

In the Light of the Red Lamp

By Maurice Level

Seated in a large armchair near the fire, his elbows on his knees, his hands held out to the warmth, he was talking slowly, interrupting himself abruptly now and again with a murmured: "Yes. . . yes. . ." as if he were trying to gather up, to make sure of his memories: then he would continue his sentence.

The table beside him was littered with papers, books, odds and ends of various kinds. The lamp was turned low: I could see nothing of him except his pallid face and his hands, long and thin in the fire-light.

The purring of a cat that lay on the hearth-rug and the crackling of the logs that sent up strangely-shaped flames were the only sounds that broke the silence. He was speaking in a faraway voice as a man might in his dream.

"Yes . . . yes . . . It was the great, the greatest misfortune of my life. I could have borne the loss of every penny I possess, of my health . . . anything . . . everything . . . but not that! To have lived for ten years with the woman you adore, and then to watch her die and be left to face life alone . . . quite alone . . . it was almost more than I could bear! . . . It is six months since I lost her. How long ago it seems! And how short the days used to be . . . If only she had been ill for some time, if only there had been some warning . . . It seems a horrible thing to say, but when you know beforehand the mind gets prepared, doesn't it? . . . Little by little the heart readjusts its outlook . . . you grow used to the idea . . . but as it was . . ."

"But I thought she had been ill for some time?" I said.

He shook his head. "Not at all, not at all. It was quite sudden . . . The doctors were never even able to find out what was the matter with her . . . It all happened and was over in two days. Since then I don't know how or why I have gone on living. All day long I wander round the house looking for some reminder of her that I never find, imagining that she will appear to me from behind the hangings, that a breath of her scent will come to me in the empty rooms.

He stretched out his hand towards the table. "Look, yesterday I found that . . . this veil, in one of my pockets. She gave it to me to carry one evening when we were at the theatre, and I try to believe it still smells of her perfume, is still warm from its contact with her face . . . But no! Nothing remains . . . except sorrow . . . *though there is something*, only it . . . it . . . In the first shock of grief you sometimes have extraordinary ideas . . . Can you believe that I photographed her lying on her death-bed? I took my camera into the white, silent room, and lit the magnesium wire: yes, overwhelmed as I was with grief, I did with the most scrupulous precaution and care things from which I should shrink to-day, revolting things . . . Yet it is a great consolation to know she is there, that I shall be able to see her again as she looked that last day."

"Where is this photograph?" I asked.

Leaning forward, he replied in a low voice:

"I haven't got it, or rather, I have it . . . I have the plate, but I have never had the courage to touch it . . . Yet how I have longed to see it!"

He laid his hand on my arm: "Listen . . . to-night . . . your visit . . . the way I have been able to talk about her . . . it makes me feel better, almost strong again . . . would you, will you come with me to the dark room! Will you help me develop the plate!"

He looked into my face with the anxious, questioning expression of a child who fears he may be refused something he longs to have.

“Of course I will,” I answered.

He rose quickly. “Yes . . . with you it will be different. With you I shall keep calm . . . and it will do me good . . . I shall be much happier . . . you’ll see . . .”

We went to the dark room, a closet with bottles ranged round on shelves. A trestle-table littered with dishes, glasses and books ran along one side of the wall.

By the light of a candle that threw flickering shadows round him, he silently examined the labels on the bottles and rubbed some dishes.

Presently he lit a lamp with red glass, blew out the candle, and said to me:

“Shut the door.”

There was something dramatic about the darkness relieved only by the blood-red light. Unexpected reflections touched the sides of the bottles, played on his wrinkled cheeks, on his hollow temples.

He said: “Is the door closely shut? Then I will begin.”

He opened a dark slide and took out the plate. Holding it carefully at the corners between his thumb and first fingers, he looked at it intently for a long time as if trying to see the invisible picture which was so soon to appear.

With great care he let it glide into the bath and began to rock the dish.

I cannot say why, but it seemed to me that the tapping of the porcelain on the boards at regular intervals made a curiously mournful sound: the monotonous lapping of the liquid suggested a vague sobbing, and I could not lift my eyes from the milk-colored piece of glass which was slowly taking on a darker line round its edges.

I looked at my friend. His lips were trembling as he murmured words and sentences which I failed to catch.

He drew out the plate, held it up to the level of his eyes, and said as I leaned over his shoulder:

“It’s coming up . . . slowly . . . My developer is rather weak . . . But that’s nothing . . . Look, the high lights are coming . . . Wait! . . . you’ll see . . .”

He put the plate back, and it sank into the developer with a soft, sucking sound.

The gray color had spread uniformly over the whole plate. His head bent over it, he explained:

“That dark rectangle is the bed . . . up above, that square,” he pointed it out with a motion of his chin, “is the pillow: and in the middle, that lighter part with the pale streak outlined on the background . . . that is . . . Look, there is the crucifix I put between her fingers. My poor little one . . . my darling!”

His voice was hoarse with emotion: the tears were running down his cheeks as his chest rose and fell.

“The details are coming up,” he said presently, trying to control himself. “I can see the lighted candles and the flowers . . . her hair, which was so beautiful . . . the hands of which she was so proud . . . and the little white rosary that I found in her Book of Hours . . . *Mon Dieu*, how it hurts to see it all again, yet somehow it makes me happy . . . very happy . . . I am looking at her again, my poor darling . . .”

Feeling that emotion was overcoming him and wishing to soothe, I said:

“Don’t you think the plate is ready now!” He held it up near the lamp, examined it closely, and put it back in the bath. After a short interval he drew it out afresh, re-examined it, and again put it back, murmuring:

“No . . . no . . .”

Something in the tone of his voice and the abruptness of his gesture struck me, but I had no time to think, for he at once began to speak again.

“There are still some details to come up . . . It’s rather long, but as I told you my developer is weak . . . so they only come up one by one.”

He counted: “One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . This time it will do. If I force it, I shall spoil it . . .”

He took out the plate, waved it vertically up and down, dipped it in clean water, and held it towards me:

“Look!”

But as I was stretching out my hand he started and bent forward, holding the plate up to the lamp, and his face, lit up by the light, had suddenly become so ghastly that I cried:

“What is it? What’s the matter!”

His eyes were fixed in a wide terrified stare, his lips were drawn back and showed teeth that were chattering: I could hear his heart beating in a way that made his whole body rock backwards and forwards.

I put my hand on his shoulder, and unable to imagine what could possibly cause such terrible anguish, I cried for the second time:

“But what is it? Tell me. What’s the matter?”

He turned his face to me, so drawn it no longer seemed human, and as his blood-shot eyes looked into mine he seized me by the wrist with a grip that sent his nails into my flesh.

Thrice he opened his mouth trying to speak; then brandishing the plate above his head, he shrieked into the crimson-lit darkness:

“The matter? . . . the matter? . . . I have murdered her! . . . She wasn’t dead! . . . the eyes have moved! . . .”