

A Mysterious Portrait

By Mark Rutherford (William Hale White)

I remember some years ago that I went to spend a Christmas with an old friend who was a bachelor. He might, perhaps, have been verging on sixty at the time of my visit. On his study wall hung the portrait—merely the face-of a singularly lovely woman. I did not like to ask any questions about it. There was no family likeness to him, and we always thought that early in life he had been disappointed. But one day, seeing that I could hardly keep my eyes off it, he said to me, “I have had that picture for many years, although you have never seen it before. If you like, I will tell you its history.” He then told me the following story.

“In the year 1817, I was beginning life, and struggling to get a living. I had just started in business. I was alone, without much capital, and my whole energies were utterly absorbed in my adventure. In those days the master, instead of employing a commercial traveller, often used to travel himself, and one evening I had to start for the North to see some customers. I chose to go by night in order to save time, and as it was bitterly cold and I was weak in the chest, I determined to take a place inside the coach. We left St. Martin’s-le-Grand at about half-past eight, and I was the sole passenger. I could not sleep, but fell into a kind of doze, which was not sufficiently deep to prevent my rousing myself at every inn where we changed horses. Nobody intruded upon me, and I continued in the same drowsy, half-waking, half-slumbering condition till we came to the last stage before reaching Eaton Socon. I was then thoroughly awake, and continued awake until after the coach started. But presently I fell sound asleep for, perhaps, half-an-hour, and woke suddenly. To my great surprise I found a lady with me. How she came there I could not conjecture. I was positive that she did not get in when the coach last stopped. She sat at the opposite corner, so that I could see her well, and a more exquisite face I thought I had never beheld. It was not quite English—rather pale, earnest and abstracted, and with a certain intentness about the eyes which denoted a mind accustomed to dwell upon ideal objects. I was not particularly shy with women, and perhaps if she had been any ordinary, pretty girl I might have struck up a conversation with her. But I was dumb, for I hardly dared to intrude. It would have been necessary to begin by some commonplaces, and somehow my lips refused the utterance of commonplaces. Nor was this strange. If I had happened to find myself opposite the great Lord Byron in a coach I certainly should not have thrust myself upon him, and how should I dare to thrust myself upon a person who seemed as great and grand as she, although I did not know her name? So I remained perfectly still, only venturing by the light of the moon to watch her through my half-shut eyes. Just before we got to Eaton, although I was never more thoroughly or even excitedly awake in my life, I must have lost consciousness for a minute. I came to myself when the coach was pulling up at an inn. I looked round instantly, and my companion was gone. I jumped out on pretence of getting something to eat and drink, and hastily asked the guard where the lady who had just got out was put into the coach. He said they had never stopped since they had last changed horses, and that I must have been dreaming. He knew nothing about the lady, and he looked at me suspiciously, as if he thought I was drunk. I for my part was perfectly confident that I had not been deluded by an apparition of my own brain. I had never suffered from ghost-like visitations of any kind, and my thoughts, owing to my preoccupation with business, had not run upon women in any way whatever. More convincing

still, I had noticed that the lady wore a light blue neckerchief; and when I went back into the coach I found that she had left it behind her. I took it up, and I have it to this day. You may imagine how my mind dwelt upon that night.

I got to Newcastle, did what I had to do, came back again, and made a point this time of sleeping at Eaton Socon in order to make inquiries. Everybody recollected the arrival of the down coach by which I travelled, and everybody was perfectly sure that no lady was in it. I produced the scarf, and asked whether anybody who lived near had been observed to wear it. Eaton is a little village, and all the people in it were as well known as if they belonged to one family, but nobody recognised it. It was certainly not English. I thought about the affair for months, partly because I was smitten with my visitor, and partly because I was half afraid my brain had been a little upset by worry. However, in time, the impression faded.

Meanwhile I began to get on in the world, and after some three or four years my intense application was rewarded by riches. In seven or eight years I had become wealthy, and I began to think about settling myself in life. I had made the acquaintance of influential people in London, and more particularly of a certain baronet whom I had met in France while taking a holiday. Although I was in business I came of good family, and our acquaintance grew into something more. He had two or three daughters, to each of whom he was able to give a good marriage portion, and I became engaged to one of them. I don't know that there was much enthusiasm about our courtship. She was a very pleasant, good-looking girl, and although I can acquit myself of all mercenary motives in proposing to her, I cannot say that the highest motives were operative. I was as thousands of others are. I had got weary of loneliness; I wanted a home. I cast about me to see who amongst all the women I knew would best make me a wife. I selected this one, and perhaps the thought of her money may have been a trifle determinatory. I was not overmastered by a passion which I could not resist, nor was I coldly indifferent. If I had married her we should probably have lived a life of customary married comfort, and even of happiness; the same level, and perhaps slightly grey life which is lived by the ordinary English husband and wife. Things had gone so far that it was settled we were to be married in the spring of 1826, and I had begun to look out for a house, and make purchases in anticipation of house-keeping.

In 1825 I had to go to Bristol. I shall never forget to the day of my death one morning in that city. I had had my breakfast, and was going out to see the head of one of the largest firms in the city, with whom I had an appointment. I met him in the street, and I noted before he spoke that there was something the matter. I soon found out what it was. The panic of 1825 had begun; three great houses in London had failed, and brought him down. He was a ruined man, and so was I. I managed to stagger back to the hotel, and found letters there confirming all he had said. For some two or three days I was utterly prostrate, and could not summon sufficient strength to leave Bristol. One of the first things I did when I came to myself was to write to the baronet, telling him what had happened, that I was altogether penniless, and that in honour! felt bound to release his daughter from her engagement. I had a sympathising letter from him in return, saying that he was greatly afflicted at my misfortune, that his daughter was nearly broken-hearted, but that she had come to the conclusion that perhaps it would be best to accept my very kind offer. Much as she loved me, she felt that her health was far from strong, and although he had always meant to endow her generously on her marriage, her fortune alone would not enable her to procure those luxuries which, for her delicate constitution, alas! were necessaries. But the main reason with her was that she was sure that, with my independence, I should be unhappy if I felt that my wife's property was my support. His letter was long, but although much wrapped up, this was the gist of it. I went back to London, sold every stick I had, and tried to get a situation as

clerk in some house, doing the business in which I had been engaged. I failed, for the distress was great, and I was reduced nearly to my last sovereign when I determined to go down to Newcastle, and try the friend there whom I had not seen since 1817.

It was once more winter, and, although I was so poor, I was obliged to ride inside the coach again, for I was much troubled with my ancient enemy—the weakness in the chest. The incidents of my former visit I had nearly forgotten till we came near to Eaton Socon, and then they returned to me. But now it was a dull January day, with a bitter thaw, and my fellow passengers were a Lincolnshire squire, with his red-faced wife, who never spoke a syllable to me, and by reason of their isolation seemed to make the thaw all the more bitter, the fen levels all the more dismally flat, and the sky all the more leaden. At last we came to Newcastle. During the latter part of the journey I was alone, my Lincolnshire squire and his lady having left me on the road. It was about seven o'clock in the evening when we arrived; a miserable night, with the snow just melting under foot, and the town was wrapped in smoke and fog.

I was so depressed that I hardly cared what became of me, and when I stepped out of the coach wished that I had been content to lie down and die in London. I could not put up at the coaching hotel, as it was too expensive, but walked on to one which was cheaper. I almost lost my way, and had wandered down a narrow street, which at every step became more and more squalid, and at last ended opposite a factory gate. Hard by was a wretched marine store shop, in the window of which were old iron, old teapots, a few old Bibles, and other miscellaneous effects. I stepped in to ask for directions to the Cross Key. Coming out, whom should I see crossing the road, as if to meet me, but the very lady who rode with me in the coach to Eaton some nine years ago. There was no mistaking her. She seemed scarcely a day older. The face was as lovely and as inspired as ever. I was almost beside myself. I leaned against the railing of the shop, and the light from the window shone full on her. She came straight towards me on to the pavement; looked at me, and turned up the street. I followed her till we got to the end, determined not to lose sight of her; and we reached an open, broad thoroughfare. She stopped at a bookseller's, and went in. I was not more than two minutes after her; but when I entered she was not there. A shopman was at the counter, and I asked him whether a lady, my sister, had not just left the shop. No lady, he said, had been there for half-an-hour. I went back to the marine store shop. The footsteps were still there which I saw her make as she crossed. I knelt down, tracing them with my fingers to make sure I was not deceived by my eyes, and was more than ever confounded. At last I got to my inn, and went to bed a prey to the strangest thoughts.

In the morning I was a little better. The stagnant blood had been stirred by the encounter of the night before, and though I was much agitated, and uncertain whether my brain was actually sound or not, I was sufficiently self-possessed and sensible to call upon my friend and explain my errand. He did what he could to help me, and I became his clerk in Newcastle. For a time I was completely broken, but gradually I began to recover my health and spirits a little. I had little or no responsibility, and nothing to absorb me after office hours. As a relief and an occupation, I tried to take up with a science, and chose geology; On Sundays I used to make long rambling excursions, and for a while I was pleased with my new toy. But by degrees it became less and less interesting. I suppose I had no real love for it. Furthermore, I had no opportunities for expression. My sorrow had secluded me. I demanded more from those around me than I had any right to expect. As a rule, we all of us demand from the world more than we are justified in demanding, especially if we suffer; and because the world is not so constituted that it can respond to us as eagerly and as sympathetically as we respond to ourselves, we become morose. So it was with me. People were sorry for me; but I knew that my trouble did not disturb them

deeply, that when they left me, their faces, which were forcibly contracted while in my presence, instantly expanded into their ordinary self-satisfaction, and that if I were to die I should be forgotten a week after the funeral. I therefore recoiled from men, and frequently, with criminal carelessness and prodigality, rejected many an offer of kindness, not because I did not need it, but because I wanted too much of it.

My science, as I have said, was a failure. I cannot tell how it may be with some exceptionally heroic natures, but with me expression in some form or other, if the thing which should be expressed is to live, is an absolute necessity. I cannot read unless I have somebody to whom I can speak about my reading, and I lose almost all power of thinking if thought after thought remains with me. Expression is as indispensable to me as expiration of breath. Inspiration of the air is a necessity, but continued inspiration of air without expiration of the same is an impossibility. The geology was neglected, and at first I thought it was because it was geology, and I tried something else. For some months I fancied I had found a solace in chemistry. With my savings I purchased some apparatus, and began to be proficient. But the charm faded from this also; the apparatus was put aside, and the sight of it lying disused only made my dissatisfaction and melancholy the more profound. Amidst all my loneliness, I had never felt the least inclination to any baser pleasures, nor had I ever seen a woman for whom I felt even the most transient passion. My spectral friend—if spectre she was—dominated my existence, and seemed to prevent not only all licentiousness, but all pleasure, except of the most superficial kind, in other types of beauty. This need be no surprise to anybody. I have known cases in which the face of a singularly lovely woman, seen only for a few moments in the street, has haunted a man all through his life, and deeply affected it. In time I was advanced in my position as clerk, and would have married, but I had not the least inclination thereto. I did not believe in the actual reality of my vision, and had no hope of ever meeting in the flesh the apparition of the coach and the dingy street; I felt sure that there was some mistake, something wrong with me—the probabilities were all in favour of my being deceived; but still the dream possessed me, and every woman who for a moment appealed to me was tried by that standard and found wanting.

After some years had passed, during which I had scarcely been out of Newcastle, I took a holiday, and went up to London. It was about July. I was now a man on the wrong side of fifty, shy, reserved, with a reputation for constitutional melancholy, a shadowy creature, of whom nobody took much notice and who was noticed by nobody. While in London I went to see the pictures at the Academy. The place was thronged, and I was tired; I just looked about me, and was on the point of coming out wearied, when in a side room where there were crayon drawings, I caught sight of one of a face. I was amazed beyond measure. It was the face which had been my companion for so many years. There could be no mistake about it; even the neckerchief was tied as I remembered it so well, the very counterpart of the treasure I still preserved so sacredly at home. I was almost overcome with a faintness, with a creeping sensation all over the head, as if something were giving way, and with a shock of giddiness. I went and got a catalogue, found out the name of the artist, and saw that the picture had merely the name of “Stella” affixed to it. It might be a portrait, or it might not. After gazing myself almost blind at it, I went instantly to the artist’s house. He was at home. He seemed a poor man, and was evidently surprised at any inquiry after his picture so late in the season. I asked him who sat for it. “Nobody,” he said; “it was a mere fancy sketch. There might be a reminiscence in it of a girl I knew in France years ago; but she is long since dead, and I don’t think that anybody who knew her would recognise a likeness in it. In fact, I am sure they would not.” The price of the drawing was not much, although it was a good deal for me. I said instantly I would have it, and managed to get the

money together by scraping up all my savings out of the savings bank. That is the very picture which you now see before you. I do not pretend to explain everything which I have told you. I have long since given up the attempt, and I suppose it must be said that I have suffered from some passing disorder of the brain, although that theory is not sound at all points, and there are circumstances inconsistent with it.”

The next morning my friend went to his office, after an early breakfast. His hours were long, and I was obliged to leave Newcastle before his return. So I bade him good-bye before he left home. I never saw him again. Two years afterwards I was shocked to see an announcement in the Times of his death. Knowing his lonely way of life, I went down to Newcastle to gather what I could about his illness and last moments. He had caught cold, and died of congestion of the lungs. His landlady said that he had made a will, and that what little property had remained after paying his funeral expenses had been made over to a hospital. I was anxious to know where the picture was. She could not tell me. It had disappeared just before his death, and nobody knew what had become of it.