

The Savage Breast



by Frank R. Adams

FRANK BUXTON was an execrable violinist. On the player piano he was considered a "bear," having trained at one time for a six-day bicycle race; but if Antonio Stradivari had ever heard Frank render the "Intermezzo" from "Cavalleria Rusticana" with the bow, he, Stradivari, would have risen from the grave and offered to serve a long term in jail as a punishment for having made Frank's violin.

Yes, Frank's instrument was a genuine "Strad." It had been left to him by a great-uncle who had never seen him. The bequest had come to him in his early youth, and he had taken violin lessons simply because he had it, and not because of any overwhelming musical tendency in the Buxton family.

When he had received instruction for a year, every one except Frank gave up hope of his ever mastering the instrument. He kept on doggedly in spite of everything. One after another the great violin classics succumbed to his attacks. "Träumerei," "The Angel's Serenade," the "Meditation" from "Thaïs," and countless other sweet, sad melodies gave up the struggle and went down to destruction before his bow.

Frank's love of music had condemned him to many lonely hours. No one had

ever cared for his playing, except his grandfather. The family immediately suspected grandpa of being deaf. On testing him out, they discovered that it was so, and that the old gentleman had been fooling them for years by learning lip-reading. When they got him an ear-trumpet he, too, deserted Frank during his hours of soul-rending harmony.

It is discouraging to have your pet hobby scorned by your family, but Frank had faith in himself. He loved his violin, and no matter how loudly it protested he lavished his affection on it daily. Any one with a moderately accurate ear could not have failed to become a fair violinist with the amount of practising that Frank did; but unfortunately he could not detect a variation in tone unless it was as much as about half of a semitone. The result was exceedingly Chinese.

Aside from music Frank had no very bad habits. If he had, possibly he would not have devoted himself so passionately to the violin. It acted on him as a narcotic. Where other men would have solaced themselves with tobacco, Frank soothed his soul with a cacophony of sharps and flats. When things went wrong at the office, and he came home all upset and worried, he would hurry away from the family dinner-table and shut himself

up in his room. An hour or so later he would emerge radiating sweet temper and optimism.

He was the sort of a fellow that every one would have liked socially, too. Not extraordinarily good-looking or brilliant, he nevertheless held his own in a society which likes to shine at the expense of others, and which welcomes a good listener with open arms.

But among his friends his violin barred him from real intimacies. Whenever Frank got interested in a new girl, and she began to show signs of returning the compliment, he would always suggest that they might try playing together.

As a matter of fact, he was looking for an accompanist as much as a companion. Violin music really needs a piano to fill it out. Frank's playing, especially, sounded better with accompaniment. The more accompaniment, the better it sounded. With a brass band I don't suppose you would have noticed when he flatted.

Anyway, when Frank would suggest bringing his violin over some evening, the new girl, not believing it could be as bad as she had been told, and wishing to please him at any reasonable cost, would cheerfully agree.

That was always the beginning of the end. The next time he called with his black case she was either out or too ill to see him.

After that had happened a few times Frank got sensitive about it and did not go out much evenings. This was tough luck for his family, but as he belonged to them they had to stand it. He tried accompanying himself on the player piano, which he could work with his feet, leaving his hands and eyes free for the violin, but it wasn't much of a success. He would either drop behind with his pumping during a difficult run on the Stradivarius, or else he would get excited and pump so fast that he could not keep up with the fingering. Either way was appalling in its resultant discord, and sounded worse than the violin alone.

II

ALL this was before the era of Mabel. After her, everything changed.

Mabel was a determined girl, with eyes and a complexion that would have given Aphrodite herself pangs of jealousy; not particularly on account of their colors,

which were blue and pink respectively, but because of their exquisite adjustment and softness. In her eyes was a place to find your soul reflected, and on her cheeks was a spot made for kisses. For the rest, Mabel was a trifle plump—which made her angry every time she thought of it, because you never could tell where the new-style dresses were going to be tight.

She was a lover of music, too. That's what makes the rest of the story remarkable. They met at a violin recital. One of Frank's few remaining friends introduced him, because she was mad at Mabel that day.

Afterward Mabel met the other girl and thanked her for it.

"I like him immensely," said Mabel. "And he is musical, too. He took me home and told me all about his own violin on the way."

"Is he, by any chance, going to bring it over some evening and let you play his accompaniments?" her friend asked.

"Why, yes."

The other girl had a sudden attack of contrition and told Mabel the awful truth. She advised Mabel to break a leg or get measles or something before Frank's evening to call came around.

Mabel thanked her friend again and went on her way thoughtfully. Learning that Frank was a sad fizzle as a violinist was disappointment, to be sure, but did it need to remove him absolutely from the ranks of "possibles"?

In common with nearly every other unattached female, Mabel divided her masculine acquaintances into two classes—those to whom it was possible to become engaged, and those with whom such a thing was out of the question. Lest this should seem like deliberate and unsportsmanlike planning on her part, let me repeat that everybody does it. Just like every girl in the world, Mabel planned to be carried off by a cave man some day, and she preferred to pick her own abductor.

There was nothing repulsive about Frank Buxton. On the contrary, she had been attracted to him instantly. Further, he was a successful young business man and the eldest son of a well-to-do family. Need a little thing like violin-playing stand in the way? Mabel could not see why.

At the drug-store she purchased a package of cotton. When Frank called she unobtrusively put a small piece of wadding

in each ear and, thus equipped, approached the piano without fear.

III

THE evening was a great success. Mabel was a painstaking accompanist, and by following his bow she managed to keep within a bar or so of where he was. They played all the pieces that he knew. Every once in a while there would come a note as if some one had stepped on a cat's tail, but they paid no attention to it.

In the library, which was separated from the music-room only by a solid oak door, Mabel's father was biting pieces out of the expensive Oriental rugs.

"How can such awful sounds be?" he demanded passionately of his prostrated wife. "Do you think Mabel is safe? I believe that he is choking her, and she is screaming for help!"

"No," his wife explained patiently, after she had listened a moment. "It's 'Silver Threads Among the Gold.' They are playing it with variations."

"It sounds as if they were playing it with intent to kill!"

The man took a turn up and down the room, and then, with an air of decision, he stepped to the door.

"Stop!" his wife commanded. "What would you do?"

He paused.

"It wouldn't hurt him to be thrown out of the window. He must be insensible to suffering!"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"Do what you like," she said with resignation; "but, remember, Mabel is twenty-six years old."

Mabel's father turned back to his favorite rug. He was beaten. It was true. Mabel had reached an age at which even her parents were interested in getting her married.

In the music-room Frank was treading on air. I do not mean that he had been hanged, although many people would have been in favor of such a finish to his career. He was having the time of his life. Mabel had just said, with the ring of sincerity in her voice:

"You certainly are a master of that violin!"

When she said "master" she was thinking of *Simon Legree*.

"It's partly the instrument," he told her modestly, showing her again the beautiful

curves of the mellow old body. "What a marvelous thing it is! To think that a player can take a collection of bits of wood like that and make it laugh or cry at will. Why, this violin is more than two hundred years old. Think of what it must have been through!"

A tear stood perilously near the brink of Mabel's eye.

"Indeed, I can sympathize with it," she murmured.

Frank took her hand in his. She started to withdraw, but recollected in time that while he held her hand it was impossible for him to play; and after an ineffectual flutter of resistance she allowed it to remain. Besides, she rather liked the contact of her fingers with Frank's.

She liked it so well, in fact, that she asked the young man to come again—soon. That made him very happy. It made his family happy. Everybody rejoiced except Mabel's parents. They had to grin and do the best they could. Her father, a forehanded man, ascertained the date of Frank's next visit, and was unavoidably detained down-town at a musical comedy that evening. Her mother sent out for a bottle of smelling-salts to replace the one she had used up on the occasion of the young virtuoso's first visit.

IV

If Mabel wanted Frank Buxton, she had him won after that first evening. Any slight overture on her part would precipitate a proposal, and she knew it. Out of kindness to her immediate relatives she only waited until she was sure that Frank had enough good qualities to counterbalance his fiddling. She finally made up her mind when the family doctor assured her that talent such as his was not likely to be hereditary.

After their marriage and subsequent removal to an apartment of their own—which made nearly everybody happy, if you do not include their neighbors—Mabel Buxton began to put into operation her scheme to make Frank over into a perfect husband. The first item of that scheme was to wean him from his fatal passion for the Stradivarius.

She read up extensively in the psychotherapy books how to cure bad habits. The best treatment seemed to be to occupy the mind with other things. Therefore, Mabel planned many social engagements,

parties at their own home or at the homes of friends, that would occupy Frank's waking hours when he was away from business.

It was not an unqualified success. No matter what time of night their guests left, or they themselves got home from an entertainment, Frank would rosin up the bow and play a few so-called melodies. He claimed that if his beloved instrument were not played upon every day it would grow unresponsive—what musicians call "sleepy." The neighbors, who did not understand this, hammered an obligato on the steam-pipes.

Mabel had another trick up her sleeve—one not sanctioned by the orthodox psychotherapists. It was much more hazardous, and involved a confederate, but the case seemed to be one requiring a desperate remedy.

What decided Mabel to put her plan into operation was a call she received from a real-estate man who made a specialty of suburban homes. Now Frank and Mabel had no thought of moving into the suburbs, and she could not understand why the agent seemed so sure that they were prospective customers. She asked him, and he said that he had been sent by Mrs. Miller. The Millers were the tenants of the next apartment above.

Mabel got the idea without a diagram. For a moment she contemplated going up and forcibly removing some of the lady's back hair. She restrained herself, however, and a later and calmer judgment told her that Mrs. Miller was justified in her course.

It was three nights later that the Buxtons's apartment was burglarized. The thief had evidently had a key that fitted the spring lock on the front door, for he had entered and made his exit that way without making enough noise to awaken Frank, who was a light sleeper.

The thief left no clue. Neither did he leave the Stradivarius, which, with a few valueless trinkets, was all that he seemed to have taken.

This did not appear suspicious to Frank. Indeed, he complimented the thief on picking the most valuable thing in the place.

"It's one of the best violins that Stradivari turned out after he broadened his model in the year 1700. He made it just after 'La Pucelle,' and by some it is considered superior."

Contrary to Mabel's expectations, her husband took his loss rather quietly. At first she thought he did not care much, but later she realized that he was grieving inwardly, as at the death of a dear friend.

He reported the burglary to the police, having a wild idea—which of course proved unfounded—that they might recover the missing articles. News of the robbery appeared in the newspapers. Later it was rumored that the Buxtons's neighbors had subscribed generously to a fund to defend the burglar if he should be apprehended.

"It would be impossible for the thief to sell it without being arrested, because a violin like that is known all over the world."

"He might alter it," suggested Mabel.

A groan escaped Frank.

"Lord, if he should! If he should even destroy one bit of that precious varnish, it might be ruined forever."

Mabel was sorry that she had suggested such a thing, and she tried to be extra nice to Frank, to make up for the absence of his other sweetheart. He was pathetically grateful, and tried to forget, but it wasn't any use.

"It's hard to make any one else understand," he explained. "That old Strad sort of represented the nicest part of my life. When I was playing it I used to be thinking happy thoughts, and the happy thoughts and the music got so mixed up and melted together that now I can't seem to have one without the other."

V

BEGAN a period of quiet in the Buxton household. At first it seemed a blessed relief to Mabel; but later she found that the gay companionship which had brightened the first months of their marriage was gone. She realized that she was beginning to look forward with dread to her husband's home-comings. He was no longer the sunny-tempered lover who came to woo her nightly. Formerly he had dropped all business cares at the office; now he allowed things to worry him after dinner.

Their evenings were dull and heavy, things to be dreaded. Not having acquired the club habit, he hung around the house, but they did nothing. Occasionally she played the piano in the evening, but she gave it up when she saw how it made his fingers ache to follow.

Once he brought home another violin and tuned it up painfully to the piano. After one sweep of the bow he laid it aside mournfully.

"Compared to the Strad, it sounds like a cat-fight!"

Mabel had never heard a cat-fight that wouldn't have died away in shame at hearing the noise Frank could produce on either violin, but she wisely refrained from mentioning it.

Then came Mabel's illness. Just by a narrow squeak she escaped being carried off by typhoid. The fact that she wasn't may be laid to the heroic struggle put up by her husband, who with a sudden access of loving energy fought death back inch by inch.

In a dim, delirious way she knew that he was constantly with her. Never did she become conscious for a moment during the day or night but what she found him near, his kindly, clumsy fingers suddenly become deft in loving service.

Once—to this day she is not sure whether it was a picture in her delirium or an actual occurrence—she opened her eyes and saw him kneeling by her bedside in the conventional attitude of prayer. This, in a rather slangy, irreverent young man, such as she knew her husband to be, caused her surprise, even in her fevered mental state, where only fantasy was real.

He looked up and caught her eye fixed on him wonderingly.

"What is it, dear?" she had inquired.

"Nothing," he had replied soothingly. "Don't fret yourself, sweetheart."

"But," she insisted petulantly, "I want to know what you were doing. Were you praying?"

He nodded sheepishly.

"What for?"

He hesitated, not knowing how to formulate his thoughts.

"I was sort of arranging with God for him to keep my old Stradivarius and just let me have you."

Then another delirium caught her up once more and whirled her away to a hot, revolving room peopled with black and red circles, before she could reach out and touch him to see if he were real or some heathen offering a sacrifice on the altar of a cruel pagan god.

When she was convalescent the doctor complimented Frank on his success.

"You won the fight for us!"

"I had to," said Frank. He stood on the other side of Mabel's bed and he reached down and patted her hand. "She's the only person in all the world that I could ever care for." Then he added, after a pause: "I guess it's because she is the only one who ever really understood me and liked the same things that I do."

He didn't say it, but Mabel knew that he referred to his violin-playing. A wan smile of understanding lit up her face as she pressed his hand in recognition of his thought.

Possibly it was because of this that a few days later an old violin was removed from a safe-deposit vault, where it had rested several months, and in a mysterious fashion found its way to the Buxton apartment. The burglar who brought it could not resist leaving an alleged humorous note with it, penciled in the disguised handwriting of Mabel's brother:

i haf to retern this fidle becaus nobuddy elce kin plai it like u.

No other explanation was ever made by any one. Mabel suggested to Frank that she would like to get well out in the country, and they sent for the real-estate agent who made a specialty of suburban property.

Now, when any of Mabel's old-time friends go to call on her in the evening, or on a Sunday afternoon, the maid ushers the visitors into the parlor and goes up to the attic for Mrs. Buxton. In the interval before she comes down, the visitors, if they have never been there before, are constrained to regret that they have intruded on what, from the sounds, seems to be a terrible family quarrel.

When Mabel enters, however, serene and smiling, they realize that they must have been mistaken, especially as the sounds go on. At last the solution flashes upon them.

"We didn't know," they say, indicating the mournful cries from above, "that you had a baby! Is it a boy or a girl?"

Mabel blushes and says hastily:

"It isn't a baby. That's my husband. He is a violinist."

If the visitors are inclined to doubt this, and giggle at it as a joke, they hastily pretend to be choking instead if they happen to notice the moisture in Mabel's

eyes as she listens for a moment to those unearthly squawks with a dreamy, far-away expression, as if she could just faintly hear the music of angels.

"I love to hear him play," she says gently.

And the strangest thing of all is that she really means it.

OUR TURBULENT HOUSE

Legislators Who Never Are in Order, and Probably Never Will Be
By Horace Towner

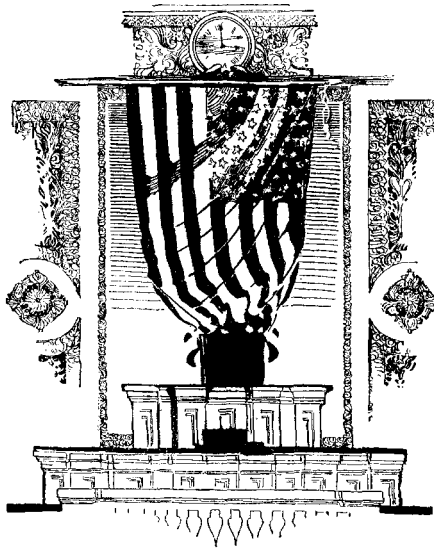
WHEN the Sixty-Fourth Congress, which we now have with us, had completed the preliminaries of organization, Champ Clark took his place behind the Speaker's desk, brought his gavel down with a resounding whack, and roared, in exactly the same tone and inflection with which he had used the same phrase several thousand times before:

"The House will be in order!" (Whack!)

But the House wouldn't be in order.

It never has been in order, and probably it never will be. Not even the majestic presence and leonine roar of Speaker Champ Clark can repress that restless body.

It must be admitted that Mr. Clark does his best. The mighty blows which he strikes with his great gavel resound through the Capitol, dying only as they are lost in the dark catacombs of the basement, where millions of Congressional documents are stored. A special sounding-board of tough, seasoned wood is placed before him to receive these terrific shocks, lest the Speaker's desk be shattered.



During the Sixty-Third Congress three of these boards were successively reduced to kindling-wood and replaced by new ones. The shattered wrecks are among the most highly prized relics about Capitol Hill. Before the present Congress is over, if the Speaker's right arm does not lose its force, there will probably be enough of these souvenirs to fill a small museum.

But still the House isn't in order. The members walk about

the aisles; they converse in audible voices, even when some eloquent Representative is pointing out, as the least of them can do on short notice, some grave situation fraught with menace to our most sacred national institutions. Usually a dozen or so of the members, who happen to be particularly interested in the business at hand, remain in their seats and pay attention to what is being said; but the others pass to and from the cloak-rooms or gather in little knots about the floor.

Now and then one of these little groups will explode in sudden laughter, which