

# 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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!’

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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.

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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 Frédéric’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.