

## The Painting

My name is Charity Florence Stephenson and I am 10 years old, my father was the painter James Stephenson. When I was very young my father would often tell me that when he was my age all he ever wanted to do was paint. Whilst other children of his age were out playing, he would be found drawing. He told everyone how one day he wanted to paint a perfect picture, so perfect it would look real, as real as life itself.

As my father grew into a young man his landscape painting became so famous that Lords, Earls and rich people wanted him to paint their gardens. My father loved to paint everything he thought beautiful. He met my mother at one of his many painting visits to one of the great houses of Somerset, Kelston Hall. Sophie was the youngest daughter of Lord and Lady Dutton, and was the most beautiful girl that my father had ever seen. Lord and Lady Dutton, were against them marrying from the start thinking that my father was nothing more than after their fortune and not worthy of marrying their daughter. As time went by it seemed that they would never be together, so they ran away and were married just after my mothers seventeenth birthday. The marriage was a success and for a long time they were wonderfully happy.

The marriage was blessed with three daughters, Faith, Hope and myself Charity. We lived in a small cottage in the village of Wick just outside of Bath. During the time of our growing up my father was unable for some reason to paint portraits so he concentrated on landscapes, which provided just enough money for us to live on.

One day the Earl of Wessex approached my father and asked him to paint a portrait of himself and his wife. The payment offered for this portrait was a very large sum of money that would change our lives so my father felt he had to accept. Such an offer did not come along very often and if he could make a success of this then he would be made for the rest of his life and he knew more work would follow. Also there was the chance he would be accepted at last by my mother's family. However, there remained the problem of how could he produce an amazing piece of work that would satisfy the Earl and his Lady.

It was early September the leaves were changing colour when my father mounted his horse and rode off in the direction of Dyrham Park, to begin work on what was to be his most famous masterpiece ever. It was to be six months before we would be together as a family again.

On reaching Dyrham village my father found lodgings in the town tavern. His room was small, but had a large window, which let in plenty of light.

The first day of painting went really well, my father was beginning to feel that perhaps this would turn out alright in the end after all. But days turned into weeks, weeks into months, for some reason he could just not get it right.

My father started spending more time in the local tavern 'The Blue Bowl.' Here he would meet with the local people and drink away any money he had, leaving nothing for us at home. He doubted that he would ever be able to come home until one evening a young gypsy boy came into the tavern, my father being rather drunk sat and talked to this boy. He told him the whole story of how he was trying to complete a painting of the Earl of Wessex, and that he could not come home until he had done so. He told of how he felt that he had let down his family and that he did not know what to do next.

Davy the young gypsy lad felt sorry for my father, he told him of this old gypsy woman who had untold powers and who may just be able to help. They agreed to meet the next day at the crossroads just outside of the town. Davy took my father to the gypsy camp and told him to go into one of the old caravans that had been parked some way from the others. Inside the dark caravan was a very old gypsy woman dressed in black. He was terrified to look her in the face but my father explained the problem he had, the old gypsy stared deep into his eyes, mumbled a few words he did not understand then grabbed his hands and stroked his fingers.

He did not remember leaving the caravan but found himself in the road back to the village. The wind was blowing wildly and seemed to be saying something to him, it sounded like it was saying beware the gypsy curse! Somehow father made it back to the tavern suddenly he felt so really tired and totally exhausted he laid down on the bed and slept for several days.

On waking he went straight to the big house and begun painting, as he had never done before. Within days the portraits were finished, the Earl and his wife were delighted. My father was paid and set off for home immediately he wanted to be with this family and did not wait for the pictures to be hung on the wall. He never heard from the Earl and his wife again.

On his return home father decided that he would like to paint the family, and as the youngest he would paint me first. I would wear my best dress, which was the same blue as my eyes. The portrait did not take long and it was finished, as a celebration we had a family feast and the picture was put on the wall that evening.

I am not sure what happened but the next day but I was gone and so was the blue dress. My father and mother searched near and far, thinking that I had run away.

Years have gone passed, and I have seen many things, my father never painted again it was said that he died of a broken heart but I know that he took his own life feeling responsible for losing his beloved daughter. I watched while my mother grew old and die, my sister's marry and leave now with children of their own.

The cottage was sold and the picture of me was put in the attic, there I stayed for many years until recently the house and contents were resold. After all this time I now have a special place to be.

If you ever visit the Great Hall in Dyrham Park, please come and say hello – that's me half way up the main staircase the young girl with blonde hair, in the blue dress that matches her eyes. At the top of the staircase is the picture my father painted of the Earl of Wessex and his wife, there they sit so life like just as the day they were painted.

I recently heard the guide talking about the man who had painted the Earl and his wife, he said the painter's hands had been cursed by a gypsy who had wanted revenge on the Earl. The gypsy woman's curse was that once the painting had been completed and hung on the wall the soul and life of the Earl would become trapped in the painting for all eternity. There he would be staring out for the rest of eternity not able to move or speak or become free of his prison.

The guide also said that the painter had only ever completed one more painting and this was of his beloved daughter Charity. It was thought that the daughter ran away shortly after the painting had been completed and James Stephenson died of a broken heart. But the guide said that if James Stephenson had listened to the old gypsy woman he would have heard that after painting the Earl he should never paint another portrait again in his life, and by doing so he committed the daughter he loved so much to a life of imprisonment.

I know now what happened to me was a terrible mistake that should never of happened, I am like the Earl and his wife trapped for all eternity. So when you visit Grand houses of yesterday please remember this story, look again at the person before you and ask yourself is this just a painting or some lost soul like me.....