

Florian's Tale

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Chapter 2

A driveway was itself an indulgence, for a home within the city, but few were so long as this.

The chiaroscuro rooftops of the city faded from sight as they drove, the brougham losing itself in the deepening fog of the night. Only the sounds of stones under wheels and hooves, and the soporific swaying of the cabin, assured Florian they were still in motion.

Otherwise, they might as well have been a ship, drifting lost on a placid ocean.

Land loomed sudden and startling ahead, great cliffs breaking the waves of mist with their majesty.

They resolved into walls, however, stone cut and chiseled into shapes too refined to be natural formations, and too magnificent to be a mere home.

Grosvenor Palace, splendid even in the darkness, glowed with the wash from hundreds of windows, a monument to ostentation which vied even with the royal residence in grandeur. A monumental work of the architect's art, erected as a statement of the great prosperity and power of he who captained it.

Florian's eye was drawn not by the marble columns or curious intricacies of metalcraft, but by that castellan who had willed it into being.

Towering over the servants at his side, Lord Grosvenor called to mind the heroic myths of ages past, a man larger than life in the most literal sense. His great oak chest was proud as ever, despite that suggestion of the barrel it made about him, and the speckles of salt and pepper in his immaculately trimmed whiskers and hair only added gravitas to his lordship.

Disembarking in the presence of that statuesque figure, Florian quite neglected to offer a hand to Lady Esmeralda.

His eyes overlooked her as easily as he did the maids and footmen floating in the periphery of that fine central figure.

Rather he was focused on the chiseled features of his host, whose visage might well have been sculpted of the same stone as his demesne, for the hardness and intensity of his expression.

A man such as he was a true work of art, timeless as a statue, yet vital and gripping in his energy. It seemed almost comical, that he should employ Florian to paint, for as fine as the youth's works were, none had that ineffable *potency* of the man himself.

"Welcome home, my dear," spoke the *basso profundo* of his patron. "It is a glad thing, to hold you in my hand once more."

For one solitary moment, Florian felt a flutter, butterfly wings beating inexplicably in his chest as the lord reached out for him.

Then Lord Grosvenor took the reciprocating hand of the young lady in the artist's shadow.

"I trust young Florian has treated you well."

The lady wore a puzzling look, knowing eyes meeting her lord husband's without faltering as she gave her demure nod in reply.

Incredible, how she could so carelessly deceive a man of such perspicacity and wit.

"And you, young man, have you completed the lady's portrait to your total satisfaction?"

"Indeed so!" he said eagerly, "I thank your lordship for his patronage... and for lending me the lovely lady Esmeralda for so long. Both were a great pleasure to receive."

"I do not doubt it – she is a most charming woman, and has been more than eager to be your muse these past months. As have a number of the noble young ladies of London, by all accounts, captured, *captivated* by your skills. You seem to lure them in with the prowess of King Nimrod himself."

For not the first time, Florian felt the prick of suspicion in his host's eye, but he had grown as adroit at dealing with dubiety as brushes, and he painted an easy picture as he answered.

"Creatures of beauty are drawn to other sources thereof," he announced, "I cannot blame them, for it is their nature – and we must not begrudge them those pure fancies, short-lived as they be. A painter of wonders such as I may amuse for a month, perhaps two, but as the whimsical Muses themselves, the attentions of the lady flutter on to the next kink of amusement readily enough."

The wistful, saddened eye of the woman in question was ill-concealed at best, as she heard his reply, however Lord Grosvenor allowed himself a small, knowing smile, nodding with the practiced words.

"Then I thank you once more for entertaining my wife's *fancy* thus far through her company at your studio, in addition to so graciously receiving my own patronage. Shall I take it that you have need only of the *latter* henceforth?"

“Assuredly so, your lordship, I should not presume to part you from your lady wife for a moment more.”

“I see, it is settled, then. I require now only the consummation of your long labor – in the form of the piece which is to have pride of place in my collection.”

The furrow on the old soldier’s brows was strikingly reminiscent of that his own wife had shown in the carriage, but Florian paid no greater heed to that querulous expression now than he had then.

It was no mystery that Lord Grosvenor might seek to divest himself of the company of a puerile woman such as Esmeralda for a few hours each day. He might even have hoped, in some secret capacity admitted not even to in his own thoughts, that she was indeed engaged with the youth in some illicit dalliance, the better to divert her from himself.

It never occurred to the young man, so infatuated with his own capacity for beauty, that a beholder might see greater grace in the happiness of a loved one, than in the pursuit of hedonistic pleasures.

Indeed for Florian those indulgences of hedonism were the chief call which had brought him that evening.

He frowned himself, therefore, not at the disappointment of his hosts, but at the calm of the great mansion.

“Forgive my asking, my lord,” he began, regarding the empty balconies and tranquil galleries of the front of the palace, “but has something gone awry? Is there not to be a grand ball here tonight, for which have gathered all the finest ladies and gentlemen of our fair city?”

Lord Grosvenor chuckled in open amusement.

“That last I cannot attest to – for I fear many a scoundrel or... *lothario* may have slipped his name onto our esteemed guest list – but yes! We do indeed mean to host tonight, only... later. I had you bring my Esmeralda back to me now that she might have the time to properly prepare herself for the event... and that I might prepare you likewise. For, you see, it is to be a *costume* ball, and our guests will be in attendance as all variety of whimsical roles.”

“A marvelous conception!” Florian exclaimed, “costumed galas are *all* the vogue on the continent this season – I heard of a marvelous affair in Vienna just this past month, where each among the attendees was done up in the guise of a wild animal, beasts from forest and jungle and oceans alike, and set a task to find and court their matching creature! However... I regret that I was unaware of the conceit until now, and so have prepared no suitable attire for the emulation of any other than myself.”

Lord Grosvenor waved aside his consternation jovially, all the more amused at the florid speech which emerged whenever the younger man was working especially hard to impress him.

“All is well my man! I made no mention of the matter for a purpose. I have already procured a certain costume I would be much obliged to you to wear. A... *fancy* of my own – you would not refuse me this, I hope?”

Florian had a queer vision then, of Lord Grosvenor’s practiced hands, dressing him for the ball in the man’s own finery.

“It should be my great pleasure to attend the ball in his lordship’s own chosen attire,” he proclaimed, his zeal ill-concealed.

“Very good, my man Wooster here will show you up to the dressing rooms, and see to your proper costuming.”

Led off by the valet and a flotilla of maids, Florian went eagerly, failing to notice the murmured conversation passing between host and hostess as he left.