

THE PORTRAIT THAT BROUGHT DEATH

By James Robbins

YOU ask me to recount the dark and fateful tragedy in which it was my lot to be involved. So be it. I will relate the story. I was staying at the time, as you have heard, in the ancient city of Pisa. I had not been there many weeks when I was met at the corner of the Colonnade on morning by my friend, Prof. Schumann. We both spoke Italian, and it was in that language that he greeted me. "You are the man I want to meet," said he. "Have you any particular engagement for this afternoon?" "I have none," I replied. "What is it that you want of me?"

"I want you to come with me, in company with an Italian gentleman, the young Count Assorli, to look at a picture in the Soffareno palace. It is called 'The Picture of the Curse.'"

Naturally struck by so strange a title, I asked Herr Schumann to explain its meaning. He then gave me the following account, which I repeat for your information. "There were many details, no doubt, which I have forgotten, but the outline is substantially correct.

"You know," he began by saying, "that the old and haughty house of Soffareno is represented now only by the young marchesa, who is at present living at the point of death. Twenty years ago, however, when the old marchesa was alive, the Soffareno were in the full zenith of prosperity and fortune. The Marchese Vincenzo had married the fairest lady in Pisa, and she had brought him two lovely children, a boy—the one who died the other day—and a girl, the young Marchesa Helena. Ever since the nuptials the palace had been given up to feasting and festivity. Every day the old marchese devised some fresh pleasure or some added luxury to gratify his wife, and she, on her part, threw herself into the tide of amusement with all the abandonment of her youth.

"Foremost among those who took part in the gatherings at the Soffareno palace was a young and handsome painter, by name Andrea Chiatto. He was not a native of Pisa nor, it seemed, of Tuscany. No one, in fact, could say from what part of Italy he came. But his talent as an artist was undoubted, and equally remarkable were his powers in all that pertained to the kindred arts or sciences of design, of architecture, and even of mechanics. In addition, there was said to be something mysterious in his studies, for a light was often seen burning in the topmost window of his solitary dwelling long after midnight, and even on the hour of dawn. The rumor among the common people was that Chiatto was a magician.

"To those who were intimate with him—if any could be said to be truly intimate with this reserved and singular man—he admitted a certain leaning towards the occult arts. He professed belief in many of the marvels related of modern spiritism, and was not unwilling at times to give illustrations of his own peculiar powers as a mesmerist. Such was Andrea Chiatto.

"He had not been long in Pisa when old Soffareno sent for him to the palace to execute a portrait of his wife. The painter accepted the commission and a large sum was agreed upon to be paid on the completion of the picture. The marchesa was next approached, and she consented to appoint certain hours at which the artist might attend and pursue his labor. He came regularly and often, and for a month the picture made steady progress.

"At the end of that time, however, a strange thing occurred. Chiatto suddenly declared himself dissatisfied with his work, and, tearing the canvas in pieces, demanded leave to begin all over again. The beautiful stater, whether flattered by this humility, or secretly willing to prolong the series of meetings with Andrea for which his task, any occasion, made no difficulty, and the sittings went on for another period. But the same thing was to be repeated. When a sufficient number of weeks had slipped past, the artist again pronounced his efforts to be wholly unworthy of his lovely subject, and a third canvas was set upon the easel.

"But the ingenuity of Chiatto and the marchesa's complaisance began, by this time, to be the talk of Pisa, and it was in the inevitable course of things that it should come at last to the ears of the man whose honor was most interested. From this point conjecture as to what happened next, to some extent, supply the place of narrative. The marchesa seems to have preferred to charge his wife alone and in private with the suspicions for which she had become a target, and to have satisfied herself from her confessions, or from her evasions, that she had merited the doom of faithlessness.

"To admit, by seeking revenge, that his honor had been sullied by a man of Chiatto's obscure rank he may have considered beneath his dignity. But the unhappy woman could not be allowed to live. Recourse was had to poison. No cry was heard, no warning given, but when next Andrea came to renew his Penelope-like labor he found dressed in the same robes and jewels, and sitting in the attitude he had chosen for the woman he loved, her frozen corpse.

"He uttered not a word, but came away, bearing his unfinished canvas. He made no report of the circumstances to the authorities, and the Marchese Soffareno procured a medical opinion that his marchesa had died from an overdose of some medicine prescribed to her a short time previously.

"It was remarked that Andrea Chiatto lingered on in Pisa, although the houses of the nobility were no longer open to him, and he could scarcely hope to accomplish much in the way of his profession as a portrait painter after the catastrophe. He continued to keep his mysterious light burning through the unlighted hours of darkness, and the belief in his magic powers, among the lower orders of the people, grew stronger every day. The popular interest in this strange character was at its height, when it became known that he had actually written to his enemy, Soffareno, offering him as a gift the completed portrait of the unhappy marchesa.

"By this time the feelings of the old man had undergone a certain change. The extreme tenderness he had formerly felt for his youthful bride revived over her grave, and if he did not wish his stern deed undone, he, at all events, began to let his memory dwell fondly on the time before his joy in her had been blasted by the touch of evil. Strange as it may seem, then, he closed with the offer of the painter, and submitted to the conditions by which it was accompanied.

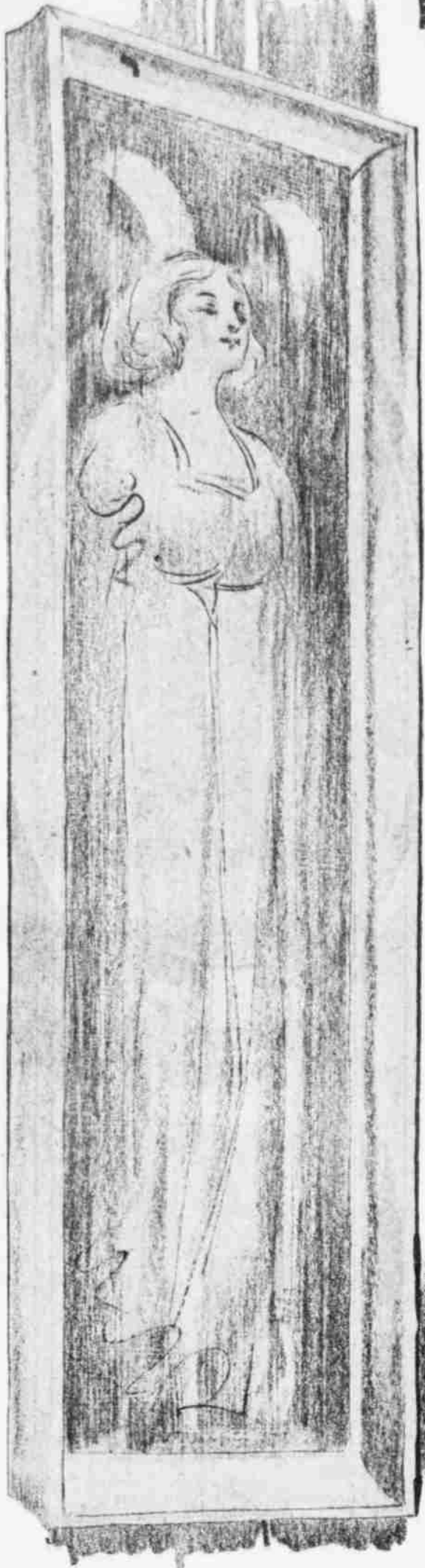
"These conditions were far more extraordinary than the offer itself. Chiatto stipulated that a room should be set apart for the reception of the picture, and that he should be permitted to come at his own time and place to the easel. He required the key of the room to be sent to him in advance, and insisted that no one should enter it till his work was accomplished. He would bring his own ladder and such other instruments as were necessary for the fixing of pictures, and no person was to question him, coming or going.

"Having obtained these concessions the painter arrived at the palace one morning at the hour of dawn with a conveyance on which were two immense and unwieldy packages. Assisted by the driver of the wagon, Chiatto carried these to the appointed room and locked himself in alone. For the next ten or twenty minutes sounds of hammering were heard and the shifting of furniture from place to place. Finally, the artist summoned his driver, and, locking the door behind them, they carried back the bulkier of the two packages to the vehicle. The man then drove off, while Chiatto demanded to be brought before the lord of the palace.

"The wondering servants obeyed, and the two enemies were presently face to face. The marchesa had been informed of the painter's arrival and his eccentric behavior, and had hastily risen and come out in his dressing gown, actuated partly by curiosity and partly by a desire to seize the earliest moment for gazing once more at the features of the once loved dead.

"The meeting was an embarrassing one, but the old nobleman, with the instincts of his caste, began to frame some words of acknowledgment of the artist's gift. Chiatto interrupted him. "'Sir,' he said, 'I did not come here for your thanks. There is something I wish to say to you about a picture. It is the key of your room. Go and see your picture as soon as you please, but know that I am not only a painter, I have the command of secrets you know not of, and I have invested that portrait with a curse that shall alight upon all who venture to behold it—and that curse is death.' "If old Soffareno was flustered for the moment by this threat he soon shook off his fears, and, affecting to regard it as the vaporing of a charlatan, he picked up the key and departed to the chamber of the portrait. Suddenly, at the end of two minutes, the marchesa rushed out, looking ghastly pale and ill. The attendants hastened to him, and, after locking the door by his feeble muttered directions and withdrawing the key, they half assisted, half bore him to his bedroom. The little boy and girl were sent for, too young to know what was passing around them, and their father bestowed on them his last caresses. The priest arrived next, and in his ear, and his alone, did the dying man confide the secrets of the accursed chamber. Within an hour he expired, his last injunction being that no member of his family should ever attempt to look upon the portrait invested with so terrible and potent a curse.

"From that time the picture, concealed from all eyes, remained in the room. The picture grew obscure, and I got up and came away as best I could. There was absolutely nothing to cause my sensations beyond the mere act of looking steadily at the picture. That there is some occult power at work I am now convinced, and nothing shall make me believe otherwise.



received the name by which it is known to every inmate of the house of Soffareno, 'The Picture of the Curse.' "For twenty years the dying command of the marchesa was scrupulously obeyed, and no human foot intruded into the chamber of the portrait. Indeed, so earthly inducement could have tempted any of the superstitious members of the household to brave a warning which had been so swiftly and horribly fulfilled before their eyes. It was reserved for the old marchesa's heir, now grown to manhood's estate, to brave for the second time the awful denunciation attached to the portrait of his mother.

"The Marchesa Helena tells me," continued the professor, "that it was against her remonstrances that her brother ventured on such a step. But young Venetio was bold to foolhardiness, and being besides a free-thinker, he especially prided himself on his indifference to all terrors not of a physical and tangible kind. Some of his young companions, it would seem, started the idea in his mind by questioning him about the enchanted portrait, as they scoffingly called it. And partly to display the effect of their powers, partly out of a natural and amiable desire to behold the features of his parent, the young marchesa finally announced his determination to explore the fatal spot. Having once fixed his intention, no persuasion on the part of his sister could drive him from carrying it out. He discovered the key used by his father among some old documents, and in the full tide of youth and health and energy he disappeared through the doorway of the forbidden room.

"He was gone for about a quarter of an hour, I happened to be in the palace at the time. I had recently come to Pisa for a long rest from my studies, which have chiefly lain, as you know, in the direction of physics, chemistry, and the allied sciences. Among my introductions happened to be one to a great friend of Venetio's, and I rapidly became an intimate at the Soffareno palace. "Never have I witnessed such a change in any man as had taken place in my young friend when he staggered, rather than walked, into the room where we awaited him. Personally I had viewed the legendary terrors of the picture as the merest fables, and I am afraid I had not refrained from encouraging Soffareno to present his adventure. Judge my surprise and consternation, therefore, when I saw him creep back looking as if he had been fatally wounded. I asked him what had happened. He did not reply. Taking the hint, I withdrew, and it was not until after his death that I gleaned from his sister a meager account of what had taken place.

"Meantime I began to consider that probably the shock which the young marchesa had evidently received was merely the result of nervousness. My theory was, invested with the most appalling traditions, to view a portrait of his mother, who, as he had heard, suffered a shocking and ghastly death. He entered in a high state of excitement, and, likely, the first object that meets his eye is a skull or a skeleton or some horrible object, above which hangs a portrait into whose expression, the artist has concentrated all of frightful, all of loathsome, all of satanic that his art possessed. A nervous shudder runs through him. He mistakes this natural trembling for some occult visitation. Latent superstition lends its aid, and he finally issues from the apartment, deeply convinced that he is mortally stricken by some invisible power.

"Reasoning thus I tried to persuade the marchesa to take the same view of her brother's case. She was not, I think, persuaded by me, but she thought it her duty to adopt any course that afforded the least hope, and she pressed my views upon her brother. It was then that he told her his experiences. "When I went into that room I thought exactly as you and the professor do. I expected to find some such skull and cross bones arrangement, and therefore, if I had seen it I would not have started in the least. Instead of that I saw at one end of the room a confused heap of furniture and pictures, while on the opposite wall was the only picture hung up in the room—an exquisitely painted portrait of a young and beautiful woman, richly dressed and adorned with gems, and in feature bearing an unmistakable likeness to yourself. I sat down in a chair facing the picture and fixed my eyes steadily upon it. Presently I felt something like a sharp pain in my heart, and by degrees a dreadful feeling of sickness crept over me.

these observations, Herr Schumann led the way into the room. As we had expected, the first object that caught our eyes was the framed door was the work of Andrea Chiatto. From that instant I paid no attention to my companion but, after a hasty glance at the portrait, which was an extremely beautiful one, I took my stand against the wall and fixed my gaze in the direction from which the count was to approach. Immediately the signal was given by the professor, who had taken his position close to an old locked chair, which stood in front of the picture and a few yards away from it.

Assorli walked into the chamber with a steady tread. His face was pale, but he showed no other sign of emotion. Taking a comprehensive glance around him, he at once caught sight of the object which was to absorb his attention, and he stepped deliberately over the floor in its direction. Nothing the chair as he approached, and seeing that it was placed conveniently for any one desiring to study the portrait, he took his seat in it and leaned back against the padded cushion of the antique frame. For several minutes I noticed nothing more.

"Then, all at once, I thought I discerned a slight change in the attitude of the man I was watching. His eyeballs, all the time turned steadily in the direction of the canvas, appeared to me to be getting brighter and projecting somewhat from their sockets. Directly after a gray hue swept across his face, and, extending his breath, he let his head sink slightly between his shoulders. He was now, I noticed, sitting upright, having discarded the support of the chair back.

Before I had time to draw any conclusions of my own my companion intervened. "'Rise,' he cried, in a strained, quick voice. 'Rise and come away. I have seen enough.' "The Italian turned his head with a startled, involuntary movement, and then, in the act of springing to his feet, seemed suddenly to realize that he was ill. The sudden change I had remarked had now deepened to a sudden pallor, and he put his hand feebly on his head as the professor took a step to his side, and drawing the count's arm within his own, assisted him out to the corridor. There we deposited him on a chair—I had lent him my help as well—and then Herr Schumann beckoned me back into the chamber.

"What did you see?" he whispered to me, with a troubled, fearful air. "Did you notice that he leaned against that red silk cushion on the left?"

"One moment," I said, "did you see him start upright again at once and stiffen, as his right hand down his back as if something had irritated it?"

I had not perceived that action, nor should I perhaps have noted its significance if I had been watching it. I confessed as much.

"There lies the secret," he announced, advancing towards the chair. "In that action and in that alone is the faintest clue to what has happened. Help me to lift this chair out of the room to where we can examine it at leisure.

"As he spoke he laid his hand on one of the arms, while I followed his example on the opposite side. A simultaneous cry of nervous horror broke from both of us. The chair was firmly rooted to the floor.

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"I will not leave this room till I have fathomed the hidden mystery to the bottom," were his words as he deliberately inserted the blade at the edge of the crimson silk and ripped it completely open.

"To our tense gaze there was revealed a square steel case imbedded in coarse wool and straw and resembling a clock without a face. Where the hands would have been in a clock, however, there projected a tiny needle, half an inch long and of extreme sharpness.

"That is what stabbed him," muttered the professor. "But how could that cause the symptoms we saw? We must open this machine."

I confess I felt no slight reluctance to proceeding further. But I was advanced to draw back, and I assisted to hold the steel box in its place, while my companion pried it open with his knife blade. It was not so strongly made but it yielded to his efforts. The front fell down, leaving the needle in its place, and we then perceived that the latter was connected with a narrow jar or tube containing liquid. The scientist pressed his thumb nail against the point, and a little jet of the jar's contents instantly suffused the needle.

"At this sight his expression grew graver yet. He wrenched the vial away from its place and cautiously tested the odor of the liquid, sticking his teeth, he set the vial down with a single chilling word.

"Assorli!"

"My flesh crept as I witnessed this gradual unweaving, at the distance of twenty years, of Chiatto's infernal scheme of vengeance. The contrivance was mechanically perfect. Human being after human being had come and sat down in the seat so invitingly placed for them, and leaned back in it had felt the fatal prick which paved the way for the passage of the concentrated poison into their veins, and, falling to give it more than a passing thought, had attributed the subsequent paralysis of their faculties to some agency beyond the reach of science. The old man, the happy youth, the beautiful maiden, and now the chivalrous soldier, had been immolated to glut the hatred of the painter to the house of Soffareno. And but for the lynx-like sagacity of the foreign savant the veil of mystery would have remained untraced, and possibly yet other victims would have shared the same appalling fate.

You will ask me whether there was no possibility of saving the lovely Helena and her betrothed. In her case, alas! the discovery came too late, and she expired within the next few hours. Her lover, perhaps, have been saved, but when he learned the fate of his mistress he refused the proffered antidote and voluntarily followed her to the tomb.

One only explanation further I sought from the successful investigator whose efforts had been so miserably robbed of their reward. I asked him to account for the great difference in time between the operation of the poison in the case of Chiatto's first victim and in those of the other three.

"In the case of the old marchesa," he answered, "the acouite was freshly distilled, and did its work more rapidly. Probably nothing could have saved him. After twenty years it had lost some of its power, and had remained promptly applied, it still would, in my opinion, have been availed. But they believed in the supernatural character of the attack, and resigned themselves without a struggle to its power."

Now the palace of the Soffareno is falling into ruin, its treasures have been dispersed by the distant heirs, and only a few of the old friends of the race recognize in the 'Portrait of a Lady,' which smiles from the walls of a Roman gallery, the blood stained masterpiece of Andrea Chiatto.

