

THE MYSTERIOUS PORTRAIT.

THESE are many things in human existence we do not understand. Few individuals live their allotted span without one or more of those incomprehensible experiences which, for want of the proper designation, are vaguely termed "supernatural." These experiences are, in reality, but the evidences of the existence of some great natural law, that will in time be as plain to all mankind as the simple law of gravitation; but meanwhile they must be universally assigned to the "realm of the mysterious."

Perhaps there was never such another case as that of Gideon Trowe. Illustrating as it does, one of the peculiar phases of life that scientists are ever seeking to explain, it is well worthy of narration, and I here set down the facts exactly as they occurred.

On a certain pleasant morning the artist, in pursuance of his custom, walked from his private apartments near the Park to his studio in the same street, and, greatly to his surprise, discovered on his easel, in the centre of the atelier, a canvas on which was outlined the perfect and beautiful figure of a woman.

The fact of itself was not remarkable, for the young man, as all the world knew, was exclusively a portrait painter, and in the studio at all times were many oil and pastel likenesses in various stages of completion; but this particular picture was of a woman he had never seen: it had not been there the evening before, and of the manner in which it came to be there he had not the faintest conception.

He was satisfied that he had locked the door as usual when departing at five o'clock the day previous, and he was equally certain that it was locked on his return in the morning, for there were his keys still dangling from the lock. How, then, had an intruder gained entrance?

Nothing was missing and everything was in its place, if the articles of furniture and vertu which were scattered about in artistic negligence may truthfully be said to have had a place. It was evident, therefore, that the nocturnal visitor, or visitors, whoever they might be, had not been bent on plunder.

However, they had not shrunk from appropriating such materials as were needed for their purpose. Trowe noted that his palette and brushes had been used, and recognized the canvas as one that he had purchased only yesterday, and which was intended for a portrait of young Mrs. Tescott, a rich English widow, who had been taken with some of his paintings exhibited abroad, and was now on her way to New York to sit to him.

The artist gave the picture a long and careful scrutiny. There could be no doubt of its excellence, for although the face and figure were as yet little more than laid in, there was a certainty and finish to every lineament that betokened the work of a master hand. The figure was full length, standing in an attitude of dreamy meditation, and was nude. Nothing classic or historic was represented; it was simply a portrait and a study.

Who was the artist and who was the model? The more Trowe puzzled over the mystery the more of a mystery it became. Who was there among his fellow artists who would presume to force a way into his studio in his absence and make free with his materials? And what an insane notion prompted the painting of such a picture at night, in this mysterious manner?

He examined the lock of the door, but there was no evidence of its having been tampered with; he made inquiries of the janitor, but that functionary had seen no strangers in the building the night before. At last the artist gave up the investigation, and turning the canvas to the wall, proceeded with a work he had under way for the private gallery of a local connoisseur. However, he was nervous and restless, and found it impossible to apply himself, so that he finally left the studio in disgust, taking special precaution to lock the door as he went out.

The next morning he was still further astonished to find that the mysterious picture had been worked on during the night. It occupied the easel, as before and the colors were fresh on palette and brushes. The artist had evidently labored rapidly at his task, for the painting was very materially advanced, and presented many qualities of grace and beauty which had not been apparent in its cruder state.

Trowe was fairly dumbfounded. It occurred to him that he was the victim of a practical joke, but the high character of the work and the evident sincerity of its conception dispelled the idea. A painting like that was never originated in a spirit of humor.

Withal, there was something in the whole proceeding that impress-

ed him with the most indescribable sensation; the mystery of the affair assumed an exaggerated importance and preyed upon his mind and unsteadied his nerves. Had he believed in the so called supernatural, he must have thought the picture the work of spirit hands. For its existence in his studio he could hit upon absolutely no plausible explanation.

The woman's face and figure began to have a fascination for him, and aroused his profoundest admiration and interest. The canvas was not again turned to the wall, and he found it difficult to pursue his work for gazing upon it. Indeed, the whole day passed without his accomplishing a single satisfactory stroke of his brush.

That night, executing a plan determined upon during the day, he remained in the studio in opaque darkness, watching for a third visit of the unknown artist and model. But they came not, and the picture was in no way altered in appearance. Baffled, he returned home at sunrise and slept half the day.

On the succeeding morning, however, the picture again presented a marked advance. In truth, it evidenced marvelous progress toward completion. The color and texture of the fair skin were done with exquisite delicacy and the art that conceals art. The really transcendent merit of the masterpiece now revealed itself, and charmed Trowe the artist quite as much as the subject charmed Trowe the man.

"If it is the work of a spirit," said the mystified painter to himself, "surely the spirit is that of Titian or Raffael."

He knew of no living artist that could paint like that. It was far greater work than any of which he had demonstrated himself capable. It combined strength and beauty to an extent that insured dying fame to its creator.

But his admiration of its superlative technical value was dimmed by his enthusiasm for the glory of the subject it portrayed. What manner of model was this that possessed all the attributes of an oriental ideal? It would have appeared like profanation to conceal with senseless drapery the least of her youthful perfections. The philosophers that have declared that Nature never makes anything perfect, could not have seen the glorious and radiant creature this picture represented.

Who was she? A thousand times Trowe asked himself the question. And a thousand times it remained unanswered.

So deeply was he affected that she now became as a real presence to him, and he sat gazing upon her in a sort of rapture, abandoning all attempt to continue his labors. He locked the door against the intrusion of patrons and visitors, of whom he developed a sudden jealousy lest they should insult her naked beauty with an evil thought. He also began to dread lest some one should come to take her away and thus deprive him of an object he now deemed priceless and indispensable to his happiness.

In short, Gideon Trowe was in love with a being he had never seen—a mysterious creature of the night that came whence he knew not, that might not even be of earth, so far as he could tell, whose only semblance, as discovered to him, was this shadow on the canvas. To solve the mystery enshrouding her, to learn her identity if she be a living woman, now became the dominant purpose of his life.

The inscrutable circumstances of the case and the intensity of his strange passion told heavily upon his physical nature. He had not been in good health for more than a month past, and now a great nervousness and depression beset all his waking hours. He discontinued his work altogether, and gave himself up to the absorbing contemplation of the mysterious picture.

Day by day it grew, unfolding its beauties to his eager eyes as a flower unfolds its graces to the sun. A second and still a third night he watched in vain for the appearance of the nocturnal artist and his model. Then seeing that by this useless vigilance he but deterred the completion of the portrait, he forbore from further investigation, and preserved his custom of departing from the studio with the sunlight.

In good time he resolved he should know and understand.

It made him feverishly happy to gaze on that beautiful form, and dwell on the joy of holding its living counterpart to his heart. Each day he speculated on the nature and extent of the improvement that should take place in the picture during the succeeding night, and each morning was gratified to see that the identical improvement he had foreshadowed had really been made, only his ideas were always enchanted and exalted.

More and more lifelike grew the painted form, and as Trowe lingered before her, gazing into her dreamy eyes, he was so impress-