

The Skull

"Ben!"

"Yes, Nellie."

The response was not as fond as usual, and the girl felt it. She felt the reason for it. Earlier in the evening she had said that the cherubs in the painting of the Madonna had impish faces, and had declared that the whole thing was stiff and wooden. When he had tried to point out where and why she was wrong, she had waxed sarcastic. So that was why he was leaving so early, and that was why he answered almost shortly when she spoke to him.

"Yes?" he said again, in an inquiring tone.

"Oh, well; if you're going to be cross,—it's nothing much anyway,—only Ben, do you really want to make a picture of me?"

In an instant a light sprang in his eyes, and he turned to look at her. Want to make a picture of her! How many times had he asked to do it, and had each time been held in expectation by her wavering indecision, only at last to be refused.

"Do you mean it?" he cried, eagerly.

"Of course I do," she answered. "I have a perfectly lovely dress,—lace over satin,—real lace, you understand; it's made with pleats. Oh, it's a perfect dream!"

Glancing into his face she felt that something in her words had not been to his liking. The truth, was that he was shuddering inwardly at the thought of the pleated dress. "It would be a regular fashion plate," he said to himself. But he did not say it aloud.

Both had risen, and as she stood with the light behind her her hair shone like a halo about her face. It was a fine-featured face, delicately colored, with big, gray eyes, and a halo of golden hair. That was all. There is nothing more to say, except that she was small and slender, and knew what was becoming to her.

The bitter wind of October whirled gusts of leaves and rain about the young artist as he entered the street and walked homeward that night, but it did not annoy him, for he was not thinking of it.

"I'll persuade her out of the fashion-plate idea," he said to himself. Then he smiled to think of her face as it would look at him from the canvas, when his brush had placed it there.

It had been arranged, she was to come once a week to sit for him until the picture was finished. She said she could not spare more time than that, and the sittings were to begin at once. He told her of his objections to the satin dress, reasoning with her as best he could, but all to no purpose.

"I'm sure I can't see why you don't like my dress," she said, with an injured air. "It's the very latest thing out."

"That's just it," he answered hopelessly. "Of course it's a pretty dress, but couldn't you wear something simple, something without any trimming on it?"

She looked at him askance. "Everything is trimming this season," she declared, "and of course I couldn't think of such a thing."

Moreover she objected to oil paints. The smell of them made her sick, she said. Why couldn't he do the picture in crayon? She liked crayon best anyway, and he had done some lovely things in that. Besides, she was sure it would bring out the lace work better.

"And I want you to introduce a mirror into it," she added. "Then it will show both the back and the front of the dress. Isn't that a cute scheme? I spent a whole evening thinking about it, and planning it."

So, rebelling in spirit, the artist finally consented and the sittings began.

"I will sketch you as Vanity," he said, smiling at her rather sadly, and she glanced at him quickly, but concluded that he had not said anything worth quarreling over.

Day after day the picture grew under the young artist's skillful fingers; and little by little he overcame the dissatisfaction with which he had begun the work. Although it was only a study in crayon, he put his heart into it,—his heart of love. He had sketched her before a mirror in her costume of lace and satin, and as her face smiled out at him from the mirror, he began to

feel that it was better to picture her as she wished than not at all.

"Let me see it," she coaxed, day after day, when the sittings were over, but he smiled and shook his head.

"We will look at it together when it is done," he answered, "I want it to be perfect before you see it."

One day she was more insistent than usual. "I don't see why you are so obstinate," she pouted, "you can't imagine how badly I want to see it."

He was touched. "Do you really care so much for my poor work? But I'd rather you wouldn't see till it is done."

She looked at him, drawing on her gloves, and smoothing them carefully at the fingertips. "Well I'll tell you why I want to see it," she said. "I want to see if you've done the pleats over the shoulders so as to make the right effect at the belt." Then she put up her hands to readjust her hat, and he noticed that there was a little bird caught and twisted in its velvet folds. He turned abruptly and began to arrange his crayons.

At length the last sitting was over. "May I see it now?" she begged.

"Come tomorrow afternoon," he answered, "there are still a few touches to put on. Come early, for even a crayon needs a good light to appear at the best advantage."

"I'll come," she said, "and I know it will be a perfect dear."

The appointed hour found him waiting. The last touches had been given to the picture, and he knew that it was good. He smiled as he thought of her delight when she should see it, but as the hand of the clock on the mantel moved on around the circle he began to fret at her tardiness. She was an hour late already, and the light would be wretched. Half an hour longer he waited before he heard her step on the stair, but at the sound of it annoyance and resentment vanished. He sprang to meet her at the door.

"How late you are," he said, but there was no reproach in his voice, and his eyes softened as they looked at her. How well those white furs became her! How gently they caressed her throat and cheek, and the jeweled clasp which held them was not brighter than her eyes.

"I'm really very sorry," she said, cheerfully, "but I saw a dream of a hat as I came along. I only went in to ask the price of it, but there were so many, and I simply couldn't resist the temptation to try them on. I was so absorbed! Really, I forgot that time was passing. Don't scold now, I shouldn't have been so late, only it took such a long time to decide between the green felt with the velvet and the brown one with plumes. But I finally took the brown, and it's a perfect dream!" She paused out of breath. Her face was alight with enthusiasm. His was shadowed with some inward feeling.

"Have you forgotten the picture?" he asked.

"Don't be a bear," she answered, and pouted.

His hand trembled a little as he drew the curtain aside. He had put his heart of love into the work, and he felt that it was good. How like life the eyes smiled out from the mirror as he looked into them in the light of the falling day. But when he turned to look as his companion's face he was startled at what he saw there. Her face was bright with anger, and her eyes flashed resentment as they met his own. She struck her foot upon the carpet.

"You are horrid," she cried, angrily. "You are mean to have made it so. I see the whole thing now! You drew it that way because you think I am vain, and the skull means,—the skull could not believe his ears. 'The skull' was put in to make fun of me."

He looked at her bewildered. He echoed blankly. Then his startled eyes sought the picture, and as he gazed at it in the gray, falling light, it was borne in upon his horrified consciousness that the rounded mirror, with its arrangement of light and shadow, bore a curious resemblance to a human skull. In tracing the picture of the girl, his unconscious fingers had at the same time been busily shaping the form of this horrid thing. He stepped backward and gazed at it with a helpless kind of fascination. As he looked the real substance of the figures that composed the picture seemed to grow more and more obscure, and the skull stood out with startling distinctness.

CHRISTMAS BOOKS

From which Santa Claus is already making heavy purchases. Many of them are gift editions with special illustrations and attractive bindings. Some of them are limited in number so do your buying early.

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MILLER & PAINE

"I shall never forgive you," cried the girl, her voice shrill with anger. "It is an insult, a mean, cruel insult, and I shall never speak to you again! Oh! You needn't look at me like that! I know you think me vain and silly and stupid,—yes, stupid, but you can't poke fun at me that way." Her eyes sought the picture once more. "A skull!" she said between her teeth. "You have made a skull out of my portrait."

"Don't!" he cried, and raised his hand as if to warn her of something.

She turned on her heel and walked quickly to the door of the studio. He did not beg her to stay; he made no notion to detain her; he did not even speak to her. When she paused on the threshold, he was still standing before the portrait, staring at it in a blind, unseeing way. With a little sob, half of vexation, half of regret, she turned, and hesitated. Still he did not move. Is he was going to let her go, was he? Oh, well, if he wanted it,—why—she would go.

The biting air rushed into her face as she entered the street, and stung her a yet brighter color the flush on her cheeks. Great, bitter tears of anger rose to her eyes, as she hurried along the cold, gas-lit pavement. So he was to let her go, was he!

Back in the studio the artist was still standing before his picture, thinking, staring at it till the gray pitying twilight gathered its shadows about him, and hid it from his sight. At last he roused himself, and drew the curtain before it, his hand awkward with trembling.

"The skull has saved me," he said to himself, not bitterly, but as one who has reached a conclusion.

In the studio of an artist, now successful, a portrait with its covering carefully drawn, stands in a corner. No one ever sees beneath the curtain. But sometimes the artist, a man with gray streaks in his hair and kindly eyes with a touch of humor in them, comes when the studio is empty, and drawing the curtain aside, looks long and carefully at the picture beneath. It is the portrait of a girl before a mirror. The face is fine featured with a halo of hair about it, and a smile hovers on the lips, a smile of self-satisfaction. But when one looks long enough, one sees with a start of surprise that the lights and shadows in the mirror have blended by some unconscious trick of the artist's pencil, into the form of a human skull. The image of the girl grows obscure and is forgotten as one looks at the horrid grinning thing that comes to view.

Sometimes the man looks at the picture so long that he ceases to see it. Then finally he lets the curtain drop back into place again.

LETA STETTER.

Roses.

"Never a rose without a thorn," The Pessimist sadly said, "And the thorns all stay and sharpen When the roses are fallen and dead."

But the calm-faced Optimist gathered The petals that fell at his feet; And laid them away where they gladdened His life with their fragrance sweet.

LETA STETTER.

Convocation Next Week.

Tuesday—Professor Caldwell, "Cuban Reciprocity and the Extra Session."  
 Wednesday—E. Benj. Andrews.  
 Thursday—Rev. F. W. Eason, "Passive Resistance to British Educational Bill."  
 Friday—Christmas music.

TOILET ARTICLES FOR DECEMBER

Our line of all toilet articles has been largely increased in view of the approaching holiday season. All the new things in brushes, hand mirrors, fancy combs, etc., as well as an endless stock of rare perfumes. These goods are ready and those buyers who realize the advantage of early choosing can select any time. An especially good time for those to buy who have need of items in these lines for per- 1321 O St., Lincoln, Neb.

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