

The Light Is Not The Sun

Darkness had already overtaken that part of the world. It was a place where the seasonal cold and gloom came early. On this particular evening nightfall had been given an extra push thanks to a raging snowstorm. The swirling clouds of white crystals, faintly visible even after sunset while obscuring practically everything else, whipped around the endlessly marching boles of tall conifers, the lines of needled giants like something out of the primordial past. Although it was northern Europe in the opening years of the Twentieth Century, the countryside might have been something primordial: the endless forests of some antique age vaguely cleared here and there to accommodate the villages and farmlands of the peasants and the few châteaux of the landed gentry.

The grounds of one such château had scarcely pushed back the encroaching forest, the human delving seemingly in perpetual war with the crushing forces of nature. Even on clear nights it would not have been possible to see from very far the glimmer of oil lamps winking in the windows of the quaintly out-of-date stone and wood-frame edifice. (No new-fangled Twentieth Century electricity in that part of the world!) On this particular night, even from the gate leading into the park, the clouds of swirling snow were swallowing up everything, allowing nothing to reach that far but the feeblest glimmers from the château's windows.

Most of the windows in the large rambling three-story building were always dark anyway. The château had not seen full use in recent years, with most of its many rooms closed off. In one room, though, it was a different story: all light and warmth and bustling activity. In the richly appointed drawing room, a girl of about twenty, quite pretty in her pleasing figure and smoke-blue eyes, was standing in front of a group of servants with a

rather bulky loose-leaf notebook in one hand. She periodically glanced at it as a guide while she ordered up a sumptuous repast for two. Her long flowing gown of pale-blue brocade and satin—actually something out of the last century—and the proud, assured way she held herself proclaimed her as one with the exalted gentry living in the château, not somebody belonging to the servant class.

“Potage crème aux perles.”

“Potage crème aux perles,” echoed the major-domo, writing in his own pad. Although the girl was stumbling a bit over the pronunciation of the French dishes, Nicholas, the major-domo, thoroughly French himself, had no trouble following her.

“Écrevisses à la bordelaise.”

“Écrevisses à la bordelaise,” the major-domo dutifully confirmed.

“Find something better than that!”

The voice, a high feminine one, had come from around an over-stuffed, excessively high-back easy chair parked across the room in front of the fire blazing in the grate. Since the chair’s back was facing the girl and the servants, the owner of the voice was totally invisible to them. But the girl knew who was there. She knew only too well.

“All right,” she sighed. *“Langoustines grillées sauce aux huîtres.”*

“Langoustines grillées sauce aux huîtres,” replied the major-domo, scribbling down the words in his dignified hand while scratching out the last entry.

“Faisan braisé au porto.”

“Sick of pheasant...*canard!*”

“Very well.” The girl glanced hastily at the notebook. *“Canard farci sauce Savoie.”*

“Too many sauces!” the voice snapped again.

The girl gave another sigh, this one a bit exasperated. *“Palombes rôties nature?”* she asked the chair-back.

“Better,” came the reply.

The girl nodded to Nicholas, who wrote it down while quietly mumbling to himself.

“Gâteau d’amandés au miel,” she told him. He wrote it down while repeating it. “One bottle of Montrachet, two bottles of Romanée-Conti. That’s all.”

“Don’t forget the camellias,” came the voice again.

“Oh, yes,” the girl said, glancing at the chair-back. “One fresh camellia on his dressing table every morning.”

“Oui, Mademoiselle,” Nicholas said, inclining his head slightly.

“Also a centerpiece of Christmas roses for lunch,” the girl went on. “One of green orchids for dinner.”

“Oui, Mademoiselle.”

“Erika, don’t forget the bell,” said the voice from around the chair.

“Oh, yes, I nearly did forget. Have the gatekeeper ring the tower bell all night in case

the sleigh has gotten lost in the storm. Thank you. You all may go.”

With another slight bow, the major-domo turned and left. The rest of the servants followed.

The girl Erika, remaining where she was, motionless like a statue, gazed over to the grate and the chair in front of it. Her eyes didn't flicker. Near the chair and its invisible occupant, but on the far side of the grate against the wall, was another easy chair, one also occupied. The woman sitting in the second chair, easily visible from where Erika stood had her eyes been willing to stray that far, was old, quite old. However, there was nothing feeble about her. She radiated strength and sureness. The characterful lines of her hawkish face, the tilted angle of her jaw, the stiffness of her carriage suggested a moral righteousness and sternness. She was adorned in a faded wine-red gown, more outmoded than Erika's. So out-of-date did it look, it could have been something right out of the late Eighteenth Century.

Erika at last noticed that the stern old eyes from across the room were fixed on her. For one giddy moment she thought that the old Baroness von Landsbro, her grandmother, was about to speak to her. But she instantly brushed the thought aside. Speak to her? In the presence of another, her own daughter no less, sitting almost within arm's reach? Nothing could have been more ridiculous!

Erika shook herself as though coming out of a trance. She took a step toward the other chair, the one whose occupant still remained invisible.

“Aunt Vanessa,” she called over quietly, “it will take them at least an hour to prepare the dishes. Maybe you'd like a little something to eat before then?”

Several moments of silence slipped by. Then, almost like a cry of anguish, there came from around the chair, “Oh, I do not understand this! Why has he not arrived yet? Has no message come?”

Erika, remaining outwardly unperturbed, replied, “They left Värnamo station just after ten this morning. Or should have. Perhaps the train was late. Or perhaps they decided to remain in Värnamo to let the storm die down. Or were forced to stop somewhere for the same reason.”

“My guest is not the sort of man to let a storm stand in the way. And Karl should know the road blindfolded. I shall have him dismissed if they are lost.”

“But the snow is so deep, Vanessa.” Erika's voice was almost pleading. “It's so hard on the horses.”

“Oh, I shall die if something happens to him!”

The owner of the voice was no longer hidden behind the chair. In her growing agitation she had sprung to her feet, appearing so suddenly as though like something magically conjured out of air.

Or a dream.

Erika stood transfixed, frozen like one who was indeed being confronted by something out of a dream. That was the effect her aunt had on her when she entered a room or otherwise put in a sudden appearance. To say that Vanessa, the current Baroness von Landsbro, was a lady of great beauty would have been using words of pitiful inadequacy. She was perfectly—more than that, artistically—molded in every respect, from her glowing chestnut hair, her turquoise-green eyes, her delicately shaped face, to every last striking contour of her statuesque figure. She was devastating, like a force of nature, something to vie with the storm raging outside.

But it was more than just her beauty. There was a timelessness about it, as though after being conjured out of a dream—or from the pure abstract essence of beauty in women—it had been frozen for all time. Vanessa was over forty; yet, to look at her, she might not have been a day older than her niece. Time might have stopped for her when she was Erika's age.

Nevertheless, Vanessa was no fantasy but a live, breathing woman. Time had left its mark not in her looks but in her expression, her manner, her attitude. She had known suffering, great suffering, and still knew it.

She was knowing it all too well at the moment.

Vanessa was pressing her hand between her breasts, as though she were in pain.

“Oh, my heart! My heart! I cannot wait any longer!”

“Aunt Vanessa, please!” Erika pleaded. “You haven't eaten all day. Please let me have them fix you a little something. Otherwise, you're going to start feeling sick.”

“I will eat *nothing* until he arrives!” her aunt cried at her. “Oh, my heart! My heart! I can no longer stand this waiting!”

Erika looked frantically around, seeking a way to divert her aunt's anguished thoughts. Her eyes alighted on the line of bookcases along the wall opposite the grate.

“Shall I read to you?” she asked her aunt.

“Yes, yes, Erika,” cried Vanessa eagerly. “Read to me.”

Erika walked over to the bookshelves and looked. Presently, she reached up and pulled down a thin volume from a high shelf. Going over by the fire, she lowered herself onto a wobbly three-legged stool near the over-stuffed easy chair her aunt had been occupying and was again adorning. Vanessa had come over and sat back down. She seemed much calmer now, almost serene.

Outside there began the regular tolling of the tower bell. Its mournful cadences reached into the drawing room greatly muffled, almost like a sound from a different world.

Opening the book at random, Erika ran her finger down a page.

“Here's something. Oedipus.”

She began slowly reciting the verses.

“Woe, woe is me,
Sorrowful that I am,
Where am I?
Where am I going?
Where am I cast away?”

Her aunt reached over and snatched the book from her hand.

“You do not know how to read. You have never known what love is!”

Once more on her feet, she pranced in agitation back and forth while in a voice more anguished than ever she read the same lines. Read them over and over. While she did, Erika silently cursed herself. She had picked exactly the wrong thing to recite to her aunt. All she had succeeded in doing was to upset her even further.

Finally, in her anguish, Vanessa threw the book to the floor and continued her pacing. Erika, almost furtively, left her stool to retrieve the book and put it back on the shelf.

“Oh, why doesn’t he come? Why does he *not* come?”

The agonized words echoed from the high ceiling.

Erika, still by the bookshelves, saw movement near the grate. Her grandmother was slowly getting to her feet.

“Good night, grandmother,” she said, going over to the old Baroness and pecking her on the cheek.

Vanessa stopped her reckless pacing and turned.

“Even now you will not speak to me,” she said to her mother in a tone full of reproach.

For many strained moments the two women, mother and daughter, gazed at each other in total silence.

“Oh, go, go. Good night.”

Vanessa’s tone had turned imperious.

The old Baroness stepped with quiet lassitude toward the door that opened into the large entrance hall where the stairs were. Having already pulled the bell cord to summon a maid, Erika went to lead her grandmother toward the door. There she handed her off to the maid, who appeared a few moments later.

Such close solicitude toward the old Baroness was far from necessary. It was hardly the infirmities of old age that prevented her from stepping more spryly. Rather, her lagging was really an unconscious statement of the great dignity flowing from her really quite remarkable strength of character. She moved with back straight and head held high, belying any hint of senility. Erika had always found much to marvel at in her grandmother, things like her agile mind. And other things to make Erika or anyone wonder.

One of those was her strange silences. Many people thought that her adamant refusal to speak to her daughter sprang from resentment over being cut out of the will at the time of

old Baron von Landsbro's death a few years back. The title, the land, all control over the family fortune had gone to Vanessa. Yet, the terrible silences the old Baroness had woven around her daughter went back much further, as far back as Erika could remember. Erika wasn't entirely sure, but she strongly suspected that the silences had started the day Vanessa had fled back to Château Landsbro over twenty years ago, to hide from a terrible scandal that had boiled up around her. Although Erika didn't know much about the scandal since it had happened before her birth, she did know that this guest her aunt was expecting—and anguishing so fitfully over—was intimately connected with it.

Maybe her grandmother's silences were understandable in Vanessa's case. Yet in recent years the old Baroness had taken to withholding the sound of her voice from everybody, even the servants, with a single exception: her granddaughter. And even then she would not speak to Erika if someone else happened to be present. Or even within earshot.

After seeing to her grandmother, Erika went over to the large French window giving access to the darkened *jardin d'hiver*. Standing there, she peered out into the park beyond. Vanessa collapsed back into her chair before the fire. She sat there listlessly, seemingly drained of all vitality.

Presently, her voice came.

“Is it still snowing?”

“Yes, Vanessa,” Erika answered.

There was a pause.

“Look, look well, deep into the woods. Don't you see the light of lanterns shining there?”

Erika threw a sharp glance at her aunt, whom she could now see in profile sitting before the grate. If Vanessa thought she was seeing lights, it would not have been easy looking out any of the windows from that chair without awkwardly craning one's neck around the chair's high back. But Vanessa wasn't even trying. She was staring fixedly into the bright yellow flames dancing before her.

“No, Vanessa.”

A deep sigh escaped from the vicinity of the chair.

“Go to bed. I shall wait here alone.”

But Erika remained standing where she was.

Thoughts, winter thoughts, seeped through her mind. She peered more intently out the window, seeking to pierce more plainly the curtain of white flakes swirling against the high window panes of the *jardin d'hiver*. Perhaps her thoughts were more like a lament. In a melancholy vein she wondered why winter had to come so soon. There were nights when, with her bedroom window open, she could hear the deer making sounds—they were not always totally silent. She imagined the sounds to be of weeping as the deer wandered

through the woods, seeking to appease their hunger. Sometimes she heard the hoot of an owl, imagining him frozen in his home of brittle bark.

She gazed out pensively. So little to mark the passing of the winter days deep in this forest, days marked by neither dawn nor sunset. So long the winters were, so long and hard. And she was a part of it, an integral part. She had never known any other home but this gloomy forest. She was as one with the hungry deer and frozen owls.

With a slight shudder, Erika turned away from the window.

An hour slipped by, an hour punctuated by near total silence, with only the muted tolling of the tower bell reaching into the drawing room to trouble the air. Vanessa remained sitting listlessly before the fire. A couple of times Erika stole quietly out to the kitchen to inquire about the sumptuous supper for two she had ordered. On her second trip she found it was almost ready. She wondered who would consume it. Certainly not Vanessa, not without her guest. The small table for two, reposing in a corner of the drawing room, had long since been set up, the fine white linen covering it, the bone china and crystal goblets lying there ready, the tall candles in their silver candlesticks waiting to be lit. And the bottles of wine begging to be sampled.

Well, she could partake of it herself, Erika supposed. She hadn't eaten any real supper that evening. After her aunt finally gave up and went to bed, she could have the supper served to her right in the drawing room, where it had been intended to be served. Since it was being prepared for two, she could invite.... Now, whom could she invite? She thought a moment. Nicholas? Yes, Nicholas—poor man! He would be scandalized were she to ask him to sit down and eat at the master's table. Having served at Château Landsbro longer than she could remember, he was more upright than even her grandmother.

No, that would never work. In all likelihood Vanessa would remain right where she was, stubbornly waiting for her guest, until she finally fell asleep sitting in her chair. If there was any hope of tasting those dishes, she would have to stay in the kitchen. Maybe there she could persuade Nicholas to join her—or any of the other servants who felt inclined to take a few nibbles.

Erika cocked her head. What was that sound? She strained her ears, trying to catch it above the faint crackle of the fire and the muffled tolling of the bell. It was coming from outside, she was sure. It could have been the sound of sleigh bells....

She sprang to her feet and raced to the French window. Yes. Lights. The light of lanterns in the distance. And they were moving, moving closer.

"Listen!" she cried. "They are here! I can see the lights. I can hear the bells."

Just then the tower bell began pealing louder and faster.

Vanessa, too, was on her feet. She was almost hysterical.

“He has come! Oh, he has come! Go gather all the servants. Have them light up the courtyard. I shall wait for him here.” She gazed at her niece with burning intensity. “And, Erika, listen. I wish to be alone with him when he comes in.”

Erika hastened out.

In the greatest agitation Vanessa, now alone, paced up and down the room. This time there was none of the earlier anguish in her gyrations, but mixed in with the yearning excitement there was a hint of dread. That sense of dread turned more pronounced every time she glanced up above the mantelpiece in her pacing. Hanging there was a large painting that had been covered with a piece of thick cloth. No hint of the subject matter of the painting was discernible. There were other wall hangings here and there in the room also strangely covered with cloth. Yet, every time her eyes came to rest on that particular one, they betrayed a surge of dread. Twice she stopped to gaze at it for many moments. At those times the dread turned almost strong enough to drive out all her excited joy.

Vanessa suddenly wheeled and, going from oil lamp to oil lamp, blew most of them out, plunging the room into a haunt of ghostly shadows. She then sat back down by the fire, first turning the chair slightly so that her back would be mostly to the main hallway door. There she waited with as much composure as she could summon.

The bustle of activity in the courtyard, the shouts and occasional curse of the servants, all was slowly dying down. Vanessa heard the tread of approaching footsteps in the entrance hall. A moment later the door was thrown open with such suddenness that Vanessa gave a violent start.

She poked her head around the chair for the briefest of moments, just long enough to see the darkened silhouette of a man standing in the open doorway. While she spoke, she remained seated in the chair and kept her eyes staring straight ahead, away from the door.

“Anatol, say nothing. Do not say a word.” Her voice was low but penetrating. She spoke with restrained emotion as she kept her feelings under tight control. “Do not move. You may not want to stay. I cannot know your mind. All I know is that for over twenty years I have waited for you. No, I *do* know your mind. I have always known that one day you would return to me.”

She uttered a sigh that came out sounding almost like a sob.

“Let me tell you something, Anatol. For those twenty years I have scarcely breathed so that life would not leave its mark on me, so that nothing would change in me, the things that you once loved. Alone, apart, unseen, I have waited for you. Oh, how cruel it has been—how dark, how desperate—to let all those days go by unheeded, unmarked. How cruel, how wrong to rob a beating heart of so much time, of so much space! How bitter to freeze one’s beauty in waiting—beauty, the hardest gift to keep. Yet, I have done all this for you, Anatol. All this!”

Her voice dropped lower, turning more tender.

“Now listen. Listen well. Unless you still love me, I do not want you to look at me. Without love, do not dare look into my eyes. For then all change begins when love is lost.”

The dread was now a thing alive.

“Do you love me, Anatol? Do you still love me as you once did? Because if you do not, if your love has died, I shall ask you to leave this house, ask you this very night.”

Many moments of silence passed. Vanessa sat in the chair like a frozen idol.

At last a man’s voice seeped to her from the open doorway.

“Yes. I have every reason to believe that I will come to love you.”

Vanessa gasped. That voice! Whose voice was it? It was the voice of a stranger!

Pulling herself shakily to her feet, she stumbled to an end table on which one of the oil lamps still burned. Picking it up, her body racked by greater tremors, she forced her unwilling feet to carry her toward the door and the dark silhouette outlined there. Her hand trembling violently, she lifted the lamp up to gaze on the face.

“My, God! My God! Who are you? Just who are you?”

With a dreadful screech, she stumbled back. The lamp would have fallen from her nerveless hand except for the stranger’s lunging forward and seizing it before it could. Vanessa, recoiling in horror from his closeness, fell back halfway across the room.

She let out another terrible screech.

“Erika! Erika! Help me! Please, someone help me!”

Erika rushed in through the door from the pantry. By then Vanessa was in an untidy heap on the floor.

“He is not the one!” she gasped in a strangled voice as she raised one hand toward her niece. “He is not the one I was expecting! I do not know him, I have never seen him! Have him put out of the house immediately!” She tried to struggle to her feet. “Help me. Please, help me upstairs! I think—I think I’m going to be sick!”

Erika, not even glancing at the stranger in her concern for her aunt, rushed over and helped her up. With her aunt leaning heavily on her for support, Erika led her out into the entrance hall and up the stairs to her bedroom.

The stranger, suddenly finding himself alone, casually strolled into the center of the room. Unable to see much in the semi-darkness, he took the liberty of lighting the oil lamps that Vanessa had earlier blown out. Now able to note things better, he looked curiously about him.

The light revealed him to be a young man, in age not much older than Erika. And handsome. Oh, yes, very handsome. His face was finely molded, his light flaxen hair worn long. He stood straight and tall, his frame fine-boned. His every movement was delicate yet not at all effeminate.

Still, though he was Vanessa’s counterpart in representing the essence of young masculine good looks, he somehow seemed incomplete, like a beautifully painted portrait

that was not yet finished. It had nothing to do with youthful inexperience. Nor the sweet boyishness of his features. One felt that, when he was sixty, he would still be an incomplete human being.

He was gazing with a puzzled expression on the covered painting over the mantel when Erika bustled in.

“Just who are you?” she demanded severely. “Why did you come here? You must leave at once!”

He swung around to her.

“Yes, it was a deception. But there were no lies.” He offered her a warm smile. “I really am Anatol. Not the right one, certainly. But still an Anatol. You see, when my father died, I felt I had to—”

Erika’s sharp gasp interrupted him.

“He had a son? And you’re that son? And now he’s dead?” She let out a small cry. “Oh, poor Vanessa! After all these years of waiting, after so many dreams. And now this. What am I going to tell her? What will she do? Oh, how unfair life can be! Life can be like...like a game, one you can never win, not with death lurking around to tally the score at will.”

Her voice again turned severe.

“Why didn’t you write her? Why didn’t you let her know?”

The young man looked apologetic.

“I was about to explain. Ever since I could remember—all throughout my childhood, my youth—I kept hearing that name Vanessa. I couldn’t help but hear it. My mother used it to reproach my father, which was often. She was never able to forgive him and was constantly bringing the matter up. Not that she enjoyed uttering that name. It scorched her lips like a hot flame burning there. And every time he heard it, even from my mother, my father’s eyes would light up with the deepest longing. Of course, as I got older, I eventually learned what happened twenty years ago. It made quite a stir at the time. I still occasionally hear something about it when I’m in Brussels. Anyway, now that I’m alone, with both my parents gone—”

He looked at Erika with a sudden flash of sorrow.

“They were both killed earlier this year in that terrible ferry accident off Malmo,” he uttered in a lower voice. “You no doubt read about it.”

“Oh, I—I’m so sorry!” said Erika with deep sympathy. “Both gone. So terrible! No, I didn’t hear anything about a ferry accident. We don’t get much news from the outside world here.”

The young man shrugged off his moment of sorrow.

“Well, even if you had, you would not have learned of my father’s death that way. The list of victims was withheld for some time after the accident—they kept thinking they would

find survivors—and was never widely published when it did appear. As I was saying, with both parents gone and the worst of my grief done with, my mind kept swinging back to the woman who so haunted my parents' house. I felt compelled to meet her at last. But how? I was told she never left Landsbro and never received visitors. I could see only one recourse: to make her think that it was my father who was coming to pay her his respects. She would surely not refuse to see him!"

His voice dropped.

"I'm sorry for the deception," he said in a hesitant voice. "I really am. But I could think of no other way."

Erika sighed. "Well, it's a bit late for regrets."

"By the way, just who is it that I'm addressing, if you will permit me to ask?" he said, his voice throwing apology aside and becoming its usual forward self.

"Her niece. Sometimes." No hint of a smile crossed her lips. "But I'm really more her shadow than a niece."

"Oh?"

She declined to elaborate, saying instead, "Now you must leave. You heard what she said."

"You're not going to throw me out into the storm, are you?" he asked anxiously. "My father might not have thought anything about plowing through the storm, but I was terrified. Tell her who I am. If she knows I'm his son, she will surely let me stay the night, at least."

Erika glanced up at the ceiling. Her aunt's bedroom was directly above.

"I think it would be useless to ask right now, not in the state she's in. Anyway, it would be a cruel thing to send you off. I mean for Karl. He'd have to ride you back to Värnamo or take you to the nearest town with accommodations. Unless, of course, I simply have you put outside in the snow to freeze."

Again there was no hint of a smile.

"But since that wouldn't be desirable either," she went on, "I think I'll usurp the Baroness's authority and say that you can stay the night."

It was Anatol who smiled.

"Part of being that shadow, I presume."

"You might say that."

Completely at his ease, with the assertiveness of his male prerogatives in the presence of a woman coming to the fore, Anatol drifted over to one of the covered wall hangings. He was determined to find out just what was hidden there.

He had just touched the drape to pull it aside when Erika's voice cried out sharply, "Don't touch it! She cannot stand the sight of mirrors."

"A mirror?" He waved his hand about, letting it indicate the large covering above the mantle. "Even that?"

“It’s a painting, a portrait of Vanessa. Full-length and life-size, done in oils.”

Erika herself only knew because one day some years back, when as an impetuous girl of twelve driven by curiosity, she had gotten up on a ladder and pulled the drape aside to look. She had paid for that indiscretion with a sound scolding.

The painting had been done years ago, in Brussels, where Vanessa, as a young girl, had gone to study art. Her teacher, a well-known portrait artist, had executed the commission. (That much her grandmother had been willing to reveal, after the scolding.) Much more recently she had taken another peek at the portrait, this time without getting caught at it, to satisfy another point of curiosity: the absolutely stunning likeness of the girl in the portrait and the current Vanessa. Totally identical. The portrait might have been painted just yesterday. Little wonder that the painting had been covered like the mirrors. It differed in no essential fashion.

Thinking of the portrait drew her mind back to that time in her aunt’s life when she had indiscreetly thrown herself into the arms of this man’s father. The first Anatol had been little older than Vanessa herself at the time. He already had a wife, had been married only a few years. From her rather old-fashioned outlook on love, Erika found it hard to understand how a man with a fresh wife could let his eyes stray from her to another woman. Unless, of course, it had been a marriage of convenience, one forced onto the older Anatol.

Regardless, Vanessa and her lover had tried to keep their affair a secret but without much success. The wife found out, then all Brussels. Ordinarily, it wouldn’t have caused much of a ripple except that in this case both the wife and Vanessa’s lover came from families of considerable note in Brussels society. The elder Anatol’s uncle, for example, was at the time a highly placed minister in the Belgium government. The scandal rocked the Belgium capital. It forced Vanessa to flee back to Landsbro, where she had been keeping herself hidden ever since, seldom venturing even to the village.

Erika glanced at the features of this young man standing next to her. Was he the perfect image of his father like the portrait was of Vanessa? In the fanciful recesses of her mind she could imagine she was standing with the father, also frozen in time, who had come to take up with her aunt as though the intervening twenty years had never happened. Maybe it could really be. Maybe he, too, had stepped down from a painting only a moment ago just as it seemed that Vanessa was always just stepping down from hers.

But, no. He didn’t bear a close likeness. No way he could. Vanessa would have mistaken him for her lover instead of crying out for help. A different man had come. A quite different man. Certainly in looks and probably in most other ways as well.

Still impelled by idle curiosity, Anatol wandered over to the small table laid out for supper. Erika followed.

“Was the supper laid for him?” he asked. He picked up one of the bottles of wine. “Ah, Romanée-Conti. My father loved this wine. Is it all right if I light the candles?”

Without waiting for permission, he picked up the small box of matches lying by the candlesticks and, after striking one, lit every candle.

“I too love good food and wine. But my poor father. You might say he lost his fortune dreaming while my mother brought subtle poisons to destroy his dreams. Now it seems I can only drink the wine of others.”

He paused and looked significantly at Erika.

“Will you join me for supper? Will you have it served?”

“That place wasn’t set for me,” she replied, shaking her head. “Besides, it wasn’t with me that you came so far to drink your wines.”

“Nor was I the one expected,” he laughed. He stepped back and bowed to her in mock gallantry. “I am the false Dimitri, the pretender. Be my Marina!”

He laughed again.

Taking up the corkscrew lying on the sideboard, he opened one of the bottles and poured generous portions of the ruby liquid into both crystal goblets.

“Why is it that you never smile?” he asked, setting the bottle down.

He waited for an answer, but Erika remained silent.

With another florid gesture, he pulled one of the chairs out from the table. He motioned with his hand. When she remained rooted where she stood, he ordered preemptively, “Sit down.”

Erika slowly sank into the chair.

He pulled out the other chair and sat.

“This is certainly a wild and solitary place you live in. Not a place you would think to pass one’s youth in. Being here with you like this could make me believe that you and I have been alone together since the beginning of time.”

He picked up the goblet and raised it.

“Come. You should sample these good wines yourself.”

Erika touched her own glass.

“By the way,” he said, “I still have not heard your name. What is it?”

“Erika,” she answered simply.

She could not understand her feelings. Why was she suddenly taking up with this stranger, ordering Nicholas to serve the dinner, drinking these wines with the man? She really was starting to think of them as his wines. Nicholas had been a bit scandalized but had carried out his function with impeccable grace. By then he knew that the man was not the Baroness’s expected guest, though he still didn’t know that he had been serving the expected guest’s son.

After the supper, during which he kept pushing the wines on her, she showed him

upstairs to the room that had been prepared for him. Or rather prepared for his father. She was feeling light-headed, giddy, fey, totally reckless. All due to the wines, of course. At least she could blame the wines for unlocking feelings she didn't know she had but which, she more than suspected, had been lurking in her heart all along.

So it came as no surprise—not to her anyway—when she blithely preceded him into the room, ostensibly to make sure it was ready and point out any features he might wish to inquire about. After all, wasn't she her aunt's stand-in just as he was his father's stand-in? If the expected guest had shown up instead and had dined with her aunt as planned, would Vanessa had spurned him for the rest of the night? Spurned her former lover, a man fervidly longed for during twenty years of waiting?

She had never known what love is. Those were the words her aunt had flung at her, words she remembered with some bitterness. Perhaps it was time to know. Perhaps it was time to bring more meaning into her rather sterile existence. Where was she going? Nowhere, it seemed. Where was she cast away? Here for maybe the rest of her life. A wild and solitary place to spend one's youth in. A place where she was her aunt's shadow. Then *be* her aunt, her heart told her. Yield to this stranger, who was in fact no stranger but the remnants of a shattered dream. Do what Vanessa would have done this night if fate had not cruelly taken the dream and broken it.

When he kissed her, she made no effort to pull away. More kisses followed, kisses that washed over her face, kisses that burned her eyes, her lips, kisses that left her totally yielding. He gently forced her onto the bed. Soon her pale-blue satin gown was gone, it and the more intimate items of her apparel. A new flood of kisses, this time all over her, with cunning hands joining in. He was now on top of her, his weight turning her totally helpless. She felt a piercing urgency. She knew when his seed washed through her loins....

“The very night you met him?” her grandmother uttered with a low moan, in complete astonishment. “Oh, Erika! How could you have done such a thing!”

“Yes, the very night,” she sighed with palpable sorrow. “And the only night.”

“You, who are so proud, so pure—I cannot believe it!”

“I was neither proud nor pure that night, grandmother. Believe it. Once he kissed me—well, I was utterly lost. I could do nothing but obey.”

It was a month after that fated night. Erika and her grandmother were cloistered together in front of the blazing fire in the drawing room. Nobody else was around. Vanessa and Anatol were out skating on the lake that clear bright sunny Sunday morning. The servants were busy elsewhere. So it was possible for her and her grandmother to talk.

Erika desperately needed somebody to talk to. That night and the sorrows it had sowed

were sending out new shoots every day, like some monstrous fungus growing deep in her heart, turning all joy to ash, until she could no longer stand it. Maybe her grandmother would have no words of wisdom for her. But even at the risk of bringing down the old Baroness's censure, she thought that talking about it would bring a little relief.

"I cannot imagine what you could have seen in such a man," the old Baroness said to her granddaughter. "When *I* was a young girl and betrothed, the man who was to become your grandfather came into the house like a conqueror, carrying his love with the utmost pride. But this Anatol, what a cautious knight he is. He entered our house like a thief! Just what sort of man is he?"

"I wish I knew, grandmother. If I did, maybe I'd know why I both hate and love him," Erika uttered with a sob.

The old Baroness shook her head then sighed.

"Does he have any honor at all? Will he now do the honorable thing?"

"If you mean marry me, yes, he will. That is, if I wish. But do I wish it? I certainly do not want his honor just to save mine. All I want is his love, his unequivocal love. How else can mine stay kindled?"

"Does he love you or not?"

Erika looked with sorrowful eyes at her grandmother.

"He says he does. But I don't know. I feel he's incapable of love, of real love. I feel he just doesn't know what love is. His words when he speaks of love are like his kisses. So easy. They come just so easy."

"I fear it's too late, Erika, to measure or to weigh the issue." The voice was stern. "You will do what must be done."

"Must I?" Her own voice was adamant. "I have always believed that each woman has a right to wait for the one correct love, the one that's right for her life. The first, the last, the only love. Yes, I was being foolish that night, an utter fool, if it turns out he is not the one. Oh, if only I could be sure of him! Then I would fly like a dove into his arms and let the whole world go up in flames!"

She uttered a deep sigh of regret.

"But does he tremble as I do when our eyes meet? Or has the memory of that night erased the mocking laughter from his lips? No, no, none of it. He remains impervious."

"Then do *you* love him or not?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes." Her voice rose like a cry. "I love someone very much *like* him!"

"Ah, my poor child," her grandmother said with the greatest tenderness. "The image of love is never what we think, never what we dream of. If it ever seems to be, then beware the disguise!"

"But listen, grandmother. Do I have the right to hold onto what I consider is of little worth when it would mean breaking another woman's heart?"

“Whose heart?” the old Baroness asked sharply.

Just then the sound of laughter crept faintly in through the slightly ajar French window from the *jardin d’hiver*. The laughter belonged to Vanessa.

“Hers, of course. Surely you’ve noticed. She loves him more than I do.” Erika paused. “Because she loves him blindly.”

“The fool!” uttered the old woman contemptuously.

More laughter joined Vanessa’s, a man’s laughter. Through the French window could be seen two figures in skating togs entering the *jardin d’hiver* from the direction of the lake. Each figure was carrying a pair of skates.

“No, you’re not the skater your father was, I’m afraid,” came Vanessa’s voice.

“I may be a luckier man, though,” the other voice said.

A moment later the French window was flung all the way open and in trooped Vanessa and the young man she had hysterically wanted to throw out into the snow that night a month ago. Erika, who had gotten up from her chair in front of the fire, saw a radiant smile on her aunt’s lips.

While they were taking off their scarves and unwrapping themselves from their outer fur-lined garments, Anatol gazed over toward the grate.

“Good morning, Erika,” he said. “Why didn’t you join us?”

“For a very good reason. You forgot to ask me.”

“Did I?”

His voice had a decided coolness in it.

After freeing himself of his outer wrappings, Anatol went over to the old Baroness, who had remained sitting in her chair before the fire.

“Ah, good morning, Baroness. I hope you slept well last night.”

Vanessa, dropping her fur-trimmed gloves on a table, came over to him.

“Save your breath, my friend. She will not speak to us. She has gotten so old she can only understand the language of the young.”

“But surely we’re still young,” said Anatol.

Vanessa gave him a teasing glint. “Oh, my dear. We lost our innocence long ago!”

Erika looked at them both with a certain amount of vexation. That same ridiculous ritual! They went through it, it seemed, almost every morning. Anatol knew very well by then about the old Baroness’s silences. Vanessa had told him often enough. Whether he also knew the real reason for those silences she couldn’t say. Her aunt might have told him, but then again maybe not.

Nicholas came in to fetch the wraps Vanessa and Anatol had discarded. With him was a distinguished-looking gentleman in his late sixties. He was short and stocky, though clearly not self-conscious of his lack of physical stature, and wore an ingenuous expression on his face. Long whiskers sprouted from his cheeks and chin, incongruously dark while his head

of hair was silver white. He was Thaddeus Olson, the family physician. He was also a close friend of the family, often over to the *château* on social calls. Since his practice did not extend much beyond the village, he had plenty of time for socializing. Nobody ever called him by his name. He was always The Doctor.

“Good morning, good morning,” he said to everybody in general.

“Good morning, Doctor,” Vanessa replied.

“Ah, what a pretty pair you make skating on the lake,” he remarked to Vanessa and Anatol with laughing eyes. “I spied on you while I was passing by. Yes, a pretty pair.”

“Must you spy on us?” Vanessa retorted in mock severity. “Really, Doctor!”

Just then two servants, under Nicholas’s orders, brought in some of the breakfast things that had been earlier laid out on a table in the *jardin d’hiver*. Since everybody was now inside, Nicholas saw no reason to let the coffee get cold sitting in a place warmed only by the sun. The servants brought more breakfast foods from the kitchen.

“We must have breakfast in a hurry or we shall be late for chapel,” Vanessa went on. “You too, Doctor, if you care to join us.”

The doctor took a croissant from the sideboard and spread butter on it.

“Ah, how good it is to see this house alive again!”

“Yes, dear Doctor,” Vanessa replied, smiling. “The day may be coming when I shall unveil all the mirrors and the portraits. Who knows, maybe it’ll be today.”

“You see, sir, this house used to be such a gay, lively place once,” the doctor confided in Anatol. “But since the old Baron died...no, let’s be honest. It fell into somnolence long before that.”

Vanessa, refusing to let the implications of the doctor’s remark perturb her radiance, said, “The day may be near to open up all the rooms and give the greatest ball this part of the world has ever seen.”

The doctor, swallowing the second half of his croissant in one gulp as he got caught up in Vanessa’s growing excitement, returned with, “My dear Baroness, do you remember as a young girl the garden parties and the games?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, I remember quite well. It will be like that again. I shall light up the lake with Chinese lanterns and the hills with bonfires. I shall call the peasants with their accordions and fiddles to make the air tremble with their sweet tunes.”

“Do you still remember our country dances, Milady?” the doctor asked with a gallant bow.

“Of course. I wonder, though, if you are not getting too old to dance them, dear Doctor.”

“What impertinence! Really, quite cheeky! Have I gotten too old to dance!”

He took a few dance steps and started to sing.

“Under the willow tree...come, come,” he said, motioning to Vanessa. “Let us show

them who is the best dancer here.”

He took Vanessa’s hand and began whirling her over the drawing room floor, his voice booming out in song as they danced.

“Under the willow tree
Two doves cry, two doves cry.
Under the willow tree
Two doves cry, oh my.
Where shall we sleep, my love,
Whither shall we fly.
Where shall we sleep, my love,
Whither shall we fly.
The wood has swallowed the moon,
The fog has swallowed the shore.
The green toad has swallowed
The key to my door.”

“Ah, charming, charming,” said Anatol with an amused grin. “Dear Doctor, I am truly envious. I wish I could compete with you.”

“Nonsense, young man.” He abandoned Vanessa and came over to him. “If you do not know the steps, give me your hand and I will show them to you.”

The grin faded, replaced by a frowning look of uncertainty. Anatol was clearly not too terribly keen on knowing about simple country dances. But he shrugged in resignation, smiled, and gave the doctor his hand.

“Now then, sir. Right foot first. Back, then left. Forward, sli...i...i...ide. One, two, three, reverse....”

Anatol, clearly no dancer, at least no country dancer, blundered about awkwardly.

Unable to suppress her amusement over Anatol’s discomfiture, Vanessa laughed then burst into song herself.

“Under the willow tree, two doves cry, two doves cry....”

A couple of moments later Erika joined her aunt in giving the old village folk tune an airing. Both women had remarkably good singing voices.

Meanwhile, Anatol was getting more confused by the moment in trying to follow the “simple” country dance.

“No, no!” the doctor scolded. “What do they teach you in school these days?”

“One, two, *left*...one, two, *right*...” Anatol’s voice was almost grim in his determination.

“That’s better, young man. Much better.”

Vanessa suddenly abandoned the tune and clapped her hands for attention.

“Stop this nonsense or we’ll be late for chapel. I still have to go up and change.”

The doctor took Anatol’s arm and steered him out to the *jardin d’hiver*.

“Do you play a good game of chess, sir?” he said on the way.

“I’m afraid I don’t play at all, Doctor,” was Anatol’s reply.

The doctor shook his head. “How the world has changed! It’s not easy for me to imagine how you young people spend the evenings these days.”

Erika, catching those words before Anatol and the doctor were out of earshot, wondered whether the doctor was being ironic or just plain naïve. She could have told him how she and Anatol had spent one particular evening about a month ago.

Vanessa came over to her niece.

“Erika, I am just so happy. I know now...” She gestured toward the French window and the two figures visible through it. “...it was he I was waiting for all these years. I kept my youth for him. His father sent his younger self to me.”

She did a swift graceful whirl.

“Oh, Anatol, Anatol!”

Erika pressed her lips into a tight line before speaking.

“Aunt Vanessa, don’t be fooled by a name. He’s not some exact incarnation of the one you were waiting for. It’s a different man who has come.”

“Oh, no, no, Erika,” she said with a dreamy smile. “He carries his father’s destiny within him. And he knows it. Yes, he knows it.”

“What makes you think that?” Erika asked sharply.

“Because of something that happened this morning.”

“*What* happened?”

“Well, it wasn’t what happened so much as what he said.”

“And what was that?”

That dreamy expression on her aunt’s face grew more pronounced. At the same time she did a few dips and weaves as though she were still out skating on the ice.

“Our arms were entwined,” she said, her voice turning dreamy like her face. “My hand was in his, our wrists touching. We were flying over the ice. Like the wind he sped me on. Like a leaf I followed. It was all too fast, too cold for breathing. We were happy children in a shiny world! Then without warning he let me go, circled around me, then stopped. He gazed into my eyes, deep into them. I saw his quickening breath make trembling clouds that hovered around his youthful face. There was a long pause. I waited...curious...knowing he was about to say something of great significance. And he did.”

Vanessa herself was now standing stock still, the dreamy expression joined by a look of yearning.

“He said, ‘Christmas is drawing near and the winter will pass. It is time for me to leave. But I cannot find the strength to do so.’ ”

“He said that?” Erika uttered in almost a gasp, more shaken than she cared to admit but not yet quite knowing why.

“Those very words.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Oh, yes. But not before I asked him, ‘What makes you so weak?’ ”

“And his reply?”

“Before answering, he took my hand. Then he said, ‘I came as a guest. I am now foolish enough to want to leave as the master.’ ”

“Did...did he really say that?” Erika’s voice had a slight tremor in it.

“Ah, yes, Erika. His exact words.”

“Then...?”

“A long silence followed.”

“But what then?” Erika asked impatiently.

Whether it was due to the sudden sharpening of Erika’s tone or something else, Vanessa came out of her dreaming reverie and, glancing with great amusement at her niece, uttered a high trilling laugh.

“What a curious niece I have!”

Erika could have strangled her at that moment.

A glance out the French window revealed that the two men standing out there had been joined by a third. The newcomer was arrayed in a surplice and high reversed collar while on his head there perched a shovel hat. He looked a little too young and acted a little too brash for the calling his attire proclaimed, yet there was also no denying that he carried about him an air of unworldliness.

On seeing him, Vanessa said, “Dear me, here’s the pastor. I must hurry if I’m to get ready in time.”

She pushed open the French window and called out, “Good morning, Pastor. We should be ready pretty soon. Have some coffee while you wait. I’ll have Nicholas put it back out there for you or you can come in here if you like.”

The young pastor waved breezily at her.

“Good morning, my good Baroness von Landsbro. No need to bother with the coffee. I have had too much already today. And I will stay here as I am having a most stimulating conversation with these two gentlemen.”

He went back to his animated conversation, waving his hands around like a windmill, as Vanessa reshut the French window.

“Oh, how happy I feel this morning,” she sighed, her dreamy manner again asserting itself. “Just so happy!”

She drifted over to the door opening into the entrance hall and disappeared through it.

Erika was again alone with her grandmother.

“Did you hear that?” she said to her. “Leave as the master. That can mean only one thing.”

“Child, you must speak out or you will lose him,” her grandmother told her pointedly.

“It’s his love I want, not his capture,” Erika replied just as pointedly.

“Even for love you must fight.”

“Why shouldn’t he fight for mine?” Her voice lost its quarrelsome tone. “Oh, what’s the use? Vanessa or me, it’s all the same to him.”

“He saw your money, or rather guessed its lack, before he saw your eyes,” her grandmother said cynically.

“Yes, of course from that viewpoint Vanessa *is* the much bigger prize,” Erika sighed forlornly. “Still...the way he kissed that night...how can I ever forget those kisses? Tell me, grandmother. I’ll ask you the same question you asked me: What kind of man is he?”

“He is the man of today,” she replied authoritatively. “That much I can see. He is the sort who will always choose what is the easiest.”

“Then why should I waste my time on such a man when it’s love I am *dying* for?” Erika wailed.

Just then the French window was thrown open with such force that Erika and her grandmother gave visible starts. They both looked up just in time to see Anatol shutting the French window with nearly the same haste.

“Oh, save me, save me!” he panted. “Spare me their talk. It’s too much. Between a doctor and a minister, when they get wound up, a fellow can lose both body and soul!”

He uttered a japing laugh.

“Anatol, please come over here,” Erika called from where she and her grandmother were sitting in front of the fire. He moved their way but not with any great show of enthusiasm.

“Anatol, I must speak to you.”

He glanced at her grandmother.

“Is this...well, a good place? If you want it to be private?”

“Grandmother? She knows everything. I have confided every last thing in her. But you need not worry. She is as secretive as my own conscience. Anyway, you know very well she will not speak to anybody. It is only with me that she does.”

“Then, what is it?” he asked.

“Anatol, is it true what you said to Vanessa this morning?”

“What I said to Vanessa? This morning?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, stop being evasive!” she told him crossly. “I want to hear it personally from you.”

“Well, well, the little sphinx is beginning to clamor for some answers!” he said with a touch of amusement.

“Don’t you think I have the right to claim them?” she returned abruptly. “You know I do!”

They were so intent on each other that they failed to hear the faint words whispering on the old Baroness’s lips.

“Listen to him, child. Be patient with him!”

“Haven’t you told me that I am free?” he said to Erika.

“Of course I have. I will not bind you if you are not already bound by memories.”

“I have not forgotten that night. How could I? Especially since it was the night that has since made you so dark and bitter.”

“That night!” muttered the old Baroness.

“Just what has become of *you* since then?” Erika shot at him.

“Careful, careful, child. Or you will lose him!”

“I have not been silent,” he shot back at Erika. “I have asked you before and I will ask you again, this time in front of a witness: Will you marry me?”

There was a pause.

“What would you do if I were to answer...no?”

That last word she forced out with a sharp gasp.

“What do you want me to say? That I should cut my throat like this?” He drew his index finger from ear to ear under his chin. “Or that I should spend the rest of my days as a monk in some Italian monastery chanting *Te Deum laudamus*?”

His bray of laughter was loud and sardonic.

“Oh, how I hate your infernal laughter!” she shouted at him.

He looked at her in wonder.

“What a sentimental child you are. I never really quite realized it before. You belong to another age, one long since gone.”

“Has the human heart then changed so much?” she asked in misery.

He waved his hand around the room.

“I can tell you this much, Erika. Outside this house the world truly *has* changed. You wouldn’t know it, being isolated here since your birth, but life now moves swifter than it did before. Life no longer leaves any time for idle gestures. If I were to offer you eternal love, it would be nothing more than that, an idle gesture—or more properly speaking, a lie. We have learned today that such words are indeed lies. But the brief pleasures of passion—yes, certainly. And sweet long friendship. Those I can offer you. With complete sincerity, with all my heart.”

He did offer one thing that moment: his hand to capture hers. Erika spurned it by backing up a pace. To her, *that* was the idle gesture.

“Who could resist your gentle beauty, Erika?” he went on, waxing more eloquently. “Oh, how happy we could be together! Being here all your life, of course you do not know Paris or Rome or Budapest or Vienna. You know nothing about the velvet rooms for jeweled suppers or the coast of Spain for solitude. Nor the gilded grand hotels for dancing, the glass and marble stations for goodbyes. We could share all this together, Erika—I could show them all to you—if you will only accept my love. And, who can say? My love might last forever.”

He uttered a faint sigh.

“Life is, after all, so brief.”

She could have laughed if she were the laughing sort.

“Some offer!” she told him in disgust. “More meager than the teeth in a chicken. I wish your so-called love could blind me like it does some people I could name. Instead, I see you too well, only too well.”

“What is your answer, then?” he flung at her harshly. Anger was beginning to get the better of him.

In her present sour mood she was ready to tell him to go to the devil and was opening her mouth to do just that when the door to the hallway swung open and in hurried Vanessa.

“Here I am! Ready at last.” True that the nicely tailored black velvet dress she had on was more suitable for church than skating togs. “Let us hurry. We can’t keep the poor pastor waiting.”

She pulled on a bell cord, then went over to the old Baroness.

“Here is your shaw, Mother,” she said, handing it to her. “And your prayer book. Doctor, will you give her your arm?”

The doctor had just entered the room, having finished his heated discussion with his good friend, the village pastor. A glance out the French window showed the youngish clergyman trudging through the snow toward the small chapel tucked on the baronial grounds a hundred paces away. What had originally called him to Landsbro was the ministry of the much larger church in the village, but as was the case on many baronial manors, the Baron—Baroness in this case—had a private chapel for herself, her family, any guests staying on the grounds, and her servants. Part of the village pastor’s duties was to officiate there.

The doctor went over to Vanessa’s mother.

Nicholas came in, summoned by the bell cord.

“Call the servants for chapel,” Vanessa said to him. He bowed and went out.

Her eyes strayed to her guest.

“Oh, Anatol!” she scolded. “You’re not at all ready!” Her scolding had no real bite

to it, not while being accompanied by one of the inevitable smiles she was always offering him. “Oh, well, it’s too late now. I guess you will just have to assert your male prerogatives and go dressed as you are.”

He gave her a warm smile in return.

Then her eyes alighted on her niece.

“You’re not ready either, Erika!”

Her manner was far less sweet.

“Please, don’t wait for me, Aunt Vanessa,” she said, a note of disquiet entering her voice. “I can always join you later.”

The old Baroness, getting to her feet, slowly slipped the shaw around her shoulders. A maid came in with gloves and a black bonnet with long dangling strings. The old Baroness carefully put them on, willing to let the maid assist her.

“Are you ready, Mother?” Vanessa asked.

Her mother gave her arm to the waiting doctor and the two slowly walked toward the French window and on out into the *jardin d’hiver*, where a group of servants had just assembled. Passing Erika on the way, she stopped a moment to turn and shoot a quick inquisitive look at her granddaughter.

Once outside, the doctor frowned and murmured softly to the old Baroness, “Even to your old doctor you will no longer speak. I wonder how you will call him when you have need of him.”

Back inside, Anatol, still smiling, offered his arm to Vanessa.

“May I take yours, Baroness?”

Again using that light scolding tone, she said, “You must not call me that. You must call me Vanessa.”

They followed the others out.

Chimes from the nearby baronial chapel seeped sweetly into the drawing room through the French window, which had been left partly open. Erika, left alone, began walking around the room, her disquiet growing moment by moment.

She stopped in front of one of the covered mirrors. Staring at it, she bit her lip. She hesitantly reached a hand for the covering. Then, with sudden determination, she tore the covering from the mirror.

She stood in front of it for a moment, gazing at the young woman staring back at her, the image of a greatly agonized woman.

Erika went from mirror to mirror, tearing all the covers off. After looking up at the covered portrait over the mantel, she disappeared through the door leading to the pantry but was soon back with a stepladder. Mounting it, she quickly had the heavy drape hiding the

portrait torn away.

She gazed at the portrait for many minutes.

Yes, a splitting likeness. Indistinguishable from the real thing. A testament to the woman who had been pinned to the cork board of time.

On looking at the portrait, a name seeped into her thoughts: Dorian Gray. For a few moments she struggled to place the name, then suddenly had it. Dorian Gray was the chief character in a novel she had read a few years back, a work written by some Englishman. She couldn't remember the Englishman's name, only that he had also created a scandalous play—*Salome* was it?—which just that year a German had turned into an equally scandalous opera. (How she happened to know such esoteric things—she, who had never been to an opera—she really couldn't say. Could somebody have told her?) The point about Dorian Gray was that he had commissioned a painting of himself, like Vanessa, but through a Faustian turn of mind had succeeded in causing the image in the portrait to age while he himself stayed eternally youthful.

Well, in a sense Vanessa had done that literary character one better: Both she and her portrait had remained eternally youthful.

An even more potent pact with Lucifer?

In the growing anguish of her thoughts, in knowing the terrible decision she knew she had to make, her mind seemed to fall into such odd byways without any effort. Through the French window came the faint sounds of a hymn from the chapel. By moving closer to the French window, she was able to catch some of the words.

“...Our smiles trembling in the heart:
Our fears lost in the night.
Joyously this day we start...”

She gazed out into the *jardin d'hiver*, hesitating whether or not to join the others in the chapel. After a moment she shook her head.

Back again in front of the portrait, Erika let her eyes slowly drift up to it. Her aunt gazing back down on her in such a life-like manner finally snapped her mind.

“No, Anatol, no!” she cried out in her anguish. “My answer is no! Let Vanessa have you. She who for so little had to wait so long!”

She dropped to her knees below the portrait and, letting her face drop into the open palms of her hands, quietly wept.

Château Landsbro had a large ballroom, which had not seen use in over twenty years. Nobody had so much as stuck his nose in the place in all that time—as Vanessa learned

much to her sorrow. Only five days before the ball, she had ordered the ballroom opened and made ready, only to discover the tapestries moth-eaten, the rugs mildewed, the lace curtains falling in tatters, with dank and damp and decay everywhere. A large leak had developed in the roof and a couple of window panes, not easily visible from outside, were broken, which had allowed birds and a few varieties of small wild furry creatures to make the ballroom their home. Seeing the mess threw her into a blind panic. She had already scattered the invitations far and wide! Oh, what a fool she had been for not glancing into the ballroom beforehand!

The result was a flurry of orders scattering the servants far and wide with instructions to secure new furnishings in the quickest possible time. Nicholas went as far as Copenhagen in his race around the countryside to produce the needed replacements. Even Erika was pressed into service for the Herculean effort, going to Värnamo to find new lace and some expert help in restoring paintings, somebody willing to come to Landsbro and clean up the portraits that lined the walls of the ballroom.

Erika had been more than willing to make the excursion to Värnamo. She had welcomed the excuse to go there since she desperately needed to consult a doctor. But not old Dr. Olson. No, least of all him. This was a matter that had to be kept an absolute secret. Well, she had told her grandmother. Maybe a mistake, but her grandmother really was the voice of her conscience. She had found throughout the years that she could hold nothing back from her grandmother. Even this.

Other than the journey to Värnamo, Erika had gone nowhere the last six weeks, seldom even venturing from her room, not since the day she had given Anatol her unequivocal answer. She was in her room now, gazing out the window at the bright sunlight glancing off the snow. The ball was that very evening, the ball during which the announcement would be made. Sorrow lined her young face, making her appear years older. Sorrow on her face and hands on her belly. As she gazed out the window, she clutched her belly as though in deep pain.

“The Count and Countess d’Albany.”

The footman stood at the wide, thrown-open doors of the ballroom, pronouncing the names crisply, loud enough to be heard above the orchestra. The two notables, latecomers, had just disgorged their sumptuous outer wraps at the château’s main entrance, helped by Nicholas, who was standing there for that purpose and for arranging the fur coats, cloaks, hats and whatever on the racks set up by the front door.

Through the open doors of the ballroom couples could be seen dancing to the lilting tunes being supplied by the orchestra. Laughter wafted out into the château’s high, wide entrance hall.

Nicholas gazed through the open ballroom doors for a few moments, then walked over to the footman standing there.

“Almost everyone is here now,” he said to the footman. “You go and help inside. I shall watch the door.”

As the footman disappeared into the ballroom, Nicholas wandered back to the racks and went to the one holding the women’s fur coats. An odd expression slipped across his otherwise rather wooden face. Taking the one he had just hung up, the one that had been adorning Countess d’Albany’s back moments ago, he rubbed the fur gently against his cheek.

“Ah, these lovely furs,” he sighed. “So soft, so sweetly scented. This, I fear, is all I shall ever know about such women.”

Old Dr. Olson, who happened to be passing near the ballroom’s entrance carrying two champagne glasses, glanced out and saw what Nicholas was doing. Moving a bit unsteadily, he stepped out into the entrance hall in time to hear the major-domo’s softly uttered sentiment. He gazed at Nicholas in considerable astonishment.

“Why, you rascal you!” he said, his speech a bit unsteady like his movements. “I never knew you had a soul!”

Nicholas instantly released the fur, straightened up, and assumed his usual wooden expression.

Looking a tad bleary, the doctor came a little closer.

“What an evening! What women! What champagne!” He looked at the glasses in his hands, from one to the other and back. “But what am I doing with...*two* glasses? I must have been carrying one to some charming lady. That must be it. But who *was* it? Nicholas, can you tell me who she was?”

The major-domo looked at him blankly.

“Oh, well,” the doctor sighed, then promptly drained them both one after the other into his mouth.

Which didn’t help his equilibrium any too well.

“Ah, Nicholas,” he said, setting the glasses down on a small table by the racks, “I should never have been a doctor. A gentleman, a poet, yes, that’s what I really am. A naked body—what’s that to a doctor? Nothing. We see them all the time.” He waved his hand in the general direction of the entrance to the ballroom. “But under a chandelier, with the right music, the right perfume, a naked arm, a naked shoulder—oh, God! I could lose my mind!”

He rumbled a deep unsteady laugh. Nicholas continued to look at him with the dignity demanded of his station, but there was a slight twitch in the corner of the major-domo’s mouth.

“Did you see me dancing with *Mademoiselle* Doriat?” the doctor asked him. “She’s

not so young anymore. I know that. A bit too plump perhaps, a bit too tall for me. But so light on her feet. Oh, so light! And soft and blonde. Tra la la la la....”

The good doctor began twirling in front of Nicholas, whose normally imperturbable manner was now definitely slipping a bit, showing some astonishment mixed with a drop of disdain.

“ ‘Doctor, dear Doctor,’ ” came the doctor’s voice in a high falsetto. “ ‘Not quite so fast, dear Doctor!’ Her blue scarf floating over my head.... Her bosom heaving under my chin.... ‘Doctor, dear Doctor. Not quite so fast, dear Doctor....’ ”

He lost his balance. Nicholas caught him just in time to save him from tumbling into a heap on the floor.

“*Monsieur*, perhaps it would be wise to cut back on the champagne somewhat,” he said, putting the doctor back evenly on his feet.

“Oh, la la! Yes, yes, I must stop drinking. I really must. I still have the engagement to announce.” He gazed at the major-domo with sudden steadiness. “Yes, Nicholas, yes, they chose the old family doctor to make the announcement. Don’t you think it a sweet idea? Yes, so touching. So very touching....”

He felt into his jacket pocket. His pleased expression gradually turned into one of acute consternation.

“Good heavens! Where is my speech? I cannot find it! I should not have drunk so much,” he groaned, slapping his forehead. “I shall muddle up everything!”

After a few moments, he shrugged in resignation. “Well, I suppose it can’t be helped now. Nicholas, could you lend me your comb?”

With the proffered item, the doctor wobbled over to a nearby mirror near the château’s front door and began putting his disheveled crown of silver back into some semblance of order. He was still at it when Vanessa, resplendent in a stunning ballroom gown of damask rose, came tripping into the entrance hall from the ballroom. Her jerky manner and agitated expression betrayed a distraught turn of mind.

“So, here you are!” she said to the doctor. “I’ve been looking for you.”

The doctor, swiveling around as fast as his bleary state would allow him, slipped the comb into his pocket while offering Vanessa a sheepish smile.

“Yes, yes, I am ready. No need to fear. I know it all by heart. Here, I’ll show you.” He began to declaim in a loud voice, “Ladies and gentleman, I have the great honor—”

“Oh, be quiet, Doctor!” Vanessa chided him. “Can’t you see how upset I am? They will not come down. They refuse to.”

“Who? You mean the old Baroness and your niece?”

“Yes, of course. Who else?”

“*Zut alors!* Then we shall make the announcement without them.”

“I quite expected it of Mother, but Erika? Why? Why? Why does she refuse? What

will people think? My own niece....”

Nicholas, seeing that such a conversation was not meant for a domestic’s ears, quietly withdrew.

“Perhaps she is feeling a little shy,” the doctor said, giving Vanessa a reassuring smile. “This is a momentous occasion. After all these years, for the Baroness von Landsbro to be marrying....”

“Please, Doctor, will you go up?” Vanessa pleaded. “I have sent servants up to fetch her. I have gone myself. She will not open the door for me. She will not even answer my knock.”

The doctor paused a moment, then said quietly, “I shall see what I can do.”

He turned and started up the wide curving main stairs leading to the second floor. It was necessary for him to hold onto the banister tightly as he tottered unsteadily up. As he mounted each step, a faint melody issued breathlessly from his lips.

“Doctor, dear Doctor. Not quite so fast, dear Doctor....”

Vanessa, standing by the steps, gazed up after him until he was lost to view.

Just then Anatol appeared from the ballroom and came toward her. He, too, was resplendent in formal wear that in his case was the last word in current fashion.

“Ah, at last I found you, my Vanessa, my sweetest Ariadne,” he said with gay abandon. “What has been keeping you?”

Vanessa sank to the lowest two steps and dropped her face into her hands.

“Vanessa, my darling, what is wrong?” Anatol demanded, his laughing manner melting into perplexed concern.

She looked up at him.

“I feel so weak, Anatol. So afraid.”

“But...why, my darling? What is there to be afraid of?”

“Why won’t those two come down?” she cried, springing to her feet in a sudden fit of anger. “They sit up there like brooding harpies getting ready to feed on carrion.”

“Oh, it cannot be quite as bad as all of that, my darling,” Anatol said, giving her one of his most charming smiles, of which he had a good supply. “Certainly not enough to get upset over. Erika, I know, will come down. Earlier today she promised me she would.”

Which would have been a laugh if Erika could have heard it, though there would have been no trace of humor in her laugh. She had not spoken one word to him since that day she had turned down his marriage offer.

“Then why has she built this wall of silence all around my happiness?” demanded Vanessa. “She and Mother?”

“Forget, my darling. Forget.” His voice was smooth and lulling. “You are at your

most enchanting when you forget. And smile.”

She pulled away from him, for once evading the spell.

“There is something I do not know. What is it? Could I have been wrong for twenty years? Was I being a fool all that time?”

She suddenly swung around and leveled a piercing gaze at him.

“Is there something you have not told me, Anatol?”

“I? How could I possibly have anything to hide? My biggest sin, my only one, was pretending to be my father before you met me and learned the truth. Other than that, I am fleeced.”

His voice turned low, melodic, hypnotic.

“But know this, my darling. Love by its very nature is bitter at the core. You must never taste too deep of it. To do so, to search into the past, can only lead to sorrow, to regret. Because those who hunger for the past will be fed on lies. Instead of considering the past, let your love be new, as though it were born only today. Like mine. My love has only just begun, my darling.”

Her gaze, though still steady, was now innocent of all contention. She was again falling under the magician’s spell.

“If love has a bitter core, Anatol, then let me taste it with you. You need never fear that I will take too much—if only you will offer it all. But my love cannot be born anew, cannot begin nor grow nor die. For it has always been, a thing existing for all time.”

“Then for every question let my kiss be the answer,” he said, his voice turning more compelling, the spell of his words like binding links of chain.

“Can a kiss be an answer?”

“I did not ask whom you were waiting for the night we met. I asked no questions at all.”

“It was for you, Anatol,” she sighed in deep ecstasy. “I was waiting for you!”

“No, not for me,” he said, shaking his head. “I was only born that night.”

“For you, Anatol. For you. Like the burning phoenix, you flew out of the ashes of a shattered dream.”

He put his hands gently on her shoulders.

“Then scatter the ashes to the four winds. Follow my flight, Vanessa. Follow my flight!”

“I follow! I follow!”

She threw her arms around him and gave him a long lingering kiss full of flaming passion.

They were interrupted by the sound of the doctor descending the stairs.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he informed Vanessa as he reached the bottom step. “A bit apprehensive, perhaps. She’s not used to all this excitement. Anyway, she will come down later, she said.”

“Ah, well,” Vanessa said with a quick sigh. Her vexation over her ungrateful relatives had all but evaporated under the magician’s magical efforts. “Let us proceed without them. We cannot wait any longer.”

She motioned to Nicholas, who was standing just inside the ballroom door.

“Call our people in,” she told him. “Have them stand by the door. They should begin their dances right after the announcement.”

She vanished into the ballroom.

Anatol, as an aside to the doctor while following Vanessa, asked, “What did she really say?”

“Nothing. She refused to speak to me.”

Anatol shook his head and disappeared inside.

The doctor stood for a few moments by the stairs before he, too, vanished into the ballroom.

Moments later Nicholas entered through a side door, ushering in a group of peasants from the village. He lined them up by the ballroom door, making a solid wall of peasant stock facing inward. There was renewed music from the orchestra inside, the sudden blast of a fanfare.

Just then a shadow appeared on the upstairs landing. It belonged to Erika. She was dressed in a white ballroom gown. For some moments she hesitated at the top of the stairs. It did not take much of a glance to see how pale and weak she looked, how distraught the expression on her face was. She looked to be in a fierce battle to master herself.

Slowly, hesitantly, as if she feared she would fall, she started down the stairs.

The music issuing from inside the ballroom faded. Only the buzz and hum of conversation wafted out into the entrance hall.

Then came the sound of the doctor’s voice from within the ballroom.

“Silence, everybody, silence, please. May I have your attention.”

At the sound of the doctor’s voice, Erika stopped halfway down the stairs. Turning more pale yet, she looked as if she had suddenly been taken violently ill. She clutched her belly.

The buzz of conversation in the ballroom slowly died away.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the doctor’s voice was going on, “I have the great honor, as an old friend of this noble and distinguished family, which for many years has been a shining example to us all of what is finest in the traditions of our country, to announce the engagement of our dear Baroness Vanessa von Landsbro to the Honorable Anatol Hjerkin of Oslo....”

A sudden burst of music from the orchestra swept away the last words of the doctor. At the same moment Erika gave a faint gasp, stumbled but was able to ease herself to a step instead of tumbling headlong down the stairway, and fainted dead away.

As the music died down, a boisterous round of applause erupted from within the ballroom.

“Now let us all drink to the happy couple,” came the doctor’s loud voice.

“Prosit! Now to your health!” came voices from the inside.

As the orchestra started up a lively country dance, the peasants lined up outside the door slipped into the ballroom and began their dances. Some moments later Nicholas slipped out, heading for the racks of deposited winter garments. As he passed, he happened to glance up the stairs.

“*Mon Dieu!*” he muttered as he raced up the steps. “*Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle Erika!*” He stooped on the step beside her and gently shook her shoulder. “Answer me! What can be wrong?”

A faint moan escaped her lips. She stirred, sat up, and glanced rather vacantly at him.

“Oh. It...it’s Nicholas.” She shook her head slightly. “There’s nothing...nothing wrong. Really, there isn’t...”

“But something must be. You were passed out. I should fetch the doctor.”

“No, please.” She gripped his arm. “Please don’t tell anybody. I’m fine. Really, I am. I shall come down at once.”

Nicholas gazed at her dubiously. Then, with a Gallic shrug, he helped her to her feet.

“May I bring you something?”

“No...no, thank you. It’ll be all right to leave me now. I wish to be alone.”

He gazed at her for another few moments, to make sure she could stay on her feet. She was swaying slightly.

Then he turned and slowly descended the stairs, stopping a couple of times to glance up at her. Presently, he vanished into the ballroom.

After he was out of sight, Erika’s hand flew to her belly, where it stayed. The anguish crept back onto her face, starker than ever.

“His child. His child.” Her voice was a soft moan. “It...it must not be born!”

Slowly, putting one foot carefully before the other, she descended the stairs. Turning toward the entrance hall, she moved like in a dream to the main front door. Opening it, she slipped out into the night. She left the door standing wide open behind her. The wind whistled in, rustling the furs hanging on the racks.

Music continued to blare from the ballroom. Dancing couples occasionally swayed through the open double doors a few steps into the outer hall before swaying back into the ballroom and onto the crowded dance floor. None seemed to notice the open front door and the bite of the chill wind come to join them in their gyrations. Or perhaps they didn’t care.

Another figure appeared at the top of the stairs. Disheveled, adorned in an old, rather disreputable dressing gown, the figure gazed down the stairway to the floor below.

“Erika! Erika!”

Although agitated, the voice wasn't very loud. The old Baroness von Landsbro knew that others were not far away.

She started down the stairs.

“Was that you, Erika? I thought I heard your footsteps in the snow below my window. Oh, I am afraid. If only I could call someone!”

At the bottom of the steps she made her slow way to the open front door. As she stood in the aperture, the wind whipped her hair.

She cried out into the night.

“Erika! Erika!”

But her voice, no louder than before, was swallowed up in the icy gasp of the wind.

The pale streamers of dawn were turning bright enough to allow objects to be made out from the second-story window. The doctor, standing there and peering out intently, saw nothing to smooth over the lines of anxiety etched deeply across his face. Behind him Vanessa, in one of her plainest dressing gowns, was pacing restlessly from one end of the room to the other. The old Baroness, displaying a considerably greater calmness than her daughter, was sitting by the small fireplace.

All three were in Erika's bedroom. The bed that graced the room was actually in a separate alcove and was nearly out of sight. But enough of it was visible to indicate it was all too empty.

“Oh, why, why did no one give me any indication?” Vanessa's voice was as full of anxiety as her eyes. “Was everybody as blind as I was? Did no one see the sorrow in her face?”

She stopped her pacing and cocked her head as the distant sound of howling dogs reached faintly through the window panes.

“It is almost dawn and still they have not found her,” she said, resuming her pacing. “Erika, Erika, what made you do this?”

She again stopped her pacing, this time to direct her eyes to the doctor.

“You are her doctor and have known her all her life. How is it possible that you suspected nothing?”

Turning to her from the window, the doctor emitted a deep sigh.

“My dear, I have always known I am a bad doctor. Now it seems I am also a bad poet, for I have never learned to read the human heart.”

He turned back to look out the window.

Vanessa, her face suddenly turning stern and reproofing, took a pace toward the old Baroness.

“And you. You must surely know something. But will you speak? Oh, no, you will not. Whatever have I done to you that I must bear your awful silences? Oh, I would hate you if you were not my mother!”

“Do not speak to your own mother like that,” said the doctor. But his voice was barely above a murmur while his mildly articulated words were directed not at Vanessa but at the window, leaving puffs of vapor on the cold panes.

“Why can they not find her?” Vanessa wailed. “The whole village is out there looking. They *have* to find her!”

“She cannot have wandered very far,” the doctor said, turning his head her way a little. “Not in this cutting cold.”

“What if they do find her? Surely she will not be alive!”

She dropped her face into the palms of her hands and began weeping noisily.

The doctor, leaving the window, quickly went to her and put his arm around her shoulder.

“Come, come, my dear, you must not give way to despair or jump to conclusions. It may all be very innocent. They found no trace of her steps near the lake and the ice was not broken.”

Vanessa took her face out of her palms.

“Why, why must the greatest sorrows come from those we love the most? Erika, Erika, my sweetest Erika, why have you done this? Why? What moved you, you who are only as wild as the wild dove and no prouder than the rose? I love you, Erika, I have always loved you. As I would my own child, my own daughter. Why did you break my heart just now, just as it started beating again? Oh, Erika. Come back! Please come back!”

The doctor released her and went back to the window. Something had caught his attention.

“Yes. Look there. Some men are coming toward the house.”

Vanessa flew to the window to join him.

“Do you suppose...?”

The doctor peered more closely.

“Yes! They are carrying her. They have found her!”

He raced out of the room.

Vanessa jerked open the sash and cried outside.

“Anatol! Anatol! Is she alive?”

She waited for the distant call of her lover, then closed the window with the greatest care, leaning against it as the world took on a dark fringe as though seen through a fainting spell.

The old Baroness, who had gotten out of her chair a little shakily, stared at her daughter

with imploring eyes.

Vanessa jerked her head in a quick nod.

“Yes, yes!” she gasped in a faint whisper. “She is alive. Thank God. Oh, thank you, God!”

Not more than a couple of minutes later the bedroom door was thrown open and Anatol entered, carrying Erika in his arms. Behind him crowded a group of peasants followed by the doctor. Anatol, with the greatest care, set her down on the bed in the alcove. Her white ballroom gown, still clinging to her, showed signs of having shared in whatever ordeal Erika had suffered.

The doctor helped Anatol position her on the bed and cover her, murmuring, “There, there, gently.”

“Doctor, how is she?” Vanessa asked anxiously.

“She seems all right, from what I can tell without doing a thorough exam.” He turned to Anatol. “Send them all out.”

To the group of men, Anatol said, smiling pleasantly yet at the same time gravely, “You had all better go now. Thank you all for everything you’ve done. You will find wine downstairs and a blazing fire in the kitchen.”

The peasants withdrew quietly. The doctor, with Vanessa, remained in the alcove. Meanwhile, the old Baroness, who had kept back, not approaching the group, returned to her chair by the fire.

Presently, Vanessa came out of the alcove and leaned against Anatol, who embraced her tenderly.

“Oh, in what terror I have been! Anatol, Anatol...”

Overcome, she broke into tears.

“Poor Vanessa. What an endless night! Come, come back into my arms, my dearest. Yes, weep. Weep in my arms.”

After some moments she was able to speak.

“What happened, Anatol? Where did you find her?”

He sighed deeply and shook his head.

“Just off the path to the lake. She was lying in a small ravine, hidden like a wounded bird. She must have fallen. Her frost-white gown was torn and damp with blood. There she lay in the snow, the bitter cold had glazed her lovely face into deep and opaque sleep. I felt the faint beat of her heart. It was like...well, like some undeciphered signal from another world. I lifted her into my arms, warming her against my body. I called her name. Only then did she sigh a little.”

Just then the doctor came out of the alcove.

“How is she?” Vanessa asked.

“Leave me alone with her. She is not ready to see anyone yet.”

As he returned to the alcove, Vanessa pulled Anatol across the room to where a small sofa resided. She had him sit down on it with her.

“Anatol...,” she began. Her expression was tormented.

“Yes, my Vanessa.”

She clasped his hand in hers.

“Anatol, tell me the truth!”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do *you* know why she did this strange thing?”

“How could I possibly know?”

“Anatol, you must not lie to me. Look me in the eyes. Does she love you?”

“This much I can tell you. She does *not* love me.”

“Swear!”

“I swear.”

Vanessa paused a moment.

“How can you be sure?”

“Did I not know *you* loved me long before you spoke? But Erika, she chose to judge me before she could learn to love.”

She gazed at him for another silent moment.

“Can I believe you?”

“You can always ask Erika yourself. She never lies.”

Again Vanessa broke down and wept.

“Oh, Anatol! Take me away from this house. We must quickly leave! The sorrows of others raise dark walls between our hearts. Oh, help me tear apart these bonds. Help me take flight!”

“Yes, Vanessa. Every day of waiting roots you deeper in the past. Hide in my love! Brief is the day for blindness. And brief is the day for madness. Hide in my love. Only the mad, only the blind can fly!”

Again the doctor emerged from the alcove.

“Nothing to worry about,” he pronounced. “She will be all right.”

He stopped Vanessa and Anatol, both of whom had gotten up from the sofa to go over to the alcove.

“No, no. Not yet. She wants to be alone with her grandmother.”

“But...why?” Vanessa asked.

“Come, come. We must not upset her.”

He gently ushered them out of the room, closing the door quietly after himself. A long silence ensued in the room. The old Baroness, alone in front of the fire, still hadn't moved since retaking her seat there.

“Grandmother!” came Erika's voice faintly from the alcove.

“Yes, Erika,” the old Baroness replied.

“Do they know?”

“How can I tell? They lie only to themselves and to each other.”

“That is good. Very good.”

There was a pause.

“And your child?”

“It will not be born, thank God. It will not be born.”

The old Baroness slowly got up from her chair and without haste but with stern determination made her way toward the door. From the alcove Erika could see the figure of her grandmother glide slowly past with stern regal dignity.

“Grandmother, why are you leaving me?”

There was no reply.

Moments later, the door opened then closed, leaving Erika in a chill silence.

“Grandmother! Grandmother! Answer me!”

Snow was falling. Not heavily but enough to mantle the world in a new frock of pristine whiteness. Inside the Landsbro château there was considerable activity. Servants were trooping up and down the stairs, carrying down a seemingly unending stream of trunks and bags and boxes, all of which were being stowed in a sleigh standing out in front of the house.

Inside the drawing room the old Baroness von Landsbro was sitting in her accustomed place near the fireplace. Anatol and the doctor, standing near the French windows leading to the garden, were quietly conversing. Anatol was dressed in a fashionable set of traveling clothes. Anatol was saying, “By the time we reach Paris, the new house should be ready,” Anatol was saying.

The doctor shook his head in a marveling way.

“Imagine it, to be living in Paris! How I envy you. And how I will miss you both.”

“We shall miss you, too, dear friend,” Anatol replied in his partly bluff, partly ingratiating manner.

“I know you will make a happy couple,” the doctor sighed.

“Yes, we shall have the most beautiful house in Paris.”

Just then Vanessa, wearing a traveling suit with a hat and veil, came in through the doorway from the entrance hall.

“I am almost ready,” she announced a bit breathlessly.

Anatol kissed her, then held her elbows while stepping back at arm’s length to look at her.

“My, how lovely you look!”

A little fretfully, Vanessa said to him, “Be sure they put everything in the sleigh. And tell them to be especially careful with the hat boxes.”

“Relax, my Vanessa. They will be careful....”

His voice faded as he escorted Vanessa back through the door of the drawing room, intent on personally seeing to the loading for Vanessa’s peace of mind.

Finding himself alone except for the old Baroness, whose silent presence he along with most others tended to discount if not actually forget, stared pensively out the French windows at the falling snow.

He was feeling a great welling of sadness. Words went through his mind, words unbidden, words that told him that for every love there was a last farewell, for each remembered day an empty room. How many children had he brought into the world? Yet, no one took the place of those who were lost, those who left him behind. He thought of Vanessa, who was herself once a child. A smile came to his lips as his mind drifted back to those days long gone.

“Do you remember, Vanessa?” his lips murmured softly. “The mumps, the chicken pox, the scarlatina? Do you remember the many times I cooled your burning cheek? And fought the grinning dwarfs at the foot of your bed! Will you ever think of your old doctor now? Now that the pulse of your life takes you so far away from him?”

Still gazing out the French window with his back to the rest of the room, he remained oblivious to the reappearance of Vanessa until he heard her voice say, “And you, my friend, what are you mumbling about?”

He turned. Erika was with her, gowned in a simple black dress and looking pale and tense.

“Oh, my dear,” he started to say, “I just wanted to tell you—”

“Yes, yes, dear Doctor,” she cut in brusquely. “Come, you go help Anatol. He’s not very good at supervising servants.”

The doctor gave a wry smile and headed for the door. Vanessa, following him, carefully closed the door after him.

She then turned to her niece.

“Erika, sit down here next to me,” she said, indicating one of the two-seater couches scattered about the drawing room. “Now that I am married and I’m going to Paris, who can say when we might see each other again. You can live here as long as you wish. As I have told you, I have willed the house to you.” She paused significantly. “But please do not tell Anatol.”

“No, of course not.”

“We may not come back for years. We may never come back.”

“I choose to stay,” Erika said with the tenseness about her more palpable. “I am not afraid to stay.”

“But you are really too young to be here alone,” her aunt said with great conviction.

“You, too, were young when you came back here. Weren’t you younger than me even?”

“Oh, but that was different!” Vanessa cried.

“Was it? Anyway, someone must take your place now.” Erika nodded toward the old Baroness. “*She* cannot be left alone.”

Vanessa also glanced over toward the fireplace.

“I shall think of you always,” she said. “Do take care of my azaleas and the parakeets and don’t forget—”

“Please, Aunt Vanessa. You have nothing to worry about. It shall all be as if you were here.”

There was a long awkward pause as Vanessa gazed at her niece with eyes compelling yet full of dread.

“Erika,” she said in a low voice, “before I leave you must tell me the truth about that night.”

Erika tensed.

“I have told you the truth.”

“No, no, you are hiding something. And now I must know. I cannot live with the uncertainty sticking like a thorn in my heart.”

“No, really. There *was* no reason for what I did. It was a foolish thing to do. It was...well, the end of my youth.”

“Tell me truthfully, Erika. Was it...because of Anatol?”

“Anatol?” The words tumbled out of her mouth. “No, no! It had nothing to do with Anatol!”

“Swear?”

“Yes, I swear!”

“Then what was it? Do not torment me, Erika.”

She forced a degree of calmness to her voice.

“You would laugh if I told you. As I have laughed since then.”

“But...why?”

“I thought I loved someone who didn’t love me.”

“But who?” Vanessa was now calmer herself. “The young Pastor perhaps? The gamekeeper?”

“Does it matter? It was a foolish thing. It’s all over now. And something I would rather forget.”

“Perhaps he wasn’t the man for you!”

Erika nodded sadly.

“Yes, I know that now. He was not the man for me.”

Just then Anatol entered the room.

“You must hurry,” he said to Vanessa, “if we are to reach Värnamo station before dark.”

“Yes, of course.”

She rose gracefully to her feet and drifted into the entrance hall, where a group of servants were waiting to tender her their final farewells.

“Bring me down my things, Clara,” she said to a maid, her voice floating through the open doorway into the drawing room. “Oh, do not cry, silly thing.”

Through the doorway she could be seen talking to each one of the servants, who in turn kissed her hand.

Anatol took Vanessa’s preoccupation with the servants as an opportunity to approach Erika, still seated on the two-seater, and speak softly to her.

“There was a time, Erika, when I thought it would be with you that I would be leaving this house.”

She looked up at him, wondering how deep the sincerity of his words ran.

“Oh, please forget me. I am sure you can. All I want is for you to make her happy. Remember, she loves you in a way I never could.”

He was about to reply to that when Vanessa came back into the room. The doctor was following right behind her.

“Let me look around once more,” Vanessa sighed. “Who knows when I shall see this house again.”

She looked out into the garden through the French windows. There ensued a long silence.

Thoughts, voices seemed to swirl about the five people assembled in that old-fashioned drawing room. As they gazed at one another, the thoughts, the voices seemed to pin each to the cork board of his and her special place of destiny.

To leave, to break,
To find, to keep,
To stay, to wait,
To hope, to dream,
To weep and remember.
To love is all of this,
And none of it is love.
The light is not the sun,
Nor the tide the moon.

To leave, to break....

Ah, Anatol, how hard it will be, the backward road of regret!

To find, to keep....

Ah, poor Vanessa, only to die empty-handed!

To stay, to wait....

Erika, Erika, only to kiss the impostor!

To weep, to hope....

And you old people, may Death release you before you too clearly remember or cease to dream!

Vanessa shook herself, as though awakening from a dream. She came over to Erika, who was now standing.

“Goodbye, Erika,” she uttered softly, kissing her niece.

“Goodbye. Be happy, Aunt Vanessa. Please be happy.”

Vanessa went over to the old Baroness, who was still sitting in her accustomed place by the fire.

“Goodbye, Mother,” she said, bending over to peck her mother’s cheek.

“Goodbye, Erika,” said Anatol. “When I see you again, perhaps you will have learned to smile.”

Erika curved her lips into something resembling just that, but it was a gesture tinged with irony.

“Goodbye, Anatol. I hope you will still be smiling when I see you again.”

The doctor, clearly overcome, uttered in a shaking voice, “Goodbye, goodbye, my dear ones!”

“Please, please, no tears!” Vanessa admonished. “Come in the sleigh with us, Doctor. We can drop you off in the village.” She glanced at her niece. “You, too, Erika, if you wish to accompany us that far.”

Erika shook her head.

“I shall wave goodbye from here.”

Vanessa and Anatol, accompanied by the doctor, left the room, going into the entrance

hall and out the front door. Erika closed the door to the drawing room after them. Now alone with the old Baroness, she went to the window and looked out into the snow. Her movements were jerky, barely under control, as she labored without total success to keep down the bitter agony she was feeling.

At the sound of the departing sleigh, she weakly raised her trembling hand to wave goodbye.

At that moment the agony burst forth with a bitter cry.

“Anatol! Anatol!”

She dropped into a nearby chair and covered her face with her hands.

But almost immediately she sprang to her feet, clenching her fists along with her teeth.

“No! I must never utter that name again. Lucky those people who are so eager to believe! Do you really think she believes the lie I told her?”

As she said that, she turned to the old Baroness and waited for a response.

“Grandmother?”

There was still no response.

Erika let her lips curl down in the saddest expression.

“Oh, of course. I forgot. You will no longer speak to me either now. Like Aunt Vanessa, I have sinned beyond the pale.”

She went over to a draw string and rang the bell.

“I am now truly alone.”

The major-domo came in.

“Nicholas, will you please cover all the mirrors in the house again?”

“What, *Mademoiselle*?” Nicholas uttered, visibly astonished.

“Yes, just as it was before.”

Going over to a chest, she pulled out some pieces of drapery.

“Begin with the ones in here now.”

While the startled major-domo began to cover the mirrors in the drawing room, Erika went from window to window, closing the curtains. As she passed by the mantle, she glanced up at the portrait above it.

“No need to cover that, I suppose,” she said softly to herself. “I do not look at all like my aunt.”

With her voice ringing with imperious assurance, she said to Nicholas, “From now on I shall receive no visitors. Tell the gatekeeper that the gate to the park must be kept locked at all times. Thank you.”

The major-domo left to carry out her instructions.

Erika went to the fire and sat in her aunt’s accustomed chair near her grandmother.

“Ah, that is good. Now it is my turn to wait.”

She closed her eyes and appeared to drift off into a light doze.