

FATHER

Pray let us hear the story you were so good as to promise.

GENERAL

[with an effort]

With all my heart

LAURA (VO)

After a short pause in which to arrange his subject, he commenced one of the strangest narratives I ever heard.

GENERAL

My dear child was looking forward with great pleasure to the visit you had been so good as to arrange for her to your charming daughter.

LAURA (VO)

Here he made me a gallant but melancholy bow.

GENERAL

In the meantime we had an invitation to my old friend the Count Carlsfeld, whose schloss is about six leagues to the other side of Karnstein. It was to attend the series of fetes which, you remember, were given by him in honor of his illustrious visitor, the Grand Duke Charles.

FATHER

Yes; and very splendid, I believe, they were.

GENERAL

Princely! But then his hospitalities are quite regal. He has Aladdin's lamp. The night from which my sorrow dates was devoted to a magnificent masquerade. The grounds were thrown open, the trees hung with colored lamps. There was such a display of fireworks as Paris itself had never witnessed. And such music—music, you know, is my weakness—such ravishing music! The finest instrumental band, perhaps, in the world, and the finest singers who could be collected from all the great operas in Europe. As you wandered through these fantastically illuminated grounds, the moon-lighted chateau throwing a rosy light from its long rows of windows, you would suddenly hear these ravishing voices stealing from the silence of some grove, or rising from boats upon the lake. I felt myself, as I looked and listened, carried back into the romance and poetry of my early youth.

GENERAL (VO)

When the fireworks were ended, and the ball beginning, we returned to the noble suite of rooms that were thrown open to the dancers. A masked ball, you know, is a beautiful sight; but so brilliant a spectacle of the kind I never saw before.

It was a very aristocratic assembly. I was myself almost the only 'nobody' present.

My dear child was looking quite beautiful. She wore no mask. Her excitement and delight added an unspeakable charm to her features, always lovely. I remarked a young lady, dressed magnificently, but wearing a mask, who appeared to me to be observing my ward with extraordinary interest. I had seen her, earlier in the evening, in the great hall, and again, for a few minutes, walking near us, on the terrace under the castle windows, similarly employed. A lady, also masked, richly and gravely dressed, and with a stately air, like a person of rank, accompanied her as a chaperon.

Had the young lady not worn a mask, I could, of course, have been much more certain upon the question whether she was really watching my poor darling.

I am now well assured that she was.

We were now in one of the salons. My poor dear child had been dancing, and was resting a little in one of the chairs near the door; I was standing near. The two ladies I have mentioned had approached and the younger took the chair next my ward; while her companion stood beside me, and for a little time addressed herself, in a low tone, to her charge.

Availing herself of the privilege of her mask, she turned to me, and in the tone of an old friend, and calling me by my name, opened a conversation with me, which piqued my curiosity a good deal. She referred to many scenes where she had met me—at Court, and at distinguished houses. She alluded to little incidents which I had long ceased to think of, but which, I found, had only lain in abeyance in my memory, for they instantly started into life at her touch.

I became more and more curious to ascertain who she was, every moment. She parried my attempts to discover very adroitly and pleasantly. The knowledge she showed of many passages in my life seemed to me all but unaccountable; and she appeared to take a not

unnatural pleasure in foiling my curiosity, and in seeing me flounder in my eager perplexity, from one conjecture to another.

In the meantime the young lady, whom her mother called by the odd name of Millarca, when she once or twice addressed her, had, with the same ease and grace, got into conversation with my ward.

She introduced herself by saying that her mother was a very old acquaintance of mine. She spoke of the agreeable audacity which a mask rendered practicable; she talked like a friend; she admired her dress, and insinuated very prettily her admiration of her beauty. She amused her with laughing criticisms upon the people who crowded the ballroom, and laughed at my poor child's fun. She was very witty and lively when she pleased, and after a time they had grown very good friends, and the young stranger lowered her mask, displaying a remarkably beautiful face. I had never seen it before, neither had my dear child. But though it was new to us, the features were so engaging, as well as lovely, that it was impossible not to feel the attraction powerfully. My poor girl did so. I never saw anyone more taken with another at first sight, unless, indeed, it was the stranger herself, who seemed quite to have lost her heart to her.

In the meantime, availing myself of the license of a masquerade, I put not a few questions to the elder lady.

GENERAL

[laughing]

You have puzzled me utterly. Is that not enough? Won't you, now, consent to stand on equal terms, and do me the kindness to remove your mask?

MADAME LA COMTESSE

Can any request be more unreasonable? Ask a lady to yield an advantage! Beside, how do you know you should recognize me? Years make changes.

GENERAL

As you see.

[bows with a melancholy little laugh]

MADAME LA COMTESSE

As philosophers tell us. And how do you know that a sight of my face would help you?

GENERAL

I should take chance for that. It is vain trying to make yourself out an old woman; your figure betrays you.

MADAME LA COMTESSE

Years, nevertheless, have passed since I saw you, rather since you saw me, for that is what I am considering. Millarca, there, is my daughter; I cannot then be young, even in the opinion of people whom time has taught to be indulgent, and I may not like to be compared with what you remember me.

You have no mask to remove. You can offer me nothing in exchange.

GENERAL

My petition is to your pity, to remove it.

MADAME LA COMTESSE

And mine to yours, to let it stay where it is.

GENERAL

Well, then, at least you will tell me whether you are French or German; you speak both languages so perfectly.

MADAME LA COMTESSE

I don't think I shall tell you that, General; you intend a surprise, and are meditating the particular point of attack.

GENERAL

At all events, you won't deny this; that being honored by your permission to converse, I ought to know how to address you. Shall I say Madame la Comtesse?

GENERAL (VO)

She laughed, and she would, no doubt, have met me with another evasion—if, indeed, I can treat any occurrence in an interview every circumstance of which was prearranged, as I now believe, with the profoundest cunning, as liable to be modified by accident.

MADAME LA COMTESSE

As to that—

GENERAL (VO)

—she began; but she was interrupted, almost as she opened her lips, by a gentleman, dressed in black, who looked particularly elegant and distinguished, with this drawback, that his face was the most deadly pale I ever saw, except in death. He was in no masquerade—in the

plain evening dress of a gentleman; and he said, without a smile, but with a courtly and unusually low bow:—

MAN IN BLACK

Will Madame la Comtesse permit me to say a very few words which may interest her?

GENERAL (VO)

The lady turned quickly to him, and touched her lip in token of silence; she then said to me:

MADAME LA COMTESSE

Keep my place for me, General; I shall return when I have said a few words.

GENERAL (VO)

And with this injunction, playfully given, she walked a little aside with the gentleman in black, and talked for some minutes, apparently very earnestly. They then walked away slowly together in the crowd, and I lost them for some minutes.

I spent the interval in cudgeling my brains for a conjecture as to the identity of the lady who seemed to remember me so kindly, and I was thinking of turning about and joining in the conversation between my pretty ward and the Countess's daughter, and trying whether, by the time she returned, I might not have a surprise in store for her, by having her name, title, chateau, and estates at my fingers' ends.

But at this moment she returned, accompanied by the pale man in black, who said:

MAN IN BLACK

I shall return and inform Madame la Comtesse when her carriage is at the door.

GENERAL (VO)

He withdrew with a bow.

Credits

This episode featured Sasha Sienna as Laura, Karim Kronfli as Laura's Father, Alan Burgon as The General, Amy Rockson as Madame La Comtesse, and Sam Nguyen as The Man In Black. Directed by Ella Watts. Dialogue editing by Brad Colbroock. Sound design by Tal Minear. Music by Trace Callahan. Executive produced by Jamieson Ridenhour, Hannah Wright, Stephen Indrisano, Ella Watts, Pacific S. Obidah, and Tal Minear. A Bloody FM production.