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Slipping her hand into his, she pressed her cheek to his arm.

The earl, touched, ashamed of his own want of sympathy, stooped to kiss the dark braids of hair, but Esmer, looking up, received his lips on her forehead.

Gerard started as he met the brilliant flash of her eyes. They had the glitter of a snake's. He could not recall those soft, clear, feminine ones, which, despite himself, were ever haunting him.

Esmer, from compulsion, consequently yielded, and, finally, with rather an ill grace, consented to accept the guardianship of Lady Davenant, a distant connection, and a widow, with two ladylike, pleasant, but passe daughters.

It would be wrong not to say the earl felt infinite relief in his cousin's absence. He saw matters all satisfactorily arranged at the hall; signed papers, renewed his tenants' leases; then hastened up to town.

Why did he so long to be in the metropolis? Why, on reaching Euston station, did he cast such a long, lingering gaze around. He dared not ask himself—dared not for he knew very well he was possessed by a craving, an uncontrollable desire once—yes, if only once—to see that lovely countenance again, every lineament of which was impressed indelibly upon his memory.

He knew he was wrong—that he was an engaged man, still, he could not help it. Despite all his efforts he detected himself searching ever for that face as he traversed the crowded London thoroughfares.

His advent into society, where, at present, he nervously delayed letting his engagements be known, was greeted with flattering enthusiasm. Innumerable fair ladies entered his name on their visitors' list; not for balls, to make up a crowd, but to choose little reunions and pleasant dinners, while his name was put up at several clubs.

But for that one blot in his life, a blot that was to shadow all its brilliance—Gerard Earl of Lethington's entrance into society would have been a very pleasant, enjoyable affair indeed.

On the day of the drawing-room he was scattering down Piccadilly when Lord Hampton, an old college chum, broad-shouldered, frank, full of vitality, and cheery of countenance, came in his bon-homme fashion, sailing down upon him.

Lethington, by George! The very fellow I desired to meet," he cried. "You are not engaged anywhere this evening, are you? Now, don't say you are, dear boy. By George, you mustn't."

He had already linked his arm in the earl's and was piloting him down Piccadilly.

"My dear Hampton, you do so much yachting, that I declare you are getting quite nautical in your manner. I shall expect to hear you say, 'my dear fellow, I am going to dine with me this evening, and to spend the mainbrace, or something of that kind, soon.'"

The nobleman burst into a cheery laugh, starting, and then, suddenly, but of so contagious a nature that many a face turned pleasantly towards him, as if he had bestowed a gift on them, as, in a fashion, he had.

"You are right, Lethington. I delight in it, and, 'pon my life, I've half made up my mind to give it an expedition to go in search of the north pole myself. But, to leave greater matters for less, are you engaged this evening?"

"If you are going to ask me to be your guest I am glad to answer in the negative."

"Bravo! I am going to ask you. There are two or three capital fellows you know—old Cantabrigia, Limerick, and Dunleith—going to dine with me this evening at the club, and I want you to join us."

The earl willingly gave his consent, and the hour not being far off, the friends bent their steps towards St. James's.

The dinner was a very merry one; a blending of wit and good hearty fellowship, such as exists between men. Rather late the door opened and another guest entered.

"Hallo! here you are at last, Combermere!" cried Lord Hampton. "I thought you were not coming."

"Better late than never, eh, Hampton?" replied the guest, taking a seat, and filling his glass, and then, as he sat, he turned to the earl and said: "Lady Westbrooke, the to-be-belle of the season, and hence my delay."

"Excuse me," he exclaimed, "Hampton with a long-drawn sigh. 'Ah, my dear Combermere, what a lot of broken hearts, what a awful amount of envious and jealousies Lady Westbrooke is heaping up for herself.'"

"How do you mean, Hampton?" "Why, when a lady is transcendently beautiful, you may be sure she will possess more enemies than friends."

"Gad!" exclaimed Jack Doran, "Lady Westbrooke has made one victim already, eh, Combermere?"

"No, Jack. I'm safe," sighed Hampton, "glad because I should have no chance. Still, I here maintain," and he raised his glass, "that Lady Westbrooke, niece of the Marquis of Santyre, is so peerlessly lovely that she has not her equal in England. Come, will anyone present gainsay me?"

"Nothing is more diverse than masculine idea of feminine beauty," broke in Gerard, jestingly, yet with a throb of chivalry at his heart. "Consequently," ejaculated his host, "but then, you have not seen Lady Westbrooke."

"I have not. Yet I will maintain," and unconsciously his tones grew fervent as he thought of that never-to-be-forgotten countenance, "that her ladyship, whom I would not for a second disparage, does not surpass, if she equal, a face I know."

His manner brought a little volley of jest upon him, which he received good humoredly enough.

"Do you hear that, Combermere?" cried Lord Hampton. "A face exists that excels Lady Westbrooke."

"As the earl remarked," said the guest addressed, leaning back easily in his chair, "on nothing do opinions differ as female beauty. Still, he has not seen Santyre's niece, therefore his lordship must own that his judgment is a biased one."

"True; but what do you say to our putting him to the test?"

"By going to the opera this evening," Patti, the queen of song, the sweet nightingale of choristers, sings tonight in 'Dinorah.' Lady Westbrooke will be there, and Lethington can judge."

"Yes," laughed Gerard. "I can; but I will not go. Unfortunately, it is by my power to show you the face I uphold."

"Never mind," rejoined Lord Hampton. "I am so assured of my wager and your honor, old boy, that I will let the decision rest on your own word. You shall see Lady Westbrooke tonight."

"Nay, I will go further," laughed Viscount Combermere. "If you like, I will introduce you."

The dinner having been rather prolonged the party instantly arose and repaired to the theatre. As Lord Hampton had stated, Patti was that night to appear in "Dinorah," and the superb house, brilliantly crowded, presented the most splendid crowd of all conceivable.

The young men, however, were fortunate to procure seats in the seats in the boxes of the stalls. The latter, dress-circle, pit, and even gallery were filled, only several loges in the grand tier had the curtains yet closed.

"Santyre is sleeping late over his Burgundy," whispered Hampton, "and robs us of our start."

"Then," remarked the earl, carelessly, in the same tone, as he swept his long round the house, "her ladyship is not here yet?"

"Not yet; but the box yonder is Santyre's."

The orchestra was playing the overture, a soft murmur nummed through the theatre.

Meanwhile, Gerard studied the numerous female faces. No, none there equaled the one he had beheld.

He was so engaged when Lord Hampton's voice fell on his ear, and he turned to see the earl, who, now, my boy, speak the honest truth, unblinded by Master Dan Cupid."

Smiling rather bitterly, as his friend's speech recalled how little he must have to do with the young gentleman named, the earl brought his long round the house, "her ladyship is not here yet?"

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