

THE MAD ARTIST.

It was in my early artist days that I took rooms at Rogis for the summer and settled down to paint. It was a queer little out-of-the-way house on the top of the cliffs, and I was the only lodger.

I had been there about six weeks, when, one evening, as I lay on the sitting room sofa, smoking and ruminating, I became oddly conscious of another presence in the room—conscious that I was not alone.

Then I looked around and saw, to my astonishment, on the farther side of the square center table a man standing, sideways to me, at an easel, painting in oils. I saw him as clearly as I see the paper now before me—a small thin man, with prominent bright brown eyes, wearing an old black velvet coat. I knew I was suffering from some delusion, yet still I saw the fellow painting away as if his life depended upon it.

Presently he scraped his palette and placed it on one side; and picked up a finished picture from the floor and put it carefully in the drawer of a heavy oak table behind him. He closed the drawer, but not a sound of palette knife nor closing drawer reached me.

Then, for the first time, the man looked at me, his feverish brown eyes fastened on me intent and eager.

The vision could have lasted but two or three minutes; then man, easel and oak table were gone, and I saw my room with its common-painted deal furniture just as usual.

Well, I shook myself, and resolved for the sake of my brain to work rather less hard in future. But, in spite of the teachings of common sense, those eager brown eyes haunted me; neither could I forget the linked picture of which I had had full view; my trained eye told me at once that it was the work of a master-hand.

The subject was a shipwreck, and I would have given my life to have painted the beating waves as they had been depicted on that supernatural canvas—or, as I told myself, on the canvas of the mirage conjured up by my tired brain.

She was a small, gentle woman, with the remains of good looks, but looking older than her thirty years, which was not surprising when one thought of her matrimonial experience and of her struggle to keep up her small home.

"I would not mind my foot, if my hand were not wrenched, too," she said, with a sigh and a glance at the unfinished work spread about.

She was so gentle, so grateful for my small help, that I found myself giving her landlady directions for her comfort as if she were a helpless child. When I had done what I could I said good-by.

I had turned to leave the room when my eye was caught by an oil painting on the opposite wall, the head and shoulder painting of a white-faced, brown-eyed man in a velvet coat—in short, the portrait of my visitor of the previous night. Under the picture stood the heavy oak table of my vision.

My involuntary exclamation of surprise attracted Mrs. Raymor's attention, and on seeing me staring hard at the picture she told me that it was the portrait of her husband, done by a brother artist soon after her marriage.

How I got myself out of the house I do not know. I was feverish with excitement, wondering what could be the meaning of the mystery. I waited that evening, half expecting a repetition of my previous experience; but nothing happened, though the state of my nerves would have warranted any hallucination.

The following day I did not paint. I thought rest was necessary. But,



A SMALL, THIN MAN.

while I lay idle on the downs, the vision of that white-faced artist was over me, before me. I grew quite disturbed, and thought my brain was softening.

Strolling back that evening, I passed a lady whom I had often noticed because of her sad history. She was the widow of an artist of whom some great things had been predicted. The poor fellow had gone mad, and, though still painting, had allowed no one to ever see his work.

What he had done with his canvases no one knew—probably he had burned them; at any rate, when he died, not a trace of his work was to be found. His young widow was left penniless. She was forced to support herself—as she had been forced during much of her married life—by doing elementary teaching and needle-work.

I had gone a little way on when I heard a sharp cry, and, turning, saw that Mrs. Raymor had slipped on the steep, stony descent and fallen. Naturally I offered her assistance, of which she stood in need, for she had sprained her foot badly, and could barely walk. Luckily, her lodgings were close by, and with the aid of my arm she hobbled to them.

I helped her into the poor sitting-

room she rented. From its appearance, from the sewing machine and piles of work lying on the table, I guessed how hard the poor soul strove to make the two ends meet.

The following day, at the earliest possible moment, I called on Mrs. Raymor, for I had resolved to get to the bottom of the affair if I could.

The doctor had forbidden her to use her hand or foot for a month at least, and I could see that the poor little woman was greatly depressed. For a while I made conversation, turning over in my mind how I could lead her to talk of the picture.

At last I went to examine the oak table. It was, as I have already said, the exact duplicate of that other table, except that the latter had possessed a drawer, and in this one, deep and heavy as it was, I could see no opening.

Noting my interest in it, Mrs. Raymor asked me whether I could help her sell it. She said she must have money; that, through her accident, she could not gain even the small sums she had before earned; that she had long ago sold almost everything of value, but had retained the table because her husband had been so proud of it. Though she assured me the table held no drawer, I remained unconvinced, and I continued to examine it minutely.

Suddenly I remembered a table I had seen years before in an old curiosity shop, which had possessed a secret spring in one of the legs. I had hit on the secret. The center leg was embellished with quaint, deeply cut heads of demons. In the open mouth of one of these my finger touched a spring.

Immediately the table's curved half-front slid suddenly back, revealing a large, deep drawer. Trembling with eagerness, I pulled it open, and there lay the mad artist's canvases, some thirty or more, large and small. On the top lay the "Wreck," the masterpiece I had seen on the previous night.

Well, I possessed friends in the painting world, and among us we sold the pictures for fairly decent prices; enough, at any rate, to give the widow a modest competence for life.

I learned later that Raymor and his wife had lived in the house in which I was then lodging; his studio had been the very room in which I lived; he had let no one, not even his wife, enter it, but had painted there year after year.

It was supposed he burned his work, and some he undoubtedly had, for, at his death, the charred remnants crowded the grate; but the main part he had stowed carefully in the secret drawer.

Mad as he was, his madness had never touched his art—that had remained powerful to the end. I occupied the same rooms for many a season, but the "mad artist" never reappeared to me. I believe firmly his spirit had wished to repair the evil his clouded brain had wrought in life, and for that purpose he had visited me.

For long I told no one, not even the widow, of what I had seen. But now those whom my story could affect are dead, and so I relate without scruple how I was led to find the mad artist's hidden treasure.

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