



LORD EGLINTON'S WAGER

Baroness Orczy

Illustrated by
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AND the miniature?

Ah, yes; it is Lord Eglinton. You know, that same handsome, merry, dashing, young Lord Eglinton who won all hearts at the Court of Louis XV., and created for himself a reputation for valour and—shall I say!—for impudence unequalled by any of his contemporaries.

How well the artist has caught the expression of those laughing blue eyes, and of the proud, disdainful line around the sensitive lips.

No wonder the young Englishman was popular at the Court of Versailles. He was rich, too, and a magnificent swordsman, and what was best of all—an ardent admirer of the fairer sex. It was the age of frailty, too: virtue was not a la mode at that brilliant Court, and many a pair of ruby lips smiled at the gallant young Englishman, and tender eyes wept when he frowned.

No wonder that he held smiles and tears lightly, nay, even in gentle, pleasant contempt. The gardens of Versailles were full of overflowing with lovely, luscious fruit, and he had but to stretch forth one of his slender, aristocratic hands, and lo! the ripening peach and full-blown apple fell readily within his grasp.

Not all, though. There was Marianne de Neuilly. Proud, exquisite, fastidious Marianne! scarce out of her teens, yet with all the jeune noblesse of France at her feet. They knelt, and she passed disdainfully by, holding up her dainty white skirts away from contamination with this dissolute Court.

She was under the guardianship of her brother, the Duc de Neuilly, himself as proud as Lucifer.

And he had plenty to be proud of, too. His ancient lineage, his position at Court, his influence and political attainments; and, above all, the beauty and virtue of his sister and ward, Marianne. Marianne was tall and divinely fair, and prouder even than her brother, M. le Duc de Neuilly.

Everyone at Versailles knew that, and at this Court where freedom of language was only equalled by freedom of action, a barrier of respect and instinctive homage had been erected around the personality of Marianne de Neuilly.

The young Earl of Eglinton should have known it, too.

Nay! I'll not excuse him! but remember, he had been very much spoilt, and not one pair of beautiful eyes had ever frowned when Lord Eglinton had chosen to smile.

But that night he felt piqued.

He had danced the minuet with her, and whispered soft nothings in her ears, which she had received with such disdainful aloofness that an unaccountable sense seized him, as of a conqueror baffled by a weaker foe.

Then his friends and hers began to chaff him: it had been very amusing to watch the irresistible young buck being so persistently snubbed, where he most desired to conquer.

"Ma foi, milor Eglinton," said the young Marquis de Mirepoix, "you will find our French beauties more farouche than your English ones, eh?"

"And 'tis many a time you will prick your fingers, as you aim at gathering the roses of France!" added the Viscount d'Ethain, with an affected smirk.

"By this you mean, M. le Visconte?" queried the Englishman, haughtily.

"That the fleur de lys is not destined to adorn the Eglinton coat of arms, milor," responded the Visconte, lightly. "No offence, I assure. Will you honour me at a game of hazard?"

The young lord bit his lip. His temper was rising. Accustomed to succeed and to rule, he was not ready to take failure philosophically.

And Marianne was very beautiful! Her very pride had captivated his fancy! He would have given much to force her to stoop.

"A game of hazard, milor?" repeated the young Visconte, with a slightly ironical smile.

"As you please," retorted Lord Eglinton.

The Visconte shuffled the cards, and the talk drifted into other channels, but Lord Eglinton remained moody and silent, despite the fact that, as the evening wore on, a pile of gold seemed to grow in amazing profusion close beside him, whilst the young Visconte's pile diminished with equally astonishing rapidity.

"Ah, milor!" said the Visconte at last, as he threw a further handful of louis on the table, "I find myself wishing that your suit had prospered to-night."

"My suit?" queried Lord Eglinton, haughtily.

"Aye, indeed! for does not the proverb say: 'Unlucky in love, lucky at cards?'"

"And you consider, monsieur, that being lucky at cards to-night, I must of necessity have been unlucky in love!" added the Englishman, with that icy calm which always portends a coming storm.

"Obviously, milor," retorted the other lightly, "had Mlle. de Neuilly not frowned on you, I might still be richer by the several hundred louis which have passed from my pocket into yours."

"Then have no fear, Visconte, my luck at cards is always of short duration."

"Oh?"

"As is my ill-luck in love."

"Is that a boast, milor?"

"It is more, Visconte, it is a challenge."

"How so?"

"Will you take my wager?"

"Certainly."

"Double or quits," continued Lord Eglinton, carelessly passing his hand over the pile of gold beside him and scattering it over the table, so that the louis rolled hither and thither, some of them on to the floor.

"Double or quits by all means," retorted the Visconte. "What is your wager, milor?"

"That my suit prospers to-night."

"With Mademoiselle de Neuilly?" queried the Visconte, ironically. "Nay! I'll lay you half my fortune that she'll not smile on you to-night."

"Double or quits," said the Englishman, coldly. "That I win a kiss from Marianne de Neuilly to-night."

"Liar and impudent coward," came in stentorian accents from the further end of the room.

Lord Eglinton turned suddenly to face the daring utterer of this monstrous insult, and found himself face to face with the Duc de Neuilly, Marianne's brother, and the guardian of her person and of her innocence.

There was a moment of deathlike stillness in the room. The Visconte had not replied to the Englishman's final challenge, and Lord Eglinton himself, dazed by this sudden tragic turn of events, felt his proud temper, his boastful arrogance, slipping away from him like a noisome mantle of evil.

His sangfroid had never forsaken him, even when he had proposed the insolent wager over a woman's honour, but now he saw his own conduct in all its cowardice, and in his turn would have given half his fortune to undo the past half-hour of his life.

The Duc de Neuilly had stepped forward and lightly thrown his glove in the Englishman's face.

A deadly insult, and one that could only be wiped out by the blood, freely shed in a woman's cause.

There were but four men present in the room at the time: the two antagonists, facing one another, then the Visconte d'Ethain and the Marquis de Mirepoix, passive spectators of the coming inevitable tragedy.

The card-room where this brief drama was taking place was some little distance from the ball-room beyond, whence the sound of gay dance music came as a faint and tender echo.

"Then draw, milor," said the Duc de Neuilly, with equal calm; "for as the cowardly words left your lips I swore to God that you should not leave this room alive."

"As you please!"

"Marquis, I pray you guard the doors," continued the Duc, quietly; "the quarrel is between myself and milor Eglinton alone. Gentlemen, I trust to your honour that my sister's name will not be mentioned in connection with this affair."

"We swear it, of course," said the Marquis and Visconte jointly.

"We'll call it a quarrel over a game of cards, M. le Duc," added Lord Eglinton. "I swear to you that I already regret my presumptuous folly, and am prepared to pay for it at the risk of my life."

There were a few preliminary details to go through ere these two high-born gentlemen prepared to cut one another's throat.

But the Marquis de Mirepoix was well versed in all matters pertaining to the etiquette of affairs of honour. He also saw to the door, that no one should come to disturb the combatants; he, himself, acted as second to the Duc de Neuilly, whilst the Visconte d'Ethain performed the same friendly office towards Lord Eglinton.

It is from the Visconte himself that we have the particulars of this extraordinary and momentous duel. Both gentlemen were noted swordsmen, both in the prime of life, active and determined.

On the whole, perhaps, at first sight, the advantage lay with the Englishman. He was as calm and impassive as if he were practising with the foils in a salle d'armes, rather than measuring swords with a man who had sworn before God that he should not leave the room alive.

The Duc de Neuilly was too well-bred, too proud, to show the deadly hatred which he felt for the man who—he considered—had dared to insult Marianne. That a storm of passion was raging beneath his outward calm was, however, clear to both the spectators, for from the first the Duc's sword-play was somewhat wild.

He attacked the Englishman with vigour, nay!—so the Visconte asserts—with passionate fury, whilst Lord Eglinton at first confined himself to a defensive line of action.

The Duc seemed with the very point of his blade to challenge his antagonist to a more determined attack, once or twice he so uncovered himself that it was a marvel that the Englishman's sword did not pierce his breast.

The Visconte, in his account of the duel, makes a great point of this fact, and he is right there, as it certainly makes what subsequently followed all the more unexplainable.

Both the spectators were lost in admiration of Lord Eglinton's brilliant parries, and of his admirable sangfroid. But these very qualities seemed every moment to enrage the Duc de Neuilly more and more, and his last attack was dealt with such indiscreet fury that literally the Englishman held his French antagonist's life absolutely at his mercy.

And yet, at the very moment of such an easy and assured victory, something happened. . . . What was it? Neither the Visconte nor the Marquis were ever able to say; all they knew was that Lord Eglinton suddenly appeared to swerve, the Duc de Neuilly uttered a short cry of triumph, then one of horror as the young Englishman seemed literally to throw himself upon his antagonist's sword, and then, without a groan, fell backwards to the floor, whilst a deep crimson stain rapidly spread itself over his elegant satin waistcoat.

"My God! have I killed him?" murmured the Duc, throwing aside his wea-