

Deception's Reach

On the day of Lenin's death, January 21, 1924, Quisling wrote to his parents, ostensibly from Sofia.¹ The letter reads, in part:

 Maria returned to Paris a few days ago, there is so little in it for her to sit here, and so expensive. We have now been on the road for about two months and seen most of what there is to see. . . . I still have to travel around quite a bit, and it would be a waste of money for her to go along to places she has already seen. . . . I also want very much for Maria to spend some time with Alexandra. They are very good friends, and there is altogether a beautiful relationship among the three of us. For me, it has been strange to notice that I have never in my life been so misunderstood, even by those closest to me, as with regard to the only truly selfless act I have committed. Is it because the circumstances have been so unusual or because selflessness is so rare? However, despite difficulties and bitterness, I have pushed my will through, and so it will continue to be in the hope that I may see the realization of my goal, which was to see Alexandra preserved as a good person and secured a good future.

In his efforts to obliterate his tracks and to support the story he had served his parents about his and Maria's marriage, Quisling produced a couple of massive untruths. He knew very well that

1. NB, Quisling Archive, Ms. fol. 3920: XI: 9.

there had been no beautiful friendship between Maria and Alexandra in Russia and that the circumstances had not exactly been conducive to the development of such a friendship later. He also knew that Maria was still right there with him.

He went on a bit in his letter about the messy conditions in the Balkans, about family concerns back home, and about his hope that he and Maria might, perhaps, get to see a little more on their journey home to Norway. He also mentioned that he had to go to Constantinople, possibly also to Athens, and that he had a good mind to stop over in Italy on his way back.

In all, eight pages of chit-chat served to obscure his main purpose in writing, which was to advertise that he was in Sofia and not planning to participate in Maria's and Alexandra's Parisian idyll which, according to him, had been going on for some days. In reality, he and Maria arrived in Paris together two days after the date of his letter (see below), and he was to be found in Paris several times more during the next several weeks. He even arranged to have his mail forwarded there. In the Quisling archives are two envelopes with postmarks from exactly the period in question, marked to show that the letters had been forwarded to him from Sofia to Paris, addressed to "Studia," Boulevard St. Germain.²

Quisling's marital confusion was reason enough to pull the wool over his decent old parents' eyes, but it is doubtful that these were his only grounds for wanting to keep secret his various trips to Paris during this first part of 1924. It was not just to his family that he tried to conceal his whereabouts; indeed, he shored up his efforts with a letter to Baron Kaufman (the League of Nations representative in Salonica), which he typed on official stationery—"League of Nations High Commission for Russian Relief, Representative in Bulgaria, 5 rue Shenova, Sofia"—and dated

2. NB, Quisling Archive, Ms. fol. 3920: V.

“Sofia, January 22, 1924.” In his introductory remarks, he explained in English that he had just returned to Sofia from a journey to Austria and Rumania, so that it was only now that he had been able to reply to the questions the Baron had put to him on December 28. He did not say a word in his letter about an impending trip to Paris.³

As soon as Quisling had posted these two letters in Sofia, he and Maria packed their bags and left on another journey, this time because Maria had received Alexandra’s Christmas letter. Before nightfall on January 23, the same day that Lenin’s death was announced in the European newspapers, they were in Paris. Alexandra now tells the details of this reunion:

My reunion with my husband, which I had longed for and dreamed of for so long, turned out to be far different from anything I had imagined.

Christmas and New Year’s came and went without my having received a reply to my letter to Mára, and my anxiety mounted as the middle of January approached without a word from either Vidkun or Mára and without the visit they had promised me.

I was distracted from my tension by the news about Lenin’s death in Moscow on January 21, 1924. To me the news came as a shock, although rumors about his impending death had circulated in Russia for a couple of days before his death.⁴ This event would have great impact everywhere and, of course, on the Russians most of all. The Paris newspapers were full of speculations about the changes this event might create in the Soviet régime and about the expected struggle between Stalin and Trotsky for supremacy. Although I usually distanced myself from anything

3. NB, Quisling Archive, Ms. fol. 3920: VI.

4. W. George Yourieff confirms this as an eyewitness to those days in Russia.

having to do with politics, I could not help wondering how this new development might affect Mama and me.

The date of Lenin's death has remained engraved on my memory because of what happened later that day.⁵ I was at home studying the exciting news in the latest French and Russian newspapers when Mára walked unceremoniously into my room, unannounced and unexpected. She showed no trace of embarrassment when she hugged me in greeting. On the contrary, she radiated self-assurance.

"I was waiting for a letter from you," I said. "Why didn't you let me know the time of your arrival? We could have met you at the station. Where is your luggage? And how is Vidkun?"

"Why Acia, have you really not understood yet that Vidkun and I are getting married? That is the reason we've come to Paris together this time. We've just arrived from Vienna, and my luggage is at the hotel where Vidkun and I are staying."

This attack was too sudden, too incredible even to shock me. I looked at Mára for a short while in silence before saying with all the sarcasm I could muster:

"And I suppose you're here now to invite me to the wedding? It looks as if both you and Vidkun have lost your minds! Has he forgotten that I am still legally married to him? Why isn't he here? Why is he hiding from me? He abandoned me here without a proper explanation, and I want to see him!"

Despite the tide of hot anger rising inside me, I managed to keep my voice under control. I did not want to give Mára the satisfaction of seeing me lose the remains of my dignity.

Mára was clearly somewhat taken aback and replied: "Well, that's exactly why I came here. Vidkun wants you to come to our hotel tomorrow. When the three of us are together, we can talk about the situation."

5. Alexandra would have read about Lenin's death on January 23. Neither *The New York Times* nor *The Times* (London) had the news before that day.

"No, I see no reason for all three of us to get together. I want nothing to do with this disgusting affair, and I have nothing more to say about it. I hope Vidkun knows what he's doing, so let him come here and speak for himself. All I can do is listen to him," I said firmly.

"All right, I'll pass on to him everything you've said. You'll hear from him tomorrow," said Mára with a small, defiant smile. She talked for a few more minutes about insignificant matters and then left, visibly much less confident than when she had arrived.

As soon as she was out the door, the strain of keeping up a brave front began to take its toll. I was shaken to the core, and only my mounting anger prevented me from collapsing. I was not nearly as angry with Mára as I was furious with Vidkun for his unfaithfulness and for having allowed himself to be taken in by Mára. Regardless of what arts Mára had used to ensnare my husband in such a short time, how *could* Vidkun, with his professed love for me and with his avowed principles, have let himself fall into this situation? I blamed myself most of all, however, for having been so gullible and so blind.

Anyone who has ever been betrayed and made a fool of in such a manner, and who forever afterwards has had to contend with the jagged pieces of a shattered life, will understand the maelstrom of conflicting feelings raging inside me that day. Aware now that I had been reduced to a bothersome object that could be moved about as necessary, I was both scared and angry because I had already had ample opportunity to find out how helpless and dependent I was in my present situation. Vidkun had kept me in complete ignorance of his own plans and intentions. What was I to do? What would happen to me if Vidkun abandoned me altogether and completely without means?

Understanding, at last, how careful I must be, I tried to calm down enough to analyze what at first glance might seem a banal and trite situation easily explained by circumstances. Vidkun was

very inexperienced in everything that concerned women, and I was even more naïve. When I left him by himself while I went off to the Crimea with Mama and Nina, it had not even occurred to me that my husband might easily fall prey to a woman who could teach him things about sex that were completely against my principles, but to which he might find himself attracted. Such things happened all the time, all over the world. I had just never thought they could happen to Vidkun and me.

It was fast becoming obvious to me, however, that ordinary though this situation might be in the affairs of men and women, the solutions proposed and the actions Vidkun and Mára found acceptable were anything but common. It was preposterous that my husband should be arranging his marriage to another woman before he had even started divorce proceedings against me—and on top of it all to send his mistress to me with the news!

It was so preposterous that the more I thought about it, the less I believed most of what Mára had said. Nevertheless, if even a fraction of what she had said was true, my position as a wife was obviously badly threatened. More sinister still was the knowledge that Mama was now, more than ever, hostage to a renewed threat that Mára or her mother would inform the Soviet authorities about her background, just to stop me from resisting what was about to happen.

Mára returned the next morning, this time with Vidkun, to take me back to their hotel by taxi. Vidkun tried to behave as if nothing unusual had happened to change our relationship, but I could see that he had become a different man from when I saw him last. It was clear that he expected trouble from both Mára and me and that he tried to avoid it by carefully maneuvering between the two of us and by steering the conversation away from dangerous subjects.

When we had finally sat down in their hotel room and the

purpose of our meeting could no longer be put off, Vidkun began in a roundabout way:

“Well, *lille venn*, now that Mára has spoken to you, and you at last are aware of the changed situation between you and me, we can, like the good, old friends we are, freely and calmly discuss our future course of action. I told you on our way to Paris that I want to divorce you, and now I have returned to tell you that I have decided to marry Mára. As a matter of fact, we may say that she is already my new wife.”

He ceased talking and raised his protuberant, blue eyes to mine as if to gauge my reaction.

Remaining as stiff as a pole, I looked him straight in the eye and said nothing. It was clear that he was extremely uncomfortable, and he kept throwing sideways glances at Mára as if asking her for support. She just glared back at him, however, without saying a word.

The silence had become almost unbearable when Mára finally said: “No use beating around the bush, Vidkun. We haven’t got the time. Come straight to the point.”

It was the first time I heard her directly addressing my husband by his first name. At this display of easy familiarity, I felt a strong surge of indignation and disgust, and I had to exercise all my willpower to refrain from telling Vidkun and Mára what I thought of them both.

“Well, yes, *Acia*, you’ve gradually been prepared for this news, and now you know everything. Do you have any comments?” Vidkun said.

Oh, what a tempting invitation! Still, I remembered that I had promised myself the night before to remain calm. Willing my voice to come out, I replied:

“What can I say? Especially when I’m not alone with you. You’ve never consulted me about anything before. It was you who persuaded me to marry you. Both of us promised each other

love and fidelity to the end of our days, and you were forever preaching to me about the sanctity of marriage. And then, when you've persuaded me to love you and trust you, you decide to marry another woman. . . . ”

I scarcely recognized my own voice, and it was with great difficulty that I continued: “I—I simply don't understand it. How can you marry *anybody* without first getting a divorce from me? I know I can't stop you from divorcing me. Then go ahead—divorce me! Do whatever you please. But what do you want from me? And what will happen to me? I'm completely dependent on you. I have nobody else. What about your promise to take care of me?”

I suspect that while I was blurting out all these questions in a last, feeble attempt to force some order into the chaos surrounding me, Vidkun was making tidy notes of them in his methodical mind. I think he was glad that I was not crying, losing my temper, or making other violent emotional displays. Always more comfortable when called upon to reason than to feel, he became less tense and launched into one of his dissertations, delivered while he moved restlessly about the room.

“Let's not talk about things we cannot change, Acia. Let's talk about the future, rather than about the past. You have nothing to worry about, I assure you! I've promised to take good care of you, and I'll keep my word. Please don't forget that I still care for you very much and that I want you to be happy and safe. I'm even considering the possibility of adopting you as my own daughter.”

He paused, and I just had time to think, “He must have lost his mind!” when he continued:

“First of all, you must complete your education. I've written about you to several reputable boarding schools for girls, but they won't accept anybody who is or has been married. Besides, that's not really what you need; you're well enough educated as you

are. You read a lot and know a lot, and I think you only need some tutoring to be admitted to any university. You wrote to me that you've attended some lectures at the Sorbonne, but I think a good provincial university would be better and safer for you—like the one in Tours that I have in mind for you. It's in beautiful Indre-Tours—in lovely country that is also famous for its apples. I'm sure you'll like it. . . .”

His voice trailed off, and I was sure I must be dreaming. Apples? What did apples have to do with my future?

Vidkun warmed to his subject again: “And you don't have to worry about your passport, either. In Norway, just like in all other civilized countries, once you become a Norwegian subject, by marriage or otherwise, you're a Norwegian citizen forever, even if you later remarry and change your name. You can always keep and renew your Norwegian passport. I've checked on that—it's true. And there is no reason to be concerned about our divorce, either. There are countries where anybody can obtain a divorce and remarry with little delay and very few formalities, and I've already made use of such facilities.”

He carefully avoided meeting my eyes. “In Norway, it's a little different. Your presence and consent would be required there, and the whole procedure is more complicated and expensive. But all that can be reduced to a mere formality here—it can be handled at the Norwegian Legation right here in Paris. I've already made an appointment with them; we are going there now. You just have to confirm to the Minister that you have no objection. I'm sure that will suffice to have your name in my passport replaced with Mára's. I'll take care of everything. You know you can trust me. Is everything clear to you now? Are you ready to go with us to the Legation?”

Although Vidkun had probably rehearsed this monologue in his mind many times, his delivery of it was anything but smooth, and he appeared less confident at its conclusion than at its begin-

ning. He certainly had good reason to be both nervous and apprehensive.

For me, this scene was an utterly humiliating experience, made worse by the fact that Mára did not have the elementary decency to leave me alone with my husband during this intimate and crucial discussion. She just sat there, watching and listening, in dead silence. She was obviously in full control of the situation, while Vidkun behaved like a wooden marionette.

It is our nearest and dearest who have the greatest power to hurt us, and from whom we therefore have some right to expect the best treatment. I had just been handed the worst treatment imaginable, and with blinding clarity I realized that I had just lost the last vestige of my respect for Vidkun. I felt pity for him, but I could not help thinking: "Oh, what a fool! What a contemptible idiot! He married for the first time when he was approaching forty and scarcely knew how to cope with one wife, and now he has involved himself with a second woman. And such a woman!"

Out loud, I finally said: "Yes, you know that I've trusted you as I've never trusted anyone else. But that doesn't matter now. And I have no choice. I'll do whatever you tell me."

At this response, both Vidkun and Mára suddenly grew more cheerful and animated and evidently lost all interest in me because they started talking to each other in a relaxed manner, mostly about our impending visit to the Norwegian Legation.

I was in such a state that I had difficulty paying attention to small-talk. Only one thing they said made me sharpen my ears; it was so incredible that the memory of it is still vivid. At first, I thought I was hearing wrong when Vidkun said to Mára:

"By the way, your surname, Paseshnikova, is somewhat common, a bit too plain. Now is your chance to take another maiden name, one that would sound more distinguished. Listen, let's all agree that from now on, we'll forget the name Paseshnikova and use Pasek instead. It sounds less Russian; its shorter and sounds

more noble. I know that in the Ukraine there is a large and distinguished Passek family. Their name is written with a double 's', but yours will sound exactly the same, and nobody will ever know the difference. Isn't that a brilliant idea? Any objection to it?"

"There are no objections," Mára replied in an indifferent voice, using the standard Russian expression so often heard at committee meetings. She remained totally unconcerned, as if she had been aware of this brilliant idea for some time.

I looked at them both in utter amazement. Clearly, I had only just begun to discover all the flaws in my husband's character. Regardless of which of them had first thought of Mára's new name, the idea obviously had Vidkun's enthusiastic support. Since when did he have such an urge to be associated with the aristocracy, and on false premises, at that? The way he had just expressed himself showed not only snobbishness and utter disregard for the truth, but also a very low opinion of other people's ability to realize when they have been duped.

After these preparations for the meeting at the Norwegian Legation, we left for our appointment with the Minister. By this time, I was in such a state of shock and revulsion that nothing seemed important to me any longer, and I objected to nothing. I was, nevertheless, faintly curious to see what else Vidkun might have up his sleeve after his proposed sleight-of-hand with Mára's maiden name. He seemed so unpredictable, so absolutely unlike his usual self, that I began to worry about his mental condition. Was the only person close to me in this new world, the only one on whom I could hope to depend, becoming deranged?

At the Legation, everything, at first, went according to Vidkun's plan. At the appointed hour, he, I, and the newly-created Miss Pasek were ushered into the study of the Minister, or of his *chargé d'affaires* for the day, who looked slightly familiar. He greeted

Vidkun in Norwegian in a very friendly manner. Then, turning to me, he said in French:

“Perhaps you don’t remember me, Mrs. Quisling, but I’ve already had the pleasure of meeting you, last year in Oslo.”

I replied that I recognized him, too. When Vidkun introduced Mára to him in Norwegian, the *chargé d'affaires* looked somewhat puzzled, but he merely bowed and said nothing.

After we had all been seated, there followed a rather drawn-out conversation between the Norwegian diplomat and Vidkun. Since they were speaking their own language, neither Mára nor I understood a word and had to content ourselves with watching the two men. It was an earnest discussion, and I could see that it was becoming somewhat strained, more like an argument.

Finally, the *chargé d'affaires* said to me in French that he wanted to ask me a few personal questions. I nodded my agreement.

“Then, will you please tell me truthfully why you want to divorce your husband?”

I could only tell him the truth—that it was not my wish, but Vidkun’s, and that I had not had any idea until the day before why he had suddenly made this decision. I added that I was in no position to object to this arrangement.

Then he asked me if I had consulted my parents, if I had engaged an attorney, and if I had signed any settlement papers. My replies to all those questions were negative. Vidkun wanted to add something but was politely told not to interrupt. The *chargé d'affaires* then asked me a few other carefully formulated questions and, as he heard my story, he grew visibly furious.

Then he addressed Vidkun in Norwegian again, and a rather heated argument ensued before the *chargé d'affaires* switched back to French so I could understand what was going on. He was now speaking very loudly and with great indignation, and he grew angrier as he went on.

"I want both of you to hear my decision. Captain, I have carefully considered your request for a change in the passports, and I find your reasons indefensible. There is no evidence that a legal divorce has taken place between you and your wife. According to Norwegian law, Alexandra Quisling is your lawful wife, and the law recognizes only her—and nobody else—as such. And if you have really married again and have a second wife, then you are a bigamist, and I'll see to it that you will be prosecuted for bigamy in a Norwegian court. Speaking personally, I am shocked that you, Captain, have dared to bring to my office this other woman together with your wife. And that is all I have to say to you!"

By this time he was shouting. I saw that Vidkun was also losing his temper. He grew very red in the face and began a retort, but the diplomat cut him short by getting up from the chair behind his desk. One by one, the rest of us rose, as well. The *chargé d'affaires* walked over to me, took my hand in both of his, and bid me a warm and fatherly goodbye. Before letting go of my hand, he advised me to get a good lawyer. Then, with his arm around my shoulder, he guided me over to the door, where he gently patted my cheek and wished me good luck. And that was all. Even if I had thought of it, there was no chance of telling him that I did not even have the means to return to the *pension* by myself, much less to hire an attorney.

Knowing that, at least for the time being, Mára had also failed to get what she wanted brought me no satisfaction. In a way, her defeat was also mine, for both of us had been forced to witness Vidkun's humiliation. In addition, I had discovered that my husband—for I still regarded him as such—had not only been unfaithful to me, but that he was also undependable, unstable, weak, and evidently willing to mislead people. To what degree, I mercifully did not yet know.

I had been through more than enough during the past two

days to make me feel congealed inside, and my heart was very heavy. I was glad when I was back, at last, in the solitude and quiet of my room at Mme. Glaize's.

While I tossed and turned in my bed, one question kept going around and around in my head: Why, oh why, if Vidkun wanted to get rid of me, had he not simply left me in Russia?