

# The Doll

By Vernon Lee

I believe that's the last bit of *bric-à-brac* I shall ever buy in my life (she said, closing the Renaissance casket)—that and the Chinese dessert set we have just been using. The passion seems to have left me utterly. And I think I can guess why. At the same time as the plates and the little coffer I bought a thing—I scarcely know whether I ought to call it a thing—which put me out of conceit with ferreting about among dead people's properties. I have often wanted to tell you all about it, and stopped for fear of seeming an idiot. But it weighs upon me sometimes like a secret; so, silly or not silly, I think I should like to tell you the story. There, ring for some more logs, and put that screen before the lamp.

It was two years ago, in the autumn, at Foligno, in Umbria. I was alone at the inn, for you know my husband is too busy for my *bric-à-brac* journeys, and the friend who was to have met me fell ill and came on only later. Foligno isn't what people call an interesting place, but I liked it. There are a lot of picturesque little towns all round; and great savage mountains of pink stone, covered with ilex, where they roll faggots down into the torrent beds, within a drive. There's a full, rushing little river round one side of the walls, which are covered with ivy; and there are fifteenth-century frescoes, which I dare say you know all about. But, what of course I care for most, there are a number of fine old palaces, with gateways carved in that pink stone, and courts with pillars, and beautiful window gratings, mostly in good enough repair, for Foligno is a market town and a junction, and altogether a kind of metropolis down in the valley.

Also, and principally, I liked Foligno because I discovered a delightful curiosity-dealer. I don't mean a delightful curiosity shop, for he had I nothing worth twenty francs to sell; but a delightful, enchanting old man. His Christian name was Orestes, and that was enough for me. He had a long white beard and such kind brown eyes, and beautiful hands; and he always carried an earthenware brazier under his cloak. He had taken to the curiosity business from a passion for beautiful things, and for the past of his native place, after having been a master mason. He knew all the old chronicles, lent me that of Matarazzo, and knew exactly where everything had happened for the last six hundred years. He spoke of the Trincis, who had been local despots, and of St. Angela, who is the local saint, and of the Baglionis and Cæsar Borgia and Julius II, as if he had known them; he showed me the place where St. Francis preached to the birds, and the place where Propertius—was it Propertius or Tibullus?—had had his farm; and when he accompanied me on my rambles in search of *bric-à-brac* he would stop at corners and under arches and say, "This, you see, is where they carried off those Nuns I told you about; that's where the Cardinal was stabbed. That's the place where they razed the palace after the massacre, and passed the plough-share through the ground and sowed salt." And all with a vague, far-off, melancholy look, as if he lived in those days and not these. Also he helped me to get that little velvet coffer with the iron clasps, which is really one of the best things we have in the house. So I was very happy at Foligno, driving and prowling about all day, reading the chronicles Orestes lent me in the evening; and I didn't mind waiting so long for my friend who never turned up. That is to say, I was perfectly happy until within three days of my departure. And now comes the story of my strange purchase.

Orestes, with considerable shrugging of shoulders, came one morning with the information that a certain noble person of Foligno wanted to sell me a set of Chinese plates. "Some of them are

cracked,” he said; “but at all events you will see the inside of one of our finest palaces, with all its rooms as they used to be—nothing valuable; but I know that the signora appreciates the past wherever it has been let alone.”

The palace, by way of exception, was of the late seventeenth century, and looked like a barracks among the neat little carved Renaissance houses. It had immense lions’ heads over all the windows, a gateway in which two coaches could have met, a yard where a hundred might have waited, and a colossal staircase with stucco virtues on the vaultings. There was a cobbler in the lodge and a soap factory on the ground floor, and at the end of the colonnaded court a garden with ragged yellow vines and dead sunflowers. “Grandiose, but very coarse—almost eighteenth-century,” said Orestes as we went up the sounding, low-stepped stairs. Some of the dessert set had been placed, ready for my inspection, on a great gold console in the immense escutcheoned anteroom. I looked at it, and told them to prepare the rest for me to see the next day. The owner, a very noble person, but half ruined—I should have thought entirely ruined, judging by the state of the house—was residing in the country, and the only occupant of the palace was an old woman, just like those who raised the curtains for you at church doors.

The palace was very grand. There was a ballroom as big as a church, and a number of reception rooms, with dirty floors and eighteenth-century furniture, all tarnished and tattered, and a gala room, all yellow satin and gold, where some emperor had slept; and there were horrible racks of faded photographs on the walls, and twopenny screens, and Berlin wool cushions, attesting the existence of more modern occupants.

I let the old woman unbar one painted and gilded shutter after another, and open window after window, each filled with little greenish panes of glass, and followed her about passively, quite happy, because I was wandering among the ghosts of dead people. “There is the library at the end here,” said the old woman, “if the signora does not mind passing through my room and the ironing-room; it’s quicker than going back by the big hall.” I nodded, and prepared to pass as quickly as possible through an untidy-looking servants’ room, when I suddenly stepped back. There was a woman in 1820 costume seated opposite, quite motionless. It was a huge doll. She had a sort of Canova classic face, like the pictures of Mme. Pasta and Lady Blessington. She sat with her hands folded on her lap and stared fixedly.

“It is the first wife of the Count’s grandfather,” said the old woman. “We took her out of her closet this morning to give her a little dusting.”

The Doll was dressed to the utmost detail. She had on open-work silk stockings, with sandal shoes, and long silk embroidered mittens. The hair was merely painted, in flat bands narrowing the forehead to a triangle. There was a big hole in the back of her head, showing it was cardboard.

“Ah,” said Orestes, musingly, “the image of the beautiful countess! I had forgotten all about it. I haven’t seen it since I was a lad,” and he wiped some cobweb off the folded hands with his red handkerchief, infinitely gently. “She used still to be kept in her own boudoir.”

“That was before my time,” answered the housekeeper. “I’ve always seen her in the wardrobe, and I’ve been here thirty years. Will the care to see the old Count’s collection of medals?”

Orestes was very pensive as he accompanied me home.

“That was a very beautiful lady,” he said shyly, as we came within sight of my inn; “I mean the first wife of the grandfather of the present Count. She died after they had been married a couple of years. The old count, they say, went half crazy. He had the Doll made from a picture, and kept it in the poor lady’s room, and spent several hours in it every day with her. But he ended by marrying a woman he had in the house, a laundress, by whom he had had a daughter.”

“What a curious story!” I said, and thought no more about it.

But the Doll returned to my thoughts, she and her folded hands, and wide open eyes, and the fact of her husband’s having ended by marrying the laundress. And next day, when we returned to the palace to see the complete set of old Chinese plates, I suddenly experienced an odd wish to see the Doll once more. I took advantage of Orestes, and the old woman, and the Count’s lawyer being busy deciding whether a certain dish cover which my maid had dropped, had or had not been previously chipped, to slip off and make my way to the ironing-room.

The Doll was still there, sure enough, and they hadn’t found time to dust her yet. Her white satin frock, with little *ruches* at the hem, and her short bodice, had turned grey with engrained dirt; and her black fringed kerchief was almost red. The poor white silk mittens and white silk stockings were, on the other hand, almost black. A newspaper had fallen from an adjacent table on to her knees, or been thrown there by some one, and she looked as if she were holding it. It came home to me then that the clothes which she wore were the real clothes of her poor dead original. And when I found on the table a dusty, unkempt wig, with straight bands in front and an elaborate jug handle of curls behind, I knew at once that it was made of the poor lady’s real hair.

“It is very well made,” I said shyly, when the old woman, of course, came creaking after me.

She had no thought except that of humouring whatever caprice might bring her a tip. So she smirked horribly, and, to show me that the image was really worthy of my attention, she proceeded in a ghastly way to bend the articulated arms, and to cross one leg over the other beneath the white satin skirt.

“Please, please, don’t do that!” I cried to the old witch. But one of the poor feet, in its sandalled shoe, continued dangling and wagging dreadfully.

I was afraid lest my maid should find me staring at the Doll. I felt I couldn’t stand my maid’s remarks about her. So, though fascinated by the fixed dark stare in her Canova goddess or Ingres Madonna face, I tore myself away and returned to the inspection of the dessert set.

I don’t know what that Doll had done to me; but I found that I was thinking of her all day long. It was as if I had just made a new acquaintance of a painfully interesting kind, rushed into a sudden friendship with a woman whose secret I had surprised, as sometimes happens, by some mere accident. For I somehow knew everything about her, and the first items of information which I gained from Orestes—I ought to say that I was irresistibly impelled to talk about her with him—did not enlighten me in the least, but merely confirmed what I was aware of.

The Doll—for I made no distinction between the portrait and the original—had been married straight out of the convent, and, during her brief wedded life, been kept secluded from the world by her husband’s mad love for her, so that she had remained a mere shy, proud, inexperienced child.

Had she loved him? She did not tell me that at once. But gradually I became aware that in a deep, inarticulate way she had really cared for him more than he cared for her. She did not know what answer to make to his easy, overflowing, garrulous, demonstrative affection; he could not be silent about his love for two minutes, and she could never find a word to express hers, painfully though she longed to do so. Not that he wanted it; he was a brilliant, will-less, lyrical sort of person, who knew nothing of the feelings of others and cared only to welter and dissolve in his own. In those two years of ecstatic, talkative, all-absorbing love for her he not only forswore all society and utterly neglected his affairs, but he never made an attempt to train this raw young creature into a companion, or showed any curiosity as to whether his idol might have a mind or a character of her own. This indifference she explained by her own stupid, inconceivable incapacity for expressing her feelings; how should he guess at her longing to

know, to understand, when she could not even tell him how much she loved him? At last the spell seemed broken: the words and the power of saying them came; but it was on her death-bed. The poor young creature died in child-birth, scarcely more than a child herself.

There now! I know even you would think it all silliness. I know what people are—what we all are—how impossible it is ever *really* to make others feel in the same way as ourselves about anything. Do you suppose I could have ever told all this about the Doll to my husband? Yet I tell him everything about myself and I know he would have been quite kind and respectful. It was silly of me ever to embark on the story of the Doll with any one; it ought to have remained a secret between me and Orestes. *He*, I really think, would have understood all about the poor lady's feelings, or known it already as well as I. Well, having begun, I must go on, I suppose.

I knew all about the Doll when she was alive—I mean about the lady—and I got to know, in the same way, all about her after she was dead. Only I don't think I'll tell you. *Basta*: the husband had the Doll made, and dressed it in her clothes, and placed it in her boudoir, where not a thing was moved from how it had been at the moment of her death. He allowed no one to go in, and cleaned and dusted it all himself, and spent hours every day weeping and moaning before the Doll. Then, gradually, he began to look at his collection of medals, and to resume his rides; but he never went into society, and never neglected spending an hour in the boudoir with the Doll. Then came the business with the laundress. And then he sent the Doll into a wardrobe? Oh no; he wasn't that sort of man. He was an idealizing, sentimental, feeble sort of person, and the amour with the laundress grew up quite gradually in the shadow of the inconsolable passion for the wife. He would never have married another woman of his own rank, given *her* son a stepmother (the son was sent to a distant school and went to the bad); and when he *did* marry the laundress it was almost in his dotage, and because she and the priests bullied him so fearfully about legitimating that other child. He went on paying visits to the Doll for a long time, while the laundress idyl went on quite peaceably. Then, as he grew old and lazy, he went less often; other people were sent to dust the Doll, and finally she was not dusted at all. Then he died, having quarrelled with his son and got to live like a feeble old boor, mostly in the kitchen. The son—the Doll's son—having gone to the bad, married a rich widow. It was she who refurnished the boudoir and sent the Doll away. But the daughter of the laundress, the illegitimate child, who had become a kind of housekeeper in her half-brother's palace, nourished a lingering regard for the Doll, partly because the old Count had made such a fuss about it, partly because it must have cost a lot of money, and partly because the lady had been a *real* lady. So when the boudoir was refurnished she emptied out a closet and put the Doll to live there; and she occasionally had it brought out to be dusted.

Well, while all these things were being borne in upon me there came a telegram saying my friend was not coming on to Foligno, and asking me to meet her at Perugia. The little Renaissance coffer had been sent to London; Orestes and my maid and myself had carefully packed every one of the Chinese plates and fruit dishes in baskets of hay. I had ordered a set of the "Archivio Storico" as a parting gift for dear old Orestes—I could never have dreamed of offering him money, or cravat pins, or things like that—and there was no excuse for staying one hour more at Foligno. Also I had got into low spirits of late—I suppose we poor women cannot stay alone six days in an inn, even with bric-à-brac and chronicles and devoted maids—and I knew I should not get better till I was out of the place. Still I found it difficult, nay, impossible, to go. I will confess it outright: I couldn't abandon the Doll. I couldn't leave her, with the hole in her poor cardboard head, with the Ingres Madonna features gathering dust in that filthy old woman's ironing-room. It was just impossible. Still go I must. So I sent for Orestes. I knew

exactly what I wanted; but it seemed impossible, and I was afraid, somehow, of asking him. I gathered up my courage, and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I said—

“Dear Signor Oreste, I want you to help me to make one last purchase. I want the Count to sell me the—the portrait of his grandmother; I mean the Doll.”

I had prepared a speech to the effect that Orestes would easily understand that a life-size figure so completely dressed in the original costume of a past epoch would soon possess the highest historical interest, etc. But I felt that I neither needed nor ventured to say any of it. Orestes, who was seated opposite me at table—he would only accept a glass of wine and a morsel of bread, although I had asked him to share my hotel dinner—Orestes nodded slowly, then opened his eyes out wide, and seemed to frame the whole of me in them. It wasn’t surprise. He was weighing me and my offer.

“Would it be very difficult?” I asked. “I should have thought that the Count—”

“The Count,” answered Orestes drily, “would sell his soul, if he had one, let alone his grandmother, for the price of a new trotting pony.”

Then I understood.

“Signor Oreste,” I replied, feeling like a child under the dear old man’s glance, “We have not known one another long, so I cannot expect you to trust me yet in many things. Perhaps also buying furniture out of dead people’s houses to stick it in one’s own is not a great recommendation of one’s character. But I want to tell you that I am an honest woman according to my lights, and I want you to trust me in this matter.”

Orestes bowed. “I will try and induce the Count to sell you the Doll,” he said.

I had her sent in a closed carriage to the house of Orestes. He had, behind his shop, a garden which extended into a little vineyard, whence you could see the circle of great Umbrian mountains; and on this I had had my eye.

“Signor Oreste,” I said, “will you be very kind, and have some faggots—I have seen some beautiful faggots of myrtle and bay in your kitchen—brought out into the vineyard; and may I pluck some of your chrysanthemums?” I added.

We stacked the faggots at the end of the vineyard, and placed the Doll in the midst of them, and the chrysanthemums on her knees. She sat there in her white satin Empire frock, which, in the bright November sunshine, seemed white once more, and sparkling. Her black fixed eyes stared as in wonder on the yellow vines and reddening peach trees, the sparkling dewy grass of the vineyard, upon the blue morning sunshine, the misty blue amphitheatre of mountains all round.

Orestes struck a match and slowly lit a pine cone with it; when the cone was blazing he handed it silently to me. The dry bay and myrtle blazed up crackling, with a fresh resinous odour; the Doll was veiled in flame and smoke. In a few seconds the flame sank, the smouldering faggots crumbled. The Doll was gone. Only, where she had been, there remained in the embers something small and shiny. Orestes raked it out and handed it to me. It was a wedding ring of old-fashioned shape, which had been hidden under the silk mitten. “Keep it, signora,” said Orestes; “you have put an end to her sorrows.