

## THE VENGEANCE OF THE OVAL PORTRAIT

### *The Vengeance of the Oval Portrait*

The man in question, Don Arias d'Alilaya, lived in a ruined ancestral castle in Estremadura.<sup>1</sup> For 20 years, he had lived alone. A bloody drama that had unfolded during his youth had infected his heart with a ferocious hatred for humanity, and women in particular.

His father, the noble Count Pablo, had ruled his domain like a true king while he was alive. By virtue to feudal customs, he had the right of life and death over his subjects—but all of them, while fearing him, venerated him, for he was as just as he as strong. Having become a widower early in life, he had consoled himself rapidly for the death of Arias' mother. Leading thereafter a dissolute and wandering life, he had confided the child to aged relatives who had lived him and pampered him, in a distant house in another province. The Count came to embrace him between voyages, but his soul was elsewhere.

In the course of a journey through Italy he had fallen madly in love with a charming young dancer. He had abducted her and taken her to his seigniorial residence. The woman was named Juana. She had a bewitching and superhuman charm. After a few months, however, the Count had found the long days that formed preludes to the splendors of the evening monotonous. Satisfied by seeing the divine creature on his return, he soon developed the habit of hunting during the daylight hours, pursuing eagles and vultures over the mountain-sides, expending strenuous physical activity in these exercises.

Alone in the castle, Juana became bored. She soon allowed herself to be seduced by the delicate speeches of the young head groom, who was handsome and eloquent.

One day, on a high plateau, Don Pablo met an old woman who was said to be a witch. He asked her if she knew the whereabouts of the eyrie of a black eagle that he had been hunting since morning.

"Why pursue so obstinately a bird that has done you no harm?" she replied "There are other malevolent beasts that you ought to kill first."

Astonished by these enigmatic words, the noble lord pressed her with questions. He offered her all the gold he had on him. She did not want to accept anything or add anything. He returned to the castle, therefore, full of suspicions, much sooner than was customary.

When he had passed through the third defensive wall he perceived the groom fleeing like a thief over the balcony of Juana's apartment. With a superhuman effort, the Count succeeded in controlling himself, but he had the trumpet sounded and ordered that the guilty man be brought before him, without giving him the reason.

"It's the first time," he said to him, "that I shall cross iron with a mere groom. At any rate, this evening, after supper, you will defend yourself to the death in a closed arena. Groom or Count, one of us is surplus here."

Juana knew about the challenge. During the last feast that Don Pablo held in company with his friends, she poured a violent soporific into his brandy-glass, which would only take effect at the time for which the combat was arranged.

The duel with lances took place in the moonlight, in an arena sealed by barricades formed by serried pikes. From the first pass, the astonished Don Pablo felt his hand weakening. He attacked and defended tamely. In a desperate effort, he hurled himself upon his adversary, but the groom's lance, directed by a rapid and sure gesture, cleaved right through the Count's breast.

As he collapsed, the blood gushing from the terrible wound, a trumpet-blast was heard on the drawbridge of the castle, and almost immediately, a young man of proud appearance was seen to appear on the edge of the arena, mounted on a fine black horse. It was Don Arias, who had been armed as a knight the day before and had come to render homage to his liege-lord. He had ridden all night, bloodying the golden spurs that he had hastened to put on.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the six Medieval provinces of Portugal, and one of Lautrec's favorite locations for exotic stories.

He leapt into the arena without further enquiry, seeing nothing but his dead father, leapt upon the groom, and buried his sword all the way to the hilt in the other's throat.

When he went into the castle, greeted by universal acclamation, he was informed that his father had a wife that he had never seen before—but she had just fled, terrified, wrapped in a cloak, taking nothing with her but her jewels and the desire to avenge herself against the man who had arrived to kill her happiness.

Count Arias immediately had it proclaimed by his heralds at every crossroads in the domain that all women, no matter what their age or condition, were to leave his lands within three days, under pain of slow death by asphyxiation on the pyre.

They left, and the majority of the men went with them. No one any longer remained in Don Arias' lands but a few old servants whose lugubrious existence had to accord with that of their overlord. Gradually, powerful vegetation invaded the outskirts of the castle, where the young man had shut himself away with two or three domestics, more isolated every day from the rest of the world.

He spent his time in the ancestral dwelling's ancient library reading fabulous romances of the Middle Ages or books of magic. The mystery of these books suited the wild and solitary atmosphere in which he lived. His mind, already shaken by the fatal event, filled with new chimeras every day in the isolation of the castle.

At other times, in his fits of melancholy, he wandered through the corridors and somber galleries. He went through large rooms with walls covered in sumptuous tapestries, which undulated in the wind, leading and appearance of moving reality to the richly-dressed people, the running dogs whose heads were turned, naively folded back, and the falcons borne on wrists, which seemed ready to take flight.

He wanted to remove one of these tapestries to put it in his bedroom. That was an isolated retreat at the end of the great gallery. Imagine his amazement to find behind the hanging, on the wall, a painting representing a woman of marvelous beauty. She was leaning languidly on her elbow in a red velvet armchair. The delicately-sculpted golden frame was oval in form.

Don Arias took the painting and transported it to his bedroom.

Time went by. The lord had fallen madly and unhealthily in love with the lady in the portrait. He had sent his servants on long journeys into all the surrounding regions to try to discover the woman whose image he adored. Their research remained fruitless. Gradually, the conviction took root in his mind that she must have died years ago and that the only reality—a reality that a miracle alone could bring back to life—was that image, the profound eyes of which poured a delicious and mortal enchantment into his own.

His preliminary studies had prepared him for that idea. He imagined that he might succeed in resuscitating the woman he loved desperately, and who was asleep with open eyes in the coffin of the oblong frame. He consulted old grimoires and learned the formulas of incantation. All day and all night, liturgical prayers rose up in the bedroom transformed into a temple, addressed to the idol who smiled ironically and insouciantly, seemingly awaiting the moment when it would please her to emerge from her colored exile.

Finally, one day, weary of waiting and furious at seeing all his efforts had been in vain, he climbed up on a stool with a stiletto in his hand, determined to stab the canvas in order to annihilate the dream that refused to make itself his. He had raised the weapon and was about to strike when, all of a sudden, doubtless solicited by that gesture, more powerful than all the incantations, the image appeared to obey.

The eyes took on a new and savage expression. Don Arias hesitated momentarily, astounded to see his dream realized. But the eyes became animated by a life even more intense. The arms of the portrait detached themselves from the dead, flat surface—and the woman's hand, seizing the dagger, brandished it and plunged it all the way to the hilt in the amorous man's throat.

The unfortunate's incantations had only succeeded in rendering momentary life to the portrait's true soul. And as the cadaver fell at the foot of the painting, the image of Juana, her vengeance satisfied, resumed its funereal immobility.