

Nikitin

Before he left, Vidkun warned us to stay quietly at the hotel while we waited for further instructions from him, and to keep away from everybody connected with Mme. Glaize's *pension* in order not to reveal that we were still in Paris. For someone in my depressed state, the warning was superfluous. My deep depression during my whole confinement to the Hotel Swan is, no doubt, the reason I remember so little about that period.

The building was, at most, seven stories high, but it looked much taller because it was extremely narrow with only a few rooms on each floor. The entire ground floor was taken up by lobbies and the hotel office. The hotel had no dining room and no restaurant, so the guests, mostly transients, had to depend on restaurants in the vicinity. Because the residents did not meet each other at a *table d'hôte*, we remained complete strangers to one another. I had never before lived in such a hotel. The atmosphere was completely different from the warm, distinguished ambience of Mme. Glaize's *pension*, which had given me the secure feeling of living in a family.

I had never lived alone and had always needed to feel that there was at least one person close to me who cared about me. The Hotel Swan may well have been a decent enough place, but

its cold, impersonal feel frightened me in my badly shaken state. It was bad enough to be in that small third-floor room with Mára, of whom I was increasingly afraid, but I also grew apprehensive about staying alone. Whenever Mára was not there, I locked and barricaded my door. My fear now was greater by far than the dread and sense of abandonment I had experienced as a small girl when my parents left me in that half-deserted boarding school.

For the first few days, Mára and I took our meals in cheap restaurants near the hotel. Then, Mára suddenly announced that we had very little money left and must be even more careful, and she suggested that we cook our meals in our room. I did not doubt that we needed to economize because Vidkun had again failed to give me any money. Nor was I concerned about the food because I had no appetite. Although it was against the hotel rules, we got a hot plate, and for the rest of our stay, we subsisted on cheap cereals, boiled eggs, tea, and the like.

Mára also supplemented her diet with proper meals outside, however. As soon as she was confident that I would not stir from our room, she began to spend most of her time at Nikitin's Studio or somewhere else. She seemed perfectly content with our gypsy-like way of life, which was not surprising, for, unlike me, she was not deprived of her freedom, her friends, and money with which to get around.

This period has remained in my memory as the most terrifying time of my life, all the more frightening because I had no idea when or whether it might end or what might succeed it. I had no books, only a French newspaper now and then. I received no letters because any mail addressed to me at Mme. Glaize's was forwarded to Oslo, so I was cut off from the rest of the world and from Mama. I lost all sense of time and can only guess that this ordeal lasted for three or four weeks.

From time to time during this period, Vidkun would reappear in

Paris, but I never knew when he arrived or when he left, or where he stayed. I would see him only briefly—and then always in Mára's presence—when he occasionally came over to the hotel to see me. Mára must have been meeting him in other places, as well, but she continued to live with me even when Vidkun was in town. I had the impression they did not want to leave me out of their sight for too long.

My fear and frustration mounted until, one day, when I was alone in the room with Mára, I exploded in a tirade against Vidkun. It was he who had created this insufferable situation and broken his promise to provide me with decent living conditions and a chance to complete my education! I told Mára that things could not go on like this indefinitely; something had to be done.

Mára seemed somewhat alarmed by my outburst, but, to my surprise, she did not side with Vidkun. Instead, she joined me in criticizing "that muddlehead," as she called him. Although she had often revealed her lack of respect for Vidkun when we lived at the *pension*, it still jarred me every time she called him names. Her disdain may have been genuine, but an inner voice cautioned me that she might also be trying to provoke me into being indiscreet myself. She shared my feelings, she said now, but we had to remain patient until Vidkun had time to complete all the necessary legal arrangements. Besides, he was having difficulties with his superiors in the Norwegian Army, as well as with Nansen and the League of Nations; he might possibly soon find himself in the situation of having no job at all instead of the two enviable ones he had now. That meant that he now had to be very careful with his expenses, she added.

It was clear now that Mára knew much more about what was going on than she had ever admitted. However, I kept quiet about my opinion, which was that Vidkun's problems might be the result of news having leaked out about his unsavory marital situation.

After a brief pause, Mára mentioned that Nikitin still asked about me and said I was the most gifted student he had ever had—he could make me into a great movie star if I would continue to work under him.

I told her what I thought of those cheap compliments, which I had already heard many times before. And I reminded her of the many other White Russians we had met in Paris who had gone out of their way to flatter us because of our connection with Captain Quisling, Nansen's trusted associate who had a say in the allocation of Nansen passports.

Mára was not easily put off. She admitted that Nikitin's Studio was in trouble, like so many other refugee enterprises; it was losing students and could not survive much longer. On top of that, Nikitin's wife had just died, leaving him with the responsibility for a small daughter in addition to the Russian Art Studio. He had to try something else, so now he was organizing a group of aspiring young actors and actresses for a venture trip to South America, where some rich former pupils of his could help him open another school and start a film company. There was no competition in this field over there, so success was virtually guaranteed. Nikitin would be glad to take me along if I would pay for my passage, Mára added. Everything could be arranged; all my problems would be solved and my dreams would come true. Of course, she did not explain where the money would come from. As so often before, her money appeared to come from a spigot that could be turned on and off at will.

I told her that her idea was preposterous and that she ought to know better than to make such suggestions. I had never been interested in any other stage career than that of a classical ballerina with a reputable company, and for such a career I was already well prepared. If I could not live with my husband, I wanted freedom and decent living conditions in a location of my own choice. When my husband lured me away from Mama and Rus-

sia, he had promised to take care of me, to love me, and to be faithful to me. Instead, he had betrayed me in every possible way, and I was sick of it all. Sick, sick, sick of it!

Thoroughly worked up by now, I told Mára that I was perfectly capable of finding a school or a university to my own liking, or a place in a first-class ballet company, if only Vidkun had not objected to my performing even under another name. I also asked her why she thought Vidkun would suddenly change his mind and let me take part in obscure, second-rate films produced somewhere at the back-of-beyond.

“Why, exactly because it would be so far away and not here in Europe where you’re already known as Mrs. Quisling and could be easily identified.”

“Then forget about it. The whole thing sounds fishy to me. I won’t leave France except to go to my home in Norway or return to my mother.”

“Well, please yourself,” Mára said with a shrug. “I just wanted to be helpful.”

Aside from such rare interludes, I spent most of my time in the seclusion of that bare little room brooding about my present situation and about my life in general. I began to see that all the cataclysmic events of my childhood had imbued me with a fatalism that had enabled me to appear cheerful and optimistic throughout most of the crises I had been through since I married. Now, however, at the age of eighteen, I was overwhelmed by the realization that the end of all life is death—a simple fact that most people confront sooner or later in their lives and with which they deal in a variety of ways. Some seek comfort in the immortality promised by religion, while others try to perpetuate themselves through their children or through fame, even through infamy.

I had always believed in God, but I still lacked the deep, strong, and unquestioning faith that had kept my mother and

others like her from going under in their living hell. Since my child had been brutally torn away from me, I could not look for the continuity and meaning of life through raising a new life, either. The realization that life is finite created a void inside me, and in facing that, I slowly began to understand that if I wanted to survive the ordeals confronting me, I must not waste my strength fighting what I could not control, but must concentrate on finding something that would lend meaning to my life while there was still time. For me, fatalism was still the solution.

Intellectually, I worked my way through that long, dark tunnel, but emotionally, I was never again free of the horror and awe that are the inevitable result of confronting the concept of Eternity. The clear realization of the finiteness of life on earth frees the soul. Every day seems like a gift, and when sudden decisions must be made, material considerations become insignificant when one is faced with the very real chance that there might be no tomorrow. This realization will occasionally enable us to think that it is better to be oppressed than to oppress, better to be persecuted than to persecute, better to be robbed than to rob.

When my loneliness and dark thoughts became intolerable, I would sometimes take a long walk, the only recreation that cost nothing. Some might wonder why, on one of these outings, I did not simply walk all the long way to Mme. Glaize's *pension* to seek help from my friends there. The answer is that I was still governed by the same pride that had prevented me from speaking about my problems when I lived at the *pension* and by my deeply ingrained belief that one must never go back on a promise. Vidkun had made me promise that I would keep to myself and do nothing that might complicate our situation further. He was still my husband, and, as such, I owed him the same kind of obedience I had owed my mother before him.

Still, my old friends at the *pension* were often in my thoughts,

especially Vidi. During my hurried packing before leaving Mme. Glaize's, I had inadvertently taken along Vidi's book with her favorite aphorisms and poems. It bothered me greatly that I had been unable to return her *Album*, and that I could not repay the small sum of money I had borrowed from her. In my depressed state, it sometimes seemed to me that my days were already numbered and that I would never be able to settle my accounts.

One day, when Mára was away at an hour when I knew Vidi was likely to be alone in the *pension* office, I telephoned her to say that I would return her *Album* and her money at my first opportunity. She was very glad to hear from me and told me not to worry because she had no relatives and no close friends and had meant for me to have that little book in any case.

Although I did not feel free to ask her for help, it was a great relief to hear her voice and to know that someone still cared about me. I was very brief and did not tell her where I was calling from, but I promised to write her soon and asked her not to tell anyone about my call. My voice must have betrayed my agitation and fears, but Vidi asked no questions. She promised that my call would remain a secret between us and added:

"Think no more about it. That husband of yours couldn't fool anybody. We knew it was all a sham and that you didn't go far away. Besides, Mára has been seen since at the Studio and at other haunts of hers. We know you're staying together, and we have a pretty good idea of where you are. Take good care of yourself, Acia dear—be cautious and remember that you have some true friends."

An unexpected visit from Vidkun temporarily lifted the heavy blanket of stagnation surrounding me. Although his visit was a surprise, it was apparent that Mára, who had taken care to be present, already knew he was back in Paris. It was equally obvious that he had come strictly on business. He seemed very ill at ease

in our humble little hotel room, which was further dwarfed by his tall stature.

During this short visit, he addressed himself chiefly to me, impressing on me that he was very busy winding up his Mission in the Balkans. He had come to talk to me about my complaints, but he had to leave very soon. Although he understood my impatience to return to a normal and active life, there was, unfortunately, nothing to be done until the legal complications concerning our marital status were untangled and he was able to return to Norway with Mára. He hoped I had not forgotten that he had tried to have this muddle taken care of unofficially by talking to those bureaucrats at the Legation when all three of us were there in January. It was certainly not his fault that his plans had failed.

Yet, he continued, we could still hope to avoid the scandal of a public divorce if I made a written, legally binding declaration that I had no objection to separation. Such a statement would provide each of us with the chance to go our separate ways and to marry others. Mára had said that Nikitin was willing to put his own name at our disposal for a sufficient consideration, and Nikitin looked a suitable and decent enough fellow. Naturally, this would be our very last resort.

I was tired and listless. I had heard too many of Vidkun's sermons and intricate plans before, and now I was so upset that I could hardly follow his contorted reasoning. His last statement nevertheless stung me to the quick, and I sat bolt upright, interrupting his self-satisfied flow of words.

"Now wait a minute, wait!" I burst out angrily. "What right have you or Mára to make those kinds of arrangements on my behalf or even to speak about my personal concerns to a stranger? And can't you get it into your head that our marriage is already one too many for me and that I'll never marry again, fictitiously or for real—never, never—do you hear me—never! As for your-

self, just go ahead! Go and marry your Mára or anybody else. I can't stop you, and I don't care! Not any more! And don't blame me for your problems—they are of your own making. I have nothing to do with them!"

When I paused for breath, I saw Vidkun and Mára exchange looks of surprise and dismay, like conspirators caught in the act. Mára was about to say something, but I was not yet finished with my tirade.

"Tell me at last, why are you tormenting me for your own mistakes? What are you afraid of? You're not a small boy; you must know that fantasies won't help you here. Sooner or later, the truth will come out. Everybody knows you're married to me. People may ask you embarrassing questions: 'Say, Captain, I see you've acquired a new wife. What happened to the one you brought last year?' What's stopping you from acting honestly and openly, the way most people would do in such a situation? Why not say: 'Yes, I admit that my wife is too young for me; somehow it's not working out, so I'm asking her for a divorce. It's not her fault, we're still good friends, and I'll take proper care of her'—something like that? It would save us all a lot of grief. And what about all your promises? For how long will I have to live here like a prisoner? Worse, even, since I'm not even able to keep in touch with my own mother! How come that you, the famous Captain Quisling, in charge of the fate of millions, can't provide your own wife with decent living conditions?"

I could not go on. Vidkun just stared at me without saying a word. Disregarding me completely, Mára glared at him angrily, but she did not break the sudden silence, either. Finally, Vidkun sat up and squared his shoulders.

"Well, Acia, you've just answered all your own questions. I cannot act like everybody else precisely because of my prominent position and because of concerns for my future. I have promised to take good care of you, and I'll keep my promise. But we must

be very careful. I can do nothing for you until these problems have been solved in a prudent and private manner. Then, and only then, will I be able to occupy myself with you and your needs. But, as I say, it's a delicate matter, and complications might make it necessary for you to go away for a while. Much depends on your own prudence."

So saying, he pulled out a sheaf of papers from his briefcase, placed them next to me on my bed, and continued:

"Here are the papers I was telling you about. Have a look at them before you sign them."

I did not move. I could not move. I did not care one whit about any papers. Vidkun separated the papers into two piles and put both in my lap with the words:

"Go ahead, *lille venn*. Take a good look at them and tell me if you have any questions."

Absentmindedly, I looked through these official-seeming documents and noticed that some of them were in French, while the rest were in languages I did not understand at all—Norwegian, as far as I recall, and another language completely unknown to me. I could not focus my attention on any of them, and they all remained incomprehensible to me. My thoughts were far away.

Vidkun towered high above me, pointing to the papers in my hand. "This bunch has to be signed right now. The other you'll have to sign later, in front of witnesses."

Mára, who up to that moment had remained absolutely silent, suddenly broke in. "No, let her sign everything right away. Otherwise, something might go wrong again. We must take no chances."

"But that would be against the law!" Vidkun protested in some confusion.

"Never mind. Have no fear, *Vidkunchik*; it can all be done any time, even in her absence. Many of my friends say that for the

right price, the Mayor himself would put on all his regalia and do whatever you want!"

Puzzled, I looked up at Vidkun, who was standing above me and holding out his pen. He was obviously deeply embarrassed by Mára's surprising intervention. A large, stubborn lock of his silvery blond hair fell over his forehead, obscuring a part of the face I knew so well. He looked the same as always, but at the same time he appeared quite different from the man I had married, as he always did now in Mára's presence. He, who had always been so sure of himself, now had the air of not being his own master.

Lost in my thoughts about all the heartaches this man had brought me, and forgetful of time, I suddenly heard his anxious voice:

"Do you want to ask me something, Acia?"

"Oh yes," I wanted to say. "Do you ever think of what we have had together and of the life we could have had? Do you ever think of our child?"

"May I have your pen?" I said instead.

"Thank you, Acia," he said with relief. "You can rest assured that none of this will harm you in any way, and that I'll always take very good care of you."

I signed some papers, and that was that. Then I was, mercifully, left alone.

I was left more or less alone for the next several days and many of the nights because Mára was spending her time somewhere else and dropped in only occasionally. She did not volunteer any information about what she was doing, and I asked her no questions.

Toward the end of one of those long, wearisome days, there was a knock on my door, and Vidkun surprised me by coming in unannounced and without Mára. Very agitated and upset, he

again appeared completely unlike his usual reserved and confident self. After some small talk and a great deal of hesitation, he said that he had been looking for an opportunity to speak to me in private. Then he got no further.

Watching him sit there so silent and fidgety in his chair, I forced myself to ask what it was that was disturbing him.

He got up as if preparing to deliver a speech, but instead he suddenly clutched his head in both hands and said in a broken voice:

“*Acia, yá propál*, I’m done for, I’m lost. Oh, my God, what have I done, what have I done—everything is lost for me now! Oh, why did I part from you! Why did I go back to Russia! How could I make all those terrible mistakes! I know I’m done for now.”

His face was horribly distorted. Kneeling down beside me, he began to kiss my hands and repeat his anguished cries: “Oh, what a fool I’ve been! How could I leave you for that woman? She brought ruin on all of us! Now I’m stuck; now I’ve no way out!”

He laid his head in my lap and sobbed like a small child. I felt thunderstruck because this was so completely unlike him. I had never imagined that he was capable of this kind of emotion. It was terrible to see a strong man cry. I simply could not bear it. Keeping my hand on his head, I gently stroked his disheveled hair, but I could find no words of consolation. He calmed down somewhat, but then he suddenly jumped up with unusual ardor.

“*Acia*, let’s run away from here! I still have enough money—let’s go somewhere together, far away where nobody knows us, to America, Australia . . . Anywhere! Let’s start our life all over again! Collect your things and let’s get out of here right away!”

Only a few weeks or even days earlier, this fervent invitation, this chance to escape with him, might have made me happy. I might perhaps have jumped at it. Now they were just meaningless

words. Something vital had died within me during my long and lonely struggle in Paris. I made no reply, no move.

Vidkun was obviously taken aback, not to say shocked, by my complete lack of response. And the shock seemed to restore his self-control. When he had calmed down, I asked him what kind of trouble he was in and whether there was anything I could do to help him.

Shamefacedly and gently, he said he would explain everything to me later. For the time being, the best thing was for me to be patient and willing to help him find a solution to our joint predicament. Then he changed the subject and asked me about my plans for the future—which profession appealed to me the most, what I wanted to study, where I would prefer to live—polite questions to which he already knew most of the answers. I think he was preparing a dignified exit after his emotional outburst. He was still sitting there, however, when Mára, for some reason, returned much earlier than usual.

She was quite surprised to find Vidkun alone with me, but by that time we were calmly talking about serious subjects, and she had no choice but to join in our conversation. She had scarcely had time to wonder about the reason for Vidkun's unexpected visit when there was a telephone call for me from the hotel desk clerk, who said there was another gentleman who wished to see Mme. Alexandra Quisling. He was waiting in the hotel's sitting room downstairs.

Vidkun and Mára were visibly alarmed. "Whom are you expecting?" Vidkun asked.

I had not the slightest idea who my visitor might be, but I suggested that we all go downstairs together and find out. At the foot of the stairway in the lobby stood a young Frenchman, Mushka's and Lilly's lawyer friend, whom I had met so often at Mme. Glaize's *pension*. I am sure Mára recognized him, as well. I was really glad to see him, so I greeted him enthusiastically and

was just about to introduce him when Vidkun took a step forward. To my horror, he curtly and rudely asked the young man:

“Who are you, and what do you want here?”

The young lawyer stiffened, introduced himself in a very formal manner, and said that he had come to speak to Mme. Quisling.

“What do you want to speak to her about?”

“I am a lawyer, and I want to speak to Mme. Quisling in private.”

Vidkun suddenly exploded with rage. “This is an outrage. What right have you—how dare you disturb a member of my family without an invitation! She has nothing to say to you! I order you to leave her alone! And now get out of here!” He was shaking with fury.

“You will regret it, sir!” said my uninvited protector, trying to preserve his dignity. “I warn you, you are suspected of having kidnapped and conspired to harm a young and helpless person. And, from this moment, I can personally testify that you are keeping her here against her will and cut off from communication with other people. You will now be reported to the police and to the Public Prosecutor!”

Physically, the slightly built Frenchman was no match for the athletic Vidkun towering over him, but he continued his threats even as he was being forced backwards, menaced by the advancing Vidkun, who continued to shout: “*Allez, allez—go, go!*”

While Mára and I silently watched this amazing contest, Vidkun succeeded in pushing the Frenchman out the door. Fortunately, there were no other people in the lobby, and it seemed that nobody else was aware of what had transpired.

I felt weak with amazement, not only because of the scene that had just taken place, but from discovering, in the course of only a couple of hours, two more completely unfamiliar sides to Vidkun's nature. By the time the three of us had silently returned

upstairs to our room, Vidkun had entered yet another mood. It seemed that he had totally forgotten all of the day's earlier events and emotional displays. He was grim, composed, and full of determination, as if the skirmish with the Frenchman had returned his confidence.

"Well, it seems that all our plans are collapsing!" he said, looking at Mára. "Now we have to act fast! I have a solution reserved for such an emergency. It's risky, but it should work. Mára, you cannot remain here. Start packing your things right away; you'll leave with me tonight. And you, Acia, you must stay here a little while longer and wait for me. I'll return in four or five days. Meanwhile, see nobody and speak to nobody. Here is some money for your expenses—I'll pay your hotel bill myself. Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

In less than an hour, Vidkun and Mára were gone, without telling me where they were going or how I could find Vidkun in an emergency.

Sitting there in that tiny hotel room, I felt like the lone survivor of a shipwreck, clinging to a flimsy, sinking raft in an immense, raging sea. I could only tremble, pray, and think.

For fear of missing Vidkun or his call, I avoided going out even for a few minutes to buy some food or a newspaper. My friends at the *pension* did not call; perhaps Vidkun had given orders down at reception not to pass on any calls to me. I hesitated to call my friends myself, both because of Vidkun's injunctions and because I did not want to impose on my friends after the reception Vidkun had given one of them.

One day, for lack anything better to do, I went through my trunk and came across Vidi's *Album*. I read most of its sentimental and old-fashioned entries in the hope of finding some consolation or guidance, but of course I found none. I also found the small address book Vidkun had given me before sending me on ahead

to Moscow in 1922, and in which he had made me write down the addresses of the Norwegian Legation in Moscow and of his parents in Telemark, as a precaution against our losing each other.

At the bottom of my trunk were some letters of introduction I had been given the last time I left Russia, written by various friends with relatives and friends outside of Russia. In addition, my trunk contained some old letters from Mama and my friends in Russia. In one of Mama's letters, I found the names and addresses of some of our own friends and relatives outside of Russia, including of my two aunts, Papa's cousins, who had lived abroad since before I was born and whom, therefore, I had never met. Aunt Génia (Eugénie) Katroutza was still living in Nice, and her sister Aunt Káthia (the opera singer Ekaterina Hertza) was living in Rumania with her fabulously pampered daughter Lisa Pushchin.

I wrote to Mama and then to each of my aunts and to my dear Nina. I did not tell them anything about my current problems, but said only that, although I was still in Paris, it was possible that I might leave France soon. I asked them to write to me meanwhile and address their letters either to Mme. Glaize's *pension* or directly to my "permanent" home in Oslo.

Several days went by, but Vidkun did not return. On one of those horrible, endless days, I had another unexpected visitor, this time our Studio instructor Nikitin. His usual suave, almost obsequious manner had given way to brazen impudence. Instead of greeting me in a proper manner when I came down to the lobby, he slowly and insolently studied me and the room's modest décor before he said:

"So this is where your famous husband is hiding you! Well, he won't get away from me so easily this time!"

His extraordinary conduct made me speechless for a moment, and he was clearly amused. My indignation rose, hotly and

quickly. I did not ask him to sit down, and I remained standing myself.

“What is the matter with you? How dare you speak to me in this manner?” I finally managed.

“Nothing much,” he replied airily with a seasoned actor’s studied gestures. “Just tell me where he and that crafty girlfriend of his are now. That pretty pair cheated me. First they talked me into a very peculiar deal—promising me mountains of gold and a lot of favors besides, and then they walked out on the deal without paying me what we had agreed on. Well, I have figured everything out, so now they’re in my power and will have to pay until it hurts. Come on, tell me where they are now!”

I assumed he was referring to the proposal that he would enter into a fictitious marriage with me, but I tried to conceal how hurt and indignant I was that my private concerns had been discussed with strangers. I merely said that Vidkun and Mára had left a few days earlier without telling me where they were going. Rather testily, I added that I did not want to hear about Nikitin’s business deals with them and that he would have to settle his accounts with the Captain and not bother me with his complaints.

That did not stop him. “But what about yourself? Did he leave you with enough money for your needs? Who is paying your hotel bills?” he asked with some concern.

My first impulse was to tell him that it was none of his business, but then I thought the better of it. “You don’t need to worry about that. My hotel bills are paid in advance, and I have enough money to last me until my husband’s return,” I said as coldly as I could manage.

He looked at me very sarcastically. “Don’t be a fool! They dropped me and cheated me when they found out they could do without me, and then they duped you and got rid of you, too! Your husband has abandoned you and will never come back.”

Then, having made sure that his words had the desired effect, he continued: "Listen, if you help me, we can put them in their place. They think they can order people around at their whim, as if they're moving pawns on a chessboard, but I can teach them a good lesson. They have money and power, but they have skeletons in their closet, and they're afraid of publicity and of public opinion. They'll not get away from me. Just tell me where they're hiding and I'll do the rest. Oh, and you'd better let me have whatever money you can spare so I can get by until I get my payoff!" His voice quivered with the foretaste of his triumph.

I could not stand this a minute longer. "All right, just wait for me here, and you'll certainly get what you have coming to you!" I said, fighting against the anger that was threatening to choke me.

Nikitin must have realized that the situation was not developing as well as he had hoped because he walked briskly over to the doorway and blocked my way. "I warn you. Don't try to slip away from me!" he said menacingly.

"Get out of my way! Don't worry. I'm calling the police, and I'll be waiting here until they come so I can tell them about your dirty blackmailing threats! And you can't run away from the police because they'll find you anyway!" I cried, unable to control my anger any longer.

This confused him somewhat, but he tried to stand his ground. "You wouldn't dare to report me. Don't forget that then you'd also expose your husband's machinations, and he would not thank you for that!"

"Then let it be so! That suits me fine! Let the chips fall where they may. I'm sick and tired of all of you! Let everyone get what he deserves!" I said.

There could be no doubt he knew that I was not bluffing. A miraculous metamorphosis now took place right before my eyes. Nikitin was not acting any longer, old pro though he was, because

he would have had to be a brilliant actor, a genius, to deliver the performance I now witnessed. I watched, spellbound, as this self-assured man—a moment ago, an arrogant and insolent creature—wilted, aged, and collapsed with every passing second. First his cheeks grew hollow, then his whole face took on a sunken look, and, finally, his whole body became flabby and hunched. It was like watching an inflated rubber toy being pierced. His eyes betrayed his fear and confusion, but there was also shame and despair in them.

“Forgive me! For God’s sake, I beg you, please understand and forgive me!” he said at last. “I really don’t know what has come over me. I’ve always considered myself a good and honest man, but lately I’ve had nothing but bad luck. I got desperate and lost my bearings. My poor wife recently died. I wasn’t able to provide her with the rest and treatment she needed. I was too busy even to stay with her and take care of our little girl. My Studio is bankrupt and I have to move out. I have no other place for me and my daughter. She’s waiting for me now, and I’ve nothing to bring her. It may be hard to believe, but only a short while ago I was a well-known film director. And I was famous as an actor all over Russia, I had everything I could wish for, and my fans worshipped me. . . . I had not the least doubt that I was a good and honest man. But then everything went wrong, everything turned topsy-turvy. Russia is lost, I am lost, and now my honor is also lost. I have nothing to live for. I dare not ask you for anything, but please make sure that somebody takes care of my daughter if I’m not there.”

He tried to seize my hand with his trembling hands, but I jerked it away. He closed his eyes, and his face became wet with tears.

It was unbearable. I felt both shame and disgust. Shame on behalf of all men, disgust with all those who had set themselves up to direct their surroundings, women included. Twice within

one week, strong and mature men had come to me wanting my help in their shady schemes, only to fall apart before my eyes, shamelessly exposing their corruption and impotence.

Nothing remained, now, of the fairy tale in which I had retained some belief up to that day. Between them, Vidkun and Nikitin had trampled underfoot every ideal I had ever cherished about men being strong and noble knights devoted to the protection of their own and their faithful ladies' honor! I did not want to be a part of a world as ugly and despicable as the one that had been revealed to me. What if everything in this world was only self-admiration, pretense, and fakery? What if honor, beauty, true love, and friendship existed only in the fairy tales?

And yet, mingled with my contempt and despair, I felt a wave of strong pity. "I am poor myself, so I can do nothing for you and your daughter," I said reluctantly.

Then, seeing on my hand the ring Vidkun had given me in Moscow before our church wedding, I added: "Here is my engagement ring. You ought to get a lot of money for it. Take it and go away. I don't want to see you again, ever!"

It was the first real jewel I had ever owned. Later, I received and gave away many better jewels, but I still miss only that particular ring.

The shadow of a person was moving in the open doorway leading to the lobby, and I saw Nikitin cast furtive glances in that direction.

"I—I don't know if I can take advantage of your generosity in this way," he said sheepishly.

"I don't need that ring anymore. Take it and leave. Right away. I have other things to take care of," I said mechanically. I had already forgotten that he was there. Other things occupied my mind.

Nikitin

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Back upstairs in my room, I wrote a few short letters, and then I did what I felt I had to do. Fortunately, the hotel staff had realized that something was going on and had kept an eye on me. Thus, my second childish and bungled attempt at ending my life was thwarted, and Vidkun, who must have left his address with the hotel, was summoned back to Paris.