

A Study in White **Caroline Hardwick**

It's that time, the perfect time. I feel the first stirrings of warmth as they reach my face. There is pain, yes, obviously, but the joy of sun on my skin is such that for the moment it is bearable. The thick fog of white turns to mist then clears and if I could close my eyes to the stabbing shafts of light I would instinctively do so. But I can't. So I don't, and the myriad of dancing stars finally fade leaving the magnificence of vision. The vision that greets me, as it always has over the uncountable years, is of my village, Tobrizen, at its most picturesque. Snow-topped peaks with Castle Wonung on its rocky base before them. I can see there is still snow on the pastures in the valley but it will soon be gone. Therein lies the rub.

I can now see the garden behind the castle wall from my elevated vantage point. A figure has set off across the sun-dappled snow. It is her! Her figure is unmistakable to me, even stooped with age. She is wearing a long fur-trimmed hooded velvet cloak and thick fur boots. With a sweep she draws the hood back and I see her hair is now white. It is a few years since I saw her last and I wonder how long before I stop seeing her. I know not whether her visits to the Castle have become more infrequent over the years or if she has varied the times of those visits to suit some new life. I know where she is going, though, and what she holds in the basket over her arm.

I remember when the mere sight of her could take me to the dizziest heights. The air would feel rarified when I was in the same room, thinner than at the top of Mount Erfalt, which towered above the village. She was younger than me by ten years but made me feel like an embarrassed teenager whenever I tried to hold conversation with her. Despite my high birth she seemed to me to be far more regal and sophisticated than my dull intellect could comprehend. Yet Isabella was a mere merchant's daughter.

It was inevitable that we would be sworn to each other. My infatuation and her ambition made it so. But the heaven I envisaged would follow remained tantalisingly out of reach. Yes, she gave her flesh to me, but her soul remained resolutely out of reach. After our first son Algred was born I hoped things would change; and they did, but not for the better. Isabella was devoted to the child and refused nursemaids, leaving me alone in my dark cold bedchamber at night, while she slept in the small warm nursery on a low maid's mattress beside the child. I was occupied with castle business during the day, but evening and nighttime weighed heavy and I could think of nothing but my loneliness. When the child was brought to me for an hour before his bed each night at least I could see Isabella and attempt conversation, but she remained distracted. Algred was a delightful child with my red hair and Isabella's grey eyes, and my one consolation was the love I felt when I held him for those few minutes. Eventually, Isabella allowed more of his care to be taken by the nursery nurse, who was despairing of her position. We returned to something more akin to normality and the seeds of hope started to grow in my mind. Then she was with child again. My pleasure at the news was tainted by the knowledge of what might follow, but by now Algred was able to converse and learn so I consoled myself that at least I would not be so lonely.

And it was so. Whilst Isabella doted on our newborn, Estgart, who was as dark haired as she and as quiet and still, I was able to sit with Algred and tell him tales of Tobrizen and the lands around.

I became content rather than happy. Maybe this is the best a man can hope for.

The agony is starting and for the millionth time I wish with all my soul that I could experience one tiny portion of that contentment ever again. But of course it cannot be. The pain is indescribable, not one part of my body escapes and certainly not my spirit, which is beyond hope. I focus again through the pain and wish that I could shed even one tear. I see she has crossed the meadow and is nearing

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the small walled glade. The green of the late spring grasses shows through white lace as the sunlight focuses its sharp rays on the frosty ground.

It was Isabella's idea, the tutor. It seemed so sensible as our castle was remote and there were few children in the village so the school was rudimentary. Although I believed my sons should mix with children from many walks of life, I wasn't ready to send them away to study at such a tender age and before I could firmly instil my principles into them. I secretly hoped that Isabella would then have more time for me, with the boys occupied for most of the day. I must say I was pleased and surprised when, after much correspondence, Isabella chose a young woman who spoke three languages and had travelled the continent to be the boys' tutor.

Her hair was a golden halo and her laugh echoed through the stone corridors. Castle Wonung became a happy, sparkling place. The boys skipped and smiled and followed her like innocent puppies. Wherever Krista went the air became warmer and spirits soared. I should have realised, but I didn't, until it was too late. Her knowledge was wide-ranging and she had some rare science as well as knowledge of the history of Mestolania and our neighbouring countries. She also knew the names of all the flowers that appeared in the two months of the year when the sun melted the snow and ice covering the village and Castle, though never that on Mount Erfalt. She melted our hearts and more.

It should never have happened. Secret glances, her body close by. Then sudden blushes and a step back. I tried to ignore it, but that fateful day - how I wish I could change it now! How I wish that door had stayed closed! But time moves inevitably onwards in one direction. I passed Krista's bedchamber and heard her tinkling laugh and then more. I hesitated, then turned the handle, opening the ancient oak wide. There they were, wrapped in an embrace, lips on lips and such passion. I had never seen my cool Isabella in such a state of fervour or enchantment, even though it had been my life's wish. They turned to look at me and there was neither fear nor apology in their eyes. I knew my life was over.

I sat in my study, tears drying on my face. They would go away, I knew it. Isabella would take the boys. My heart was like the frozen boulders that fell from the mountains. I could not live like this. But the idea of the boys living on without me ... How they would suffer, how they would miss me! Far better, surely, that we spend eternity in the afterlife together on the far side of the river, they forever innocent, and with me to guide them.

The trip to the village to visit Herr Franz took all my resolve. In my blind-sided state I wore only a thin cloak and soft shoes. Dark was falling and without the weak sun the ground had frozen hard again. The alchemist heard my request grudgingly, as he was keen to return to his fire and the open bottle of kümmel I could see on the hearth. I told him my favourite horse was in colic and I could not bear to kill it as it stood but needed a potion to render it still and calm. He went to the large wooden chest and after some thought returned with a bottle and dropper. I handed over the gilt he required and without so much as a farewell shut the door behind me and made for my home.

It was easy. The boys came to see me before bed. Isabella brought them and it was as if nothing had happened, though she did look back as she closed the study door, giving me a gentle sad smile as if saying farewell to an aged relative. I'd had the cook bring the warm goat's milk with nutmeg that the boys sipped while I talked to them of my life and experiences. I had added many drops of the potion; the rest I had placed in my wine along with the rat powder from the cellar.

As I spoke gently, telling the boys how much I loved them, their eyes glazed and they both slipped on to the rug. Their breath still came, though, and I held my hand over their mouths and noses, Alged

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first, applying pressure until I felt his slight body bucking under my heavy forearm and then lie still. I tried not to look into Estgart's eyes as I did the same to his frail tiny form in case I might see any terror or comprehension. Then I took my chalice, drank the contents and slid down beside them.

I became paralysed, but my breathing continued. Soon, I hoped, soon I would join my sons.

Noise, sounds - no, screams - surrounded me. I could smell her perfume, hear Isabella howling.

My body rocked, I could see nothing and feel little, but I could hear everything sharply. Krista was kicking me whilst Isabella attended to our sons. Running feet stopped as the servants entered. Sharp intakes of breath; I was lifted and taken somewhere, I know not where. My body was moved and discussions ensued. I lost consciousness totally.

When I finally re-entered the world it was to feel pain as my eyelids were opened by unseen hands, then stitched in place. I could not bear the agony and must have lost consciousness again. The next memory was of sitting strapped to a wooden chair as the council of judges sat before me. Evidence was heard from Herr Franz and my stable-hand. Then Krista spoke. Not a word about Isabella, but about my sons and how they were last taken to me, and how my behaviour that day had been strange and distracted. I was unable to speak or move as the judges pronounced me guilty of the crime of filicide and the equal crime of attempted suicide. My sentence was fitting, some will say.

And so it is that I lie here below the ice of the glacier overlooking my village. Each year the summer sun melts it just enough for the decomposition of my body to restart. The exquisite pain of rotting while still sentient is nothing compared to the knowledge that I will witness the passing of everyone I have known before I finally die. My soul feels the pain of watching what I cannot experience whilst knowing when I finally cross to meet my sons again they will have been in paradise with Isabella. I will never have forgiveness. I can only watch as the distant figure bends to place a posy of wild flowers on our children's graves before the sun drops and a thin frost covers my open eyes.