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The Painter of Ghosts



By Hudson Strode

"It Isn't a Real Boy," Said the Ibsen Lady, Shaking Her Head: "It Is Only His Ghost That Sits for Me."

WHEN Commander Maxon gave me a letter to his wife at Carmel-by-the-Sea asking her to be nice to me I little dreamed that I would stumble upon something as strange and terrible and fascinating as any fiction I have read. And yet at the end it did not leave the expected "bad taste in the mouth." It was more like a tiny glass of strong Swedish aqua vite—white, burning, bitter, which leaves the mouth and throat tingling with subtle stinging sensations—but clean.

That was the second time that Mrs. Maxon had asked me to dine at her new dove-colored studio with the vivid green roof where she lived eight months of the year and worked with her canvas and oils.

Just at 6 I stepped up to the hammered-brass gong that hung outside the studio door and gave it a resounding tap with the leather stick. Mrs. Maxon herself let me in. She was dressed in a dull orange-colored smock, and wore about her neck a long, heavy, finely-woven gold chain with two enormous topazes on separate strings of gold cord drawn through an even larger third topaz and dropping pendant-like to the waist. It was an unusual and beautiful bauble.

We sat down in the two large wicker chairs nearest the big stone fireplace, where an eucalyptus log lay across the flat black andirons over a fire of burning pine cones. An ashtray had been placed on the wicker tabouret beside me and some cigars. I took out my ivory cigaret holder designed with the imperial dragon. It seemed to go with the room—with the rare Chinese embroideries on apricot and cerulean satins, the wood carvings centuries old, the blue pottery vases filled with golden poppies and mariposa lilies. I began to smoke and, after a few minutes' talk of this and that, I expressed admiration for the topaz necklace.

"I seldom wear it," said Mrs. Maxon, letting her finger tips slip along the gold cord. "Tonight I more or less thought I should—for a special reason. It is a gift." She paused for the barest moment. "I wonder if you would be interested in the story of the lady who gave me this?" She weighed the two topazes lightly in her palm.

"Tremendously," I answered.

Mrs. Maxon walked over to a table covered with gold brocade and took from a black lacquer box a sheathed dagger. She placed it in my hand and sat down.

"Rather gressomely, that belongs to the story, too," she said.

The case and handle of the dagger were of dark red leather and bound with fine silver wire. I felt the edge and point of the steel.

"It is quite deadly," I said, and smiled at her.

Her brow wrinkled slightly. "Well, perhaps not so deadly, after all," she said. "Still—" She paused.

"Do go on," I said, and laid the dagger beside the ash tray.

Mrs. Maxon looked into the glowing pine cones for a moment thoughtfully. Then she told the story.

It seems the woman called herself Valerie Gray. She had come into Carmel very quietly and had taken rooms at the little Seaside inn. Her maid accompanied her, an oldish woman, a Russian, who spoke not a word of English. At this time Mrs. Maxon was spending a few weeks at the inn during the building of her studio. That was how she came to know her.

It was not until the third evening after Mrs. Gray's arrival that she made her appearance downstairs. Shortly before the dinner hour there were grouped about Mrs. Maxon in the hotel parlor a dozen or so of the guests, listening to some of her humorous adventures in bargaining with Chinese tradesmen in the San Francisco bazaars. There was a peal of laughter as she finished a particularly funny incident. Then the laughter died suddenly and every eye was drawn to the top of the staircase, where the strange woman stood about to descend. She was gowned in emerald velvet with bodice cut low. She came down some 10 steps and hesitated, and then walked back up. Evidently she had forgotten something. Fully two yards of court train swept behind her and disappeared in the upper corridor.

A thrill of surprise ran through the group gathered about Mrs. Maxon. What they had just seen was quite different from what they had expected. From a description of the lady that had been given by a man and woman who saw her when she first arrived, muffled about the chin in smoke-colored chiffon, there was only a vague impression of sad eyes and very white skin. Four others in the crowd had had shadowy glimpses of her. A marine artist

there had passed what he took for her in the woods the night before; at any rate, she had the white skin and sad eyes. Two others had seen her clad in a black cape on the beach late the first night of her arrival, walking on the wet sand close to the water. A young Princeton undergraduate returning at 3 that very morning from a dance at Del Monte had seen her at an upper window with her face pressed against the pane, and an oil light burning in the room. Each one retold his experience in subdued tones.

Again the conversation died abruptly as the lady in emerald velvet appeared at the head of the stairs. This time she held a blue leather book in her slim white left hand. As she came down the steps the fingers of her other hand held up the front of the long skirt out of the way of pointed silver slippers with vermilion heels. The woman held her head high, and the dark brown hair was parted in the middle and coiled low on the back of her neck. There were traces of gray in the brown of her hair, and there were lurking blue shadows about her eyes that looked dark and far away, with a light burning deep. Her skin was transparent white, like ivory wax. There was no color in her cheek, but across the lips there was a stain of vivid scarlet. A most distinctive feature was the right eyebrow, which arched decidedly higher than the left.

of inflection not exactly foreign—more English—and rather wistful.

"I am glad you like the picture," said the artist cordially. "I am Mrs. Maxon."

"I have wanted to meet you. I have noticed you at the inn. You are so bright; and when the people are with you they always look happy. You may call me Mrs. Gray. I wonder if you would talk to me sometimes? I am rather lonely. I think you might cheer me. For over a week I have spoken to no one but my maid, and I grow rather tired of Russian. Would you talk to me?"

"Why, I should be delighted," answered Mrs. Maxon, gathering up her things.

"I think I can promise not to bore you," said the lady. "I have traveled a bit. I paint a little." Then she hesitated before she added, "You will be interesting because I am sure you never ask questions—and that is a rare quality."

Mrs. Maxon understood. She did not need to reply. Delighted with the rare beauty of the chain with three topazes that Mrs. Gray was wearing, she said, "What a lovely chain!"

"I seldom wear it," answered its owner. "It was given me by a woman whose life I saved—indirectly. But it's a commonplace story of no interest. Shall we walk toward the sea?"

That night as she made ready to retire Mrs. Maxon began to think things over. This Valerie Gray was unquestionably a gentlewoman of high culture. She had apparently lived at the ends of the world—South Africa, New Zealand, the Argentine. She spoke of certain childhood impressions of the elephants and the temple bells and the varicolored turbans of India. A few sentences dropped here and there suggested a deep and sincere love of the really great in poetry and drama.

But there was one incident of the afternoon's stroll on the beach that filled Mrs. Maxon's mind with imaginings. Two little boys in dripping bathing suits, sons of a friend of hers, had rushed up out of the sea to the two women on the beach with some inconsequential child-like greetings. Mrs. Gray acted most oddly. She shuddered, closed her eyes, and moved off quickly. "Send them away!" she begged. "Send them away!" When Mrs. Maxon joined her she was on the verge of tears and trembling violently.

The next afternoon Mrs. Maxon thought of the episode again when she saw arrive at the inn with his parents a handsome, bright-looking blond boy of 6—a friendly little lad, accustomed to making new chums.

After dinner that night Mrs. Gray had brought down to show Mrs. Maxon a blue leather-bound volume of Hindu poems. She said it had been given her by a very dear friend, the anniversary of whose birthday had occasioned her dressing in emerald velvet a week before. It was just a fancy of hers, she said.

The two women sat down on a davenport in the parlor facing the west window. As they turned the leaves in the book of verse suddenly the blond head of the little boy of 6 was thrust over the back of the davenport between the faces of the two women, and the child said cheerily, "Hello!"

Mrs. Gray caught her breath. Then as she looked at the blond hair and smiling face of the boy her pupils dilated and she screamed in his face. Without a word she rushed upstairs.

Mrs. Maxon did not attempt to follow her. She found a bright yellow rubber ball and gave it to the child to play with.

Some time during the next morning Mrs. Gray asked Mrs. Maxon to come to her apartment and look at an oil portrait that she had just finished.

In the center of the floor there stood two easels, side by side. On the canvases were the paintings of two blond youths slightly under 20. At first glance they looked like twins, but one portrait had been done a year ago; the other had not been varnished.

"Here he was 18," Valerie Gray explained, touching the older canvas. "And today he is 19. See, the fresh look of innocence is still unsullied." She sighed. "But I am half afraid to do him next year. Ugly shadows will perhaps creep into his face and the corners of his mouth will begin to curve down cruelly, and his eyelids may take on that puffy droop of sensuality."

Mrs. Maxon did not ask any questions. She was examining the picture closely. "It is a beautiful face," she said.

"There is one physical defect."

"You mean the height of the arch of the right eyebrow," Mrs. Maxon answered promptly. "That makes him more interesting." She made no further comment.

"I am really hopeless with oils," said Mrs. Gray, getting a new light on the later painting. "But I can't be expected to do good work, for I paint only one portrait a year." She moved over to a long, low shelf under the window. "When I was a mere girl I won medals for my miniatures. I studied at Vienna under the most famous man in



She stopped, startled at the apparition, and then realized that she was staring into the distracted eyes of the Ibsen lady.

At the foot of the stairs she glanced toward the group, and her eyes met Mrs. Maxon's, and almost seemed attracted. It was only for a flash, but there was something peculiarly fatalistic in the attitude of that moment. She walked to the window at the far end of the room and looked out over the rose bushes, heavy with white roses, to the sea. A big gold sun was merging into the mercury-colored ocean.

"Is she foreign?" asked a youngish married woman.

"Yes, I should say so," answered the marine artist. "But of indefinite nationality."

The Princeton student declared a corking mystery.

"More a realistic tragedy," put in the man who had met her in the woods.

Mrs. Maxon's eyes grew very bright. "I know," she said. "She's like a lady from Ibsen."

"Good," said the Princeton undergraduate. "But which one?"

Mrs. Maxon paused. "Sort of a composite, I should say," she answered slowly. "Something of several—Rita, Hedda, Nora—even Mrs. Alving—and certainly a possible Rebecca West. Yet she looks distinctly individual."

"You have forgotten one," said the Princeton man. "The Lady from the Sea."

"Yes, the Lady from the Sea. There is a strange longing in her eyes."

"And fear," put in another.

"Yes—fear," Mrs. Maxon admitted. "But I am sorry I spoke. It isn't kind to dissect her."

"She would like you, Mrs. Maxon," the student said. "Did you notice how she looked at you?"

"Nonsense," answered Mrs. Maxon. "I am far too frivolous for her."

On a blue and gold afternoon five days later Mrs. Maxon, with her canvas and supply of materials before her, sat painting a quaint Carmel flower garden with beds of marigold and great clusters of purple blossoms. Suddenly a shadow fell upon her and across the canvas as she dabbed some deep green into the foliage. She turned, and the Ibsen lady's pale face was close to hers. She started back, and the lady said, "I beg your pardon. I came too close. I have been watching you for some time. The reproduction is charming."

Her voice was very low and had a subtle, illusive sort