

excerpt from *"A Limited Engagement"*

by Saralee Etter ~ Available from Cerridwen Press Cotillion www.cerridwenpress.com ISBN - 9781419911590

It was not until the second act that Miranda noticed *him*. She decided later that he must have arrived during the interval between acts one and two or at least during the first scene with the fairies while she was in the green room exulting over having gotten through the first act. At any rate, she just made it into the wings in time for her cue and was too flustered to take notice of new audience members.

She entered with Lysander—they were two lovers on the run, weary from their journey and looking for a place to sleep. George St. John was overplaying his role as he generally did and caught her in his arms as he addressed the gods in the gallery.

"One turf shall serve as pillow for us both'," he shouted to them and was rewarded with hoots of delight. "One heart, one bed, two bosoms and one troth!"

"One beast, two backs!" some wag shouted and laughter erupted throughout the audience.

With more force than necessary, Hermia shoved her overeager Lysander away and spoke her lines.

"Nay, good Lysander. For my sake, my dear, lie further off yet, do not lie so near'." Groans of disappointment greeted her speech but she ignored them. Flinging her arm out dramatically, she pointed to a spot at the corner of the stage where Lysander should make his bed. As Miranda gazed in the direction of her extended finger, she happened to look into the box closest to the edge of the stage.

A man was sitting—no, lounging—in the box, his arms crossed over his chest. His dark blue coat and cream-colored waistcoat were well cut but not noticeably fashionable. He had dark hair and his features were finely drawn but still masculine, with dark bristling eyebrows over deep-set eyes and a square jaw that hinted at a determined nature. There was a stillness about him that spoke of quiet confidence and complete self-control.

As Miranda's eyes fell on him, he looked up and their gazes met. His eyes widened—they were a clear blue color and his gaze was piercing. She had the impression that he was truly seeing her—as if he recognized her somehow—although she was certain they had never met before. Her heart gave a little flutter. The moment stretched out into a breathless eternity as their eyes locked together in wordless communication. She felt as though she knew him too, her own feelings echoing that odd sense of recognition she saw in his eyes. Miranda stood transfixed.

Suddenly she heard a hissing voice behind her. "Lysander riddles very prettily!" Mr. Gregory whispered. She blinked and saw George St. John staring at her expectantly. Goodness, that is my cue!

"Lysander riddles very prettily'," Miranda repeated loudly. She hoped that her distraction had not been too noticeable. What was the matter with her to allow her wits to wander in such a fashion? She resolved not to look at any more faces since it seemed it was too easy to lose track of what one was doing.

Naturally the moment they were offstage George St. John began to tease her about her distracted moment.

"In love with a gentleman, little Miranda?" he said soulfully, grabbing her hand and pressing it to his bosom. "Ah, and I thought you loved only me! What fickle creatures women are, to play with a man's heart."

She rescued her hand. "I am not in love with anyone and definitely not with you. I was merely distracted. It won't happen again," she informed him and moved away with dignity.

The rest of the performance proceeded without incident. Miranda did not allow herself to look into the box again although she wondered if that man was still there. Sometimes she fancied she could feel the weight of his stare upon her. Then Kitty swept onstage, resplendent as the fairy queen Titania, wearing the diamond-studded white dress and with her long dark locks curling in artful disarray over her shoulders. Miranda glanced self-consciously down at her own simple white dress. It was folly to imagine that a man would look at her when such a gorgeous creature flitted about the stage. Briskly she smoothed out her skirts and reminded herself not to become distracted. It was time to make her entrance in the final scene at the Duke's palace.