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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Portrait of a Bride

By EARLE PEIRCE, JR.

An utterly strange tale of a painter who fell in love with a make-believe wife, or so his friends thought—but did he merely imagine her, after all?

WITH a hollow rattle in its exhaust the ancient bus started down the road and left me standing in the darkness. It was a warm spring evening, and the rain of a few hours before had made perfume in the air as it filtered through the trees. I inhaled the fragrance hungrily. It was like coming home again.

The shabby bus terminal was closed for the night; but a bench stood outside the door beneath an eave, and I sat down to smoke my pipe while awaiting Richman's arrival. It would be a few minutes before he came. Oddly enough, the old Ford bus had been ahead of time.

After the lapse of a year I was keen to see Richman again. We had been together so much in the old days that I looked upon him as a brother; at times an older, wiser brother, and at other times a much younger one who needed looking after. And now he was married.

I couldn't quite adapt myself to the realization that he had a wife. Perhaps I was jealous of her, but God knows he needed a capable woman to look after him. Artists and scientists are alike in that respect.

But it was love and not a desire for domestic orderliness which had finally made a married man of him. After all his years of celibate scorn he had at last fallen, hard. She must be quite a woman.

Of course I couldn't rely completely upon the descriptions of her in his letters.

Maudlin devotion there. The man was blind; he could see nothing but the shining side of her. However, the opposite side is for the best man to see, and to keep his counsel about. I suspected that Elizabeth must mother him frightfully.

To end these reflections a car drove up the road and stopped beside the terminal. A man climbed out. It was Stephan, whom I had not seen since Richman left New York a year ago. As he came under the illumination of a street lamp I saw that he hadn't changed a hair; servants rarely do.

"Welcome to Vermont again, sir," he greeted as we shook hands. "Mr. Richman will be delighted that you are here."

"He's expecting me tonight?"

"Oh yes, sir! He requested me to come to the depot. He has a slight catarrh. The doctor keeps him indoors."

Stephan carried my bag to the car. It was the same antiquated Buick, but miraculously clean. I saw Elizabeth's Victorian hand in that.

"You feel the difference already, sir?" Stephan was buoyant with enthusiasm as we climbed into the car. "It's something in the air. You can't help but notice it—a sort of rarefied, invigorating quality. It's made a new man of Mr. Richman, sir."

"He's well, then — other than the catarrh?"

Through the corners of my eyes I perceived the negative shake of Stephan's head.



"At first I saw only a vague outline of a woman's body, with the moon shining through it."

"Not exactly well, as you would say, sir. His lungs are still a bit crusty, and the doctor can't give him much of a margin on that account. But he's happy! He's working and he's happy. I never expected to see him like this again."

This was good news, but not unexpected. Richman's many letters spoke well of his new lease on life. I relaxed in the automobile seat with a feeling of complacency.

"I take it," I murmured, "that married life is good to him."

There was a short silence which, at that time, I did not construe as ominous. Indifferent to it, I went on:

"After all those years we nearly lost

hope of his ever marrying, didn't we?"

"Yes, sir, we nearly did."

Again there was a brief silence as the car rolled smoothly over the dirt highway. I became aware of a slight tension between us.

"Fond of your new mistress, aren't you, Stephan?" I inquired.

FOR the moment Stephan did not answer me. He seemed deliberately preoccupied with his driving. I repeated my question.

With a grim cast to his face, Stephan let up on the accelerator and steered the car to one side of the road. He pulled

back the brake and brought the machine to a jarring stop.

"I've got to tell you, sir," he cried suddenly. "It—it's about Mrs. Richman. She is a myth."

"A myth?" I reiterated. "What do you mean?"

Stephan ran a hand distraughtly through his graying hair. His lips twisted in an attempt to find words.

"I realize what a shock it must be to you, sir. And I sincerely wish that I had written you about it before you came up here. Mrs. Richman doesn't exist except in his imagination. It's an obsession, the doctor says. He calls it the fixation of an idea in his conscious mind."

I stared at him incredulously.

"Do you mean to tell me that his wife is not real—that she's imaginary?"

"Yes, sir. She's imaginary. Ever since the beginning she has been a part of his mind. It's uncanny, but he believes in her reality as—as a saint believes in Christ. It frightens me at times. I fear he might suddenly awaken and find her only a dream. It would kill him, sir."

For a moment I was speechless.

"Let me get this straight, Stephan. You mean to tell me that Richman's wife does not exist in reality? There is no such person as Elizabeth?"

I stopped. Belatedly I realized that Richman had never told me his wife's maiden name.

Stephan seemed to understand my hesitation. He spoke as one at a high requiem.

"I wish I had written to you, sir. It would have prevented a great deal of embarrassment. I really don't know what I can say now."

I shook my hand to stop his abject chatter. There was no need for him to explain further. I saw it clearly now: Richman, the idealist—the artist in search of beauty. . . . His mind rebelled against harsh realities. His sensitive soul did the rest.

To any psychiatrist it was an old story. But Elizabeth a myth!

"I tried to orient him several months ago," Stephan went on, "but the idea had already taken possession of him. Now it is too late. The doctor says he is hopelessly insane."

It was a brutal word even in Stephan's quiet voice, and I winced at it.

"Please, sir! He isn't in any discomfort. On the contrary, he seems sublimely happy, and his work is better than ever before. He is doing her portrait in oils. A work of genius, even though it is inspired by insanity. The two are not remote, you know."

"Her portrait? As he sees her?"

"A beautiful painting, sir. You will see it for yourself."

"But how do you deal with him?" I demanded. "With Elizabeth a——"

"It's quite simple, sir. One might call it a sort of game we play. The madam has a room of her own next to his. I never go in there, except to take a meal tray to the door. He does all the rest—sweeps it, sir, and does the cleaning, and brings down her dishes. He is worried because she doesn't touch any of the food, but not even that can shake his faith in her reality. At night they—seem to slip out into the garden together."

"Good God!" I muttered. "How long has this been going on, Stephan?"

"For three months, sir, ever since the marriage."

"Marriage! D'you mean to tell me he actually had a ceremony?"

"The Reverend Mr. Blanding himself performed it, sir. You see, we are all his friends, and anything we can do to make him happy—even though it be in this mad dream of his—we shall do it to the end. It's little enough for the man who's been so kind to us."

With defensive deliberation Stephan released the brake and started the car ahead.

THE drive to the house was too brief for my peace of mind. I wanted some time in which to think this over. The suddenness of Stephan's revelation shattered my fondest visions, and I sat there with the wreck of them in my hands.

The ancestral home of the Richmans came out of the night to meet us. Huge frame windows spilled rectangles of light out onto the drive. The black outline of the house stood soberly against the blue-black sky with all the durability of a mountain.

Stephan stopped the car to let me out before he drove on to the garage.

"Try to act normally, sir," he cautioned. "And speak to her once in a while. He will imagine that he hears her respond."

Stephan drove off before I could question him on this point, and for a moment—as the car vanished around the corner—I felt a sting of panic. I was tempted to await his return before venturing into the house; then I realized that he would enter by the back way. I knocked on the door.

Richman himself answered the summons. He was less emaciated, although still thin and consumptive-looking. I was impressed by the singular brightness of his eyes.

"Welcome, John!" He pumped my arm vigorously. "By all the gods, you're welcome! Sorry I didn't get down to the depot, but Doc's been dosing me with all kinds of nostrums. How've you been? You're looking fit."

He was feverishly cordial, and I knew that his cordiality was sincere. We went into a shabby old living-room for drinks.

"Elizabeth's dressing," he said. "Dinner in a few moments. She's dined already, but I think she'll come down. She doesn't take cocktails, so it's you and me on these." He lifted a glass to his lips. "We'll drink to her."

The initial surprise of Stephan's confession had not worn off. I studied Richman

shamelessly as I sipped the martini. It was shocking to think of him as mad—shocking and a little horrible.

"You will adore her," he went on. "Everyone does. A woman as rare as genius. Did I tell you how we met? I was walking in the garden at midnight, and there she stood, all radiant and story-bookish in the moonlight. She'd been out walking too, and had lost her way. . . . She never went back, John. I often think that some kind of fate sent her to me. I dreamed of her, you know, long before she came. . . ."

Richman looked recklessly handsome as he spoke. His skin was pale and taut across his facial bones, but the eyes imparted to him a vitality I have seldom seen in any man. His jet-black hair was heedlessly mussed; a ringlet of it dangled over his forehead.

"D'you remember how we used to philosophize on women, John? I the Victorian, you the cynic. How we were to put women in their places. Remember how I was to paint nothing but pastorals? And you to write nothing but Cabellian novels? Oh those years! I often tell Elizabeth about them. We spend hours in reminiscence. It's odd how she seems to know all that history that you and I lived together. It's telepathy, I'm certain. We intrude on each other's most private musings as if we shared a single mind. Poetic, eh?" He laughed shortly, and, I thought, in slight embarrassment.

He swept a hand through his hair and dropped into a chair, but immediately he rose and began to pace back and forth.

"Can you name any celibates in history who have reached creative genius?" he demanded suddenly. "Your monastic saints, perhaps, and Spinoza. Yet women stood behind these men—women of dreams and reverie, women like visions leading them onward. . . ."

He walked to a table and filled his glass.

Another ringlet of hair fell over his brow. I used to determine his mood by these ringlets. In moments of intense passion, a condition generally provoked by his failure to paint exactly what he saw, his forehead was completely blackened by disheveled hair. His brow was rarely bare.

As I watched him I felt myself to be a detached, an almost clinical observer. Stephan's word *insanity* was responsible for that. I would never have considered it otherwise, never have erected that inviolate barrier between him and me.

He put down his glass and turned toward the door. "Here she comes," he said. "She's always on time."

He walked to the entrance and vanished. A moment later he returned, frowning, sweeping the hair from his eyes.

"I must have been imagining things," he muttered. "Her tread is so light that sometimes I confuse it with the tapping of trees on the roof."

He picked up his glass.

"I remember that when I first saw her I couldn't be certain whether she was there or not. At first I saw only a vague outline of a woman's body, with the moon shining through it from behind. Then gradually a mist seemed to collect and fill in the outline. It grew denser, and suddenly—there she was! A peculiar illusion, due probably to my overwrought mind. I'd been in an absolute hell of despondency just before I decided on that turn in the garden. Fortunate decision!"

His eyes met mine directly as he smiled at me over the top of the glass.

SO FAR I had avoided his eyes out of a fear of embarrassment, but now I saw that my fears were groundless. Richman's eyes were so frank and sincere that I had a momentary impression that there was no subterfuge between us. I smiled back at him.

Unexpectedly he turned again toward

the entrance. His brows lifted in surprise.

"Beth!" he cried. "I didn't hear you come down."

Considering the extra weight I seemed to have acquired in the space of those few seconds, I climbed to my feet with commendable alacrity. I was at a complete loss for anything to do; nevertheless I turned expectantly toward the door and waited. Richman, having crossed the room, stood with his back toward me and his arms lifted curiously in the air. His fingers were clasped, as if about a pair of shoulders.

Richman gave me no time in which to adjust myself to this situation. He turned on his heel, dropped one hand to his side but retained the other in its same position, as if holding a person's arm, and accosted me with complete disregard of my plight.

"This is she, John. Beth, you've heard me speak of John Kenyon."

It was a frightful moment. The room fell into an abrupt silence. None of us moved. Then I realized that my eyes were affixed, not upon this imaginary woman, but upon Richman himself. Even to a madman this was unexplainable conduct! I averted my eyes jerkily and made a grotesque bow.

"I—I'm happy to meet you," I stammered.

That silence fell again. Richman was immobile. He stood staring at me, his face strangely set.

Stephan appeared behind him, too quietly to have not been listening.

"Dinner is ready, sir," he announced. His eyes shifted from me to Richman, whose back faced him. "Good evening, madam," he said clearly.

Richman closed his eyes and opened them as if to break a trance. He turned, brushing back his hair.

"Very well, Stephan. Thank you."

I took advantage of this intrusion to overcome my inertia. Primarily, I cracked

the nervous rigidity which had settled upon me and managed to throw my mind into neutral gear, as it were, to permit a relaxation of the muscles in my face. I broadened my wan smile by deliberately pulling back my lips. Even so, I could not trust myself to address a non-existing woman. I spoke to Richman instead.

"An ideal servant, Stephan. Men like that are rare today. You're lucky."

"Yes, we are," said Richman abstractedly. "Very lucky.—Hungry, Beth? Oh! You've dined already, of course. But come along anyway; we want your company."

For the next few minutes, fortunately, Richman broke into one of his long monologs which prevented a silence that might have been unendurable. We seated ourselves about the table, he at one end, I in the middle at his left, and an empty space, with a vacant chair drawn to it, at the opposite end.

"We have a lot to talk about," he continued, his eyes at rest upon the empty chair. "You'll see, Beth, that all I've told you is true. Those days! They fill me with disconsolate pity!"

Stephan entered with a tureen of soup. He went directly to the vacant space, where he paused for a moment before serving me and then Richman.

IT WAS the most unpleasant half-hour I have ever lived through. Richman lapsed into a brooding silence. Stephan came and went, hesitating each time he passed *her* place as if to make an obeisance. The food, to me, was tasteless. The wine was like water.

No longer did Richman gaze at his "Beth." He was sunk in introspection. It was an old mood with him; one which I knew too well. The silence persisted until coffee took us back into the living-room.

Stephan caught my eye as he deposited the tray, but I was unable to decipher his

expression. He seemed to be warning me of something. But before I could follow him from the room Richman pinned me to my chair with a cup and saucer.

There were only two cups; we each had one. I surmised that "Beth" forwent coffee as she did cocktails.

The silence became unbearable. I set my cup aside and leaned forward, gripping my knees.

"You — you are native to Vermont, aren't you Mrs. Richman?" I inquired.

Richman's head jerked up.

"Mrs. Richman! What's the matter with you, John? Beth went upstairs two minutes ago!"

2

IT WAS a three-story house. Richman had torn away part of the roof and replaced it with a skylight facing the east. As we climbed the attic stairs I detected the characteristic odor of resin and oils.

He turned on the light. At once I saw the portrait of Elizabeth.

Stephan was right; this was Richman's most inspired work. She was a tall woman, with deeply tanned skin, and a wholesome fullness to her face. Her eyes and hair were as black as Richman's own. She wore a billowing white tea-gown that rose high on her chest and puffed at the shoulders. There was a faint smile on her lips—a child's smile. The whole impression was that of a child: the simple gown, the guileless dark eyes, the faintly bluish handkerchief that floated from her fingertips. . . .

"It's my best work," Richman said, "but it's inadequate. It's only a caricature of what she's truly like."

"There's a spirit to it," I told him.

Richman made a deprecating motion.

"A man can't do it as he wants. No man can. I'll destroy this before I'm through."

"Don't do that."

"I shall! I shall! How futile it is even to try!"

These were odd words.

"They say our minds are mirrors reflecting nature. That's all I want—to reflect her perfection. But some place the image is distorted. Some flaw——"

He walked closer to the portrait. Standing there, he studied his work with an air of dejection.

"You can't improve on the original," I pointed out matter-of-factly. "This is a duplication, not a reflection. I mean, it's not as if your canvas were a mirror."

"You always say that," he cried. "As long as I've known you, you've used that same trite simile. A mirror reflects. The mind does more than that; the mind creates, interprets. . . . There is creative art as there is creative literature. Fundamentally, all true art is creative."

"That depends on your definition of the word *creation*," I said. "In sculpture you can only change form. In music it's composition. In art—painting—it's part shape and part color. True creation, to my mind, is impossible, since all things have already been created. You can only duplicate."

Richman whirled on me, his hair swishing across his eyes.

"D'you think I'll argue this with you! Come along. Let's go downstairs!"

HE GAVE me a room in the back of the house. Stephan had laid out my things; he said good-night to me and left. I got into bed, thinking that Richman deserved less of my pity and more of my material aid. But how could I aid him? My mere presence here seemed to be a source of irritation.

The sound of painful coughing awakened me shortly after eleven o'clock. Richman was in the garden below, hatless, without his coat. I was tempted to call

him from my window, but I decided to risk no chance that he would evade me. Donning my robe and slippers I went down to the garden.

He was sitting alone on a stone bench when I tiptoed from the porch. Something about his attitude forbade me to approach any farther. He was as if listening to a voice from beside him.

I listened too, but heard nothing save the occasional rain-drops that slithered earthward through the trees. Unexpectedly Richman spoke.

"If we leave in April we can be there in time for the festival. You'll adore the folk dances, Beth. . . ."

He was interrupted by a coughing spell that seized and shook him brutally. Alarmed by the rawness of his voice I started toward him. I took three steps; a voice hailed me in a shrill whisper.

"Mr. Kenyon, sir!"

A shadow detached itself from a clump of shrubs. Stephan's face appeared, framed beneath derby and muffler.

"Please, sir, let him be," he begged. "No good can come of stopping him. And he suffers intolerably when these moments are intruded upon."

"But that cough! This night air!"

"I know, sir. It aggravates his lungs; it hastens the end. But he lives for these nights. He spends hours here, planning the future, building air-castles. I know, sir. I never let him out of my sight."

"Do you want him to die?" I demanded.

"His death would pain me more than anyone. But since he must die soon I want his last weeks to be happy ones. Just listen to him, sir. Have you ever seen him happier?"

I looked at Richman. I saw a shivering man, a sick man, a man frenziedly chattering to himself.

"It's rather horrible," I grunted.

"Is madness ever without its horror? But is love ever without its beauty? All

his life he has been a lonely and unhappy man. Now his life draws to its finish, and for the first time he knows happiness. There is something—something rather beautiful about it.”

“Rot!” I said. “He can commune with Elizabeth indoors as well as out. Come along! We’ll get him back into the house.”

RICHMAN overheard these words, but whether he understood their meaning or not I never knew. He rose and searched the garden with his eyes until he saw us. His lean face, etched in shadows, was a mask of pain. He blinked rapidly several times. Suddenly he turned and walked swiftly toward the side door of the house. Halfway he stopped and turned around. Again he blinked. He started to come back, hesitated uncertainly, then turned and proceeded into the house.

“What do you make of that?” I asked. “He left her sitting there. That is—well, I imagine she was there! Damn it, Stephan. This is fantastic!”

“That’s because you’re burdened with preconceived images of her,” said the servant. “Had you, as I did, watched the gradual growth of her in his mind you would not find it fantastic. I think you’d find it beautiful.”

I shook my head.

“Perhaps,” I said dryly. “But this is no time for such speculation. We must safeguard his health, not conspire in these adolescent fantasies. They should have been stopped months ago. Along to the house, Stephan. We’ll give him a rub-down and pack him in bed where he belongs.”

Stephan followed me silently into the house. We found Richman sitting in his room in the darkness. He coughed raggedly as I turned on the light.

“It’s after midnight,” I said. “Hadn’t you better get to bed? We’ll give you a

massage. You’ll sleep better for it.”

He shook his head as if it were too much of an effort to speak. He looked utterly exhausted.

“Come, come, Richman! You’re tired. You need a good rest. Let me help you out of those damp things.”

He looked up into my eyes.

“Have you seen Beth?” he asked. “We were talking a while ago. Now I can’t find her.”

“She’s in her room asleep,” I said shortly. “Just where you belong.”

I slipped my hand under his arm and pulled him gently.

“Stephan,” I summoned, “take his other arm.”

Richman came up easily, but he would not move toward the bed. It was all Stephan and I could do to keep him from walking to the door leading to the empty room where “Beth” was supposed to be lying.

“I must see Beth,” he insisted.

“Easy, Richman. Beth’s asleep. You can’t see her tonight. You must get some rest.”

A coughing spell attacked him and he slumped into my arms. Stephan and I took advantage of this to drag him to his bed. We stripped him and clad him in his woolen pajamas.

“I’ll sit with him a while,” said Stephan. “You’d better get some rest yourself, Mr. Kenyon. You’ve had a long day.”

“Do you think he’ll be all right? I’d hate to go to bed if anything were—to happen.”

Stephan tucked the blankets about Richman’s throat. The coughing had subsided.

“I’ll read to him, sir,” whispered the servant. “It’s an unfailing soporific with him.”

There was a slight evidence of resentment in Stephan’s voice. Obviously he held me responsible for Richman’s present agitation.

I gripped the lower bedpost.

"Call me if anything happens. I——"

I broke off as Richman coughed. His face grew congested with blood; his voice was raw and hoarse. Spasmodically his eyes encircled the room, but he seemed to see nothing familiar. Stephan stroked back his hair until the seizure passed.

"I—I'm sorry about this," I blurted out. Turning, I strode quickly from the room and closed the door behind me.

I FOUND it difficult to get back to sleep. For one thing the incident in the garden had chilled me. For another I tried half-heartedly, as one will do on the brink of sleep, to follow the muted drone of Stephan's voice. Twice within an hour I got out of bed and paced the floor while I smoked a cigarette. The second time I ventured into the hall, the better to hear Stephan's words. He was reading from *Peter Ibbetsen*.

Richman coughed intermittently throughout the early hours of the morning. It was after three before I fell asleep, and Stephan was still reading to him.

It was a short night. Stephan awakened me at six o'clock. He was greatly excited, and apparently had had no sleep at all. I went at once with him to Richman's room, where we found the invalid in delirium.

"I'm afraid it's the end, sir. He fell asleep about four, then awoke a few moments ago as you see him now. I've already sent word to Doctor Bronson."

I sat on the bed and felt Richman's brow. It was feverishly warm. He breathed strenuously, the short, shallow gasps of a bronchial patient. His eyes were wide open, but they were hopelessly wild.

"Beth," he groaned, "Beth, Beth. . . ."

I combed back his hair, tidied the covers about his neck. There was nothing to be done for him until the doctor came. I

said as much to Stephan, but the old servant faithfully persisted in every trifling ministrations of comfort.

Doctor Bronson arrived half an hour later. He was a short, brisk-mannered man of middle fifties; a New Yorker.

"It's serious," he admitted gravely, "but just what that means I can't say. I advise immediate hospitalization. He needs expert nursing.

"You know I can't send him to a hospital," said Stephan. "Not him!"

"Poor devil," murmured Bronson with a shake of his head. "I wonder if Beth would follow him to a hospital."

So Bronson was a conspirator too!

That fatal name impinged upon Richman's delicate mind. He choked on, and swallowed, some matter from his mouth.

"Beth? Beth!"

Stephan moved apprehensively closer.

"Does he feel pain, Doctor?"

"Discomfort mote or less," said Bronson abstractedly. "That doesn't worry me. I worry about a lucid spell. Mental cases often have them just before the end. All the——"

"The end?" repeated Stephan in a hushed voice. "Does it really mean he's going—to die?"

The physician nodded. "I'm afraid so, Stephan. He's hung on a long time, considering his condition. Remember I gave him only six months to live. That was a year ago."

Stephan's voice broke out passionately: "That was before he met her!"

"Yes, and I'm afraid he'll lose her now. That lucid spell I mentioned—it'll expose his Beth for the unreal creature that she is. It'll be a damned bad moment for him."

I spoke then: "You mean he'll know the truth about her?"

"It's probable."

"We can't let it happen," Stephan cried. "I'd rather see him dead than ever know!"

"We can scarcely intervene," put in

Bronson sharply. "Of course, I may be wrong. He may pass on still believing in her."

"Is it likely?" I asked.

"No. I'm sorry." Bronson stood up. "If worst comes to worst we'll tell him she's gone on a trip, or something."

"But suppose this lucid spell lasts days, weeks even?"

Bronson was silent.

"No!" cried Stephan. "We can't let this happen to Mr. Richman. It would be better to give him an injection now than ever let him know the truth."

"There's a limit to what we can do for him," remarked the physician. "We'll do all we can, naturally. An opiate might help as a last extremity."

Richman suddenly sat up in bed and propped himself on his elbows. He blinked his eyes several times before getting his focus.

"Is that you, Beth?" he asked.

He was looking at Bronson.

BRONSON stepped to the bedside and put his hand on Richman's shoulder. "It's I," he said. "Bronson. Beth is— is on her way to you."

Richman fell back. "I'm glad," he whispered through dry lips. "She can help me—breathe—better." His head rolled disconsolately on the pillow.

Bronson removed his stethoscope from his pocket and applied it to Richman's chest. He was as intent as if listening to a far-off voice.

"That," he muttered, "was a bit too exciting for him."

Richman's head stopped rolling. He lifted it, looked into Bronson's eyes. A rueful smile touched his mouth.

"Scoping again, Doc? No good. Send Beth instead. Tell her to please hurry."

Bronson lifted his brows; he was evidently surprised by the coherence of Richman's voice. Was this the lucid spell?

"Beth is coming," he said hastily. He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Tell Mrs. Richman to hurry, Kenyon. I don't believe she heard us the first time."

This was to assuage Richman's anxiety, of course; but it left me holding the bag. I would have remained rooted to the spot if his eyes had not told me to leave the room—to pretend at least.

I went out as he bade, and stopped the moment I was in the hall. Bronson followed me by half a minute.

"We've got to do something," he cried. "I was a fool to say that, I suppose, but damn the man's eyes! Have you ever seen a pleading dog, Kenyon?"

"This complex should have been nipped in the bud," I retorted. "You should have known that some day——"

"Fine talk now! He's in there waiting for her. What are we going to do?"

"I believe you mentioned an opiate?"

"I'm afraid you're right." Bronson cast a meditative glance at the sickroom door. "Damn! I left my bag in the car. Come down with me, Kenyon."

We were on the front porch when Stephan joined us. He was at his wit's end.

"Please do something," he begged. "He's demanding to know why she doesn't come. What can I tell him? Suppose he gets up and looks for her?"

It was a new peril to consider. Bronson and I exchanged glances.

"I've an idea," he said suddenly. "My office nurse—you remember her, Stephan—has a faint resemblance to his portrait of Elizabeth. With the curtains drawn and the light down low——"

He left off under Stephan's steady scrutiny.

"Of course," he went on after a moment, "it may seem rather a brutal trick, but considering the circumstances he could not detect the difference. I mean, it's not as if his Elizabeth were a real person. She can't be as vivid to him as all that."

"No?" I inquired. "What of that portrait?"

"Well, after all, we've nothing to lose by it."

"Nothing to lose!" repeated Stephan. "Think of *him* when you say that. Suppose we did get your nurse? And suppose he detected the difference? Which one of us would explain that to him?"

"It seems to me," I remarked, "that we're making entirely too much of this. Let's get your nurse, Bronson. For a few dollars she would be willing to sit on his bed and hold his hand until the end. You said it might not be long."

Neither Bronson nor Stephan responded to this suggestion. The uneasy silence was at last broken by Richman's impatient "Beth" from upstairs.

"I'll stay with him," I continued. "Stephan had better go to town with you and instruct your nurse in the essential details."

"Very well. It's better than nothing." Bronson seemed to be a trifle short-tempered. "Keep your eye on Richman. Don't let him get out of bed. And keep him well covered. We'll be as quick as we can."

I WATCHED the car until it carried them out of sight; then I went upstairs to my own room and dressed. As I was shaving I heard a sigh from Richman's room. I felt a little ashamed that I had not looked at him sooner. After drying my face I went through the communicating doors of the bathroom and found Richman motionless on the bed.

He was dead.

Death, apparently, had come only a few moments before I entered the room. His body was extended its full length on the bed; both hands were crossed on his chest; his eyes were closed. The lingering phase of a smile rested on his lips.

Something about him struck me as be-

ing odd; the smile for one thing—it did not become a man who had died in suspense and agony.

I walked closer and studied his face. His muscles were relaxed. He looked happy—happier than he had ever looked in life.

A vague irritation stirred my mind. I walked slowly around the bed to examine him from another angle. When I reached his far side I imagined I smelled a weak perfume.

This brought me up alertly. I turned toward the hall door and listened. There was no immediate sound, although I had the impression that some sound had just escaped my notice.

Walking into the hall I looked to the right and left. The door to the attic was slightly ajar. I reached it in four strides and stood still to listen. A faint swishing sound reached my ears. It might have been anything, from the moving of a dress to the dropping of leaves on the roof.

I ran up the steps and stopped at the open studio door. The perfume was stronger now; it seemed to come from a vase of white roses on a table near by.

The studio was aglow with morning sunlight. Motes of dust scintillated in the air.

The life-size portrait of Elizabeth, bathed in the warm light, was like a living thing. Her eyes shone; her white teeth glistened. For a moment, transfixed by her gaze, I was awed. Then suddenly I noticed that her left hand, which yesterday had held a pale blue handkerchief, was now empty.

I could not trust my senses. Perhaps the shadows of last night had deceived me; there may not have been a handkerchief. I did not know. Nor did I know for certain a moment later when I walked into the studio; but lying on the floor beneath the easel, as if dropped in flight, was a pale blue handkerchief.