

# To Each His Own Kind

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London was everything the Count had imagined it to be when he'd told Jonathan Harker of how he'd longed to walk "through the crowded streets... to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity." *Although*, he amended as he waited for a break in the evening traffic that would allow him to cross Piccadilly, *a little less whirl and rush would be preferable.*

He could see the house he'd purchased across the street, but it might as well have been across the city for all he could reach it. Yes, he'd wanted to move about unnoticed but this, this was wearing at his patience. And he had never been considered a patient man. Even as a man.

Finally, he'd been delayed for as long as he was willing to endure. Sliding the smoked glasses down his nose, he deliberately met the gaze of an approaching horse. In his homeland, the effect would have been felt between one heartbeat and the next. Terror.

Panic. Flight. This London carriage horse, however, seemed to accept his presence almost phlegmatically.

Then the message actually made it through the city's patina to the equine brain.

*Better*, he thought and strode untouched through the resulting chaos. Ignoring the screams of injured men and horses both, he put the key into the lock and stepped inside.

He'd purchased the house furnished from the estate of Mr. Archibald Winter-Suffield. From the dead, as it were. That amused him.

His belongings were in the dining room at the back of the house.

"The dining room?" He sighed. His orders to the shipping company had only instructed that the precious cases be placed in the house. Apparently, here in this new country, he needed to be more specific. They would have to be moved to a place less conspicuous, but not now, not with London calling to him. He set his leather case upon the table and turned to go.

Stepping around a chair displaced by the boxes of earth, he brushed against the sideboard, smearing dust across his sleeve. Snarling, he brushed at it with his gloved hand but only succeeded in smearing it further. The coat was new. He'd sent his measurements to Peter Hawkins before he'd started his journey and had found clothing suitable for an English gentleman at journey's end. It was one of the last commissions Mr. Hawkins had fulfilled for him. One of the last he would fulfill for anyone, as it happened. The old man had been useful, but the necessity of frequent correspondence had left him knowing too much.

Opening the case, he pulled out a bundle of deeds—this was not the only house that English dead had provided—and another bundle of note paper, envelopes, and pens. As he set them down, he reminded himself to procure ink as soon as possible. He disliked being without it. Written communications allowed a certain degree of distance from those who did his bidding.

Finally, after some further rummaging, he found his clothing brush and removed the dust from his sleeve. Presentable at last, he tossed the brush down on the table and hurried for the street, suddenly impatient to begin savoring this new existence.

*"... to share its life, its change, its death, all that makes it what it is."*

The crowd outside on Piccadilly surprised him and he stopped at the top of the stairs. The crowds he knew in turn knew better than to gather outside his home. When he realized that the people were taking no notice of him and had, in fact, gathered to watch the dead horse pulled up onto a wagon, he

descended to the street.

He thrilled to his anonymity as he made his way among them. To walk through a great mass of Londoners unremarked—it was all he had dreamed it would be. To feel their lives surrounding him, unaware of their danger. To walk as a wolf among the unsuspecting lambs. To know that even should he declare himself, they would not believe. It was a freedom he had never thought to experience again.

Then a boy, no more than eight or ten, broke free of his minder and surged forward to get a clearer look. Crying, "Hey now!" a portly man stepped out of the child's way.

The pressure of the man's foot on his meant less than nothing but he hissed for the mark it made on his new shoes. And for the intrusion into his solitude.

The portly man turned at the sound, ruddy cheeks pale as he scanned the ground.

By the time he looked up, the Count had composed himself. It would not do to give himself away over so minor a thing.

"You aren't going to believe this," the man said without preamble, his accent most definitely not English, "but I could've sworn I heard a rattler." Then he smiled and extended his hand. "I do beg your pardon, sir, for treading on you as I did. Shall we consider my clumsiness an introduction? Charlie March, at your service."

The novelty of the situation prodded him to take the offered hand. "I am..." He paused for an instant and considered. Should he maintain the identity that went with the house? But no. The Count de Ville was a name that meant nothing; he would not surrender his lineage so easily. Straightening to his full height, he began again. "I am Dracula. Count Dracula."

The smile broadened. "A Count? Bless me. You're not from around these parts, are you?"

"No. I am only recently arrived."

"From the continent? I could tell. Your accent, you know. Very old world, very refined. Romania?"

The Count blinked and actually took a step back before he gained control of his reaction.

Charlie laughed. "I did some business with a chap from Romania last year. Bought some breeding stock off me. Lovely manners you lot have, lovely."

"Thank you." It was really the only thing he could think of to say.

"I'm not from around these parts myself." He continued before there was even a chance of a reply. "Me, I'm American. Got a big spread out west, the Double C—the missus's name is Charlotte, you see. She's the reason we came to England. She got tired of spending money in New York and wanted to spend some in London." His gaze flicked up, then down, then paused. "That's one hell of a diamond you've got stuck in your tie, if you don't mind my saying so."

"It has been in my family for a long time." He'd taken it from the finger of a Turk after he'd taken the finger from the Turk.

"Well, there's nothing like old money, that's what I always say." Again the smile, which had never entirely disappeared, broadened. "Unless it's new money. Have you plans for this evening, Count?"

"Plans?" He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so nonplused. In fact, he couldn't remember if he'd ever been so nonplused. "No."

"Then if you're willing I'd like to make up for treading so impolitely on your foot. I'm heading to a sort of a soiree at a friend's." His eyelids dropped to a conspiratorial level. "You know, the sort of soiree you don't take your missus to. Oh, you needn't worry about the company," he added hurriedly. "They're your kind of people." He leaned a little closer and dropped his voice. "His Royal Highness will be there. You know, the Prince of Wales."

About to decline the most peculiar invitation he'd ever received, the Count paused. The Prince of Wales would be in attendance. The Prince of Wales. His kind of people. "I would be pleased to attend this soiree as your guest," he said. And smiled.

"Damn, but you've got some teeth on you."

"Thank you. They are a... family trait."

The party was being held in a house on St. James Square. Although only a short walk from his own London sanctuary, the buildings were significantly larger and the occupants of the buildings either very well born or very rich. Seldom both, as it happened. It was an area where by birth and power he deserved to live but where it would be impossible for him to remain hidden. Years of experience had taught him that the very rich and the very poor were equals in their thirst for gossip, but the strange and growing English phenomenon of middle class—well researched before he'd left his homeland—seemed willing to keep their attention on business rather than their neighbors.

He followed Charlie March up the stairs and paused at the door, wondering if so general an invitation would allow him to cross the threshold.

Two steps into the foyer, March turned with his perpetual smile. "Well, come in, Count. No need to wait for an engraved invitation."

"No, of course not." He joined the American in removing his hat, coat, and gloves, handing them into the care of a liveried footman.

"I expect you'll want to meet His Highness first?"

"It would be proper to pay my immediate respects to the prince."

"Proper to pay your immediate respects," March repeated shaking his head. "Didn't I say you lot have lovely manners. Where would His Highness be then?" he asked the footman.

"The green salon, sir."

"Of course he is, the evening's young. I should have known. This way then." He took hold of the Count's arm to turn him toward the stairs. "Say, there's not a lot of meat on your bones is there? Now me, I think a little stoutness shows a man's place in the world."

"Indeed." He stared down at the fleshy fingers wrapped just above his elbow, too astonished at being so held to be enraged.

Fortunately, he was released before the astonishment faded, for it would have been the height of rudeness to kill the man while they were both guests in another's home.

At the top of the stairs they crossed a broad landing toward an open doorway through which spilled the sounds of men... and women? He paused. He would not be anonymous in this crowd. He would be introduced and be expected to take part in social discourse. While he looked forward to the opportunity of testing his ability to walk unknown and unseen amongst the living, he also found himself strangely afraid. It had been a very, very long time since he had been a member of such a party and it would have been so much easier had the women not been there.

He had always had a weakness—no, say rather a fondness, for he did not admit weakness—for a pretty face.

"Problem, Count?" March paused in the doorway and beamed back at him.

*On the other hand, if this man can move amongst the powerful of London and they do not see him for what he is...* "No, not at all, Mr. March. Lead on."

There had been little imagination involved in the naming of the green salon, for the walls were covered in a brocaded green wallpaper that would have been overwhelming had it not been covered in turn by dozens of paintings. A few were surprisingly good, most were indifferent, and all had been placed within remarkably ugly frames. The furniture had been upholstered in a variety of green and gold and cream patterns and underfoot was a carpet predominantly consisting of green cabbage roses. Everything that could be gilded, had been. Suppressing a shudder, he was almost overcome by a sudden wave of longing for the bare stone and dark, heavy oak of home.

Small groups of people were clustered about the room, but his eyes were instantly drawn to the pair of facing settees where half a dozen beautiful women sat talking together, creamy shoulders and bare arms rising from silks and satins heavily corseted around impossibly tiny waists. How was it his newspapers had described the women to be found circling around the prince? Ah yes, as "*a flotilla of white swans, their long necks supporting delicate jeweled heads.*" He had thought it excessively fanciful when he read it but now, now he saw that it was only beautifully accurate.

"We'll introduce you to the ladies later," March murmured, leading the way across the center of the room. "That's His Highness by the window."

Although he would have much preferred to take the less obvious route around the edges, the Count followed. As they passed the ladies, he glanced down. Most were so obviously looking away they could only have been staring at him the moment before, but one met his gaze. Her eyes widened and her lips parted but she did not look away. He could see the pulse beating in the soft column of her throat. *Later*, he promised, and moved on.

"Your Royal Highness, may I present a recent acquaintance of mine, Count Dracula."

Even before March spoke, he had identified which of the stout, whiskered men smoking cigars by the open window was Edward, the Prince of Wales. Not from the newspaper photographs, for he found it difficult to see the living in such flat black and gray representations, but from the nearly visible aura of power that surrounded him. Like recognized like. Power recognized power. If the reports accompanying the photographs were true, the prince was not allowed much in the way of political power but he was clearly conscious of himself as a member of the royal caste.

He bowed, in the old way, body rigid, heels coming together. "I am honored to make your acquaintance, Your Highness."

The prince's heavy lids dropped slightly. "Count Dracula? This sounds familiar, yah? You are from where?"

"From the Carpathian Mountains, Highness," he replied in German. His concerns about sounding foreign had obviously been unnecessary. Edward sounded more like a German prince than an English one. "My family has been *boyers*, princes there since before we turned back the Turk many centuries ago. Princes still when we threw off the Hungarian yoke. Leaders in every war. But..." He sighed and spread his hands. "... the warlike days are over and the glories of my great race are as a tale that is told."

"Well said, sir!" the prince exclaimed in the same language. "Although I am certain I have heard your name, I am afraid I do not know that area well—as familiar as I am with most of Europe." He smiled and added, "As related as I am to most of Europe. If you are not married, Dracula, I regret I have no sisters remaining."

The gathered men laughed with the prince, although the Count could see not all of them—and Mr. March was of that group—spoke German. "I am not married now, Your Highness, although I was in the past."

"Death takes so many," Edward agreed solemnly.

The Count bowed again. "My deepest sympathies on the death of your eldest son, Highness." The

report of how the Duke of Clarence had unexpectedly died of pneumonia in early 1892 had been in one of the last newspaper bundles he'd received. As far as the Count was concerned, death should be unexpected, but he was perfectly capable of saying what others considered to be the right thing. If it suited his purposes.

"It was a most difficult time," Edward admitted. "And the wound still bleeds. I would have given my life for him." He stared intently at his cigar.

With predator patience, the Count absorbed the silence that followed as everyone but he and the prince shifted uncomfortably in place.

"Shall I tell you how I met the Count, your Highness?" March asked suddenly. "There was a bully smash up on Piccadilly."

"A bully smash up?" the prince repeated lifting his head and switching back to English. "Were you in it?"

"No, sir, I wasn't."

"Was the Count?"

"No sir, he wasn't either. But we both saw it, didn't we, Count?"

The Count saw that the prince was amused by the American so, although he dearly wanted to put the man in his place, he said only, "Yes."

"And you consider this accident to be a gutt introduction to a Carpathian prince?" Edward asked, smiling.

If March had possessed a tail, the Count realized, he'd have been wagging it; he was so obviously pleased that he'd lifted the Prince of Wales's spirits. "Yes, sir, I did. Few things bring men together like disasters. Isn't that true, Count?"

*That*, he could wholeheartedly agree with. He was introduced in turn to Lord Nathan Rothschild, Sir Ernest Cassel, and Sir Thomas Lipton—current favorites of Prince Edward—and he silently thanked the English newspapers and magazines that had provided enough facts about these men for him to converse intelligently.

He was listening with interest to a discussion of the Greek-Turkish War when he became aware of Mr. March's scrutiny. Turning toward the American, he caught the pudgy man's gaze and held it. "Yes?"

March blinked, and the Count couldn't help thinking that even the horse on Piccadilly hadn't taken so long to recognize its danger. It wasn't that March was stupid—it seemed that old terrors had been forgotten in his new land.

"I was just wondering about your glasses, Count. Why do you keep those smoked lenses on inside?"

Because the prince was also listening, he explained. "My eyes are very sensitive to light and I am not used to so much interior illumination." He gestured at the gas lamps. "This is quite a marvel to me."

Prince Edward beamed. "You will find England at the very front of science and technology. This..." he echoed the Count's gesture, trailing smoke from his cigar, "is nothing. Before not much longer we will see electricity take the place of gas, motor cars take the place of horses, and actors and actresses..." his smile was answered by the most beautiful of the women seated across the room, "replaced by images on a screen. I, myself have seen these images—have seen them move—right here in London. The British Empire shall lead the way into the new century!"

Those close enough to hear applauded, and March shouted an enthusiastic "Hurrah!"

The Count bowed a third time. "It is why I have come to London, Highness; to be led into the new century."

"Gutt man." A footman carrying a tray of full wine glasses appeared at the prince's elbow. "Please try the burgundy, it is a very gutt wine."

About to admit that he did not drink wine, the Count reconsidered. In order to remain un-noted, he must be seen to do as others did. "Thank you, Highness." It helped that the burgundy was a rich, dark red. While he didn't actually drink it, he appreciated the color.

When the clock on the mantle struck nine, Edward led the way to the card room, motioning that the Count should fall in beside him. "Have you seen much of my London?" he asked.

"Not yet, Highness. Although I was at the zoo only a few days past."

"The zoo? I have never been there, myself. Animals I am most fond of, I see through my sights." He mimed shooting a rifle and again his immediate circle, now walking two by two down the hall behind him, laughed.

"And he'd rather see a good race than govern, wouldn't you, Highness?" Directly behind Edward's shoulder, March leaned forward enough to come between the two princes. "Twenty-eight race meetings last year. I heard that's three more visits than he made to his House of Lords."

The Count felt the Prince of Wales stiffen beside him. Before the prince could speak, the Count turned and dipped his head just far enough to spear March over the edge of his glasses. "It is not wise," he said slowly, "to repeat everything one hears."

To his astonishment, March smiled. "I wouldn't repeat it outside this company."

"Don't," Edward advised.

"You betcha," March agreed. "Say, Count, your eyes are kind of red. My missus has some drops she puts in hers. I could find out what they are if you like."

Too taken aback to be angry, the Count shook his head. "No. Thank you."

Murmuring, "Lovely manners," in an approving tone, March stepped forward so that he could open the card room door for the prince.

"He is rough, like many Americans," Edward confided in low German as they entered. "But his heart is gutt and, more importantly, his wallet is deep."

"Then for your sake, Highness..."

The game in the card room was bridge and Prince Edward had a passion for it. After two hours of watching the prince move bits of painted card about, the Count understood the attraction no better than he had in the beginning.

Just after midnight, the prince gave his place to Sir Thomas.

"It was gutt to meet you, Count Dracula. I hope to see you again."

"You will, Highness."

Caught and held in the red gaze, the prince wet full lips and swallowed heavily.

One last time, the Count bowed and stepped back, breaking his hold.

Breathing heavily, Edward hurried from the room. A woman's laughter met him in the hall.

The Count turned to the table. "If you will excuse me, gentlemen, now that His Highness has taken his leave, I will follow. I am certain that I will see you *all* again."

In the foyer, only for the pleasure of watching terror blanch the boy's cheek, he brushed the footman's hand with his as he took back his gloves.

He very nearly made it out the door.

"Say, Count! Hold up and I'll walk with you." March fell into step beside him as he crossed the threshold back into the night. "It's close in those rooms, ain't it? September's a lot warmer here than it is back home. Where are you heading?"

"To the Thames."

"Going across to the fleshpots in Southwark?" the American asked archly.

"Fleshpots?" It took him a moment to understand. "No. I will not be crossing the river."

"Just taking a walk on the shore then? Count me in."

They walked in blessed silence for a few moments, along Pall Mall and down Cockspur Street.

"His Highness likes you, Count. I could tell. You have a real presence in a room, you know."

"The weight of history, Mr. March."

"Say what?"

He saw a rat watching him from the shadow, rat and shadow both in the midst of wealth and plenty, and he smiled. "It is not necessary you understand."

Silence reigned again until they reached the riverbank.

"You seemed to be having a good time tonight, Count." March leaned on the metal railings at the top of the embankment. "Didn't I tell you they were your kind of people?"

"Yes."

"So." A bit of loose stone went over the edge and into the water. "Did you want to go somewhere for a bite?"

"That won't be necessary." He removed his glasses and slid them carefully into an inside pocket. "Here is fine."

The body slid down the embankment and was swallowed almost silently by the dark water. Replete, the Count drew the back of one hand over his mouth then stared in annoyance at the dark smear across the back of his glove. These were his favorite gloves; they'd have to be washed.

He turned toward home, then he paused.

Why hurry?

The night was not exactly young, but morning would be hours still.

As he walked along the riverbank toward the distant sound of voices, he smiled. The late Charlie March had not been entirely correct. The prince and his company were not exactly his kind of people...

... yet.