

Florian's Tale

<https://www.patreon.com/ralwatt>

Chapter 1

Glittering in the light of moon and lamp, a small, ornate carriage rattled along a cobbled road, the gilded vehicle ascending the street between rows of similarly refined houses, almost as new as the brougham itself. They were likewise of the most forward and fashionable design, windows glowing with the light of *gas* rather than candle, crisp stone frontages in conversation with the most modern styles of the continent. Those impressive edifices were the dwellings of traders, financiers and investors of all sorts. Men – for all were men – whom had made their fortunes a hundred different ways, gathering together from a thousand ports all across the Empire to take up residence here, in the greatest city of the age.

Cresting the hill, the carriage turned, and through the windows was revealed the capital, stretching out below.

Florian felt a familiar tremor in his chest as he beheld the sight of it, relentless towering spires softened by veils of mist, sprawling lines of grand avenues and squares warmed with the pricks of thousands more twinkling gas lamps, bringing the light of innovation and artistry to every corner of the great metropolis.

London.

A modern, *vibrant* city, yet one home not only to the *nouveau riche*, but to generations of the highest society. Poets and painters, dukes and duchesses, even kings and the Queen herself, all accumulated in those streets and houses, haunted ballrooms and hotels and abounded in every theater and gallery.

There was surely no place finer suited to a man of his stock, or his talents.

Surely London was the only stage worthy of his performance.

Brushing the immaculately-pruned hairs of his whiskers, Florian's fingers followed the curve around his jaw, strengthened by the extra bulk they brought to his otherwise pinched jowls. He took special care to groom his beard, keeping smooth-shaven chin and neck and inspecting his moustaches for flecks of stray paint at the end of each day's work.

An artist should himself be a creature of beauty, he felt.

Florian had never disappointed himself in that, his handsome features well apportioned, if on the narrow side. His was a balanced face, easily turned to compelling laughter or captivating sorrow.

Florian wielded it well, his charm flowing with a deft, careless air one moment, his whole person a picture of soulful angst or smoldering passion the next. Gifted as he was with greatness in the visual arts, it was his theatrical performances at galas and dinner parties, more than his painting, which made him a favorite of high society events.

He was coveted to such a degree indeed, that his continued status as a bachelor was a source of much consternation among the young ladies of the aristocracy, who vied eagerly for his attentions, despite his frequent dalliances with their compatriots... both those eligible, and those less so.

Hence it was, that Lady Esmeralda sat with one hand on his knee, watching him as he watched the swirling colors of night outside the carriage.

"Is it really true that my portrait is finished?" asked the young beauty, a blue pang of sorrow running through the grays of her exquisite eyes.

"Indeed so," Florian replied, still disregarding her gaze. "I shall have it sent on to your husband presently, once the framing has been handled."

"Then... I shan't be coming to sit for you again?"

There was a strained tone to the question, wistful, yet resigned.

Florian graced her with a glance, and a reassuring caress of her thin fingers.

She was prettier than any painting could portray; an elegant creature, shapely yet demure, offering all the temptations of the biblical Jezebel, yet innocent and empty as the proverbial lamb.

Boring.

There had been no challenge in claiming her, and sweet as it had been, there was nothing to gain from her he couldn't have from a dozen other ladies that very same evening.

"You are a married woman, after all," he reminded her, in the chiding tone of one reprimanding a forgetful schoolgirl.

"But in the bedroom, you said-"

"There will be other times, my dear...."

He left unspoken when those times might be.

Returning his affections to the great city outside, which was his sole rival in beauty and grandeur, he neglected the sharpening of her eyes.

"It's true what they say about you, the *Casanova* of Hyde Park!" she said, the hurt plain to hear, for anyone listening, "and more at that! You are a scoundrel, Florian, a *lothario*! You whisper so sweetly of longing, of passion, but never does it turn to *love*. Nor to duty, or concern. Even simple *care* eludes you, I shouldn't doubt. You will toy with the wrong woman one of these days, and she will be the undoing of you."

"Yes, it is as you say."

Still watching the view, he patted her hand, dismissing her displeasure as he had so many times before.

It would all be gratefully forgotten, should he choose to return to her again.

Unlikely as that was.

Esmeralda was a fool to fall for his charms so readily, and Florian could never abide a fool.

She lacked even the perception to see what she already had.

If she meant to court anyone, it should have been her worthy husband.

Lord Grosvenor was an aristocrat of the oldest and highest order, proud member of the Lords Temporal, able to trace his lineage back to the reign of the great King William the First. More than that, Reginald Grosvenor III, head of his family and master of his ancient familial lands and title, was a man not just of power, but of self-possession.

One who took that which he desired.

Took *who* he desired.

As in his storied capture of the Duke of Dalmatia, at the great battle of Waterloo.

The tale was only a single early chapter in the litany of that noble figure's life, from his years exploring the farthest flung corners of the globe, to his military service in multiple grand campaigns, to even his personal, equestrian accomplishments or achievements in the realm of business.

Where Lady Esmeralda's advances had left him cold, Florian found his heart stirred instead at the thought of her husband.

Uncouth and brutish as the life of a mere footsoldier must undoubtedly be, the painter felt a prick of envy, that he had not once been present, among those fine young men Lord Grosvenor led into battle. Not that he felt any desire to shed blood for Queen or country – Florian was wholly content to leave such tasks to those better suited to their conduct – but the image lingered in his mind of the immaculately-presented figures of those military men, lining up to serve his Lordship as leal, eager soldiers.

An odd thought, which he brushed aside with the swaying of his carriage, but still, there it was.

With a gentleman such as Lord Grosvenor awaiting in their boudoir, Lady Esmeralda was quite the fool to have sought after any other.

Especially one as disinterested as Florian.

Rather than relishing those many indulgences he had taken with her, he was more eager to reach the mansion where her husband awaited, to once more meet the very man he had spent those past months cuckolding.