

# The Artist

By MARGARET McLACHLAN

HE had loved her and she had laughed at him and married someone else.

This was ten years ago. She was a widow now and had written to ask him to paint her portrait. He had done it scores of times from memory. He called the sketches "Ivory and Gold." Ah! those green eyes of hers!—flashing, haunting, elusive green eyes. He dreamt of kissing the white lids into sleep. . . .

And now he held her letter. She said she had heard he was famous, and if he hadn't forgotten his old friend, would he paint her? Forgotten her!—he smiled as he read the words. The memory of her made him shiver. No other woman had come into his life.

He wrote to say he would be pleased to paint her. He wrote coldly because he felt deeply. What an inspiration she would be! What a picture he would paint!

When the day came he stood by the fireplace on a Persian rug. The studio was large and furnished with pictures and statues and draperies, and in one corner a figure of a Bacchante—white and cold. High up on a shelf were pewter plates and mugs. A large unfinished portrait of a girl rested on the easel. She was very dark, and her blue-black hair had the real shimmer of the raven's wing. The painter looked at it critically from where he stood. Frequently his eyes wandered to the door. Woman-like, she was going to be late! He glanced at the clock. It was not yet twelve. It was he who was ready too soon. Suddenly he moved to the windows and drew the holland blinds to temper the strong top-light—women don't like a blaze of light; besides, they would both feel less shy in a subdued light! The bell rang and the door opened. The artist hurried forward and took the gloved hand of his visitor. She was a beautiful woman—tall and slender, perhaps a shade too slender. She smiled cordially. He forgot to smile, but he quite agreed that it was a lovely day.

Her colouring was just the same, but there was a wistfulness in the green eyes which had not been there before. Had marriage disillusioned her? He wondered. She looked at him. Of course he was older, and his hair was just touched with grey—but he was extraordinarily good-looking and attractive. (What a little fool she had been!)

She walked about examining his pictures and ornaments, chatting gaily all the time. At the high mantelpiece she paused, and her eyes ran over the photographs. She half expected to see an old one of herself in a ridiculous hat or balloon sleeves. But the photographs were evidently all of portraits.

"I hate photographs, don't you?" he said, coming up to her.

"No—why?"

"Because they invariably smile."

"But you paint portraits."

"But I don't paint smiles."

"Who is this?" she asked, as she pointed to a picture of a girl, strikingly handsome.

"She was in last year's Academy," he said, without answering her question.

She turned and faced him. "Are you married?"

"Very much," he answered quietly.

"She reddened slightly. "Oh, I had not heard. Where is your wife?"

"There," he said, and he pointed to the marble statue of the Bacchante. "Isn't she exquisite?"

She laughed, because she was relieved. "Ah, I see—married to your art sort of thing."

"That's it," he said, and his eyes lingered on her face.

She looked away and began to unbutton her gloves. He watched her, eager to see her hands again. Ah! they were just the same, almost transparently white, with the long, nervous fingers. But a wedding ring was on her finger now!

"Shall I sit here?" she asked, as she touched the model's seat, an old oak chair.

"Please," he said, as he placed a cushion at her back.

"How shall you paint me?" she asked,

as he began to arrange his easel.

"Just as you are," he answered.

"But not with a hat on?"

"Yes, just as you are."

"Ah! I see, the hat's to hide the wrinkles."

"But you haven't any."

"Then call them lines—it is kinder!"

"Lines on a woman's face are like honourable scars on a man's," he said, as he sharpened a chalk pencil.

Under the brim of her big hat her eyes looked grey. Her white face with the sad mouth was oddly piquant.

"I will begin now," and he sketched rapidly in chalk.

She watched his face. It was quite impassive. Did he remember? She wondered.

He watched her, and despite her smiling gaiety he knew she remembered.

"I want you to turn more to the left," he said, and he went up to her. He refrained from touching her face.

"Certainly; it's my best side, isn't it? All women have a better side, you know," a gleam of mischief shone in her eyes.

"But all men don't perceive it," and the man walked back to his easel.

"But artists do," she answered readily.

"It depends on—" and he stopped.

"On what?" she asked.

"Oh, on the artist, I suppose"—and for the first time he smiled.

There was a silence.

"I've been in India since—since I saw you." She could not resist an allusion to the past.

"Did the climate suit you?" he asked indifferently, as he narrowed his eyes and held up his pencil to measure the depth of her chin.

"Fairly well. I got thin there—but I was worried."

No answer, but the pencil moved rapidly over the canvas.

She turned her eyes to him.

"Please look to the left," he said, "at my Bacchante."

"I won't look at her. I don't like her face."

"I love it," he said.

Something like a gleam of jealousy came into the green eyes.

"She is so white and cold."

"As all women should be," he said quietly.

His pencil was accentuating the curve of her under-lip. She looked annoyed, and with difficulty repressed the desire to tell him he used to think otherwise.

"I was so pleased when I saw flattering notices of your pictures in the papers."

"Thank you," he said warmly.

"I ought to be a little afraid of you now you are such an important person, but somehow I'm not. Do you like people to be frightened of you?"

"Certainly. One has so much more influence over them. One can bend them to one's will."

"Ah," she said, "the old tyranny of man! You ought to have lived in Mediaeval ages."

"But I should not have been so happy as I am now."

A faint colour came into her pale face.

"Why?" she said, in a low voice.

"Because I should have had what I wanted!"

"I don't quite follow your reasoning," and she turned impatiently from the Bacchante to the man.

"She knows"—and he jerked his pencil in the direction of the hated statue.

His model shrugged her shoulders.

The artist obliterated every line he had drawn.

"Am I so difficult?" she said.

"Terribly," he answered.

"But not 'difficile'?" she said, almost below her breath.

Then he slowly put down his cloth and pencil and walked up to his sitter.

"It is no use," he said, and his blue eyes looked coldly into her green ones. They fluttered beneath his gaze. "I can't paint you—because—because I no longer love you."

The Bacchante's smile seemed one of triumph. . . . The woman drew her cloak round her, and left the studio.



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