The Selected Prose of John Gray

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"The Yellow Princess"


"The Yellow Princess" was probably among those stories offered John Lane in December 1893. Gray’s acquaintance may well have identified as its model Alice, Princess of Monaco (1858–1925).

Born Heine, a grand-niece of the poet, she was the widow of the Duc de Richelieu, marrying her second husband, Prince Albert Honoré Charles of Monaco, in 1889. She was known as a great patron of art and artists. In "The Diner-Out" (Horizen, October 1941) A.J.A. Symons offers an imaginative account of an actual dinner party given in 1891 at Claridge’s by Frank Harris for the Princess, at which Oscar Wilde and George Moore were present. It was apparently at this dinner that Gray recited his poetry for the Princess, as she writes him (in an undated letter) a warm appreciation of his “strange, weird, fascinating verses.” Gray dedicated a poem ("Les Demoiselles de Sauve") to her in Silverpoints. She may also figure as the model for the Princess I in Park.
The Yellow Princess

ELLOW-HAIRED and sallow, she looks as if she had forgotten to paint her face after dyeing her hair, or as if the yellow of her skin had run into her straight, smooth hair. Her eyes are dark and large and prominent; her features are insignificant, uninteresting, and her smile and the outline of her chin and cheek suggest the mechanical smile of a wooden figure. She is middle-aged; she can never have been pretty; she refuses and has refused the best known of the brilliant impecunious; she has no history.

In her box (always the same box) at the opera, in her yellow dress (gauze trimmed with feathers, or silk worked with gold, or satin with roses) she sits season after season. She comes every evening and listens with the same satisfaction to Verdi, Wagner, Bizet, Mozart, and Mascagni.¹ Her head with its yellow aigrette a little inclined on one side, she gazes at her yellow fan (ostrich feathers and écaille blonde)², and looks almost bored when the curtain falls at the end of the act that precedes the last. Then she always gets up, accepts the arm of some attentive man who is absolutely indifferent to her, and drives home to supper when she does not sup out. Supper is the only meal she likes out of her house. She hates to be left alone, and she also hates giving up her solitude. She has no ear, she does not know anything about music, she scarcely can tell a soprano from a contralto, a tenor from a baritone, and yet her greatest pleasure is to listen quietly to music and singing. She is like those people who

¹ Verdi, Wagner, Bizet, Mozart, and Mascagni.
² Ostrich feathers and écaille blonde.
spend their days reading circulating library books, whose titles and whose contents they forget as soon as they have read them.

She is very rich. She does not care for society. She neither wants to shine among the small nor among the great. The claims of philanthropy and those of snobbishness have no hold on her, and she would as little allow herself to be bothered by a dull duchess or snubbed by a rude one, as she would be bled by a charitable dowager. She has few interests and few follies. Hers is a very empty but not a hollow life.

At eighteen—eighteen years ago—she was a strangely romantic girl, who lived for an impossible and unknown lover on whom she meant to lavish her fortune and her love. She was vain, she was ambitious, she was coquettish, she was all she was, in fact, for her ideal; and as one always meets one's ideal, she came face to face with hers. She did not know that he was her ideal at first: it took him and her some time for that to happen. He only presumed to paint her portrait, and she did not know when she consented that she would love him in the end. He painted her in a rich Eastern dress, but being an impressionist and not a very successful one, he did not flatter his model. She blazed on his canvas in all the colours of the rainbow, but all the yellow was in her poor face; hence the comic papers called the picture The Yellow Princess. His seeing her yellow did not prevent her from loving him, and from showing it, and the dazzled young painter "began like an eagle to gaze more boldly on the sun of" (he called it "love" in his letters to her) fortune! She adored him. She would have died for the little man, the plump little man with the cold eyes and the soft voice, and at last with many tears and many kisses the yellow princess and the impressionist painter agreed that they were meant for each other.

They wrote long letters, but neither dared to speak to her guardian. Wait, she always said. Waiting was hard, and at first not profitable—until she discovered (in spite of all his attempts at concealment) that
his money troubles were driving him to despair, and then she offered him what she had saved of her pocket money. He refused. He was deeply offended; but (as they met so seldom) his anger dropped, and not to grieve his guardian angel, his golden queen (as he called her on account of her hair), he accepted. He grew to be less and less offended, and at last to accept quite amiably. Was she not to be his wife, and was he not merely having now some of the crumbs of his future income?

Months passed away thus. She lived more and more in a world of love, and it seemed to her that there was no one save her little lover who could stir her heart and fill her dreams; and she intended when she came of age (only two years to wait) to make him prince of her golden realm. She went to stay with some relations in the country. The house was full, and she was much petted; she was eager, lively, and so rich. One of the guests who noticed her least was a slightly impecunious young stockbroker, not very interesting, not very handsome, whom no one disliked, about whom nobody gushed. There was nothing striking about him. He was an ordinary young man, one of the sort easily replaced, and only missed by those who love him. The yellow princess and he had talked about commonplace in a commonplace way. She did not even know the colour of his eyes or the spelling of his name. One evening after dinner they were walking in the garden. It was a moonless, warm, summer night. She stumbled, and might have fallen if he had not caught her. And somehow (whether it was a way of his or whether he was suddenly struck by the power of her gold) in a narrow path under a thick tree, the branches of which brushed against them as they passed, he put his arm around her waist and kissed her half a dozen times, and his seventh kiss was returned; and then the sound of voices made them hurry on towards the light. The yellow princess had a headache, she said, and went to her room. The world had changed, there was nothing left of the old world. She had felt the same happiness, the same romantic superhuman bliss in the shadow of that tree as when
her dearest, her only love, had murmured adoring words. It was dreadful, it was horrid, it was wonderful. It was the turning point in her life.

She thought, she thought, that night. She could not sleep. She had made a discovery and she was overwhelmed with its importance. One thing was certain: her love was dead; she could never again think that her painter was her twin soul. She shuddered as she thought of him, of his weakness, of his greed, of his insincerity. Nor did she turn with more tenderness to the other man who had unwittingly taught her so much. She did not blame him, but she hoped never to see him again, and if she had heard of his death she would have had a sense of relief. Herself she did not treat with more consideration. “Fool! fool! fool!” she cried; and a hot flush of shame and mortification brought tears to her eyes.

That was eighteen years ago, and that is why she has never loved, never married, and why year by year she has grown more strange, more eccentric, more dull also, more suspicious of herself and of others, and why she has narrowed her life for fear of losing her freedom.

Yellow-haired and sallow, as if she had forgotten to paint her face after dyeing her hair, or as if the yellow of her skin had run into her smooth, straight hair, in her yellow dress (gauze trimmed with feathers, satin with roses, silk worked with gold), she listens to Mascagni as she has listened to Verdi and as she will listen, empty-hearted though not hollow-hearted—and yet (who knows?) if a loud-voiced underbred young man, with plenty of bombast and a little power, came and wooed her hurriedly, roughly, I think that he might win the golden princess and her golden realm.