

The last waltz

Claire had laid her head at the first strokes of midnight. The big *biedermeier* clock had suffocated the silence with vibrant echoes, now fading with difficulty. The dark, broken by the mild whisper of an *abatjour*, had filled the woman with gloomy unhappiness. It was not the first time. Even if more than two years had passed, she still felt Arthur's death as heavy as a stone that, though made lighter by time, continued to roll in her thoughts. More that ever, the river of memories flooded her mind, and filled it with a solid, suffocating melancholy that grew stronger at the end of the day. It was then that the ghosts of the past began to show up. Hidden behind the forms of the dearest objects, they grew gigantic as she heard a note, or when her longing slowly began to thin. She could not make them go away, because all her world lived again in them. And anyway, how could she leave those bewildered, unhappy children of her? So, slowly, she had become accustomed to their presence, and their moans, sometimes so painful, poured into her mind like gentle rains.

The days passed around her, discolouring as pale autumn's days, and a sense of emptiness constantly held her throat. So, to go on, she sought comfort in old photos that sometimes made her smile again. Accurately ordered in volumes, those photos prevented her memories from sinking in the blurred ocean of forget-

fulness.

Weakened in the body, she wearily went through the rooms dragging her hurting legs. That was one of the few sounds still to be heard in the shabby old house, made dull by the fog of indifference. But inside, though imprisoned in the rough cocoon of time, she still felt alive.

Tired and disheartened, she had surrendered to the night, sinking into its arcane, unknown world. The curtains of her eyelids had been drawn for a little while now, and torpor was beginning to take hold of her body. In a few more moments the dark penetrated into her mind, surrounding her with darkness and silence. Then soft music echoed in the distance, and abruptly she was thrown into the dream.

«This way» suddenly broke in a man elegantly dressed in tails.

«Dad!» she burst out in disbelief.

«Hurry up, they're waiting for you.»

«Who?»

«We haven't got time, I'll tell you on the way.» In a moment, she found herself inside an old carriage, driven by a distinguished elderly coachman.

«Dad, I'm so happy to see you again» continued she, radiant.

«It's been such a long time...»

«Indeed» said he, smiling.

«I see you're fine and so young!»

«My beautiful little doll.»

Claire just bent her gaze to find herself in a sparkling white dress. In disbelief, she stared at the precious emerald glittering at her finger, and then jumped. Her wrinkles had mysteriously vanished, and her hand was like a butterfly.

«They require the utmost elegance» went on the father, smil-

ing.

«Who?» said she in astonishment.

«Now you'll see.»

With a happy expression she looked outside, attracted by a mysterious light that shrouded the night. The sky was bright with fine moon dust that suffused every sight. That strange sparkle seemed to lead the horses along the old stone track, and no crack of whip dared break the arcane.

Suddenly, she found herself on a path lighted by crackling torches and, as the carriage stopped, two valets came towards her. Slowly she climbed down the step, baring her thin, velvety ankles. An outburst of joy crossed her face, and suddenly she was inside the palace. A chorus of amazement greeted her passage as she began to go up the steps of the great marble staircase. Confused, she paused in front of the hall full of life, and after a slight hesitation, she began to recognise the first faces.

«Grandpa, mum, uncles...» she burst out, amazed, at the sight of her family.

«We're all here» said they, smiling. An intense emotion took hold of her throat, and overflowed as joyful, impetuous tears. The tears had not died away yet when the circle opened, revealing an elegant figure in the distance. Walking sternly, he began to go towards her, and she immediately recognised him.

«Arthur!» she stammered in a low voice.

«Claire» said he and put his arms around her waist.

«What's this place?» asked she, radiant.

«The palace of the feasts.»

«How did I come here?»

«Don't mind» he went on as a sweet symphony rose in the hall.

«The *waltz of the flowers!*» exclaimed she, amazed.

«...your favorite one» added her husband and started to dance. Claire did not move but stared at him carefully.

«What are you looking at?» said he with a bemused expression.

«I want to make sure that you've shaved, you always scratch me on the cheeks.» Arthur took her hand and, in a vortex of sounds, the dance carried them along. For long, never-ending minutes they lightly moved in the immense, sparkling hall, under the smiling eyes of all the friends they had shared. It was so beautiful to watch them dance, happier and younger than ever. The musicians seemed entranced by their love and that passion infected the instruments, making them play as never before.

«Now, we'll always be together» Claire whispered with a content hearth. All her world was inside that palace and she would not leave it all.

«The time isn't ripe» he said awkwardly.

«I don't understand...»

«It isn't the right moment yet.»

The woman stared at him with a hesitant look.

«Are you telling me that...»

«So you really thought nothing would come afterwards?» Radiant, she held him tightly and kissed him on the cheeks again and again. All of a sudden the notes became hoarse dissonances, and Arthur stepped back abruptly. As her husband's face began to vanish, a sense of anxiety made Claire knit her brows. Stupefied, she looked around, and a terrible presentiment tore her thoughts: she was floating on a dying dream.

«It's just an illusion!» she burst out discouraged.

«Do you really think so?» said Arthur vanishing in the dark.

As the clock echoed in the room, her eyes opened at once. Looking dazed, she turned to the strokes and saw her world

again. Daybreak was creeping inside, painting the windows bright red.

Still sleepy, she enjoyed the last drops of night and, after having lifted the sheet, left the bed. Wearily, she put on her dressing gown, walked through the door and went into the kitchen. The fresh footprints of night thickened on the cold walls, and made her shiver. Impatiently, she put her hands near the fire, where she was making coffee. As the last drops puffed out, she slowly began to sip her coffee. Warmth filled her body, and allowed her to think. Sweet sensations still tinged her thoughts. With a drawn face, she walked down the corridor, just a few steps, a sudden sight and she was startled. Her heart started to beat fast. With wide-opened eyes, she reached the mirror. For many long, intense moments, she stared in disbelief at her scratched cheeks.