

The Enchanted Woman

By Anna Kingsford

The first consciousness which broke my sleep last night was one of floating, of being carried swiftly by some invisible force through a vast space; then, of being gently lowered; then of light, until, gradually, I found myself on my feet in a broad noon day brightness, and before me an open country. Hills, hills, as far as the eye could reach,—hills with snow on their tops, and mists around their gorges. This was the first thing I saw distinctly. Then, casting my eyes towards the ground, I perceived that all about me lay huge masses of grey material which, at first, I took for blocks of stone, having the form of lions; but as I looked at them more intently, my sight grew clearer, and I saw, to my horror, that they were really alive. A panic seized me, and I tried to run away; but on turning, I became suddenly aware that the whole country was filled with these awful shapes; and the faces of those nearest to me were most dreadful for their eyes, and something in the expression, though not in the form, of their faces, were human. I was absolutely alone in a terrible world peopled with lions, too, of a monstrous kind. Recovering myself with an effort, I resumed my flight, but, as I passed through the midst of this concourse of monsters, it suddenly struck me that they were perfectly unconscious of my presence. I even laid my hands, in passing, on the heads and manes of several, but they gave no sign of seeing me or of knowing that I touched them. At last I gained the threshold of a great pavilion, not, apparently, built by hands, but formed by Nature. The walls were solid, yet they were composed of huge trees standing close together, like columns; and the roof of the pavilion was formed by their massive foliage, through which not a ray of outer light penetrated. Such light as there was seemed nebulous, and appeared to rise out of the ground. In the centre of this pavilion I stood alone, happy to have got clear away from those terrible beasts and the gaze of their steadfast eyes.

As I stood there, I became conscious of the fact that the nebulous light of the place was concentrating itself into a focus on the columned wall opposite to me. It grew there, became intenser, and then spread, revealing, as it spread, a series of moving pictures that appeared to be scenes actually enacted before me. For the figures in the pictures were living, and they moved before my eyes, though I heard neither word nor sound. And this is what I saw. First there came a writing on the wall of the pavilion:—"This is the History of our World." These words, as I looked at them, appeared to sink into the wall as they had risen out of it, and to yield place to the pictures which then began to come out in succession, dimly at first, then strong and clear as actual scenes.

First I beheld a beautiful woman, with the sweetest face and most perfect form conceivable. She was dwelling in a cave among the hills with her husband, and he, too, was beautiful, more like an angel than a man. They seemed perfectly happy together; and their dwelling was like Paradise. On every side was beauty, sunlight, and repose. This picture sank into the wall as the writing had done. And then came out another; the same man and woman driving together in a sleigh drawn by reindeer over fields of ice; with all about them glaciers and snow, and great mountains veiled in wreaths of slowly moving mist. The sleigh went at a rapid pace, and its occupants talked gaily to each other, so far as I could judge by their smiles and the movement of their lips. But, what caused me much surprise was that they carried between them, and actually in their hands, a glowing flame, the fervour of which I felt reflected from the picture upon my own cheeks. The ice around shone with its brightness. The mists upon the snow mountains

caught its gleam. Yet, strong as were its light and heat, neither the man nor the woman seemed to be burned or dazzled by it. This picture, too, the beauty and brilliancy of which greatly impressed me, sank and disappeared as the former.

Next, I saw a terrible looking man clad in an enchanter's robe, standing alone upon an ice-crag. In the air above him, poised like a dragon-fly, was an evil spirit, having a head and face like that of a human being. The rest of it resembled the tail of a comet, and seemed made of a green fire, which flickered in and out as though swayed by a wind. And as I looked, suddenly, through an opening among the hills, I saw the sleigh pass, carrying the beautiful woman and her husband; and in the same instant the enchanter also saw it, and his face contracted, and the evil spirit lowered itself and came between me and him. Then this picture sank and vanished.

I next beheld the same cave in the mountains which I had before seen, and the beautiful couple together in it. Then a shadow darkened the door of the cave; and the enchanter was there, asking admittance; cheerfully they bade him enter, and, as he came forward with his snake-like eyes fixed on the fair woman, I understood that he wished to have her for his own and was even then devising how to bear her away. And the spirit in the air beside him seemed busy suggesting schemes to this end. Then this picture melted and became confused, giving place for but a brief moment to another, in which I saw the enchanter carrying the woman away in his arms, she struggling and lamenting, her long bright hair streaming behind her. This scene passed from the wall as though a wind had swept over it, and there rose up in its place a picture, which impressed me with a more vivid sense of reality than all the rest.

It represented a market place, in the midst of which was a pile of faggots and a stake, such as were used formerly for the burning of heretics and witches. The market place, round which were rows of seats as though for a concourse of spectators, yet appeared quite deserted. I saw only three living beings present,—the beautiful woman, the enchanter, and the evil spirit. Nevertheless, I thought that the seats were really occupied by invisible tenants, for every now and then there seemed to be a stir in the atmosphere as of a great multitude; and I had, moreover, a strange sense of facing many witnesses. The enchanter led the woman to the stake, fastened her there with iron chains, lit the faggots about her feet and withdrew to a short distance, where he stood with his arms folded, looking on as the flames rose about her. I understood that she had refused his love, and that in his fury he had denounced her as a sorceress. Then in the fire, above the pile, I saw the evil spirit poisoning itself like a fly, and rising and sinking and fluttering in the thick smoke. While I wondered what this meant, the flames which had concealed the beautiful woman, parted in their midst, and disclosed a sight so horrible and unexpected as to thrill me from head to foot, and curdle my blood. Chained to the stake there stood, not the fair woman I had seen there a moment before, but a hideous monster,—a woman still, but a woman with three heads, and three bodies linked in one. Each of her long arms ended, not in a hand, but in a claw like that of a bird of rapine. Her hair resembled the locks of the classic Medusa, and her faces were inexpressibly loathsome. She seemed, with all her dreadful heads and limbs, to writhe in the flames and yet not to be consumed by them. She gathered them in to herself; her claws caught them and drew them down; her triple body appeared to suck the fire into itself, as though a blast drove it. The sight appalled me. I covered my face and dared look no more.

When at length I again turned my eyes upon the wall, the picture that had so terrified me was gone, and instead of it, I saw the enchanter flying through the world, pursued by the evil spirit and that dreadful woman. Through all the world they seemed to go. The scenes changed with marvellous rapidity. Now the picture glowed with the wealth and gorgeousness of the torrid zone; now the ice-fields of the North rose into view; anon a pine-forest; then a wild sea-shore;

but always the same three-flying figures; always the horrible three-formed harpy pursuing the enchanter, and besides her the evil spirit with the dragon-fly wings.

At last this succession of images ceased, and I beheld a desolate region, in the midst of which sat the woman with the enchanter beside her, his head reposing in her lap. Either the sight of her must have become familiar to him and, so, less horrible, or she had subjugated him by some spell. At all events, they were mated at last, and their offspring lay around them on the stony ground, or moved to and fro. These were lions,—monsters with human faces, such as I had seen in the beginning of my dream. Their jaws dripped blood; they paced backwards and forwards, lashing their tails. Then too, this picture faded and sank into the wall as the others had done. And through its melting outlines came out again the words I had first seen:—“This is the History of our World,” only they seemed to me in some way changed, but how, I cannot tell. The horror of the whole thing was too strong upon me to let me dare look longer at the wall. And I awoke, repeating to myself the question, “How could one woman become three?”