

My Last Duchess

Ancient stone walls of the castle of Este echoed the lone sound of shoes on the cobbled pavers. Intricately carved statues and art in elaborate, golden frames adorned the grand foyer, their acquisition recent. Quiet darkness was upon the grounds and flower heads had closed for the night, until one chilling scream woke any within earshot!

Hounds howled at the disturbance, the noise carrying on the still air of the Italian countryside. The Black Death from years ago had caused such upheavals throughout Europe and remained fresh in memory.

Instantly, doors were pried open and candle-shadows danced into the maw of the timber beams high above the unfolding drama. It seemed that none of the servants of the house knew what they had been awoken by. The Duke, with bed attire awry and hair reminiscent of a shaggy dog, called for the person who was the interruption of sleep that night. The staff of the castle gathered, their eyes searching for the one. A wisp of a girl no older than twelve, with a downcast countenance and cheeks with no colour, quickly pointed to the immense double entry doors.

“There, Sire”, stammered the slight lass with her tear sodden lashes.

With strides long and purposeful, the Duke approached and threw back the heavy timber revealing a cloaked shape on the gravel carriageway. Many who saw crossed themselves, for the old ways were ingrained. Where the appearance of a body in the middle of the night would not have bode well for the house hold, modern thinking was on the rise, suppressing the long held power of religion and the Church.

Ironically, the Duke ordered a servant to remove the coverings of the lifeless form, his last Duchess, realistically captured in paint hung from the wall lifelike and seemingly watchful of the proceeding. The face of the dead Duchess was shockingly white, even in poor post-midnight light. Collective gasps were the only sound as the Duke bent down to the Duchess and touched the collar of her gown.

Turning to the young girl, the Duke queried, “Did you happen to gaze upon who brought her to our door?”

“Nay, Sire, I was leaving for the night when I chanced upon what I thought to be a dead animal.”

The Duke nodded, and appeared visibly upset. The Duchess had gone missing; it had been months since her last sighting in and now here she was. The chunk of gold on his finger wavered as he directed the Duchess to be carried into the library, her delicate ankles sprinkled with brown earth. The brocade on her dress was ripped, as if a struggle had taken place sometime prior to death. Missing from her throat and noticeably absent, was her favourite piece of jewellery- a fine cameo, encrusted with precious stones and well-known to all. The fine and fashionable Duchess was no longer.

“Find out who poisoned my last Duchess; start with the stable hands and call the Watchman!”

As first light produced bleak shadows and most of the household had returned to their rest, the summoned Watchman was in a heated argument with the Duke.

“But you were heard to have spoken the word ‘poison’. Your nine hundred year old name will not keep you safe on this occasion, nor will it keep you safe from proof of guilt.”

Spitting in rage the Duke ordered the watchman from his castle.

“You accuse me, a Duke who is embroiled in the commerce and advancement of Italy – of murder?”

“You gave commands; and said that her smiles stopped altogether! It was known that you thought the Duchess to be promiscuous. How else do you determine she was poisoned?” countered the Watchman.

A slight knock resonated during a brief pause in thee shouting. A stocky woman of indeterminate age and dressed as a maid of the household backed slowly into the library full of history books and literature of the times and the click of the latch closing was heard.

“What is it?” grunted the Duke, perhaps relieved at the interruption.

Not looking at the Duke but instead turning her attention to the Watchman, the maid held out a pudgy hand. As her clenched fingers uncurled, the cameo shone in the morning light as it streamed through the stained glass high above.

The colour from the Duke’s face drained, as he realised what was contained within the maid’s hand.

Then, the maid elaborated.

“Buried deep in the drawers belonging to the Duke, I found this piece of the Duchess’. Rarely did she take it off as it was a gift from the Duke himself.”

Written by Calen Grohn