

The Mandrake and the Lushington

Wyndmoor Street. He was late. He was always and entirely late. I stood on the stoop in front of his house. It was dim; the sun was setting, and yet the big and ornate street lamps had yet to alight, creating monstrous patches of darkness that emanated from the tidily kempt trees adorning the sides of the avenue.

I rapped on the door.

“Ah. Lord FitzGibbon,” spoke the butler, “Lord Goodwin has been expecting you.”

He was breathing shortly as I followed him down the hallway. He hated me, I could tell. Scott always had no discretion when picking his servants.

“Lord Calvin Albrecht FitzGibbon,” spoke the servant, as we entered Scott’s chamber. He left the room before I could request anything of him.

Scott was turned towards an aureate mirror, his lustrous black and slightly curled hair facing me. His morning coat was lying on rumpled silken bed sheets, and he was grumbling fastidiously, his arms moving up and down in front of his person. He always had a world of trouble trying to tie his cravat properly, and he hated the looks he got when he tied it lazily.

I stood for some minutes, during which he untied and re-tied the lace several times over. I do not think he actually heard the manservant announce my presence. I coughed rather forcibly, at which he turned, startled.

“Good Gracious! How long have you been standing there?”

“Oblivious as always, I see. Here, let me assist you with that.” I approached.

Scott had a fair complexion and an angular face with a square jaw and otherwise chiseled features. Though he also had frail looking eyes, as if he were about to blow away in a terrible

windstorm, or if he had just witnessed a murder.

The cravat properly tied, he retrieved the morning coat from his bed. I dodged the glances of the valet and we proceeded onto Wyndmoor, and, strange, those lamps were still malfunctioning. I knew that it disappointed Scott; we were having one of those late in the evening discussions and he had told me once about those lamps, about how they embodied our civilized nature, about how they exemplified our triumph over the dark. They were, to him, the very height of our society. I remember wanting to tell him that some things could not be appreciated in an illuminated state, and were much preferable to look at in darkness, but he insisted that if it couldn't be improved by lamps, if the lamps failed to illuminate it in a bright and cheery glow, then it was not so much worth having.

“Remind me why I find myself going to Chesterford's party again?” I enquired in monotone as we waited for a carriage to pass by, before crossing Rue Falmiré. A nearby bakeshop was just closing up, and I missed the warm and yeasty smell that would have normally emanated from the building in the morning.

“Because,” he said as we walked briskly over the cobblestones, his tone sprightly as always, “It will be *zeer vermakelijk*, good sir.” He had this annoyingly endearing habit of using an occasional word or phrase in Dutch. It was something like those people who borrowed French words for dramatic effect, though he never came off as being so very pretentious. It also made it quite hard to discern if he was being sarcastic or not.

“I doubt it,” I said demurely, shooting him a questioning glance after some delay.

We turned onto Kempshott Road, and walked past *The Wind and Smoke Inn*. It was a grand building, the façade of which, save for the door, was covered entirely in the deep green of ivy. Outside, a few tables, occupied by enigmatic patrons, sat. A few strides later we passed the

keeper of the establishment; he was rolling a barrel of ale in the opposite direction. Scott eyed the cask, his eyes wistful pools of longing, but his mouth was snarled in an expression of utmost disgust. His nose was whiffing, I presume in some sort of frantic search for the heady scent of drink.

I made an attempt to alleviate his condition via distraction, "I can never carry on a conversation with those pretenders anyway. Mother insists that I find myself a suitable lady to court tonight..."

Fazed, he turned his head, his dark blue eyes clear once more, and answered with a grin, "Well, she certainly wasn't fond of the last one, was she? Then again, I hadn't the highest opinion of him either."

I took a quick look about the street. My 'crime' had been a capital offense just a few scant years ago, yet it was still wise to avoid any problems that I may. Oscar Wilde had just been sentenced to several years of hard labour, and I wished to avoid such a fate, if at all possible.

"Please do keep your voice down," I intoned. "But you are aware, that it is quite impossible to find anyone with a shred of respectability in my position. Well, anyone who should reveal themselves as what they truly are, anyway."

"Yes, well, I feel that she would not deem anyone of your choosing to possess a shred of respectability, anyway," Scott countered. "Her concerns are not falsely constructed; she merely wishes that your familial lands remain such." The fluidity with which Scott changed from humour to reasoned discourse was truly interesting to me.

We took a left onto Margrave Lane, and we were not far from Chesterford's now.

"Enough of my problems. How goes your courtship of Signora de Luca?"

Scott's face seemed once more to retake that ghastly shade it had possessed previously,

and I immediately regretted approaching the subject. "I am not appreciative of those Italians any longer... I do hope that neither the Lord Ambassador nor his daughter shall be attending this evening." His speech was terse and it did not strike the ear as pleasantly as it was keen to do.

"Oh, but why? They say you can't speak Italian properly unless you happen to be drunk. I should think that they're you're kind of people." My joke did not appear to improve his morale, and he said nothing in return. We walked in growing darkness, the air sour, no longer conversing as before.

After some time I could stand it no longer, and I proclaimed, "I do apologize. That was in poor taste."

A short and hollow sort of laugh was the result, "As always, you treat me far too nicely. I know that you merely jest... I really do hope that she will not be attending, though," Scott continued, "the bruise looks rather horrible. I fear that the Lord Ambassador should throw his glove at my face."

I frowned. This had been going on for some time now; as soon as Scott got into some semblance of a promising relationship, he would swear off drink entirely. As time wore on, he would feel increasingly as if he were failing, as if he were an entirely insufficient suitor, neigh an insufficient man altogether; some 'thoughts of self-doubt,' he would put it, and inevitably, he turned to alcohol to escape whatever problems that may or may not have been present. He hated his addiction, and he merely turned to the bottle once again. This of course would always ruin any sort of sentiment existing between Scott and whomever he happened to be courting. Sometimes, this would end in Scott in coming to physical blows, as it apparently had with the Signora de Luca. I was always wise enough to avoid Scott when he was brought into a drunken rage. Or perhaps something in him yet remained, so as for he to avoid me.

Scott never shared his thoughts on his own behavior, but I knew that it was not something that he slept easily upon. I admit, I found such ungentlemanly behavior unsavory, but then again, who am I to speak? Perhaps far more unpleasant, was to watch my dear friend tear himself up about it. A man who had always strived to be morally good, must indeed be concerned when he realizes that he is not what he thought he was, and further still, when he finds himself unable to control his base need for debauchery, unable to resist the allure of lush. His reputation was steadily sinking, although not at the rate of mine own.

We did not quite belong here.

And now it was completely dark. Chesterford's manor loomed ahead. It glowed, the amazingly trimmed shrubbery appearing to shift and move like things unknown, things of which we lacked a proper understanding. Some would wish to trim it into the neat boxes and geometric shapes, normally assigned to shrubbery, I'm sure. And it was a shame though, the lawn was really and rather quite pretty when there was the light available to appreciate it.

Chesterford's manor house was opulent, as always. I'm told he has an even nicer one out in the countryside. In the ballroom, there were marble floors, and a string quartet had set up. It served to drown out the customary murmuring that so often seemed to frequent my entrances as of late. Whether such chatter was entirely for myself, or also for Scott, I did not know.

The room, as always, was subdivided into male and female groups. An area for dancing was located in the center. I never really understood why we must be separate from our female counterparts. I assume that my opinion had something to do with my condition, but when I examine the issue under an entirely objective light, I still fail to make logical sense of the matter. The prim and stiff dancing appeared as if it were reaching its close, however. I did wonder why anybody should start in the first place. The rough and tumble jigs of the lower classes was

brutish and unbefitting people such as we, but they did seem to enjoy it ever so much more.

We approached a small grouping of people to the side, “Ah, Mister Lloyd, how have you been keeping?”

“Ah, Lord FitzGibbon! Quite well, thank you. And yourself? I see you’ve brought Lord Goodwin with you.”

This small talk was infinitely annoying, they were all lying through their teeth as they inquired as to my health, my family and made other such vague and polite friendly statements. It was required. I suppose that’s the real reason I was here. As a member of the landed gentry, it would have been unacceptable if I were to fail to attend. Scott was so very much the better at small talk than I, though. I think that he secretly enjoyed it. He was good at talking, and would often secretly insult you before your very face; unless he was drunk of course, in which case he would just outright insult you. But presently, he had managed to excuse himself from the pointless and dull conversation. No doubt to find himself some means of refreshment. It would not do for him to be going and making a fool of himself here.

As he returned, I quickly grasped the glass he held and said politely, “Why thank you, Scott. I was just about to ask you for something to drink.” He looked at the glass resignedly, but said nothing. But what was in the glass? It was the strangest colour of green. I moved the glass to my nose and sniffed: absinthe. I was glad that I had removed the foul liquid from Scott’s person, but unhappy that I had to now ingest such a drink. I stomached a sip of the Green Fairy as the quartet trembled its final note.

“Lord Goodwin! Lord FitzGibbon!” A deep bass voice rumbled from behind. Oh dear. Chesterford. What a windbag of a man. “I and some other fine fellows were presently heading to the back parlor to play a game of cards. Care to join us?” It was always impossible to tell

whether Chesterford happened to actually mean what he said to you or not. He did as etiquette required, and found it necessary to invite anyone that was well-bred to anything. I doubted that he actually wanted us, or in particular, myself, present here at his party. Nevertheless, this was where I was and he had invited me.

Scott answered the question for us, ‘We would be much obliged.’ I wouldn’t, of course. But the question and its response were entirely unnecessary. I couldn’t very well go and join the other group of people. Hah! Imagine that, a single male in the midst of a room of women. Chesterford was then essentially asking me if I were going to stay, which of course I had to.

Chesterford had been a naval commander during the Crimean War. He loved to go on and put on about his glorious days in the Sea of Azov. I found his tales rather boring, and hoped that we should find some other subject to speak of. But that was not correct, of course, as the back parlor had to be filled with men, and we must all drink and smoke and play cards and share war stories and otherwise act as idiots, pretending we have some semblance of chivalry.

I stood silently in the corner, sulking, as I watched Scott and a few others have a game. I hated the fact that we could not express any notion of resentment, gloom or suspicion, but of course nobody knew of it aside from Scott, as it was improper to say so. Society presented a never ending cascade of requirements and restrictions; and each and every time I attended Lord Calloway’s, Sir Walton’s, Captain Chesterford’s or whoever else’s event, having nobody to actually converse with, I found myself sinking into the tempest of depressive apathy that resulted from my ruminations while in the presence of these fools. I sniffed at my sifter of absinthe; it did smell nice, though I hated the effect it produced.

I searched the room, looking for some manner of interest, or entertainment. To my astonishment, I did find something: his back was turned, and he was conversing with one or two

others to whom I was not especially acquainted.

“Why, fancy seeing you here, Harrison...” I trailed off upon perceiving the faces of the man I was addressing and his compatriots. Perhaps I was mistaken. No, I am quite sure that I recognized his face.

“Are you referring to Chesterford?” one of the men gathered round inquired, confused.

“Captain Chesterford? No, I-”

“Chesterford Jr.”

What trouble, and how embarrassing. Harrison, or rather Chesterford, was silent yet. Of course, someone like that should have an alias in one of those places. I do not know why I should have forgotten, especially as I had used one myself. And while I was intrigued to find that one from my own social class had shared a certain distinction, Chesterford Jr. apparently did not.

“I am afraid that I have never met you.”

“I see. I must have been entirely mistaken. My apologies.” It was a strange experience, to see him act so cold and indifferent, when the last week he had been so much the warmer.

I am a fool.

As I left, I heard those about question him. Considering my reputation, which I had received in spite of not actually being caught by anyone important, I feared that I might have done some damage. From the corner of my eye, I saw one of the men walk away hurriedly. Perhaps I ought to have left? But no. To leave in such a fluster would make the debacle even more intolerable.

But Chesterford’s son! How funny that he should be in the same predicament as I. Apparently he had kept it better concealed. Then again, I hadn’t known that Chesterford had a son and perhaps this was merely the reason why. I watched the card game, not really paying it

much attention, for minutes it seemed. What a plight I may have caused.

I very nearly dropped the glass of absinthe that I had scarcely touched when I found myself addressed by Chesterford the Elder, “Are you enjoying the evening, FitzGibbon?” he inquired.

“Why, yes. I was just thinking to myself what a fine time I was having. I must thank you once again for inviting me, if I haven’t already.” There was not a trace of sarcasm, and yet I could barely stifle my mirth.

“Would you like to accompany me and a few others outside? You see, I recently received a shipment of explosives from China.”

“Hmm. That sounds enjoyable, but do you not think it best to set them off later, when some of our fellows are less occupied,” I said, gesturing to the men still absorbed in their game of cards. They seemed less focused on the game, actually, and rather more enraptured in a discussion of politics: some new and arbitrary governmental policy or the other that would likely have no impact on my life. The game was an afterthought.

“Ah, well, these shall be merely the smaller ones. A few tests, if you will. We’ll set the larger ones off later, perhaps over the water.”

“I understand, make a show of it and all.”

In truth I did not. Why anybody should not wish to see the novelty, even from some of the smaller ones, was beyond me. Especially considering the alternative: sitting in a stuffy parlor talking about things that did not matter. And yet, it would be improper of me to refuse to come, or to insist we wait.

We exited from the building and proceeded to the back of the lawn. It was just as dark as before, and I was unable to tell who exactly else was standing here, as the moonlight was not

sufficient enough to allow me to recognize these vaguely familiar people from the behind; William Somerset, maybe, and perhaps Seth Harvey. I joined the group of gathered men and peered about in the darkness for the rocketry, of which I was unable to find. As soon as I felt the hand lain upon my shoulder, I realized it had been a mistake to depart from the manor. Chesterford's tone was imperious, and considering my recent blunder, I ought to have been more wary.

I dropped the glass of absinthe and attempted to run, but my head reeled backwards as I took an elbow to the gut, and then a fist to the face. Staggering sideward, someone caught and stabled me, whereupon they forcefully connected their knee to my chest. My body crumpled to the ground in a heap, despite my desire to continue and flee. I chuckled softly. Perhaps I may not have fit the ideal form of what a gentleman ought to be, but at this point, they met the specifications less than I.

They crowded about and began to kick me. It hurt, of course, but what I hated more was just lying there in the short, cool and damp grass. Properly kept lawns were quite pretty in the sun, but I could not even see the lawn at the moment, and nevertheless, it was still quite an improper thing to be lying upon. On the bare earth, like some sort of animal. They railed blow upon blow over me. I could hear them saying things, but was unable to decipher much more than an occasional, "filthy mandrake." It didn't matter, I'm sure I could have guessed anyway.

They had stopped for a moment. It hurt to breathe. Would that I had been unable to, or that I had lost consciousness, for the pain in my side was so great; I assume that they had broken a rib of mine. I wonder whether they intended to play the part of executioner in addition to judge and jury? If they were to dump me in the river, then they would have no cause to worry, I'm sure. While there were some people who may have been honest enough to say that I had been

here this evening, the people it would incriminate were far too powerful and influential for it to have done much good. I made an attempt to stand, but someone pushed me down and I was kicked into submission once more.

There was a gunshot. I attempted to squirm away for a moment, and then paused, realizing that I had not been shot. A bit of loud speaking and the men gathered round me dispersed, but my head was facing the wrong direction, and pounding besides. I could not determine the speaker in the slightest; only a blurry image of an absinthe glass. But why should that matter? I knew well enough the only one who would come to my defense.

His hand reached and picked the glass lying in the grass to my front. "Hmm. Empty. Tut tut, Calvin, can you not learn to hold onto things without dropping them? You know, you're awfully lucky you took this from me," he stood and then threw the glass. I heard it clink against a tree or rock somewhere in the distance, "I might not have come looking for it."

"Kindly shut up, Scott," I grumbled weakly.

"Well, that's not a nice way to treat your rescuer. Can you stand? I'd like to get out of here before everyone comes looking for the gunshot. Or worse yet, they return with guns of their own. I didn't actually shoot anyone, but of course everyone is bound to come looking, and... oh..."

Scott helped me up and slung my arm over his shoulder. I dangled weakly on the side as we made our way round the manor and onto the street.

"What did you do to them anyway?"

"I think I might have dabbled it up with Chesterford's son..."

Scott stifled a laugh.

"I do hope they aren't too hard on him," I murmured as Scott hailed a hansom. We

ignored the driver's arched brow, and Scott helped me up and inside.

"1266, Wyndmoor St," he shouted out to the driver before hastily closing the door. I surveyed my appearance: my clothes were peppered with wet dirt and a few shreds of grass, the white lace of my cravat had dribbles of blood. The splotches of what might as well have been a glass of burgundy had come from my broken nose, I presume.

"How is it that you managed to discern my predicament?"

"Does it matter? It's not like we would be returning and I should have to explain my sudden absence. I noticed you were not present, and neither was Chesterford and several other occupants of the room..."

"Why is it that you had a gun, then?"

"As I said, I feared that the Lord Ambassador should challenge me to a duel."

"Ah."

I looked outside, in the darkness, at nothing in particular.

"So, what are we to do now, then?"

I do not know which of asked, but the question went unanswered. We rode in silence, and upon exiting the hansom, made our way quickly through the dark and into the house. Street Lamps were useless things. Even if they were on, they only told you where you were, and never where you were going or how to fix what was wrong.

The servant was aghast at my appearance, whatever his sentiments towards me. I asked for a cup of tea, and he complied silently. Scott and I determined our course. I was tired, and I retired promptly.

We ought to have done this ages ago.

I hobbled out the door. The sun had just risen, and the street was doused in a faint and glowing white light. Birds chirped in the radiance. The street lamps might not even have existed; I felt like whacking each and every one with my cane bearing all force I could possibly muster. There was no need for their constricting, fake and artificial light, created by and for arbitrary purposes. It was of no consequence, nearly the maligned creation of a rampant bunch of fools who thought they knew the difference between right and wrong. I hated it. Why bother with the things, when there was the brilliance of the sun. The night? They would counter. The darkness? The darkness had its merits as well; there was no reason to change the nature of things.

But what did they matter now? In a few scant hours or perhaps more, knowing Scott, we would be away, and free from this brutish and pretending place with all its constraints and expectations. I waved to Scott, watching me from the staircase with pursed lips. In the doorway behind, his servant stood, anxious, but awed.

Amsterdam was not so far away. Scott had suggested it almost immediately, and he already knew the language. It was, perhaps, the most socially tolerant city in Europe, and a fitting destination for a Mandrake and a Lushington. No doubt the street lamps would be better there.