

A VISION OF THE NIGHT.

(Concluded.)

'But that is certain!'

'He requested me to furnish him with your address. When I informed him that I was not acquainted with Madame he desired to know who had authorized me to send your portrait to a public exhibition. I observed that I was not aware that it was the portrait of Madame, since the face in the picture was but the study of a face which I had seen in a dream.'

'In a dream! You did not tell him the little history?'

'I entered into no particulars.'

'I entreat you, Monsieur, not to tell him the little history. There will be a scandal; he is so quick to misconceive.'

'I will endeavor to observe Madame's wishes.'

'It is like a romance, is it not, Monsieur? That night I left my husband. In effect he had become unbearable. I have seen and heard nothing of him since. But I am beginning to become conscious of a desire to meet with him again, I know not why! I suppose when one loves one's husband truly, one wishes to meet him—once a year. I do not wish our reconciliation to be inaugurated by a quarrel—no, I entreat Monsieur not to recount to him that little history.'

'I should inform Madame that I expect Comte d'Humieres to return.'

'Return? Where? Here? When?'

'Very shortly—with a friend. In fact, unless I am mistaken, he comes already.'

The lady listened.

'It is Philippe's voice! *Mon Dieu!* He must not find me here.'

'But, Madame—'

'Ah, the screen! It is like a farce at the Palais Royale—is it not a fact? I will be your model, Monsieur, behind the screen!'

'Madame!'

Before he could interpose to prevent her the lady vanished behind the screen. The door of the studio opened and the Vicomte d'Humieres entered, accompanied by his friend.

The Vicomte's friend was a gentleman of a figure which is not uncommon in France, even to-day. His attitude suggested a ramrod, he breathed powder and shot, and he bristled—What shall we say?—with bayonets. The Vicomte performed the ceremony of introduction.

'Mr. Gerald Lovell, permit me to introduce to your courteous consideration my friend, M. Victor Berigny!'

M. Berigny bowed, ceremoniously. Mr. Lovell only nodded—his thoughts were behind the screen. The Vicomte turned to his friend.

'Victor, I have explained to you that I have already had the pleasure of an interview with Mr. Gerald Lovell.' M. Berigny bowed. 'I have also explained to you that I have desired him to inform me by whose authority he exhibits a portrait of my wife in a public exhibition. To that he has replied that his picture, "A Vision of the Night," is not a portrait of my wife. I request you, Victor, to state in Mr. Gerald Lovell's presence whether that picture, in your opinion, is or is not a portrait of my wife.'

'Certainly, it is a portrait.'

'I thank you, Victor. It remains for me to once more request, in your presence, Mr. Gerald Lovell to explain how it was that he happened to dream of the face of my wife last August at the Hotel de Flandre at Spa. Mr. Gerald Lovell, I have the honor to await your explanation.'

Mr. Lovell's thoughts ran screenward.

'What the deuce shall I do if he discovers her behind the screen?'

'Monsieur, I am waiting.'

'If he does discover her there'll be a row.'

'I am still waiting, Mr. Gerald Lovell.'

With each repetition of the statement the Vicomte's tone became more acidulated. The artist arrived at a sudden resolution.

'Then I am afraid, Vicomte, that you will have to wait.'

'Is it possible that I understand your meaning, Mr. Gerald Lovell?'

'My language is sufficiently simple.'

'In France, Mr. Gerald Lovell, an artist is supposed to be a gentleman.'

'And so in England, Vicomte. And, therefore, when an artist is interrupted at his work by another gentleman he feels himself at liberty to beg that other gentleman to excuse him.'

Mr. Lovell waved his hand affably in the direction of the door. The Vicomte's countenance assumed a peculiar pallor.

M. Berigny approached the painter—with a ramrod down his back.

'I have the honor, Monsieur, to request from you the name of a friend.'

'Of a friend? What for?'

'Ah, Monsieur, to arrange the preliminaries.'

'Is it possible that you suppose that I am going to fight a duel?'

'Monsieur intends, then, to offer an explanation to my friend?'

'M. Berigny, I do not wish to say to you anything unworthy an English gentleman, but I do beg you to believe that, because you choose to be an idiot and your friend chooses to be an idiot, it does not follow that I choose to be an idiot, too.'

'Monsieur!'

'One other observation. I have not seen much of you, M. Berigny, but that little has not disposed me to see more. May I therefore ask you to leave my studio?'

'Monsieur!'

'Or must I turn you out?'

'Turn me out?'

Mr. Lovell moved a step towards M. Berigny.

'I have asked you, as a gentleman, to leave my studio.'

'Monsieur, you are a coward!'

The painter's eyes gleamed. But he kept his temper pretty well considering.

'You appear to be taught singularly ill manners in your native country, sir. I will endeavor to teach you better manners here. Are you going? Or must I eject you?'

'Polisson!'

That was M. Berigny's answer. There was just a momentary hesitation. Then, grasping M. Berigny by the shoulders, Mr. Lovell began to move him, more rapidly than gently, in the direction of the door. There would probably have been a slightly undignified scramble had not a diversion been created by the opening of a door and the entrance of Mr. Warren. That gentleman glanced from one person to another.

'I beg your pardon,' he observed. 'I hope I don't intrude.'

Mr. Lovell laughed, a little forcedly. His complexion was distinctly ruddy.

'Not at all! I wish you had come in sooner. The most ridiculous thing has happened.'

'Indeed! I have an eye for the ridiculous.'

'You know that picture of mine, "A Vision of the Night!?"'

'I've heard of it.'

'This gentleman says that it's a portrait of his wife.'

Mr. Lovell pointed to Vicomte d'Humieres.

'No! Then, in that case, this gentleman's wife came into your bedroom in the middle of the night, and—kissed you, wasn't it?'

Mr. Warren spoke in the innocence of his heart, but at that moment Mr. Lovell could have struck his boyhood's friend. He was conscious that the Vicomte's unfriendly eyes were fixed upon his face.

'So! That is it! You—you!—The Vicomte moved a step forward, then checked himself. 'Tell me, where is my wife at this instant?'

'I decline to give you any information of any kind whatever.'

'You decline?' The Vicomte raised his hand. Mr. Warren interposed to avert the blow.

'He declines for the simple reason that he has never seen your wife isn't that so, Gerald?'

Mr. Lovell hesitated. He scarcely saw his way to a denial while the lady was behind the screen.

'You see! He does not even dare to lie!'

'Don't talk nonsense, sir. Gerald, why don't you tell the man that you have never seen the woman in your life?'

'I repeat that I decline to give this person any information of any kind whatever.'

'You decline?'

The Vicomte uttered the words in a kind of strangled screech. His patience was exhausted. He rushed at Mr. Lovell. Mr. Lovell, probably forgetting himself on the impulse of the moment, swung the Vicomte round against the screen. It tottered, reeled, and raising a cloud of dust it fell with a bang to the floor.

It was a leaf out of Sheridan.

For an instant the several members of that little party did not distinctly realize what it was that had happened. Then they saw. There was a pause—a curious pause. Their attitudes betrayed a charming diversity of emotions. The Vicomte, his coat a little disarranged, owing to the somewhat rough handling which he had just received, stood and glared. M. Berigny, more ramrodly than ever, stared. Mr. Warren gasped. Mr. Lovell's quickened breathing, crimsoned cheeks and flashing eyes seemed to suggest that his breast was a tumult of conflicting feelings. The lady, whose presence had been so unexpectedly revealed, stood behind the fallen screen, with the most charming air of innocence in the world, and she smiled.

It was she who broke the silence. She held out her hand to the Vicomte.

'Bon jour, Philippe!'

'Ah-h-h! The Vicomte drew himself away with a sort of shuddering exclamation. 'Antonette! It is you! It cannot be?'

'My dear Philippe—why not?'

'Why not? She asks why not!' The Vicomte held out his hands, as though he appealed to the eternal verities. 'Traitor! Once more is woman false and man betrayed.'

The Vicomte's gesture was worthy of the tragic stage—in France. The lady still held out her hand and still she smiled.

'My dear Philippe—try comedy!'

'Comedy? Ah, yes, I will try comedy—the comedy of r-r-revenge!' The Vicomte distinctly rolled his r's. He turned to Mr. Lovell. 'I will kill you, even though for killing you, by the law of England, I am hanged. Victor, where is my hat?'

The Vicomte put this question to his friend with a peculiar coldness. M. Berigny shrugged his shoulders.

'How should I know? It is not a question of a hat.'

'As you say, it is not a question of a hat. It is a question—the Vicomte moved toward Mr. Lovell—'of that!'

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