

# THE COUNTESS AND HER FRIENDS.

From the Metropolitan for Sept. A TALE OF COQUETRY.

WHEN I went abroad, the hope of enjoying the society of an old college friend, Ned Hayleigh, with whom I had long been on terms of the most confidential intercourse, induced me to go forthwith to Milan. Had I reflected on his confirmed social habits, some hesitation might have delayed this step. Ned Hayleigh was, there was no room for the acknowledgment of a moody humor, since he was an inflexible adherent of all the merry sports like himself that came within his sphere, and one was certain to find him the centre of a riotous group as ever gave food for the lice sheet of Bow-street office, or troubled the panting proctors of the Alma Mater. As it proved, however, my seeking him was the wisest course that I could possibly have adopted, for under the most trying circumstances high spirits are more or less contagious, and the melancholy that might have nursed itself into madness, frequently gives way before the exhilarating influence of surrounding mirth. Poor Ned! a finer fellow never breathed; he would have dared death and sea to serve a friend, and so well was his warm nature appreciated, that his friends would, even to the end of their utmost to serve him in turn. He was drawn some years after in Norway, and there lies his dust.

"Noli, my dear boy," said he, when I joined him, "you are as welcome as if you brought news of a legacy. Sit down here, old fellow. Dined, I suppose?" Sullivan, whose round the bottle—Grimmett, bring glasses. Sullivan, Jack Forby, Macneil, Wilson—my friend Warner Ophiast."

"This brief introduction paved the way to a delightful addition to my circle of acquaintance. Forby had been my cotemporary at St. John's; Major Sullivan was a stranger, but I had known his brother; Macneil and Wilson were new faces, but very young, very merry, and very good-natured; were familiar at once, and intimates in an hour.

"We are to adjourn to the *la Scala*," said Macneil, a young Scotch laird; "are you inclined to join us? You will hear the most singing in Italy to-night, if Hayleigh permits you to listen."

"Very true," said Major Sullivan. "Velluti was in magnificent voice at rehearsal, though I prophesy that this *Aureliano* will disappoint the hopes of its stripping composer. The thing will be a failure, unless that wonderful voice, with its incomparable power and execution, avails to save it. However, with Velluti you do not risk a disappointment."

"And as all the world will be there," said Wilson, "you can have a catalogue with notes and illustrations of all the *troupiers* in Milan. It will be a vast saving of time to you in that preliminary branch of your education."

"I shall be delighted to visit a theatre which has the credit of being the first in the world. Let me finish my glass of claret, and I am much at your service."

After a few minutes' further conversation, we rose to go. "Ned," I heard Sullivan say, "you know it is quite against rule to allow your friend to sit with that; that is, in the Society's box at least."

"Nonsense! I will be his surety that he joins us in a week," said Hayleigh.

"In that case we may for once break the rule," said Sullivan. "The fact is," he added, turning to me, "the *Aurora*, a society to which we all belong but you, has a box at the *Scala*; and we have agreed to suspend our rule against the admission of strangers in your favor; Hayleigh here will explain the somewhat unusual method of gaining admittance, should you desire to become one of us."

In half an hour we were all seated in the theatre, enjoying the second act of Rossini's *Aureliano*, and surveying the varied and numerous audience. There was only one person in our box besides our own party; he was a young man who seemed to take very little interest in the opera, and a great deal in a box on the same tier as ours, but the opposite side. I concluded he was one of the *Aurora*.

"Pray, Ophiast," said Ned, "where did you pick up that funeral aspect? You are not dressed in mourning, or I should fancy your grand-uncle had died. Where got those that goose look?"

"Do not ask me now; you shall hear the story soon, and a fearful one it is. But come, tell me how one is admitted to the privileges of this society. I have serious thoughts of becoming a member. Are you any relations to the *Aurora*?"

"None in the least, except that my title, like those of the fantastic corporations you name, embodies a joke. Look across the theatre—there is a line with the chandelier—and what you see."

"I see a very beautiful girl, of diminutive figure, sitting alone, and stealing frequent glances at this side to this very box."

"No wonder," said Ned, "for she is the patroness of the *Aurora*."

"That is the Countess V.," said Macneil, "a rich widow of a poor Italian count, aged nineteen in years, but twice nineteen in cunning. She is an English girl, and her father kept a fruit-shop on the Strand. She travelled in Italy after her death, and met Count V., who fell in love with her to distraction; if she did not love him, she was delighted with his title, and her mother, captivated with his mouseth, gave consent to a marriage. At seventeen she was a bride, at eighteen a widow, and now all the English in Milan seem anxious to make her a bride at nineteen."

livan was right in his belief that Mildworth had only to ask her hand to obtain it; she had resolved from the first to secure him, if possible, and it was the proudest moment of her life that saw him at her feet. On this chance, strange to say, his thoughtless lordship had never calculated, and when he heard a soft and impetuous consent to his solicitations, nothing could exceed his surprise, except his embarrassment. The Countess V. must have thought him a gawky lover, for instead of receiving her gentle confession by pressing her incomparable hand to his licensed lips, and whatever else accepted suitors do, he sat on his chair in dumb amazement, revolving in his mind the best means of escape and emancipation; he was what your friend Tollet would call 'planted.' Invention refused to befriend him; and at last, in utter despair, he pressed her hand, gave his forehead a couple of slaps, and rushed from the room, the beautiful Agnes being left in the belief that her last new worshiper was afflicted with temporary derangement.

"Such a woman—yes, I would remain."

"Soon after I met Sullivan. We talked about the Countess V., and at last I took him into my confidence, told him of my love and its issue, and how I was the firmest and chosen friend of the woman I adored, but could not marry. The major laughed heartily, and disconcerted me not a little.

"Forgive my rudeness, but the fact is, that your story is the exact counterpart of what occurred to me, and I too am the most esteemed of the countess among her friends." This was startling, but it was exactly true; so I echoed the laugh, though it seemed somewhat against myself. Wilson here joined our circle, and the major one day made a bolt of a hundred that, if he proposed, the result would be the same.

"And lost," said I, "for the credit of poor human nature."

"No, by Jove! I won," said Sullivan, "and might have done so in half a dozen other cases, but one does not like to take advantage of moral certainties."

"Well," said Macneil, "we learned to enjoy the thing, and set on two or three other fellows to become her friends. At last Sullivan proposed that we should form a club, to be called the *Aurora*, no one to be permitted the privileges of membership until he had made love to the countess, and been nominated by her the most esteemed of her friends."

"So then, you have your name, not by virtue of being friends to each other, but to the Countess V.?"

"Exactly," answered Macneil; "and now what do you think of the lady?"

"That a lady who can desire to be surrounded closely by men who have longed for her as a wife, is just little better than—"

"Than our worthy patroness," chimed in Ned Hayleigh. "Don't crack, Noli; you hardly appreciate the dear creature yet. There are women so fond of admiration that they cannot bear to part with an adorer and to whom it would be death to see the discarded one swell the train of another fair; yet so conceitedly selfish, that they would never bestow purse and person on one who is not able to give them more than an equivalent—such is our countess. As for love, you might as well expect love from a drumstick."

"But does she not find out you are laughing at her?" inquired.

"You do not know how blind one may become through vanity," said the major.

"She thinks we are all dying for her still, whilst in truth we are only dying of laughter. Did you remark the man who sat in this box when we came in? Is he now at her side?"

I looked up, and saw him conversing earnestly with the lady opposite.

"That is Lord Mildworth; he insists on endeavoring to become a member, yet I feel convinced that if he proposes she will accept him at once, without a single hint about friendship. She knows he will be an earl one day soon."

"And now," said Hayleigh, "that you understand the constitution of our society, will you become a member?"

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