

THE MYSTERIOUS FACE.

I AM an old-fashioned old boy, and when I was a child, I was an old-fashioned young boy; so of what fashion I really am it is hard to conjecture. I have tried to read Mr. Thackeray's works, but I do not think I quite understand them, not being literary, and feeling puzzled by satirical remarks, especially when I know beforehand that the author is a wit, and that I ought, therefore, to find a hidden meaning in every line; yes from what I have been able to make out, I should say that I was a *foggy*. I do not belong to any club, though my means are comfortable; I live in London, and have often been asked whether I should like to join the Polynices or Artaxerxes. Well, I should like; and yet, you see, I could never exactly make up my mind, because I never have belonged to a club. No; there is a tavern I frequent, where the cooking is most excellent, and where I dine daily at the same minute, in the same corner. Once that corner was usurped; I tried to dine at another table, in vain! I was unwell the next day, and had to take medicine; but the waiter, Charles, has been very careful ever since; and I believe, that rather than allow me to be subjected again to similar inconvenience, the proprietor would feed a succession of beggars, gratis, in that place for the entire afternoon, to keep it for me, just as noblemen with younger sons at college present octogenarians to their livings. Why must I dine in that particular corner? Because I always have done so. That unintelligible remark about noblemen's sons and livings is not mine, but my nephew Tom's; Tom, whom I have employed to write out this account, from my dictation, insists on putting in his remarks, will 'touch up' my narrative, as he calls it, and I do not quite like it; no more do I like his slapping me so hard on the back, and rubbing down the calves of my trousers when I have been standing for some time with my back to a large fire; and I do not know why I should let him and everybody play upon me, but I always have. There is also a cigar divan to which I go every morning at ten o'clock, and read the newspaper till half-past twelve, smoking during that time two cigars. One paper always lasts me the whole time, as I peruse every column; and yet, somehow, if any one in the course of the afternoon asks me about the news, I find it has all slipped out of my head. No, Tom, I am not asleep all the time; if I were, my cigar would go out, which it does not—often. I remember my childhood: we always had roast-beef and Yorkshire pudding on Saturdays, cold meat and fruit-pie on Sundays. I can also call to mind my boyhood and school-days, for never have I in after-life been able to discover such toffs as that sold at the dame's round the corner, or such open tarts as appertained to the pastry-cook's higher up the street. I was about eighteen when I first discovered that earth possessed a charm, not indeed equal to eating and drinking, but only secondary to those pleasures: the name of *woman* began to stir my heart; I indulged in reveries and poetical fancies; and often in the midst of the joys of some unusually piquant dish, have I thought how sweet it would be to see a fair form gracing the opposite seat, enhancing the flavour by her sympathy and, when there was enough for both, participation.

When in the presence of ladies, however, I was bashful, embarrassed, awkward; I trod on their dresses, spill scalding coffee down their backs, pulled all their music off the piano, split their fans, dropped and broke their smelling-bottles, and made myself generally disagreeable; so that I retired early from the field, and made up my mind to die an old bachelor. Still, I could not stifle a yearning towards beauty, which, after a while, took the settled form of a fancy for painting and sculpture; at least as far as those arts took the female face and form for their study. I never bought, but I potted about sales and exhibitions, and spent hours daily in staring in at shop-windows, and turning over second-hand prints. The society of women's pictures is certainly not so thrilling as direct communication with the real article; but then it is more comfortable—the bewitching smile in a painting never turns to a frown; the expression of the features fades not into bored apathy immediately you are left alone with it. You have not got to tickle its vanity—you feel no jealousy when others gaze on it; on the contrary, the admiration of friends enhances your pleasure; and if you are poetically gifted, what charming scenes, tender and domestic—oh, how far above reality!—may the imagination conjure up. Even I, who hate poetry—that is, I can't read it, can't make out what the writer is driving at—even I can fancy all sorts of things, and encounter all sorts of adventures while gazing at a good picture of a beautiful woman. I never came to understand anything about the art as an art, and it was some time before I picked up picture-slang. For instance, one day a friend came up to me at a sale, and interrupted my musings over a painting, by whispering: 'Are you thinking of bidding? Be warned, my dear fellow, and do not go high—quite a take in! not a Titian! by no means a Titian!' 'Perhaps not,' I replied, 'but very pretty; I doubt whether Titian herself had a better leg and

ankle.' Of course I came to know better than that, but still I am not yet a first-rate amateur.

It was when I was about thirty that I was very much struck one May-day by a face in the exhibition of the Royal Academy. It was that of a full-sized Judith, who was standing in a striking, if not strictly feminine attitude, with a bloody sword in one hand, a dripping head in the other, and her eyes turned up to heaven. That face fascinated me; I waited patiently till a seat opposite the picture was vacant, and then plumped myself down, and, heedless of the connoisseurs, country-cousins, and flirting couples, who trod on my toes, and hustled me on every side, there I sat and gazed my — (No, Tom, that is not so elegant; scratch it out)—gazed to satiety (that is better).

I was fascinated. Day after day did I return to feast my eyes upon that picture; and the R. A. was making quite a nice little competency out of me in shillings, when I began to find myself lying awake at night thinking of those upturned eyes, and horrible symptom, my appetite showed signs of feebleness. Having no fancy to become a second Pig, Pig (What's his name, Tom?), Pigmallyon, I left off my visits to Trafalgar Square; and as Ovid tells us the best remedy for love is to multiply the objects of our admiration—proving thereby that Hahnemann was not the first homoeopathist—I patronised the exhibition in Pall Mall, determined to find a rival for Judith. In the first room there was nothing particular to arrest my attention; but the moment I entered the second, I was struck all of a heap by a Siren. No!—yes! it was! The attitude was different, the expression was different, the dress was very different; indeed, the present lady only wore her hair, which was fortunately very long and plentiful, but still there was the identical nose, the very charming chin, the same bewitching mouth. It was a fate, then; for how could two artists have struck out the same idea by chance? I left the room confused, bewildered; and the waiter at Bob's that day looked astonished when I told him I was ready for the Siren; nor was his surprise mitigated when I ordered a pint of Judith. I now no longer attempted to resist my destiny, but gave myself up to rapt seraphic contemplation of the ideal (Ah, cabbage! Uncle has one of Bulwer Lytton's books in his hand.—Tom), visiting one or other of the exhibitions every day until they closed, and then I felt a void in my existence I had never known before. I grew melancholy and despondent, and consulted a medical man, who prescribed complete change of scene; to obtain which I made up my mind to quit my native land, and take up my residence, for a fortnight, at Boulogne. I pass over the horrors, the perils, the miseries of the voyage, which lasted upwards of two fearful hours, and proceed to chronicle my extreme good-fortune in discovering a boarding-house where the hostess was English, the guests English and Irish, the servants English, and, oh! the cookery English. Here I took up my abode, and sought once more the distractions of society—that is, I played Pope Joan with the old ladies for counters at a penny the dozen; I walked on the pier, and saw the people bathing, and the packets come in; and I subscribed to the *Etablissement des Bains*, and sat in a corner on the ball-nights. Plunged in this vortex of dissipation, the face which had so long haunted me began to fade from my remembrance, when one day, the third after my arrival, as I stood on the pier and watched the debarkation from the London packet, I saw a lady advancing alone, along the plank leading from the vessel to the shore. Her veil was down, yet I could distinguish the outline of her features, and my heart throbbed with emotion. With a stately step, she pursued her way to the custom-house door, and then, ere she entered, turned, and to see more clearly where her luggage was being carried to, raised the envious veil. It was she! the Judith! the Siren! the ideal of two artists, and mine. I put the burning end of my cigar to the back of my hand to see whether I was awake or not, and an instantaneous blister proved the fact indisputably. Who shall describe my bewilderment? I felt like the he-dancer in a ballet when the principal she-dancer bursts at unexpected moments out of cupboards, limonpresses, laurel-bushes, flower-beds, and tombstones. Was it angelic? Was it diabolic? Was it a coincidence?

I went home with an oppressive presentiment that something was going to happen to somebody somewhere, and mused till dinner.

We sat at meals in the order of our arrival, and got promotion when those above us departed; and as I had hitherto been the last, I was surprised to see a clean napkin laid next to mine below me. We did not have clean napkins daily, but folded up our dirty ones, and stuck them through a ring with a number on it, which we invariably forgot; so the clean napkin attracted attention, and Mrs. Jones, our hostess, explained that we were to have an addition to our circle, a Mrs. Plantagenet, widow. My heart gave a bound in my bosom—what if it should be her! Pooh, nonsense; it was most probably some dumpy old woman with a red nose, who took snuff, and next to whom it would be very unpleasant to sit. Be she whom she might, the stranger

was late; the soup, the fish passed away, the *entremets* were handed round before the door opened, and—it was she! I thought I should have swooned, collapsed, died of apoplexy, of rush of blood to the heart, and believe that some or all of these calamities would have happened to me, had not a heaven-directed mouthful of oyster-pâté gone down the wrong way.

'Have a glass of water?' said she in the most natural way in the world, as if we had known each other for months.

Could she have seen pictures of me? Was I her ideal, as she was mine?

'Anything going on here?' she asked, when I had somewhat recovered. 'What's at the theatre?'

I replied that I had not been there, not understanding the language.

'Oh, you must learn it,' she said; 'it is soon done, if you are plucky enough to talk, and don't mind being laughed at when you make mistakes.'

'There is the Etablissement, where they dance.'

'That is all right. I adore dancing; don't you?'

'Yes, a little; that is, I am rather clumsy at it.'

'Oh, soon learn—practice in the evening, take lessons in the morning. Is the champagne good here?'

I hastened to order a bottle, and offer her a glass. I had never got on so well with a lady before. I was like the simple Simon (Query, *Cymon*—Tom) of antiquity, Love had polished me. When I sought my pillow that evening, two things astonished me: one was, the manner in which my destiny had taken my education in hand; the other that, as a widow, she must have been some one else's destiny beforehand; but doubtless that was a forced match, an ill-assorted union. Bashful and unenterprising as I naturally was with the fair sex, my present advantages might have been lost from the mere want of being followed up, had not a series of minor events—lacking individually the same startling and supernatural character which distinguished those employed to bring us together, but still bearing the stamp of destiny when considered as a whole—combined to draw Mrs. Plantagenet and myself into closer intimacy. Thus, the morning after her arrival, I was smoking my after-breakfast cigar in the paved court at the back of the house, when the Venetian shutters of a window on the ground-floor were opened, and she appeared, clad in a delightful fresh morning-dress. She started, smiled, and bowed. I apologised for the cigar. It was the scent of all others she most preferred, which emboldened me to remain near the window. What a beautiful day it was! how she would enjoy a walk, if she only had a companion. I offered to attend her; she demurred a little, and saw no harm—we were not known. In a quarter of an hour we were quite familiar. Had I had a dancing-lesson yet? No! She herself would teach me a few steps. In two hours we were walking arm-in-arm up to the Napoleon column; in two days we were dancing together at the Etablissement; in a week, we called each other Leonora and Edward; in ten days, I was an engaged man.

In consequence, as she informed me, of a distressing lawsuit at that time depending, it was not convenient for Leonora to return to England just then; and as I had certain affairs to arrange, and certain relations (a word rhyming with expectations) whose advice it was desirable to ask, and, so far as it coincided with my own views follow, it was decided that I should cross the Channel, settle everything, and return to Bliss; while Bliss remained at the boarding-house at Boulogne, and occupied herself in looking out for comfortable lodgings in the upper town. It certainly saves one a good deal of trouble to marry a widow.

By Leonora's advice I went straight from Boulogne to London, for though the voyage that way is of longer duration, you can go to bed and sleep all the time, or at least you can try to do so; so I took a berth on board the *Stunakpooop*, and, in order to secure it, undressed and turned in before the vessel left the quay. The experiment was to some extent successful, for though the motion caused me to feel giddy, bewildered, and helpless, I was spared that horrible sensation of approaching dissolution, accompanied with tickling in the sides, which I had before experienced, whenever the packet shot rapidly down the side of some unusually big wave, and indeed escaped all the worst symptoms of the malady.

After I had lain quiescent on my back for about three hours, two gentlemen came into the cabin whom, from their long hair, beards, and general cut, I rightly conjectured to be artists.

'Well, Jack, as it is raining cats and dogs on deck, and the saloon is full of temporary invalids drinking brandy-and-water, I suppose this is about the cosiest nook in the whole ship. Upper or lower?'

'You have the longest legs. Lower.'

'All right; here goes!' and the taller of the two swung himself up into the berth immediately opposite mine, the other rolling into that underneath him.

'Jack!'

'Yes!'

'Can one smoke?'

'No!'

'What a bore.' And they plunged into general talk. They discussed politics, cookery, operas, preachers, everything; but their principal conversation was of paintings and painters; to all of which I listened in a dreamy way, passively, not paying attention, when suddenly a word caught my ear which startled me like an electric shock—Judith!

It was the end of something said by the under man, and the upper directly answered: 'O yes, I remember now; she sat also for Blower's Siren, didn't she?'

'That's her. Pity she is so extravagant. Over head and ears in debt. Can't put her foot in England, they say. I saw her yesterday on the pier.'

'Speak to her?'

'Not I; she had the prize in tow; it might have spoiled sport. Besides, she tipped me a little frown.'

'Ah! and you say he is well off?'

'Very, they say. He won't be long so, poor beggar!'

'And he is really going to marry her?'

'Safe.'

'What a consummate ass! It is rather a bore though; perhaps he won't let her sit.'

'Not while his money lasts, perhaps; but that cannot be long, in her hands; and then he cannot be a very particular sort of chap to marry her at all.'

Only Dante could describe my feelings; suffice it that on arriving in London I made searching inquiries into the antecedents of Mrs. Plantagenet, the result of which was to determine me to break off the match.

It is pleasant to be a wife who is a model of virtue, sobriety, industry, good-humour; but not one who is a model of Venus rising from the sea.

An enlightened British jury, however, saw the matter from a different point of view, and when the action was brought against me, brought in a verdict for the plaintiff—damages £500.

Missouri hogs are so fat that in order to find out where their heads are it is necessary to make them squeal and then judge by the sound.



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