

The Oval Portrait and...

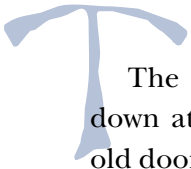
The Oval Portrait

BEFORE READING

Story 1

“Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears.”

(Philosophy of Composition)



The great, gloomy chateau high on the Apennines looked down at us disapprovingly, as my valet, Pedro, forced open the old door, desperate to find shelter for the night for me. I urgently needed to rest, I was so weak and sick from my wounds.

He helped me, with considerable difficulty, through the abandoned rooms until we finally discovered a suitable, smallish apartment in a remote tower, furnished not only with rich, decaying old tapestries¹ and armory², but also a multitude of paintings which seemed to observe us from every niche³ in the walls, of which there were several, due to the rather odd⁴ architecture of the place.

These immediately attracted my attention in my half-delirious state, so I asked Pedro to close the heavy shutters as night was falling fast and to light a candelabrum⁵ near the bed, so that I could contemplate the pictures while I was resting. He drew back the thick, black curtains which hung around the bed for me. I found a small book on the pillow which proved to be the history of all the paintings in the room.

I settled down⁶ to read and pass this strange night as I knew sleep would not come easily. Pedro, on the other hand, went out like a light⁷. I read and rested quietly until midnight, but then, not wanting to wake him, I changed the position of the candles to see the book more clearly. As I did so, the flames illuminated a picture

1. *tapestry*: a piece of cloth with pictures made by embroidering and used as a wall hanging.

2. *armory*: weapons and military equipment.

3. *niche*: a hollow recess in a wall, often used for statues.

4. *odd*: strange, unusual.

5. *candelabrum*: an ornate candleholder with arms.

6. *settled down*: made himself comfortable.

7. *went out like a light*: fell asleep very suddenly.

which had previously been hidden in the dark shadows. My eyes focused upon it for a second and I closed them at once. I do not know why I did this and I asked myself at the time why I had done so. It gave me a moment to think of what I had seen in the picture and to assure myself that I *had* actually seen it.

I opened my eyes and looked upon the picture once again, this time prepared for a long, more studious gaze⁸. The face of the young woman shocked me out of my sleepy dreams and I was suddenly wide awake.

It was a beautiful work of art and portrayed a stunning⁹ young woman. Her head and shoulders seemed to emerge from and yet at the same time blend into the shadows of the painting, which was a little in the style of Sully, the portrait painter. Her picture was framed with an oval gold filigree¹⁰, Moorish-style frame. Had I imagined that overwhelming¹¹ and instinctive sensation of her being alive? Possibly, I had been already half asleep and so I had thought for a second that she was real. I contemplated her for a long time, perhaps as long as an hour, until suddenly I found I could not look at her any longer. The absolute lifelike quality which had first fascinated me, now suddenly confused, frightened and even sickened me, and I moved the candle, almost in reverence to her and she fell into the shadows once more.

Relieved¹² that I could see her no more, I eagerly searched the book for the description of the portrait and began to read avidly¹³ when I found it. These were the singular and shadowy words which I found.

“She was a radiant young girl whose exceptional beauty was quite out of the ordinary. Happy and full of the joys of life, like a young fawn¹⁴, her dark fate was sealed when she fell in love with and married the artist, a passionate, serious and austere man, totally dedicated to his art. Her only enemy in the world was his Art, whose brushes and pallet¹⁵ took her lover’s time from her, so

8. *gaze*: a long, observant look.

9. *stunning*: extremely attractive.

10. *filigree*: ornamental work of fine gold or silver wire.

11. *overwhelming*: difficult to fight against.

12. *relieved*: no longer anxious.

13. *avidly*: with great interest.

14. *fawn*: a young deer in its first year.

15. *pallet*: the thin board used by an artist for mixing his paints.



Anonymous woman's miniature portrait
(author unknown, early 1900s, Cambi Auction House)

when he asked her to allow him to fulfill his desire to paint her portrait and capture her beauty for ever on canvas, her heart sank and she felt strangely cold. She was, however, both obedient and humble, only wanting to please him, so she agreed reluctantly.

Therefore, she sat for him for many long weeks in a high dark tower, with only one upper window, through which a single shaft¹⁶ of light lit up her face so that he could paint her in the perfect light for his Art.

He was wild and lost to the world as he painted, his only thought was to complete a perfect likeness of his beautiful young wife to be captured for eternity.

Immersed in the depths of his art, he did not see her begin to fade as the hours, days and weeks went by. He did not see the color slowly leave her cheeks as he painted them brightly on his canvas. She smiled on, never complaining, even as her once joyful spirit and happiness sank silently within her, for¹⁷ she could see that he gained such intense pleasure and satisfaction from his work; and still *he* did not see.

He worked on blindly to produce a masterpiece for this young woman who loved him so deeply. Some said that it was his great love for her which produced such a lifelike and wonderful portrait and saw it as a marvel of Art and proof of his talent.

All the time she sat, quietly smiling, impassive in the cold tower, her growing weakness unseen by anyone, for as the painting neared completion, no one was allowed into the room. It was the artist's kingdom and his inspiration was sacred. He wanted to see nothing but the face that he was bringing alive on his canvas, so that he no longer saw his beautiful bride in reality.

At last the day finally came, after many weeks had gone by, when only two strokes of the brush were needed to complete this passionate painting, to honor the love of his life and his Art.

His brush moved skillfully and quickly. A last touch of color to the cheeks, a final touch to the eye... his lady's spirit flickered¹⁸ like the flame of a candle for a second... it was done! He stood

16. *shaft*: a ray.

17. *for*: (here) because.

18. *flickered*: went on and off with quick movements.

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back to admire his work at last; but as he gazed lovingly upon the extraordinary beauty which he had transmitted to the portrait, something awoke him from the trance which had taken him over for the past weeks. He grew pale as death as, shaking uncontrollably, he cried in horror, "This is life itself!" and turned suddenly to look at his beloved bride. She was dead!

