

The Commission

Well, Ian ma'boy, you're on your way, I said to myself as I swung the car between the big gate posts and up the drive. The miner's son from Fife was about to ring at the front door of a mansion on Richmond Hill.

I parked my wee car well away from the entrance. The Triumph Herald was nothing to be ashamed of back in Acton, where I was staying, but here it was right out of its element. I got out and waded through the gravel to the front door, trying to shake off the feeling that I should be round at the tradesmen's entrance.

The lovely ring of a real bell sounded away in the distance when I touched the brass push button. There were footsteps and the door was opened by Lady Emily in person. I announced myself: "Ian Telfer. Good morning." Trying to sound confident I barked a bit too loudly.

"Hello, do come in. You're very punctual." The accent was just what I expected, the voice silky smooth.

I nodded without a smile and walked into an entrance hall that was bigger than my flat. From force of habit my eye scanned the work of her decorators - top notch of course; it had to be, what they'd be paying. I heard her voice behind me, "They're beautiful, aren't they?"

She thought I was looking at the landscapes hanging on the walls - understandable really, since I was there to paint her portrait. I cast an eye over them and grunted, non-committal. She called to someone in the kitchen: "Milena, will you bring us some coffee to the Morning Room?"

She led me to a room at the back of the ground floor and spread her hands in a kind of questioning way: "Will this do?"

I didn't want to show too much enthusiasm, but my goodness, it certainly would do. High ceiling, tall window, I'd have given anything for a room like that as a studio. "It faces north-west, I think. It'll do well if we work in the mornings. The light should be enough."

"Oh good," she said.

My first encounter with the aristocracy. I reckoned I was doing okay. I'd had a picture accepted at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters and this commission was the result of it - my first, though Lady Emily was not going to know that.

I was eyeing my sitter, looking for the kind of features that get a portrait painter excited - something to get hold of and maybe exaggerate a bit. Give it a bit of zing. She was about thirty-five, a good-looking woman in a quiet kind of way - good bone structure, fine skin. A bit colourless, though. The hair was fair, cut just below the jaw, the ends turned under. She was wearing a sweater of a soft green, not tight of course - that wouldn't have been her style - but still hinting at a nice shape underneath.

"My husband insisted on the sweater," she said, "he wants an outdoor, country look."

Lady Emily told the maid to help me in with my stuff and we headed for the car. Once we were outside I introduced myself, "I'm Ian."

"Milena," she said quietly. I had the idea that since we were both employed in that place we'd maybe have something in common. We picked up my gear and set off across the gravel.

"Let's see what I can make of her ladyship's features," I said. She gave me a shy smile; nice white teeth, eyes a chestnut colour, matching the hair. A bonny girl.

I okayed the antique chair that Lady Emily suggested and I placed it at forty-five degrees to the window, marking the position on the floor with chalk. I was pleased at the way the light fell on her. The green of the sweater was reflecting into the shadows of the face and the neck; there were hints of it in the hair, too. That colour would hold it all together.

I took a look outside to see if there might be some motif I could use in the background. The French window opened onto some paving and beyond it was a bank, all covered in heather, rising up to the lawn. Away to the right I could see the sun glinting on a chrome handrail. I guessed that up there, above my eye-level, was a swimming pool. The whole garden was closed in by a thick screen of pines; there wasn't another house in sight.

I looked back into the room. Lady Emily was sitting up straight, but there was no stiffness about her – the product of a good finishing school, I guessed. Poise would be the essence of this portrait - after all, she was the daughter of an earl. It was a marriage of old breeding and new money; her husband's fortune was made in the wine business. I had this information from my landlady, Mrs Hobbs. She was an authority on the Royals and what she called 'Society'. Apparently the older sister was often in the gossip pages, but there was nothing written about Lady Emily, except once a mention of her interest in photography.

I placed the easel where I wanted it and I marked that too. We were ready to begin. I sketched in the head and figure with a broad brush and after that I blocked in the tones - the darks and the lights - including the background. The canvas was thirty by twenty-four - inches that is – and I got her placed nicely, from the waist up. I let her see it when we stopped for a break.

“My goodness, you have got a lot done!” she said, “I like the hair. Do you think my neck is quite long enough?”

“It's early stages yet,” I said.

When we broke again she had more suggestions: “I don't look very cheerful – it's the mouth, I think. I wonder if the eyes are a tiny bit on the small side.”

Changing the mouth involved subtle alterations to the outline of the cheek. I'd given her a little more length of neck and opened the eyes wider, but that was conflicting with the slight smile round the mouth. For God's sake, I was doing all the things I said I wouldn't. No compromising. The next sitting would be different.

The next sitting was worse. I was getting drawn into the detail too soon, when I should have been keeping it loose. The fact was she'd been a Lady all her life; I'd been a portrait painter for five minutes. She had only to speak in that soft voice of hers and I was a workman again, getting my instructions, wanting the client to be satisfied.

It was two and a half years since I walked into an evening class at Hammersmith Art School, straight from my day's work as a decorator. Took a bit of courage, I can tell you. Where I was at school the art class was no more than a joke. I was forever sketching, though; I'd been drawing my mates at work and they reckoned I was good at catching a likeness.

I put my brushes down at the end of the session and stepped back to study my efforts. I decided that next time I'd take a knife to the portrait – scrape it down, see what was left and what I could do with it. I'd done that before – rescued a painting at the last gasp. It's amazing how desperation can motivate you.

When I reached the gateway the next morning I slowed down to let a powerful car come out, an Aston Martin it was, driver with dark hair and tinted glasses. Lady Emily

answered the door. She had on a maroon housecoat, tied at the waist, the collar up. “I hope you didn’t collide with my husband,” she said, “he’s off to France. I’m afraid we’re all a bit behind today.” The housecoat does more for her than that insipid sweater, I was thinking.

Milena came out to the car to give me a hand. She was dressed in the loose man’s shirt that seemed to be her uniform, dark hair hanging over the collar. Her age was hard to guess – no more than eighteen I’d have said. She really did have a sweet face and she always gave me a nice, shy look. We’d never had a chance to talk, though; I knew nothing about her.

When we were sliding the easel from the car I tried a question, “Where are you from, Milena?”

“I am French,” she said.

“Milena – is that a French name then?”

“No, is Bulgarian. From where I was born.”

We carried my stuff to the house and she said no more.

I’d set up the easel and I was studying the painting, trying not to look gloomy. The colours were getting muddy and I hadn’t got her at all. In some way a portrait will always tell you what the painter thought about the sitter. My feelings about her Ladyship were confused. I think her charm was winning me over, but I was resisting – my socialist principles getting in the way.

She walked over with a look of purpose about her. She glanced at the canvas and then faced me, standing quite close. I’d always been aware of her perfume - expensive for sure - but this morning the scent was of talcum powder. A vision of her rising from the bath flashed across my mind.

“I’m not inspiring you, am I?” she said.

I didn’t know what to say, so I waited.

“I saw your picture at the Portrait Painters exhibition, as you know, and I remember thinking it was the sitters who inspired the best paintings.” She gave me a kind of sideways look. “That girl you painted – she was more than just a model to you, wasn’t she?”

I’d wanted to exhibit something that would catch the eye - after all, the RSPB was my shop window. I had picked Kirsty, a Graphic Design student. She’d been out a few times with Brian, a good friend I’d made at the college. She was a striking-looking girl – wild hair of an amber colour and huge eyes, as dark as they get. She was bursting with life; you couldn’t look at Kirsty and paint a dull picture. I excelled myself. Of course I fancied her from the start, and standing there gawping at her for hours it was hard not to make a move. But I wanted to be loyal to my friend.

I took Kirsty to the private view and she was thrilled to see herself on the wall of the Mall Gallery, getting quite a bit of attention. We had a fine time that night; we drank a lot of wine and finished up at my place. I’m afraid we soon forgot about Brian.

I felt as though I’d arrived. This was the life! In my mind I was Augustus John, swaggering through Chelsea, dashing off the portraits and seducing the sitters.

“Maybe it’ll be me next year,” Lady Emily said. I gave her a swift look but I think she was only talking about having her portrait in the exhibition.

“D’you know what?” she said, “we’re going to give my husband a surprise when he gets back in three weeks’ time.”

She walked away from me, loosening the belt of the housecoat. For just a second I was back in my first Life Class, my heart thumping, waiting for the model to step out of her gown. Lady Emily got to the chair and turned to face me. She slipped the robe off her

shoulders and held it together in front of her. “I have a dress in rather this style. I’ll go and put it on. We’ll make a new start.”

She was back in no time at all. The dress was a burgundy colour, silk, the neckline very low and the shoulders bare. She was quite right, what she said about inspiration. This was more like it.

“Milena,” she called out, “can you come and help me?”

The girl slipped into the room, giving me a quick glance on the way.

“Straighten this dress for me, will you?”

Milena began to ease the creases from around the neckline, running her fingers under the material. After a bit Lady Emily raised a hand, to shoo her away I thought. But no; she lifted a lock of Milena’s hair and tucked it behind her ear. Very gently done. Then she gave a wee touch to the girl’s cheek with the back of her hand.

When Milena had gone she lifted her hair up and looked to me for an opinion.

“That’s good,” I told her, “I like that.”

I scraped down the thicker areas of paint and sketched in the new pose. Then I went over to the window and closed the curtains a bit. I wanted dramatic lighting this time. I would keep the tones low, the colours cool. Then, at the end, some warmer touches would take the eye where I wanted it to go.

“I’m not going to interfere this time,” she said. “I shan’t look until it’s finished.”

I was used to attracting the sitter’s attention when I wanted to work on the eyes, but whenever I looked at Lady Emily her eyes were looking straight into mine. She never looked down, or blinked. I found this a bit disturbing. More than a bit, actually. She seemed to be playing a game, because when we took a break there was always the distance between us.

The new portrait began much better. I had learned a lesson – don’t let the client get the upper hand. I was keeping the brushwork loose and the dim lighting was a help. It was during the third sitting, she said suddenly, “I’m going to commission you to do another painting, after this one.” I knew she had sneaked a look or two at the portrait and now she was trusting me. I was pleased. What would it be, I wondered – maybe a portrait of her husband? Another fee would not go amiss and I’d have the chance to get better acquainted with Milena.

“Come. I’ll show you where I want it to hang.” She led me to the stairs. After the first flight there was a half-landing with a big window looking over the garden. I could see the swimming pool now, away to the right. We went on to the bedroom. It was straight out of one of those beautiful home magazines – pure luxury, everything in silk, the colour a pale turquoise. She pointed to the wall over the bed. “That’s where it’s for. The colours will have to harmonise with the fabrics, of course.”

It would take a forty by thirty canvas, landscape shape, I reckoned, maybe even bigger. She headed back to the stairs and I followed her.

“You haven’t told me what the subject is to be,” I said.

She stopped at the half-landing window. Over at the swimming pool I could see someone standing, wrapped in a dark blue towel. The head turned a little and I recognised Milena. She might have seen us watching, I couldn’t be sure. She dropped the towel. Then she took one step and slipped into the water, feet first. She was quite naked and I clocked every bit of her anatomy as it went down. Beautiful.

“There’s your subject,” Lady Emily said, moving off down the stairs.

She took up her pose and sat quite still. There was to be no more conversation for the moment. I fiddled about with the painting, feeling unsettled, trying not to do any damage to it. Next time I'd be positive, maybe even finish it.

Milena came with me to the car, as usual. She was back in the baggy shirt, the hair combed away from her face, still damp. I was getting thoughts of what I'd seen from the window. Whose idea was that performance, I wondered. She was such a modest wee thing. I thought she might keep her head down, embarrassed, but no; before turning back to the house she gave me one of her looks, if anything a bit longer this time. By now I was waiting for those moments when our eyes met. It was like when I was a wee boy at school, smitten with Morag McClure.

The next session on the portrait was two days later, a cloudy day, which suited me well. I'd been working up the tones, and now the last, lighter touches went in just as I wanted them. I nearly cheered when I saw how well it worked.

I put down my brushes and stepped back. I'd got that look of hers – aloof, but with a hint of mischief. She came and stood beside me. I saw her eye travelling up and down the canvas, no doubt taking in how much of herself she'd exposed. I'll swear she blushed.

The smile came slowly. She looked me in the eye and gave me the nod. I'd brought it off. I couldn't wait to tell my friends at the college. We'd have a celebration for sure.

She pointed to the settee and said, "Have a rest. You deserve it." She went away somewhere and I sat down, checking first for paint on my clothes. The furnishings were so pale and pristine, they made me feel grubby.

There was a big, glossy art book on the low table in front of me. 'The Nude in Art' was the title, or something like that. I saw a marker in one of the pages, so I opened it. The picture was the 'Venus' by Velasquez, in the National Gallery. I knew it well - the back view of a reclining woman, nude of course. The essence of it is the line where the pale skin meets the dark blanket, a line that flows beautifully from the arm she's resting on, right along her body to the ankle. I'd once stood gazing at that painting, up as close as they'll let you get. It was so real I was tempted to reach out and give her flesh a nudge.

I was pulling the book a bit closer when something slipped out from under the dust jacket. It was a photo. The pose was just like the Velasquez, except that in the painting you see the face of Venus reflected in a mirror that's held by her son, Cupid. In the photo there was no mirror, so you couldn't see the face, but I had lately seen a body just like that – slender but nicely rounded. I tucked the photo back.

Lady Emily came in carrying two glasses of wine. She was back in the housecoat. "First things first," she said, handing me an envelope. The flap was open and I pulled out a cheque. The amount was double the fee we'd agreed. I started to protest, but she interrupted me.

"No, no, I insist. Two portraits must be paid for, even if we did decide to abandon the first one." I didn't argue with her.

She sat next to me. Then she reached forward and slid the heavy book towards me, pulling out the marker on the way. "See if anything gives you an idea for the bedroom picture." I flipped through some pages and came to the Velasquez. When I turned she gave me that unblinking look of hers.

I couldn't get the photo out of my mind. "Lady Emily," I said, trying for a note of authority, "I'd like you to be a bit clearer about what you're asking me to do. And I'm wondering what the model thinks about it."

"You've no need to worry about that," she said, "but anyway, we won't decide now. I'm sure you'll have some ideas when you come next time."

She called Milena to help me. Then she headed off towards the stairs, pulling the housecoat tight round her hips as she went.

“Do you have any friends here, Milena?” I asked her, when we had the car loaded. I wanted to get her talking, but she just shook her head.

“If ever you need help...,” I said. The words just came out. She looked at me for quite a few seconds. Was that an appeal I was seeing in those brown eyes of hers? I couldn't tell. Just then we heard her mistress' voice and Milena hurried away to the house.

The first thing I saw when I came through the gate the next morning was the Aston Martin, parked under the front windows. I couldn't resist a peek at the interior; I'd once had a dinky toy of that very model, the DB5. Cream upholstery, just like this one.

He answered the door himself, a man a little taller than me. What you might call rugged good looks, dressed in cavalry twill trousers and an Aran wool sweater. A few years older than his wife I'd have said.

“Mr Telfer, the artist – good to meet you at last. Come on in.” A firm voice to match the appearance. What did he think of the portrait, I was wondering. He'd have noticed that his wife had been showing me quite a bit of herself. He probably thought that was my idea.

“I must say, the painting surprised me,” he said. “Not what I was expecting at all.” Surprise was what she'd intended. I'd have liked to be a fly on the wall when she showed it to him.

“I understand my wife wants another picture. She hasn't told me much. From a photo, I believe.” I had never worked from photographs and I'd no intention of doing so now. I kept quiet though. If that was what she wanted him to think...

“Anyway, I look forward to seeing the result. Another surprise, perhaps. I shan't see it until it's finished though; I'm travelling again. Just back for the one night.”

Once the lovely growl of the Aston Martin had faded away in the distance, I went outside. I had brought a big canvas with me but I left it in the car and took in a sketch pad and a box of drawing materials. Lady Emily came down the stairs, dressed in slacks, beautifully tailored. I thought how well she'd look on a horse.

“Good morning, Ian.” My first name now. No invitation to call her Emily, of course. “Your model is upstairs somewhere. Why don't you go and find her; she'll show you where you can set yourself up.”

I started to climb the stairs, each step taking me towards something that felt wrong. I reached the landing. Milena was there, waiting. She was wearing the baggy shirt, unbuttoned, holding it closed in front of her. Her legs and feet were bare.

She gave me one of her long, silent looks and then set off along a passage with doors on either side, all of them closed. I followed her. We turned a corner and went up three or four steps to a door. She had a key in her hand and she unlocked it.

We were in a bedroom, furnished, but with nothing personal anywhere. There was a closed door on the far side, a bathroom I guessed. The walls were lined with photo landscapes in dark wood frames - classy photography, no doubt about that. A colour print was lying on the bed. I picked it up. It was the Velasquez.

Milena sat on the edge of the mattress, the shirt still wrapped around her. I pulled a chair away from the wall and sat facing her. Up till then I'd only had those brief moments with her, out at the car, but now we had some time. I wasn't going to drive her away with questions, so I just started talking.

I pointed to the picture. “It's called the Rokeby Venus,” I told her. “Back around the turn of the century there was a movement of women in this country, campaigning for

their rights. They were called suffragettes - maybe you've heard of them." There was no reply, but I could see she was listening. "Well, one of the suffragettes went into the National Gallery and attacked this painting with a meat chopper. Made a terrible mess of it. Got lots of publicity." Milena picked up the print and studied it.

"They did a beautiful job of restoring it," I said. "You can't tell it's been damaged."

"What happened to her?" She'd asked me a question. We were in conversation!

"She went to prison for six months," I said.

"But she made them listen," she said, nodding her head.

Milena got up then. She took a dark blue blanket that had been folded on the bed and spread it out. She was arranging pillows into a heap when I began to see what she was up to. She was setting the scene for the Rokeby Venus. She'd be the perfect model for it, but I was feeling resolved. I wanted to get to know her, but not as a nude model, willing or otherwise.

She made a move to open the shirt. I held up my hand, "Don't!" For a while we looked at each other. "We don't have to do this," I told her. I'll protect you from the consequences, I wanted to say, but just then she turned her back and let the shirt drop to the floor. In a swift movement she crawled onto the bed and took up the pose, wriggling to get the hips, legs and arms just right.

I'd made my gesture of principle, but she'd taken things into her own hands. She had done what was expected of her. There was nothing I could do now but start drawing and my pencil seemed to have a life of its own.

An hour flew by and I said that was enough. I turned away while she got up and put on the shirt. By way of conversation I explained how I would square up my drawing and transfer it to the big canvas. I would do that at home and in a couple of days I would be back to work it up in oils. She didn't ask to see what I'd been doing.

I reckoned we still had a bit of time. She was sitting on the bed, looking quite calm. I started to talk again.

"From Bulgaria to France and then to England. Sounds quite an adventure," I said. "And you must have been very young. With your family, I suppose." I was expecting her to clam up, but this time she answered.

"From Bulgaria with my father, to France."

"Dangerous, I expect." I knew it wasn't easy to leave those countries at that time.

"He come with State Orchestra – musician. Artist must be free, he say. So in Paris we hide. They let us stay – refugees. He bring nothing, only me and his violin. Has been very difficult for him, playing violin to get money. Playing anywhere."

"So you grew up in France," I said, "and now you are here, on your own." She nodded.

"One time, in Paris, my father play for him." She pointed to indicate the man downstairs. "Big party for his business. Me dancing, dressed like gipsy. After, he help my father with money. Then take me here."

"And your mother?" I asked.

"I have no mother." The words came out angrily. "She go away with German businessman. I never see her any more."

"How old were you then?"

"I was five."

So there was her story. She stood up and I didn't press her to tell me more.

I was back with the big canvas, wrapped in a sheet for decency's sake on the journey. I was on the step with it when Lady Emily opened the door.

“She's upstairs, I think,” she said. “She'll give you anything you want. I've got to go out for a while but I'll see you before you go.”

I carried the canvas up the stairs and along to the bedroom. It was open so I went in and leant the picture against the wall. There was no sign of Milena, but the door on the other side of the room was ajar. I went to have a look.

I was in a photo studio cum gallery. There was a big white drawing table covered with equipment - lenses and filters, a trimmer, packets of printing paper, that kind of thing. On the walls were photo studies in black and white, mostly nude figures. I walked round, looking at them, and the first thing that struck me was that the model was always the same. It was Milena, no question. The essence of them was the use of light and the results were graceful, artistic. They were never sleazy, but I felt a kind of chill as I looked from one to the next. What I was seeing was a young body developing over a period of time, exposed to the eye of a photographer.

When I went back to the bedroom I noticed something I had missed when I came in carrying the big canvas. It was on the bed. The print of the Rokeby Venus, torn into shreds.

I rushed back along the corridor, opening doors and calling her name, but I knew she was gone. She had reclaimed her body from the artists. I wouldn't even have the chance to say sorry.

I came to the master bedroom and went in. There was my portrait of Lady Emily, propped on the dressing table. I grabbed a heavy perfume bottle; I would soon wipe that smirk off her Ladyship's face. But then I put it down again. I couldn't destroy my own work.