

The Picture on the Wall

By Katharine Tynan

“Upon my word, Millicent”—with an impatient laugh—there are times I could swear your heart wasn’t in it; times when, for all your childlike transparency, I could almost believe there was another man somewhere to whom you had given all that ought to be mine.”

“Oh, hush, hush,” answered a soft voice; “don’t say such things, my darling; they are treason against our love.”

“Poor little woman,” said the man repentantly. “I oughtn’t to have said that, for I know it is not true. But you are cold-blooded, little girl—deucedly cold-blooded. Here have I been talking about our honeymoon—our honeymoon that you seem so determined to postpone—and cheating myself by talking of it into a half-belief that it had arrived, and yet, when I look in those milky eyes of yours to see if I have put a spark of fire into them, I find only a wandering look of alarm. Is it any wonder you baffle and distress me?”

The girl lifted up the eyes he had called milky. The unusual epithet was the right one in her case. The wide, innocent-looking eyes were of a curious pale blue, nearer the colour of spilt milk than anything else one could think of. There was a slightly scared expression about them, and the sensitive lines of the mouth, the fineness of the silky hair, the frequent movements of the slender hands, all spoke of a highly-strung, nervous organization.

“I am afraid,” she said, “with me love means fear. You are so strong and confident. While I, since I have known and loved you, I have realized with anguish the thousand and one chances that may snatch us away from each other for ever.”

“The more reason for hastening our marriage. If I had your shadowy fears, Millicent—as I have not, for you are healthy, my white rose, despite your too active imagination—I should scarcely breathe till we belonged to each other. After that the deluge.”

The girl trembled violently within his arms, murmuring his name half inaudibly.

“‘Geoffrey, Geoffrey,’” he repeated after her. “But what have I said to frighten you, my sweetheart? Nothing can separate us. It is only your timidity that delays our heaven. Why, Millicent, why? Do you know sometimes I could crush you to bend your will to mine? What a will, little girl, though you look so soft and yielding!”

“I will yield everything once we are married, Geoffrey.”

“Yes, darling,” said the man, suddenly mollified; “but when is that to be?”

“Let us forget about it, Geoffrey, for a little while. Let us be lovers. Marriage so often means the end of love, or, at least, the end of romance.”

“It shall not with us, you foolish child. I promise you that, if that is all you fear.”

She gave a little tired sigh as of one who gives in out of weariness.

“Poor Geoffrey,” she said, stroking his cheek. “It is hard that you should be worried with my inexplicable whims. Wait a little longer patiently. When you come to Dormer Court next month I promise you that then I will fix the date—if you still desire it.”

The man laughed.

“If I still desire it, sweetheart! Well, thanks for so much grace. I have had visions of your perpetual unwillingness that should land us somewhere into old age unmarried.”

The girl crept close to him and they were silent—the silence of lovers that means so much satisfaction. After a time they stood up and sauntered easily down the garden path. It was

September, and the late roses were out in bloom, and now and again a bird trilled sweetly, a little song very different from the full rapture of early summer.

“The latest of late warblers sings as one
That trolls at random when the feast is over,”

quoted Millicent Gray.

The homely red house came into sight, with its verandah, and the many garden paths diverging from it into winding walk and shrubbery. There was a lady in the verandah, comfortably seated in a rocking-chair, her eyes bent on the novel in her hand, and a pretty tea equipage drawn within reach of her. She looked up as the Lovers approached.

“Dear people,” she said gaily, “I am glad you have thought at last of me and the tea. I have had some difficulty in restraining Jones’s impatience. Though, indeed, if I had taken my tea a quarter of an hour ago, and given you the tannin, I don’t suppose you would be a whit the wiser.”

She tinkled a little bell at her elbow, and in a minute or two the spruce Jones arrived with the teapot. Mrs. Evelyn drew herself up from her languid position and poured out the tea. She was an exceedingly pretty woman, nut-brown and with flashing white teeth, this cousin of Geoffrey Annesley and school-friend of his betrothed.

“Well, Helen,” said Annesley, “we haven’t been idle. Millicent has at least named a time for naming the time for our marriage. Most men mightn’t think it a tremendous concession, but I am grateful for small favours.”

“She’s a shy bird, Geoffrey,” Mrs. Evelyn answered, getting up to kiss her friend. “So I think you have gained a concession. And Millicent is well worth waiting for. But here comes my great boy!” she cried, as the house door was opened by a smiling nurse, and a delightful brown-faced youngster toddled on to the verandah and ran to his mother.

“Thank you, Nurse,” she said. “Now you go to your tea while I take care of Master John.”

The boy trotted from his mother to Millicent, and stood by her knee, leaning his chubby arms upon her dress. Presently the two went down on the lawn for a romp—a delightful romp—with a ball and a puppy, which was accompanied by peals of laughter.

“She will make an exquisite mother some day,” said Mrs. Evelyn, translating into words something of the look in the man’s eyes.

He gave her a swift glance which had a shy gratitude in it.

“I am nearly tired waiting, Helen,” he said. “She is in no great hurry to give me my happiness.”

“But she has promised something now?”

“She has promised to fix a date when I go down next month to their place. Have you ever been there, Helen?”

“Never. For all our staunch friendship, Millicent has always had her reserves with me. I know little about her family except that they are poor and proud.”

“The father’s letter to me was stiff enough. I suppose they live in a kind of feudal atmosphere in their Northumbrian woods. I might have resented the tone of it, only I feel so unworthy of my girl. After all, if the old fellow writes as if he were of the blood royal, I, Millicent’s lover, should be the last to complain.”

“You have the ideal temper for a lover.”

“It has been sorely tried, Helen, I assure you. You women wear well through an indefinite engagement. For some incredible reason you make your heyday of it; while with us it is a time that stirs the sleeping savage in us more than any other set of circumstances in which we could be placed.”

“Poor Geoffrey! But here comes your pretty lady-love. And my young savage has pulled down all the gold-silver of her hair. How delightful she looks dishevelled!”

It was indeed a charming face that looked at them as Millicent came towards them, vainly endeavouring to twist up the coil the child had pulled about her shoulders.

September passed goldenly, and the trees were in full pomp when there came in wild weather with the October new moon. The storms very soon made havoc of garden and woodland, and every day brought tidings of destruction by land and sea. It was on one of those wild days that Geoffrey Annesley and Millicent Gray left King’s Cross for the long journey northwards. It was murky in the great station, and without in the yellow streets there was a fog of rain, and a sodden plashing under foot where the miserable ranks of pedestrians trudged stolidly.

The lovers were undismayed by the weather. Millicent for once seemed to have pitched care to the winds, and her eyes had a brighter light, her cheeks a rosier flush than usual.

When the train steamed out, and they were rushing through grey sheets of Water, past ghosts of warehouses and ranges of dingy dwellings, dimly seen through the mist, Geoffrey leant forward and took the two little hands warm from the muff. They were alone in the compartment.

“This might be our honeymoon, little woman,” he said, fondling the slim fingers.

“In this weather?” she asked.

“Yes; why not? I should have no eyes for the weather.”

“Nor I,” she said, softly audacious.

“No, sweet? “ he cried delightedly. “So you wish for the dreaded time, after all?”

“*Wish* for it! Ah, that is a poor way of putting it.”

He had not often seen her in this mood, and was enchanted.

“You are making up to me now for being so cold sometimes. You have starved me, Millicent. You women don’t know what it is never to meet with an answering ardour.”

“I have never felt cold even when I seemed so. I have been afraid to show you all I felt. Believe this, my dear. But to-day I am done with fear. No matter what comes you must believe in the fullness of my love for you.”

The rain lasted all day till late evening, when the lights of a little wayside station shone blurred through the mist.

They drove to Dormer Court through a heavily wooded country. The place looked ancient, and did, indeed, date back some hundreds of years. The dining-hall was panelled with fine old oak, and the fireplaces on each side massively carved. A gallery ran round it, from which corridors diverged each side to the sleeping apartments. There was a good deal of armour in shadowy corners, and on the high dresser there was a show of heavy silver plate, the sale of which might have turned the poverty of the Gray family to affluence. But Sir Roland Gray would as soon have thought of selling one of his daughters, perhaps sooner, as of reducing the heritage that had come to him by turning the slightest portion of it into hard cash.

He was a frosty old gentleman, with a haughty air which Annesley did not find reassuring. Dormer Court seemed to him a rather chilly place, and, glancing at Millicent as they entered, he thought she looked suddenly nervous and depressed. Those great fireplaces would have needed roaring cressets of wood in them to make the place human, but they showed only polished brass dogs, evidently quite innocent of use—for some time, at least.

Annesley noticed these things as he passed through the hall on his way to the drawing-room, an apartment as stately as the dining-hall, and more chilly. There Millicent’s sister and his hostess awaited them. She was a rather unhappy-looking woman, past her first youth and delicate-looking.

His room, to which he followed a manservant carrying his portmanteau, was gloomy. The bed had huge testers hung with heavy curtains; the shuttered windows were also heavily draped; the dark mahogany furniture was of the most massive build. But as soon as the servant had left the room, and Annesley had an opportunity to notice these things, he observed a portrait above the fireplace which seemed to dominate the room, and which drew his own gaze to it with a curious sense of fascination.

The portrait was that of a handsome man, dressed according to the period of the second Charles. His skin had the peculiarly warm ruddy tinge we associate with Vandyck's portraits, and out of this setting his eyes looked startlingly blue. His love-locks straying over a steel corselet were golden brown, and together he looked a most gallant cavalier. But the painting of the eyes was the painter's great achievement. As Annesley stood looking at the picture with a candle lighted the better to see it, he could have sworn the eyes looked back at him like those of a living man. He turned to the dressing-table with a half-uneasy laugh at his own delusion. He had laughed out unconsciously, and as he did so he thought the laugh was faintly echoed within the room. He looked around him sharply. No, the room looked harmless enough, and it was not likely to be anything but imagination. Yet the eyes of the portrait seemed to gaze towards him, and he fancied now that they had a saturnine gleam in them.

"Nerves, my friend," he muttered to himself. "This is a new development. You'll be looking under the bed and prodding the window-curtains for burglars next, like any hysterical woman."

But he could not shake off the sense of being watched. He made a resolution not to yield to his folly by looking at the portrait, but as he went to and fro he felt assured that the eyes were following him.

"Confound you, sir," he said at last, half jocosely, "I wish you'd keep your eyes out of my back."

He could have sworn again that he heard the faint, malicious laugh.

"Well," he said as he finished his toilet, "if Dormer Court possesses such a thing as a haunted room, I'm in it. It would make a nice little case for the Psychological Society."

At dinner the conversation somewhat flagged. Annesley did his best valiantly to keep it going, but reflected within himself that certainly Dormer Court was not cheerful. Millicent had become very quiet since she entered her home, and Sir Roland, though he treated his guest with very punctilious courtesy, had apparently little to say; the elder Miss Gray scarcely spoke, and once when Annesley addressed her directly started violently.

"Poor little Millicent!" said the lover to himself. "No wonder she is a little strange sometimes. She will be different in a happier atmosphere."

Presently, in the search for a subject of conversation, he remembered the portrait.

"That is a very fine portrait over the fireplace in my bedroom. A genuine Vandyck, is it not, Sir Roland?"

The baronet bent his frosty brows upon him.

"It is not a Vandyck," he said coldly.

Millicent had turned quite pale when the picture was mentioned. She now leant forward, and said in a shocked voice:

"You have not put him in that room, father?"

"Why not?" said the old man sharply. "Guests of honour have slept in that room many a time."

The girl sank back in her seat very pale. Annesley had no opportunity later of asking the meaning of this odd little scene. He guessed, indeed, that the room had some ill name, but was not perturbed. The man in the portrait was a decent looking fellow, he thought, and if he chose to

walk, why, one might have worse company. He was not at all likely to be afraid of a ghost; indeed, to see one was an experience he rather coveted, for he had had most other adventures that can fall to a civilized man.

The evening was no improvement on the dinner. Millicent sat silent and scared-looking. Her sister played melancholy music at the grand piano, and Sir Roland, having detained the young man inordinately long in the dining-room, discussing some dry aspect of politics which happened to interest him, continued the discussion till ten o'clock, at which hour everyone was expected to retire. By ten o'clock Annesley was indeed in rather a bad temper. He didn't like his future father-in-law, with his bushy eyebrows, his pursed, opinionated mouth, and his light eyes, with their suggestion of evil temper.

"Once I carry off my girl," he said to himself, "'tis precious little Dormer Court will see of us."

He had nothing but a handshake of her at parting for the night. Into that, however, he managed to infuse as much loving reassurance as he could under her father's discouraging glance. When he went up to his room he again examined the portrait. The life-likeness of the eyes was so pronounced that he reached up to feel the painted canvas, and so make sure. He was reminded of a story he had once read, in which someone had been spied upon by living eyes gazing through the holes where the painted eyes of the portrait had been.

"Only harmless canvas!" he said to himself; "but the painter of those eyes, if he wasn't Vandyck, must have had an uncanny sort of genius of his own."

He determined to look no more at the portrait, but blew out his candle and jumped into bed. He was soon sleeping soundly, in spite of the rain that beat against the windows, and the blast that howled in the chimney.

He could not have told how long he had slept when he was awakened by a cold breath on his forehead. He opened his eyes in thick darkness, and thrust out his hands; they met only the air, though that struck strangely chill. Then from the dark into which he gazed a face shaped itself—an evil face, swollen, distorted, malignant; the eyes, with a red gleam in them, looked furiously into his. Annesley was a brave man, but the hair of his head stood up, and the sweat came in drops on his forehead. He pushed both hands against the face, and felt nothing, but it seemed to recede a little into the darkness. Then, still watching it, he felt for the box of matches which had stood beside his bed. He scarcely knew how he was able to see the face, because he felt the darkness of the room to be intense; the light seemed to come in some strange way from the apparition itself, and to illumine only that.

He struck a match sharply, and the flame sputtered a little, and then stood up steadily. The face was gone now. He jumped out of bed and lit the candles on his dressing-table. Then he peered about him into the dark corners. There was nothing. He opened the great wardrobe, looked behind curtains, lifted the valance of the bed. There was nothing anywhere. He sat down on the side of his bed and wiped his face.

"By Jove!" he said; "that *was* a nasty experience!"

He lifted his eyes to the portrait. The eyes were still watching him, and he had the delusion that their expression had changed. They looked like the eyes of an enemy. The eyes of the apparition—he shuddered recalling them—had the expression of a tiger before he springs. Annesley felt with a sick horror that another minute of darkness, and the creature would have grappled with him.

He was struck now by a certain likeness between the eyes of the portrait and those tiger-eyes. And the face—yes, there had been a shadowy likeness. If the handsome face there on the wall

had been battered, bruised, beaten out of human likeness, it might be something like that face in the dark.

Annesley looked at his watch: one o'clock. The room was very cold, and smelt damp. He was determined not to lie down again in the canopied bed, where he had seemed so horribly at the mercy of the evil thing. He looked around for materials to make a fire. There were none. A fire would have been companionable in his vigil. He looked at his two candles. They were tall and solid, and would last till daylight. He wished he had had a book to keep him company, for he was determined not to sleep again; but the most diligent search in the room brought him nothing, and he remembered, with an impatient exclamation, that he had left his big parcel of newspapers in the hall as he entered.

He dressed himself fully, and then threw himself in an arm-chair to get through the hours as best he could. He had deliberately turned the chair so that he should not see the portrait. How he wished for some companionship in his dreary vigil; if only he had Jim, his bulldog, whom he had left forlorn behind him in London! He gazed at the candles steadily while the slow minutes passed. When he thought half an hour had gone he looked at his watch. It was only ten minutes past one. If he had been more at home in the house he would have left that unpleasant room and betaken himself anywhere, out in the storm even. But he had the English dislike of doing anything out of the ordinary, and when he contemplated an escape from the house he imagined a midnight alarm, and all the consequent rumpus.

He must have dozed in his chair, for he awoke in a cold sweat suddenly, with that clammy breath lifting the hair on his forehead, and an ice-cold hand on his throat. When he sprang into wakefulness the hand slowly relaxed its grasp. There was nothing to be seen except that the candles were guttering in the wind from the chimney.

He flung back the window shutters and opened the windows. He thought now of the room as of a grave. The fresh air rushing in seemed to steady him. His heart was beating fast, and he could not rid himself of a conviction that those fingers had meant to strangle him. The rest of the night and during the grey dawn he walked up and down his room.

The morning brought relief, and also anger. He was in no state of mind to unravel the things that had happened to him, but he was furious at the house and the people. That old devil, as he mentally called Sir Roland, must have known what guests that infernal room of his harboured, and yet had put him there to sleep. And Millicent—She had let him sleep there.

His anger became cold, but none the less steady, at the thought of her.

But the bitter things he could have said in his first brief anger froze on his lips when they met. He was early in the breakfast-room, and had packed his portmanteau for his departure before coming downstairs. But she was waiting for him. A great rush of pity flowed into his heart as he saw her. She looked so pale, so forlorn, so utterly hopeless and wretched. And he had been thinking of her as sleeping well!

He went towards her with a half-articulate expression of tenderness.

"No," she said, waving him back, "not now. Come this way, we shall be disturbed here, and I must speak to you."

She led the way to a little room that opened off the hall.

"This is my own room, where no one comes unless I ask them," she said. "We are safe here. Now tell me, my dear, how did the night go?"

Her voice was full of tenderness, but it was a tenderness that repelled rather than attracted. He felt that she wanted no lover-like demonstrations, and that the few feet of space between them might have been as wide as the sea, so effectually did she seem to set him apart.

“You know,” he said awkwardly by way of answer, “I did not sleep well.”

“You saw *it*?” she asked, her eyes dilating.

“I certainly fancied I saw something very unpleasant.”

“Don’t try to describe it,” she said. “Go back to the room. Lift the picture over the fireplace and look at the reverse side. Then come back here and tell me if that is what you saw.”

He obeyed dumbly. The portrait was a heavy one to lift, but his arms were strong, and he swung it around on its cord. When it turned into the light he almost cried out. On the back of the portrait was painted the face he had seen in the night.

He hurried from the room with a shudder. He felt that he never wanted to enter it again, and his repugnance to the house was so strong that he could hardly breathe within its four walls. He returned to where he had left her.

“Well?” she said.

“I don’t know what devilry is at the root of it, but the face on the back of the portrait is the face that came to me in the night.”

For a minute she hid her eyes. Then she spoke in a voice which pain had made apathetic.

“It is the end of our love.”

He would have uttered a fierce protest, but she silenced him with a commanding gesture.

“It is the end, and nothing you can ever say or do will make it otherwise. The man on the wall, whose evil spirit still haunts that room, was an ancestor—Sir Anthony Gray. He was a bad man, and after a wicked life he died raving mad. Whether the second portrait of him in his madness was painted cynically or seriously none of us know. Its existence is only known to ourselves. Unhappily, Sir Anthony left us his madness. Now and then it skips a generation; my father escaped, but our only brother is a dangerous madman, and at any time the curse may seize upon Alison or me. I was wicked when I thought I could marry you and keep this from you, but not wicked enough to do it with a light heart. You will some day be grateful for the night of terror that saved you from a worse thing. I shall never marry now, and I only hope that you will be able to forgive me, because I loved you and was sorely tempted.”

“I will not give you up,” said the man with an oath.

“You will,” she said sadly. “You will be sad for a little while, but presently you will realize what an escape you have had, and be glad.”

“Millicent, Millicent, are you in earnest? Am I really to go away out of your life, and you out of mine?”

There was despair in his cry, but there was also acquiescence, and she caught the sound. She looked at his imploring face with a maternal pity.

“It must be, my dear,” she said.

“I will wait for you,” he cried. “I shall never marry, and I shall always be ready to come to you. Oh, Millicent, Millicent, is there no help?”

But even as he said it he knew there was none. The reeling shock of the thing, coming upon him after his night of terror, had scarcely left him the power of thinking clearly, but somewhere at the back of his mind he was conscious that what she had told him was irrevocable. However, his wounded passion cried out for her, he felt that her most unhappy doom had set her as far beyond man’s love as though she were already dead.

“Good-bye,” she said mournfully; but she did not offer to kiss him or to touch his hand. “The carriage will be round for you presently, and you will wait here till it comes. I shall explain to my father, for you will not care to see him.”

She left him standing there, dumb, and glided like a ghost from the room. A few minutes later the servant brought him his coffee on a tray, with a message that the carriage was ready. He drank the coffee half-consciously, thinking to himself that she had not been so lost in her bitter trouble as to forget his material wants. Millicent had always been kind; he remembered that her kindness was one of the qualities he had loved in her.

A minute later the carriage had swept him into the depths of the forest. Millicent Gray, unseen herself, watched it depart, and noticed that his head was bowed and his shoulders drooped. It was her last sight of him. As the forest took him she turned away to accept the burden of her lonely life, and the terrible possibilities it held.