

Sweets

By Alexander Saxton

My Dearest Mama,

How can I describe the splendours of London in Springtime? It must be so changed since last you visited during the reign of 'Farmer George'. The Prince Regent has transformed its culture, fashion, manners, and architecture, until they must indeed surpass those of any other city in any other age of this world! If ever there were a time and place for a young (ish) Canadian just recently come into his Father's Inheritance to search for a wife, then this certainly must be it.

Perhaps to your eye it might all seem risqué; the men without powder in their hair, the women all dressed in diamonds and ribbons and sleek-waisted dresses of Parisian cut; the gilded opulence of Almack's all awaft with the fragrances of Mr Floris! But I can assure you; the son you have raised is a no rake; my sole mission in London is to find myself a bride of breeding and virtue. While the dizzy glamour of the Social Round might amuze & entertain, I know full well that it is not for me, not for long, and that the place of a Gentleman is back in his home Province, managing his affairs there and investments abroad. And so I hope and pray that I shall return swiftly to your loving bosom, accompanied by the ring of Wedding Bells.

As for my health, I can indemnify that it is hale. The one complaint I might make is for my teeth, which do continue to ache terribly, as they had begun to do before I left our beloved Country Home. I must admit, I am somewhat embarrassed by the state of them. Every smile in London seems to be so Radiant & White! I might tell myself that my... yellowed dentition is a sign of eligibility (after all, how better to show that one has inherited a sizeable fortune in Jamaican Sugar, than to have a handful of cavities?), but nevertheless, I find myself unwilling to smile, even, nay, especially, around the fairest of ladies.

However! All hope is not lost! One of Father's business associates has recommended to me the services of a French dentist, an erstwhile Jacobin (shocking, I know, though we have won the war a second time now, and may afford to be magnanimous) by the name of Monsieur Lescrocs. If all goes well, when next we speak, it shall be, on my part, through a set of pearlescent fangs as white as one of Mr. Brummell's cravats.

With all my love and fondest regards,

Your Darling Baby Boy,

Charles.

My Most Precious Mama,

Success! Your dear son is now the proud master of a set of teeth as refined and white as the sugar loaves that paid for them. Monsieur Lescrocs was a sheer delight, an absolute original. He is a gentleman of what they now call Haiti; a fair-complexioned man of the '*gens de couleur*' caste, who studied dentistry in France after enfranchisement. I told him that as a former revolutionary, he was my friend, since the revolution had destroyed Haiti's sugar industry, driving up the value of my father's Jamaican shares. Well, we shared a great laugh over that, and have since become fast friends.

I was at first unsettled to find that his establishment was not constructed in the most... salubrious quarter of the City. Indeed, the trip there somewhat... moderated my glittering impression of London.

I was even accosted en route by one audacious rogue who claimed to have lost his leg fighting for Wellington at Badajoz. A lie undoubtedly; when father and I visited the peninsula to deliver sugar to the Army, I was struck by how the soldiers all seemed to be adolescents. We joked that we were delivering candy to children! But this man, and his street-full of fellow-cripples all seemed to be older. Perhaps the War just aged them... but I find that preposterous. Regardless, I relented and tossed him a halfpenny, which I regretted immediately. No, given the preponderance of such wretches, one might say that (haha) Jermyn Street.... it was not.

But *this*, as I was to discover, was by design! Do you remember that I mentioned how radiant was each smile one seemed to pass in London Society? Well: as it transpires, most of these smiles are works, not of the Lord, but of Msr Lescrocs. I, it seems, am not alone among my peers in enjoying four to five lumps of sugar in my tea, or the odd plate of jam pastries before lunch, or a bottle of nectar-sweet Tokay to wash down one's after-dinner pudding. Indeed it seems that all of London Society hides a brown and mottled secret behind its smiling white visage. The work of Msr Lescrocs therefore, is not only concealment, but discretion; hence the obscure locale.

His offices are most generously apportioned, and give one the impression of both refinement and medical hygiene. In one room, he keeps an astonishing collection of tusks, some of them, he claims, sawn living from the heads of bull elephants, at enormous risk to the lives of the native persons he engages to cut them. *Does the Elephant often die when his tusks are removed*, I asked? *Oh indeed*, came the reply, *and oft slowly; but it is worth the extra risk and expense to harvest the ivory live, given*, he claims, from a professional's intuition, *that it is of superior quality to that which comes from elephants dead already*. With this, and other such dazzling claims of Modern Science, did Msr. Lescrocs win over my full & entyre confidence.

Of course, a denture carved fully from ivory is perfectly serviceable. Even one carved from the harder sorts of wood might suffice for a mere shopkeep or, *haha*, American President. But for the elite, I am assured, there is no substitute for actual, human teeth. And Msr Lescrocs keeps thousands of these, tens of thousands, on site as well. Unlike the ivory, these are not hidden in the back, but set out in huge glass cylinders at the front desk, like confectionaries kept in the window to tantalize passing children. Msr. L has them sorted according to size, type, and quality,

and laughs that these teeth, so much more valuable than ivory, should be so much less risky to keep in the open. Nobody, he says, would even consider stealing human ivory! Society, even society of a Lower Sort, would think the thief too odd, or worse yet, ghoulish. And so he keeps them on proud display, as any honest craftsman of his skills and character would.

After taking the measurements of one's jaw, Msr. L carves the denture out of ivory by hand, and then personally selects teeth that he believes shall be best suited to the client, sometimes fishing through the glass cylinders elbow-deep, finding one tooth by memory among thousands. Clipping the roots with iron pliers, he then sets a proprietary adhesive and lovingly fits the clipped teeth into their new ivory frame.

When all is said and done, the resulting denture is a thing of beauty and elegance, almost of jewelry, and it makes a man look ten years younger, a veritable Prince, when fitted into his mouth. My darling mama, you should see your bouncing baby boy now! He looks once again like a man in his early 30s, dazzlingly suited to wooing even the most... *youthful* brides.

With my most winning Smile,

Your dandy boy,

Charles.

My Adored and Adorable Mama,

I write you, once again, in the highest of Spirits! Since the arrival of my new teeth, I have become quite this season's beau, and have made it my pleasure to call upon young ladies in the drawing rooms of several of the City's most luxuriant homes. In particular, I have my eye & heart set upon the hand of one compelling Young Lady. Her name is Marie, and as her father (recently deceased), was a French *emigre*, she may yet turn out to be another way in which the past decades of War have showered blessings upon Our House. She was raised in Montreal and speaks perfect English (at least, to my Canadian ear), but despite her incomparable beauty, she has found herself undervalued in the marketplace of *Amour*, given the financial difficulties her family has experienced since *Papa's* death. This is, no doubt, why the *Vicomtesse* is keen to see her daughter courted by a modest, yet wealthy Colonial Gentleman like myself.

Marie herself seems to have little interest in me, despite our mere twenty-five years age difference. Indeed, I was quite delighted by the precocity and boldness which she showed in upbraiding me for my business affairs. The child, hilariously, has convinced herself she is an abolitionist and anti-war, even going so far as to forswear Sugar and Tobacco. I've no idea who put such ideas in her pretty little head, but I am content to indulge her at the moment; Tobacco, after all, is an unladylike vice, and as for sugar, well, her teeth and figure are as-yet unspoilt.

Of course, such notions are charming naiveties when they come from the mouth of a pretty child, but she will have to abandon them once we are married. Fortunately, I am unapprehensive on that count. Many's the successful marriage that grew from awkward beginnings, and many's the wayward wife, who learned to see things her husband's way.

Nevertheless, a wealthy young (ish) bachelor must keep his options open, and I continue to make the rounds. I was disappointed to find some spots of decay had already begun to appear upon my new denture, and an apologetic Msr. Lescrocs assured me that this was an inevitability, since that which rots living teeth can only decay dead ones faster. I shall admit that since adopting my new smile, I had assumed I was off the hook and indulged more than usual in my favourite sweets: Yet, there is no cause for alarm; Msr. Lescrocs provides good rates for his returning customers, and it looks like there is no end in sight for the profitability of sugar (unless Marie gets her way, hardy har har). And so I have commissioned him to begin work on a new denture for me; an even finer one that includes molars, which, given the difficulty of extracting them, are the rarest and most expensive teeth that can be found.

In answer to your question, the teeth are all honestly obtained, either from willing donors among the lower orders, or, more commonly, from the battlefield dead; hence their common name 'Waterloo Teeth'. Msr. L tells me that many of the finest teeth currently on the market were indeed obtained from that battlefield, and so it seems to me practically a patriotic duty to wear them. It warms one's heart to know that in some small way, one provides a second life to these dear, fallen boys.

Yours in solemn love of King & Country,

Charles.

My Most Prized & Cherished Mama,

Must I share with you my good news? Or have you divined it already from the joyous resonances of the aether? I am to be married!

Perhaps, given the optimistic tone of my last letter, you are not surprised. But much has transpired in London since last your bubbling baby boy was able to find time to express warm sentiments to his wuvvly wuvving mama.

You see, I, through sheer ill-fortune and no fault of my own, have become embroiled in two separate scandals. It has been a most trying time, in which I have longed ever so much for the comfort of your soft & gentle bosom. The first scandal involved my beloved and admirable bride-to-be, Marie, who I must confess, has behaved toward me in a most inconsiderate, and unwively manner, in public, for all to see, as we promenaded (with the Vicomtesse's permission, of course), along the green at Kensington Gardens. I had made some polite and innocuous

comment about the advancement of her Figure, when she rounded on me, quite unexpectedly, and with the aspect of a Harpy upon her face. She told me, at great volume and in no uncertain terms, that she considered me a dastardly miscreant, slavemaster, and war profiteer to boot. She went on at length, borrowing some choice phrases from Shakespeare and, I believe, the ruder works of Moliere.

Well, you know your son and his mild disposition. I was taken aback, but managed to respond in a handful of calm, articulate phrases, even though such public insolence would surely have warranted a stern response. Nevertheless, the whole affair was very public and overheard, and afterward my words were *entirely* misquoted and taken out of context by the gossip rags which circulate the lesser sort of London club and salon. So much for that; knowing myself to be in the right, I continued with my head held high.

As for the other scandal, it consisted solely of some ugly and unfounded rumours involving myself and my chums and a gin shop I have never even been to. It was really nothing, so I'll move swiftly past it, but suffice to say, my good and noble name was dragged through the mud a second time in one month.

Mama, you cannot understand my desolation. Thank goodness for Msr. L and my new denture, for I am afraid I came to lean rather heavily on my dear delicious turkish delights, Donovan's Nougats, and Kings's Bastards (with extra hazelnut) during this time of hardship. Indeed, my grin had quite come to resemble its old, brown, self again when L, my Angel, arrived at the front door with my new and shining set of teeth. They are quite magnificent, Darling Mama; more so even than the last set. One feels that one has never had quite so many teeth in one's mouth; one feels like one is quite so full of teeth that one could bite through anything; through the very whispers of one's enemies; through the stuff of this world itself.

Of course, the large and high quality molars (taken from the corpse of a Fleming, I believe) have caused me some discomfort. Indeed, the new denture is quite so full of teeth that it does not sit exactly comfortably in my jaw, rasping somewhat at the gristle and tissue in the back of my mouth. A lingering discomfort, but surely worthwhile, in the long run. One cannot put a price on one's Smile.

Did I call Msr. L my Angel? An apt comparison, given that Angels serve as a Messengers: and his arrival seemed to herald another of even greater importance. For no sooner had I finished installing my new plate of Waterloo Enamel between my poor, tender gums, than another call came at my door. It was, of all people, the Vicomtesse, whom I had never anticipated seeing again.

She was in a mood as the common folk say, to 'talk turkey'. We sat in the drawing room, drinking cream sherry, sweetened, as I take it, with a good bolt of fancy molasses. I could tell she found the thick drink excessive, but she gulped it down for politeness' sake and confided in me the true extent of her family's debt. I must confess, their penury was more desperate than I had anticipated. But, given my recent scandals, both real and alleged, I too, was in dire straits.

No woman of standing would marry a man with a tainted name unless she *had* to. And yet my Sweet Marie *had* to! It was a match made in Heaven! We toasted the union of our families over a second unctuous glass of sherry.

Needless to say, I was overjoyed! Not even the Vicomtesse's grim countenance could put a damper on my high spirits. I cannot wait for you to meet Marie on our wedding day, Mama. Her skin as white as sugar; her hair the colour of syrup; her voice as sweet as nectar, her skin as smooth as molasses-sweetened sherry. Expect your invitation soon, Mama, it shall be the finest day of my life.

Oh, before I finish, I shall update you briefly on my health. I am, as they say, in good cess, and since I indulge only in sugar, limiting myself to little more than a bottle-and-a-half of wine or spirits per day, my figure has not been too much damaged by my stay in London. I will confess, my sleep has been somewhat disturbed of late. No doubt the stress of these ridiculous scandals, perhaps confounded by too many Candied Chit'lings before bed. I have dreamt of Teeth, every single night.

Your sweet baby boy,

Charles.

My Most Loved, Doted Upon, Missed, Longed-For, Treasured, Appreciated, and Revered
Mama,

The Wedding Approacheth, and I am utterly a-dizzy with the preparations!

I will confess; the work would go more quickly if I spent less time fussing over the details of my next Denture in the back rooms of Msr Lescrocs.

The problem, I find, is not that there are too *few* perfect teeth, but too *many* to choose from. Msr L theorizes this is because many of the boys we sent soldiering in Europe died so young that their teeth had not yet begun to rot. *Well*, I confided to him, *then you should offer me a discount, since the sugar my father and I sold the Army was heavily cut with sawdust*. We shared a great laugh at that one. Msr L is a fanatic for my wit.

And I am a fanatic for his work. I do so love to watch him sort the teeth; the careful way he examines every one for flaws, and the meditative sound of him clipping off their roots.

These quiet moments mean so much more, now that the Teeth Dreams deprive me of my rest.

I asked him, one afternoon, what becomes of the roots once clipped? His answer surprized and delighted me. He told me they were crushed by indigents at the work house, and then sold to a manufacturer of Bone Char. Bone Char! Of exactly the type we use to refine our Sugar!

And as he said this to me, I was suddenly dazzled by a Ecstatic Vision, in which I could see all the moving parts of a Glorious System, and how they fed into one another: How the Wars raised the price of Jamaican Sugar, so we could invest in *more* sugar; how more sugar created the need for dentures, and how that same War provided the teeth Msr L needed to make them! And how the by-product of those teeth helped men like me refine *more* sugar more *cheaply*, and how our revenues allowed His Majesty to continue the War! *And so on, and ever upward, spiralling into infinite ascent! Oh rapt'rous vision! Oh ebullient and providential, How elegant! That it should all hang together so neatly!* I felt tears springing to my eye.

Oh Mama, the Lord has Smiled upon us, in both metaphoric and literal sense.

Your elated boy,

Charles.

Dear Mother.

I suppose I must call you mother now, though I find it abhorrent to admit any familial connection to that man it was my misfortune to marry.

Forgive me, for I shall be blunt.

I am writing to inform you of the death of your son.

No doubt you shall be curious as to what caused the death of a man just past the prime of his life, even one in as wretched a condition as your son had inflicted on himself.

This letter will inflame your curiosity rather than satisfy it.

No doubt you will remember, madam, the ghoulish mouthpiece of dead men's parts with which your son filled his jaws on our wedding day. I still flinch to recall the *clicking* feel of his kiss.

If memory serves, he had one made for you as well, and you sported it proudly, though quite clearly your mouth was filling up with blood, and you were in the most regrettable pain.

Shortly after the wedding, this set of false teeth was already badly decayed, and my husband's mouth smelled of death at all hours of the day and night. Needless to say, he being himself, he already had that macabre craftsman of his concocting some set of tusks worthy of Lucifer's own dentist.

Do you know how many teeth belong in a human mouth, Madam?

Traditionally, it is no more than thirty-two.

At his last excess, your son appeared sporting a plate of over sixty human teeth, crammed into the denture like flower stems in a bouquet.

I cannot express to you my revulsion.

Of course, he was quite proud of his new folly, and decided to organize a dinner party in order to show it off. Lescrocs was invited, of course, being his Muse, as were the rest of that pack of hyenas with whom Charles did such unspeakable things at that gin shop. Not wishing to be outdone, these men also showed up with overflowing mouths. For some, this involved a snaggletoothed look, with extra teeth wedged in seemingly at random. Others took a more orderly approach, with rows of cuspids spiralling into their mouths, lamprey-like. Some brought their wives, others their mistresses. They all drank a great deal, and became appalling.

This, incidentally, was the night of June 18th. The anniversary of Waterloo.

Indeed, your son was aware of this. At the stroke of 11, he rose to deliver a toast, grinning idiotically through those echelons of strangers' teeth, all stained red with cloying port.

"A toast," he said. "To the heroes of Waterloo."

After reliving the events in my head a thousand times, I am convinced he did not mean it as some grisly joke. No; worse than that, I am certain at that moment he was filled with a patriotic earnestness; a sense of his own nobility of spirit.

We raised our glasses and drank.

Madam, this is where my story becomes difficult to believe.

I will not try to convince you of its truth, because to be frank, I do not care what you think. Nevertheless, he was your son, and so I feel obliged to inform you of the loathsome facts.

As he opened his mouth to consume another of his endless, vile sweets, a curious expression crossed his face, and he paused, letting the confectionary fall as he lifted a hand to his jaw. There was a thick, wet sound, and then a click as his teeth snapped shut.

Something thudded to the table and bounced once before laying still, oozing a red pool into the tablecloth.

I leaned forward, to get a better look.

It was his tongue.

I heard an odd, muffled scream and looked back up, to see your son howling through clenched jaws. The teeth began to, how shall I put this, *unfurl* themselves from his mouth like a fern frond, or as if pulled on like a string of beads by some invisible fist. He was lifted, screaming, off his feet, and dragged forward across the table, scattering plates and crystal tumblers, and his own tongue.

I did nothing to help him. I wondered why his friends stayed back, until I looked around, and saw that their plight was much the same.

The man beside me had opened his mouth. He was silent, but his eyes rolled with a wild panic. I realized his mouth had opened *too* wide, and that the tendons and joints were creaking, and that the skin of his cheeks was beginning to split.

I looked away. The awful sound came a moment later. I did not need to look in order to know his jaws had opened... the full one hundred and eighty degrees.

Perhaps you think this is all some sick invention of mine. Shall I describe what happened to the man whose teeth dragged down his head until his back broke, and they were able to gnash at his own entrails? Or the man whose teeth forced themselves backwards, until they pierced his lower jaw like a beard, his brow like a coronet? Or the man whose smile decided, violently, to face the other way?

No, I shall not bore you with senseless descriptions of the things it has been my misfortune to see. Just know that not all the women were immune. Some of the wives and mistresses had visited Msr. Lescrocs themselves.

All this time my husband continued to scream, until the last tooth had left his head, dropping him to mewl helplessly at the centre of the table, diseased gums now plainly visible in an empty mouth.

The string of floating teeth curled together again in midair, rolling slowly into a ball that hovered between the candles and the chandelier. And then, one at a time, with a wet noise, teeth began to pull themselves from the dentures of the other guests, floating through the air to join the orb.

Your son slowly drowned in his blood as the orb waxed like a hunter's moon above him. Before long, it had reached the size of a cannon-ball, or human head. It was dripping softly, but other than that, it made no sound.

Shall I be fanciful and say 'watched', of a thing that had no eyes? — nevertheless, it *watched*, motionless, until your son's eyes went bloodshot, and then empty.

And then it fell, crashing to the tabletop, so that it broke apart and teeth scattered like dice in a game of Hazard, each one leaving a thin, crimson comet-tail over the tablecloth.

For a moment, we survivors stared at one another in amazement, blinking through the spatter that had misted our faces.

And then a polite cough drew our attention to the end of the table. It was Msr Lescrocs, standing with a polite bow.

“Please excuse me, Ladies,” He said. “But I have an early start tomorrow.”

He was almost gone before I could bring myself to whisper,

“What did you do?”

Pausing, he half-turned, and gave me a bemused look.

“I merely made some dentures,” he said. “Your husband did the rest.”

With that, he bid us *adieu* and disappeared.

And so shall I.

I remain, unfortunately,

Your faithful daughter-in-law,

Marie.

P.S. Please look after your teeth.