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The Unveiling

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

An uncanny tale about a great artist who painted emotions

“RAVENOFF’S studio,” Parker told the cabman. “Sorry I kept you waiting, people.”

“Don’t apologize,” Buchanan said. “I don’t think any of us are in a hurry to view Ravenoff’s latest.”

“But please, I am!” Patricia Clark protested. “I’m really anxious to see one of what Ted calls Ravenoff’s ‘diabolical’ paintings.”

“Ted should be shot at sunrise for bringing you,” Parker growled.

“I tried to dissuade her, but——” Ted shrugged expressive shoulders.

“I can’t believe Ravenoff’s paintings are really so terrible,” Pat continued. “When I met him, he seemed such a pet rabbit of a man.”

Parker chuckled delightedly. “Ravenoff is an enigma. There’s Ravenoff the man; frail-looking, soft-spoken, kind, gentle, considerate. His wife and youngsters adore him. His friends swear by him. But Ravenoff the painter? He’s a madman! He seizes a brush, and *voilà!*—he’s possessed of a devil! He slaps pigments on with wild, slathering strokes and vicious jabs. He doesn’t harmonize colors; he clashes them. He doesn’t paint human beings; he strips civilization and convention away and paints emotions, the base, cruel, terrible emotions. He paints stark fear and sheer terror and grisly horror and bestial cruelty only as one who has lived through them can paint them.”

“As one who has lived through them?” prompted Pat.

“Ravenoff was the child of aristocrats

when the Russian revolution broke. They let *him* live. To kill him would have been too easy, too kind. But his pitiful, starved body and cringing soul absorbed the fear and terror, the horror and cruelty, and survived. Now he paints those things with such vivid reality and intensity that pigment and canvas cannot hold them imprisoned. They leap out at you to fill your bloodstream and inflame your brain. You grind your teeth with rage or hate; you break out in a cold sweat of fear; or overpowering greed or cruelty possesses your soul—or should I say dispossesses it?” He turned to Buchanan. “Did you see his first great picture, *Beelzebub?*”

Buchanan shuddered. “And had nightmares for weeks. And *Greed* was even more repulsive. The bestial expressions on the faces of the rabble, the utter cruelty of their grasping, claw-like hands—ugh! Thank Heaven I was too late to see *Hate*.”

“I think nobody regretted the fate of that picture,” Parker said, then answered the question in Pat’s eyes. “A local millionaire bought it and presented it to the Public Museum. People would go and stare at it until hate burned in their eyes and distorted their features. Two people went away and committed murder under its influence before an attendant was stationed beside it to keep people moving. For three days he performed that duty. The fourth day he didn’t show up.”

“Why?” Pat asked.

“Your fiancé covered the case for the paper.”

“And may I never cover another like

it!" Ted breathed. "He was a likable old chap, but his domestic life had evidently been anything but happy. He brought home the money. His wife and two grown-up daughters squandered it for him, nagging constantly because there was not more. After three days with that picture he murdered the lot of them in the most brutal fashion imaginable. Next day someone slashed the painting to ribbons. Ravenoff's next picture was *War*, but it was sold privately to a collector and has never been publicly exhibited."

"What ghastly titles!" Pat said. "*Beelzebub! Greed! Hate! War!*"

"And now *Death*."

Patricia shuddered. "I'd think Ravenoff would want to forget such things, or keep them hidden in his mind instead of perpetuating them on canvas."

Buchanan shook his head. "To forget them he must first work them out of his system. People who bottle up things in their minds brood over them and go mad. The pressure becomes too great and the bottle bursts; then *all* their mind, instead of just part, is affected. Psychiatrists bring such things into the open to be dispelled, just as matter from a festering sore is got rid of so the injured part can heal cleanly. Perhaps when Ravenoff has rid his mind of the unpleasant emotions, his kinder, gentler self may gain dominance over his brush, and he may give us—but here we are."

ALIGHTING, Parker eyed the cars parked solidly on both sides of the street. "Not a very exclusive unveiling, I'm afraid," he apologized. "Even model-T Fords!"

"Sure! Didn't you hear what the old geezer who bought the picture done yesterday?" the driver asked. "Chartered a cab for the afternoon." He indicated Parker's invitation, taken from his wallet with the fare. "He had a stack of them

things. Yeah, he filled 'em in that way, too: Admit So-and-so and friends, and he told 'em no limit to the number of friends, 'cause he wanted everyone to see this picture."

"To whom did he give the invitations?"

"Cripes, everybody, Mr. Parker! Workmen on buildings, folks in stores, truck drivers, shoppers, folks in the West End and the East End and the Ghetto and Chinatown, on the docks and—well, he covered the city. While I unloaded a gent here at two o'clock, along come a Kosher butcher I know, with forty-three relatives. I counted 'em! And a little Eytalian boot-black brought all his relatives from his great-grandmothers down to the latest flock of bambinos. And three Chinese in tails and toppers—say, they've had to let folks in in relays. Thank you, sir. Thanks!"

Parker joined his guests. "Up this driveway," he said.

"Look!" Patricia gestured. "The people coming out!"

"A motley crowd, certainly!" Parker said. "I understand Neville Walker went into the highways and byways to invite all and sundry, not to mention their friends and relatives. Rather perverted sense of humor, if you could call——"

"No, no! I mean their expressions. Look at that woman's face."

Parker did. His gaze followed the woman after she had passed.

"They're all like that," Patricia said. "They don't notice us. They all look as if they were seeing a vision."

THEY followed Parker to the barn-like studio behind the house. Ravenoff's secretary received them in an ante-room where a dozen people already waited.

"Monsieur Ravenoff was suddenly called away," he said. "He left a note asking me to express his regret that he could not greet you personally and show you his painting." He waved toward the studio

door. "The others are nearly all out now."

And presently the last of the others emerged, and the secretary ushered the latest comers in. The only lighting in the studio was at the far end before a great drape that entirely hid the end wall.

"Monsieur Ravenoff wishes you to look at the painting as long as you wish," the secretary said, "but he does not wish you to advance beyond the rail. The painting is so large, he says, that only from back here can you get the proper perspective."

He vanished. Something whirred. The drapes slid aside and there was the painting. One or two gasped; then there was silence, utter and complete.

On the great canvas, as wide and as high as the studio wall itself, not one in that silent audience saw what had been expected. Only at one end did colors clash. There one saw the trenches and shattered buildings, the shell-torn trees and wrecked bridges of a battlefield, and people, infinitely weary people, coming away, staggering, stumbling, some with improvised crutches, some crawling, some without arms or legs, some without sight.

And there was a great city of factories and foundries, docks and railroad yards, store and office buildings and traffic-congested streets. At a railroad crossing was a wrecked train and school bus. On a mountainside a great airplane had crashed. On a rocky coast a ship was pounding to pieces. Beyond, a village was being devastated by an earthquake. Everywhere, in some form or other, was Death, and people coming, some crippled, some whole, some with hopeless defeat in their bearing, some with a look of great questioning, but all

converging toward the path leading up the storm-swept hill, to meet and mingle and toil onward and upward.

And presently they passed out of the storm clouds to sunshine and flowers and singing birds, and then they did not look so tired or so defeated, but their eyes were alight with hope. And reaching the top of the hill none were crippled or deformed, for no longer did the discarded mortal body encumber them; and on each face was infinite peace and joy as they scattered, the children to play in flower-strewn fields, the elders to wander by twos and threes into the sunlit vistas beyond.

And the gaze of those in the studio came back, from time to time, to the words lettered along the bottom of the great canvas: "Death is not fearsome or terrible. Death is a beautiful, shining adventure."

IT WAS Buchanan who broke the silence at last. "Wonderful! Magnificent!" he said. "But Ravenoff slipped up on one tiny detail."

"What might that be?" Ted asked.

"The shadows cast by that figure down in the corner of the battlefield. See it, right down in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas; the figure of a man with the bullethole in his forehead and the blood running down his face onto the revolver clutched in his hand. The shadows are on the wrong side."

"Merciful heaven!" There was horror in Ted's voice. He leaped the rail and raced forward. He stooped. When he straightened, his face was a mask of horror. He moved between the figure and the canvas.

"It—it's Ravenoff!" he said.

