

# The Spell of the Sword

by Frank Aubrey, 1840-1927

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"YES, it is a curious-looking ornament, isn't it? And it has a curious history, too—at least, the sword had of which it once formed part," observed Clayton, with a gravity that was somewhat unusual with him.

"Tell me about it," I said. I am not inquisitive, as a rule; but, somehow, his manner impressed me.

He remained silent a short time. Then, looking at me very earnestly, he answered:

"Well, perhaps I may; though I would not tell it to many. Indeed, only two other people know the story. I hate—ah! more than I can convey to you—even to think about it. But to you it may be of special interest, for you are not one of those who thoughtlessly laugh at that which is out of the common, merely because it cannot be explained on ordinary grounds."

I began to grow interested. I scented something savoring of the mysterious, the supernatural. However, I replied quietly:

"You know that I regard all such matters from the point of view of a simple, unbiased inquirer. If one cannot always explain, one need not therefore ridicule."

"Just so, just so," he returned gloomily; and then lapsed into silence again. I said nothing; only pulled at my cigar, and patiently waited for what I saw was coming.

"Do you know—but no, of course you don't," he began presently. "But can you imagine how it can be, that a man may suddenly, unexpectedly, once in his life, feel like a would-be murderer? You have heard of men in the East who suddenly run 'amok,' as it is called? Well—what would you say if I tell you that—I even I—who sit now so soberly before you, whom you know to be ordinarily, a quiet, peaceably-disposed English gentleman—had once been on the very verge of running 'amok'?"

"Temporary frenzy—a heat-stroke, probably," I suggested.

"You think so, *now*; but wait till you've heard my story. Then you'll be better able to judge." And he proceeded to unfold to me the following strange tale:

"WHEN I said, just now, that I knew the history of the sword to which that curiously-wrought silver death's-head belonged, I meant only its history since it came into the hands of a friend of mine named Knebworth. I suspect that many other histories or stories—and terrible ones—attach to it, if we could but trace them. But what I have to tell is quite gruesome enough, and I have no wish to learn anything more about it.

"You have heard that I fought in the Brazilian civil war of some years back. My friend, Jack Knebworth, and myself, attached ourselves to the popular—and winning—party.

"We were given commissions, and fought almost side-by-side through nearly the whole term of the war.

"It was just before the close of the last campaign that I one day found Jack in possession of that sword. It had the most curiously worked hilt I ever saw; and that death's-head was fixed on to the end by a screw. You see, there are two emeralds in the eye-sockets of the skull. They are dull now; they seem, somehow, to have lost their lustre; but, I tell you, their brightness formerly was something little short of marvellous. I have been told they are not very valuable, being scarcely, I believe, strictly speaking, emeralds at all. Some other stones of a similar color, perhaps. Anyway, they used to throw out greenish-yellow beams of so vivid and fiery a character that the thing made you sometimes jump when you looked at it. These beams, with the grinning jaws gave the whole affair a most ghastly, yet strangely fascinating appearance—you almost thought it was alive, and was grinning and rolling its eyes at you!

"The rest of the hilt was curiously worked out with strange woods inlaid with silver, upon which were signs, or letters, or designs of which I could not guess the meaning. The blade was an old-fashioned rapier, of wonderfully tempered steel; and this also had on its four faces signs or characters which no one, however, professed to understand. There was a scabbard of leather, mounted with soft black velvet and silver; the latter with similar markings. It was probably of ancient Spanish manufacture; that was all we could guess at. Knebworth bought it of an

Indian chief we knew, who, one day, came into the camp and offered it at a ridiculously low price. That was all he could tell about it at that time.

"Well, two or three days after he bought it, his servant, a staunch, trustworthy old soldier, who had served him faithfully, and fought bravely, all through the war, 'ran amok' as they say in India—I don't know how else to describe the affair—killed two of his own comrades, and then threw himself over a bridge into a mountain torrent, where he was dashed to pieces on the rocks. In one of the victims he left this sword; and, after the inquiry, it was returned to Knebworth.

"Then came the peace; and we were moved into one of the towns. There Jack obtained another servant; one strongly recommended by a brother officer who was packing up to leave the country. Two days afterwards, this new servant disappeared; but, in one of the side streets, a man was found lying dead, with a wound through the heart; and, beside him, this sword! There was more fuss this time, and it was well for my chum that he could show a very clear and unassailable alibi. As it was, he had much trouble about the affair; and by the time it was over I was packing up and was nearly ready for my journey back to England. Knebworth was returning to the old country too, but not just then; he wished first to make a trip upon some matter of private business into the interior. He promised to follow me as soon as he could; and to look me up in London.

"Entering his room one day, I found him sitting on a packing-case with the sword lying across his knees. He told me he thought the thing was 'uncanny' and that he was about to break it and throw the pieces away. After some talk I induced him to give it to me; I procured some sacking, and wrapped it up then and there, ready to pack in one of my chests. And that's how the thing came into my possession.

"I CAME back to England full of hope and expectations of happiness: for I was hastening to return to one I dearly loved, one who had long ago promised to be my wife. Her name was Mabel—Mabel Karlake—and she had been all the world to me for many long years. True, I had not heard from her of late; but I attributed that to the disorganized state of the country while the war was about. But alas! when I arrived here, I soon found that this silence had a different, and, for me, a more sinister, meaning; she was engaged to another; and that one an old college friend of mine!

"That was a terrible blow! I do not wish to dwell upon it; it is best passed over; but for weeks—months—I lived in a sort of dazed condition, as one who has been stunned and has never fully recovered from the shock. It is a dreadful experience for any man to have to face such a thing. The terrible sense of loneliness that falls upon you as you realize that you have come back, not to the world you know, but to one that is new and altogether strange, where everybody is interested in himself and his own affairs alone; and you are—an outsider, a stranger!

"And then, above all, to be deserted by the one being you had believed would be true to you through everything; by the one you had lived for, worked for, fought for, risked your life for, again and again. Ah! think of it! But—let it pass. I go on now to other matters.

"I had taken some rooms in London, in Fitzroy Street. They were large, lofty, roomy apartments of the kind let out to artists as studios. They were, in fact, used

for that purpose by an artist who was away for the summer and who was desirous of making a few pounds by letting them during his absence. I liked them better than the ordinary stuffy London lodgings; for, if poorly furnished and rather rough, they were airy, and there was plenty of room to move about, even after I had placed in them all my packages. Many of these I had never even taken the trouble to open since my return, so listless and miserable was my state of mind.

"I received a letter from Knebworth, written at Rio, saying he had nearly finished his business, and would come to England by the next boat. This letter contained a rather curious paragraph, which ran thus: 'By the way, I have a message for you from Macolo, the old Indian from whom I bought that unlucky ancient sword you took away with you. The beggar had been playing double, it seems; he got into mischief, and I was able to do him a good turn—about saved his life. By way of showing his appreciation, the rascal confessed that he sold the weapon to me in the hope that it would get *me* into trouble—as it most certainly did. *Now*, he wants it back again, and offers quite a big sum for it.

"When I told him you had taken it away, he looked very anxious, said he had always liked you, and did not wish to bring you to harm. "Therefore," he said, "tell your white brother to avoid the sword as he would a rattlesnake. Tell him on no account to take the handle in his hand. There is a curse upon it; and those who come under its spell become lost." He did not use exactly those words, but that's the sum and substance of his information. Cheerful news, isn't it? Did I not say the thing was uncanny? In all seriousness, however, if you send the beastly thing back to him, he promises you "much gold" for it.'

"I smiled languidly at the strange message, and thought no more of it at the time. Later I had a note from Knebworth, saying he had arrived at Southampton; then one saying he was at Croydon. Finally, came a post card, announcing that he would call upon me the following afternoon.

"NOW, that same afternoon, I was expecting a visit from Cyril Bellingham—the man who had won Mabel from me. He came to call upon me sometimes. I cannot say I was glad to see him; but he was, as I have told you, a college friend, and I did not like to appear so mean as to break off an old friendship because of what had occurred. Indeed, I was inclined to blame her rather than him; especially after the one interview I had with her. Her behavior then had seemed to me strange, inexplicable; her replies to my impassioned words were cold and stinging. Yet in her eyes was an expression I could not fathom. It seemed a mixture; there appeared to be doubt, surprise, and a look as of half fear, mingled with a sort of pathetic pity for myself. This last was so evident that I had no heart to upbraid her; and I left her without one word of reproach for what she had caused me to suffer.

"Jack Knebworth's expected visit had put me in mind, as I sat expecting him and Bellingham, of the old sword that lay packed away in one of my chests, but which belonged, properly, to him. I decided I would give it back to him, and let him do with it what seemed good in his own eyes. I therefore opened the chest, and began pulling out the contents till I found it wrapped in the sacking in which I had tied it up.

"Amongst other things I discovered, before coming to it, were two fencing foils, which were very old friends I had had many years. I laid these on the floor, took out the sword, and went and sat down by the table to undo the wrapper at my leisure. Soon the curious old rapier was unfolded, and I drew it from its scabbard to see if it had rusted. I found it quite bright; and, then, as my glance fell upon the hilt and the death's-head, I gave a great start. Never have I seen in any stones such gleams of lurid light as those that danced, and sparkled, and darted from the two eyes of that skull! I say 'lurid,' for, at times, the stones seemed to change to rubies and the scintillations took a blood red hue, changing quickly again to a glittering green.

"As I gazed, the baleful glare of those fiery eyes seemed to grow and grow in intensity, and the eyes themselves to increase in size, till I felt as though I were enduring the mocking gaze of a mighty demon; and, verily, I half expected each moment to see appear before me some appalling, devilish shape from the under world, I took hold of the hilt with a half-conscious determination to see whether the thing were really alive; and also, as I believe, with the vague wish to shut out the sight of the hideous skull and its rolling, leering eyes.

"AS my hand closed upon it, I felt at once an odd tingling in the fingers, that was not however, at all unpleasant. Gradually it increased, and crept up my arm, and it seemed to bring a sensation as of great strength and power. I began to brandish the weapon, and to make lunges at an imaginary foe, thinking how easy it would be to bear down his guard, or wear out his defence, with such nerve and vigour as had suddenly come into the muscles of my arm.

"Then my thoughts took a fresh turn. I thought of Bellingham, and, for the first time, I felt towards him a fierce anger. *'He has stolen your loved one from you'* seemed to be whispered into my ear. *'He has taken from you all you had worked for, striven for, risked your life for. There is, perhaps, treachery at the root of it all. Kill him, kill him, KILL HIM! Rid yourself and your loved one of him; then the road to happiness will lie open before you.'* And—God help me!—I listened to it all! I madly resolved I would kill my rival when he came in; and I knew that he might arrive at any moment.

"Meanwhile, the queer sensation grew till it had permeated my whole frame. I felt full of a rich, warm glow, that tingled and rushed through my veins like a fiery flood, and that seemed to give me the strength of a dozen men. Then I began to fancy I heard strange sounds—murmurings and voices; the room rocked and swayed, and of its walls—that on my left—opened, and there, spread out before my eyes, I saw a wonderful scene. From the floor on which I stood I looked out on a wide tropical landscape—a great stretch of rolling pampas, that ended, in the distance, in a range of blue mountains.

"On each side, in long ranks, were numbers of people of almost all nations, dressed in the strangest garbs—costumes, for the most part, of those who had been dead and gone, for hundreds and hundreds of years. Some were men in flowing robes of various hues and shapes—Moors, Saracens, Arabs; many were in flashing armour or coats of mail; while others, again, were like unto the Incas and the priests of ancient South America. Mingled with them were Spaniards, Portuguese, Indians of many tribes; and some, again, of later times; even a few

were of today. Never, not even on the stage in wildest pantomime, have I seen such a motley throng.

"Those on the left were grim, hard-visaged beings who gazed at me with an expression that was half-friendly, half-mocking. Their looks, however, filled me with aversion; for somehow, it was borne in on me that their friendliness was more to be dreaded than their most terrible enmity. They were nearly all men; though amongst them were a few women; and each held a sword—the exact counterpart of the one that was in my own hand! The figures on the right carried no swords; but here, each one showed some ghastly wound, apparently still fresh and bleeding. And there came upon me the knowledge that all these I saw before me were the forms of the wicked or unhappy beings who had fallen under the spell of the sword; those to the right being the victims, and those to the left their murderers.

"FOR a while we gazed at each other in silence, I looking from one to the other in ever-increasing wonder and awe. Then those that carried the swords, lifted them in the air towards me as in salute, and, at the same time, began a strange, wild singing or chanting, the words being sung first by a few, and then repeated by the remainder.

"*Hail! Brother of the Sword!*" was chanted by the first singers.

"*Hail! Brother of the Sword!*" came the response, so deep-toned and sonorous that it resembled a great wave that travels from afar, and falls, with its deep diapason, as from some grand ocean of sound, thundering upon the shore, rather than the melody of human voices.

"*He is one of us!*" was next chanted forth; and '*He is one of us!*' came the deep response.

"But at this a great horror seized me; a feeling of loathing and repulsion of these weird figures. 'One of them? No! *That* I would never be.' And as these thoughts rushed through my mind, I tried fiercely to loose my grasp upon the fatal sword, and to cast it from me. But I could not; try as I would, I found myself utterly unable to let it go. And the figures before me, as though they read my thoughts and answered them, sang again; but this time there was a sound of mockery in their tones: '*He who takes up the sword cannot loose it! It is the spell of the Sword!*' And the words were repeated, as the others had been.

"Still, however, I strove; I wrestled and fought strenuously against the dread power that kept the sword in my hand. Seeing this, the figures, as by one accord, lifted their swords, and pointed to the wall of the rooms in front of me. As I turned in the direction thus indicated, the wall there opened also, and I seemed to see the Mall in St. James's Park, and, walking towards me, my rival, Cyril Bellingham. He appeared to be looking at me; but I *knew* that, though he was *thinking* of me, he did not really see me. And, on his face, was an expression of such insolent triumph as stung me to fury again as I gazed. At once the voices chanted: '*He sees his enemy. He will kill him!*'

"But even as the sound of the response died away, the wall on my right hand opened, and there, gazing at me with a look of indescribable anguish and intreaty, I saw the face of Mabel—of my dear lost love.

"Shall the one I loved—and *love still*—become a murderer?' it seemed to say. I almost heard the whisper from the loved lips; and it fired me with sudden strength and resolve to throw off the spell.

"No! A thousand times No!' I cried resolutely. With my left hand I seized the blade, and, with a desperate effort, wrenched the hilt out of my right, and the sword fell with a clatter, on the floor. Then the voices burst out into mocking laughter.

"*He thinks to escape! But the Sword shall be turned against him!*' they cried.

"But the sound grew dim, and soon died away in a low wail; the room rocked and swayed around and under me, the figures faded slowly from my sight, and the walls seemed to return to their places.

"THEN, trembling, and feeling strangely weak, I went over to a sideboard, poured out a glass of brandy, drank it off, and dropped into a large armchair that was near. There I must either have fainted or fallen asleep, for I remember nothing more till I seemed to wake up suddenly and saw Cyril Bellingham standing before me. He was looking at me with the same cynical, triumphant smile that had so exasperated me a short time before. But it vanished as he saw me rouse up; and in its place came the usual look of cordial friendship.

"Having forty winks, eh?' he said, with a short laugh. 'What in the world are you doing with all these playthings scattered about?' He indicated the foils and the sword, and, picking up the latter, he laid it on the table.

"I watched the action in silence, and, until I saw him put the weapon down, I made no reply. Then I said I felt tired, and out of sorts, and supposed that I had fallen asleep.

"I have something to tell you,' he went on, regarding me curiously. 'Mabel has been so good as to fix the happy day. We are to be married this day month. I want to know if you will be one of my groomsmen?'

"This was, I need not say, cruelly trying to me; but I still felt tired and listless, and only answered quietly:

"Thank you, but I shall not be in London. I am going away with Jack Knebworth. He is coming here this afternoon to arrange about it.'

"Ah! Mabel will be sorry,' he returned, but, I could see, with evident relief. Then he took up the sword, and began bending it with the point on the floor.

"Now, by that time, I had persuaded myself that I must have fallen asleep, and dreamed all that I have just told you. Therefore I did not trouble myself about his handling the thing, I rather welcomed it as a ready way of changing the conversation.

"It's good steel,' he went on.

"I picked up one of the foils, and bent it as he was bending the sword.

"Not better than this.' I said indifferently.

"Ah, I remember those foils,' he replied. 'You and I had many a bout with them years ago, hadn't we? I think I used to be the better fencer in those days. I wonder if I am so still?'

"I've learned more of fencing than I knew then,' I told him. 'And in a hard school too—where either you or your antagonist has to "curl up," as the Americans call it; and—it was not I that went under as you can see,' I finished rather grimly.

"H'm. Well that may be a good thing for you,' he answered musingly, 'because—'

"Because what?' I asked, as he seemed to hesitate.

"Because it's your only chance,' he exclaimed, suddenly springing up and lunging at me with the weapon he was holding. 'I mean to *kill* you!'

"It was fortunate for me that I held the foil in my hand; and still more fortunate that I was looking at him at the moment; otherwise the weapon would have passed through my heart. Something in his manner, however, had put me on the alert; and I parried the stroke.

"Great Heavens, Bellingham! What on earth's the matter with you? What are you thinking of?' I cried. 'Are you suddenly mad?'

"Aye,' he shouted, lunging again, 'mad for your life! And I mean to have it too, as you will soon find out!'

"Again I parried the thrust, and stepped back, looking at him in horror and astonishment. Then I saw that his eyes seemed to be blazing; he looked literally, unmistakably, a madman.

"Suddenly, the truth flashed upon me. What I had experienced had been no dream; it had all been true! And now *he* was under the spell of the sword, as I had been but a short time before!

"For the love of heaven, Bellingham,' I gasped out, 'throw that accursed sword down. Why should you wish to kill me?'

"Why,' he hissed out, making at me again, 'because I know that Mabel loves you still. She has never loved *me*. I told her lies about you—said you had a Creole wife and three children out in Brazil; showed her letters that made her believe it. And she *did* believe it—ha, ha! And became engaged to me. But I know she loves you all the time—and *that's* why I mean to kill you!'

"Great God!' I burst out. 'You infernal scoundrel! But—why do you tell me all this?'

"Why do I tell you, fool?' he almost screamed. 'Because I mean to kill you. You will never leave this room alive! Today I feel I have the strength of ten men—aye, of fifty! All your boasted swordsmanship will avail you nothing today, for I shall *kill* you. But I want you to die knowing that, had you lived, you could have won back Mabel from me. As it *is*, you will die with the knowledge that she will be *mine*.

"He got all this out in incoherent gasps, attacking me fiercely the while; and I saw it was no time for reply or for bandying words. It was all I could do, in this one-sided encounter, to defend myself. As he had nothing to fear from my weapon, all the advantage, of course, lay on his side. He had no necessity to defend himself; all he needed to do was to try to pass my guards, or to tire me out.

"And when I remembered the feelings I had experienced while grasping that diabolical sword, my heart sank within me. I recalled the strange sensation of wonderful strength and vigour; my conviction that I could prevail against any, even the strongest, opponent. And now all that mysterious force and power were turned against myself—against *me*, when I had but a foil to defend myself with, and at the moment, too, when life seemed sweeter than ever it had before—when I knew that Mabel loved me!

"This thought nerved me to fight hard for my life; but it could not give me the advantage my antagonist held; nor equalize the chances. Still, I fought



desperately. Round and round the studio—there was no table in the middle—to and fro—backwards and forwards, we went; sometimes stopping as by mutual consent, for a moment's breathing space, when we would stand and glare at one another like furious, watchful tigers. But, in the end, I knew my strength was gradually failing me. I felt a wild, mad despair creeping over me—the feeling of one struggling hopelessly in the toils and knowing he can, at best, only stave off death for a few moments longer.

"TWICE, Bellingham, with a fierce, almost irresistible beat, nearly forced the foil out of my aching hand. I knew the end was near; I felt sick and staggered, when the door opened, and Jack Knebworth entered. He looked, in open-eyed astonishment, for a second, then, taking in the whole situation in that brief glance, he raised a heavy walking-stick he was carrying, and, with one slashing blow, knocked the sword of Bellingham's hand. It was just in time; for Bellingham had seen him, and, expecting that he would interfere, evidently determined to finish me off first. He threw himself forward with his whole power, and, as his weapon was knocked up, he came on to the button of my foil with such force that it snapped off near the end, and the jagged blade entered his breast. He fell to the ground with a mad yell of disappointed fury, and then lay still, the blood flowing from the wound.

"I rested, panting, against the wall, and stared at Knebworth, who stared back at me.

"'Well!' he exclaimed, 'this is a pretty business, truly! Lucky for you I came in when I did.'

"'Lucky, indeed, old friend! Give me a drop of that brandy over there. Is he badly hurt—dead, do you think?'

"'What does it matter?' he returned coolly, as he poured out the brandy. 'The infernal, murdering villain! To set on, with a sword, against a man armed only with a foil!'

"'Ah! there's worse than that at the bottom of it all,' I said savagely. 'Deceit, treachery, devilry! But I'll tell you another time. What's to be done now?'

"'Go for a doctor,' he said, and bring one as soon as you can; I'll see what I can do for him meanwhile. But first we'll have no more devil's tricks with this cursed plaything.' And, with that, he picked up the fatal sword, broke it into several parts over his knee, and threw all the pieces into the chest, shutting down the lid.

"'Now, remember,' he went on, looking meaningly at me, 'you were fencing, in a friendly way, with those two foils; and there was an accident. I happened to see it, and can give all necessary explanations.'

"I gave him a nod of comprehension and assent, and hurried away for a medical man. Later on, Bellingham was carried, still unconscious, to the nearest hospital. His wound was a bad one; and for long it was not known whether he would live or die. In the end, however, he recovered, and went abroad.

"I took no steps against him, but let him go. I felt too happy, and too well pleased with the world in general; for, by the time he was convalescent, Mabel and I were married.

"I unscrewed that death's-head from the hilt—handling it very gingerly the while, you may be sure—and, one day down at Brighton, Jack Knebworth and I

threw all the rest of the weapon into the sea. We were determined that no other human creature should run even the faintest chance of coming under the influence of that terrible sword and its spell."

