

## The Beldonald Holbein, by Henry James

amusement a small afternoon party. Every one came, my big room was full, there was music and a modest spread; and I've not forgotten the light of admiration in Outreau's expressive face as at the end of half an hour he came up to me in his enthusiasm. "*Bonte divine, mon cher—que cette vieille est donc belle!*"

I had tried to collect all the beauty I could, and also all the youth, so that for a moment I was at a loss. I had talked to many people and provided for the music, and there were figures in the crowd that were still lost to me. "What old woman do you mean?"

"I don't know her name—she was over by the door a moment ago. I asked somebody and was told, I think, that she's American."

I looked about and saw one of my guests attach a pair of fine eyes to Outreau very much as if she knew he must be talking of her. "Oh Lady Beldonald! Yes, she's handsome; but the great point about her is that she has been 'put up' to keep, and that she wouldn't be flattered if she knew you spoke of her as old. A box of sardines is 'old' only after it has been opened, Lady Beldonald never has yet been—but I'm going to do it." I joked, but I was somewhat disappointed. It was a type that, with his unerring sense for the banal, I shouldn't have expected Outreau to pick out.

"You're going to paint her? But, my dear man, she is painted—and as neither you nor I can do it. *Ou est-elle donc?* He had lost her, and I saw I had made a mistake. She's the greatest of all the great Holbeins."

I was relieved. "Ah then not Lady Beldonald! But do I possess a Holbein of *any* price unawares?"

"There she is—there she is! Dear, dear, dear, what a head!" And I saw whom he meant—and what: a small old lady in a black dress and a black bonnet, both relieved with a little white, who had evidently just changed, her place to reach a corner from which more of the room and of the scene was presented to her. She appeared unnoticed and unknown, and I immediately recognised that some other guest must have brought her and, for want of opportunity, had as yet to call my