentiment of evil, for her voice faltered, while she added with a forced smile, 'I also will keep watch in my room to hear the first news; take good care of yourself!'

"And now, George having selected one of a pair of pistols which Forbes had brought for the occasion, loaded it, at the same time drawing a hint or two about his skill with the weapon, and having again declared his intention to fire at an unusual object, he wished them 'pleasant dreams' laughingly, and closing the only door of the haunted room after him, he reconnoitered by looking under the bed and out of the window, which is at some distance from the ground, and then, to the dismay of the outsiders, who, in their stocking-feet, listened to the whispered report of one of their number, who was stationed at the key-hole, he placed his chair against the door and sat down there, effectually barring all entrance, without his knowledge, to anything bodily.

"The stocking-footed council was in consternation. Some of the mortals had already suggested giving it up as a bad job, and the only medical student in the party paused in handling the brush, although the skeleton had by no means his full complement of bones; but after some consideration, a ladder was proposed in connection with the window; the idea was approved, and two of the party booted and started for the gardener's ladder, which was silently raised against the window. By this time Morton had his bones anatomically depicted on his exterior, and all that remained was to wait until George dozed.

"As George had resolved to keep awake at least till midnight, he had taken a book; but as the hour approached, he laid the book aside, and handled the pistol. Presently he put that down, and began to consider the evidence corroborating the appearance of the spirits. He could not deny that there was a strong testimony in favor of the theory; but the thought that if a phantom had power to injure him, such a course would be contrary to justice, reassured him. Yet the stillness and a vague feeling of expectation were depressing, and it was with a feeling of relief when he heard the faintest sound of a door being unlocked. 'Now, then,' thought he, 'for something!' but as the 'witching hour' passed by and nothing happened, his only feeling was one of vexation that he should have volunteered to lose his rest, although it was some consolation to know that Lucy had promised to keep awake; this led him to another series of thoughts and to castle-building, until the welcome sight of George, nodding, was presented to the strained eyes, or rather eye, of the watcher, who immediately communicated the intelligence to the plotters, most of whom were by this time asleep in the most comfortable positions within the chair, the staircase, and the floor admitted of. After several starts and ineffectual attempts to keep awake, George let his head drop upon the table.

"The time for action having come, the skeleton climbed the ladder rather anxiously, crept in at the window, and cautiously approaching the table, substituted for the pistol lying upon it the other one of the pair, and which, of course, was minus a bullet. Having concealed the loaded pistol, and taken his position, all that remained was for George to be awakened. As Morton was considering about some ghostly means of doing this, he was saved the trouble by the dog which had followed him to the foot of the ladder, and which, becoming impatient at his absence, began to bark. At the first sound George started, saw the figure, passed his hands before his eyes, and, taking the object out more distinctly, he seized the pistol and started up, with the challenge: 'Who is there?' Although Morton was itching to make a speech, he remained silent, while George, speaking somewhat hurriedly, said: 'If you are human, I advise you to throw aside your disguise; for I will certainly fire at you; if not of this world, why, I'll have a shot at you at any rate!' Receiving no answer, he steadily took aim, saying, 'I will fire at the word "three," and I never miss my aim. One—two—three!' The pistol went off harmlessly, of course, but with a result upon George entirely unlooked for; being sure of his aim, he could not account for the figure being not only unharmed, but even now approaching him steadily; his feelings seemed wrought up to a frenzy, and almost as quick as thought he thrust his hand into the breast of his coat, drew a small pocket pistol, the existence of which no one had dreamed of, and before a word of warning could be spoken, he had fired it full at Morton, who fell dead at his feet!

"Meanwhile, the outsiders impatiently awaited the denouement; they heard George speak and then fire, and while they were hesitating about entering, they heard the second report, and their hearts sank at the sound; they rushed in, and found their worst fears realized. As they raised the body, one of them said: "'Poor Stephen!' 'Merciful God!' exclaimed George, 'my friend—her brother!' But I cannot describe the heart-rending scene—perhaps you can picture it to yourself."

"As my informant ceased at this point, I asked: "Forbes and Lennox," said he, "gave themselves up at once to the proper authorities; of course nothing could be done to them, although the former frantically declared, that, having been the instigator of the plot, he must suffer or he would go mad; and sure enough, he died in an insane asylum, after being tormented for several months by imaginary skeletons. The medical student is now the family physician. Lennox, of course, returned no more to the house; his leave of absence soon expiring, he rejoined his regiment, almost reckless of his life, which he lost in a tiger-hunt. Poor Lucy pined away and died of a broken heart—if ever there was an instance of the malady.

"Our host thus lost two friends, a brother and a sister. Do you wonder at his antipathy for practical jokes?"—Knickerbocker.

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CONVERSATIONAL POWERS.

The late William Hazlitt, a man gifted with great powers of observation and expression, was of opinion that actors and authors were not fitted, generally speaking, to shine in conversation. "Authors ought to be read and not heard," and as to actors they could not speak tragedies in the drawing-room, and their wit was likely to be comely and farce at second-hand. The biography of men of letters, in a great measure, confirms this opinion. Some of the greatest names in English and French literature, men who have filled books with an eloquence and truth that defy oblivion, were more mutes before their fellow-men. They had golden ingots, which, in the privacy of home, they could convert into coin bearing an impress that would insure universal currency; but they could not, on the spur of the moment, produce the farthings current in the market-place.

Descartes, the famous mathematician and philosopher; Lafontaine, celebrated for his witty fables; and Buffon, the great naturalist, were all singularly deficient in the powers of conversation. Marmontel, the novelist, was so dull in society that his friend said of him, after an interview, "I must go and read his tales to recompense myself for the weariness of hearing him."

As to Corneille, the greatest dramatist of France, he was completely lost in society—so absent and embarrassed that he wrote of himself, "I am witty, complete, important, but I was never eligible but through the mouth of another." "With an paper seems to be something widely different from that play of words in conversation, which, while it sparkles, dies; for Charles II, the wildest monarch that ever sat on the English throne, was so charmed with the humor of "Hudibras" that he caused himself to be introduced in the character of a private gentleman to Butler, its author. The witty king found the author a very dull companion; and was of opinion, with many others, that so stupid a fellow could never have written so clever a book. Addison, whose elegant elegance of style has long been considered the best model for young writers, was shy and absent in society, preserving, even before a single stranger, stiff and dignified silence. He was accustomed to say there could be no real conversation but between two persons, friends, and that it was then thinking aloud. Steel, Swift, Pope, and Congreve—men possessing literary and conversational powers of the highest order—allowed him to have been a delightful companion among intimates; and Young writes of him that "he was rather mute in society on some occasions, but when he began to be company he was full of vivacity, and was good at the attention of every one to him." Goldsmith, on the contrary, as described by his contemporary writers, appeared in company to have no spark of that genius which shone forth so brightly in his works. His address was awkward, his manner uncouth, his language unpolished; he hesitated in speaking, and was always unhappy if the conversation did not turn upon himself. Dr. Johnson spoke of him as an inspired idiot; yet the great essayist, though delivering oracles to those around him in pompous phrases, which were never less than a studied language, so as to chain the attention of every one to him." Goldsmith, on the contrary, as described by his contemporary writers, appeared in company to have no spark of that genius which shone forth so brightly in his works. His address was awkward, his manner uncouth, his language unpolished; he hesitated in speaking, and was always unhappy if the conversation did not turn upon himself. Dr. Johnson spoke of him as an inspired idiot; yet the great essayist, though delivering oracles to those around him in pompous phrases, which were never less than a studied language, so as to chain the attention of every one to him." Goldsmith, on the contrary, as described by his contemporary writers, appeared in company to have no spark of that genius which shone forth so brightly in his works. 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