

A STRANGE STORY.

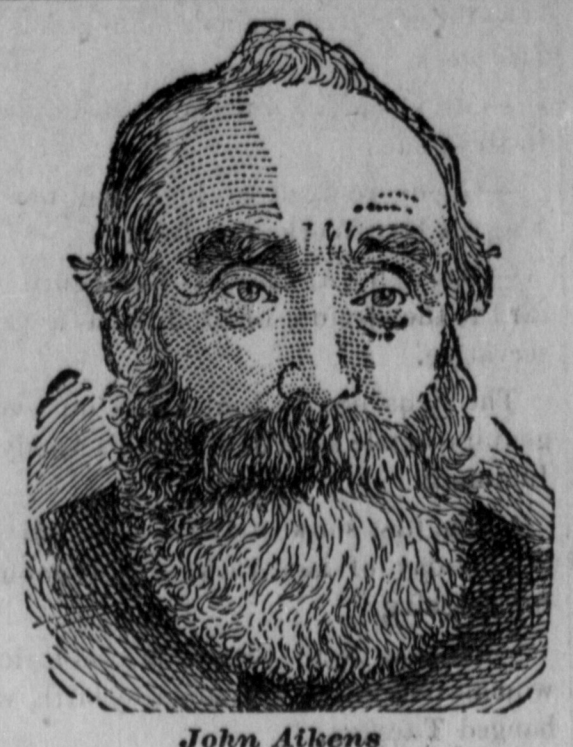
Are These Things Within the Possibilities?

BY NANCY NUGENT.

Copyright by the Author, 1892. I was called one night to visit the wife of an old friend who had been married about two years. They lived in the suburbs of a large city. My friend was editor of one of the city papers. I had just begun my career as a medical man. I had known my friend, Paul Pentland's wife, only a short time before he had married her. She was very beautiful. Dark as midnight, and as dreamy. I had not seen either of them for nearly a year. Previous to that I had spent all my spare time with them. At their pretty home, I had been treated as a brother. Mrs. Pentland calling me by my name, Jack, and I called her, Letty. They were perfectly happy in their married life. As I hastened onward, I tried to picture to myself the change there might be in one year. I had known them so well, and knew how happy they were that I was wholly unprepared for the great change that had taken place. As I sprang from my carriage the front door opened and Paul stood waiting me. I ran up the steps and shook hands with him. When he drew me into the hall, and I was enabled to see his face, I uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Why, Paul, old man, what have you been doing to yourself?" "Come this way, Jack, and I will tell you." We were soon sitting in Paul's room, and looking into his troubled eyes, I wondered if it were possible to change from the bright happy Paul of one year ago, into the haggard, weary man of to-night. He sat looking into the fire for some time, then he turned those sad, brown eyes on me. "I think I can trust you with my horrible secret. I will have to, or go crazy. Jack, I believe my wife is insane. Yet she seems as sane as either you or I. Her attendants think me a most brutal husband. God knows how I have loved and cared for her. I have never spoken one harsh word to her, my beautiful Letty. "She thinks I come home and accuse her of being untrue to me; that I'll treat her. She wakens in the night screaming. When her maid comes in and asks her what she wants she says, 'I dare not tell,' looking at me with such horror in her eyes, that you cannot blame her servants for saying I'll treat her. I want you to question her about her health she may be ill. Come, I will take you to her room, she retires early, always at ten. I cannot account for it. As soon as the clock strikes ten nothing would keep her up." "How long has this been going on?" I asked. "About a year; shortly after you left us. It came on very suddenly. She was as usual in the morning; but when I came home shortly after ten at night she was in bed. I went up to say good night, and to ask if she were well. She said she was. I asked her why she had retired so early, she made such a strange answer: "Why, you know you all say I have to be in bed at ten, because it is the rule." "I never said so, Letty, and I bent over to kiss her, when she uttered scream after scream the most demoniacal I ever heard. Her maid ran in asking what she wanted, and what was the matter. She answered as I have told you, that she dare not tell, looking at me with horror-distended eyes, and that has continued ever since. Come." He led me to her door. "You had better go in alone; she has often asked to see Jack. My presence may excite her, and I would that you see her calm first, she may tell you what troubles her." Grasping my hands, he looked into my face with a look of beseeching confidence. "Save her for me, Jack," was all he could say. When I entered her room she turned on the pillow to look at me. It was the same beautiful Letty of old, dreamy and sensitive. How beautiful her eyes were; no insanity there. Could it be that Paul did abuse her? Surely, no. Paul could not do so base an act. As I advanced she reached out her hand to me. "Jack, you have come at last. I thought you would never come, does he know you are here?" "Yes." She looked surprised. "Sometimes he is so good to me and treats me kindly. I try to be happy and forget the horror of it all, but I can't—I can't!" She took my hand in hers as she spoke. Holding it, she asked in her sweet, low voice: "Jack, will you listen to me? I must tell you all about it, but you must promise you will not let him know I have told you anything. It is wrong, I know, for a wife to tell her troubles, but you are only Jack. You may be able to tell me what is the matter with him. Lean close, Jack." I bent over her and she whispered: "I believe my husband is insane. At least at times he must be. Oh! it is horrible to live day after day in such dread. His violence is fiendish, and I have been so good to him and bear it all without complaining. I not only suffer the physical pain at the time, but for days before I know that he will come and cruelly torment me. I am in constant fear of him. Oh, Jack! I am married to a maniac. Can you realize the awful horror of such a married life? Why, oh, why am I so made that I know those awful scenes will happen for days before they take place? I suffer so terribly. The agony I endure while I wait and wait for the time to come is almost unbearable, yet I dare not defend myself or

ask anyone to help me, for they would know that Paul is insane—a madman. Yet only on one subject; he thinks I have been untrue to him. To-day, tomorrow, or it may not be until the day after, I know it will come; but how I know I cannot understand, he will come to me and will stand by my bed and will clench his hands, his mouth will work until foam oozes from his pallid lips. He seems unable to speak. Then with his eyes scintillating and projecting from their sockets, his white lips drawn back from his teeth, he will stoop slowly over me, the while opening and closing those long, thin fingers, until I can feel his breath; then, with a rapid movement, he places his cold, clammy fingers around my throat, and in a hoarse whisper he will say: 'False, false as hell!' Then, with a snarl like a hungry tiger, he sinks his teeth into my cheeks, sometimes once, other times more. Then with horrible strength he closes his fingers and I know nothing until I hear my maid asking me what is the matter, and all I can say is, 'I dare not tell.' They do not know he is insane. Can we keep it from them? Servants talk so, you know. I will trust you, Jack, to cure him; they say you have become clever. Will you try?" I promised I would do what I could and left her, saying I would see her in the morning. Paul met me in the hall, looking anxious. "Well, what do you think about her; is she ill or insane?" "I cannot say she is insane. To-night there was absolutely nothing to indicate such a state of health. She talked most rationally and her health seemed good. I will see her in the morning." "Will you stay with us all night? I have been expecting her to have one of those terrible turns for some days; she has them about every two weeks. You would understand the case better were you to see her at such a time." I consented, and after half an hour's talk Paul proposed that I wait in the hall and if I heard her scream enter immediately, and I would find her at her worst. I seated myself just outside the door, which had been left slightly open. Paul went in, and I heard his steps approach the bed. I waited breathlessly for the degrading accusation Letty had prepared me for, but, as she had told me it was always whispered close to her face, I did not hear it. Soon I was terrified to hear the most heartrending screams I had ever heard. I could not move; they froze the blood in my veins. I sat as if mummified; then breaking the bondage of horror I hastened to her bedside. Letty lay staring at Paul, her breath coming fast, her lovely eyes expressing most abject fear. I bent over her to examine her face for the bruises from the bites she had told me of. If I found any Paul was the guilty one. Ah! there they were. On the round, red cheek the mark of a perfect set of upper and lower teeth. When I saw the mark first the outlines were raised and white, while the center or where the teeth had pressed was a dark purple. There were two such marks, one on either cheek. A shudder of repulsion for my old friend shook me. Such a brutal action. Could it be that he was the insane one. I raised my eyes and looked at Paul; he stood watching Letty with the calmness of despair. He seemed unable to remove his gaze from her face as she lay watching him as if she feared another attack. Her maid came hurrying in, saying, "What is the matter? Why will you not tell me?" "I cannot, I dare not tell." The spell was broken. Letty turned with a little sigh, nestled down in the pillows and was soon fast asleep. I looked at the bruised cheek and was somewhat surprised to see the swelling of the bruises had completely disappeared, leaving only a slight red mark. I sat watching her for probably five minutes; at the end of that time every trace of the bite had vanished. "I think, Jack," Paul said, "you have had enough horror for one night." He bent over Letty and kissed her tenderly, then we left her with her maid. I asked to be allowed to go to my own room immediately. I was tired and worried. Throwing myself on the bed as I was, I covered my eyes with my hands. I thought long into the night. I decided to watch Paul rather than Letty. She was not insane, but would be if his treatment of her continued. Poor Paul! I now pitied him; he did not realize the grossness of his actions to his lovely, loving wife. I will go in the morning to my old friend, Dr. Denham, and tell him about the case, and that I am interested in insanity, and have him post me. Then, if my suspicions are verified, I will have him consigned to his private asylum. Poor Letty, what a horrible ending for such a happy beginning. I can feel her fingers around mine yet; how she clung to me in her helplessness. As my thoughts ran on a softer train I went to sleep and did not waken until morning. When I appeared at breakfast I found Letty and Paul waiting me. He looked sad and was very restless. She was her sweet self; no trace of the terrors of last night visible on that exquisitely beautiful face. I left immediately after breakfast and drove straight to Dr. Denham's. I had to wait some time before the Dr. could come to me. As he shook hands, he told me he had just received word of the death of the husband of one of his oldest patients. I told him I had become interested in the study of insanity, and asked to be granted the privilege of visiting his asylum, and studying his patients. He, like all enthusiasts, pleased to have a new admirer of his pet theme, gave me welcome, bade me sit by him and in an easy, kind manner gave me quite a lecture on insanity, concluding with the history of one of his patients. "Well, my boy, you have become interested in the mysterious study, insanity. It is a fascinating study. I have been thirty years among the insane, and I have not found two alike.

Something new in each one. I have a woman under my care now whom I never allow an assistant to see. I have given her a special nurse; the cleverest and gentlest of my staff, who never leaves her and reports every day. I see her myself, every two days; yet her case baffles me. I will tell you all I know about her, then you will see her, she is beautiful as a picture, but I am sorry to say this last year she has faded very much. She has lost her rich red coloring and has become emaciated, but her glorious eyes can never change. About five years ago, shortly after I opened my asylum, there called a young man, evidently of a wealthy class. He said his only sister had a year previously married against the family's wishes, that the father had disinherited and disowned her, and had forbidden the family to even speak her name. He was the only one that had disobeyed the father's orders, and had visited her at the home of her choice. He found her surrounded by every luxury, but the year he had not seen her had wrought a great change. The vivacious girl had changed to a dreamy, sensitive and somewhat nervous woman. Being questioned as to the cause of the change, she confessed that her husband, Paul Dean by name, was unreasonably jealous of her, thinking she had been untrue to him, and at times she feared for her life. She begged her brother to stay with her for a week or two, but he, being a doctor, could not, but consented to stay over night and was allotted a room adjoining hers. "Her great beauty was the talk of the town and of course she had a great many admirers, but I believe she was true to her husband. It seems he had very often told her she was 'false as hell,' and some day he would be tried past endurance and kill her." "He came home this night a little earlier than usual, and as he neared his wife's room, she thinking it was her brother, called out, 'Good night, Jack, I am very happy.' Her unfortunate speech maddened her husband. He advanced, she told us after, with his face livid and mouth foaming, with a growl seized her by the throat, repeating again and again, 'False, false as hell.' Leaving over her he had sunken his teeth in her face two or three times. She had time to utter a scream of fear and pain before his fingers closed around her throat in murderous strength. Her brother hastened into the room in time to save her life, but not her mind. At times she is as sane as I am, for two weeks, probably, then she lives that dreadful scene over again, and a peculiar thing is that she knows for two and sometimes more days before that it is going to happen. 'Nurse,' she will say, 'there is something going to happen. Paul will surely kill me this time. Why am I allowed to know this before it happens; I suffer it manifold?' Often when I went to see her it would bring on the delirium. She thought me her husband, and would scream with fear, then lay watching me until the nurse would come and ask what she wanted, and why she screamed. She would answer in her sad sweet tones, 'I cannot, I dare not tell.' Then she would turn and go to sleep like a child, and sleep for hours. When she awakened she was quite sensible, but she never asked to go home. All she asked was to see Jack. Lately, however, she has noticed her surroundings, and asked for Paul, her husband, and asked to go home. But, for a year, she does not recognize her brother, but as she has not had one of those bad turns for the same length of time, I hope she is improving. When her brother comes she says, 'That man is not my brother. I never had one.' Sometimes I am hopeless as to her recovery. I feel for her more than any of my patients. We will go and see her." As we passed along, some were singing, some laughing, others talking. We stopped before a door at the end of the passage. I heard a woman sobbing bitterly. When we entered she turned, and I was surprised to see the exact counterpart of Paul Pentland's wife, eyes, hair, expression, all alike. When she saw me she uttered a cry of delight. "Jack, Jack, you have come to take me home to Paul; I am not sick, take me home now." She was clinging to my arm by this time, looking into my eyes, pleading to be taken to Paul. "O, you will not, you cannot leave me here!" "We seem to be exciting her. We will go." She clung frantically to my arm. "Don't leave me Jack, don't leave me here alone." The doctor gently loosed her hands, and I hastened from the ward back to the reception room. I was so preoccupied with the events just witnessed that I did not notice another visitor was waiting Dr. Denham, until I heard my old college name called in the pleasant voice of my room-mate, Jack Leland. I had always been called Dr. Jack, and he, Quack Jack, and we were very much alike. "Why, Quack Jack, are you studying insanity?" "His face assumed a sorrowful look. "No, my sister, my only sister, is a patient here." I expressed my sympathy, and told him of the lovely woman I had just met, and the great resemblance she bore to my friend's wife. Dr. Denham now came into the room looking very much worried. "Ah! you have come, Leland. Allow me to—" "We are old chums, Doctor," I interrupted. "Then you did know his poor sister?" I said I had never met her but had often heard Jack speak of her as beautiful. "My patient you have just seen is his sister." Dr. Denham asked us if we would not like to go up together to see her. I, dreading the recurrence of my recent painful experience, declined; but at Jack's earnest request I accompanied



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