

A VISION OF THE NIGHT.

"Charlie, do you believe in dreams?"

It was in the great hall of the Pouchon spring at Spa. Among the crowd were Gerald Lovell and his friend, Charles Warren. Mr. Warren was puffing rings of cigarette smoke into the air.

"Ask me," he said with distinct irreverence, "another."

"A queer thing happened to me last night."

"If you have any malicious intention of inflicting upon me a dream, young man, there'll be a row."

"But I'm not sure that this was a dream. Anyhow, just listen."

"If I must," said Mr. Warren. And he sighed.

"I dreamt that a woman kissed me!"

"If I could only dream such a thing. Some men have all the luck."

"The queer thing was that it was so real. I dreamt that a woman came into my room. She came to my bed-side. She stood looking down on me as I slept. Suddenly she stooped and kissed me. That same instant I awoke. I felt her kiss still tingling on my lips. I got up and lit the gas and searched the room. There was nothing and no one."

"It was a dream!"

"If it was it was the most vivid dream I remember to have heard of; certainly the most vivid dream I ever dreamt. I saw the woman so distinctly, and her face as she stooped over me with laughter in her eyes. The whole thing had impressed me so intensely that I made a drawing of her then and there."

Mr. Lovell handed his sketch-book to his friend open at a page on which was a drawing of a woman's face. Mr. Warren sat up in his chair with a show of sudden interest.

"Gerald! I say! Do you know that this is the best drawing of yours I have ever seen, young man!"

"I believe it is."

"It looks to me—I don't want to flatter you; goodness knows you've conceited enough already—but it looks to me as though it were a genuine bit of inspiration."

"Joking apart, it seems to me almost as if it were an inspiration."

"I wish an inspiration of the same kind would come to me. I'd be considerably grateful—even for a nightmare. I should use it for a picture."

"I thought of doing something of the kind myself."

"Just a study of a woman's face. And you might call it—the title would be apposite—"A vision of the night."

And Mr. Lovell did. He began to paint a woman's face—just a woman's face and nothing more. She was looking a little downward, as a woman might look who was about to stoop to kiss some one lying asleep in bed—say a sleeping child—and she glanced from the canvass with laughing eyes.

It was the first of Mr. Lovell's pictures which ever had been hung. And it attracted quite a considerable amount of attention in this way. It was sold on the opening day.

One morning about the middle of June a card was brought into Mr. Lovell. On it was inscribed a name—Vicomte d'Humieres. The card was followed immediately by its owner, a tall, slightly built gentleman, unmistakably a foreigner.

"Mr. Gerald Lovell."

The accent was French, but for a Frenchman the English was fair.

"I am Gerald Lovell."

"Ah, that's good! You are a gentleman, Mr. Lovell, whom I wish particularly to see. I believe that we are not strangers—you and I."

Mr. Lovell glanced at the card which he was still holding.

"I am afraid—it is unpardonable remissness on my part; but I am afraid that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting you before it is a pleasure which has escaped my memory."

"It is not that we have ever met before—no, it is not that. It is my name to which you are not a stranger."

Mr. Lovell glanced again at the card.

"Your name? I am afraid, Vicomte, that I do not remember having ever heard your name before."

"Ah! Is that so?"

"My business with you, Mr. Lovell, is of a rather peculiar kind. I have come to ask you to acquaint me with the residence of my wife."

"With the—did you say with the—residence of your wife?"

"That is what I said. I have come to ask you to acquaint me with the residence of my wife." The artist stared.

"But, so far as I am aware, I do not know your wife."

"That is absurd, I do not say, Mr. Lovell, that you are conscious of the absurdity. But still—it is absurd—I was not aware that you were acquainted with my wife until I learned the fact this morning at your Academy."

"At our Academy?"

"You have a picture, Mr. Lovell, at the Academy?"

"I have."

"It is a portrait."

"Pardon me; it is not a portrait."

"Pardon me, Mr. Lovell, in my turn; it is a portrait. As a portrait it is a perfect portrait. It is a portrait of my wife."

"Of your wife! You are dreaming!"

"You flatter me, Mr. Lovell. Is it that you suppose I am an imbecile! Are not the features of a wife familiar to a husband? Very good. I am the husband of my wife. Your picture, Mr. Lovell, is a portrait of my wife."

"I cannot but think you have mistaken some other picture for mine. Mine is a simple study of a woman's face. It is called, 'A Vision of the Night.'"

"Precisely. And 'A Vision of the Night'—is my wife."

"It is impossible!"

"Do I understand you to say, Mr. Lovell, of a thing which I say is so that it is impossible?"

The Vicomte rose. His voice had a very significant intonation. Mr. Lovell recoiled it.

"I do not know, Vicomte, that I am called upon to explain to you. But in face of your remarkable statement, I will volunteer an explanation. I saw the face which I have painted in a dream."

"Indeed, is that so? What sort of a dream was it in which you saw my wife's face, Mr. Lovell?"

The young man flushed. The stranger's tone was distinctly offensive.

"It was a dream which I dreamt last August at Spa."

"Ah! This is curious. At what hotel were you stopping last August at Spa?"

"At the Hotel de Flandre—though I don't know why you ask."

"So! Last August, my wife and I, we were at Spa. We stayed, my wife and I, at the Hotel de Flandre. It was at the Hotel de Flandre my wife left me. I have never seen her since. Perhaps, Mr. Gerald Lovell, you will be so good as to inform me what sort of a dream it was in which you saw my wife's face at the Hotel de Flandre last August at Spa?"

Mr. Lovell hesitated. He felt that if he entered into minute particulars of his dream there might be a misunderstanding with the Vicomte. So he temporized—or he endeavored to.

"I have already told you that I saw the face in my dream. It is the simple fact—that I have no other explanation to offer."

"Very good so far, Mr. Gerald Lovell. I thought it possible that you might have some explanation to offer. I was at the Academy with a friend when I perceived my wife's portrait on the walls, and that it was painted by a Mr. Gerald Lovell, I said to my friend: 'I will go to this Mr. Lovell and I will ask him, who authorized him to exhibit my wife's portrait.' My friend proposed to accompany me. But I said: 'No. I will go alone. I will see what sort of explanation Mr. Lovell has to offer. If it is not satisfactory then we will go together, you and I.' I go to seek my friend, Mr. Lovell. Shortly we will return. Then I will request of your courtesy an explanation of that very curious dream in which you saw my wife's face at the Hotel de Flandre. Mr. Lovell, I wish you, until then, good-day."

The Vicomte withdrew. The artist looked at his visitor's card, with a puzzled expression.

"If the Vicomte d'Humieres returns, it strikes me there'll be a little interesting conversation."

"Pardon! May I enter?"

The artist turned and stared. For there, peeping through the partly open door, was the woman of his dream! Although the head was covered with the latest thing in Persian hats there was no mistaking, when one once had seen it—as he had seen it—that lovely face, those laughing eyes.

"You are Mr. Gerald Lovell?"

As she came into the room he perceived that she was not only divinely fair, but most divinely tall. Her figure, clad in the most recent coquetties of Paris, was the most exquisite thing in figures he had lately seen.

"You are the painter of my portrait?" For the life of him he knew not what to say. "But, if you are Mr. Gerald Lovell, it is certain that you are. Besides, I see it in your face. There is genius in your eyes. Mr. Lovell, how am I to thank you for this honor you have done me?" Moving to him she held out to him her hand. He gave her his. She retained his—or rather part of it—in her small palm. "If I am ever destined to attain to immortality, it is to your brush it will be owing. Monsieur, permit me to salute the master."

Before he had an inkling of her intention she raised his hand and touched it to her lips. He withdrew it quickly.

"Madame!"

She exhibited no signs of discomposure.

"I was at your Academy with a friend, not half an hour ago. I beheld miles of mediocrity. Suddenly I saw—my face! my own face! glancing at me from the walls! *Ah quelle plaisir!* But my face—how many times more beautiful! My face depicted by the hand of a great artist! by the brush of a poet and a genius! Monsieur, you have placed on me ten thousand obligations."

She gave him the most sweeping curtsy with which he had ever been favored, and in her eyes was laughter all the time. He was recovering his presence of mind. He felt that it was time to put a stop to the lady's flow of flowery language. He was about to do so when a question she put to him again sent half his senses flying.

"There is one thing I wished to ask you, Monsieur. When and where did I sit to you for my portrait? I do not remember to have the pleasure and the honor of meeting you before." The lady's laughing eyes were fixed intently on his face. "And yet, as I look at you, a sort of shadowy recollection comes to me of a previous encounter; it is very strange! Monsieur, where was it we encountered—you and I?"

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