

Admiring the image in the shop window of the well-dressed gentleman in gray top hat and velvet-collared cloak, Peter Denning straightened his broad shoulders. When the image did the same, he smiled, cocked the hat to a rakish angle, and proceeded onward.

Despite the expensive tiepin, the absurd silk scarf dangling about his neck swung as he walked. He felt a trifle foolish tucking a bit of stick beneath his arm as the other gentlemen on the street were wont to do, but his side-whiskers were neatly groomed and his Wellingtons gleamed. He was satisfied that he had achieved the image of the perfect gentleman that he had set out to portray. He was no such thing, but there was no need for the world to know that.

It was not that he meant to defraud the society in which he walked. He had as much wealth and more as the young gentlemen in the club to which he turned his feet now. Unfortunately, that wealth had not come about from the opportune demise of one of his relatives.

His mother had been a lady's maid who had never seen two coins to rub together in all her life. His father had had the courtesy to marry her before disappearing from their lives, but that had been the extent of his involvement in Peter's affairs.

No, the wealth that paid for a well-appointed apartment in Mayfair, a valet who had naught better to do than see to his master's newly acquired wardrobe, and a rig and four that ate their worth in expensive feed had come from hard toil.

Not to mention a certain shipping venture that had generated unexpected profits. Denning grinned to himself as he pushed open the elaborately carved door. A servant who had shirked his duties rushed forward filled with apology, bowing and scraping as Peter handed him his cane and hat.

After all those years on the sea in the company of men who ate, slept, and breathed in their own filth, he was finding it pleasant to return to the cultured confines of an orderly society, one that he had only been able to admire from afar before he went to sea.

He was learning to conquer these outer appearances very well. He had grown up on the estate of a wealthy lord, listening to the speech of his betters, cultivating their accents even more than his mother had. His mother had encouraged him, hoping one day he would find a position in the household for himself and so secure his future.

But Peter had grown into a great strapping lad with ideas of his own, and bowing and

scraping before effeminate lords and their vain ladies had not been among them.

But he'd had his stomach full of sea now, and it was time to turn his mind to new pursuits. He had every confidence that he could achieve whatever goal he set himself, but this particular pursuit seemed to be dragging out to tedious lengths and prospects weren't looking good.

Denning sighed as he took his usual table, acknowledged the salutes of several of the younger gentlemen with whom he had spent time, and ordered his meal. He knew he would be joined shortly by several of the young idlers, and before the evening ended, he would have tried his hand at cards, downed a bottle of port, and no doubt toured one or more of the brothels near Haymarket.

The gentlemen considered him a rare good sport, a dab hand at all the rigs, and an easy touch for a bit of the ready when needed. He could whistle the days away in idleness forevermore if he wished.

But he hadn't been bred for idleness, and as entertaining as the company might be, it didn't ease the ache of loneliness. Denning had returned to England to discover his mother dead and himself alone.

He had spent years at sea imagining a cozy cottage in England with his mother keeping warm by the fire and a laughing wife in the doorway waiting for his return, with curly-haired children at her knee. He hadn't thought it would be difficult to find the woman of his choice once he had a home and a bit of savings to offer. He had never imagined returning with great wealth and the complications that would ensue.

Sipping at his glass of port and cutting into his beefsteak, Peter attempted to avoid the ennui that haunted him, but he could not find a successful diversion for his thoughts. Great wealth should have opened all the doors that had been closed to him in the past, but he was discovering that there were doors behind doors and that breaching them was tedious business.

The gentlemen accepted him for what he was as long as he had the coins to keep up with their play, but the ladies were entirely another story. He was caught between two worlds with this charade he acted, and he was beginning to doubt that he had set the right course when he had donned his expensive clothes and knocked on the doors of society.

Coins opened that first set of doors and appearance allowed him to remain in those

outer circles. To reach the inner sanctums where the ladies resided seemed impossible without the right credentials, and he couldn't manufacture those as he had his image.

At the same time, he had no real dealings with the layers of society to which he had been born. His wealth, appearance, and speech placed him outside their world, and any female servant would only look at him with suspicion did he ask to call. It was an awkward situation at best, one that Peter felt certain he would conquer with time, but it left him restless and alone while he sought the solution.

As he finished his meal and his second glass of port, Peter was joined by two younger gentlemen eager to attend a prizefight on the outskirts of town. His tilbury was required to carry the light-skirts they meant to accompany them, and they gallantly offered to acquire a third for Peter's use. Contemplating that evening of entertainment, he shook his head and bowed out with an excuse of other plans.

It wasn't a complete lie. The plan he had in mind didn't include the tilbury or horses or loose women. The plan he had included a warm study, a good book, and the painting he had acquired last week. The more he thought about it, the more eager he became to seek that source of comfort.

Setting out on foot for his apartment, Peter conjured up the image of his first artistic acquisition with satisfaction. Had he been told while lying in his bunk at sea that one of the first things he would do upon obtaining riches was to buy a piece of oil and canvas, he would have laughed himself to the floor.

But that painting had called to him from the first moment he had set eyes on it. He was well aware that the great houses of the land had such paintings scattered haphazardly across their walls and stacked in their attics and buried in closets, and few were paid any attention no matter what their resting place. He couldn't describe a single one of the oils that had adorned the house where he had attained maturity.

But this painting hanging in a shop window had leapt out at him, caught his eye in such a fashion that he had to return the next day to be certain it was still there.

And he had returned again the day after that. He had never set foot inside a gallery of art in all his life. He hadn't even been certain one could buy a piece of artwork like that or if it had just been hung for the appreciation of all. But on the third day, he had pushed open the gallery door and walked in.

He had acquired the canvas at an amazingly low price for the amount of satisfaction it brought him. He knew nothing about the cost of art. In all likelihood they had named an absurd price in hopes of obtaining half that, but Peter had merely signed the bill and walked out with the package and not questioned the cost in the days since. For all the money he had thrown away in gambling and drinking and whoring, not one cent had brought him the contentment of that painting.

Arriving at his flat, Peter dismissed his valet for the evening. He retired with a bottle of madeira to the study he had purchased complete with books. Settling into his desk chair, he admired the framed canvas on the wall before him.

The lamp lit below it cast the oils in murky shadows, but he knew every line and color by heart. Not that there was a wide range of colors. Almost the entirety of the background was filled with the broad gray stone walls of some substantial country mansion. The walls could only be seen from behind a forest of trees, shrubbery, and climbing vines, but the darker greens seemed to blend into the very nature of the building until, after a while, it became difficult to detect where nature ended and man's work began. Peter delighted in discerning new and previously unnoticed quirks in the house's exterior: the griffin on the lintel, a child's toy in a window, a shutter painted with a rose in the corner.

But the artwork he appreciated most in the picture had naught to do with house or grounds and all to do with a fleeing fairy figure in the forefront. In broad daylight the figure all but disappeared into the landscape of trees and overgrown shrubbery, but by night, with the lamp at just the right angle, she flew wild and free through that landscape, moonlit hair streaming in long cascades down a back as slender and feminine as any he had ever seen.

That figure fascinated him. She held her arms up in glorious embrace of the night, head flung back, face turned toward the moon that couldn't be seen anywhere in the portrait. And the face! Peter moved from his desk to the wall to better observe the delicate features.

She shimmered with moonlight even from this proximity. Her skin seemed to sparkle with silver. Large, almond-shaped eyes danced with a darkness that made his blood shiver. Perfectly formed rosebud lips turned upward in a smile of welcome that stripped him of all pretense and left him longing for more. He ached to reach out and touch her, to know the warmth of that welcome, to feel at home in that house with rosebuds on the shutters and

toys in the windows.

How just one painting could bring him so much happiness and so much misery was beyond Peter's ability to reason. It represented everything he wanted while disguising it all in shadows and mockery. There were times when he had drunk enough that he thought it might be best to destroy the canvas, to slash it from top to bottom and heave it from the window into the night. And there were other times, like now, when he only wished he could step inside the painting and become a part of it.

Imagining being another shadowy figure in that forest of trees, one toward whom the lady was running, Peter smiled and lifted the canvas from the wall. He was not only growing maudlin, but fanciful.

Perhaps the painting was a sign that he had chosen the wrong place from which to make his entrance into society. The country house and the trees called to him. He had always enjoyed the country as a boy. He could remember fishing in wide ponds, hunting in rolling fields, tumbling down snowbanks in the winter. The country was a good place to raise children. Perhaps the women were easier to meet and less arrogant in their requirements in a solitary place such as the one in the painting.

Setting aside his whimsical fantasies, Peter pried at the back of the painting with his pocket knife. Perhaps he could find some clue as to the house's origins. Much of everything in this world was for sale. It would be amusing to locate this place and see if anyone would accept an offer for it.

The protective backing peeled off without a great deal of trouble, revealing a blank canvas and some spidery writing in one corner. Peter carried it to the lamp on the desk and tilted the frame until the light caught on the words and played them back to him: *Lady Honora Chelsey, Rosebud Cottage, near High Wycombe*

Peter sat down in his chair and studied the name with a sense of satisfaction. Perhaps he had just found a home.