

The Duchess

By

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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.