Carry van Bruggen

A COQUETTISH WOMAN

Translated by Hester Velmans

The window stood open, and the cool May wind gently, oh so gently, lifted the curtains, ballooned them like sails and propelled them into the middle of the room — then they sank back again in quiet retreat, like the expelled breath of a sleeping child. Ina gazed at them over the bunch of damp hyacinths she was clutching in her hands, her mouth and nose buried in the fragrance. Her heart pounded with a soft, intense joy, she felt it rising in her throat — and just as when she was a child, she let the words of her thoughts pulse to the rhythm of her heartbeat: the winter is over... the winter is over... the winter is over...

But for a moment only, for presently she lowered her eyes, drinking in with even deeper, more ardent draughts the humid, heavy smell. It was more than the fragrance of the young sap of returning spring, it was the smell of her own youth, of her past, and now, as she kept her face buried, eyes shut, it seemed as though the portals of her soul were flung open wide and her entire childhood came rushing back to her, the entire procession of years and days, down to the earliest ones — with their emotions, incidents and encounters, flashes of dusk and dawn — sounds, smells, people's voices and scents of home. She let it wash over her tremulously, moved and in blissful wonder: astonished that this was possible, that thanks to the smell of the hyacinths, all these long-gone, long-forgotten snippets could be revived and reborn in almost staggering clarity and sharpness. It seemed to her as if her very soul were a photographer's plate: outwardly grey and blank, yet in the developer bath capable of conjuring up startlingly clear and wondrous images that were invisible before. Scent, then, was memory's developer bath, but not scent alone — music too, and sometimes it needed nothing more than some vague and indistinct sound, rain and wind, or a shout from outside in the night, to transport her abruptly to the distant corners of the past. How amazing this was — that it was the impressions of her earliest childhood which remained strongest in her, and in their recall, proved the most powerfully moving. All from that innocent time when she hadn't really been aware of listening or paying attention, and yet must have been observing more keenly, listening more intently, than she ever had later on, when such

experiences had felt richer, more vivid; when she had been more conscious of listening and looking and appreciating them — yet which had finally left only a faded remembrance.

And then her thoughts, as always, drifted off to that one great mystery, that elusive, alluring secret: what *was* memory, that thing that transcends mortality and decay as if to defy them entirely? Until she stopped thinking altogether, merely inhaling the fragrance fully, deeply, as the wind played with the heavy curtains, driving them into the room with its breath, and her whole being seemed to expand, seemed to stretch itself to the limit, to take in all that splendour.

Someone knocked.

"There's the doctor, Miss."

"The doctor!" She jumped up and put down the hyacinths; the past fell away. The present closed in, throttling her in a chokehold: she was nineteen years old, she was living amongst strangers because she couldn't bear it at home any longer. For two whole days she'd sat here cooped up by choice, fed up with everyone and with herself, tangled up in petty quarrels like a bird caught in a snare, retreating into solitude as a last resort.

"Will you see the doctor, Miss?"

"I don't need a doctor, my headache is gone," she wanted to say — then she heard him stepping out of the room downstairs with Mary, heard his voice at the bottom of the stairs and then both their voices, Mary's plummy, fretful bleating over his more muffled drone. How dare that woman complain! Complain about her as if she were a schoolchild, to a man she did not know and both of them probably smiling and shaking their heads about her.

"Ask the doctor to come up, Bartje." Her voice sounded imperious, petulant. The maid closed the door; she waited, her breath coming fast, prepared to offer ferocious resistance. She caught sight of the flowers on the table in front of her and stared at them; the thought occurred to her that she had only to pick them up, drink in their scent, to mellow out and grow tender, to save herself from herself, from her petty anger and her petty pride, and find another version of herself, more magnanimous, wider, freer; but she would not, she could not. The present held her fast, pressed close, sank its teeth into her — there was no escaping it.

Suddenly the voices fell silent. She heard them coming up the stairs, a door shut below: Mary had gone into the sitting room. And just as she was asking herself what the doctor would look like and what sort of man he might be, an alarming thought struck her: she did not know what to say to him. She wasn't ill, after all — and it wasn't she who had asked him to come!

Quickly she turned to the mirror, forced a smile, ran her hands through her hair. What if she told him the truth? Perhaps he would understand. She felt a flicker of warm hope. She was standing by her chair when he walked.

"You haven't come here just for me, I trust?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Rutgers needed me. A minor issue, but seeing that I was here anyway, she asked me to... A headache for several days? Have you taken your temperature?"

How absurd. Illness, thermometers, a dutifully concerned expression on the face across from her. If she told it calmly, perhaps it would not sound too overwrought.

"I have not taken my temperature, I am not ill, I'm just up here to... to rest for a couple of days."

"And why didn't you simply say so?"

She didn't answer; he sat down, looking up at her with a smile, and she looked down at him and smiled back. He had a pleasant, smooth, round face, kind eyes, boyish eyes, he must be about be thirty-five or so. He was different from the others, that much was quite clear. It was nice to have him come here unexpectedly, to chat with him a bit. She suddenly had the urge to tell him things, tell him a great deal about herself. He thought she was pretty, she could tell from his eyes. She was pretty, she'd seen it in the mirror. Because he thought she was pretty, it would be easy for her to talk to him. But he was the one who should start. She kept face half-averted, leaning against the fireplace; he was looking at her, she felt it, she mentally took stock of how she looked, wondered what he thought of her dress, the colour of her skin.

"Why, then, hide the truth and pretend you had a headache?"

She laughed, her heart was glowing. Strange, just a moment ago, when she'd thought Mary was talking about her as if she were a child, it had made her furious, but now that he was speaking to her as if to a child, it made her feel good, pleased. She stepped away from the mantel and took a seat across from him.

"If you like, I'll tell you why, but it's a long story."

"I'm listening." He sat up straight.

"But it's not what you think. It isn't just one little thing. I mean that there's much more to it. But it isn't hard to tell, in fact: I am a difficult, irascible and intolerant thing — I'm at loggerheads with everyone and I can't stand people who are 'sympathetic'. I've been here less than three months and have already made a scene three dozen times. Actually, making a scene

isn't really acceptable here. Everyone is very placid and civilised, they mind their manners. To the hilt. Hook-line-and-sinker. I always give the wrong answer and always do the wrong things right and the right things wrong." She broke off, and laughed: "Nonsense, what I just said. Now you know the score."

He laughed.

"You're laughing about what I just said. Fine, I am feeling indulgent today. Did you know that I am capable of murdering someone for making fun of me? Or for even less than that. My first mealtime here, I wanted to stab Rutgers with a fruit knife."

He laughed again.

"It may sound horrible, but it wasn't horrible at all. I arrived here on a Wednesday in February. On Wednesdays they have a suffragette meeting here, when all manner of respectable, distinguished, high-born, intelligent, educated and impeccably dressed ladies are seated downstairs in the modern salon on those practical chairs round the specially dedicated table — and at that table on the afternoon of that terrible day, I had the gall to say some disrespectful things about those respectable, noble, clever, sympathetic ladies. Yes, you must not make light of it. Mary, for one, did not. I can still picture her, with that smug fish-pout of hers and those vacant round eyes —tell me: don't all suffragettes look alike, or is it merely because they all dress the same? I've been puzzling over it for a long time, it's something that's been bothering me!

"But we can come back to that later. Mrs. Rutgers stood up... proud as a peacock, despite her considerable girth, and began to berate me in her snooty voice. Mr. Rutgers was eating rice pudding..."

He snorted loudly. She shot him an indignant look.

"Please don't be mad at me. What do you have against rice pudding?"

"Exactly the same objection I have to 'sympathetic' people. That rice pudding should have warned me — but I didn't understand and just went recklessly full steam ahead. I should have known that a girl has nothing to hope for from a man who eats rice pudding the way he does."

"And what were you hoping for, then?

"That he would help me. That he would sense how miserable and humiliated I felt — although I did manage to hold myself together, but I was burning up inside — when Mary scolded me like a child on my very first day, and spoke about those silly bitches with their blank faces as an outstanding group of women, women whom an insignificant worm such as I ought to

look up to and revere — that he would be chivalrous, that he'd have said something nice, something kind, or just made light of it. The ugly prig, the pedantic nitwit. You call that a man? I can still hear him, in that nasal voice of his, "... most inappropriate to make fun of such upstanding ladies,' as if he were standing in his classroom. He can't stand me and I, oh, I despise him. The polar opposite of what I imagine a man ought to be."

"And then you felt the urge to go at him with a fruit knife."

"You shouldn't talk so flippantly about rage," she said, suddenly serious. "It is far worse than you think — it turns you into an animal, your voice goes raw, your face turns ugly, you want to see blood, you want to throttle somebody. Hours after a fit of temper, I'm still thinking about the terrible things I said and wished for. It's so ghastly and so strange...'Blowing your top' is the perfect expression for it. And anyone can set me off, everything, the slightest, the silliest thing. Just now, for instance, when you were talking to Mary. What did she say? Was it about me? Of course it was, I felt it. And what did she tell you?"

"I don't know if I should say!"

"I don't know if you should either — but tell me anyway."

"She did not swear me to secrecy, and perhaps it is better for you to know. They've had a letter about you from your family." She leapt to her feet and stared at him angrily.

"They have? From whom? Not from Otto or Josefine. Otto would never allow it: so now Annie has done it anyway. My future sister-in-law, that selfish creature my brother is in love with. And what, what did she write?"

She had gone pale and was shivering.

"Please try to remain calm. Come on." She sat down.

"What did the letter say?"

"Things that happened last year and the year before — involving you. That you..."

"That I..."

'That you jumped out of a window, involving a teacher at your school."

She blushed to the roots of her hair and buried her face in her hands; her voice came out strangled.

"And so Annie wrote about it to Mary and Mary will tell Herman and Gerda and Erik and by tomorrow Coba will know and by next week all those noble, virtuous, high-minded souls will know, as well as the other noble, virtuous, high-minded souls at home — and they'll shake their

worthy heads, and laugh about the silly child, or perhaps pity her. Are you even starting to see why I hate them all? And so you knew the whole story when you climbed these stairs?" He nodded yes. She flew off the handle.

"Mary sent you up here to investigate if I'd hung myself by now!" she yelled, beside herself. "They probably think it's a joke, some sort of proclivity of mine, or hobby. Like that character Pennewip, the schoolmaster, you know: 'He-only-did-it-for-fun.' Are you one of those heroic types who think suicide is 'cowardly'? Tell them for me, if you ever hear them talk of it again, that they should try it themselves sometime, jumping out a window or into the water." She sat down again. "Now you probably think I'm crazy too — just like the rest of them."

"I truly don't know if I should say yes or no, to make you calm down. You're like a keg of gunpowder right now."

"If only you knew. Have you ever had a dream where you woke up suddenly to find yourself trapped in an eerie, narrow space enclosed in four high, bricked-up walls? No? I think it came from a weird novel I once read, where a nun had been sealed up like that. I dream the strangest things, I couldn't begin to tell you — and you wouldn't believe me, either. Sometimes I have the notion that I would give ten years of my life in order to understand what these dreams mean — and ten more to understand what memory is."

"You are a spendthrift with your years, and you'd run out of them all too soon. There are so many more mysteries than just those two."

"And if I were given the ability to understand them, those mysteries, each one of them for just an instant, and then die, would you feel sorry for me? Is this living, what we do, always in the dark, always groping for meaning?"

"I am sure you don't always think this way."

"I don't usually, that's what's so strange. If someone likes me and loves me and understands me, or if I'm feeling love towards other people — not for the people I know, but for people in general; or if a friend plays *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* for me and then tells me that he could never play it as beautifully for anyone else in the whole world..." She fell silent, as if lost in memory.

"You were telling me about a dream of four bricked-up walls."

"I don't know," she said quietly and weakly. "I'm afraid I may be making too much of it. Perhaps it was just a very silly thing. Have you ever fallen to your knees before someone?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"I know how ridiculous it sounds. I have a very keen sense of the absurd, I am very aware when I'm making a fool of myself, or when I'm being childish. But it wasn't ridiculous then. It only became ridiculous when she laughed. Do you see what I mean? When she mocked it, it became fodder for ridicule. As did I. And everything I had ever said or done in those months, the poems, the little notes, the hours spent waiting in the rain; I'd never sensed it, never suspected, for all those months, that she was making a spectacle of me, to the others. And when I suddenly understood, like a lightning strike to my brain, when I saw my 'ideal' standing there laughing — giggling like a shopgirl — that was the point at which I suddenly found myself waking up inside those four bricked-up walls, with no way out. I do see, now that I'm telling you this, that it all sounds rather dull and trite, not real, perhaps; even I am hardly convinced by it. Yet at the time it seemed the only, the natural, the obvious solution. Isn't it amazing that now, even after so short a time, I can barely remember what it felt like then? Most people would draw the conclusion that it wasn't 'real', but I know better."

"Naturally. A storm will blow over, yet it was 'real' for as long as it was raging."

"I am glad that you think so, and that you don't immediately dismiss me for being shallow, as the others seem to do."

"Always 'the others'!"

She blushed.

"You are right. I care more about them, and about what they think of me, than I let on. Sometimes — and yet at other times I am so terribly sure of myself, and so proud. I am a totally different being from one moment to the next, as if I weren't one person, with one heart and one pair of eyes, but a hundred people, with a hundred hearts and a hundred pairs of eyes. That's such a bewildering, uncertain feeling."

He did not respond, pondering. Then: "How did you wind up here? Why here?"

"The decision came from on high. The connection was forged in suffragette-heaven. Mary, my hostess, and my sister Josefine have known each other for years — bound together through the propaganda of sisterhood. They like each other. And I didn't care."

"And who have you befriended here? The younger sister — what's her name? — Gerda, of course, but she is often away. That's a shame, for you."

"Perhaps — but she tends to remind me how aloof and unpopular I am. Because I hardly dare admit it, but in my heart I cannot stand Gerda either, she is so adorably in love and so full of Erik, who was supposed to become a mathematician and has now reluctantly taken up the law, because he hopes to inherit some doddering old uncle's position at a bank or something."

"And do you think that's so awful?" he laughed.

"But of course I think that's awful," she asserted, seemingly annoyed, although she did not for a moment believe in his professed scepticism; felt, on the contrary, that he understood her need to carp and that he was attracted by it. "Who wouldn't think that? I would never want to marry a man who was doing something he didn't want to do, and gave up a worthy field of study for the sake of a 'good prospect'."

"Do you really mean that?"

She flushed, but did not look away.

"Yes — I really mean it," she said earnestly and firmly, "and I know exactly why you ask. Shall I tell you?"

"If we both know already? Who else is there?"

"The sister of the little favourite: Coba, medical student."

"Yes, I know her, rather erudite, isn't she?"

"And so ugly too, so disagreeable to look at, with that tight bun and wispy hair in her neck."

"Already had it out with her then, have you?"

"Oh, that swollen head of hers, just because she's crammed a few books into it and sliced a dead body into bits. Say what you will, but girls tend to make much more fuss about their studies than do boys."

"Yes," he smiled, "that may well be true. It makes them a bit big-headed, doesn't it? Their learning can be overly obtrusive. But aren't you planning to study too?"

"The classics — well, if I make it, that is. I am studying for the state exam right now, but I may choose a different direction. I have considered the law myself. Pleading cases would be heavenly — but have been cautioned against it, for the very fact that I'm expecting too much of it. I do understand their objection. In any case, I shall do my best not to become too big-headed."

"Do you intend to stay up here much longer?" he smiled then. "In your self-imposed exile, I mean."

"I don't know," she said, blushing again, "Right now, actually, I'm feeling much more placid and tolerant than I was an hour ago. Remarkably well disposed. These horrors seem to have lost their bite, now that I've been able to speak of them. Don't you agree that the reason the Javanese tend to run 'amok' is because they are so tight-lipped? I've thought so for a while, and sometimes sense it in myself, how I would run 'amok' if I weren't allowed to let it all out. But now," she said warmly, meaning to say something kind to make him feel good, "now I am grateful for having been able to speak with you, and if you ask me to, I shall go downstairs and sit down to dinner with the others, the model of graciousness, and eat rice pudding with them, and speak about Mary's ladies' circle with interest and appreciation, and read aloud from *Women's Monthly* deep into the night."

"Do I really deserve this?" he asked with a smile, but suddenly his demeanour turned wary and withdrawn. The happy, coquettish expression faded from her face, she did not know what to say to him. In the silence he rose and took his hat.

"I'll come back in a few days, to look in on Mrs. Rutgers." He said it very kindly, but it sounded so professional — a doctor's house-call —that she could not bring herself to say "Gladly." It would have seemed importunate and presumptuous of her, to present herself as the true reason for his return.

From the window she watched him go, but he did not look back. She blushed with embarrassment, because she'd expected him to look back and he had not. Suddenly she'd had enough of being alone, and went downstairs.

•

Translated by Hester Velmans