The Fake's Progress.

THE STORY OF AN ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT.

By D. Donaldson.

WHEN first I met him he had just left the Academy. He had brains, and he did not lack friends to tell him so. He played the piano charmingly, with the natural facility that is worth all the practised expertness in the world. He was radiantly young. he knew no sorrow, and seemed always to live in the sun. His soul was transparent and responsive to every impulse for good or ill. He was full of enthusiasm, expansive and undirected; he was ready for anything, and did nothing.

I liked him, and he knew. He came to me when he thought he was ill, but was really down with Balzac's malady — the congestion of ideas. He had an extraordinary capacity for feeling, and no real experience to help him. He would play to me, at these times, anything I asked him. He forgot, or affected to forget, his aversions; he played Brahms as readily as he did Chopin, and took up the Beethoven sonatas without derisively crossing himself as he did on more public occasions. He complained, as boys will that Brahms was a bore and Beethoven a preacher; but I knew he really did not think so —for at this stage he was innocent of thought. He posed a good deal when others were watching him, but with me he was generally natural. I knew him, and I saw that he had stuff which would last.

I lost sight of him for two years. I well remember our last evening together before he went to Germany. He stayed with me until long after midnight—playing and talking and trying to drink whisky. He was then in a high state of fever about Tchaikovsky. He had mighty conversions every now and then: very sudden they were, and short lived. He had only a week or two before staked his life on Palestrina; but now it was the Russians, and, more than them all, Tchaikovsky. The dear boy thought he knew what the Russian outlook really was- but he had never been in trouble.

When he left me early in the morning I felt that it was the last time I should see him. Not that I thought he would die or that I expected him never to come back to England; but I knew that when he returned he would be altered and I should never see him as he was.

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He did come back, and he had changed. He had assumed, for how long I could not guess, the airs of a decadent, after the manner of Tite-street rather than of Montmartre. His trappings were fearfully and wonderfully made, and he seemed all soft and velvety. Physically he had matured; and although he tried his best to appear neurotic, I could see he was as healthy as ever. His face, which often amid derision I have proclaimed beautiful, was as clear as ever it was; and his eyes, in spite of his efforts to keep them half closed, were as bright as when I first knew them. His impulse on meeting me was, I saw, to take both my hands in his and wring them, as he used in the old days; but he checked himself in time and, languidly turning his eyes upon me, murmured with half a sigh:

"So you remember me? How charming of you!" I was rather sickened at first, but I knew him better than he knew himself, and I was certain that this new infatuation would be but a phase.

While in Germany he had learned that Oscar Wilde was a great writer and a still greater prophet of art; that Aubrey Beardsley was a supreme artist and Ernest Dowson the very poet of poets. The stagy Hellcon of the middle nineties seemed to him the very Land of Promise —so easily are the poorest things hallowed by time and distance. He had accepted the creed of the fantastic Irishman without question, and supremely facile pornography of Beardsley he found irresistible. The beauty of Wilde's language and the luxury of his thought made an instant appeal. Moreover, just then young Englishmen in Germany were making violent attempts to show that they were free from the narrow prejudices which led to the persecution of the unhappy author by their fathers. The pathos of poor Wilde's downfall touched them, and served to quicken their interest in his work, and, in no small degree, to raise their estimate of his greatness. He seemed to them the spirit of Petronius speaking with the lips of Christ. They admired Wilde's writing and liked the things he praised. They took as gospel his brilliant misinterpretations of Gautier of Baudelaire, of Barbey D'Aurevilly; they aped his mishegotten mediavalism and his spurious aesthetic postures. Their talk was much brocaded, and they thought in terms of decoration.

Of course they missed the real man: the Dandy so sorely misplaced, and so hideously out of his day, that his tragedy was as certain as death. There is something fascinating in the gorgeous danger of the last days of Wilde's success: something of the grand manner in his brazen attitude under fire. The personality was everything: the writings but its withered slough. Young England in Germany held the creed but missed the prophet: learnt the gibberish but lost the tragedy.

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And so he came back an aesthete. He found sweet-sounding names for his laziness, and hid behind a veil of elegant langour the insincerity of his pose. Like all conscious revivalists he was just a little ridiculous. It was then they first called him "the Fake"; but they were quite wrong. I knew him better than they did; and I was content to wait.

I did not see much of him for some months, and when we met we spoke but little. I think he felt uncomfortable with me. He went out a good deal and played lazily and very badly to stuffy, sham-aesthetic crowds in fashionable houses. His clean, boyish face fascinated—even though it appeared amid a eclectic scheme of tailoring in velvet and soft felt. It was of the type strong women like and most men distrust: the face of a pure uranian. He talked airily of "strange scarlet things" by Dvorak, and "delicious indiscretions" of Chopin. He yawned charmingly over Brahms and Beethoven; but of Mozart he never spoke. For this I liked him: it proved that the capacity for reverence was only dormant.

After some months of a kind of half-estrangement he sent for me suddenly. His telegram bade me come to him at once because his wife was ill. I had no idea that he was married. I went, and found him walking up and down outside the house in Chelsea where he had rooms. . . . . He told me that he hoped it would be a girl.

I pitied his wife instinctively: I wondered whether she had reached his standard as a decoration. I tried to imagine her, and something he had once said in commendation of "unsullied dairymaids" gave me a clue: I wondered how they could live under the same roof.

He was manifestly uneasy and he had forgotten the pose. He was as anxious as a schoolboy suddenly called, for reasons unknown, into the presence of the Head. He had a suspicion that she was in pain, and pain was a thing he disliked . . . . We waited . . . . Presently the doctor came out, full of professional optimism that masks a forlorn hope. . . . . We two looked at each other for a moment: it was more than I could bear . . . . He went up to her room and the doctor followed; but I walked home alone.

When I saw him next day he had aged ten years. He asked me to go with him and see her. I did not go, for I knew that he had passed the night with death . . . . He is no longer the Fake: he has found himself And now he can play Beethoven.

On Nerves and Noises.

TRIALS OF A LONDONER.

By D. Donaldson

OURS is the day of fervid activities and frenzied motion. All our machinery is driven at top speed and our nerves are always in dangerous tension. We have wondrously sharpened our senses and quickened our sympathies. We are so delicately strung, and so nicely poised, that every breath from without can sway us. We are supremely sensitive recording instruments and our stability is as easily disturbed as that of the magnetic needle. We have developed our capacities both for pleasure and for pain; we can enjoy more than our ancestors, but we can suffer more also.

Among the means of agony made accessible to us by the over-development of nervous sensibility, not the least distressing is our increased susceptibility to noise. Schopenhauer eloquently expressed the anguish of the super-impressionable brain of his day; but, compared with the sufferings of the "second-rate sensitive minds" of our time, his troubles are negligible. We have become accustomed, it is true, to much that would indubitably have alarmed our grandfathers; the hiss of turbines, the drone of dynamos, the roar of railways and the tangle of tongues. We live with these, and we have ceased to notice them; they have, moreover, a rhythm that is not unrestful in its constancy. The rough average produces a feeling of balance and rest. Continuous noises, no matter how hideous in themselves, are sporific so long as they are uninterrupted. It is to the spasmodic and unrhythmical caesura that we owe most of our pain. The fitful silences hurt us more than the continued din. There is something infinitely restful in the regular pulse of the wheels of a railway carriage; but the jagged chirping of a sparrow, though perhaps essentially more beautiful, is as salt in our wounds. So, also, the jangling "treble bob" is less exasperating than the irregular vocalism of the domestic cat. The little, smarting tents of quiet try us more than the thundrous cannonade.

Noises in the open air, and when we are moving, have a vagueness that exalts them almost to the dignity of sounds; a kind of barbarian music which would crumble before analysis, but has in its very evanescence a charm. The rustling of trees and the splashing of pebbly streamlets, although we find in them neither books nor sermons, cause us no pain; but the least sensitive must know the cruel potentialities of a creaking door. A kindly wind will often screen us from the more fearsome irritations of a shunting-yard, and distance dilute the acid of a fife band until it becomes almost soothing. Few things can so increase the annoyance of a sleepless bed as the cooing of doves; yet, in a country ramble, we welcome whole choirs of shrill voices. The petty affects us more than the noble; our senses are all for detail. We have complicated the mechanism of our minds; and for this, as for all elaboration, we must pay; we are more sensitive than our ancestors, but we are also more frail.

The daily increasing ugliness of human expression, including that attained in the fine arts, is shown most startlingly in our new noises. At home we have substituted for the kind crackle of coal fires the sickly oozing of hot water pipes; for the happy swishings of the carpet beater, the hungry suckings of vacuum cleaners. Domestic euphony is further endangered by the changes due to electricity; instead of the crisp sound of match-striking we hear the snick of little buttons on the wall, and our meals are announced by shrill electric noises in place of the pleasant human summons. The soothing speech between man and beast, until lately to be heard in any livery stable, yields to the horrid grating of steel rods; the coachman's cheery "cluck" is supplanted by the hootings of infamous chauffeurs. The bracing tones of the post-horn have died, to reappear as something new and strange; and the pleasant patter of hoofs has ceased with the coming of the petrol engine. The countryside that echoed, but a few years ago, all the beloved noises of farm and meadow, is now but a sounding-board for the already hideous belchings and barkings of motor drivers. The lurid cacophones in use on all our high roads, if they are to be read as indices to the souls of their owners, make one look to Hell for relief.

It may be that we of to-day are too puny for our environment; our conditions of life, perhaps, have outrun our powers of accommodation. We may be exotics in this age of steel, and the ugliness and noise we so fretfully lament may be but the idiom of to-morrow. We may lack insight, and our feeble complaint may serve only to amuse our children. We may be degenerate, but our pain is real. We may me a dying race but we will have our swan-song.