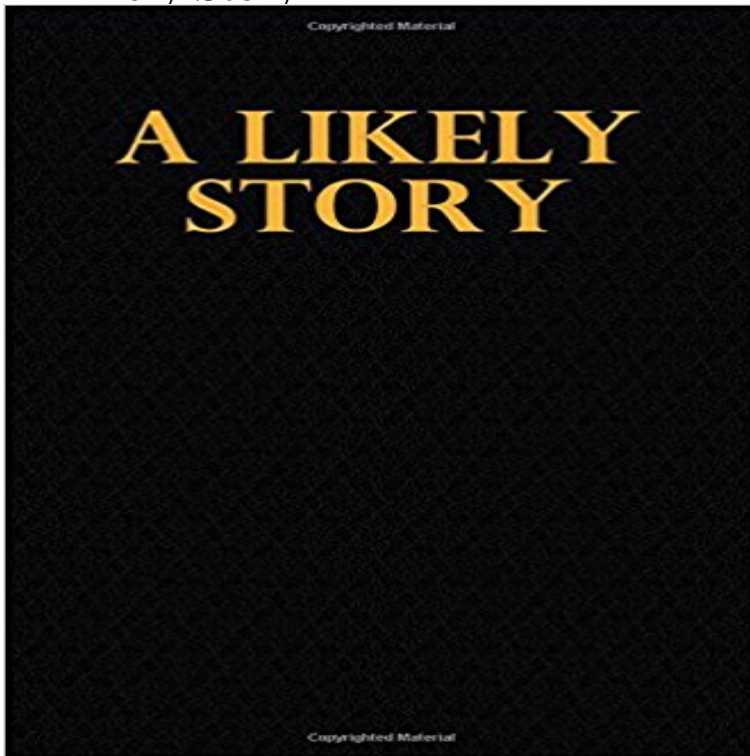


A Likely Story



In *A Likely Story* Mr. De Morgan's genius for giving supererogatory twists to unexpectedness went further than on any previous occasion. In this book a fifteenth-century Italian painting, hung in a nineteenth-century drawing-room, tells its history or rather an episode in the life of the woman it represents which it witnessed while it was being painted. This story, with the circumstances of the picture's powers of speech, inter-threaded as these are with the love affairs of two nineteenth-century couples, might have seemed sufficient for a plot. But, in Mr. De Morgan's hands, the mediaeval romance, which had appeared to end with the murder of the painter of the picture, is taken up and carried to a happy ending by a manuscript, describing the period immediately subsequent to the picture's spectatorship (the picture had been removed to a lumber room and hung face to the wall). Thus we have, in the mediaeval story alone, three personalities in one, or rather one personality in three pieces—the picture, the original as beheld by the picture, the original as described in the manuscript. And the adroitness of it all; the way seemingly inevitable confusions are avoided, apparently insuperable obstacles overcome, and amazing intricacies held in the background. Mr. De Morgan, the *Times* wrote of this book, seems to have achieved the impossible. What, well may we ask, is the quality that can convert tangled skeins of the kind just described into lengths of brocade? The answer, as I conceive it, brings me to the core of my subject. Mr. De Morgan, if he stood for nothing else, might stand as the lesson to our day of the place of the intellect, as such, in the artist's equipment. Every book of his contains cleverness enough for half-a-dozen novels, yet cleverness never gets the upper hand. What has the mastery always is the flooding, vitalizing emotion in which incompatibilities melt into compatibilities that

is of time or circumstance taste is a quality of the inner soul, which gives a bias to intellect. Mr. De Morgan has vitalized and seated at our firesides presences and truths that before had been folded away in our prayer-books. In his novels, from Joseph Vance onwards, he has been going far towards dissolving the barrier between the quick and the dead. Time, philosophers tell us, does not exist; but where has that idea been brought home to the ordinary intelligence as it has by old Jane in Alice-For-Short? In A Likely Story nineteenth-century love affairs are eternalized before our eyes, as it were, by their inter-threading with lives that have been and are not. The loves of Madeleine and Jack Calverley, of Mr. and Mrs. Aiken even, are caught up by the mediaeval Duchessa into the great passionate succession, irradiated and inflamed beyond their mortality. The Contemporary Review, Volume 108 [1915]

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