

The Doll in the Drawer

As the preceding chapter mentioned, it soon became clear that the famine in Russia was far from over and that Nansen, as early as in August 1922, had made it clear to Quisling that a new stay in the Ukraine might soon be a possibility. Already, in October, Quisling had received a formal request from Nansen and his organization, and right after New Year's he confirmed to Nansen that he was on the road to recovery and could return to Russia if Nansen wished.¹ That was, indeed, Nansen's wish; in fact, he had written to Minister Aavatsmark in Oslo on October 30 requesting that Quisling be given leave of absence from the Army, without damage to his military career, in order to make it possible for him to return to the Ukraine. The answer arrived on November 11. The Department of Defense had no objections.²

There is no reason to doubt the urgent need for aid. On his return from the Ukraine in the middle of December, Hermod Lannung had told the Danish newspaper *Politiken* that all reserves over there were gone, and that cannibalism was so common that people refused to let their children outside unaccompanied for

1. NB, Nansen Archive, Ms. fol. 1988, RUO₁, (letter from Nansen to Frick, January 4, 1923.)

2. NB, Nansen Archive, Ms. fol. 1988, F₆C (for both documents).

fear they would be slaughtered.³ Nansen was, therefore, well received by the Ukrainian authorities when he went to Kharkov at the end of January, 1923 and announced that his friends Quisling and Frick would resume practical relief work.⁴ The ARA in Kharkov also assured its Moscow headquarters that suffering was on a steady increase in its district; Rakovsky (the President of the Ukrainian SovNarKom) and Bashkóvich (still the Plenipotentiary for the foreign relief organizations in the Ukraine) were, at the moment of writing, in Moscow to negotiate for funds to carry on the relief work.⁵

Alexandra could not read in Norwegian papers about the situation in her homeland, but she feared the worst and probably also learned something from Quisling now and then. What she did not receive was much advance notice of her return to Russia, although her husband had known about it for some time. Quisling knew even before he and Alexandra left Russia that they were likely to return rather soon, but to her he said nothing about this until shortly before they were to depart from Oslo, toward the end of February 1923. As Alexandra's continuing story will show, in this matter, Quisling played his cards just as close to his chest as he had when planning for his marriage and for his and Alexandra's departure from Russia.

I had not given up hope of being able to continue both my education and my ballet training. Surely, there must be ballet schools in Kristiania! But most of all I dreamed about what it

3. *Morgenbladet*, December 16, 1922. Lannung's remark is no exaggeration. W. George Yourieff personally witnessed a peasant family butcher and prepare one of its own children—a sight he could not forget.

4. H, ARA Russian Section, box 80, folder "Nansen (letter from W. N. Haskell in Moscow to W. Lyman Brown in New York, dated February 19, 1923, plus newspaper cuttings, including a translation of an article in *Proletarskaya Pravda* (Kiev) for January 31.)

5. H, ARA Russian Section, box 146, no. 30.

would be like to start my own family. I found it hard to believe that Vidkun would not, in the end, be happy about our baby.

I took it as a good sign that Vidkun and I now were spending more time together, including redecorating our apartment and equipping it with necessary household articles. Although I still had no money for private purchases, my husband had begun to defer to me in matters of taste and let me have a more or less free hand in buying things for our home. My shopping sprees were, nevertheless, rather modest, and it is probably not surprising that my chief urge was to lay in a supply of canned goods and other household staples. However, it was an entirely new experience for me, and I was overwhelmed by the variety of goods in the stores. Vidkun both encouraged my efforts and was amused by my enthusiasm. Once, when we were passing some shop windows downtown, he suddenly pulled me back to a leather goods store we had just passed, pointed to a riding saddle in the window, and said:

“See there, Acia, I’m afraid you overlooked that saddle!”

Still, there were times when I was overcome by sadness in the midst of our calm and comfortable life. Whether this was chiefly due to my pregnancy or to my cultural isolation, I cannot say. Most of all, I missed receiving proper news from my mother, whose vague and short messages always left me feeling apprehensive about her situation, and I was sad that she could not share this period in my life and look forward to becoming a grandmother.

Nevertheless, I have a great many happy memories from this time in Oslo, many of them related to music. Ever since I was little, my parents had encouraged me to join in their singing, whether they were by themselves or giving a home recital for their friends. In this way, despite a lack of formal training, I had learned many well-known arias and popular songs by Russian and foreign composers, songs that suited my low-pitched voice. My

new Norwegian cousins soon discovered that I loved to sing, and one of them learned to accompany me on the piano so that we could give recitals at family gatherings, as well as at several bigger Oslo parties. Even Vidkun encouraged my singing and said it was a proper accomplishment for a lady.

One of my favorite songs at that time was one of Lermontov's poems set to music. Not only was the melody hauntingly beautiful, but the text also seemed so relevant to my own situation and emotions as I struggled to adjust to my new surroundings and to the new life I was carrying:

I walk out alone to the highway.
Through the mist afar glitters the roadway's spar.
The night is still, and God speaks to the desert,
And a star speaks to another star.
 And the sky is marvelous and solemn.
Sleeping earth is lit in pale blue light.
 Then why do I feel such pain, such anguish?
 Oh, why this longing in me on this night?
I expect nothing from my future life,
Nothing do I miss of what is past.
I am looking just for peace and freedom,
I would like to lose myself in sleep.⁶

Although Vidkun always took part in both family gatherings and official receptions, no matter how busy or preoccupied he might be, he never showed any sign of merriment and never contributed any entertaining stories. He may well have been amused by what was going on around him, but you could not tell by looking at him. He would sit there like someone assigned to an observation post, as though he was carrying out one of the duties required by his position.

Once in a while, however, he would discard his wooden man-

6. Translated into English by W. G. Yourieff.

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ner. I remember a time when we were on our way to a very formal function. I had dressed for it with great care, and we had been fetched by a chauffeur-driven limousine. Outside it was already dark, but the inside of the car was lit by the ceiling light. For a while, Vidkun sat there motionless and silent. Then, with an abrupt movement, as if he had just woken up from a deep sleep or regained consciousness, he sent me a long, attentive, and tender look and said with some hesitation:

“My God, how beautiful you are. . . . You know, *lille venn*, you remind me so much of my sister’s doll, which I remember so well from my childhood. I secretly admired that doll so much. Whenever I happened to be home alone, I would take the doll out of its drawer and play with it. How scared I was that somebody might catch me with that doll in my arms! They would have teased me and called me a sissy, and that would have been the end of me. But nobody else has known about it until this moment. I always put the doll back in its drawer when I was through, and nobody was the wiser. Well, we’ve arrived—let’s get out.”

Another occasion during this winter of 1922–23 stands out in my mind and shows Vidkun in a very different light—though I cannot remember whether the episode took place in Oslo that winter or in Berlin a short while later. We had been invited to a large and important diplomatic function, and Vidkun looked very handsome in the black full dress uniform of a General Staff officer. The minute we entered the sumptuous antechamber, a liveried footman standing in the doorway to the reception room loudly called out: “*Capitaine et Madame Quisling!*” and Vidkun paused for a moment in front of a large mirror for a quick check on his appearance.

Trying to smooth out some wrinkles at the back of his tailcoat made of fine wool, he held the collar with his left hand and tugged hard on the coat tails with his right. There was a ripping

sound, horrible in its startling loudness. Vidkun's strong hands had succeeded in tearing off the whole bottom of his tailcoat! I stood there as if thunderstruck, wondering what we should do. We had already been announced; our hosts were standing there greeting their guests. We had to go in, but how?

"We can't just stand here like this," said Vidkun. "Go inside by yourself and tell our hosts that I was unavoidably detained. I'll rush home and change my coat or else have this one mended."

With that, he disappeared. When our hosts asked where my husband was, I laughed and came out with the whole story, probably resorting to a little pantomime as well. My story was a great success, and I had to repeat it a couple of times to other guests standing nearby.

Any diversion that breaks the ice on such pompous occasions is welcome, so when Vidkun soon afterwards returned, he was greeted with relaxed friendliness everywhere. He was very pleased with me and said that I had provided a fortunate ending to what might have proved an embarrassing situation.

In addition to being beautiful, Norway seemed so prosperous, well-run, comfortable, and democratic. I was continually struck by the pride people took in their homes and possessions, as well as in their accomplishments, and I felt a growing admiration and respect for their good life. It reminded me of the prosperous life of country squires in pre-revolutionary Russia, except that in Norway, such a life seemed to be within almost everyone's reach, just like the opportunity for outdoor life in the mountains and forests.

Vidkun missed this outdoor life. Later that winter, he somehow acquired an automobile, a huge Packard convertible touring car with a collapsible leather top. This top had sides made of oilcloth and small celluloid windows that could be buttoned up for additional protection in bad weather. The car's rear seats could be turned down to form a wide bed. I do not remember

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whether he bought, rented, or borrowed this car, only that he said he got it in order to take me all over the country on hiking and fishing trips. He wanted me to know his homeland, of which he was so justifiably proud.

“Just wait, Acia!” Vidkun said. “Now that we have the car, come spring and summer we can travel around the countryside and go hiking and fishing.”

Evidently, he did not want to wait for warmer weather before taking me on a trip to Trondheim by car. Cold and inclement weather made it hard for me to admire the many beautiful views as I ought, and I was very happy to return to our apartment, where life had become so pleasant. Vidkun was not discouraged, however, but held out the prospect of more trips in the spring. As it turned out, fate would have it otherwise.

While I was feeling more and more settled, there were many signs that Vidkun was growing restless. After several years of independent, responsible, and exciting work abroad, away from military discipline and his superiors, he understandably found his daily routine now rather monotonous. He also missed his former opportunities to travel abroad and was haunted by the memory of his recent high position in Russia, where so many lives had depended on what he said and did. By comparison, his present position was devastatingly humble and boring. It did not make matters better that there seemed to be waning interest in Norway in what he had accomplished in Russia. He now feared being marooned and going to waste in a far corner of the world, and for the first time he appeared to understand a little of my need for meaningful occupation with work and a family of our own.

He was especially dissatisfied with his work at the General Staff's headquarters and disappointed that the Army did not sufficiently appreciate his years of hard work in Russia. In his opinion, what he had accomplished there had also been important to

Norway's reputation and security. Instead of rewarding him for these services, the Army had delayed his promotion on the grounds that he had been absent so long from active duty! People he regarded as mediocre bureaucrats had surpassed him in rank and were now his superiors, he raged. Another sore point with him was what he saw as Nansen's failure to acknowledge publicly his indebtedness to Vidkun for work done on Nansen's behalf. His bitterness became acute when Nansen received the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1922.

Giving vent to his frustration, which of course grew out of his exaggeratedly high opinion of his own abilities and accomplishments, Vidkun became increasingly caustic in his censure of everything and everyone around him. Such-a-one was uneducated and uninformed; another was leading the wrong kind of life; a third had poor manners; the government was ineffective; the teaching methods in the schools and at the University were stupid; and so on. What galled him the most was his conviction that he could mend all those ills if only people would ask for his advice and then act on it.

In this fretful frame of mind, Vidkun spent much of his time in correspondence with Nansen and influential friends in Russia and at the League of Nations. His efforts were, evidently, successful. One day, he showed me a letter from Nansen.

"Here, you see, Nansen wants me to return to Russia to wind up the unfinished relief work there. His organization has changed its name, but the problems are the same as before. We'll be going back soon."

"When?" I asked.

"Soon. This spring, as early as possible. I still have to settle some things at the General Staff headquarters here. But you'd better start getting ready. We'll try to rent out our apartment, but if we don't find tenants, we'll just lock it up."

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“And for how long will we be in Russia, and where will we live?”

“Well, in any case for several months. We’ll be in Kharkov again.”

Kharkov! I was filled with happiness. Until that moment, I had not fully realized how much I longed to see Mama and my friends again. I could hardly wait for our departure and started packing right away.

This decision to return to Russia affected not only us, but also Vidkun’s youngest brother Arne, who intended to emigrate to the U.S. the following autumn, and who eventually settled in Brooklyn, New York. America seemed very remote to me at that time, and I did not know that many members of the Quisling clan had long since moved to the United States and done well there (among other things, they owned and operated one of the largest medical clinics in the U.S., in Madison, Wisconsin), and the thought that Arne was going so far away made me sad. I liked him very much because he was friendly, thoughtful, and cheerful, and he treated me like a younger sister. Although much older than I, he was still considered the baby of the family. Vidkun loved him dearly, and he once said to me:

“I’m glad you get along so well with Arne. I see now that you need the company of young people.”

It was decided that when we left for Russia, Arne would go with us as far as Berlin. The three of us had numerous conferences on the subject of packing. I realized that I had acquired quite a lot of clothes and thought to myself that I probably ought also to bring along some baby clothes to be on the safe side, so I told Vidkun that I would probably need a trunk and at least one or two suitcases. After some reflection, he decided that I need not take everything I owned with me. I would not need my winter clothes in Russia because we would be home before the following

winter. For the time being, I could just use his suitcases, which would be half empty.

He did not mention anything about baby clothes, and I still said nothing on the subject, telling myself that we would surely be able to take care of that later. And I stopped worrying about my own clothes, although I was sorry I would not be able to show off the lovely things my husband had bought for me abroad. Also, I had to admit that my lovely fur coat would be out-of-place in Kharkov in summertime. I nevertheless reminded Vidkun that the weather would still be cold on our arrival, and he promised that, in Berlin, he would get me an overcoat suitable for the occasion and buy what we still needed. Having lost the war, Germany was in the midst of a catastrophic depression and inflation, so, for us, the prices in Berlin would be just a fraction of the Norwegian ones.

With Russia's plight in fresh memory, I could not help feeling sorry for the Germans. Vidkun and Arne, however, spent hours studying reports on the current economic conditions and prices in Germany and discussed fabulous investment opportunities for people with stable foreign currencies.

Arne left Norway with Vidkun and me and our unborn child toward the end of February 1923. I left most of my possessions behind in Oslo and came away with hardly more luggage than when I had arrived.