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## A WHIM OF FATE

A VIENNESE STORY IN LETTERS

### I

#### THE POET TO THE LADY

**M**Y dear, beautiful, and beloved Lady:—It is now a week since I saw you for the first time and you were gracious enough to smile upon me. Sometimes I ponder, did you really smile upon me or didn't you rather smile at me, at my wonder, and my delight, and the heavenly surprise I felt, when I was deemed worthy to behold you. Be this as it may,—the smile was there, the smile I have seen, and it was so sweet, and lovely, and dazzling that I want to keep it stored away in the treasure-house of my memory just as it is, and do not care to dissect it with super-nice, scientific-psychological distinctions. But—now I come to my great and strange confession—since this unforgettable day when I saw you for the first time, you are every evening my guest. I have only to wait for the hour of dusk, when the lights grow dim, and the shadows are creeping nearer, and when—just like day and night—the Possible and the Impossible are subtly melting into each other; at this particular hour I have only to sit down at my desk, and there you are, standing just behind me, and I feel—tremblingly and blissfully—that in the next, the very next moment your soft hands will cover my eyes as if I were a foolish little loving and beloved boy.

Or I sit at one corner of the black, bare, summery desolated fireplace, and when I look up you sit at the other corner in the deepest and biggest chair to be found, and your smile greets me. You wear a very wonderful, soft, and clinging gown that looks somewhat like a *robe d'intérieur*

and somewhat like a garment of an Indian dancer, and you say the wisest, and kindest, and most whimsical things, things I have always known and always longed to hear, but which mortal beings only in certain charmed hours really are permitted to tell to each other. And while you talk it is getting later and later, and the languid summer night is smiling into the room, and the stars are glittering and glaring in their utter, starry loneliness, quite white with jealousy and envy about our wonderful and unsurpassed understanding. Only the moon is our friend, and her yellow light bathes your shoes and plays around you like a sidereal caress. But after a while even the moon is hiding behind a cloud, and we are quite alone, and it is quite late, and—no, not even you are allowed to know more of this fairy-hour.

But you are not only my evening guest, dear Lady; more than once you have been my companion in my morning-strolls. All that I have to do is to get up very, very early, when the dew is still clinging to the fresh-green blades, and when the woods are beckoning in undefiled, sylvan beauty. If I go at this hour to the Prater, and if I possibly wander toward the Krieau, then I see you, quite suddenly, walking with me like a darling comrade upon spring-gay roads. You are wearing the dearest little round sailor-hat (they call it Girardi-hat, if I am not mistaken), a very boyish waist, and a skirt of tweed, and we are the best of friends, and the jolliest chums, and we are telling each other all possible things, and even some other, dearer, quite impossible ones. And you are wonderfully young, and happy,

and full of laughter and fun and delight, and thus you change for me the most common-place walk through the meadows into a gay and charming fairy-stroll into Arcadia.

Only yesterday, dear Lady, as I was sitting in the Volksgartencafé and sipping soberly and quietly my afternoon-tea, you were again suddenly sitting at my table. I hardly dared to trust my eyes, but there you were, clad in the most gorgeous lace gown I have ever seen, and looking just like a queen. (There do exist such lovely little graceful and charming queens.) I was so happy, dear Lady, and my tea tasted magically like the most bubbling champagne. It was the dreamiest of all dream-hours we ever spent together. You were in so kind, and good, and tender a mood, and your smile was so soft, and so full of promise, and your eyes so dark, and so very misty, and after a while you were bending towards me, and your hand rested on mine and you said—no, not even you must know what sweet and sacred things you said in this moment.

The whole evening I went about as in a dream, but to-day I am a little sad and vexed. I am harassing my mind for one little thing, for one little inconsequential, yet for me most important detail, and that is the reason I write to you and beg you to help me. On your lace gown I saw, somewhere at the side, a very graceful and teasing little velvet bow, and for the life of me I can not remember, was this bow bluish-red or reddish-blue? I feel this one missing shade, this soft blur of my vision, this faint incompleteness of my picture as a real calamity, and so I ask you most humbly for permission to visit you once in the world of facts and realities, and to have a long look at the lace gown. Poets have their fancies, dear Lady, and even if you think me foolish, I

implore you to be lenient with me, and to allow me to come to you and to come soon. Afterwards, I shall be happy and satisfied to meet you only in the realm of dream and wonder.

## II

### THE LADY TO THE POET

My dear Friend:—You are not only a poet; you are a hero. You do not fear the unavoidable disenchantment of realities. If you are indeed as brave as this, and if you indeed care so much to see—the lace gown, call on Thursday, that is the day after to-morrow, at five o'clock. I promise you the lace gown, I promise you even tea, and I think that is all that you wish and desire.

## III

### THE LADY TO HER COUTURIER

Dear Mr. Maurice:—I must have my lace gown Thursday morning at ten o'clock sharp, and that, mind you, without fail. I am going to have tea with the Princess Metternich, to discuss a charity-affair, and *I have absolutely nothing to wear*. I may as well tell you at once that you will never get the trousseau of my niece if you disappoint me this time. It is most important for me to look as well as possible on Thursday, in fact it is the affair of the season, and I depend entirely on you. Don't forget that I have not one decent dress.

P. S.—Somewhere at the side I want on this lace gown a very dark bluish-red or reddish-blue velvet bow. I have heard that such bows are quite the rage in Paris, and I want to be *the thing* in all details. For heaven's sake tell your *directrice* that she must take all possible pains with the fitting, and not again make my hips the most prominent part of my figure as she did last time. And tell her not to be too modest with the décolleté.

My masseur tells me that my shoulders are extremely good.

## IV

THE POET TO HIS SWEETHEART (SHE IS DIRECTRICE AT THE FAMOUS MAISON MAURICE)

Dear little brown Squirrel:—Thursday evening I am not going to meet you and to take you on the little spree in our beloved Prater. Believe me, child, I would prefer to be with you, but art does not pay too well nowadays, and my material needs, not to speak of my hunger for fame, force me to look for connections. A very influential lady has invited me to have tea with her, and I want even to dedicate to her my next book. (Her husband is a publisher—understand?) Duty, therefore, before Love, and you, Little-one, the Prater, and afterwards our little room have to wait. Don't cry too much; try to be true to me, and if you really must betray me, please think of me between your kisses.

## V

THE DIRECTRICE TO HER AUNT IN MOEDLING (A SUBURB OF VIENNA)

Dear Aunt:—I hope you are well, and I hope my little baby is well too, and, please, give her a kiss from her dear, loving mamma. And, dear aunt, I think I will come out on Thursday for a visit and enjoy something of this grand weather. I'll bring a snappy little waist for my dear aunt, and I'll bring a swell dress for my sweet tootsie-wootsie. I'll send word to Maison Maurice that I am sick, as my gentleman friend has some business to attend to, anyway, and can't take me out. He is a very elegant man, and a poet, and he spends a lot of money on me. So, please, expect me, and have some

fried chicken for dinner. Again a kiss for my lovey-dovey and another one for my dear aunt.

## VI

MAISON MAURICE TO THE LADY (SENT BY MESSENGER)

Madame:—Our first *directrice* has suddenly fallen ill, and therefore it is quite impossible for us to deliver the lace gown at the right time, as we cannot give this dress to another worker. Madame is hard to fit around the hips and is never quite satisfied when Mademoiselle Cécile does not herself attend to this part of the work. So as she, unfortunately, is ill, we take the liberty of sending Madame the black gown with the jet paillettes, which might very suitably be worn to a tea instead of the lace frock. We regret immensely that it is not possible for us to do better, and we hope that Madame will believe us very etc. etc.

## VII

THE LADY TO THE POET (SENT BY PNEUMATIC POST—EQUIVALENT TO OUR SPECIAL DELIVERY.—ED.)

Dear Friend:—You are very brave, but I—I am a coward. I have a childish, a foolish fear before facts, and realities, and disenchantments. Dream lace gowns are so much prettier than the creations of even our best couturiers. I should feel sorry till the end of my days, I could never forgive you nor forgive myself if you were to be disappointed in—the lace gown. So I beg you not to come and to leave it to the God of Chance to arrange a second meeting for us. Perhaps you will be hurt by this letter, but if you really know us women you will understand what a compliment I am paying you.

## VIII

## THE POET TO HIS SWEETHEART

Squirrel, hurray! we will have our spree. The influential lady has chucked me, and, therefore, I belong again to you and to Love. I am going to meet you at six o'clock at the door of Maison Maurice, and if you are very, very good, or if you are very, very naughty (each has its charm) I will have an auto and we will play millionaire.

## IX

## THE DIRECTRICE TO HER AUNT (TELEGRAM)

Rushwork. Can not come before Sunday.

## X

## MAISON MAURICE TO THE LADY (LETTER AND BAND-BOX SENT BY MESSENGER AT TWO O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON)

Madame:—At the last minute we made it possible to finish the lace gown and we are sending it to Madame by special messenger to make sure that the dress arrives in time. We are happy to serve Madame, and we sincerely hope that the frock will be entirely to her satisfaction.

## XI

## THE LADY TO FATE

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*From Die Zeit, Vienna.  
(Translation, Lotus Magazine.)*

## EMILE VERHAEREN'S LAST RESTING PLACE

ON a dull winter day, when the sun was veiled with heavy clouds, with the waves beating a melancholy plain song on the shore at La Panne, the body of Emile Verhaeren—brought from Rouen—was carried to the Soldiers' Hospital, where a little chapel had been improvised, and there, wrapped in the Belgian flag and surrounded with candles, many beautiful wreaths piled beside it, was laid the coffin of this great Belgian poet. Later, followed by a detachment of infantry and accompanied by the few friends who were able to come to that little corner of Belgium to do him honour, the funeral procession took its way through the cold and mist to the humble cemetery of Adinkerke, the Belgian flag the only spot of colour in the procession.

He died a soldier's death. He had been eloquently pleading his country's cause an hour before the end came. Since the beginning of the war he had done this work, speaking in neutral countries, also facing the cold of Norway and Sweden, travelling to Switzerland for his country's good. A great citizen of his little land, he merited that all honour should be done him from the King down to the humblest of his people. And somehow his funeral was just such as he himself might have wished, a grey winter day, with the mist rolling over his beloved dunes, a few tried friends, and the Belgian flag on his coffin.

*From Everyman, London.*