

Everything to Order

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The bell rang precisely at the appointed hour of eleven. As the porter swung wide the door, Miss Violet Carr peered out at the three well-dressed women standing on the steps half-clad in darkness. At first she was cross with the porter for not lighting enough lamps, but she realized that the visitors were hanging back in the folds of the thick fog that wrapped around the London night. Miss Carr curtsied and dipped her beautifully coiffed head with the deferential half-bow she reserved for members of the titled class. They all wore heavy coats of velvet lined with the most expensive sables, with more furs wrapping them to the ears. Their hats were also black fur, from which depended thick black silk veils. The outfits must have been sweltering on an August night. "Welcome to the House of Feldon, ladies," Miss Carr said, with deference and cordiality. Silently, the shrouded figures slipped one by one over the threshold. Once inside, they lifted their veils. Miss Carr scanned the faces and hesitated slightly, conscious of the possibility of making a dreadful faux pas and starting the evening out on the wrong foot. "I... I beg your pardon for asking—which of you is Countess Dracula?"

"We all are," the eldest said. She gave Miss Carr a smile as curiously undefinable as her accent. She didn't seem to be very much older than the youngest, who seemed as though she could boast the same number of years as Miss Carr herself, twenty-four.

Violet Carr was young for a vendeuse, but was grateful for the opportunity that the owner of the House of Feldon had bestowed upon her, to oversee showings of the house line to clients, to take orders, and to supervise fittings of the chosen garments. It was a position of trust, and she already had two—two!—titled clients who asked particularly for her when they came to the House of Feldon. She hoped to increase her status this very evening, if it meant she had to stay up until dawn.

"We must thank you for your indulgence in allowing us to come to you so very late," the eldest countess said. "We keep late hours. It is not an English custom. All of your shops are closed before sunset. How are we to make our purchases? Other houses of fashion of whom we made this little request were unable to accommodate us. It is most inconvenient."

"We endeavor to please," Miss Carr said, pleased for Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs's sake. It surely would be worthwhile having remained. These ladies were possessed of fabulous wealth. The necklace about the neck of the youngest countess was composed of real diamonds, each stone the size of Miss Carr's thumb tip. Such jewels had to be worth the value of a steamship. Those other couturiers would regret having

refused, and Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs would have reason to be smug.

Her eagerness must have showed upon her face, because the eldest countess smiled. She had a most interesting face. It spoke to Miss Carr of high breeding and quality. The cheekbones were particularly beautiful, not too protruberant, yet with a piquant shadow beneath. Her nose was high-bridged, narrow as a hawk's beak, and she had large, deep brown eyes that seemed to be a blend of black and red, and black-brown hair swept up into sleek folds around her head. She wore black velvet sewn with jet beads and fringe that swayed gently as she moved. The second lady was very much like her, the lineaments of her dark-complected face spare as a sculpture, with large dark eyes. Her dress, also of velvet, was blood red, trimmed in jet and garnets. The third lady, clad in heavy blue velvet, was equally striking, lovely in a more English manner, with masses of blonde hair, fair skin, and large, luminously blue eyes. At least their beauty would be more pleasant if these ladies had the bloom of health upon them. They were all so very pale. Perhaps in Rumania ladies of quality were not permitted or encouraged to take the air very often. It was on the tip of Miss Carr's tongue to ask, but good manners took over. It was not a question she would ever ask of an Englishwoman. She must not allow her training to desert her even though these were only foreigners.

Pages, yawning openly due to the late hour, assisted the countesses in removing their coats and hats, and vanished with the garments to the cloakroom. Miss Carr took the lead, escorting her visitors into the salon. She heard a murmur of approval from behind her as she stepped aside to allow them to enter the chamber ahead of her. The room, the most superior of the five that Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs maintained, had walls covered in Regency-striped oyster silk with dark wood trim and doors. A vase of lilies stood on one occasional table, and a vase of ostrich feathers adorned the other. She was pleased to see that the porter had raised a good fire in the marble-lined grate, and begged the visitors to make themselves at home. The second-eldest countess took the most comfortable chair, a luxuriously padded, chestnut-coloured upholstered leather armchair with mahogany legs that sat at one side of the fireplace, and was chased from thence by a glance from her senior. Strangely, the eldest did not sit down in it herself, but left it for their fair-haired junior, who sank into it with the grace of a queen.

"How may our establishment assist you?" Miss Carr asked, standing before them a trifle nervously. In light of the byplay she had just witnessed, she did not quite know which one to address.

"We do not wish anything that has been worn before by anyone else," the eldest said, settling herself at one end of the bottle-green velvet couch at the other side of the hearth. "We are here for haute couture, nothing less. This house has produced handsome wares in the past. That is what we wish."

"Made-to-measure, then," Miss Carr said, inwardly jubilant. Bespoke gowns were worth to the

establishment ten to twenty times the value of off-the-rack garments. She tried not to look excited as she opened her tiny notebook and raised her gold pencil. "Do you perhaps have a concept of what particular needs in your wardrobe you wish to fill?"

The youngest, enthroned in the great leather chair, waved her hand dismissively. "We have not had new wardrobes in ages, not ages! The whole ensemble, if you please. Evening dresses, walking dresses, night dresses! We wish to see it all."

Less explosively, the others agreed. "Yes, show us your current line, if it is not too much trouble."

"Not at all," Miss Carr said. "We are pleased to do anything that will suit your convenience."

The eldest countess smiled her enigmatic smile. "I am most delighted to hear you say that."

Miss Carr bowed herself out to go to the robing room where the mannequins were waiting to hear what garments they should don.

The girls sitting on couches and benches in their altogethers in the cloth-draped chamber looked up at her as she entered. They had been drinking tea and coffee to stay awake. A few of them had taken naps, but many of them were worn and a little pallid, looking older than their ages, which were from sixteen to twenty years. They had all expressed themselves willing to work late for the bonus wages Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs offered for this night. It was hardly a respectable time for young ladies to be out, but the owner constantly impressed upon her staff that the customer was always right, and three ladies who wished to be fitted for entire ensembles was not an opportunity to be missed.

"The whole line," she said. Excitement brought roses back into the girls' cheeks as they hurried to help one another dress. "The first walkthrough should begin in ten minutes," Miss Carr announced, pitching her voice slightly to carry over the hubbub. "Make your change in time for the second walkthrough and wait for my signal. Repeat your promenade in the same order until I inform you to stay or go back to your first costume." The girls didn't look up at her, busy as they were with corsets and petticoats, but she knew they heard her.

She returned to the salon, clasped her hands together nervously and beamed at her guests.

"We shall be ready to present our line to you shortly. In the meantime, may I offer you refreshment?"

"Thank you," said the second-oldest, raising her hooded eyes to Miss Carr. The glance was piercing and disquieting. Miss Carr suppressed a shudder. "But not just now."

"Of course," Miss Carr said, feeling her heart flutter. "I...

Countesses, how shall I address you to distinguish among you? Are you perhaps sisters?" she asked, though she couldn't see how the third woman might have been related to the first two. "Or are your

husbands brothers? Cousins?"

"We are all the wives of the great Count Dracula," said the second woman, with great pride.

"Our ways are not your ways, I know," the eldest countess said. She smiled, showing her teeth. All three had red, lush lips framing perfectly white teeth.

"I hope you will not think that I am questioning your ways!" Miss Carr exclaimed, shocked.

"No. Of course you are not," the eldest Countess Dracula said, with a smile.

"Indeed, it is a fascinating concept of those of us in England," Miss Carr went on, "that a man should have three wives, rather like a Turkish sultan." The ladies, to her great surprise at women of such elegance, all spat on the white silk carpet.

"The Turks," said the eldest, disdainfully. "The Turks are barbarians."

"I apologize," she said hastily. "I did not mean to offend."

"It is not you," said the second-eldest countess. "It is the Turks who offend by their existence."

Miss Carr was relieved having just experienced an inner vision of the countesses sweeping out of the salon and into the night, outraged; and herself, standing on the very same stoop the next morning, unemployed, having wasted resources of the House of Feldon, then driven away the customers. She supposed that her grandmother might have made a similar gesture regarding the French, so perhaps the ladies' reaction was not so outrageously exotic as it at first seemed. What an odd thing it must be to be a co-wife, she thought, like those people who lived in the American states. What were they called, Mormons? Miss Carr had thought that the religion was new, but it might have originated in the Balkans, for all the proponent was a man called Joseph Smith. Perhaps there was a Rumanian equivalent of the name.

Mannequins swirled into the room like a bouquet of flowers. Each turned this way and that before promenading slowly around the room clockwise, then counterclockwise. In all, each spent nearly ten minutes displaying the dress she was wearing. The girls may have come from the poorer classes, but each one was attractive, perfectly groomed, and bore herself with the carriage of a queen, full tribute to Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs's rigorous training.

"You must tell me, Countesses, if there is any dress that appeals to you that you would wish to try on yourselves. We would be more than happy to assist you during the second showing."

The visitors chatted excitedly among themselves in their own tongue, leaving Miss Carr to watch the mannequins. One young woman was particularly good. Miss Carr recalled that her name was Claire Stimson, and that she was new to the House of Feldon. The dress she wore was Miss Carr's favorite of

the season's line. The cream-silk evening dress daringly displayed a good deal of long, slender neck and the upper curve of the bosom before falling into becoming puffs of satin around the bust and shoulders, fitting tightly at the waist, and bustled with Alençon lace at the rear of the smooth skirts. Though the décolletage was much lower than a modest lady might find comfortable to wear, Miss Stimson still managed to assert dignity. Miss Carr watched her with approval. The three countesses sat up and showed great interest in Miss Stimson's ensemble, eyeing the model hungrily.

"Ah!" one of them exclaimed, in English. "Yes, this is precisely what we have come for."

They seemed particularly taken by the demeanor of the mannequin herself. Miss Carr thought that she would recommend the girl for promotion when the new line was brought out in the spring. The lovely gown concealed beneath it, Miss Carr happened to know, an entirely new kind of corset that Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs had designed for not only bestowing the wasp-waist so vital to the year's fashions, but subtly lifting the bosom. The undergarment was not yet complete, and had to be pinned together. It was surely very uncomfortable, yet Miss Stimson carried herself with aplomb.

"Ye-es," said the eldest, slowly, avidly, staring as Miss Stimson turned and pirouetted. "Exactly, exactly so." The mannequin looked to her employer. Miss Carr nodded, indicating she was to remain in the room. How could Miss Carr possibly send her away, with all three Countesses Dracula staring at the model gown with such interest that their mouths were slightly open. Miss Carr was faintly troubled by their very red lips. Such vivid paint was not the fashion for respectable women in England, but foreign customs were different.

And yet women talked the same the world over. The middle sister-wife had been keeping careful track of the various fashions that had been displayed.

"I want the evening dress in crimson. I believe it was the sixth dress," she said. Miss Carr went down her list to verify that it was so. "I shall also have the walking costume in midnight blue with white fur, the ninth selection. I shall look very elegant in it, should I not? The morning costume, number two in black and cream striped silk, is very handsome. I think highly of the fourth gown, the tea dress, although the dusty pink will not suit me. Does it come in other shades?"

"Of course, Countess. I have squares of the colors available for you to examine," Miss Carr said, adding up the value of each costume in her notepad and coming up with a most attractive sum, and the other two had not chosen yet!

Disconcertingly, the countesses appeared to divine her thoughts.

"You must not think we are extravagant, my dear Miss Carr," said the eldest, raising an eyebrow dark as a raven's feather on her pale forehead. "It is only our due from our lord and master. For the trouble he

has caused us, he owes us much, to the very last coin in his treasury! Plucking us up from our native soil, and making us endure this arduous and dull journey into a foreign land... you must forgive me," she said, charmingly apologetic. "I mean no disrespect to your homeland, and you have been the most welcoming of hostesses."

"Not at all," Miss Carr murmured, embarrassed to overhear such private arguments between husband and wives. "It is difficult to travel such distances, although the summer is the best time in which to do it. How was your journey to England?"

"Abominable," said the middle one. "On the terrible little boat upon which we embarked from our beloved Rumania we sailed through a horrendous storm. All of our trunks were washed overboard. We barely came ashore with the vitals for existence still in our grasp."

"Your lives?" Miss Carr asked, gasping with excitement. There was an indefinable pause before the eldest broke the silence that had fallen.

"So to speak. And Magda retained our jewel box," she said, with an approving nod to the second-eldest wife. "She is always one to hold on to opportunity. Luckily our bankers had already received our letter of credit. If our lord had only followed our advice we might have saved the vessel—but he never does listen."

"We smelled the storm, but he enjoys such things," said Countess Magda. "Never mind that we have lost our whole wardrobes and everything we held dear."

He wrecked the ship on purpose? Miss Carr wanted to ask, but didn't dare.

"But, he will pay," said the eldest avidly, licking her red, red lips. "He will pay dearly. This is only the beginning of the price."

"Oh," Miss Carr said, uncomfortably, wishing to change the subject away from such personal issues.

"Well. Did you land at Southampton?"

"No," said the youngest, sulkily. "Whitby."

"My goodness," said Miss Carr, with great excitement, "then you must have heard of the shipwreck there! It was in all the newspapers. A ship called the *Demeter* ran aground, steered by a dead man's hand."

Miss Carr thought the event sounded like a romantic and strange play that sent a frisson up her back when she'd heard. It was not gossip, but news, so it was a fair subject to broach, by Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs's rules. But it failed to intrigue her guests.

"How very... interesting," said the eldest countess, after another pause. "No. We had not heard of such a

shipwreck."

The last mannequin curtsied lightly as she did her final turn, and slipped from the room.

"Well, Countesses," Miss Carr said, nervously. This was the moment when they would either make an order or find an excuse to leave. "Have we shown you anything that would suit you?"

"Oh, yes," the eldest countess said, with a lift of her dark brows. "We have seen many things that we wish to have. As you may guess, price is no object."

"Then, if you permit," Miss Carr said, "allow us to take measurements at this time, so that when you give your order, we may start at once tomorrow upon your choices."

The senior countess looked at the other two. "Yes, this would be acceptable to us."

With the assistance of three of the seamstresses, Miss Carr helped the countesses out of their gowns. Their velvet dresses, oddly heavy for the climate and the season, had a musty air about them, as though they had been hanging in a closet or folded into a chest for a very long time. Their undergarments were also curious, being extremely old-fashioned, albeit of the best fabrics and lace. One of the seamstresses prepared to wrap a tape measure around the bosom of the Countess Magda, when she jumped back in surprise.

"Oh!" she cried. Miss Carr hurried over to see what was the matter.

Spinning down along its own thread from a web just under the lady's décolletage was a large black spider, very much alive. Miss Carr looked at the countess in puzzlement. The creature was so large she could not possibly have missed knowing it was there. Perhaps she had *no* fear of them. Perhaps she liked them. Perhaps having a spider about one's person was a foreign custom, like the English tradition of letting a money spider walk across one's palm.

"Oh," the countess said, glancing down at the object of their curiosity. She seized a feather from the display in the vase on the side table, and whisked it to the floor. The spider promptly ran underneath a chair. Miss Carr made a mental note to send one of the page boys in to hunt it down and kill it as soon as the visitors were gone. When the ladies' measurements were complete, the seamstresses offered them dressing gowns and assisted them to sit down.

"And now we will show the line again," Miss Carr said. "You may stop any of the mannequins if you wish to try on her costume. Please let me know which you wish to order, or to add to the list for later consideration."

In the end the Countesses Dracula amassed an enormous order. Hardly a mannequin came and went without one of the three insisting that she must have the costume, with all the appropriate accessories

and underthings.

"And when may we expect to have the first fitting?" the eldest countess asked, as the eighth model put in her appearance. Miss Carr glanced up from her notebook.

"I believe that Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs will say that it can be a week hence, er, also at night if you require."

"We do. You can do all this in a week?"

"Indeed, yes, madam," Miss Carr said with pride. "We have the best staffed and most efficient workrooms in London. I trust you will be satisfied not only with our workmanship, but with our promptness."

"That is most satisfactory. Ah! Here she is again."

Miss Stimson had returned for her second appearance in the perfect, pearl-white satin dress.

"Enchanting," said the youngest countess, her blue eyes wide. "We must have one of those."

"Two," said Countess Magda.

"Would you care to try it on?" Miss Carr offered politely, jotting the style number into each of the two younger ladies' measurement charts.

"Perhaps not now," said the eldest wife. "There is so much else to see."

"But, she must stay," the youngest wife insisted. Miss Stimson received her silent instructions from Miss Carr, and took up a languid-seeming stance against the wall near the vase of feathers, with one arm resting lightly on the table top. It was actually a restful posture, designed to ease the back when one of the mannequins must remain standing for a long time. Another girl swirled into the room in a walking costume of leaf green with sage trim. The countesses chattered to one another with delight, though their eyes kept returning to Miss Stimson.

Miss Carr was quite dizzy with delight by the time she finished writing up the order. Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs would have to put the workrooms on full alert, but it would be worthwhile. This order would be the talk of the industry. The last model was displayed and retired. The eldest countess clapped her hands.

"Brava," she said. "This is all very good. And now, we are feeling rather famished. Perhaps you may furnish us with that little refreshment?"

Their red mouths looked almost predatory, their white teeth sharp as an animal's. At once Miss Carr was horrified at herself for even thinking of such a comparison. "Of course!" she said. "Forgive me for not offering again." She nodded to one of the seamstresses, who left the room and sent in the page boy. Miss Carr gave the order for tea, sandwiches, and cakes. She risked a discreet look at her watch. The hour was

long after midnight. She hoped the day's bread would still answer. Knowing that they would have night visitors who might require sustenance, they had wrapped a fresh loaf as well as they could.

The final group of mannequins began to withdraw. Miss Stimson, seeing release at hand, crossed the room to join her companions.

"Oh, no, don't go," the youngest countess said, catching Miss Stimson by the arm. "You must join us for our meal."

She drew the girl beside her and held her quite close. Miss Stimson looked unhappy, but she was afraid to refuse. She knew what it meant to them all if she should displease the customers.

She smiled tremulously, looking to Miss Carr for rescue. Miss Carr was uncertain what to do, and wished the owner was there. She knew no respectable Englishwoman would touch another person so familiarly, but these were foreigners. She fancied that she saw their mouths open as if they would eat the girl right there.

What to do? The gown was lovely, and the girl did look lovely in it. Perhaps the countesses just wanted to have it there under their eyes while they discussed the final details of their order. Since the financial arrangements had not yet been concluded, Miss Carr was as paralyzed as Miss Stimson. She watched in horrified fascination as the youngest countess reeled in the girl like a fish until they were virtually eye-to-eye. Suddenly, the blond woman let out a horrified cry and threw the girl away from her. The girl landed in a heap of white silk on the floor. The countess pointed a trembling, accusatory finger at the mannequin's neck.

"What is that?" she cried.

Miss Carr went to help Miss Stimson up and investigate the problem. About the girl's neck was a tiny chain. Miss Carr hadn't thought a thing about it except that it accessorized the neckline of her gown and drew attention tastefully to the bare shoulders. Hanging from the fine chain was a minute gold cross, a small personal item that belonged to Miss Stimson herself. The mannequins were permitted to wear such jewelry as long as they were handsome and in good taste. The tiny cross was real gold, classic in shape and irreproachably modest. Miss Carr hadn't thought that the countesses might not be Christians and would find the symbol offensive. They didn't look Jewish. Perhaps there was another faith they followed in the Balkans that went along with polygamy.

"I am so sorry," Miss Carr said, lamely, searching for words to repair the damage.

"I can see that we are not welcome here," the blonde said, rising to her feet with flashing eyes.

"Don't be silly," Countess Magda exclaimed, tugging on her sister-wife's sleeve. "*Clothes*, sister! This

will be our only opportunity. He never shows remorse. You know that. We must take advantage of this indulgence as we can."

"Ladies, please," Miss Carr appealed to them, seeing hundreds of pounds fly out the window on night-borne wings. "If the bauble offends you, I shall remove it."

"Please do," said the eldest countess, swiftly. "That will suffice." There was a muffled outburst from her co-wife, but it was quickly quelled by a fierce glance.

"I am so sorry, Miss Carr," Miss Stimson whispered, her fair cheeks crimson. "I thought it would be all right. Please don't sack me."

"It is not your fault," Miss Carr said, unfastening the tiny clasp and gathering the chain in her palm. "I will put this in the dressing room on the table. In future let us choose a different jewel for you to wear."

The girl's gratitude shone in her eyes. "Thank you, madam." She gave an uneasy glance over Miss Carr's shoulder at the visitors. "I... I do wish you would not leave me alone with them."

"Nonsense," Miss Carr said briskly. "They will do you no harm. They merely wish to look more closely at the dress. Allow them to examine it as they wish."

"Yes, madam," the girl whispered.

"Refreshments, Countesses!" Miss Carr announced, as the page boy entered, pushing the laden tea cart. She was grateful for the distraction. It also gave the mannequin time to recover herself and resume her station near the wall. The visitors waited as the page poured tea and offered sandwiches all around.

"That is very nice," the eldest countess said, accepting a cup with a slice of lemon floating on the amber tea in one of Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs's heirloom cups. "Very nice. All is most satisfactory."

"Now, if you will excuse me for a moment, I will go and prepare the papers for your approval," Miss Carr said.

"Yes, yes," said the Countess Magda. "Everyone go away. We wish to talk among ourselves. Not you, my dear," she said, taking the girl's hand as Miss Stimson attempted to follow. "We wish you to stay with us."

The last thing Miss Carr saw as she closed the door on the salon was the girl's frightened eyes.

The invoice took little time to prepare. Miss Carr had but to transfer to it the name and price of the gowns ordered, note the name of the buyers and their impressive-sounding address. Carfax Abbey, Sussex. The owner would be pleased with everything from this night's work.

She returned to the salon in time to see the mannequin staggering back to lean against the wall, pale as a ghost, with a few drops of blood on her neck. She was wrapped in a dressing gown, and the silk ball gown was on hooks against the wall. No doubt one of the countesses had wanted to try it on, but the blood was a puzzle. Perhaps Miss Stimson had been injured by the pins holding the incomplete stays together, which had to come off over the head. Miss Carr checked the gown for spots. The girl seemed to have had the presence of mind not to bleed on the dress. Miss Stimson stood looking at her employer with the dazed expression of a sheep.

"Are you all right?" Miss Carr asked.

"Yes, madam," the girl said, rather stupidly. She blinked at the lamp, her pupils shrunk to pinpoint size. Miss Carr saw how pallid she was, red rings around her eyes very much in relief to the parchment color of her skin, and put it off to the lateness of the hour. No wonder she had scratched her neck. "It's a trifle bright in here, madam."

"Perhaps," Miss Carr said. "You have done well, Miss Stimson. I will tell Mrs. Feldon-Jacobs so. You may retire and take tomorrow off. But I expect to see you here bright and early Thursday morning."

"Yes, madam." The girl tripped clumsily out of the room. Miss Carr was tired too, but she didn't dare to give in to the sensation. Thankfully, the visitors read over the invoice with little interest. The eldest countess signed her name at the bottom beside the sum total, a colossal number that made Miss Carr want to dance, if only she wasn't so tired.

"Our bankers are Coutts & Co. The count has a substantial letter of credit with them. This should take a substantial bite out of it." As if it was part of an old joke, the senior countess showed her teeth, and the other two laughed. "We thank you very much for your hospitality, Miss Carr, but we must now be going."

Miss Carr dropped her half-bow, half-curtsy gratefully. It was after one in the morning. She'd be lucky if her bespoke cab would still be outside.

"Very well, Countesses. May I say, on behalf of the House of Feldon, that it has been a great pleasure to serve you? Is there anything else at all with which I may assist you?"

"No, thank you," said the youngest, rising from her grand chair and licking her lips. Miss Carr noticed again how very, very red they were. Was that a drop of rouge on her chin? "We have got everything that we came for."