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The Man Who Painted Souls

The Man Who Painted Souls

by

Lawrence Buentello

In the old days there lived a beautiful young woman called Constance, who was unmarried, free of spirit, and unconcerned with the opinions of any other person in the world.

Her greatest pleasure was walking through the King's woods by a shallow stream admiring the blue sky when it was blue, or the gray clouds when they were gray. She often bathed in the stream, feeling the cool water washing over her body, and the water turning her long, black hair into soft tendrils that touched her shoulders sensually. She had no care if anyone watched, nor did she wait for anyone to praise her beauty; her joy came from hearing the songs of the birds, from feeling the caress of the breezes, from inhaling the scent of lovely flowers, and from running amongst the butterflies that frequently drifted in clouds over the blooms.

She laughed without provocation, for the beauty of the natural world was inspiration enough for her spirit to rejoice.

One morning she realized she wasn't alone in the King's woods—that someone was watching her bathe in the stream.

She ignored the figure half-hidden in the trees and stretched beneath the sun, letting the warm air dry the droplets on her shoulders as she wandered through the stream, the water splashing when she kicked it playfully. When the sun had dried her, she stepped from the stream and slipped on her dress, still unconcerned by

the person watching her.

Presently, the figure found its courage and stepped toward her on the edge of the stream.

"Hello," a young man said. He was dressed in a silken shirt, and wore clean boots, which told her that he wasn't a common man, but perhaps from the King's estate. His face was thin, his eyes closely set, and when she glanced at his hands she marked them free of calluses.

"Hello," she said, pulling at the strands of her hair. She smiled, the radiance of her smile announcing her joyful nature.

"Do you know you're walking in the King's woods?" he asked, his eyes moving to see her entire body. "It is a punishable offense."

"If these are the King's woods," she said, unafraid, "then where is the King? I come here often, and have yet to see a king, let alone anyone else. What is your name?"

The young man seemed mystified by her attitude. "I am Lytton, a subject of the King."

"And I am Constance. Are you a soldier, Lytton?"

"No."

"What is your service to the King?"

The young man called Lytton stood quietly a moment, then said, "I am the King's portraitist."

"You are an artist?"

"Yes. I've painted many subjects for His Majesty."

"Then you've an eye for beautiful things, Lytton," she said. She turned and began walking. "Let us go see something beautiful."

He followed, hesitantly.

As they walked she told him that she was in love with the woods, and the animals, and all the gorgeous plenty of the world; that her mother and father often tried to keep her performing the rituals they believed proper for a girl her age, but that their words held no sway with her. She wouldn't be bound by anyone; she lived freely among the beautiful portions of the earth.

She brought him to a place where the butterflies swarmed over succulent blooms of wildflowers in the clover, and then left him while she chased after their fluttering yellow wings. She laughed for the simple experience of dancing with the butterflies, and she saw him watching, but had no care of his opinion of her.

When the butterflies had flown, she returned to his side, still laughing.

"Constance," he said, "I've watched you for many days."

"I believe you have," she said.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I believe I am in love with you."

She shook her head, knowing his love was only the pulse he felt while watching her bathe naked in the stream. Men were such foolish, simple creatures.

"You're not in love with me," she said. "You didn't even know my name until a few moments ago."

"Even so," he said, moving forward and grasping her hand. "I want you to be my wife."

She pulled her hand away, sweeping her arms into the air and laughing. "I am no man's wife, nor will I ever be. My love is not for men, but for the beauty I see."

"Marry me, Constance. Be my wife."

"Lytton, I will never be your wife."

The young man closed his mouth, his expression distraught, but he didn't curse her or move to harm her. He nodded, and seemed to accept her resolve. But he raised his hand and gestured for her not to walk away.

"If you won't marry me," he said, "then let my heart be consoled another way. Let me paint your portrait so that I may always have your likeness as my companion."

"You wish to paint my portrait?"

"Yes, if you won't have me as your husband."

She spun in the grass on bare feet, smiling, wondering how he might render her image. It seemed a harmless concession, and she was sorry that she must bruise his heart by refusing his proposal.

So she said, "Come back tomorrow and I will let you paint my portrait. There is great beauty in art."

The young man smiled pleasantly and thanked her, then took his leave.

The following day the young man met her in the woods.

He carried with him a large wooden panel, which he secured before himself on notched stakes. Then he opened a large wooden box filled with brushes, clay jars of pigment, and silver jars filled with unknown liquids. He stood before the wooden panel assessing her in the grass, picking through the jars of liquid, thumbing the bristles of the brushes.

Constance disrobed and stood nude in the brightening sun, the light sculpting her body voluptuously. She was unselfconscious in her nudity, which freed her expression from any fearful influence.

The young man dabbed and brushed at the panel assiduously, dipping the bristles

into pigments, stirring the jars at his feet, staring repeatedly from the Constance standing in the meadow to the Constance being born in colors on the wood.

By the time he was finished the sun was dropping low in the sky, and, for all her patience, Constance had grown weary of the favor. Her entire body ached; her thoughts wandered as if she were suffering a fever.

She slipped into her dress and advanced at his urging, and stood beside him, appraising her portrait.

The young man had rendered her likeness beautifully, artfully, sensually. He was obviously a masterful craftsman. The woman in the painting seemed even more beautiful than she; it was no wonder he found himself in the employ of a king. And though she admired the portrait for its skill, and the lovely, pure woman for whom she served as a model, she felt too weary to say any words of compliment.

"I must go now," she said.

"I understand," he said as he finished closing up his box of jars. "Thank you, Constance, for indulging my desire. I will keep your portrait only for my eyes."

She left him, feeling slightly ill, her hand to her cheek. She didn't look back toward the young man and his art, she only wished to sleep, for she felt a sickness coming on her that wasn't familiar. The darkening sky seemed foreboding, and the sounds erupting from the shadowy trees filled her mind with ominous portents.

Constance slept through a fever for many days, but soon recovered.

When she returned to the woods to warm her spirit with the beauty of the butterflies, she realized something was wrong. No longer did the beauty of the King's woods fill her with joy. The water of

the stream was cold and biting, the birds' songs hurt her ears, and every fluttering of hidden wings in branches startled her. The grass seemed to cling strangely to her feet, and the sun shone bitterly. She couldn't find the joy to laugh, nor could she see the beauty of the world no matter where she searched. Was this the effect of a lingering illness?

Even her beloved butterflies seemed nothing more than ugly insects swarming around her head, and she batted at them angrily for the annoyance they presented. All her joy seemed muted, replaced by loathing. She found no happiness wherever she walked and cried tears she had never cried before.

When she wiped the tears away she realized he was standing next to her, but she was so distressed by the shadow on her heart that she could only say, "What is wrong with me? What is wrong?"

"Take heart," Lytton said, his hands falling on her shoulders. "Your condition is only temporary."

She looked into his eyes, but with her joy removed saw only cruelty there. "What's happened? Why do I feel this way?"

"You feel as you do," he said, "because I've taken your soul."

She tried to understand his words as he explained her condition to her, but she heard only echoing voices speaking words of despair. In this fugue of voices his voice finally broke through, and she realized he had lied to her.

Lytton wasn't the King's portraitist—he was the King's alchemist, and used his artistic skills in the political interest of his liege. Once foreign statesmen sat to have their portraits painted by the gifted artist, their wills were held hostage by the King.

He had used his skills to draw her soul

into the portrait he had painted of her, a portrait now secured where she would never find it. Though the two were still kindred, their bond lay mute and would remain so at his discretion.

"Why have you done this to me?" she asked, her mouth open, her hands kneading her dress anxiously. "You've taken what is most important to me. Why?"

"Don't worry, dear Constance," he said, smiling thinly. "I'll return your soul to you by the power of my craft. But only after you've married me and become my wife."

"You're an evil man," she said, "you know nothing of love. Love is freely given, and received. I'll not give my love to you."

"You will love me or you will not love me, that doesn't concern me. But you are a beautiful woman, and I will have you with me in my life. You are joyless now, but you know the qualities of the soul that are absent from you. I'll return that joy to you, but you will be mine."

She wept for the horrid decision she had to make, while in her heart her hatred festered for the man who had deceived her, taken advantage of her trust. If she ever hoped to see the world as beautiful again, she would have to live the rest of her life as the ornament of an evil man. But if she refused, she would have to live the rest of her life bereft of the joy she once knew.

"You're a calculating man," she said at last. "But you've won your gambit. I cannot live my life in a soulless body, despite never wishing to be your wife."

The young man guided her through the woods to the path leading to the King's fortress, which seemed to her a dungeon walled in moldy stones and vermin. He held her hand as they walked, but his touch sickened her, as if a serpent were wrapped around her fingers. He guided her through darkened halls and shadows animated by

guttering torches. The curious eyes that watched them as they passed filled her with shame.

Lytton was a man of power, even if his will served the King. He occupied dual chambers, one for his handicraft, and another for his bedchamber where he left her.

Several days passed while she occupied the room in solitary mourning, and though she dropped kindling into the stone hearth persistently, no fire raging on the stones could warm the chill of the fetid air. Ladies attended her, brought her food that tasted of ashes, washed her with buckets, dressed her in a gown that clung to her flesh like crawling insects.

Every day that passed increased her hatred for the young man, and in the evening, when he came to her room to tell her of some intrigue perpetuated on an unsuspecting victim, her hatred found new dimensions.

"When will you return my soul to me?" she asked him.

"Tomorrow we will wed," he said, picking at the tray of fruit that lay uneaten. "And after the ceremony I will bring the portrait to this room as your bridal gift. It will be only a moment's work to free the soul imprisoned in its pigments and return it within you. Thereafter you will spend your first night in my arms."

After he left the room, she threw more wood upon the fire, but the awful chill remained. She sat in a satin-covered chair weeping for the life she had lost, knowing she would never live a joyful life again.

After the wedding ceremony, attended by gentry and aristocrats who may as well have been a host of demons, Lytton escorted Constance to their bedchamber, where he left her waiting.

After a moment he returned holding the wooden panel, and when he set it down against the dresser she saw the portrait for the first time since she had viewed it in the meadow. The beautiful woman in the portrait seemed nothing like the woman she'd been grooming in the mirror of the room. The woman locked in pigments glowed with joy, and wore a smile filled with the unbridled ecstasy of one who knew a carefree life. Her nudity was not sinful; it was a sensual expression of freedom.

Constance felt no kinship with this woman.

The woman she had become was drawn and pale, her hair matted and knotted, her vitality stolen.

"Stay a moment, my wife," the young man said. "I must find my potions to restore your soul. But while I'm gone admire the beautiful woman you will become once again."

When he left the room, she brought the chair before the panel and sat staring at the painting, her hatred for Lytton an ugly animal moving in her heart. She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, but the chill had become a permanent cold in her bones and she trembled uncontrollably.

Would she reward a man who had stolen the world she loved with her companionship? Would she grant him

ownership of the beauty that once lived inside of her?

She shivered violently, the cold of the room closing on her like a crypt. When the cold became so intense that it brought tears to her eyes, she rose from her chair to stir the flames in the hearth.

When he returned, carrying the silver jars of his alchemy, she gazed up at him from the chair, her sunken eyes studying him viciously.

"You needn't bother with your potions," she said, and for the first time since he had painted her portrait, she smiled, though wickedly.

She watched him gaze upon her curiously—then his gaze fell on the place where the portrait should have stood. He turned, and when he realized why the fire was burning so very high, he cried out for the lovely woman he had lost.

"Now we will both live a life bereft of beauty," she said. "Your craft has decided our fates."

He stared at her in sudden dread, but there was nothing he could do. The panel was consumed.

"Your wife awaits you, Lytton dear," she said. "Her heart is yours forever, though it be as cold as the water in a frozen stream."

—The End—