



THE QUICKENING SPIRIT

By Elizabeth Bibesco

With Sketches by Frances Delehanty

WHEN we were children our grandmother always appeared to us as a romantic, almost a legendary figure. To have married a Frenchman was in itself such an exciting thing to have done, and then to be called "Madame la Marquise"—what pictures did it not evoke, of powder and patches, gavottes and bowling greens, masks and fans and the fine lost arts of coquetry. And to live in Paris! How wicked, how elegant, how alluring. Grandmama, too, fitted so marvelously into the picture. Her long, tapering fingers covered with rings somehow contrived to make other people's hands look clumsy and naked. There was harmony between the dignity of her carriage and the light grace of her movements, her every gesture crisp and finished and perfect, a little touch of emphasis added by an artist. Her clothes were

quite unlike other people's clothes; they seemed, somehow, to have been created on her, to be a part of her essential exquisiteness. They carried with them a flavor of the eternal, of the absolute, belonging, as her tiny feet and her tiny waist belonged, to the age when to be a woman was a vocation, when femininity was an art, when each eyelash had a purpose and usefulness was unknown.

"Que voulez-vous, ma chère?" she would say, with a little shrug. "I was taught to want to please and I was taught how to please. It is a lesson that cannot be unlearned", and she would smile at my mother who had had one husband and a large number of children, whereas she had had one child, two husbands and, legend said, a legion of lovers.

As I grew older I longed to hear more of her adventures. They were

conducted with the taste, the discretion, the abandon which her training had perfected her in. The strings she pulled—and there must have been many—were invisible threads; she broke hearts in her dressing room, not on the stage. She was a work of art, a bibelot, a fragile, perfect thing; but true to the traditions of her age, she would fling herself into a rushing current of passion and re-emerge without a curl disarranged, whereas we today will sit on the bank and go home be-draggled from the spray.

“Moral, my dear?” she would say to me. “Perhaps we were less moral but we had tact, we had taste. You are taught how to do things, we were taught how to live.”

I always tried to make her tell me about her youth and I remember asking her once if it were true that the great Lord R—— had loved her with the passionate adoration rumor attributed to him.

“Lord R——, my dear? I wish I could remember. About what year would that have been?”

I told her.

“Dear me, I am getting an old woman, I am losing my memory. Perhaps his Christian name might recall something to me. Edward? What a very common name, my dear, very unidentifying, wouldn’t you say?”

She was sitting bold upright, her tiny foot poised—rather than resting—on a footstool, her instep as arched and as provocative as it had ever been. Little ruffles of lace were flowing from her sleeves and round her throat like the tiny waves that play round paddling children’s ankles. Here and there you caught the gleam of a half hidden diamond, and a black velvet ribbon accentuated the milky whiteness of her neck. White, too, blue-white, was the banked up lightness of her hair which

gave a peculiar emphasis to her dark eyebrows and her sparkling black eyes. There was a brightness about her that reminded me of a wonderfully cut diamond, of sun on frost, of a brilliant winter’s day. If she was old, it was the oldness of civilization, the oldness of eternity. I thought of my contemporaries, with their loose limbs, and their free, big movements, with their stooping shoulders, their sloppy carriage, their clumsy grace. And when I looked up again I almost expected to see a glass dome over Grandmama. But there she sat, beautifully straight, a little malicious, barely perceptible smile on her lips. I knew that she was thinking of our barbarous new world, where floundering, plunging forces collided at every turn, where women shouted and cut their hair and wore no stays and love was a defiant challenge to the conventions, only incidentally connected with a man.

But while I sat at her feet thinking a little sadly of that lost art of pleasing, she began to talk.

“When you are old, my child,” she said, “memory becomes an important thing, a strange force that plays with you and over which you have no control. You ask me if Lord R—— loved me and I have forgotten; I daresay he did—we loved a lot in those days. Instead, I can remember a little footstool of my mother’s, it had a pattern of forget-me-nots and pansies on it, in petit point; and I remember the blue garters I wore on my wedding day and a bluebottle that crawled over papa’s bald head as we walked up the aisle. As we drove away from the church, your grandfather kissed my hand and said, ‘Little ladybird’—I recall that I thought it rather foolish. He was a very fine-looking man, but I hated him. He used to lock me up in my bedroom and I would sit in front of the long

glass and pretend that I was talking to the most charming man in the world."

"Who was the most charming man in the world, Grandmama?"

"He naturally varied year by year, my dear. But as I look back now at the dim procession of people who must once have been so important to me, I remember here a smile and there a laugh, I see the setting of an eye or the shape of a hand, I hear the sound of a voice or a footstep, and I wonder to whom it belonged."

"But surely", I protested, "some images must be as vivid today as they ever were."

"I remember my butler and my mother-in-law and Bismarck and, of course, other people as well. But there was only one man who mattered at the time, who matters now, who has mattered all these years. There is one man whom I miss every morning when I wake up, every night when I go to bed. Always I wanted him in sorrow and in happiness, in sickness and in health, when I was amused and when I was bored. If something delightful happened to me it was only half delightful because he wasn't there; if I was sad, I was twice as sad because he wasn't with me. He understood everything. There was nothing I couldn't tell him."

She broke off and then began talking to herself, her voice soft, with a queer little break in it.

"Oh, John," she said; "I have needed you so badly all these years."

Grandmama loved me. I was her favorite grandchild. She taught me how to hold myself, how to walk, how to sit down, how to stand up, what to do with my hands and my feet, and I wish that I could have caught from her either her manner or her manners. In return I would try fumblingly to de-

scribe the new world, to explain to her the importance of votes and trade unions, mass psychology and new forms of government. She would smile a little. Ministers were there to advise their sovereigns, to make war or peace, to negotiate with other countries and, if there were time, to abolish slavery and emancipate Catholics. Grandmama did not believe in emancipation, but she thought that the whims of the Church of Rome should be humored, her French husband having been a Catholic. As for social work—well! philanthropy was an excellent thing in the country and there were a lot of people who found religion a consolation and a help. Grandmama herself was an unbeliever, but she approved of religion which seemed to her a discreet moral force, accustomed to salons and boudoirs and the ways of the world.

"There are many people, my dear", she explained to me, "who need a priest as badly as they need a solicitor—someone to prepare their case for the High Court. I prefer to conduct my own proceedings", and she laughed. Grandmama had discarded the Fabian Society, the Salvation Army, and eugenics on account of their irrelevance; her wonderful breeding enabled her to overlook ragtime and futurism; but she did remain profoundly curious of, and as profoundly shocked by, our methods of making love. That a young man should dash down to the country more or less uninvited, embrace a hitherto uncourted young woman, and then take "No" for an answer—it was too much! The lack of persistence was as distressing as the lack of preparation. What a jerky, changeable generation, how she hated to see love treated so cavalierly, without art or reverence or passion or mystery. This fickleness, how far removed it was from the burn-



"I am not going away from you," he had said.

ing infidelities she had known; this free and easy give and take was surely centuries away from the tortured pleadings, the agonized surrenders of her youth.

"Ah, my dear", she said, "look at your friends, they cannot use a fan, or enter a room, or keep a man, or love a man, or ruin a man—they cannot even ruin themselves." She looked contemptuously at my sister who was sitting in a corner discussing with a young engineer the relative merits of six or eight cylinders. And then softly, in the low voice with which she always caressed his name, "Would you

be interested to see this world, John? Would you have understood it? You, who always understood everything?"

Who was John? The question obsessed me. I went over in my mind all of the men rumor had accredited to Grandmama. I tried little casual remarks, I tried definite questions, but never did a flicker, voluntary or involuntary, tell me, "That was the man." And yet it must surely be possible to trace someone who had played such a very important part in her life that even now, to the woman of eighty, he was a vivid, immediate presence—not a faint image seen through dim

mists of memory, but a living want—a need—a gap that had never been filled, a loss that had never been accepted.

She remembered her first husband, the passionate, jealous autocrat whom she had hated, she remembered her second husband, charming, courteous, appreciative, indifferent, so carefully chosen, such an ideal background. She remembered her mother and Queen Victoria and Disraeli, she remembered a daily bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley, immense and fragrant (she had forgotten who sent it). She remembered a lavender silk domino, its hood lined with faint powder blue, in which she had escaped to keep a rendez-vous (she had forgotten whom with). She remembered old scents, old dresses, old times, but somehow that long procession of friends and lovers had become dim with faded colors and blurred outlines and missing features. "John" alone, was complete, flesh and blood among ghosts, a living man moving with cinema figures.

When she was eighty-six, my grandmother died, leaving me her papers. I felt as if some marauding vessel had suddenly come into my possession, with a marvelously rich and varied freight of life. The dim figures I had seen threading a faint way through her memory were now blazing with color, dazzlingly alive. Wicked barons and chivalrous knight errants jostled with weary cynics and tireless wits. The adoration of a poet or the passion of a lover competed with the indiscretion of a statesman or the gallantry of a king. From the chandelier-lit ballroom to the moonlit terrace, she flitted, driving one man mad with a laugh and another with a shrug, opening heaven with a whisper and

shutting it with a frown, eyes bright with lightning, lips soft with kisses, gay and defiant, all-conquering and untouched.

And then she met John. . . . It was in the country, a milky April day, a bloom of mist over the world. He had forced through her coquetry to her heart, he had pierced through her brilliance to her mind. They had explored one another with an ever increasing delight, happily, confidently, tentatively. Surrendering absolutely to the encroaching intimacy that was enveloping them, they had crept into the recesses of one another's souls, warming and lighting damp, dark places, gilding the remote peaks of their natures with this budding sunrise of their love. Later in the day, it had burst into crimson and orange, drowning the grey dawn, drenching the world in color. Frightened by the brightness of their joy, they had sat in silence, till with a sudden thump of horror they realized that time was snatching the hours away from them under their eyes and that soon they would be torn apart and thrown by Providence into opposite directions, with everything in the world still to say because everything in the world had already been said. The next day he had left for India. Blinded by her tears and by her smile—a brave, tremulous, hovering smile of which she was not quite mistress—he had kissed her hands.

"I am not going away from you," he had said; "you will be with me always. There is no forgetting, you can't forget life."

She had said "No", and she had stroked his face a little and let her fingers creep under his collar; and he had gathered her into his arms and kissed her hair and her eyes very gent-

ly and deliberately, as if he were setting a seal on something.

He was killed almost as soon as he landed in India. I don't know if she ever had a letter from him. I never found one, but there were a few lines from a brother officer:

"John told me to let you know if anything happened to him. He said death was the consummation of life and that silence was not so incomplete as speech. He said, 'Tell her life is too short for words and love is too long for life and that there is no ending and no forgetting'."

Poor Grandmama, poor brother officer, how were they to find their way through his metaphysics?

But he was right. There was no forgetting. As the acuteness of her sorrow wore off, she talked of him more and more and always as if she had known him for a great number of years. There were little passages in her diary: "I wish John had been there. He was so fond of lobster", or "It was a pity John couldn't have heard Monsieur Disraeli talking of the Greeks"; and then it would invariably reach the point of "he always said", or "he always thought", and the "always" had grown out of one day in the country where there had been no lobsters and the Greeks had not been mentioned. One milky, April day with a bloom of mist on the world, a day half full of silence and altogether full of love.

What was it he had said to her when he left her? "There is no forgetting—you can't forget life." And she had not forgotten. He had become more than life to her. He had become everyday life. She lived with him in all of the little, trivial, irrelevant, all-important intimacies of a daily companionship. He was with her night and day, on great occasions and in those naked moments when the soul cries out in an unbearable agony of loneliness. He was the great moving force in her life which made freezing or drying up impossible.

If she was vivid and vital at eighty, it was because he had kept her alive. And in a curious unanalyzed way, she knew it. Her training had not taught her to search her soul.

When she died her hospital nurse came to me.

"Are you 'Sally'?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Your grandmother wanted you to give a message for her."

"Yes?"

"She asked me if she were dying and I told her the truth. 'Ask Sally to tell John,' she said; 'tell her she must break it to him very gently, he will be so lonely without me. And ask her to say to him for me that there is no ending and no forgetting.'"

"Thank you," I managed to say.

"I always think it is saddest for those who are left behind," nurse explained briskly. "I remember when I was with the Countess of . . ."

OUT OF MY NEWSPAPER DAYS

By Theodore Dreiser

IV: THE BANDIT

(Dreiser, on behalf of the St. Louis "Republic", and Galvin, a rival reporter on the "Globe-Democrat", interview an ex-railroad employee, who has held up a train singlehanded.)

HOWEVER, even here I was destined for another drubbing, as I shall now proceed to show, illustrating once more how man proposes but fate disposes. Following Galvin forward through the train, we soon discovered the detectives and their prisoner in one of the forward cars. To my surprise, I found the prisoner a most unpromising specimen for so unique a deed: short, broad-shouldered, heavy-limbed, with a squarish, unexpressive, even dull-looking face, blue-grey eyes, dark brown hair, big lumpy, rough hands—just the hands one would expect to find on a railroad or baggage smasher—and a tanned and seamed skin. He had on the cheap nondescript clothes of a laborer: a blue "hickory" shirt, blackish-grey trousers, brownish-maroon coat, and a red bandanna handkerchief tied about his neck in lieu of a collar. On his head was a small round brown hat, pulled down over his eyes after the manner of a cap. He had the still, indifferent expression of a captive bird, and when I came up after Galvin and sat down he scarcely looked at me or at Galvin, or if so with eyes that told nothing. I have often wondered what he was really thinking.

Between him and the car window, to foil any attempt at escape in that direction, and fastened to him by a

pair of handcuffs, was the sheriff of the county in which he had been taken, a big, bland, inexperienced creature whose sense of his own importance was plainly enhanced by his task. Facing him was one of the detectives of the road or express company, a short, canny, vulturish-looking person, and opposite them, across the aisle, sat still another "detective". There may have been others besides, but I failed to inquire. I was so incensed at the mere presence of Galvin and his cheap and coarse methods of ingratiating himself into any company, that I could scarcely speak. "What!" I thought. "When the utmost finesse would be required to get the true inwardness of all this, to send a cheap pig like this to thrust himself forward and muddle what might otherwise prove a fine story! Why, if it hadn't been for me and my luck and my money, he wouldn't be here at all. And he is posing as a reporter—the best man of the 'Globe'!"

He had the average detective-politician-gambler's habit of simulating an intense interest and enthusiasm which he did not feel. His face, for instance, would wreath itself into a cheery smile the while his eyes followed one like those of a basilisk, in an attempt to discover whether his assumed friendship was being accepted at the value he wished.

"Gee, sport", he began familiarly in my presence, patting the burglar on