

# The Duchess

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The Duchess

By

Tim Kelly

## The Duchess

*To RB - for the cruelty and stimulation*

“So, you want me to paint your wife.” I smiled at the General.

He didn’t smile back.

He was a tall man in his fifties, with a hard lean body, muscular, and a cold piercing stare.

“Pour yourself a whisky, son.” He waved at the bottle on the table.

“No, thanks.”

“Take it.”

I was about to object but his hawk-eyes bore down on me and I wilted. It was clear he would brook no refusal: the General was used to being obeyed.

I poured a wee dram and a momentary sneer crossed his face, turning to a barely discernible mocking smile.

“A Scot who doesnie drink?” His Texan accent morphed momentarily into my own vernacular.

“I walked up to the castle, sir, and it’s a long hike back.”

I lowered the bottle but before it touched the tabletop, swift as an eagle, the General swooped forward and clutched my arm. “Have some more,” he said twisting my wrist. The whisky splashed

down into the glass. "I don't trust a man who doesn't drink." The General stared straight into my eyes, then releasing my arm, leaned back in his chair.

I sat back in mine, facing him. "But you trust a man that does?" The irritation in my voice was palpable.

"I didn't say that," the General replied and gave a brief laugh. He leaned forward again. "Drink," he commanded.

I looked into his vulture's eyes and then down at the amber liquid. "Slàinte," I whispered to myself and drained the glass.

The General emptied his simultaneously, swilling the whisky round his mouth to extract the maximum pleasure before swallowing. He stood up and with the slightest motion of his finger beckoned me to follow. My body moved in response. When we reached the door he paused and put his arm around my shoulder. A beaming smile crossed his face. He suddenly seemed like a different person, all warmth and charm. "Let me show you the castle."

\*

He led me through the ground and upper floors. I knew the castle from the outside, having grown up in the town, but

had never been inside. Part of the building was in ruins, and would remain in ruins, but the General had modernised the dwelling chambers and had decorated the interiors luxuriously.

The General talked and talked as he showed me round, casually intermingling the narratives of the recent building conversion with the bloody history of the castle: which paint had been used on the ceiling, whose bloodstains remained on the floor; what material had been used for the curtains, who had been murdered on opening the door. Some of the ancient castle artefacts and memorabilia, Scottish swords, helmets and suits of armour, remained on the walls, hanging awkwardly behind contemporary furniture, televisions, computer hardware and alongside security cameras.

As we ascended the spiral stairs of the Eastern Tower the General's eyes narrowed and a brooding watchful look came over him. His mood altered and he ceased talking. The steady taps of our footsteps seemed to amplify rather than interrupt the oppressive silence.

At the top of the stairs we reached a heavy wooden door. He stepped in front of me and raised his hand to knock, then paused momentarily. "Okay son, let's meet the Duchess."

The General rapped twice on the door loudly, and, without waiting for a reply, opened it and stepped inside.

I followed.

The colours hit me first. Thick reds, rich oranges and bright yellows radiated from the furnishings in the lower half of the room; a rainbow of lanterns decorated the ceiling, sparkling blues and purples across the top half of the walls; green hanging plants encircled the chamber and large, elongated pink lilies, open-petalled, exposed their stamens to the light. The textures were soft and silk, the shapes curved and pregnant, the mood sumptuous, the feel exotic, and scents of natural greenery, cinnamon and incense drifted in the air.

At the centre of the room, sitting on the bed, was not a woman, as I expected, but a girl, barely twenty, surely, of such extraordinary beauty, my legs weakened and I took a step back. She sprung towards us with waif-like movements, all flowing dress and curvy breasts. Her hair, russet with golden ringlets, danced across the creamy complexion of her face.

When she reached the General she smiled warmly and embraced him, planting a kiss upon his cheek. As she did so, she glanced up at me with bright green

eyes and smiled again. I blushed involuntarily.

"Duchess," the General greeted her, then gently pushed her away. "Let me introduce *the Artist*."

She took my hand and did a little curtsey. Her fingers were soft and warm. "Do you have a name?" she asked.

"I do," I replied, attempting irony. "Do you?"

"I do," she replied and with a laugh skipped back across the bedroom. I felt a little foolish.

"Come, look out the window," she cried. Neither the General nor I moved. "Quick," she demanded. I walked around the bed to the turret window. The outlook was west over the castle towards the sea. The sun was falling into the ocean.

"It's so beautiful," she said, gazing outwards, "watching the day die." She turned around and looked back at the General. "And sad."

The General stood there silently, his expression hardening. She turned her face towards mine.

"When do we start?" she asked.

"I..."

"He starts tomorrow," the General interrupted. "Make sure you're ready."

With that he turned, swiftly, a military move, and stood by the open door. "Son?" he beckoned.

"Yes, sir" I replied without thinking. I gave a half wave goodbye to the girl. She gave a little laugh and moved back to the window.

The General led me down the spiral stairs, across a drawing room, then down a grander set of stairs into an oval hall. At the centre was a large bronze of Neptune, taming a sea-horse.

"Well," he said, pausing by the statue.

"Well...?" I repeated.

"Can you paint her, sonny?"

"Yes, yes, I can. She's a magical subject, perfect for oil."

The General patted the bronze of Neptune. "Nicolas Brook cast this for me. I see by your reaction you know the name. It cost me two hundred thousand dollars. Do a good job and you'll be well-rewarded."

I was busily working out the pound to dollar ratio when my excitement was overcome by a troubled feeling. *Something was not right.*

"So, the Duchess, she's... your wife?" I stammered.

"Yes," the General responded. "And you want to know how old she is and what she's doing with a man like me?"

“If you don’t mind me asking..”

“Well I do. What did curiosity do to the cat, sonny?”

I stood silently looking at the statue. He was looking at me.

“What the hell,” he said, finally, putting his arm around my shoulders and smiling once more, “you are part of my unit, now. She’s seventeen.”

I gulped: she was even younger than I imagined. I was almost old enough to be her father: he to be her grandfather!

“Son, you can purchase a girl for as little as a two hundred dollars in the slave markets of Deir ez-Zur. I paid two thousand for her, aged sixteen.”

I was shocked, I must confess. I have seen many strange things in my time and observed many bizarre relationships, (had one or two myself, ha!) but I had never known till now a man who had bought himself a bride from a slave market. The idea seemed beyond comprehension. This was the twenty-first century. And he, an American! I was about to ask a question, but he narrowed his eyes and shook his head: the subject was closed.

\*

I ran and skipped my way back down from the castle, singing out loud the song

*Money* and wondering what my reward would be; the image of the Duchess as she gazed up at me from the shoulder of the General painted in my mind's eye. My excitement was such that on returning home, though it was late, I took out the canvas and pre-primed it with Trans Oxide Red. I wanted to be ready for the day ahead.

I rose early and prepared my things.

Paint: Titanium White, Ivory Black, Cadmium Red, Permanent Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine Blue, Pthalo Blue, Cadmium Yellow Light, Cadmium Yellow, Permanent Green Light, Viridian, Burnt Umber and Burnt Sienna. Brushes: three flats, two filberts, an angle, a rigger - all hog hairs - and an old house painting brush. Two palette knives, two charcoal pencils for sketching, flat palette and wax paper. Turps, linseed, pink soap and newspaper. I folded up my easel and carried it out to the car. I returned for the pre-primed canvas. Once the car was packed, I put on my painter's gown: an old multi-coloured sleeveless shirt, took a bowl of cherries from the fridge and was on my way back to the castle.

She was riding a white horse.

The Duchess, the slave girl, the General's wife, looked truly magical: if I'd been a poet I would have written a sonnet for her: *Astride a White Mare*. But as an artist, I can only paint.

She must have spied me coming up the hill or heard the revving of the car engine, for when I pulled into the castle yard she was already galloping across the meadow towards me. I opened the gate and stepped into the field. She brought the horse to a standstill and gazed down at me. Her face was flushed with the excitement of the ride.

"You came!" she exclaimed and bathed me in a smile of beaming joy. I bowed and with a flourish raised my hand to help her down.

"My Lady."

She stepped upon the stirrup and turned her back to me, inviting me to lift her down. I took her in my arms, one hand around her waist, the other cross-ways between her breasts, and lowered her slowly to the ground. A golden ringlet brushed against my cheek and I could feel her heart beating, pulsing rapidly with youthful excitement, almost as fast as my own...

We stayed that way a moment longer than was necessary and then she turned and smiled at me once more.

“My artist. Have you come to paint me, then?”

I nodded.

“And will you paint my body, or paint my soul?”

“Both, if I can.”

“Neither: you paint my portrait - only this, I should remind you.”

I laughed and gave a little salute. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“You are funny. And will you make me beautiful?” she asked, smiling excitedly, once again.

*Make you beautiful?* I whispered to myself, incredulous. *I might be a fine artist, but I could not compete with God.*

“I’ll try.”

“Try? Do you have to try?”

“Let me put it this way,” I said, conjuring up a picture in my mind. “Imagine your beauty is a beach. If I pick up just one grain of sand from that beach, and put it in the portrait, then my painting will make a fool of Michelangelo and all the other clods that have ever daubed paint on canvas.”

“Oh, you will make a fool of Michelangelo?” she said, smiling widely. “And Rembrandt?”

“A house painter,” I replied.

She gave me an amused stare. “Monet?”

“A fat-fingered bungler!”

“Picasso?”

“A graffiti artist!”

“And those beautiful works of Rubens and van Gogh?”

“Cave paintings - crude splashes of mud made by fighting monkeys.”

She laughed aloud. “Oh, you will make a fool of me. You are not a good liar. It is too much. Good liars stick mainly to the truth.”

“I don’t lie,” I said seriously. “Though I’m not sure if I can find that grain of sand.”

“You are very kind,” she said. And then she did something that struck me as extraordinary: she reached out and touched my cheek. I lowered my head to keep her fingers there longer, and she stroked my cheek again, before pulling her hand away.

I stared at her entranced.

“I will paint your beauty and I will paint your soul,” I said.

Her expression changed to one of sadness. “My soul is not beautiful.”

She turned from me and patted the horse and whispered something to it in a language I did not understand. “Come,” she said, her back to me, “we should begin.”

The weather was glorious and she insisted we work outside. I hadn't anticipated this, as the General had talked of a conventional portraiture in formal dress, with a dark interior background. Although my easel was solid enough for outdoors and I was well used to adapting to circumstance, I was worried about the change of plan.

"I should go speak to the General."

"Impossible. He is away from the castle."

"What will he think?"

"Who cares what he thinks."

"I care!" I exclaimed, astounded.

"Is it not more beautiful here in the sunny orchard than in that gloomy castle? Shouldn't you paint me here? Or do you care more for his money than for your art?"

I was shamed into silence by the answer I gave myself to the question.

"Come," she said, taking my hand and drawing me further into the orchard. "You paint me, do you not? You can paint a new background after."

"The light, the shadow, if only it were that easy," I muttered.

She stared at me with a haughty expression, odd in one so young. "Are you an artist or not?"

I was amused, I admit, and this broke my resistance: yes, the day was glorious, the orchard a perfect backdrop and she so beautiful. How could I ever imagine not painting her here?

When she saw me give in she raised her face to mine and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Go get your things!"

I walked back to the car rubbing my cheek where she had kissed me and then rubbing my finger against my lips. I took what I needed from the car and brought a small wooden stool from the castle kitchen.

It was hard work. I sat her on the wooden stool beneath an apple blossom, with the sun filtered by the leaves, giving a soft diffuse effect. The initial sketch was easy, but as time passed and I began to paint, she became restless. She kept her body still, but her expression changed constantly, sometimes sad, sometimes happy. Occasionally she would giggle and sometimes she would look away from me; other times she would engage me in conversation, laugh out loud and throw her head back, which meant I had to put down my palette, wash my hands with turps and go put her hair back in place. Though it delayed the work, I did not

mind, for I could run my fingers through those ringlets and gaze upon her neck.

A little after midday she said she was hungry and would fetch us some lunch. I used the time she was away to make some small alterations with the rigger before wrapping up my brushes. I went inside to clean myself and then stopped by the car to pick up the cherries.

"I'm here!" she cried, waving from the meadow. When I reached her she was sitting amongst the wild flowers, a platter of meze in front of her. I recognised, hummus, vine leaves, falafel, flat bread and dates, but other delicacies I could only guess at – a dish made with aubergines, pastries coated with pistachios, and twists of curd cheeses. There was a decanter of red wine and what appeared to be a pot of Arabic tea: hints of cinnamon and cardamom wafted from its spout.

We ate. She drank wine, I tea, for I couldn't let alcohol interfere with my work. She talked of the food, of the customs of her land and of her childhood in Syria. When I asked how she came to meet the General she waved her finger at me: "I will not talk of this now, I am too happy."

When we had finished the meze I offered her the cherries I had brought from home.

“Feed me,” she said laying back on the grass. She closed her eyes and parted her lips, and rubbed her hand inside her blouse across her breast. I leant over her and placed the cherry above her lips. She sensed it there for her mouth curved slightly to receive it. I lowered it gently into her mouth, a ripe purple fruit between two soft pink labia.

“Kiss me,” she uttered, eyes still closed.

So I did.

She bit the cherry and its juice flowed into my mouth, mingling with the taste of her tongue.

I lingered there, savouring the moment, my desire rising. I pulled away to gaze down at her and she opened her sparkling green eyes and looked at me with an overwhelming intensity.

“Take it,” she said, and pushed the cherry stone forward with her tongue to hold it in the bite of her teeth. I put in my finger and thumb and plucked the bloody seed from her mouth, letting it roll down her cheek. I pushed my thumb back inside and she curled her tongue around it. She pulled open her blouse and lifted out a breast for me. “Taste me,” she said. So I took the nipple in my mouth and sucked hard.

We stayed like this for a few moments, until I could wait no longer. I raised my

body to make my move and it was then something caught my eye in the distance, from inside the castle. A curtain had opened and I swear I saw the head of the General looking down towards us from the window.

I jumped up, panic rupturing my desire.

“What?” she asked startled. She sat up. “What? What is it?”

“The General. There in the window.”

She looked across at the castle and pulled her blouse back over her breast, uttering what could only have been a series of expletives in her native tongue. She stared intently for a moment.

“I do not see him.”

“No, no, he’s gone, but I’m sure I saw him.”

“But he is not here. He went out in his car this morning. You must have imagined it.”

“But I could swear...” *Had I imagined it? Perhaps it was a trick of the light.*

She stood up and regained her composure. “One can never be certain with the General. He is dangerous and deceitful. We must act as if he is here. Come, let us continue with the picture.”

She said nothing all afternoon and remained completely still, an impassive expression frozen on her face. This made my work easier and I proceeded rapidly,

though I knew the blank look that masked the life in her soul would not be the one to appear in my portrait: no I would capture the flush of her earlier excitement and that spot of joy in her cheeks.

We carried on till early evening: I could not believe the progress we had made – I was almost half done. But as the light began to fade and my eyes began to hurt, I called a halt.

“Good,” she said. “You have kept me here so long. My body aches.”

I went inside the castle with her, taking the canvas with me and returning for the rest of my things. I cleaned up inside the downstairs kitchen, in what had been the servant’s quarters many moons ago, and left my brushes out on the table to dry.

As I walked back outside to my car a big Ford SUV with darkened windows entered the castle yard. The window rolled down and the General, a large cigar between his teeth, gave a little salute. I saluted back.

Although relieved I had only imagined seeing him earlier at the castle window, I couldn’t help feeling uneasy that he was here, such a controlled threat emanated from his person.

“Howdy,” he said stepping down from the car. “Good work today, son?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered.

He put his arm around my shoulders and directed me back into the castle. "Let's have a drink."

The Duchess was there to welcome him home. The three of us walked together to the entrance of his private chamber and he unlocked the door and ushered me inside. "Help yourself, son," he said, "I'll be with you shortly." Then he left me on my own and walked off with the Duchess.

I perused the drinks cabinet and selected a Lagavulin 21-year-old single malt. I took some ice from the fridge and dropped one cube in a glass before pouring out the whisky. A rich peaty aroma filled the air. I swirled the golden liquid around the glass beneath my nostrils and inhaled deeply. *Uisge beatha*, I whispered and took a sip.

Heaven.

I took the bottle and sat down on the sofa by the coffee table. I was on my second drink when the General returned. I moved to stand up when he entered the room, but he waved me back down.

He went to the drinks cabinet and took a glass.

"A good choice," he said sitting down and filled his glass from the bottle. He took a sip and stared at me intently. "I don't approve of men making their own

decisions. You follow orders in the army or all goes fubar.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You listen to women, son, and the world becomes one almighty clusterfuck.”

“Sorry?”

“You painted outside in the orchard.”

“Yes, the Duchess...”

“Exactly.”

I took a swig at my glass and plucked up my courage. “I believe I can make it work, sir, work better.”

“Well, you do that, sonny. I’ll take you at your word.”

We sat in silence for a minute and then for another. My anxiety increased with every moment, though the General did nothing but contemplate his whisky. Then my fingers began to tap on the table top involuntarily. He blew me a “shh” and gave me a hard-eyed stare. I stopped tapping and offered an embarrassed smile but he continued to stare straight at me unflinchingly. Finally I averted my eyes and looked down. I stayed like that for perhaps another minute before his empty glass and fingers came into view. “Drink up, son.” His voice fractured the silence. “I haven’t shown you the most interesting part of the castle.”

We left his chamber, walked along the corridor and turned right down a narrow

passageway. We entered a nondescript rectangular room, which had long black curtains hanging down from one wall. The General stepped behind a curtain and held it open for me to follow. We proceeded through an arched doorway and into a small shadowy alcove with a whitewashed facade. On the wall hung a lantern and a set of rusty iron keys. The General took the keys and unlocked a heavy wooden door. He pulled a zip lighter from his pocket, flicked it alight and fiddled with the lantern. After a moment the wick caught and it gave off a small glow. "Come," he said, holding up the lantern and walking through the door.

As I stepped into the stairwell the temperature dropped sharply. In the distance down below you could hear the sound of water lapping. All was in darkness but for the light spilling from the lantern. He held the lamp aloft with outstretched arm so we could better see the way, but all this did was shake the blackness back and forth, and cast the General's elongated shadow onto the wall. The effect was uncanny and I had a sudden moment of panic and terror: I imagined he was some kind of vampire or ghoul, leading me down into Hell.

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## My Last Duchess (1842)

By Robert Browning

Ferrara

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps  
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps  
Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
For calling up that spot of joy. She had  
A heart — how shall I say? — too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace — all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, — good! but  
thanked

Somehow — I know not how — as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech — (which I have not) — to make your  
will

Quite clear to such a one, and say, "Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark" — and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
--E'en then would be some stooping, and I choose  
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave  
commands;

Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet  
The company below, then. I repeat,  
The Count your master's known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretence  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

ONE STORY AT A TIME

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