

The Sphinx Without a Secret

by Oscar Wilde

One afternoon I was sitting outside the Cafe cie la Paix in Paris, watching the people passing along the street. I was wondering why some people were very poor while others were so rich.

Suddenly I heard somebody call my name.

I turned round and saw Lord Murchison. We had not met since we were at Oxford University together, nearly ten years before, and I was pleased to see him again. We shook hands warmly.

I had liked him very much at Oxford, and we had been very good friends. He had been so handsome, so full of life, and a very honest young man. We used to say that he would be the best person in the world if he was not always so honest. But I think we really admired him for his honesty.

Now, looking at him ten years later, he seemed different. He looked anxious and worried, and he seemed to have doubts about something. I could not believe that he was in doubt about religion or politics, because he always had such definite opinions about everything. So I thought the problem must be a woman.

I asked him if he was married yet.

'I don't understand women well enough to marry one,' he answered.

'My dear Gerald,' I said, 'it is our job to love women, not to understand them.'

'I can't love anyone that I can't trust,' he answered.

'I think you have a mystery in your life, Gerald,' I said. 'Tell me about it.'

'Let's go for a drive,' he answered. 'It's too crowded here. No, not a yellow carriage – there, that dark green one will be all right.'

And in a few moments we were driven away from the cafe.

'Where shall we go to?' I said.

'Oh, I don't mind!' he answered. 'The restaurant in the Bois de Boulogne? We can have dinner there, and you can tell me about yourself.'

'I want to hear about you first,' I said. 'Tell me about your mystery.'

He took a little leather case from his pocket and gave it to me. I opened it. Inside was a photograph of a woman. She was tall and beautiful, with long hair, and large secretive eyes. Her clothes looked very expensive.

'What do you think of that face,' he said. 'Is it an honest face?'

I examined the face in the photograph carefully. It seemed to me to be the face of a woman with a secret. But I could not say if that secret was good or bad. The beauty of the face was full of mystery, and the faint smile on the lips made me think of the smile of the Egyptian Sphinx in the moonlight. Or was it the mysterious smile that you sometimes see on the face of Leonardo's painting, the Mona Lisa, in the Louvre in Paris?

'Well,' he cried impatiently, 'what do you think?'

'A beautiful sphinx,' I answered. 'Tell me all about her.'

'Not now,' he said. 'After dinner.'

When we were drinking our coffee and smoking our cigarettes after dinner, I reminded him, and he told me this story:

'One evening,' he said, 'I was walking down Bond Street in London at about five o'clock. There were a lot of carriages, and the traffic was moving very slowly. There was a small yellow carriage on my side of the road which, for some reason or other, caught my attention. As the carriage passed, I saw the face that I showed you in the photograph earlier. It went straight to my heart. All that night, I thought about the face, and all the next day. I looked for the yellow carriage in the usual places, but I couldn't find it. I began to think that the beautiful stranger was only something from a dream.'

'About a week later, I went to have dinner with Madame de Rastail. Dinner was for eight o'clock, but at half past eight we were still waiting in the sitting room. Finally the servant threw open the door and said "Lady Alroy". A woman entered the room — and it was the woman I was looking for! The woman in the yellow carriage.'

'She came into the sitting room very slowly, looking lovely in a grey dress. I was pleased and excited when Madame de Rastail asked me to take Lady Alroy in to dinner. Lady Alroy then sat next to me at the table.'

'After we sat down, I said quite innocently, "I think I saw you in Bond Street not long ago, Lady Alroy."

'She became very pale, and said to me in a low voice, "Please don't talk so loudly. Someone may hear you."

'I felt unhappy about such a bad start to our conversation, and I started talking quickly about French theatre and other unimportant things. She spoke very little, always in the same low musical voice. She seemed to be afraid that someone might be listening.'

'I fell madly in love, and I was excited by the mystery that seemed to surround her. I wanted to know more — much more — about this mysterious lady.'

'She left very soon after dinner, and when she was going, I asked if I could visit her. She said nothing for a moment, looked round to see if anyone was near us, and then said, "Yes. Tomorrow at a quarter to five."

'I asked Madame de Rastail to tell me about her, but I learned only that her husband had died, and she lived in a beautiful house in the most expensive part of London. I left soon after that, and went home.

'The next day I arrived at her London house at exactly a quarter to five. I asked to see Lady Alroy but I was told by a servant that she had just gone out.

'I went to the club, very unhappy and quite confused. After some thought, I wrote a letter. I asked her if I could try again another afternoon.

'I had no answer for several days, but at last I got a letter saying that I could visit her on Sunday at four o'clock. At the end of the letter there was a strange note: "Please don't write to me here again," it said. "I will explain when I see you."

'On Sunday she was at home when I visited her, and she was perfectly nice to me. But when I was leaving, she said, "If you want to write to me again, will you address your letter to: Mrs Knox, Whitaker's Library, Green Street? There are reasons why I can't receive letters in my own house."

'After that, I saw her often. She continued to be pleasant and mysterious. I thought for a time that she might be in the power of a man, but I could not believe it.

'At last I decided to ask her to be my wife. I wrote to her at the library and asked her to see me the following Monday, at six o'clock. She answered yes, and I was wonderfully happy. I was very much in love with her, you understand. Perhaps because of the mystery surrounding her. No, no, that's not right! I loved the woman. The mystery worried me, it's true. It made me angry.'

'So you discovered the answer to the mystery?' I cried.

'In a way,' he answered. 'On Monday I had lunch with my uncle in his house in Regent's Park. After lunch, I wanted some exercise, and I decided to walk to Piccadilly. The shortest way is through a lot of poor little streets. I was going along one of these when I suddenly saw Lady Alroy in front of me. Her face was half-hidden by a large hat, but there was no doubt in my mind.

'She was walking fast. When she came to the last house in the street, she went up the steps to the front door, took a key from her bag, unlocked the door and went in.

""So this is the mystery," I said to myself, and I hurried to the front of the house. It seemed to be a place where people can rent rooms.

'She had dropped her handkerchief when she took the key out of her bag. It was lying on the doorstep, and I picked it up and put it in my pocket.

'At six o'clock, I went to see her as we had arranged. She was lying on a sofa in a silver-coloured dress and looked very lovely.

'I'm so glad to see you," she said. "I haven't been out all day."

'I stared at her, very surprised. I pulled the handkerchief out of my pocket, and gave it to her. " You dropped this in Cunmor Street this afternoon, Lady Alroy," I said very calmly.

'She looked at me in terror, but she didn't take the handkerchief.

"What were you doing there?" I asked.

"What right have you to question me?" she answered.

"The right of a man who loves you," I said. " I came here to ask you to be my wife."

'She hid her face in her hands, but I could see the tears pouring from her eyes.

"You must tell me," I continued.

'She stood up and, through her tears, she looked straight into my eyes." Lord Murchison," she said. "There is nothing to tell you."

"You went to meet somebody!" I cried. "This is your mystery."

'Her face went terribly white, and she said, "I did not go to meet anybody."

"That's not true," I said.

"It is true," she replied.

'I was mad - completely out of control. I don't know what I said, but I said terrible things to her. Finally I rushed out of the house. She wrote me a letter the next day, but I sent it back unopened, and left for Norway with my friend, Alan Colville.

'After a month in Norway, I returned to London. When I returned I saw in the Morning Post newspaper a report about the death of Lady Alroy. She had caught a very bad cold at the theatre one evening, and had died a few days later.

'I shut myself in my rooms and saw nobody for days. I had loved her so much, so madly. God! I had loved that woman!'

'You went to the street – to the house in it?' I said.

'Yes,' he answered. 'One day I went to Cumnor Street. I had to go. Doubts were destroying my mind. I knocked on the door, and a woman of good appearance opened it. I asked her if she had any rooms to rent.

"Well, sir," she replied politely, "the sitting room is really taken, but I haven't seen the lady for three months. And the rent hasn't been paid, so I think I can let you have it."

" Is this the lady ?" I asked, and I showed her the photograph.

"Oh, yes! That's her!" she said. "When is she coming back, sir? "

"The lady is dead," I replied.

"Oh dear!" said the woman. "I'm very sorry to hear it. She paid me three pounds a week and she just came and sat in my sitting room sometimes."

"Did she meet someone here ?" I said.

"No, sir," said the woman. "Never. She always came alone, and she saw nobody."

"What did she do here ?" I cried.

"She sat in the room, sir, reading books," answered the woman. "Sometimes she had tea, but always alone."

'I didn't know what to say, so I gave the woman five pounds and walked home. What do you think it meant? Do you think the woman's story was true?'

'Yes, I do,' I said.

'Then why did Lady Alroy go there ?'

'Gerald,' I answered, 'Lady Alroy was simply a woman who had to have a mystery. She took the room for the pleasure of going there secretly. She imagined that she was a mysterious character in a story. She had a great love of secrets and mysteries, but she herself was just a sphinx without a secret.'

'Do you really think so?' he said.

'I'm sure of it,' I said.

He took the leather case out of his pocket, opened it, and looked at the photograph.

'I'll never be sure,' he said at last.