

## *Mort's Dream-Picture*

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“It was a dream within a dream, I tell you, Charlie. I was asleep in my bed in the next room, and there I dreamed that I was visiting the Randolph’s over in Berkshire county. I thought I had been up pretty late, playing billiards with Cale Randolph and some of the boys. I remember distinctly scoring seventy-eight on a run—four-ball game. Well, I went to bed tired out, dreamed I did; fell asleep, and dreamed this which I call a dream within a dream.”

“Well, Mort,” said I, “the thing is not so extraordinary after all. It is a common enough psychological phenomenon.”

“I beg your pardon,” quoth Mort Amerman, satirically, “would you be good enough to reel me off a little of that last again, please? Say a couple of fathom or so.”

“None of your chaffing now!” laughed I, “but tell me what has all this Chinese dream-puzzle to do with the picture you promised to show me?”

“Much, O Sahib! for on the silent yet speaking canvas have I depicted the scene whereof. I speak, and now *le voici*,” and with that he threw the cover from the painting on his easel, and left me to examine it at my leisure, while he went to his bedroom. The easel was, of course, in the best position in the studio for viewing the picture, and the soft, delicate light of the autumn afternoon lay full upon it; mellowed, however, by an artful arrangement of screens and shadows, to gain the precise effect desired.

The painting was of the ordinary cabinet-size, and appropriately painted, being also relieved by heavy maroon drapery, gracefully festooned behind and around it. I am not one of those who believe that a truly master-work of art may be described aptly in words, yet I must essay the task for this once, and if I render only the bold outlines of the artist’s thought, it may be, perchance, that I shall still be enabled to convey some glimmering of his meaning.

What first fastened itself upon me was the murky darkness of most of the scene. There was a dense and gloomy forest filling up the entire background and much of the middle distance. Out from among that under the trees streamed a wild torrent, and plunged over ragged rocks, and through and about the gnarled roots, and between rifts in the solid stone, and so down to a leaping cascade that disappeared at the extreme right in a black and gloomy pool. Stretching back from the right, a broad expanse of gray moor extended in prospective sight to the base of a range of blue-gray hills, that towered aloft into the clouds; a narrow path wound through this moor into the dim distance, and was lost, apparently, in the shades of night, which were fast falling.

On the very edge of a bold rock that jutted over the pool, and on the very boundary of the waterfall, was the only seemingly living object of the picture.

A young man prostrate on his knees, shading his eyes with his two hands, and gazing intently into the pool beneath.

There was that in the attitude of the figure, so deftly and truthfully expressed by the artist, that sense and meaning grew upon me as I gazed. He was agonizing—distraught. His whole soul was looking forth from his eyes, and seeking in the dim twilight, now fast fading, to wrest from the obscurity beneath him some terrible secret. So clearly was the story told that my gaze instinctively followed his, and tracked, as his must have, the secret of the black pool.

Twining about the base of the rock, upon whose crest the young man knelt, a meshed and tangled warp of roots and fibres first met the eye. But now, clinging with a death grasp to the largest of these, I saw the round fair arm of a young girl—and then—as though I should have seen it, and nothing else, from the first, so completely did it now fill the picture; I saw the white figure—limp white garments clinging to the body—and the fine white face, with rich golden hair floating and tangled, on the water and among the roots, and could almost note the swaying to and fro of the soulless form, as it was caught by the eddies, and dragged hither and thither; still held, however, by that trusty dead arm that clung so determinedly to the slimy and black root above.

A touch on my shoulder so startled me that I cried out; it was only Mort, who had entered the room unnoticed, so intent was I in my concentration.

“Well, what do you think of it?” was the first and most natural question.

“You never could have dreamed that,” said I.

“Just as you see it, dreamed I it, doubter. Now let me cover it up; and let us go and have some lunch.”

“But don’t be in such a hurry!” I said, seeking to stop him, as he again shrouded the painting beneath its cover. “I have not half seen it yet.”

But muttering, “Some other time,” he persisted in hiding it from me, and we presently went to lunch together.

Now, I was in nowise satisfied with my friend’s reticence, and experienced a very vivid curiosity to hear the particulars of his wonderful dream, which he had so graphically limned upon the canvas; but no effort of mine could induce him to say more concerning it than that it occurred to him just as he had painted it.

The painting was sent to the Academy for exhibition that season, and was sold to a particular friend of mine for a goodly sum—for so much, in fact, that I often joked Mort on his dream-picture, and the fortune it had brought to him; for it really seemed as though its sale was the beginning of a season of great prosperity.

The winter and spring passed, and as summer came and the city began to empty itself by carloads and steamboatfulls into the country, Mort and I, with a party of other artists like him, or idlers like myself, made up a trip to the Adirondacks. It is needless for the purpose of the story that I should detail our sundry adventures during the weeks we passed among the lakes and hills; nor need I relate our experiences with fish and flesh in our numerous hunting and fishing excursions.

We met many acquaintances, and made many new ones, and among the latter were the family of Mr. Sanfield, a merchant from Montreal, who, with his wife and daughter, with the affianced husband of the latter, was passing a few weeks in the search for rest and relaxation from his customary labors.

Alice Sanfield was beautiful, a pet of Canadian society, wealthy in her own right as well as by prospective heirship, and altogether a “catch.” Her lover was an officer in the British army, stationed at Montreal, and now on leave—a fine-looking and gentlemanly young fellow, a good family, and apparently desperately in love with Miss Sanfield.

Captain Rowland had, however, one peculiarity, which he displayed on several occasions very prominently, and which led Mort to remark to me one day, when it had been more than usually manifest, that he thought the captain would lead Miss Alice rather a lively dance when she should become Mrs. Rowland. He had, in fact, about the most uncontrollable temper I ever saw displayed in a man. So violent was he at times, that I commonly wondered why he had not long before got himself shot for intemperate insolence in one of his fits of passion. Another peculiarity of his was evinced in frequent lonely wanderings quite away from the hotel, from which journeys he would not return for days together. These disappearances were accounted for by the captain by various sporting excuses, and we certainly should have felt no interest in them, had it not been for the incident which I will now relate.

One day Mort and I started off on a trip of our own account, ostensibly for fishing purposes, but really for my friend to obtain a sketch of a charming visits which had not as yet been discovered by his lynx-eyed associates. Our journey led us some twenty miles from the hotel; we traveled a portion of the way in an open wagon, and then footed it toward the point desired.

On our route we passed a pretty farmhouse, which we eyed with the gratification which such rural scenes always afforded us, and should have thought no more of it had we not suddenly espied Captain Rowland, accompanied by a young lady, engaged in earnest and apparently excited conversation.

The lady was seated on a little knoll a hundred yards or so from the house, and the captain stood beside her, leaning with one hand on the tree beneath whose shades she sat listening to his words. We were out of sight of them in a moment, and with a few remarks as to Miss Sanfield’s probable appreciation of the scene if she had witnessed it, we continued on our way.

Guides had preceded us with a tent and sundry appurtenances, and on reaching the spot selected for our encampment we found these duly arrived and in order, and located ourselves for the night, Mort intending to make his sketch the next morning.

It was a bright, starlight evening, we were located just on the edge of a pretty, brawling brook, and as we sat, after a delicious trout supper, smoking our pipes and chatting lazily, we felt about as comfortable as was practicable. Twilight had faded suddenly, and just as the stars became rather necessary for illuminating purposes, a shrill scream startled us from our seats, on an old log, and thrilled us to our very marrows.

One of the guides said,

“That was a woman’s scream, and nearby.”

Then we dashed in the direction of the sound, which led us straight down the course of the brook. A few moments brought us to the outlet of the little stream, and as Mort and I turned a projecting rock we came upon a thrilling scene indeed.

Mort saw it first, and crying, “My dream! my dream!” he fell flat on his face in a dead faint. And as I stood over him, leaning forward, the moon shown full upon the original of the painting I had seen in Mort’s studio in New York.

Here was the cascade and the black pool; there were the gray moon and the distant mountains. The gnarled roots and fibres twisted together far beneath me in the clasp of a fair white arm, and the white figure rose and fell with the rise of the running stream, and on the bank opposite, prostrate on his knees, shading his eyes with his hands, while he peered into the rocky chasm, was Captain Rowland.

Even as I looked he rose to his feet, and throwing his hands wildly in the air, fled from the scene. The noise of the falling water had prevented him from observing our approach, and it was impossible for us to reach him. It took us a full quarter of an hour to get to the bottom of the little ravine, and longer yet ere our united efforts could draw the poor young creature to the bank. We took her to the little farmhouse, which was about a quarter of a mile away; and then, leaving the guides to follow with our traps, we pushed rapidly to our wagon. The next evening we reached the hotel, Mort nearly crazy with excitement, and I not in a much better condition.

Now I had not informed the old farmer and his wife of having seen Rowland. Neither had I told the guides, who had come up too late to see him.

To each and all of these I simply related the finding of the body of the young lady, who proved to be from Montreal visiting the old farmer who was a connection of hers.

I acted thus on both reason and impulse, which worked together in this wise:

Impulse and reason both agreed that as no human being but Captain Rowland knew how the young lady came to her death, any story which he—Captain Rowland—saw fit to tell must necessarily be accepted. Impulse alone suggested to me a possible means for discovering the truth of the occurrence, and as Mort had not seen the Captain, but only the body and its surroundings, which so recalled his dream, I had only to keep my own counsel—and I did. The farmer and his wife assumed that she must have wandered into the woods, as was her custom, and fallen accidentally into the pool, and I did not attempt to change their opinion. They knew nothing of her having had any visitor that afternoon, and I left them mourning for the sad accident, and the painful duty which had fallen upon them, of communicating the awful tidings to the young lady’s friends in Montreal.

At the hotel, the first persons whom we saw were the Sanfields, accompanied, as usual, by Captain Rowland. He seemed in his customary frame of mind, and, as I started a messenger with a telegram for New York, I ground my teeth in rage that time must elapse before I could expose him.

Two days later a package came to me by private hand, and that same evening I invited a number of gentlemen including Captain Rowland to come to my room and examine a rare painting. They came, the captain in excellent spirits, holding his eye-glass in readiness.

The painting stood upon an easel, and was shrouded with black velvet. Candles with reflectors, arranged in front of it, threw a brilliant light upon the gloomy covering. The gentlemen were arranged in a semi-circle in front of the easel, Captain Rowland in the centre, and I drew aside the velvet covering.

I saw Rowland start as though he had been stung; he gave a yell which was positively inhuman, and sprang for the door. There he found me with a revolver pointed at his face, and in two minutes he was in the custody of two detective officers from New York.

That evening he confessed everything. Entangled with the poor girl, he had vainly tried to buy her silence, that he might marry the rich Miss Sanfield. Failing in that, he had lured the girl to accompany him in a walk through the woods, and had there pushed her into the pool.

I hoped to have the pleasure of seeing him satisfactorily executed according to law, but in this he defeated justice. He bit a hole in his arm while confined in the prison awaiting his trial, and bled to death.

Thus Mort's dream-picture turned State's evidence, but as to the secret power by which this silent but sufficient witness was created, months before the incident it depicted had occurred—I give it up.

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