

A MODERN VAMPIRE.

BY W. L. ALDEN.



GEORGE MATTHEWS was unquestionably a successful man. He was not yet quite thirty years old, and he was the editor of a widely-circulated London magazine. He had made a reputation as a writer of stories of singular power and originality, and had thereupon followed the example of many other successful writers by founding a magazine of his own. He was proud of his success, and happy in the independence of his position. It was now his turn to accept or reject manuscripts; and, instead of waiting for the slow decision of editors, and the slower payments of publishers, he printed his own stories, and drew his pay whenever he pleased. He was unmarried, and his income was much larger than his necessities. He was in perfect health, with the exception that his nerves were beginning to remonstrate against excessive smoking and the hard work of earlier years. This, however, was a small matter, and Matthews would not have changed places with any man in London.

He was sitting in his office one day when the messenger told him that a lady desired to see him. He looked at her card and recognised the name of a writer whose stories were popular among a certain class of readers, and who had sent several manuscripts to him, all of which he had been compelled to reject. He felt that an unpleasant quarter of an hour was at hand, but he at once told the messenger to show the visitor in. He had expected to find her a middle-aged woman, either angular and acrid or stout and obstinate. To his surprise, Miss Vaughan was young and beautiful. Not only was she beautiful, but there was an expression in her large dark eyes that seemed to dominate him in a way wholly new to his experience. He could not quite understand the effect that she produced upon him, but he recognised that she was a woman who, if she asked a question, could not be met with an evasive answer. "If she asks me why I did not take her stories," he swiftly thought, "I shall have to tell her the truth, and then look out for squalls."

"I do not want to take up your time," she began, "and I know I have no right to question you, but you can be of great help to me if you will answer me a single question."

"I shall be most happy to be of any possible service to you," Matthews replied.

"I have sent you five stories, and you have refused them all. Now I don't for an instant doubt that you were right in so doing, but elsewhere I have found no difficulty in selling my stories. Will you tell me why you did not take any of the five?"

For a moment Matthews was about to make the usual reply, that he had declined Miss Vaughan's stories partly because they were not quite the sort of thing he needed, and partly because he was so well provided with stories that he was buying scarcely any. But she was looking straight at him, and he could not take his eyes from hers or tell her what was essentially untrue.

"I declined them," he answered, "because they were commonplace in conception. You write remarkably well, for a woman, and if you had a story to tell, you would tell it in an unexceptionable way; but I have never found in any of your stories a plot that was fresh, or a character that was a creation. I hate to speak brutally, but you asked me for the truth, and you have it."

He had expected to see his visitor flush with anger, but she accepted his frankness with perfect serenity.

"I think you must be right," she said presently. "I have often felt that my stories were good hack-work, but nothing more. I see clearly what you mean. I know my plots are commonplace, and I have tried hundreds of times to invent one that would be new and striking, but I never succeed. Tell me: can I ever learn to create? You can do it, and that is the reason why your stories fascinate me."

"Thank you very much," replied Matthews. "I wish I could help you, but I cannot see how that would be possible. I can only suggest that you try to look at things from a point of view different from that taken by all the rest of the world. Perhaps that will help you to find new ideas. But why are you dissatisfied? Your stories are in nearly all the magazines, and I am sure that where I have one reader you have ten. Is not your success enough to satisfy you?"

"Mr. Matthews," she replied earnestly, "I want to write something that I can be proud of. I want to get rid of this feeling, that I am always just outside of the line of true genius, and cannot get within it. If I could write one story that you could not help



calling great, I should not care if I never wrote another line. My own work seems so infinitely small when I read yours. You have shown me what is the matter with my stories. If I were to see you, and talk with you now and then, might I not get some glimpse of the way out of my miserable, commonplace, suburban-villa habit of mind?"

Matthews was still young enough to find flattery welcome, and flattery from a beautiful woman had the additional charm of novelty. Moreover, he felt that he had spoken to Miss Vaughan of her stories in a way that must have wounded her, however skilfully she concealed the wound. He answered her promptly and warmly.

"My dear Miss Vaughan, there is nothing that would give me greater pleasure than to meet you frequently. I cannot believe that my poor conversational powers will be of any benefit to you; but if you will kindly permit me to call upon you, you will certainly be of very great help to a tired, and probably tiresome, man."

A few days later Matthews called on Miss Vaughan. He had had a tiresome and unsatisfactory day. A story which, when he had first thought of it, seemed full of possibilities,

"YOU ASKED ME FOR THE TRUTH, AND YOU HAVE IT."

refused to shape itself into a satisfactory ending. He did not like to abandon the story completely, and he would not put pen to paper until he knew precisely what he meant to write. He had spent hours in thinking intently on the subject, but without achieving any result. At last he resolved to dismiss, if possible, the matter from his mind for that day, and pass an hour with Miss Vaughan.

Before he reached her door the true ending of his story flashed upon him, and with a light heart he met his new acquaintance. He was still more contented by the warmth with which he was received.

The conversation was chiefly of literary matters: of books, authors, and methods of work. Matthews, finding himself suddenly thrust into the position of confidential adviser to a young and exceedingly handsome woman, was pleased with the situation. He gave her the best advice he could command, and even promised to read and revise her manuscripts. All the time, however, his own

story forced itself upon his attention. He could not put it out of his mind. Several times, while Miss Vaughan was speaking to him, he forgot to listen to her, so intently was he thinking of his own work. He was acutely conscious of this, and tried his utmost to confine his attention to what Miss Vaughan was saying. With this view he frequently fixed his eyes on hers, more intently than was quite in keeping with strict propriety, but, oddly enough, the more he looked at her, the more that impertinent story claimed his attention. When he rose up to take his leave he felt curiously tired, instead of rested. Doubtless it was the result of the annoyance which he had experienced earlier in the day, but it was certainly improbable that a call on an attractive and entertaining woman should have tired him.

A week went by. Matthews had not yet begun to write his story, owing to a pressure of other work. He was, however, at last ready to begin it, and he had just seated himself at his desk for that purpose when he received a manuscript from Miss Vaughan. Regretting his rash promise to read her manuscripts, and wondering how he could have been so weak as to make it, he nevertheless resolved to read the manuscript at

once, and so make an end of the matter. As he read page after page his astonishment steadily grew. The story was virtually the same one that he had intended to write, and yet he could swear that he had not in the most distant manner spoken of it, or of any part of it, to Miss Vaughan. That they should both have hit upon the same idea, and that she should have carried it out essentially in the same way that he would have carried it out himself, was a marvellous coincidence. "After this," said Matthews to himself, "I shall never accuse any man of plagiarism." There could be no possible doubt that in this case the same story had occurred to two minds almost simultaneously. Miss Vaughan had written her story before Matthews had begun his own, and as a result it was clearly necessary that he should abandon all idea of treating the same subject.

He was also surprised to find that Miss Vaughan's style had greatly improved. This story was written with a masculine vigour which he had never found in her previous stories, and there were tricks of expression which she had evidently caught from Matthews himself. He felt sure that she had been making a diligent study of his writings, and heartily wished that she had chosen to compliment him in some other way.

Of course he could not blame the woman because she had happened to think of a subject of which he had never spoken to her. She had written a good story, and she was entitled to all the credit for it. He at once wrote to her, accepting the story for publication in his magazine. He made no allusion to the resemblance between what Miss Vaughan had done and what he had intended to do. Any such allusion would have done no good, and could hardly have failed to annoy her.

During the next six months Matthews saw Miss Vaughan very frequently. A warm friendship sprang up between them. There was nothing of sentiment in this friendship. The man and the woman were simply comrades, united by common tastes and common interests. It soon became wholly unnecessary for him to supervise his friend's manuscript. Her stories were, as Matthews cheerfully acknowledged, quite as good as anything he had ever written, and their resemblance to the work that he had formerly done was startling. Three times the same coincidence of ideas occurred, and each time Miss Vaughan wrote a story which Matthews had intended to write. In every case the coincidence between the



"THEN SHE WENT BACK TO HER WRITING."

written and the unwritten story was nearly perfect.

The first time this had occurred, Matthews had resolved never to speak to Miss Vaughan of any literary project of his own, and he had kept this resolution with the utmost fidelity. Yet three times the stories that he thought he alone had invented, were also invented independently and apparently simultaneously by his comrade. Once he ventured to speak of the matter to her, but it gave her so much distress that he was filled with remorse, and he hastened to convince her that he had been only joking.

It was not long before Matthews found himself wholly unable to write. If his ideas flowed as freely as of old when he began a story, he presently thought: "What if Miss Vaughan is writing the same thing!" and the thought seemed to paralyse his imagination. He would sit for hours, gazing at his unspotted papers, and waiting in vain for the impulse which formerly had never failed to spur him on. Moreover, he felt habitually tired, and it was evident to him that his strength was failing steadily. He consulted a doctor, who told him that his disease was nothing more than a slight weariness of the nerves, due doubtless to overwork, and that it need cause him no uneasiness.

Matthews could not feel confident that the doctor was right, for he was quite certain that he had not overworked himself at any time during the last three years, and that during the last few months he had done hardly any work whatever. However, he took the doctor's remedies, but they did him no good. His spirits as well as his health gave way. He became hypochondriacal, and life seemed a burden to him. Then his memory grew weaker, and in great alarm he went to an eminent specialist in brain diseases, expecting to be told that he was far advanced on the road to the madhouse.

This second doctor assured him that his brain was, as yet, perfectly sound, but that graver symptoms might at any time manifest themselves. Matthews was ordered to abandon all work, and to give himself as much diversion as possible. He smiled grimly to himself as he went away from the doctor's room. How was a man in his condition of mind to divert himself? His life was in his work, and now he found himself unable to write anything whatever. Ideas still came to his brain, but they seemed to pass away again before he could shape them to any purpose.

That evening he spent with Miss Vaughan. She was as kind to him as she had always been, and sincerely solicitous as to his health. She urged him to go away from London, and

to make a long journey; the longer the better. She said that the loss of his companionship would be a very serious loss to her, but that she was certain that what he needed was immediate and successive change of scene.

He said little in reply to her, but sat for the most part silent, wondering whether insane people were conscious of their insanity, and in what particular form insanity would come upon him. When he rose up to go he said:—

"You are quite right in what you have said. I will take a long journey, and take it at once. We have been good friends, and if you would not mind giving me a first and only kiss I think I should begin my journey in better spirits."

She kissed him without hesitation and without pleasure. She was sincerely sorry the man was ill, and earnestly hoped that he would return in good health. After all, their intimacy might as well cease then as a little later, for she had made up her mind to marry in the spring, and it would then be necessary for her to forego Matthews's frequent visits. She went with him to the door, and shook hands warmly as they parted. Then she went back to her writing, and Matthews walked down to Blackfriars Bridge and jumped into the river.

His body was never found, and his mysterious disappearance was a sensation in London for several days. His place was quickly filled by someone else, and in a year he was wholly forgotten, except by Miss Vaughan's enemies. These never forgot to say that while Matthews was living Miss Vaughan wrote capital stories in precisely his own vein, but that from the day of his disappearance she never wrote a single story that was worth reading.

"What that means, my dear," was the frequent remark of a particularly vicious old lady, "it is not very difficult to see."

But Miss Vaughan's enemies were wrong in so far as they meant to hint that Matthews had written the stories that passed under her name. They might have made an infinitely graver charge against her, had they known all the facts—a charge that would have been believed with readiness in the middle ages, but which the average man of the nineteenth century would scout as an impossibility. There is no reason to believe that she knew what she was doing during those days when Matthews's mental powers were passing into her possession. Had she known it, she would have deserved the punishment which mediæval superstition reserved for convicted vampires.