

## **CHAPTER XXV. - A FACE THAT HAUNTED MARRIOT.**

"This is not a love affair," Marriot shouted, apologetically.

He had sat the others out again, but when I saw his intention I escaped into my bedroom, and now refused to come out.

"Look here," he cried, changing his tone, "if you don't come out I'll tell you all about it through the keyhole. It is the most extraordinary story, and I can't keep it to myself. On my word of honor it isn't a love affair--at least not exactly."

I let him talk after I had gone to bed.

"You must know," he said, dropping cigarette ashes onto my pillow every minute, "that some time ago I fell in with Jack Goring's father, Colonel Goring. Jack and I had been David and Jonathan at Cambridge, and though we had not met for years, I looked forward with pleasure to meeting him again. He was a widower, and his father and he kept joint house. But the house was dreary now, for the colonel was alone in it. Jack was off on a scientific expedition to the Pacific; all the girls had been married for years. After dinner my host and I had rather a dull hour in the smoking-room. I could not believe that Jack had grown very stout. 'I'll show you his photograph,' said the colonel. An album was brought down from a dusty shelf, and then I had to admit that my old friend had become positively corpulent. But it is not Jack I want to speak about. I turned listlessly over the pages of the album, stopping suddenly at the face of a beautiful girl. You are not asleep, are you?"

"I am not naturally sentimental, as you know, and even now I am not prepared to admit that I fell in love with this face. It was not, I think, that kind of attraction. Possibly I should have passed the photograph by had it not suggested old times to me--old times with a veil over them, for I could not identify the face. That I had at some period of my life known the original I felt certain, but I tapped my memory in vain. The lady was a lovely blonde, with a profusion of fair hair, and delicate features that were Roman when they were not Greek. To describe a beautiful woman is altogether beyond me. No doubt this face had faults. I fancy, for instance, that there was little character in the chin, and that the eyes were 'melting' rather than expressive. It was a vignette, the hands being

clasped rather fancifully at the back of the head. My fingers drummed on the album as I sat there pondering; but when or where I had met the original I could not decide. The colonel could give me no information. The album was Jack's, he said, and probably had not been opened for years. The photograph, too, was an old one; he was sure it had been in the house long before his son's marriage, so that (and here the hard-hearted old gentleman chuckled) it could no longer be like the original. As he seemed inclined to become witty at my expense, I closed the album, and soon afterward I went away. I say, wake up!

"From that evening the face haunted me. I do not mean that it possessed me to the exclusion of everything else, but at odd moments it would rise before me, and then I fell into a reverie. You must have noticed my thoughtfulness of late. Often I have laid down my paper at the club and tried to think back to the original. She was probably better known to Jack Goring than to myself. All I was sure of was that she had been known to both of us. Jack and I had first met at Cambridge. I thought over the ladies I had known there, especially those who had been friends of Goring's. Jack had never been a 'lady's man' precisely; but, as he used to say, comparing himself with me, 'he had a heart.' The annals of our Cambridge days were searched in vain. I tried the country house in which he and I had spent a good many of our vacations. Suddenly I remembered the reading-party in Devonshire--but no, she was dark. Once Jack and I had a romantic adventure in Glencoe in which a lady and her daughter were concerned. We tried to make the most of it; but in our hearts we knew, after we had seen her by the morning light, that the daughter was not beautiful. Then there was the French girl at Algiers. Jack had kept me hanging on in Algiers a week longer than we meant to stay. The pose of the head, the hands clasped behind it, a trick so irritatingly familiar to me--was that the French girl? No, the lady I was struggling to identify was certainly English. I'm sure you're asleep.

"A month elapsed before I had an opportunity of seeing the photograph again. An idea had struck me which I meant to carry out. This was to trace the photograph by means of the photographer. I did not like, however, to mention the subject to Colonel Goring again, so I contrived to find the album while he was out of the smoking-room. The number of the photograph and the address of the photographer were all I wanted; but just as I had got the photograph out of the album my host returned. I slipped the thing quickly into my pocket, and he gave me no chance of

replacing it. Thus it was owing to an accident that I carried the photograph away. My theft rendered me no assistance. True, the photographer's name and address were there; but when I went to the place mentioned it had disappeared to make way for 'residential chambers.' I have a few other Cambridge friends here, and I showed some of these the photograph. One, I am now aware, is under the impression that I am to be married soon, but the others were rational. Grierson, of the War Office, recognized the portrait at once. 'She is playing small parts at the Criterion,' he said. Finchley, who is a promising man at the bar, also recognized her. 'Her portraits were in all the illustrated papers five years ago,' he told me, 'at the time when she got twelve months.' They contradicted each other about her, however, and I satisfied myself that she was neither an actress at the Criterion nor the adventuress of 1883. It was, of course, conceivable that she was an actress, but if so her face was not known in the fancy stationers' windows. Are you listening?

"I saw that the mystery would remain unsolved until Jack's return home; and when I had a letter from him a week ago, asking me to dine with him to-night, I accepted eagerly. He was just home, he said, and I would meet an old Cambridge man. We were to dine at Jack's club, and I took the photograph with me. I recognized Jack as soon as I entered the waiting-room of the club. A very short, very fat, smooth-faced man was sitting beside him, with his hands clasped behind his head. I believe I gasped. 'Don't you remember Tom Rufus,' Jack asked, 'who used to play the female part at the Cambridge A.D.C.? Why, you helped me to choose his wig at Fox's. I have a photograph of him in costume somewhere at home. You might recall him by his trick of sitting with his hands clasped behind his head.' I shook Rufus's hand. I went in to dinner, and probably behaved myself. Now that it is over I cannot help being thankful that I did not ask Jack for the name of the lady before I saw Rufus. Good-night. I think I've burned a hole in the pillow."