



Louis Couperus

ELINE VERE

A NOVEL OF THE HAGUE

Translated from the Dutch by Ina Rilke

Afterword by Paul Binding

archipelago books

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First Archipelago Books Edition, 2010

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Archipelago Books
232 Third Street #A111
Brooklyn, NY 11215
www.archipelagobooks.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Couperus, Louis, 1863-1923.
[Eline Vere. English]

Eline Vere : a novel of The Hague / by Louis Couperus ; translated from
the Dutch by Ina Rilke. -- 1st Archipelago Books ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-9819557-4-2

I. Rilke, Ina. II. Title.

PT5825.E5E5 2010

839.31'35--dc22 2009040973

Distributed by Consortium Book Sales and Distribution
www.cbsd.com

Cover art: Georg-Hendrik Breitner, *The Red Kimono*, 1893

The publication of *Eline Vere* was made possible with support from
the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature,
Lannan Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts,
the Netherland-America Foundation, and the New York
State Council on the Arts, a state agency.



E L I N E V E R E

I

The dining room, doing service as a dressing room, was a hive of activity. Before a cheval-glass stood Frédérique van Erlevoort, her hair loose and flowing, looking very pale under a light dusting of rice-powder, her eyebrows darkened with a single brushstroke of black.

‘Do hurry up, Paul! We shall never be ready in time!’ she fretted, glancing at the clock.

Kneeling before her was Paul van Raat, his fingers flying as he draped a long, gauzy veil of gold and crimson about her waist, making the fabric billow over her pink underskirt; her bare shoulders and arms were snowy white with powder and all ashimmer with doubled and twisted necklaces and chains.

‘Oh, there’s such a draught! Do keep that door shut, Dien,’ grumbled Paul as the old housemaid departed with an armful of dresses. The open door offered a glimpse of the guests proceeding along the potted palms and aralias on their way from the hall to the large reception suite, the men in evening dress and the ladies in light-coloured apparel, all peering into the dining room as they passed by.

There was much merriment behind the scenes, with only Frédérique retaining some form of composure, as befitted the majesty of her role as a queen of antiquity.

‘Please be quick, Paul,’ she pleaded. ‘It’s gone half-past eight already!’

‘Yes, yes, Freddie, don’t worry, you’re almost done!’ he responded, deftly pinning some jewels among the gauzy folds of her drapery.

‘Ready?’ asked Marie and Lili Verstraeten as they emerged from the room where the stage had been set – a mysterious elevation that was barely distinguishable in the dim light.

‘Ready!’ answered Paul. ‘And now let’s all calm down!’ he pursued, raising his voice commandingly.

He had good reason to admonish them, for the youngsters acting as wardrobe assistants – three boys and five girls – were cavorting about the cluttered room, laughing, shrieking and causing the uppermost disorder, while Lili struggled in vain to wrest a golden cardboard lyre from the hands of the twelve-year-old son of the house, and the two rowdy cousins set about climbing a large white cross, which was already teetering under their onslaught.

‘Come down from that cross, Jan and Karel! Give me that lyre at once, other Jan!’ roared Paul. ‘Do take them in hand, Marie. And now – Bet and Dien, come over here, will you? Bet, you hold the lamp, and you, Dien, stand beside the sliding door. Everybody else out of the way! There won’t be enough room, so some people will have to go out into the garden and watch through the window. They’ll have a splendid view from there. Come along Freddie, careful now, here’s your train.’

‘You’ve forgotten my crown.’

‘I’ll put it on your head when you’ve taken up your pose. Come on now.’

The three banished maids scurried away, the boys crouched down in a corner where they would be invisible to the audience, and Paul helped Freddie to ascend the stage.

. . .

Marie, who like Lili was not yet in costume, spoke through the closed window to the fireman outside, wrapped in his greatcoat, waiting to set off the Bengal lights in the snowy garden. A large reflector stood beside him like a pallid, lustreless sun.

'First white, then green, then red!' instructed Marie, and the fireman nodded.

The room was dark but for the lamp held aloft by Bet, while Dien stood by the door to the now deserted dressing room.

'Careful, Freddie, careful!' cautioned Paul.

Frédérique arranged herself carefully among the cushions on the couch whereupon Paul adjusted her draperies, necklaces, hair and diadem, tucking in a flower here and there.

'Is this all right?' she asked with a tremor in her voice, taking up her well-rehearsed pose.

'You look ravishing. Come along Marie and Lili, your turn now!'

Lili threw herself on the floor and Marie reclined against the couch with her head at Frédérique's feet. Paul quickly draped both girls in brightly coloured shawls and veils, and wound strings of beads around their arms and in their hair.

'Now Marie and Lili, you must look distraught! A bit more writhing with the arms, Lili! More anguish, much more anguish! Freddie, we want more despair from you – keep your eyes on the ceiling and turn down your mouth a bit more.'

'Like this?'

Marie dissolved into giggles.

'Yes, that's better! Do keep still, Marie, are you ready?'

'Ready,' said Marie.

Paul continued to add finishing touches, readjusting a fold here, a flower there, doubtful whether all was perfect.

'Come, let's get started,' said Lili, who lay in a most awkward position.

'Bet, take the lamp away, and then you and Dien come over here and stand on either side of the sliding doors!'

Finally they all found themselves in total darkness, their hearts pounding. Paul rapped on the window, then ran to join the boys in the corner.

After a slow, sputtering start, the Bengal light flared up against the reflector; the sliding doors parted grandly, and a dazzling white blaze lit up the tableau.

. . .

A hush descended on the reception suite and conservatory as the smiling guests pressed forwards, blinded by the burst of colour and light. Gentlemen stepped aside to make room for a pair of laughing girls, and young people at the back stood up on chairs for a better view.

'*La mort de Cléopâtre*,' Betsy van Raat read out to Madame van Erlevoort, who had passed her the programme.

Cries of 'Wonderful! Magnifique!' sounded on all sides.

In the white glow of the Bengal light, ancient Egypt came to life. Beyond the sumptuous draperies there were glimpses of an oasis, blue sky, some pyramids and a grove of palm trees, while on a couch borne by sphinxes reclined a waning Cleopatra with cascading tresses, an adder coiled round her arm and two slave girls prostrate with grief at her feet. Thus, before the gaze of a modern soirée, the poetry of antiquity was evoked by a lavish vision of oriental splendour lasting only a few seconds.

'That's Freddie! As pretty as a picture,' said Betsy, pointing out the dying queen to Madame van Erlevoort, who was so nonplussed by all this opulence that it took her a moment to recognise the lovely motionless maiden as her own daughter.

'And there is Marie, and the other one, oh, that's Lili! You'd never know, would you? What splendid costumes; they went to so much trouble! You see that drapery of Lili's, the violet with silver? I lent them that.'

'How do they do it?' murmured the old lady.

The light flickered and guttered down; the doors slid shut.

'Lovely, Aunt, just lovely!' Betsy exclaimed to the hostess, Madame Verstraeten, as she passed by.

Twice more the dream was reprised, first in a flood of sea-green, then in fiery red. Freddie, with her adder, lay perfectly immobile; only Lili could not help twitching in her contorted pose. Paul watched from the side, beaming – all was going well.

'How can Freddie keep so still? And it's all so lavish and yet not overdone! Just like that painting by Makart!' said Betsy, opening her feather fan.

‘Your honourable daughter must be exceedingly world-weary, dear lady!’ drawled young De Woude van Bergh, bending towards Madame van Erlevoort, Freddie’s mama.

. . .

After the third enactment of the Egyptian dream Madame Verstraeten went to the dressing room, where she found Frédérique and Lili divesting themselves of their draperies, chattering away as they carefully picked all the pins out of the folds. Paul and Marie, perched on tall stepladders and lighted by two of the maids, were busy dismantling Cleopatra’s boudoir. Dien bustled about collecting discarded draperies and necklaces. The three boys were turning somersaults on a mattress.

‘Did you like it, Mama?’ demanded Lili.

‘Did you like it, Madame Verstraeten?’ Frédérique chimed in.

‘It was splendid! They would all have loved to see it again.’

‘Not again! I’m half dead already!’ cried Lili, sweeping a pile of garments to the floor before collapsing into an armchair, her eyes heavy with fatigue. Dien was dismayed; she would never get done at this rate.

‘Lili, you must rest!’ cried Paul from the top of his ladder in the other room ‘Your next pose will be very tiring. Aunt Verstraeten, please tell Lili she must rest!’ He dragged the colourful oriental rugs off the clothesline they had been suspended from, and Dien set about folding them up.

‘Dien, we need sheets and white tulle – over here!’ called Marie. Dien misheard her, and brought the wrong items.

Everyone spoke at once, instructing one thing and clamouring for another in mounting disorder. Paul protested vehemently from the top of the ladder, but no one was listening.

‘I’m at my wits’ end!’ he raged, going down on his haunches. ‘It’s always me doing all the work!’

Paul reiterated his admonition to Lili, and Madame Verstraeten went off to remind the servants that the young artistes required refreshments. When the trays were brought in laden with glasses of wine and lemonade, cake and sandwiches, the commotion reached

a frenzied pitch. The three boys insisted on being served on their mattress, upon which one of the boys called Jan spilt a stream of orangeade. Marie bore down on them, scolding at the top of her voice, and with Dien's help swiftly pulled the mattress out from under them and dragged it away.

'Frédérique, I wish you'd give me a hand with the background!' said Paul in an aggrieved tone. He had given up trying to discipline the three boys, who were now being shooed out of the room by the old biddy. Some measure of calm was restored; everyone was busy, except Lili who remained in her armchair.

'What a to-do!' she muttered under her breath as she brushed her wavy, ash-blonde hair, and then, taking a large powder puff, dusted her arms to a snowy sheen.

Dien returned, quite out of breath, shaking her head and smiling benignly.

'Quick, Dien! White sheets and tulle!' chorused Freddie, Marie and Paul. Paul had come down from his ladder to erect the unwieldy white cross on the stage, and was arranging the mattress, heaped with cushions, at the base.

'Dien, white sheets and tulle, all the tulle and gauze you can find!'

And Dien complied, along with the other maids, coming up with armfuls of more white fabrics.

. . .

Madame Verstraeten had taken a seat beside her niece, Betsy van Raat, who was married to Paul's elder brother.

'Such a shame Eline is not here; I was counting on her to entertain us during the long intervals with a little music. She has such a pretty voice.'

'She is not feeling very well, Aunt. She is very sorry, you may be sure, to miss Uncle's birthday party.'

'What is wrong with her?'

'Oh, I don't know . . . nerves, I believe.'

'She shouldn't give in so easily to those moods of hers. I dare say expending a little energy would take care of her nerves.'

‘Ah, it is the affliction of the younger generation, Aunt, as I am sure you have heard!’ said Betsy, with a smile of mock sympathy.

Madame Verstraeten sighed indulgently, shaking her head, then remarked:

‘By the way; I expect the girls will be too tired to go to the opera tomorrow. So you can have our box, if you like.’

Betsy reflected a moment.

‘I am having a small dinner party tomorrow, Aunt, but I should love to make use of the box anyway. Only the Ferelijns and Emilie and Georges are invited, but the Ferelijns said they would be leaving early as their little Dora is poorly again, so I could easily go with Emilie and Georges and catch the second half.’

‘Well, that’s settled then. I shall send someone round with the tickets,’ said Madame Verstraeten, rising.

Betsy rose too. Georges de Woude van Bergh was just about to speak to her, but she pretended not to notice. She found him exceedingly irritating tonight – both times he had spoken to her he had made exactly the same comment, some platitude about the tableaux. No, there was no conversation in him at all. And tomorrow evening she would have to put up with him yet again, so her aunt’s offer of the box at the opera was a blessing. She caught sight of her husband in the conservatory with several other gentlemen – Messrs Verstraeten and Hovel, Otto van Erlevoort, and his brother Etienne. A lively discussion was going on, in which Henk had no part; he just stood there smiling sheepishly, with his bulky form pressing against the fronds of a potted palm. He irritated her, too. He bored her to tears, and he didn’t cut a good figure in evening dress, either – not at all chic! He looked better in his greatcoat!

She found an opportunity to have a word with him, and said:

‘I do wish you would talk to someone, Henk. You have been lurking in this corner for ages. Why don’t you circulate among the guests? You look so very dull. And your necktie’s askew.’

He stammered a reply and raised his hand to his collar. She turned away, and soon found herself in an animated little gathering centred on the Honourable Miss Emilie de Woude. Even the sad-eyed Madame van Rijssel, Freddie’s sister, was in attendance. Emilie

de Woude was unmarried, and wore her thirty-eight years with enviable vitality. Her pleasant, cheerful countenance endeared her to all, and while she resembled her much younger brother Georges in appearance, she had about her a certain spiritedness that was in marked contrast to his mannered reserve.

All were irresistibly drawn to the ebullient Emilie to hear her comical anecdotes, and she was now regaling her audience with an account of a recent fall she had had on a patch of frozen snow – she had landed at the feet of a gentleman, who had stood stock still instead of helping her up.

‘Can you imagine? My muff to the left, my hat to the right, me in the middle, and him standing there, staring at me open-mouthed!’

. . .

A bell tinkled, at which Emilie broke off her story to hurry to the front, where the sliding doors were opening before the assembled audience.

‘I can’t see a thing!’ said Emilie, rising up on her toes.

‘You can stand on my chair, Miss Emilie!’ called a young girl in a cream-coloured frock who was taller than the rest.

‘You’re a darling, Cateau, that’s very kind. I’m coming! May I pass, Madame van der Stoor? Your daughter has just saved my day.’

Madame van der Stoor, a lady who wrote poems under a pseudonym, stepped aside with a steely smile. She was a little put out by Emilie’s lack of decorum, and herself made no attempt to gain a better view.

Emilie and Cateau van der Stoor both got up on the same chair and stood with their arms around each other’s waists.

‘Oh, isn’t it splendid!’ cried Emilie, in rapt attention. From the waves of a foaming sea of gauze rose a white cross of what appeared to be rough-hewn marble, to which clung the slender, pallid form of a maiden apparently in mortal danger, her fingers gripping the Rock of Ages, her feet lapped by wavelets of tulle.

There were murmurs of: ‘It’s Lili!’

‘How graceful she is,’ Emilie whispered to Cateau. ‘But how does she do it? How can she hold that pose for so long?’

‘She’s bolstered up with cushions, but it’s a tiring pose anyway. You can’t see the cushions, of course,’ said Cateau.

‘Of course you can’t! It’s very lovely; I have never seen anything more poetic. But aren’t you supposed to be taking part yourself, Cateau?’

‘Yes I am, but only in the final scene, together with Etienne van Erlevoort. I should be off now, to change into my costume.’

She hopped down from her chair. The light flickered, the sliding doors closed. There was a clatter of applause, after which the white vision of foaming gauze reappeared; an angel now leant over the cross, extending an arm to raise the hapless maiden swooning at the base.

There was more applause, louder this time.

‘Of course Marie won’t be able to keep a straight face,’ said Emilie with a toss of her head. ‘She’ll burst out laughing any moment now.’

And sure enough, a tremor of unseemly mirth was seen to be hovering about the lips of the angel, whose soulful expression acquired a somewhat comical cast beneath a pair of nervously raised eyebrows.

. . .

Although everyone could see that the artistes were tired, since none of them were able to keep perfectly still, the final tableau was received with great jubilation. Four or five encores were demanded. It was an allegory of the five senses, enacted by the four girls, all of whom were richly draped in heavy fabrics – cloth of gold and silver, brocade and ermine – and by Etienne, the youngest of Frédérique’s brothers, who was garbed as a minstrel in personification of Hearing.

Then it was all over.

Due to the long intervals between the tableaux it was now two o’clock, and the guests gravitated towards the host and hostess to take their leave.

‘Will you stay to supper with Cateau?’ Madame Verstraeten murmured to Madame van der Stoor. ‘Nothing formal, you know.’

But Madame van der Stoor deemed the hour too late; she would go as soon as her daughter was ready.

The artistes, having changed as quickly as they could, repaired to the salon, where they received congratulations on their acting skills and good taste from the last departing guests. In the meantime a triumphal march could be heard being played on the piano by Emilie, who, being a close friend of the family, would stay to supper along with Henk and Betsy.

'But you'll be coming tomorrow afternoon, won't you, Cateau? The photographer will be here at two!' called Marie.

The following day was Thursday; Cateau would not be going to school in order that she might rest, and she promised to be there at two o'clock.

The fatigued artistes sat sprawled in the easy chairs of the spacious conservatory, where a light repast was laid out – turkey, salad, cake and champagne.

'Which one was the best? Which did you like most?' they clamoured.

Opinions were compared and contrasted, booed and cheered, amid the general clatter of plates, forks and spoons and the clinking of glasses filled to the brim and rapidly emptied.

II

At half-past two the Van Raats made their way homeward to Nassauplein. All was quiet at the house, the servants having gone to bed. As Henk slipped his key back into his pocket and drew the bolt across the front door, Betsy was reminded of her rosy little boy upstairs in his white crib, asleep with bunched fists. She took the candle from the newel post and started up the stairs, while her husband stepped into the dining room with the newspapers. The gas light was on, tempered to a wan glow from a small, fan-shaped flame.

Betsy's dressing room was likewise illuminated. She turned the knob, causing the light to flare up brightly, and drew her fur wrap off her shoulders. In the small grate a flame leapt upwards like the fiery tongue of a heraldic lion. There was something soothing about the room, something reminiscent of a warm bath and the sweet perfume of Parma violets. For a moment she stood over the white crib in the darkened adjoining nursery, then returned and with a sigh began to undress, letting the lace gown slide down her hips like a black cloud. The door opened and Eline came in, looking rather pale in a white flannel peignoir, with her hair loose and flowing.

'Why Elly, not in bed yet?'

'No, I . . . I've been reading. Did you enjoy your evening?'

'Yes indeed, it was very nice. I only wish Henk weren't so insufferably dull. He never said a word, just stood there fidgeting with his watch chain and looking awkward, except when they played whist during the intervals.'

Somewhat tetchily, Betsy wedged the toe of one foot against the heel of the other and kicked off a dainty shoe of gilded leather and beadwork

Eline stretched herself languidly.

‘Did you tell Madame Verstraeten I was indisposed?’

‘Yes I did. But you know me, Sis, after a late night like this I can’t wait to get to bed. We’ll talk tomorrow, all right?’

Eline was used to her sister being mildly out of sorts after an evening out, regardless of whether she had enjoyed herself, desiring only to shed her clothes as soon as possible.

Nevertheless, she was tempted to make some sharp reply, but in the next instant felt too lethargic and feeble to do so. She touched her lips to Betsy’s cheek and, without thinking, leant her head against her sister’s shoulder in a sudden craving for tenderness.

‘You’re not really ill, are you?’

‘No. Just feeling a bit lazy, that’s all. Goodnight then.’

‘Sleep well.’

Eline, languorous and graceful in her white peignoir, retired. Betsy picked up her lace gown from the floor and continued undressing.

. . .

In the corridor Eline felt a vague sense of banishment, which caused her momentary displeasure. She had been quite alone all evening, having given in to a whim of indolence and ennui not to go out, and any length of solitude tended to bring on melancholy, making her long for some company and light-hearted banter. She paused in the dark, undecided, then groped her way down the stairs and entered the dining room.

Henk had flung his tailcoat on the sofa, and now stood in his waistcoat and shirtsleeves preparing his nightly hot toddy. Swirls of steam rose from the glass as he replaced the kettle on the hot plate.

‘Hello, my dear!’ he said heartily, an affable smile spreading beneath the bushy blond moustache as he regarded her with his

sleepy, blue-grey eyes. 'Weren't you very bored this evening, all by yourself?'

'A little, yes. Not as bored as you, maybe,' she responded with a coy smile.

'Me? Quite the contrary; the tableaux were really rather good.'

He stood straddle-legged, sipping his hot drink with audible relish.

'Has the youngster been good?'

'Yes, sound asleep all evening. Are you staying up?'

'I just want to have a look at the papers. But why aren't you in bed yet?'

'Oh, no reason . . .'

Turning to the pier glass, she stretched her arms again lingeringly, then twisted her loose hair into a sleek, dark chignon. She felt a need to confide in him, to have a heart-to-heart talk, but in her vacant, dreamy state she was at a loss for any particular topic to engage his sympathy. She wished she could break down and weep, overcome by some not-too-lacerating grief, for the sole purpose of hearing his gentle, bass voice consoling her. But she could think of nothing to say, and continued to stretch herself with languishing gestures.

'Is anything wrong? Tell me, my dear, is anything the matter?'

Widening her eyes, she shook her head from side to side. No, nothing was wrong.

'You can tell me, you know!'

'Well, I'm just a bit upset, that's all.'

'What about?'

She gave a little moan, pouting her lips.

'Oh, I don't know. It's just that I've been feeling rather nervous all day.'

He laughed his gentle, sonorous laugh.

'You and your nerves! Come now, little sister, it's time you cheered up. You're such good company when you're not in one of your moods; you really shouldn't give in to them.'

Feeling insufficiently eloquent to persuade her of this, he grinned and changed the subject:

'Care for a nightcap, Sis?'

‘Thank you. Yes, I’ll just have a sip of yours.’

She turned to face him, and he, chuckling beneath his blond moustache, raised the steaming glass to her lips. Then he noted the glint of a tear in her hooded eyes, and with brusque determination set down the glass and caught her hands in his.

‘There, there now, tell me what happened. Was it something between you and Betsy? Go on, you know you can tell me everything.’

He cast her a look of reproof with his uncomprehending, trusting eyes like those of a good-natured Newfoundland dog.

. . .

Only then, in a voice broken with sobs, did she let loose a torrent of misery, for no apparent reason other than the prompting of his voice and his eyes. The urge to pour her heart out was too strong to resist. What was she living for? What use could she be to anyone? She wandered about the room, wringing her hands and lamenting without pause. She didn’t care if she died within the hour, she didn’t care about anything at all, it was just that her existence was so futile, so useless, without anything she could wholeheartedly devote herself to, and it was all becoming too much to bear.

Henk sputtered in protest, discomfited by the scene, which was no more than a repetition of so many previous ones. He began to talk about Betsy and Ben, their little boy, and about himself, and he was on the point of mentioning that she too would be mistress of her own home one day, but then thought that might be indiscreet. She for her part shook her head like a stubborn child refusing to be distracted after not getting its way, and then, in desperation, hid her face against his shoulder and sobbed there, with her arm entwined around his sturdy neck. Her nerves were frayed from the lonely hours spent in an overheated room, and she resumed her halting tirade, bemoaning the pointlessness of her existence, the wretched burden life was to her, and in her tone he detected a hint of reproach directed at him, her brother-in-law, for being the cause of all her woes. He was much confused, and also touched by the warmth of her fragrant embrace, which he could hardly return with equal

tenderness. All he could do to stem the flow of disjointed sentences was murmur trite words of consolation.

Slowly, slowly, to the soft tones of his sonorous voice, she cast off her melancholy mood, as though scattering rose petals on a stream.

She fell silent at last and took a deep breath, but continued to rest her head on his shoulder. Now that she had calmed down, he thought it incumbent on him to chide her for her foolishness. What nonsense it all was, to be sure! A lot of fiddlesticks! Because, dash it all, there was no call for such a fuss, now, was there?

‘But Henk, truly –’ she began, raising her moist eyes to his.

‘My dear girl, all this talk about there being no sense to your life – whatever gave you that idea? You know we all love you dearly.’

And, recalling his earlier, unspoken consideration of her eventual marriage, he added:

‘Fancy a young girl like you complaining of the futility of life! My dear sis, you must be quite mad!’

Tickled by this thought, and feeling there had been enough philosophy for now, he gave her arms a firm shake and tweaked her sad lips into a smile. She resisted, laughing, and it was as though the balance in her mind had been restored by her outburst. When a few moments later they started up the stairs together, she could barely suppress a shriek of laughter as he suddenly swept her off her feet and carried her the rest of the way while she, fearing a fall, half-ordered and half-begged him to desist.

‘Now Henk, let me go! Don’t be silly! Put me down at once, Henk, do you hear?’

III

Eline Vere was the younger of the two sisters, with darker hair and eyes and a slimmer, less rounded figure. The lambent darkness of her gaze, in combination with the translucent pallor of her skin and the languishing quality of certain of her gestures, gave her something of an odalisque lost in reverie. Her beauty was of great concern to her; she made it glow and sparkle like a treasured jewel, and this sustained attention rendered her almost infatuated with what she considered her best features. She would gaze at her reflection for minutes on end, smiling as she traced the line of eyebrows and lashes with the tip of a rosy fingernail, pulling the lids sideways a fraction to make almond eyes, or rumpling her mass of brown locks into the wild exuberance of a gypsy girl. Her wardrobe, too, was the object of long and earnest meditation, involving the effects and harmonies of the cold sheen of satin, the warmer, changeable shades of silk plush, the froth of tulle and gauze, and the sheer-ness of mousseline and lace. From the quivering flashes of her diamond ring to the subtle emanations of her scented sachets, the assortment of fineries gave her a pleasant sensation of luxury and delicate femininity.

. . .

Being somewhat dreamy and romantic by nature, she would sometimes while away the hours in self-indulgent remembrance of her childhood. Her memories were like beloved relics to her, to be

taken out and freshened up at regular intervals, and in the course of her contemplations she would quite deliberately replace the more faded images with new, idealised ones. Calling them to mind again later, she would lose sight of what was true and what invented, and would, with complete assurance, relate all manner of trivial episodes of the old days in this polished, poetic form. Betsy, with her more practical, matter-of-fact turn of mind, never missed an opportunity to tone down anything resembling glorification of the past, and for all her nostalgic leanings, Eline, when thus corrected, would usually succeed in distinguishing the bare facts from the fantastic blooms of her imagination.

She recalled her father, a painter, a man of refined, artistic temperament but wanting in the strength to create, married at a young age to a domineering wife several years his senior. He had felt oppressed by her, and his highly-strung nerves, like those of a noble musical instrument, had quivered beneath the roughness of her touch, much as Eline's now quivered beneath that of her sister. She recalled her father's features of yellowed ivory, and his pallid, transparent fingers lying idle and listless while he cogitated on some painterly masterpiece that would be abandoned after the first few brushstrokes. She had been his little confidante, as it were, and in her mind his embattled genius matched that of the great Raphael, painter of sad-eyed Madonnas with flowing tresses. Her mother had always inspired a quiet fear in her, and as her memories of the disillusionments of childhood were primarily bound up with her, she was unable to idealise her mother as she did her father.

She recalled how, after the death of her father in the disaffection of an unfulfilled life and the subsequent demise of her mother due to heart failure, she and her sister had lived under the kindly guardianship of a widowed aunt. Old-fashioned, thin and upright, with a mournful cast to her regular features of erstwhile beauty, she loomed in Eline's memory as a figure behind a plate-glass window, her time-worn hands working four shiny knitting needles in a measured, tremulous minuet. Aunt Vere spent her days in her spacious front room amid the gently stultifying trappings of her wealth, invariably clad in sweet-smelling, velvety garments, with a thick Deventer rug underfoot, a flaming log in the grate, and by

the door a Japanese screen of yellow silk embellished with scarlet peonies and storks on the wing.

The two sisters, growing up together under the same tutelage and in the same surroundings, developed along parallel mental and moral lines, but as the years went by each followed the bent of her individual temperament. Eline's languorous, lymphatic disposition entailed the need of tender reassurance and warm affection, and her nerves, delicate as the petals of a flower, often suffered, despite the plush comfort of her surroundings. She was overly sensitive to any opposition or impediment, and in self-defence took to bottling up her feelings, which led her to harbour a host of small, private grievances. Release from her long-pent-up emotion would come with the occasional outburst of temper. In Betsy's more full-blooded nature there grew an inclination to take control, which was exacerbated by Eline's want of self-reliance. At times her dominance was such that she could almost enter into the psyche of her sister, who, after the initial shock, would soon swallow her pride and even experience a measure of calm and satisfaction in being taken in hand. But neither Eline's highly-strung sensitivities nor Betsy's overruling egotism had ever precipitated a tragic crisis, for within the cushioned confines of their aunt's residence the contrasting hues of their personalities blended into a uniform shade of grey.

. . .

Later – after several balls at which Eline, resplendent in floaty, pastel-coloured dresses and dainty slippers of white satin, had glided and whirled to the intoxicating three-quarter time in the arms of a succession of eager cavaliers – later, she had received two offers of marriage, both of which she had declined. They lingered in her mind as easy conquests, bringing a calm smile of satisfaction to her lips when she thought of them, although her remembrance of the first often elicited a faint sigh as well. For it was at that time that she had met Henri van Raat, and since that first encounter she often wondered how it was possible that such a big bumbling fellow, as she thought of him, a man so unlike the hero of her dreams, should appeal so strongly to her sympathies that she often found herself,

quite suddenly, longing for his company. In the hero of her dreams there were touches of the idealised image of her father, and likewise of the heroes in Ouida's novels, but none at all of Van Raat, with his mellow, lazy manner arising from the full-bloodedness of an overly sanguine humour, his uncomprehending, blue-grey eyes, his slow diction and unrefined laugh. And yet there was in his voice and in his glance, as in his candid bonhomie, something that attracted her, something protective, so that she sometimes felt vaguely inclined to rest her head on his shoulder. And he too sensed, with a certain pride, that he meant something to her.

That pride, however, vanished the moment Betsy drew near. He felt so intimidated by Eline's sister that he found himself on more than one occasion responding to her lively banter with even slower speech and gruffer laughter than usual. She thought it an exquisite pleasure, cruel though it was, to goad him into paying her compliments, whereupon she would mischievously twist the meaning of his words and pretend to be offended. He would apologise, stumbling in search of the right phrases, often unaware of quite what impropriety he had committed, which flustered him so greatly that he could only stammer muddled assurances of his good intentions. Then she would peal with laughter, and the sound of that full, hearty laugh, mocking him with her sense of superiority, stirred greater emotion in him than the more ethereal, needful allure of her sister. Eline's was that of a tearful, sweet-eyed siren rising from the blue of the ocean with sinuous, beckoning arms and a piteous cry, only to lapse helplessly into the deep once more, while Betsy's was more like that of a thyrsus-wielding Bacchante seeking to entwine him with vine tendrils, or threatening to dash her brimming glass in his face by way of merry provocation.

. . .

And so it had come about – he could not tell precisely how – that one evening, in the green coolness of a dimly-lit conservatory, he had abruptly, in a rush of words, asked Betsy to be his wife. There had been something compelling, magnetic even, about Betsy's conduct that evening that had moved him to propose. She had quite

calmly accepted, without demurral, taking care to hide her delight at the prospect of being mistress of her own home beneath a veneer of serenity. She longed for a change from the dignified stuffiness of Aunt Vere's front room with its large plate-glass windows, the thick Deventer rug, the fire in the grate and the storks and peonies on the Japanese screen.

But when Eline congratulated Henk quite simply and sweetly on his betrothal, he was somewhat taken aback, and a pang of disquiet over his impetuous deed left him tongue-tied in the face of her sisterly good wishes.

Eline herself, more disturbed than she knew by this unexpected turn of events, suddenly felt on her guard with Betsy, and withdrew into melancholy aloofness. Knowing herself to be the weaker of the two, she grew haughty and irritable, and henceforth took to opposing her sister's dominating influence.

. . .

Henk and Betsy had been married a year when the girls' aunt died. Betsy had given birth to a son. Henk, at the instigation of his wife, had cast around for some employment, for he annoyed her at times with his stolid, good-tempered lassitude, which reminded her of a faithful dog for ever lying at one's feet and inadvertently getting kicked as a result. He too entertained vague notions of the necessity for a young chap, regardless of the size of his personal fortune, to have some occupation. In the meantime, however, he had found nothing suitable, and had ceased his efforts. In any case, she had little to complain of. In the morning it was his habit to ride out with his two Ulmer hounds running along behind him; in the afternoon he accompanied Betsy on social calls at her behest, or, when relieved of this duty, visited his club. His evenings were frequently taken up with escorting his butterfly spouse to the theatre and soirées, where he did duty as a somewhat burdensome but indispensable accessory. He submitted to this social whirl, for he could not summon the courage to protest, and on the whole found it less daunting to get dressed and follow Betsy than to disturb the domestic peace by pitting his will against hers. But the quiet evenings spent alone

together, although few, were gratifying to his innate predilection for home comforts, and his lazy contentment on those occasions did more to rouse his love than the sight of her at some social gathering, engaged in brilliant conversation. That only made him peevish, and he would retreat into sullen silence on the way home. To Betsy staying in was a dreadful bore; she would recline on the sofa with a book in the soporific glow of the gas lamp, stealing looks at her husband as he gazed upon the pages of an illustrated magazine or just sat there blowing on his tea for minutes on end, both of which habits she found exceedingly irritating. At times she became so irritated that she could not resist carping about his failure to find something to do, to which he, rudely awakened from his cosy reverie, could only give a slurred response. Nonetheless, at heart she was quite content; she loved being able to spend as much as she liked on clothes, without the need for any of the meticulous accounts her aunt had obliged her to keep, and frequently she could look back in smiling satisfaction on a week without a single evening spent at home.

Eline, meanwhile, had passed the year in glum solitude at Aunt Vere's house with its plate-glass windows and Japanese storks and peonies, only occasionally swept up in Betsy's social whirl. She had done a lot of reading, and was especially taken with Ouida's rich phantasmagoria of imagined lives in vibrant hues under the golden sunshine of Italian skies, much as in a scintillating kaleidoscope. She read her treasured Tauchnitz editions until the pages, dog-eared and crumpled, came loose and hung by a single thread. When her aunt was ill she spent long hours at her bedside, and even during these vigils, which gave her a sense of romantic fulfilment, she read and re-read her novels. In the airless sick-room with its medicinal odours, Eline was enraptured by the virtues and prowess of noble heroes and the astonishing beauty of infernally wicked or divinely righteous heroines; indeed she was frequently seized with a passionate longing to reside in one of those old English castles herself, the kind of place where earls and duchesses observed such refined etiquette in their courtships, and where exquisitely romantic trysts were held in ancient parklands, with stage-like settings shimmering in the moonlight against a backdrop of blue-green boughs.

When Aunt Vere died, Henk and Betsy invited Eline to come and live with them. At first she declined, overcome by a singular dejection at the thought of the bond between her sister and brother-in-law. Eventually she succeeded in rousing herself from this dismal frame of mind, but only by an immense exertion of willpower, like a fierce beating of wings. She had always wondered at the mysterious attraction she had felt for Henk, but now that he was married to her sister the situation was different. An invisible but impenetrable barrier of restraint had risen between them, by laws of decorum and custom, so that henceforth she need surely have no qualms about showing her sympathy for him as his sister-in-law. She said to herself that it would be very childish to allow the recollection of past, undifferentiated emotions to stop her from accepting their offer. Besides, her legal guardian, Uncle Daniel Vere, who lived in Brussels, was unmarried and too young to accommodate his young niece in his home.

So Eline waived her objections and agreed to take up residence in her brother-in-law's house, jokingly insisting that she be allowed to make a modest monthly contribution towards household expenses. Henk refused outright, although Betsy shrugged her shoulders, saying that she in Eline's shoes would have wanted the same, for the sake of feeling free and independent. From the inheritance her parents left her Eline derived an annual income of two thousand guilders. With this sum fully at her disposal and by putting into practise the lessons of economy taught her by Aunt Vere, she managed to dress every bit as elegantly as Betsy did on her unlimited purse.

Three years went by, which were uneventful but for the same rounds of seasonal diversions.

IV

When Eline came down to breakfast the morning after her tearful outburst Henk had already left, bound for the stables where his horses were kept along with the two Ulmer hounds that Betsy would not tolerate in the house. There was no one but young Ben, humming tonelessly as he poked a slice of bread-and-butter with his stubby little fingers. Betsy could be heard bustling about and issuing instructions to Grete, the ill-tempered kitchen maid. There would be four guests for dinner that evening – Frans and Jeanne Ferelijn and the Honourable Miss de Woude van Bergh and her brother.

Eline looked fresh and bright in a simple morning gown of dark-grey wool with a triple-flounced skirt and a close-fitting, plain bodice tied at the waist with a grey silk ribbon, and at her throat a small gold brooch in the shape of an arrow. She wore no rings or bracelets, which contributed to her air of studied simplicity and ladylike reserve. About her forehead and neck curled some delicate tendrils of hair, soft as frayed silk.

Nodding affectionately at Ben as she came in, she went to stand behind him. She placed her hands on the sides of his chubby head and, taking care to avoid his buttery fingers and lips, pressed a fond kiss on his crown.

She sat down, rather pleased with the way she looked today, and in her state of restored equanimity she felt agreeably lulled by the warmth of the stove while the snow fell outside in downy silence. Unconsciously smiling, she rubbed her slender white hands and inspected her rosy, white-tipped fingernails, and then, casting a

contented glance outside, saw a fruit vendor, thin as a reed and bent double under a dingy grey shawl, pushing a barrow laden with snow-covered oranges. She took up a breakfast roll, and as she did so felt another stirring of contentment, a shade egotistically, upon overhearing the heated exchange between Betsy and the kitchen maid – shrill commands and terse, insolent ripostes ringing out above the clanging of metal pans and the porcelain rattle of a stack of plates being violently set down.

Betsy came in, eyes flashing with indignation beneath the thick brows, her small, plump lips pursed up. She carried a set of cut-glass dessert plates, which she had decided to wash herself, as Grete had broken one of them. Carefully, despite her annoyance, she placed the dishes on the table, filled a basin with tepid water, and cast around for a brush.

‘That dratted girl! Fancy washing my best cut-glass in boiling hot water. It’s always the same; you can’t trust those duffers to do anything.’

Her voice sounded harsh and strident, and she pushed Ben out of her way without ceremony.

Eline, solicitous in her pleasant frame of mind, promptly offered to help, and Betsy was glad to accept. She had a great many things to do, she said, but plumped herself down on the sofa instead to watch as Eline cleaned the dishes one by one with the brush and then patted them dry in the folds of a tea towel with light, graceful movements, taking care not to get her fingers wet or spill a single drop. And Betsy sensed the contrast between her own energetic briskness, arising from her robust health, and her sister’s languishing elegance, which implied a certain reluctance to exert herself or defile her hands.

‘By the way, the Verstraetens said they wouldn’t be going to the opera this evening, as they need some rest after yesterday’s tableaux, so Aunt offered me their box. Would you care to go?’

‘To the opera? What about your dinner guests?’

‘Jeanne Ferelijn said she wanted to leave early as one of her children has come down with a cold again, so I thought of asking Emilie and her brother if they’d like to come along. Henk can stay at home. It’s a box for four, you know.’

‘Good idea. Very good idea.’

With a satisfied air, Eline dried the last sparkling cut-glass dish of the set, and just as she was putting away the basin another violent altercation broke out in the kitchen, accompanied by the silvery crash of cutlery. The quarrel this time was between Grete and Mina, the maid-of-all-work. Betsy ran out of the room, and there ensued another volley of irate commands and disgruntled replies.

In the meantime Ben stood where his mother had pushed him, his mouth agape in dumb consternation at the clamour in the kitchen.

‘Well now, Ben, shall we go up to Auntie’s room together?’ asked Eline, offering him her hand with a smile. He sidled up to her, and they climbed the stairs together.

Eline occupied two rooms on the first floor: a bedroom and a spacious adjoining boudoir. With modest means yet refined taste she had succeeded in creating an impression of luxury with artistic overtones, particularly in the contrived disarray here and there, which evoked still-life compositions. Her piano stood at an angle at one end. The lush foliage of a giant aralia cast a softening shade over a low couch covered in a Persian fabric. A small writing-table was littered with precious bibelots, while sculptures, paintings, feathers and palms filled every nook. A Venetian pier glass decorated with red cords and tassels hung above the pink marble mantelpiece, upon which stood the figurines of Amor and Psyche, in biscuit porcelain after Canova, with the maiden removing her veil in surrender to the lovesick, winged god.

As Eline entered with Ben, she felt the welcoming glow from the hearth on her cheeks. She gave the child some tattered picture books to keep him busy, whereupon he settled himself on the couch beneath the aralia. Eline slipped into her bedroom, where the windows displayed a few lingering frost patterns, like delicate blooms etched into crystal.

To the side stood her dressing table, abundantly flounced with tulle and lace, which she had touched up here and there with satin bows left over from ball bouquets; the top was laden with an assortment of flacons and coasters of Sèvres porcelain and cut glass. In the midst of all this pink-and-white exuberance glittered the

looking glass, like a sheet of burnished metal. The bedstead was concealed behind red hangings, and in an angle of the walls stood a wide cheval glass reflecting a flood of liquid light.

Eline looked about her a moment, to see if the maid had arranged everything to her satisfaction; then, shivering from the cold in the just-aired bedroom, she returned to her sitting room and shut the door. With its muted Oriental appeal it was a most pleasant retreat, while outside all was bright with frost and snow.

. . .

Eline felt her throat filled with melody. Hunting among her music books for a composition attuned to her emotion, she came upon the waltz from *Mireille*. She sang it with variations of her own devising, with sustained points d'orgue, finely spun like swelling threads of glass, and joyous trills as clear as a lark's. She forgot the cold and snow outside. Feeling a sting of conscience for not having practised for the past three days, she began singing scales, by turns brightening her high notes and practising difficult portamentos. Her voice rang out with plangent tones, the hint of coldness in it at once pearly and crystalline.

Although Ben was accustomed to her melodious voice echoing through the house, he stopped turning the pages of his picture book to listen open-mouthed, giving a little start now and then at a singularly piercing ti or do in the top range.

Eline was at a loss to account for her low spirits of yesterday. Where had that fit of gloom come from? She could think of no particular cause for it. How odd that it should have dissipated of itself, for she could think of no joyful occurrence to justify her change of heart. She now felt bright, gay, and in good form; she regretted not having seen the tableaux, and would have liked to have heard all about them from Betsy. She hoped the Verstraetens did not think her indisposition had been an excuse. Such a kind gentleman, Mr Verstraeten, so amusing and fun-loving, and his wife was such a dear! She was quite the nicest person she knew! And as Eline sat at her piano, now practising a roulade, then a series of shakes, her thoughts floated to all the other nice

people she knew. All her acquaintances were nice in one way or another: the Ferelijns, Emilie de Woude, old Madame van Raat, Madame van Erlevoort, even Madame van der Stoor. As for young Cateau – she was adorable. And she caught herself thinking how amusing it would be to join in their theatricals herself: she heartily approved of the way Frédérique, Marie, Lili, Paul and Etienne were always happily banding together, always planning diversions and japes. What fun it would be to wear beautiful draperies and be admired by all! And Paul had an attractive voice, too; she did so love singing duets with him, and she quite forgot that only a few days before, during a conversation with her singing master, she had remarked that Paul had no voice to speak of.

So she was in mellow mood, and sang a second waltz – that of Juliette in Gounod’s opera. How she adored Gounod!

It was half-past ten when there was a knock at the door.

‘Come in!’ she cried, resting her slender fingers on the keys as she glanced over her shoulder.

Paul van Raat stepped into the room.

‘Hello Eline. Hello there, little scamp.’

‘Ah, Paul!’

She rose, somewhat surprised to see him. Ben went over to his uncle and tried to climb up his legs.

‘You’re early! I thought you weren’t coming to sing until this afternoon. But you’re most welcome, naturally. Do take a seat, and tell me all about the tableaux!’ Eline said warmly. Then, recalling her recent indisposition, she dropped her voice to a suitably depressed pitch:

‘I was awfully sorry I couldn’t go; I wasn’t at all well, you know . . . such an appalling headache.’

‘I’d never have guessed from the look of you.’

‘But it’s true, Paul! Why else do you think I’d miss the opportunity to admire your talent? Go on, do tell me all about it, I want to know every detail!’ She swept the picture books off the couch and invited him to sit down.

Paul finally managed to disentangle himself from Ben, who had been clutching him tightly, teetering on his little heels.

‘Now then, roly-poly, you must let me go! Well, Eline, has the headache cleared up now?’

‘Oh yes, completely. I shall go and congratulate Mr Verstraeten on his birthday, and apologize for not being at the party. But in the meantime, Paul, do tell me what it was like.’

‘Actually, what I came to tell you is that I shan’t be coming to sing this afternoon, as I have no voice left. I did so much shouting yesterday that I’m quite hoarse. But it was a great success, all things considered.’

And he launched into an elaborate description of the tableaux. They had been his idea, and he had done much of the work himself, including painting the backdrops, but the girls too had been very busy for the past month, getting up the costumes and attending to a thousand details. That afternoon Losch would be coming to take photographs of the final tableau, so even if he had been in good voice he wouldn’t have been able to come by to sing with her. Besides, he was as stiff as a board, for he had slaved away like a carpenter. As for the girls, they must be quite exhausted too. He had not taken part in the performance himself, as he had been far too busy making all the arrangements.

He leant back against the Persian cushions beneath the overhanging aralia, and brushed his hand over his hair. Eline was struck by how much he resembled Henk despite being his junior by ten years: of slimmer build, of course, and much more lively, with finer features and an altogether brighter look. But the occasional gesture, such as the raising of an eyebrow, brought out the resemblance to a startling degree, and while his lips were thinner beneath his light moustache than Henk’s beneath his bushy whiskers, his laugh was much like his brother’s: deep, and warm and hearty.

. . .

‘Why don’t you take proper painting lessons, Paul?’ asked Eline. ‘Surely, if you have talent –’

‘But I haven’t!’ he laughed. ‘So it wouldn’t be worth it. I just dabble, you know, whether it’s in painting or singing. None of it amounts to anything.’

And he sighed at his own lack of energy for making the most of what little talent he might possess.

'You remind me of Papa,' she said in a wistful tone, as she evoked the poeticised image of her father. 'He had enormous talent, but his health was poor and in the end he was too weak to undertake anything on a big scale. He had just started work on a huge canvas, a scene from Dante's *Paradiso*, as I recall, and then . . . then he died. Poor Papa! But you, you're young and fit; I can't imagine why you have no ambition to do something great, something out of the common.'

'You know I'm to be working at Hovel's, don't you? Uncle Verstraeten saw to that for me.'

Hovel was an established lawyer, and as Paul had indeed, after alternate bouts of studiousness and sloth, graduated at a relatively early age, Uncle Verstraeten thought he would be doing the young man a good turn by commending him to his friend. So it was settled that Paul would join Hovel's office until such time as he set up a practise of his own.

'At Hovel's? A very nice man! I like his wife very much, too. Oh, but that'll be splendid, Paul.'

'Let's hope so.'

'You know, if I were a man I'd make sure I became famous. Come along now, Ben, be a good boy, sit down on the floor and look at those pretty pictures. Wouldn't you love to be famous? You see, if I weren't Eline Vere, I'd want to be an actress!'

And she broke into a roulade, which poured from her lips like liquid diamonds.

'Famous!' he said with a dismissive shrug. 'Oh no, such a childish idea, wanting to be famous! It's the last thing I'm interested in. Still, I'd like to be good at painting, or at singing, for that matter.'

'So why don't you take lessons, either in painting or in music? Shall I speak to my singing teacher?'

'No thanks, not grumpy old Roberts. And besides, Eline, honestly, it wouldn't be worth it. I'd never stay the course, whatever it was. I have these sudden moods, you know, when I feel I can do anything, and off I go looking for some great subject for a painting . . .'

'Like Papa,' she smiled sadly.

‘And then I get all excited about making the best of my voice, such as it is, but before I know it all my plans and resolutions have fizzled out like so many burnt matches.’

‘You ought to be ashamed of yourself.’

‘From now on I shall be hiding the aspirations of my genius in law cases, you’ll see,’ he said with a chuckle as he rose to his feet. ‘But now I must go to Prinsessegracht – to the Verstraetens’, as a matter of fact. So don’t expect me this afternoon. We have a good deal to do before Losch arrives. Goodbye, Eline! Bye-bye little Ben!’

‘Goodbye, then. I hope your throat will mend soon.’

Paul left and Eline returned to her piano. For a while she sat thinking what a pity it was that Paul had so little energy, and from him her thoughts drifted to Henk.

But she felt altogether too cheerful to do much philosophising, so she resumed her singing with gusto, and did not pause until the tinkle of the noon bell summoned her and Ben downstairs.

. . .

Paul had said he would not be lunching at home, as he was expected at the Verstraetens’. He lived in Laan van Meerdervoort with his mother, who was Madame Verstraeten’s elder sister and a respectable lady with pensive, pale-blue eyes, a slightly old-fashioned, silvery-grey coiffure, and a demeanour suffused with resignation and fatigue. As she was having increasing trouble walking, she was usually to be found sitting in her high-backed easy chair with her head bowed down and her blue-veined hands folded in her lap. She led a calm, monotonous life, the aftermath of a calm, contented and nigh cloudless existence at the side of her husband, whose portrait hung close by. She looked at it often: a handsome figure in general’s uniform, strong, open features set with a pair of faithful, sensible eyes and an engaging expression about the firm, closed mouth. Life had brought her few great sorrows, and for that, in the poetic simplicity of her faith, she thanked the Lord. Of late, however, she had been feeling increasingly tired, her spirit quite broken by the loss of the man for whom she had felt affection until the end, by

which time her youthful, ebullient love for him had subsided into the unruffled serenity of a becalmed lake. Since his passing she had taken to fretting over a thousand trivialities, which gave rise to daily vexations with servants and tradesmen, and these sources of annoyance had come together in her mind as an intolerable burden. She was feeling her age; life had little more to offer her, and she withdrew into a quietly egotistic state of daydreaming about the lost poetry of her past.

She had borne him three children, the youngest of whom, a girl, had died.

Of her two sons her favourite was Henk, whose sturdy posture reminded her most of her husband. But in his good-natured disposition, too, there was more of the upright robustness of their father than in Paul's high-strung wilfulness and constrained genius. Paul she had always found rather too unsettled and nervous; as a student in Leiden he had interrupted his law studies several times, and had only graduated after Uncle Verstraeten stepped in to apply some moral pressure. And she was no less concerned nowadays, what with his staying out late, his passions for painting, tableaux vivants and the singing of duets, not to mention his recurring bouts of idleness, during which he would lounge on the sofa all afternoon pretending to read a book.

In the years preceding his marriage, Henk, being more staid and homely than Paul, had fitted in better with his old mother's habits. He was not given to conversation, but she had never found fault with his taciturn habit: to her it was like being in the comforting presence of a faithful Newfoundland dog keeping a half-closed, watchful eye on its mistress. She felt so secure in dear Henk's company. She disliked being alone, for it was then that the rose-tinted remembrances of far-off times contrasted all too painfully with the uniform greyness of the present, and of Paul she saw little more than when he was bolting down his dinner in order to keep some appointment, or lazing about the house. She seldom went out, having grown unaccustomed to the noisy traffic of the streets and the hubbub of crowds.

Henk was her pet, and despite the worries clouding her mind she was ever alert where his welfare was concerned. She regretted

her son's marriage to Betsy Vere. She had never considered Betsy a suitable match for her boy, nor indeed had she been able to give him her whole-hearted maternal blessing when he announced whom he intended to take for a wife. But she had made no attempt to dissuade her beloved son from his choice, for fear of causing him unhappiness. On the contrary, and somewhat to her own surprise, she had concealed her feeling of unease toward the intruder and had welcomed her as a daughter. All the same, she felt deeply concerned about Henk's future. She had been acquainted with the late Madame Vere, though not closely, and had not been taken with her: she remembered her as domineering and disagreeable, and was troubled by Betsy's resemblance to her. Although Henk was clearly possessed of much more firmness of character than Betsy's father, whom she remembered as being deathly pale and plagued by migraines while letting his wife think and act for him, although Henk had inherited his father's frank robustness and would not stand for any nonsense from a wife, she was convinced he would never be as happy with Betsy as she herself had been with her husband. Dwelling on these thoughts, she would sigh and grow moist-eyed; the maternal instinct that made her blind to Henk's failings also gave her a keen sense of an underlying truth, while her only wish was for her son to find the same happiness in marriage as she had known herself.

She was roused from her meditation by Leentje, the maid, laying the round table for one in the next room, and with weary resignation she seated herself to partake of her luncheon alone. How hateful this solitude was! Tomorrow would be the same to her as today: the summer of her life had come to an end, and though autumn and winter might be free from storms, all they brought was dreariness and cold lethargy. She might as well be dead!

The sense of loneliness and abandonment made her so dull that she did not once scold Leentje for her clumsiness, although it did not escape her that her porcelain serving dish had become severely chipped along the edges during the washing-up.

. . .

That afternoon Eline left the house earlier than usual, to call at the Verstraetens'. It was nearing the end of November, and winter had set in with a vengeance. There was a sharp frost; the snow, still bluish-white and unsullied, crackled under Eline's light, regular tread, but where possible she took to the pavements that had been swept clear of snow. With her daintily gloved hands tucked into the small muff, now and then bestowing a cordial smile and nod on some acquaintance from under her short veil of tulle, she made her way along Javastraat towards Prinsessegracht. She was still in a happy humour, content with her smart winter ensemble trimmed with brown fur, and quite unaffected by the slight argument she had just had with Betsy, who had accused her of ordering Grete to do Mina's work. This kind of disagreement was becoming increasingly frequent of late, much to Henk's dismay, for he hated nothing more than the pettiness of domestic bickering.

This time, however, Eline had paid little heed to Betsy's remark, and had responded less sharply than usual; she had no intention of letting her good humour be spoiled by such trivialities – life was too dear to her.

And, thankful for having curbed her temper, she turned the corner of Javastraat.

Arriving at the Verstraetens', she found the household still in some disarray. Dien declared that her mistress was not receiving, but Eline brushed her aside and made her way to the suite, where she came upon the lady of the house, who apologised for being in her peignoir. Losch, the photographer, had his head tucked under the green cloth of his apparatus to view the ensemble portraying the five senses. Etienne and Paul and the girls were all smiles, and Eline, after apologising to Madame Verstraeten for her absence the previous evening, said how glad she was of the opportunity to see something of the tableaux after all. But now, in the bleak daylight reflected from the snowy garden, the scene did not make the same glowing, lavish impression as the previous evening, nor were the colours as rich as they had been in the blaze of Bengal lights. The draperies hung in loose and crumpled folds, Frédérique's cloth of gold had a dingy, mottled tint, her ermine turned out to be a plain woollen blanket embroidered with black, and Etienne's blonde wig

was decidedly out of curl. Losch begged them to put on a more affable expression, to no avail; Lili, as the Sense of Smell, lay half asleep on her cushions.

‘I’m afraid it won’t amount to much,’ said Marie, while Losch adjusted her robe, but young Cateau van der Stoor thought otherwise, and remained lying motionless despite the unbearable cramp in her side owing to her difficult posture.

Eline, not wishing to disturb the concentration of the posing artistes, went into the conservatory, where she seated herself beside Mr Verstraeten to offer him her birthday greetings. He laid his book aside and removed his spectacles, the better to focus his twinkling brown eyes on the smart young visitor.

‘Do you know,’ she said, unfastening her fur-trimmed jacket, ‘do you know that I’m rather jealous of that happy little lot next door, always together, always jolly, brimming with ideas and fun. Why, they make me feel quite old!’

‘Well I never!’ said Madame Verstraeten, laughing as she stood in her peignoir behind a chair. ‘You’re the same age as Marie, aren’t you? Twenty-three, am I right?’

‘Yes, dear lady, but I was never as spoiled as Marie and Lili, not that I would have minded it one bit! As you know, at our house – when I was little – Papa was often ill and naturally that made us quiet, and afterwards at Aunt Vere’s . . . she was extremely kind, but far older than Papa, and not very jolly either.’

‘You mustn’t speak ill of Aunt Vere, Eline!’ said Mr Verstraeten. ‘She was an old flame of mine, I’ll have you know.’

‘Ah, and you mustn’t poke fun at her! I loved her dearly, she was like a second mother to us, and when she died after that long illness it was a dreadful blow. I felt quite alone in the world . . . So you see, I didn’t have an altogether happy time growing up.’ She gave a wistful smile, her eyes moistening at the thought of all she had missed. ‘But when you look at Paul and Etienne and the girls, there’s nothing but laughter and jollity. Really, it would make anyone jealous. And Cateau is a sweet girl, too.’

The artistes could be heard jumping down from the stage: the photography session had come to a close. Paul and Etienne entered the conservatory with Freddie, Marie and Cateau, all in costume,

while Lili went up to bed, worn out from the excitement of the last two days

‘Goodbye, Miss Vere,’ said Cateau, offering her small hand.

Eline felt a sudden, inexplicable affection for the young girl, so pure and unselfconsciously beguiling, and as she rose to leave she had to hide her emotion by giving Cateau a brusque, playful hug.

‘Goodbye, darling!’ she cooed. ‘Well, Madame Verstraeten, I’d better be off. I expect you have lots of things to attend to now that things are back to normal. Only, I promised Betsy I’d ask about the opera tickets. Might I take them with me, if you have them to hand, that is?’

. . .

It was still early, just gone half-past two, and it occurred to Eline that she had neglected to call on Madame van Raat for quite some time, although she knew the old lady was devoted to her and liked receiving visitors in the afternoon for a chat. Henk called on his mother faithfully every morning after his ride, invariably accompanied by the two Ulmer hounds his wife could not abide, which would gleefully bound up the stairs in his mother’s house. Betsy seldom put in an appearance; she was aware of her mother-in-law’s reservations towards her. Eline, however, had won Madame van Raat’s heart thanks to the particularly engaging manner she had towards elderly ladies: something in her tone of voice, in her solicitous little attentions, that betokened a pleasing respectfulness.

Eline returned through Javastraat to Laan van Meerdervoort, and found Madame van Raat alone, sitting in her high-backed chair with her hands folded on her lap. The image she presented was of such utter despondency as to unsettle her young visitor; the grand but worn furnishings were redolent of nostalgia for past conviviality, and from the hallway to the front room with its sombre green-velvet curtains the sadness and yearning were almost palpable. Eline felt her heart sinking. How miserable it all was! No, life was not worth living. Why, oh why . . . ?

Then she mastered herself. Gathering together all the thoughts that had made her so cheerful that morning, she gave a smile and

adopted her habitual tone of respectful concern and affection as she enthused about Paul, about the tableaux, about that evening's dinner party and about the opera, and she promised to send Madame van Raat some books: light-hearted, entertaining literature, in which the world was viewed through rose-tinted glasses.

It pained her to keep up her lively prattle while she would have liked to have a good cry together with Henk's mother, in woeful sympathy, but she contained her emotion and even plucked up courage to broach a more serious subject. She had seen tears in the dear lady's eyes when she arrived, she said in her soothing voice, it was no use denying it; she did not wish to be inquisitive, but would love to console her if only she knew what was wrong, and besides, dear Madame had confided in her before, hadn't she?

Eline was alluding to complaints about Betsy and various other, minor preoccupations, which she thought better not to spell out.

The old lady, feeling comforted already, gave a light laugh and shook her head: truly, there was nothing wrong, it was just that she felt lonely at times, or perhaps it was merely the tedium of her years; she had so few interests nowadays, but then that was her own fault, was it not? Other old people read the newspapers and continued to keep abreast of things generally, but not she. Oh, Eline was such a dear, sweet creature; why couldn't Betsy be a bit more like her?

She perked up a little and began to talk of her girlhood, and then, gesturing toward her beloved husband's portrait, of her life with him.

It was past four o'clock when Eline took her leave and hurried away. Dusk was falling, a thaw had set in, and the darkening clouds seemed about to come down to smother her. The old lady had said that she had been happy once, very happy . . . but was that really true? And then look at her, Eline: she wasn't happy, even if she was young. How would she feel if she were the same age as old Madame van Raat, and all wrinkled and ugly? She wouldn't even have the consolation of happy memories to look back on; her entire life would be a sombre shade of grey, leaden like the clouds! Dear God, she thought, why must I live if I am not to be happy?

'Why, oh why?' she whispered, quickening her step at the thought of having to dress for dinner.

. . .

It was to be a simple, informal dinner party. The Ferelijns arrived at half-past five, followed soon after by Emilie and Georges. Betsy received them in the salon and enquired after the Ferelijns' little girl.

'Much better, thank you; she no longer has a fever, but she is not yet fully recovered either,' said Jeanne. 'Dr Reijer was quite pleased with her progress. It was so kind of you to invite us; I haven't had the opportunity to go out lately, so this is a most welcome change from being cooped up at home. Only, I'm afraid I took you at your word about it being an informal affair, as you can see.'

Her eyes darted with some anxiety between her own simple black dress and Betsy's grey satin gown.

'Oh, there won't be anyone else besides Emilie and her brother. But since you told me you'd be leaving early, I thought we'd go to the opera afterwards. Uncle Verstraeten has let us have their box. So there's nothing to upset yourself about, you were quite right to have come as you are.'

Henk came in looking blithe and affable in his smoking jacket, which Jeanne found more reassuring than Betsy's casual response. Emilie, rustling with jet beads and ebullient as ever, was a close acquaintance, leaving only Georges – in a tailcoat with a gardenia in his buttonhole – to make her feel uncomfortable in her day dress.

Frans Ferelijjn, a member of the East Indian colonial service, was on leave in Holland on account of his health, and his wife was an old school-friend of Eline and Betsy.

Jeanne was an unassuming little woman, very subdued, and bowed by her domestic troubles. Of slight build and anaemic pallor, with soft brown eyes, she laboured under the task of raising three sickly children with restricted financial means, and moreover she was racked with homesickness for the East Indies, the land of her birth, where she had loved the simple way of life in their remote outpost. She suffered from the cold, and counted the months remaining until their departure from Holland. She told Emilie about their home at Temanggoeng in the Kadoe, where Frans was Comptroller First-Class, and about their menagerie of Cochin chickens, ducks,

pigeons, a Dutch cow that was milked every day, a pair of goats and a cockatoo.

‘Rather like Adam and Eve in Paradise,’ commented Emilie.

Then Jeanne related how she used to go out each morning to tend her Persian roses and her lovely crotons, how she picked the vegetables for the day in her own back garden and how her youngsters had begun to cough and fall ill the moment they arrived in Holland. True, they had been pale in the Indies, too, but at least there she wasn’t always worrying about draughts and keeping the doors properly closed. She also missed her *baboe*, whom she had been obliged to leave behind for reasons of economy. In the meantime the *baboe*, whose name was Saripa, was in service with other people at Semarang, but she had vowed to return as soon as they were back in the Indies, and Jeanne in turn had promised to bring her some lengths of pretty cotton from Holland for her to make into kebayas.

Emilie listened with friendly interest and plied her with questions, for she knew how talk of the East Indies could draw Jeanne out of her customary reticence. Betsy considered her unsuitable for larger receptions, so she usually invited her and her husband on their own or with just one or two other close acquaintances. The fact was that she found Jeanne boring and insignificant, lacking in dress sense and prone to whingeing, but that was no reason, she felt, not to invite her for the occasional informal gathering. Jeanne had been included out of pity, Emilie out of pleasure, and Georges out of duty.

While Frans Ferelijn held forth to Henk about his impending promotion to Assistant-Resident, and Georges listened politely to Jeanne’s account of how her husband’s horse had once strayed right onto their veranda in quest of its daily treat of a banana, Betsy leant back in her chair, thinking that Eline was taking a very long time coming. She was hoping to dine early, so as to arrive at the opera in time for the second half, and she prayed that the Ferelijns would not be indiscreet and stay too long. They were seldom amusing, anyway, she thought, and she rose, masking her impatience. She touched the peacock feathers in the Makart bouquet, adjusted some bibelots on a side table and with the point of her shoe straightened

a wrinkle in the tiger-skin rug before the flaming fire in the grate. She was annoyed with Eline.

At long last the door opened and Eline appeared. Jeanne was struck by how elegantly fetching she looked in her pink dress of ribbed silk, simple but beautifully made, with tiny butterfly bows dotted here and there along the low-cut bodice, in the folds of the elbow-length sleeves and at the waist. In her tawny-brown hair, dressed in the shape of a Grecian helmet, she wore an aigrette of pink plumes; her feet were daintily shod in pink, her throat was adorned with a single strand of pearls and in her hands she held her long gloves, her pink feather fan and her mother-of-pearl opera glasses.

Ferelijn and De Woude stood up to greet her, and after shaking hands with them she kissed Emilie and Jeanne lightly on the forehead. As she enquired after little Dora's health, she could not help noticing that all eyes, including those of Henk and Betsy, were fastened on her. Her toilette was clearly a success, and when Jeanne reported that Dr Reijer had pronounced the girl to be on the mend, she responded with a beaming, triumphant smile.

. . .

At table, Eline jested incessantly with her neighbour, Georges de Woude. Betsy was seated between her two male guests, Emilie between Henk and Frans, Jeanne between Eline and Henk. In the slightly sombre dining room with its antique furnishings, the snowy damask tablecloth shimmered with silverware and fine crystal, while the soft gas light flickering on the decanters and glasses made the wines of purple-red or palest yellow appear to quiver. From a bed of flowers in a silver basket rose the prickly crown of a pineapple.

De Woude began describing the soirée at the Verstraetens' to Eline, giving her a glowing account of how truly regal the Honourable Miss van Erlevoort had looked in her poses, first as Cleopatra and then as the Sense of Sight. Emilie, Frans and Betsy were discussing the Indies, with Jeanne joining in from time to time, but she was sitting too far away and was distracted by

De Woude's loquaciousness and Eline's flirtatious, high-pitched laughter. Henk ate his soup and then his fish pastry in silence, save for the occasional offer of another helping or another glass to Jeanne or Emilie. Jeanne grew increasingly withdrawn, as much from her general malaise as from having conversed at such length with Emilie after a day filled with cares. It irked her to be sitting so close to Eline, resplendent in her dinner gown, for both she and De Woude looked as if they were attending a banquet – they made her feel quite dowdy in her plain day dress. Still, she was thankful to be sitting next to Henk, and was conscious of a vague sort of sympathy with him, as he seemed to feel just as out of place as she did.

She could not help comparing herself with Eline and Betsy; there she was, struggling with her three children on a small furlough-allowance, while Eline and Betsy spent their days in a whirl of sophisticated pastimes. Where was the warm friendship that had united them when they were young and carefree, walking to school together with their satchels, when Eline had filled the hood of her raincoat with cherries and Betsy had egged them on to make mischief in the classroom? She felt estranged from her young hostess, and even repelled by her condescending manner in conversation and her domineering tone towards her husband; she felt likewise estranged from Eline, whom she found vain and frivolous in the witticisms she exchanged with the dandy at her side. She could not fathom Eline; there was something strange about her, something mysterious and contradictory. Her all-too-ready laughter grated on Jeanne's nerves, and she could not imagine how someone who by all accounts sang so wonderfully could sound so disagreeable and artificial when she laughed. Oh, if only they would pipe down! She wished she was back in the narrow upstairs apartment, with her little Dora. What was she doing here, anyway? Of course, when the physician had pronounced Dora to be out of danger, Frans had been keen to accept the invitation as a much-needed diversion, but this, this was no diversion by any means, it was only making her feel nervous and shy.

And she declined Henk's offer of the sweetbreads and asparagus, which he so warmly recommended.

'I believe Mr de Woude is your brother, is he not?' Frans asked Emilie. He had not met her or Georges before, and was as much struck by the resemblance between them as by the difference.

'Indeed he is,' Emilie replied in a low voice. 'My very own brother, I'm proud to say. A dreadful fop, but a dear boy. He's at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, preparing for entry into the Diplomatic Service. So don't you go getting the wrong impression!' she laughed, wagging her finger at him as if she could read Ferelij's thoughts.

'I have scarcely exchanged half a dozen words with Mr de Woude, so I wouldn't presume to have any opinion!' he said, somewhat taken aback by Emilie's admonition.

'And quite right too; most people change their opinion of Georges once they get to know him. And as you see, I am the loyal sister leaping to her brother's defence. Would you mind pouring me some more wine?'

'You defend him even before he is attacked!' riposted Ferelij, smiling as he complied with Emilie's request. 'But I can tell he's a favourite of the ladies here, not only of his sister, but also of Madame van Raat and Miss Vere.'

Betsy joined in the exchange between Eline and Georges, attracted by the latter's vivacity as he chattered on, skimming all sorts of topics: a conversation with little substance to it, not even much in the way of wit, but light and airy as soap bubbles and peppered with firecrackers. She was in her element here: serious talk, be it ever so spirited, was too heavy for her, but this kind of froth and foam was like the wine pearling in her crystal glass, and it pleased her immensely. She thought Georges far more amusing this evening than he had been at the Verstraetens', where he had twice remarked that the red illumination was more flattering than the green. Today he did not repeat himself, but, having lost his habitual reserve, discoursed volubly, now interrupting the sisters with mock impudence, then offering a droll repartee on some disputed opinion, and on the whole paying little heed to his locution.

Eline made several attempts to draw Jeanne into their lively little group, but received only a faint smile in reply or at most a mono-

syllable, and consequently gave up trying to amuse her. The conversation became more general; Emilie joined in with her jovial, forthright mode, and Frans, in the midst of this charmed circle, could not resist throwing in the occasional bon mot, although he frequently cast a look of concern at his quiet little wife.

. . .

To Jeanne the dinner seemed to go on for ever. Although she had no appetite, she did not wish to attract attention by declining the truffled fowl, the Henri IV gateau, the pineapple and the choice dessert, but she barely tasted her wine. Henk, beside her, ate with relish, wondering as he chewed why Jeanne took such tiny helpings. Nor did Georges de Woude eat a great deal; he was too busy holding forth. Emilie, however, ate heartily, and enjoyed her wine, too.

It was just past eight when they rose from the table and the ladies adjourned to the drawing room. Frans joined Henk and De Woude in an after-dinner cigar, as Jeanne had agreed to stay another half hour. Betsy had pressed her not to leave just yet – it would be uncivil to dispatch her guests immediately after dinner, and there was plenty of time for the opera.

‘Is Dora often ill?’ asked Eline. With a rustle of pink ribbed silk she sank down on a sofa beside Jeanne and took her hand. ‘The last time I saw her she was quite well, but even then I thought she looked rather pale and delicate.’

Jeanne discreetly withdrew her hand, feeling a touch vexed by this question being put to her after the flippancy of the table talk. She came out with a perfunctory reply. But Eline, as though wishing to make up for her earlier lack of concern, put so much warmth and commiseration in her voice that Jeanne melted. She promptly voiced her fears that Dr Reijer might not have examined her little girl with sufficient thoroughness, and Eline was all ears as she spooned sugar into her cup of mocha on the silver tray held by Gerard, the manservant. Emilie and Betsy had moved to the anteroom for a look at the latest fashion plates.

‘You poor thing, all those worries, and it’s less than three months since you arrived in Holland. You came in September, didn’t you?’

asked Eline, replacing the translucent Chinese coffee cup on the side table.

Jeanne made no reply, but brusquely drew herself up and, clapping Eline's slender, cool hand in hers, broke out with:

'I say, Eline, do you remember how I always used to speak my mind? Because there is something I should like to ask you. May I?'

'Of course!' said Eline, somewhat startled.

'Well, it's just that I wonder why things aren't the same between us as they used to be, when your parents were still alive. It's four years since Frans and I got married and left for the Indies, and now that we are back, now that I have seen you again, it's just as if everything has changed. I don't know anybody in The Hague; we have practically no relations here either, and it would be so lovely to keep my old friends.'

'But Jeanne . . .'

'Oh, I know, you probably think I'm silly to talk like this, but things are so difficult sometimes that I get very miserable. Then I wish I could let off some steam to good friend, which I can't do with my husband, obviously.'

'Why not?'

'Well, he has enough troubles of his own. He's not at all well, you know, and he's losing his patience -'

'But Jeanne, I can't think what could have changed between us.'

'Perhaps I'm just imagining things. But we used to spend more time together in the old days. You move in completely different circles now, you go out a good deal, while I . . . well, we seem to have become sort of estranged.'

'We didn't see each other for four years, after all.'

'But we wrote letters.'

'Three or four letters a year isn't much, you know! It's only to be expected that one's ideas change as one grows older and one's circumstances change, surely. And I've had my share of worries, too. First there was dear Papa, and then poor Aunt Vere, whom I attended during her final illness.'

'Are you happy here, do you and Betsy get on all right?'

'Oh yes, very well, otherwise I wouldn't have moved in with her, would I?'

Eline, with characteristic reserve, had no desire to go into detail.

'You see! You have nothing to fret about at all,' Jeanne pursued. 'You are free and independent, your own mistress to do as you please, whereas I – I am in a completely different situation.'

'But that doesn't mean to say we've become estranged, does it? For one thing, estranged has a disagreeable sound to it, and for another, it's simply not true, whichever way you put it.'

'I'm afraid it is.'

'No, it's not, I assure you. My dear Jeanne, if I can be of service to you in any way, just tell me. I promise I'll do what I can. I wish you'd believe me.'

'I do, and thank you for your kind promise. But Eline, I wanted to take this opportunity . . .'

'Now?'

Jeanne was framing questions in her mind: How are you, really? Tell me more about yourself, so that I may get to know you the way you are now! But seeing the polite smile on Eline's pretty lips and the dreamy look in her almond eyes, Jeanne said nothing. Suddenly she regretted having spoken so candidly to the coquettish young creature opening and closing her feather fan. Oh, why had she spoken to her at all? They were worlds apart.

'Now?' repeated Eline, despite her reluctance to hear what Jeanne had to say.

'Some other time, then, when we have more privacy . . .'

stammered Jeanne, and she rose to her feet. She was annoyed, mostly with herself, and on the brink of tears after the unpleasant dinner followed by this fruitless exchange with Eline. Just then Betsy and Emilie emerged from the boudoir.

Jeanne said it was time they went home. The three men soon appeared, and Henk helped Jeanne into her long overcoat. Forcing herself to smile amiably, she bade them goodbye, reiterating how kind Betsy had been to invite her and her husband to this intimate gathering, and again feeling a pang of annoyance when Eline kissed her on both cheeks.

'That Jeanne is such a bore!' said Betsy when the Ferelijns had gone. 'She hardly said a word all evening. What on earth were you talking to her about just now, Eline?'

‘Oh, about little Dora, and about her husband . . . nothing in particular.’

‘Poor Jeanne!’ said Emilie with feeling. ‘Come, Georges, could you get me my cloak?’

But before he could do so Mina came in with the ladies’ outer garments, so De Woude went off to don his Ulster greatcoat, leaving Henk to rub his large hands with pleasure at the prospect of staying in after his copious dinner. The carriage had been waiting for the past half hour in the thawing snow, with Dirk the coachman and Herman the groom on the box, huddled under their capacious fur capes.

‘Oh Frans, don’t ever make me accept another invitation from the Van Raats!’ Jeanne said beseechingly, shivering on her husband’s arm as they splashed along the muddy street, trying with her small, icy hand to hold the sides of her oversized coat together against the gusting wind. ‘Honestly, I simply don’t feel at home with them any more, Betsy and Eline have changed so much.’

His response was an impatient shrug of the shoulders, and they plodded onwards in their wet shoes, the monotony of their progress relieved only by the regularly spaced street lanterns shining tremulously in the puddles along the way.

. . .

The third act of *Le Tribut de Zamora* had just begun when Betsy, Emilie, Eline and Georges entered their box. Their arrival prompted a ripple in the stillness of the audience; there was a rustling of silks and satins, a turning of eyes and craning of necks and much whispering, wondering who they were.

Emilie and Eline seated themselves at the front, with Betsy and Georges behind them, and Eline glanced about a moment, smiling faintly as she laid down her fan and mother-of-pearl opera glasses. Then she slowly untied her short cloak of white plush with the pink-satin lining and let it slide off her shoulders as a pink-and-white cloud, whereupon De Woude draped the garment over the back of her chair. Affecting not to notice the looks of admiration, she savoured the triumph of her beauty.

'It's full tonight, we're in luck,' whispered Emilie. 'I think it's so dismal when the house is half empty.'

'Oh, I quite agree!' said Betsy. 'Look, there are the Eekhofs: Ange, Léonie and their mama. They were at the Verstraetens' yesterday, too, and they're giving a *soirée dansante* next week,' she concluded, returning the girls' greeting.

'Tonight we're hearing Theo Fabrice, the new baritone from Brussels,' De Woude said to Eline. 'Did you know two baritones have already been dismissed? This is the third one since the debuts started.'

'There doesn't seem to be an end to the debuts this winter,' breathed Eline, taking up her fan.

'The tenor was excellent from the start, but this Fabrice is very good too, so I have heard. Look, there he is.'

The chorus of Ben-Saïd's odalisques had come to an end, and the Moorish king himself swept into his palace, leading Xaïma by the hand. Eline was not paying attention, however. She was still scanning the audience, nodding and smiling at acquaintances, and did not direct her gaze to the stage until Ben-Saïd and his slave girl were well and duly enthroned under the canopy, signalling the start of the ballet. She always enjoyed the dancing scenes, and minutely followed the ballerinas in their shiny satin bodices and full skirts of spangled tulle as they glided on tiptoe towards the Moorish arcades, beneath which they hovered in clusters, holding aloft their veils and silver-tasselled fans.

'A pretty ballet,' said Emilie, yawning behind her fan as she settled back in her seat. She was feeling the effects of her lavish dinner.

Eline nodded, and while she could hear Betsy and Georges whispering behind her, she kept her eyes fixed on the prima ballerina with the glittering aigrette of diamonds in her hair, who was floating on the curved tips of her satin ballet shoes as she twirled among the other dancers and the flutter of veils and fans.

True to her dreamy and idealistic nature, Eline had a passion for the opera, not only because it gave her the opportunity to display her languorous elegance, not only because of the music and the chance to hear some celebrated chanteuse sing a particular aria, but also because of the exciting, highly romantic intrigues and melodra-

matic scenes of hatred and love and revenge. She did not mind the plots being predictable, nor did she aspire to find any truth in them. She had no need to forget for one moment that she was observing actors and actresses, not knights and noble ladies, or that she was in a crowded theatre gazing at a brightly lit stage with painted scenery and music from a visible orchestra, not sharing the life of the hero and heroine in some poetic medieval fantasy – she enjoyed herself anyway, as long as the singing was tolerable, the acting not too coarse and the costumes becoming.

Betsy, by contrast, went to the opera only to see and be seen, and had she known what Eline found so enjoyable, would have shrugged dismissively, saying that was childish of her. But Eline kept her enjoyment to herself, for she knew what Betsy was like and preferred to leave her sister in the belief that for her, too, the main purpose of an evening at the theatre was to see and be seen.

She now regretted having arrived so late, for she had never seen *Le Tribut de Zamora* and consequently did not know what had gone before. Emilie had fallen silent under the influence of her fish pastry and her truffled fowl, and like Eline kept her eyes fixed on the stage.

The ballet came to an end. Ben-Saïd and Xaïma descended from their thrones, and the king, having uttered the phrase ‘Je m’efforce en vain de te plaire!’ in recitative, launched into the romantic air:

*O Xaïma, daigne m’entendre!
Mon âme est à toi sans retour!*

The new baritone’s voice was deep and resonant, more like that of a basso cantante, and in his delivery he cast a pall of melancholy over the song.

However, his extravagant Moorish costume made him appear rather large and burly. Neither in his pose nor in his facial expression did he convey anything resembling the passionate devotion of a lover, and in the looks he directed at the chanteuse-légère, silver-robed and with pearl-studded blonde locks, there was more fierceness than tender devotion.

Eline was not insensitive to this shortcoming of his acting, but was nonetheless charmed by the contrast between his over-

bearing demeanour and the humble, beseeching tone of his voice. She followed his song note by note, and when, at an abrupt, plangent fortissimo, the actress assumed an expression of great terror, she was astonished, thinking: Why is she so frightened? What could have happened? He doesn't look all that wicked to me.

During the applause she cast around the audience again, and lit on a party of gentlemen who had posted themselves on the steps leading to the stalls. She saw them peering up at her box, presumably discussing its occupants, and was about to look away in a show of gracious disinterest when she noticed that one of the men, hat and cane in hand, was smiling at her in a courteous yet familiar way. She stared at him a moment, wide-eyed, too startled to answer the greeting, and then abruptly turned away, put her hand on Betsy's knee and whispered in her ear:

'Look, Betsy, look who's over there!'

'Where, who do you mean?'

'There in the stalls. It's Vincent; can't you see?'

'Vincent!' echoed Betsy, likewise startled. 'Oh yes, so it is!'

They both nodded to Vincent in greeting. He responded by peering at them through his lorgnette, whereupon Eline hid coquettishly behind her fan.

'Who's he? Who's Vincent?' Emilie and Georges wanted to know.

'Vincent Vere, a first cousin of ours,' Betsy replied. 'He's a bit of a bounder, I'm afraid. No one ever knows where he is; he disappears for months and then turns up again when least expected. I had no idea he was in The Hague. Oh Eline, do stop fiddling with your fan.'

'But I won't have him staring at me!' said Eline, readjusting her fan with a graceful turn of her arm, still hiding her face.

'May I venture to ask how long it is since you last saw your cousin?' enquired Georges.

'Oh, at least a year and a half. When we last spoke I believe he was about to go to London, where he'd found some position; working on a newspaper or something of that nature. Can you imagine, they say he was with the Foreign Legion in Algiers for a time, but

I don't believe any of it. He's supposed to have done all sorts of things, and he never has a penny.'

'Yes, I remember him now. I think we met at some time,' Emilie said with a yawn. 'A curious customer.'

'Yes, he is, but he knows he has to behave himself after a fashion when he's in 'The Hague, where his relatives live, which he does, and so we put up with him.'

'Ah well, there's a black sheep in most families,' Emilie remarked philosophically.

Eline gave a light laugh at the popular expression, and at long last folded her pink ostrich-feather fan.

. . .

The third act passed without her comprehending much of the scene with Manoël, but she did get the gist of the great duet sung by Hermosa and Xaïma: the reunion of mother and daughter after the refrain "*Debout, enfants de l'Ibérie!*"

The curtain fell to thunderous applause, and three times the two actresses were called to the front, where they were presented with bouquets and baskets of flowers.

'Oh please, Mr de Woude, be so kind as to explain the intrigue to me. Je n'y vois pas encore clair!' said Eline, turning to Georges.

Before he could reply, however, Betsy proposed taking a turn in the foyer, and they all stood up and left the box. Seated on the ottoman in the foyer, Georges summarised the plot for Eline, who listened with more interest than her expression revealed. Now that she knew why Xaïma was terrified of Ben-Saïd she regretted all the more having missed the drawing of lots in the first act and Xaïma's sale into slavery in the second.

She caught sight of Vincent coming down the steps. He made his way towards them with a casual, familiar air, as if he had seen his cousins only yesterday.

'Why, Vincent! Fancy seeing you here!' exclaimed Eline.

'Hello Eline! Hello Betsy! Delighted to see you again. Ah, and the Honourable Miss van Berg en Woude, am I right?'

They shook hands.

‘Nearly right! Your memory for names is admirable, unlike mine, because I had quite forgotten yours,’ responded Emilie.

Betsy introduced Vincent and Georges.

‘And how is everybody? Well, I hope?’

‘Rather astonished, really!’ laughed Eline. ‘I suppose you have come to say that you are off again tomorrow to St Petersburg, or Constantinople, haven’t you?’

He smiled, studying her through his lorgnette, his pale-blue eyes like faded porcelain behind the lenses. His features were regular and handsome, almost too handsome for a man, with a fine straight nose, a neat mouth which frequently twitched with something akin to mockery, and a thin blond moustache. But his looks were a little spoiled by his complexion, which was sallow and fatigued. Of slight build, he was simply dressed in a dark half-formal suit, beneath which his feet looked remarkably narrow. His hands, too, were finely shaped, with slender, pallid fingers like those of an artist, and they reminded Eline of her father.

He took a seat and, in reply to Eline’s question, told her a touch wearily that he had only arrived in The Hague yesterday, on business. He had spent some time in Malaga recently, something to do with the wine trade, and had previously been with an insurance company in Brussels; prior to that he had invested in a carpet factory in Smyrna, which had gone bankrupt. Things had not been going his way, really, and he was beginning to tire of all the travelling; he had not sat still by any means, but fate was against him, everything seemed to go wrong. There was a chance of a position with a quinine farm on Java, but first he had to obtain the proper information. He was hoping to see Van Raat on the morrow, as he had a matter he wished to discuss with him. Betsy said in that case he should come for coffee in the afternoon, because Van Raat was always out in the morning. Vincent accepted the invitation with gratitude, and began to talk about the opera.

‘Fabrice? Oh, he’s the baritone, isn’t he? Yes, a good voice, but what an unsightly, fat fellow.’

‘Do you think so? I don’t agree, I thought he looked rather well on stage!’ countered Emilie.

‘Miss de Woude, you cannot be serious!’

Emilie abided by her opinion and Eline had to laugh at their difference. Then the bell sounded for the fourth act, and Vincent took his leave, declining Georges' kind offer of his seat in the box.

'Oh, thank you, much obliged, but I wouldn't wish to deprive you of your seat. Besides, I can see very well from the stalls. So we shall meet tomorrow, then? Au revoir, Betsy, Eline . . . au plaisir, Miss de Woude . . . a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr de Woude.'

He bowed, pressed Georges' hand and sauntered off, swinging his slim bamboo cane.

'Isn't he odd?' said Eline, shaking her head.

'I'm always afraid he'll do something to embarrass us!' Betsy whispered in Emilie's ear. 'But as I said, he's been quite well-behaved until now. I was nice to him a moment ago to be on the safe side: I wouldn't want to rub him the wrong way. You never know . . .'

'I can't say he's my most favourite person!' said Emilie. They all rose to return to their box.

'Come, come, Emmy, you're only saying that because he didn't like the look of Fabrice!' teased Georges.

Emilie shrugged, and they passed into the vestibule.

'Oh, so there is not to be a fifth act! I thought there would be five!' said Eline, almost crestfallen, until De Woude quickly told her how the opera ended.

. . .

The fourth act opened with a scene in the moonlit gardens of Ben-Saïd. Eline listened intently to Manoël's cavatina, to his duet with Xaïma, and to their subsequent trio with Hermosa, but her interest mounted when the Moorish king appeared at the palace gate, where he ordered his warriors to dispatch Manoël and then himself seized the unwilling Xaïma and dragged her away with him in a sudden burst of rage. The end of the opera, where Ben-Saïd is stabbed by the mother seeking to save her daughter, affected her more than she would have cared to admit. In his scenes with both women the new baritone acted with such fire and vehemence as to lend the melodrama a glow of romantic truth, and when, fatally wounded, he subsided on to the steps of the pavilion, Eline took up her opera

glasses for a closer look at his darkened visage with the black beard and half-closed eyes.

The curtain fell, but the four actors were called back, and Eline saw him once more, taking his bows with an air of cool detachment, in great contrast to the gracious smiles of the tenor, the contralto, and the soprano.

The audience rose; the doors of the boxes swung open.

Georges assisted the ladies with their cloaks, and they proceeded along the corridor and down the steps to wait by the glass doors for their carriage. Presently the doorman cupped his hand to his mouth and announced its arrival with a long drawn-out shout:

‘Van Raai . . . aat!’

‘Personally, I don’t believe *Le Tribut de Zamora* is one of Gounod’s best operas; what about you, Eline?’ asked Emilie when they were seated in the carriage. ‘No comparison with his *Faust*, or his *Romeo et Juliet*.’

‘I believe you are right,’ murmured Eline, loath to show how moved she had been. ‘But it’s difficult to judge a piece of music the very first time you hear it. I thought some of the melodies were rather sweet. Besides, we only saw half of it.’

‘I rather like seeing only a few acts; having to sit out a whole opera bores me to tears, I don’t mind telling you,’ said Betsy, yawning.

Georges began to hum the refrain: “*Debout, enfants de l’Ibérie!*”

The De Woudes were dropped off at Noordeinde, after which Betsy and Eline rode homeward in the landau, snugly ensconced in the cushions of satin damask. They talked a little about Vincent and then both fell silent, while Eline’s thoughts floated to the joyful waltz in *Mireille*, to her spat with Betsy about the maids, to the tableau of the five senses, to Madame van Raai and Emily and Georges, to her pink dress . . . and to Ben-Saïd.