

A MYSTIC MIRAGE,

BY

WILLIAM LE QUEUX.

CHAPTER I.

"MERRY CHRISTMAS! What a bitter mockery, when mine will be so full of sorrow. And those bells, confound them, how they jar upon one's nerves!"

With a deep-drawn sigh the speaker knocked the ashes from his pipe viciously, and tossing it upon the table, sat with both hands thrust deep into his pockets in an attitude of despair.

He was a young man of not more than twenty-five, from whose handsome face, easy grace, and dark wavy hair, worn rather long, it was easy to discover he was an artist. Indeed the room in which he was sitting this Christmas Eve was a small, and not too well furnished studio, on the top floor of an old house in Dane's Inn, and its walls were covered with plaster casts, paintings, and sketches traced by the hand of its dejected occupier, Arthur Enslie.

"My idyll is ended, and my life will henceforth be gloomy and desolate," he muttered aloud. "It will be a blank and aimless existence without a single ray of hope to illumine it. But I cannot stay here," he added, suddenly rising and pacing the room. "I must go abroad, and try to get rid of this terrible disappointment that has soured my life."

Walking over to the easel that stood on the opposite side of the studio he carefully removed a silk handkerchief from the kit-cat upon it, revealing a half-length portrait of a young and eminently beautiful girl. It was a striking picture. The background of gray distance, the golden hair shining like a halo round the delicate oval face, the tender eyes full of the light of youth, the lips parted in a charming expression of wonder, all told of a master's hand.

"Yes," he murmured sadly, as he stood gazing upon it, "for months I have been working at this, intending to give it to her to-morrow as a Christmas present, but I must keep it now. Alas! it is the only thing I have to remind me of her whom I shall never see again."

He stood silent for a few moments, then replacing the covering, turned and flung himself despondingly into the old arm-chair beside the fire to ponder over his poignant sorrow.

It was across the dinner-table of the Academician whose pupil he was, that his eyes had first met Violet Drummond's two years before, and though their social position was widely different—she the only daughter of a wealthy city magnate, and he poor and unrecognised in the ranks of his profession—nevertheless, they became mutually attached to one another with an ardent passion. Theirs was a clandestine courtship, carried on for the greater part under the trees in Kensington Gardens, until he had contrived to become formally introduced to old Mr. Drummond, her father, and received from him a genial off-hand invitation, which he did not fail to accept.

They were desperately in love with one another, not in the ordinary milk-and-water way, which is the fashion now: money on one side and looks and position on the other, but, worse luck for them! they were in earnest.

Enslie was a frequent visitor, and for a

time the successful speculator never dreamed that his daughter had set her affections upon the impecunious artist, several of whose works he had purchased more out of pity than anything else. He was a big, stout man—a parvenu in every sense. He had amassed great wealth at the Australian gold diggings, and now crowded his mansion at Queen's Gate with pictures, though he barely knew a Titian from a Millais. Painters, authors, and musicians, he looked upon as underlings, whose sole business was to minister to the amusement or fancy of the rich, upon whose notice they were dependent for their daily bread. Therefore it was no wonder that when he found Arthur Enslie paying frequent visits, and the truth dawned upon him, he became exceedingly irate.

On this Christmas Eve the young artist had responded to Violet's invitation to spend the evening, but the servant had told him she was engaged, adding that Mr. Drummond desired to see him in the library.

"Well," said the elder man sternly, after Arthur had been ushered in, "it has come to my knowledge that you have the audacity to love Violet. What have you to say?"

He started in profound surprise, for he had thought their secret safe.

"I cannot deny that it is correct, sir," he replied. "Your daughter has even promised to become my wife."

"What!" cried the old man fiercely, his face purple with anger. "Your wife! Pooh! No; I will never consent to her being dragged down to poverty with such as you. Moreover, Violet wishes me to inform you that your attentions are altogether distasteful to her, and to express a hope that you will refrain from calling again."

"What! She said this?" cried the young man incredulously. "I won't believe it, I tell you I—"

"I am not in the habit of telling untruths, sir," interrupted the other in a towering rage. "Once more I say I refuse to allow my daughter to engage herself to a struggling painter, however brimful of genius he may be."

"Because I'm not wealthy you sneer at me."

"Discussion is useless, sir; I wish you good evening."

Enslie did not reply, but turned on his heel and left the library considerably disheartened.

In the hall he met Violet's maid and sent a message to her, but in a few minutes the girl returned saying her mistress begged to be excused, as she was engaged.

On his homeward walk he asked himself how he was to make more money—enough to satisfy the ideas of such a man. Certainly he could never make it by his profession, and on arrival at his rooms he threw himself into a chair and meditated deeply, as we found him at the opening of the chapter.

Did she really love him no longer? He could scarcely believe it; yet her refusal to see him went to confirm her father's words.

Perhaps, after all, however, it might be only a cruel ruse to stop their acquaintanceship, he thought, as he sat with his eyes fixed moodily upon the fire; and at last he resolved to write and ask her whether the assertion was the truth. Seating himself at the writing-table, he penned a long, earnest letter, recounting the facts, at the same time begging her to send him a few words of reassurance that her affection had not wavered.

In anxious expectation he waited a week for a reply, but, alas! none came.

A few days after the dawn of the New Year, the studio was tenantless.

CHAPTER II.

"NONSENSE, nonsense, my dear," exclaimed Mr. Drummond petulantly, as he and his daughter stood together one summer's morning at the breakfast-room window of his pretty country house on the river bank near Windsor. "I've arranged it all. You must marry Verrall."

Violet, wan and pale, stood with her hands clasped before her, and her head bowed.

"No; never," she murmured.

"Tut, tut; why not, pray? He has good looks, and plenty of money—in fact, I dare say he's about as well off as myself."

"Money is not everything," she replied scornfully. "He is nearly twice my age, and I tell you I hate him. It is cruel to thrust this detestable man upon me; knowing I have no mother to take my part," she added in a broken voice.

"Bah! I know all about it. You have never been yourself since that painter fellow went away; but the sooner you forget him, the better," he thundered.

At these words she could restrain her tears no longer, for it was the bitter truth he spoke. Arthur had left her without a word of farewell, for not having received his letter, she had wept and sorrowed in consequence.

"There, there, it's no use saying any more about it now," he exclaimed, patting her shoulder with a show of affection. "Think over my words, and I'm sure you'll come to the conclusion it will be best to marry Verrall," and he turned and left the room.

Motionless she stood for some minutes, looking absently across the smooth lawn and bright river gleaming in the sunlight, wondering for the hundredth time the cause of Arthur's desertion.

Since his departure, she had been ailing and sickly, her walk had lost much of its gracefulness, and her cheeks their bright roses. She drooped like a fragile flower, and her face was white, hard, and set in despondency, hoping against hope.

"Ah, Miss Drummond, good morning," said a voice suddenly behind her. "I've arrived rather too early this morning, I'm afraid."

Looking round she saw the man they had just been discussing.

John Verrall was a pale-faced man about forty-five years of age, tall and thin, with coal-black eyes and dark bushy whiskers, and was attired in boating flannels. He was hard-headed, pushing, energetic, and being a successful speculator on the Stock Exchange, was undoubtedly a rich man.

As Violet saw him, she drew a long breath, and then shaking hands, replied:

"You're not too early if we are to have a long day on the river. I believe papa has just gone to see after the launch. Come along," and snatching up her hat, they went across the lawn together to where the tiny craft was moored.

It was an eventful day. When they landed, after a pleasant trip up stream, Verrall and she strolled away from the rest of the party, and whilst they were alone he asked her the question she dreaded.

At first she faltered, but with that ineffable indifference and despair engendered by the conviction that the man she loved thought nought of her, she consented to be his wife, even though his caress was hateful to her.

But she had not forgotten the young artist; she remembered him even when her actual thoughts were not centred upon him. He was the background of all. Even now, as Verrall's affianced wife, her fondest dream

was of a future when Arthur should return, and she yearned with an unspeakable pain for his presence. Yet the light was quenched in her life and she could no longer comfort herself with the assurance that he remained unchanged towards her.

Her marriage was fixed to take place in the Spring, but if she could only discover his whereabouts, perhaps, after all, it might be averted.

CHAPTER III.

ONE October evening a small dinner-party was in progress at the house in Queen's Gate. There were but a dozen guests, and during the meal, fortune-telling came under discussion; and this led to thought-reading, and lastly to that so-called mesmeric influence, hypnotism. The conversation was the more interesting from the fact that one of the guests, an elderly man named Sprague, was a well-known mental scientist and student of theosophy, so his opinion was eagerly sought.

After some assertion, and much scoffing on the part of the assembly, the old gentleman gave a dissertation upon hypnotism, and it being a subject with which he was thoroughly conversant, he offered to make some practical experiments after they had reassembled in the drawing-room.

This proposal met with the approbation of all, and soon the company were smiling derisively or shrieking satisfaction at the vagaries of those who subjected themselves to Sprague's influence. The experiments were mostly successful, and considerable amusement was caused when the experimenter placed his hand upon Verrall's shoulder, and, after gazing intently into his eyes, declared that he was possessed of hypnotic power.

Someone at once suggested he should essay to exert it, and he, interested in the discovery, acceded good-humouredly, and following the directions of the mesmerist, found he really was able to hypnotize.

He had put his power to a practical test upon several of the guests, when Drummond remarked that his daughter might possibly have a stronger will than her future husband.

Amid a peal of laughter, Verrall took her by the hand, and fixed his gaze upon her eyes for a few moments.

The result was startling, and caused great alarm.

She suddenly turned pale as death, her eyes staring at some invisible object, as, with her fingers she pointed into space, exclaiming wildly:

"Look! Look! It is he. See, he is coming towards me!"

Turning upon Verrall indignantly, she cried:—

"Let me go I must—I will speak to him. Let me go, I say—I—I must—"

With both hands outstretched she advanced a couple of paces towards the unseen object, but reeled, and would have fallen, had not the man who was to be her husband caught her in his arms.

It was indeed a strange scene that had presented itself at the moment the hypnotic power had enthralled her. For a moment she felt dazed, oblivious to all her surroundings, then, with marvellous distinctness of detail, she saw the interior of a bare, ill-furnished room, in the centre of which stood a finished portrait upon an easel. Before it, sat an unkempt-looking artist in his paint-besmirched blouse, gazing with unutterable sadness on the pictured face.

Upon his brow was a settled expression of dismal sorrow and despair, and as she looked,

he rose and gave the picture a final touch, then receding a little, critically regarded the effect.

The picture was a representation of herself in a filmy bridal veil, with orange blossoms at her breast, and the artist she recognised as Arthur Enslie.

But the room, where could it be? The apartment was commonplace, with nothing about it which would serve as a guide to its discovery, yet, as she glanced round, the view from the window attracted her attention.

It was a charming scene, every detail of which impressed itself indelibly upon her memory.

There was a broad river dashing over a weir, and away upon the opposite bank a small town nestled under a high rock, on the summit of which frowned the gray walls of a fortress. Above the red-tiled roofs there rose the quaint, bulgy spire of a church, whilst in the distance a long stone bridge spanned the stream and added to its picturesqueness. The peaked houses, the wildness of the scenery, and the strange architecture of the church spire, were decidedly foreign, and just as she was wondering what place it could be, a sudden faintness seized her, and the mirage vanished.

When, by means of restoratives, she regained consciousness, her thoughts seemed unable to assume their proper shape, and without answering the inquiries as to what she had seen, she sought her room.

She sent her maid, Elise, away, and sat alone, pondering over the inexplicable scene that had been portrayed. Her mind soon regained its proper balance, and vainly she paced the room trying to discover the identity of the visionary town, and the meaning of the strange illusion.

If she could accomplish this it would be easy to go to him and seek an explanation. He must be poor and downcast, and yet, though she had glanced at him, she was unable to help him.

The thought was maddening.

At last, wearied out and distracted, she retired to rest, but only to be awakened next morning by hearing terrible news.

Her father, who had been attacked by apoplexy during the night, had expired.

CHAPTER IV.

A MONTH afterwards, when the funeral had taken place, and the will proved, Violet found herself mistress of a large fortune. She had not seen Verrall since they stood together by the open grave, though he frequently wrote to her. With Mrs. Findlater, the housekeeper, as companion, she led as secluded an existence as was decorous under the circumstances. Her piano remained untouched, there were no visitors, and her only amusement was reading.

Chancing to take up the newspaper one morning, with feminine instinct she ran her eye down the "agony" column, when her attention was suddenly arrested by a paragraph which read as follows:

"If Arthur Henry Enslie, artist, late of Dame's Inn, London, will communicate with Messrs. Guthrie & Stone, Solicitors, Lonsdale Chambers, Chancery Lane, E.C., he will hear of something to his advantage."

With a sudden interest she read the paragraph through several times, wondering what it meant. Evidently it would be to his benefit if his whereabouts were known, she thought; then suddenly the name of the firm who were advertising struck her as familiar.

If he were abroad it was scarcely probable

that he would ever see the advertisement, and then she fell to thinking about the strange scene which was conjured up so vividly on that fatal night.

With a firm determination to exert herself to the utmost in order to find him, she went to the library to ascertain whether the solicitors were the same as those to whom her father had entrusted his affairs. It was possible their name would be on some of his papers; and taking the dead man's keys from her pocket, she unlocked a small top drawer in the writing-table, where she knew he kept many of his private letters.

There were several bundles tied methodically with tape, one of which she opened and commenced to search. It was not long before her belief was substantiated, but, as she was replacing the letters in their former position, she turned over one which seemed different from all the rest, and her curiosity prompted her to unfold and read it.

When she had done so, the paper fluttered from her fingers, and, uttering a cry of dismay, she stood motionless as a statue.

It was the letter that had been sent by Arthur before his departure, and which had been intercepted by her father.

"A cruel plot to part us," she cried aloud. "But I will find him and explain, if I devote my whole lifetime to the search."

Her face was now stern and rigid, she was no longer weak or emotional, for she had a fixed purpose, one she was bent upon accomplishing.

An hour later she was ushered into the private office of Mr. Mortimer Guthrie.

"Good morning, Miss Drummond," said the old lawyer, rising and placing a chair for her. "I have never before had the pleasure of meeting you, but pray accept my most sincere sympathy in your bereavement."

"Thank you," she replied, seating herself. "I have come to see you regarding an advertisement."

"An advertisement," exclaimed the lawyer somewhat puzzled.

"Yes; I see by the papers you are advertising for an artist named Arthur Enslie."

"Ah, yes; quite true. Can you give us any information as to where he is?"

"No, alas, I cannot," she replied, "but—but I came to ask the reason you desire to find him."

"H—m—well, Miss Drummond, we usually keep our business a secret, but, as the daughter of our esteemed client who has left the bequest, we can hardly refuse the information you seek."

"Oh, do tell me," she said. "I am so very anxious to know."

"Well the fact is, a few months ago your late father made a codicil to his will, leaving a legacy of ten thousand pounds to this young artist, Enslie—"

"My father left money to him!" she exclaimed in amazement.

"Yes, it is my opinion he was under some obligation to the young man, but, of course this is only a surmise."

"Ah, I know why this has been done, Mr. Guthrie," Violet said rising, "Arthur—Mr. Enslie must be found at any cost, for an explanation is also due to him, as well as the legacy. You understand; you will spare no expense, but please do your utmost to find him, and I—I will try and help you," she added.

"Exactly. We will do all in our power to trace him, Miss Drummond; but as regards your help, I think you had better allow the matter to rest in the hands of the detective we shall employ."

"Engage a detective by all means, but I will help you also. Good morning, and thanks for your information."

She shook hands with him, and he bowed her out courteously, wondering at the same time why the millionaire's daughter should take so great an interest in the missing legatee.

He never suspected Cupid was responsible, for it was well-known that Violet Drummond was the affianced wife of John Verrall.

CHAPTER V.

It wanted but a few days of Christmas, and though Verrall had called many times, Violet had received him coldly.

During the weeks that had passed, she had been by no means idle, but had inspected the stock of views at numberless photographers' shops, and carefully searched all the books in the library in which were illustrations of Continental scenery, but her efforts all proved futile. At the photographers she described the view she wanted, but being unable to give the name, or even country, all expressed regret that they had no such scene in stock. Undaunted, however, she did not give up, but day after day continued her search, always with the same result.

As she had arranged to spend Yule-tide with an aunt in Derbyshire, her quest would have to be suspended for a time, and it was whilst Elise was packing her trunks on the night before her departure that a thought suddenly occurred to her.

"Have you any photographs, Elise?" she asked.

"Photographs, *mademoiselle*," exclaimed the Frenchwoman in surprise, "I have a few of my friends."

"No; views of places, I mean," said Violet. Elise shook her head, but suddenly recollecting, replied:

"Ah! yes, *mademoiselle*, I have some views of my home."

"I should like to see them," her young mistress said, and the maid rose and went to her room, presently returning with a common little book of views, such as could be bought for sixpence anywhere.

Violet took it, and turning them over hastily, was about to hand it back, when suddenly she started in surprise, and almost beside herself with joy, exclaimed:

"At last I have found it!"

Yes, the view corresponded in every particular with the one she had seen in her imagination.

Elise, peering over her shoulder, said:

"That *mademoiselle*, is Dinant, my home. See, there is the river Meuse, the old church, the citadel. A charming place *n'est ce pas?*"

"Dinant," exclaimed Violet excitedly. "Where is that? How do you get there?"

"It is in Belgium. You go by rail from Brussels."

"And is there some town or village here, on the opposite bank from where we are now looking?" she asked, placing her finger upon the view.

Elise considered for a moment, and replied: "Yes; *mademoiselle* must mean Bouvignes. It is a little village."

"Then you and I will go there. We'll start to-morrow morning."

"To Dinant?" asked the maid in surprise.

"In the village you have just mentioned there is someone I must find, and you can help me. Pack your own things, and be ready for the journey; we have no time to lose."

For several hours she sat listening to

Elise's encomiums on the beauties of her native land generally, and those of the Walloon country in particular, at the same time learning much about the small old-world village that she felt convinced held all that was dear to her.

Next morning they left Charing Cross by the Continental train.

CHAPTER VI.

A WHITE crisp morning in the valley of the Meuse.

In the quiet little village of Bouvignes, whose quaint solitude in the heart of the Ardennes remains undisturbed, there existed in reality the curious scene which had presented itself to Violet. There was the artist, heedless of appearance, and forlorn; the room bare and cheerless, and upon the easel the portrait—not the one he had painted for her as a present a year ago—but a reproduction of the same face enveloped in a bridal veil.

As he stood, palette in hand, adding a few delicate touches to the fair features his skill had produced, the bells of Dinant sent tinkling across the water, a soft musical *carillon* which caused him to pause and listen. Glancing out upon the river-path below, he saw the simple peasants in clattering *sabots* wending their way to worship, and then he remembered.

It was Christmas Day.

"Twelve months ago," he murmured, and fingering his palette aside, he cast himself wearily into a chair and plunged into reverie, overcome by the sad recollections that crowded upon him. "The time has passed slowly enough" he continued aloud. "Last year I foolishly imagined she was mine, and loved her fondly, but now I'm actually painting her portrait for the man who is to be her husband; painting it for money, to keep body and soul together. Ah! had I not obtained the commission from that tourist a few months ago, I might have starved ere this," and his chin fell upon his breast as he reflected silently.

With an ever-present, heart-consuming grief, his was a melancholy, soulless existence without prospect of a brighter day or hope for the future, therefore what wonder was it he should have become careless, apathetic, and inert?

His back was turned towards the door, and, engrossed with his own ruminations, he was unaware of Violet's; presence.

She stood for a moment gazing upon his unconscious figure, then, with something that sounded suspiciously like a smothered sob, rushed wildly across to him.

"Arthur! Ah! at last. Look at me and forgive me," she cried brokenly. "We have both been wronged. See! I have come to make what amends I can."

"What's this—Violet!" he shouted, starting violently. "What does this mean?" asked he, as she fell into his arms, and clung to him, sobbing.

"It means that your letter was kept back by my father," she replied. "I have always loved you, and it was a cruel attempt to part us."

"A plot then, after all!" he exclaimed. "But you are engaged to marry John Verrall, the man for whom I am painting this picture."

Smiling through her tears, and placing her arms around his neck, she replied:

"I was engaged to him; I am not now, I—I have come to fulfil my engagement with you."

Violet's advent was so unexpected that he

lost his self-possession, and utterly unable to answer, he bent and kissed her with infinite tenderness and love, whilst the Christmas bells pealed out again more joyously than before.

But what need is there to prolong the story, save to say that they returned to London together on the following day, and as soon as the *convenances* would allow, were wedded. As for the legacy, Violet declared it was his, so he claimed it.

The cause of her strange illusion is not such a mystery, after all.

There certainly is much which is occult in hypnotism, yet the curious phenomenon may be attributed to the fact that Verrall, having met Enslie whilst travelling, and seeing the portrait of Violet in his room, had commissioned him to paint a similar picture, with the addition of the bridal-dress. The scene of the artist's studio, as he witnessed it, must have flashed through his mind just at the moment he had hypnotized Violet, and hence, by means unknown even to scientists, the mental vision was transferred to her.

She is far too happy now, however, to trouble about the why or wherefore, and regards it only as a Mystic Mirage.

THE Emperor of Russia, when, upon a provincial tour of inspection, passed a night in the simple hut of a toll-taker. Before retiring, he was pleased, as head of the Church to see the old man take up his Bible and read a chapter. "Dost thou read often, my son?" he asked. "Yes, your Majesty—every day." "How much of the Bible hast thou read, my son?" "During the past year the Old Testament and part of Matthew, your Majesty." Thinking to reward him, the Czar on the following morning placed five hundred roubles between the leaves of the book of Mark without the knowledge of the toll-keeper, to whom he bade farewell. Several months passed away, and the Emperor returned, upon a second tour, to the toll-keeper's hut. Taking the Bible in his hands, he was surprised to find the five hundred roubles intact. Again interrogating the toll-keeper as to whether he was diligent in reading, he received an affirmative answer, the man stating that he had finished the chapters of Luke. "Lying, my son, is a great sin," replied his Majesty. "Give me the Bible." Opening the book, he pointed to the money, which the man had not seen. "Thou hast not sought the kingdom of God, my son. As punishment thou shalt also lose thy earthly reward;" and the Emperor placed the roubles in his pocket, to distribute afterwards among the neighbouring poor.

MANY good stories have been told of the headles of the Scottish churches. The latest is as good as any. One Sabbath morning when a minister of an Ayrshire Established Church was about to enter the pulpit he found that John, the precator, had not arrived. He instructed the beadle, who was also bellman, to ring the bell for five minutes longer while they waited to see if John came. When he returned, the minister inquired: "Has John come yet?" "No, sir," answered the beadle. "Most extraordinary! What are we to do? I see no help for it, but you must take John's place yourself for a day." "Ah no, sir," replied the beadle, "I couldna dee that. Aibins I could tak' your place, but I couldna tak' John's."