

# **The Countess**

**by Austyn Granville, 1854-1922**

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HENRY SAUNDERS was seated alone at a somewhat late breakfast in the dining room of his very comfortable residence on Prairie Avenue, in the city of Chicago. He had become accustomed to these solitary repasts of late, for his wife and daughter had left nine weeks before for a trip to Europe and had not yet returned.

It was nearly 8 o'clock, and yet this worthy merchant, though, generally speaking, punctually at his desk at half past, had shown no signs of moving. "Old man Saunders," as his neighbors called him, just sat still with his untasted coffee growing cold before him and kept on thinking.

A telegram on the table confirmed a letter which he had received from his wife the day previously from New York. To one paragraph of this letter doubtless this unusual upsetting of his accustomed daily routine might be ascribed.

*I write to tell you that I have persuaded my charming friend, the Countess Honfleur, to visit us for a few days on her way to San Francisco, where she has*

*large real estate investments. She is certainly a most refined and accomplished woman and was so kind to us on board the steamer. I will telegraph you when we shall arrive. The countess is traveling incognito, as so many of the nobility of Europe do nowadays. I think it was Emily's French which attracted the countess, notwithstanding those rude people in Paris pretended not to understand it.*

As a result of this communication he put on his best clothes and was on hand to receive the party just as the train steamed into the depot.

"Henry, let me present you," said his wife as the party stepped on the platform.

Old man Saunders turned and saw a tall, handsome woman, a trifle under thirty perhaps, and looking a little tired and faded after her night in the sleeper. A profusion of light ringlets fluttered in elegant disorder about her face. Her dark brown eyes, with incipient crow's feet underneath them, hinted that their owner had lost quite a deal of what the doctors call "beauty sleep" in her lifetime.

The next instant he found himself holding in his own broad palm a tiny gloved hand, which he had reached for and secured. Mr. Saunders, honest but vulgar man, did not know that it was a shocking solecism to shake hands on a first introduction.

For the next two weeks uninterrupted gayety reigned in the establishment on Prairie Avenue. Mrs. Saunders never rested until every friend and acquaintance she possessed had been introduced to "my friend, the countess." Old man Saunders, however, while he tolerated refused to go into raptures over the newcomer.

"How long's this visit of hers goin' to last, Maria?" he kept asking impatiently, "It jest makes me sick to see her puttin' on sich airs in the house and criticisin' everybody and everything."

Mrs. Saunders was too much shocked to reply.

"There will be a grand event Tuesday week, dear," she said to her aristocratic guest that afternoon. "It will be one of the greatest affairs of the season—a little mixed perhaps, but then all charity balls in America are."

"It ees zo in my contree, madame," lisped the countess with her delightful foreign accent. "I suppose eet ees parefectly properre to wear zee diamonds. By zee vay, I don't zink you 'ave zeen my diamonds."

She took from her jewel case a magnificent necklace and tiara, with long, drooping sprays for the corsage to match, and adjusted them about her superb neck and grandly shaped bust.

"Zey aire vat you call—zee—zee heirloom. Zey once belong to zee Marquise de Honfleur. Aire zey not ver preety?"

"Do you know," said Mrs. Saunders reflectively, "I should hardly like to go into a public ballroom with those diamonds? They might be cut from your neck or dress or stolen in some way. You can't tell what might happen."

A friend of hers was on the committee of arrangements. She made him promise that at least two men in dress suits from a celebrated detective agency should be present.

But one detective came to the charity ball, however. He was a rather young man who had been drafted west from New York, but he knew his business.

There was quite a flutter on the floor when it became known that the Countess de Honfleur had arrived. She was an excellent dancer and her card was filled rapidly. The young man from New York strolled into the ballroom from the vestibule. A magnificent woman, leaning upon the arm of a member of the committee of arrangements, swept by him in a cloud of soft laces and with a suggestion of subtle odors, her jewels sparkling and scintillating upon the whiteness of her neck and shoulders. A joyous light was in her eyes; her little feet, daintily shod in white satin, kept rhythmic pace to the music.

A peculiar smile passed over the detective's mouth as he watched the countess and her partner sweep down the length of the room.

"I'm glad you sent for me," he said presently to the committeeman. "Notwithstanding your vigilance I see some queer characters have crept in here, it's best to be cautious."

"What do you mean?" asked the committeeman in astonishment and some alarm. Exclusiveness was his hobby. At the Union League club they called him "the McAllister of the west."

"Well, there's a great deal of jewelry about," replied the detective carelessly. "That diamond spray of your friend's, the countess, for instance. It would be a comparatively easy task for an expert to get away with it. I'll speak to her."

"You!"

"Why, certainly. Just introduce me. It's all right. I wasn't always a detective, you know."

"Who is that *distingué* young man waltzing with the countess?" asked Mrs. Saunders. "They seem to be well acquainted. A New Yorker, you say? Really, I must see that he is introduced to Emily."

"One turn more, and now come here," said the *distingué* gentleman from New York, in a quiet but authoritative tone, and he led the Countess de Honfleur to an ottoman, where, sheltered by a bank of hothouse plants, they could not be overheard.

She was deathly pale. "For heaven's sake, don't expose me here in this ballroom!" she pleaded.

"You should have stayed abroad as you promised me," replied the detective, profoundly agitated. "Is it not enough that you should have ruined and wrecked the life of one man who foolishly loved you? See to what you have reduced me—to be a spy and a tracker of men. And to think how I cared for you—once."

"Once!" The word came despairingly from her lips. She reached forward and laid her slender fingers on his wrist. He turned away his head and his whole frame shook with the fierce struggle that was going on within him.

"Give up this hateful life," she pleaded. "Come with me to France. I'll do anything you tell me. You talk the language fluently. There we are both unknown, and you can find work suited to you."

The leafy screen before them was thick and hid them well from view. She slipped from the ottoman to the soft and velvety rug at his feet and knelt there. Genuine tears glistened in her eyes. Her voice, attuned to the language of love, tenderly besought him.

"It is impossible," he cried at last roughly, rising and shaking her off. "You should have known long ago that there could be no reconciliation between you and me."

And now she stood before him, panting, indignant, yet terribly fearful lest he should overwhelm her before all those people, for she had injured this man beyond hope of forgiveness, and at last she knew it.

"You should have stayed abroad," he said—and it was the detective, the officer of the law, who spoke. "We told you after that last escapade of yours that if you ever returned you would find America too hot to hold you. Your disguise might deceive some, but not me, for I have learned through bitter experience all your tricks of trade—though I confess that, for a pronounced brunette, that blond wig of yours quite becomes you. How much have you let them in for down there on Prairie Avenue?"

"Only about \$500," she answered.

"They deserve to lose something for running after women like you and toadying to foreign titles. Upon my word, but the joke is a good one. La Comtesse de Honfleur! Where did you get that name? Isn't Honfleur some little fishing village on the coast of France?" But he didn't laugh, for he knew it well. It was the place where their honeymoon had been passed. What sacrilege!

She was pleading with him for life and death.

"Don't expose me. Think of my friends here; they have been so kind. Think how they will be ridiculed by all who know them, and think what the past few weeks have been to me, for I have been treated as a lady!"

Detective though he was, he was touched at last. A gentleman himself once, in the old spendthrift days which had brought him nothing but ruin and disgrace, he knew what she meant. The old instinct of caste was strong upon him. He forbore his revenge.

"Finish your evening," he said quietly, "but midnight must see you off this floor, and tomorrow must be your last day in Chicago."

He gave her his arm, and calm and apparently unmoved passed out with her to the floor of the ballroom.

"Shall we waltz, countess?" he asked her in full hearing of that fashionable gathering.

A moment later an elderly gentleman emerged from a curtained alcove, and passing behind the bank of flowers dropped onto the ottoman this man and woman had just vacated.

"Eavesdroppin' at my time of life. Well, I couldn't help it. They should have let me stay at home and finished my nap. Great Scott! What a woman, and what a romance!"

Next morning Mrs. Saunders' guest received a sudden call necessitating her immediate departure for San Francisco. She must positively go at once, she said, or her real estate interests would suffer tremendously.

It was not until six weeks later when Mrs. Saunders read in the *San Francisco Argonaut*, of the arrest of Mrs. Margaret Hambury, alias Mrs. Humphrey Lord, alias Mrs. Jennie Taylor, alias Mlle. Chicot, of the Varieties, Paris, France, alias the Countess de Honfleur, that a certain light forced itself on Mrs. Saunders' brain.

Heavens! Had she entertained an adventuress?

I'm afraid she had.

Old man Saunders could have told her a good deal which would have surprised her still further, but he didn't. Perhaps he thought his wife had been punished enough.

Old man Saunders simply kept on thinking.

