

Bambi La Belle



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BAMBI LA BELLE

by Eleanor Darby Wright

I. The Uncle

The big man wanted to talk only to Monsieur Nureddin, the owner of the club. He pronounced it slowly with a grimace as if he recognized that the name was surely false. He glowered then at the fastidious manager-choreographer who repeated again and again that Monsieur Nureddin was not in. He was indeed the only one to do the hiring and firing at the Club.

Zolie, the choreographer, fluttered his hands as he spoke. The gestures immediately brought more scowls to the big man's strained, sweating face. He hunched over a little more and shuffled forward towards the stage, his left leg dragging a little. But Zolie didn't stay to be confronted by a man twice his size. He retreated from the look on the unknown

face and backed towards the male dancers for support.

No-one, of course, moved to help him. Andre Leibman even laughed at Zolie's obvious discomfiture.

"How? ... How did you get in here?" asked Zolie, edging across the stage, smoothing his very tight, neatly pressed white pants. They matched his white, silk shirt with the golden buttons. They matched the necklace and earrings that Zolie wore through force of habit.

"Didn't Cesar," he was the doorman, "tell you that we were not open?" asked the choreographer. Zolie's voice faded as the man reached the stage. He stared at the fluttering hands and the bleached blond hair of the choreographer. Obviously, he didn't like what he saw though a lot of men did.

"He said you weren't," grunted the big man, shuffling along towards the stairs that would lead up onto the stage. Marc and Henri immediately vacated the area at the top of the stairs and went to hide behind Zolie. They clearly had no intentions of confronting the big, powerful, dangerous looking man advancing grimly on Zolie. I should never had said I was the manager, thought Zolie desperately, looking over to the bar but even Rioux had disappeared from his usual post for the rehearsal.

Zolie didn't know what to do. The big man's dark eyes, hidden in bushy eyebrows, were fixed on him. Behind the invader, the Club was empty. The booths and tables were dark, the chandeliers were dimmed. In the long mirrors and glassware of the bar, only a few lights reflected from the stage where the boys had begun rehearsing the new opening number.

It was then that the first ‘girls’ came on to the stage. Chantal led the way in a long, dark evening gown that gripped her feminine figure so tightly. Her blonde wig piled hair on top of her head, vividly showing off the long, sparkling earrings that she wore.

“Oh, come on, Zolie,” Chantal said crossly in the nasal drawl affected by most female impersonators in the show. “We don’t want to be around here all afternoon!”

Zolie at last had something to do. He turned from the glowering, hunched figure and began to structure the presentation as he wanted it to appear. He had most of the girls who’d joined him on stage in place when two young men, laughing and skipping in most unmanly fashion, came running through the club, brushing by the big man as if he wasn’t even there, only stopping in the wings when Zolie glared at them.

“Late again!” snapped Zolie, waving a limp wrist at the grinning pair.

“Oh, we don’t have to change, do we, Zolie darling?” lisped the darker haired one, the thinness of his femmy eyebrows denoting what he was in the men’s clothes.

“Yeth,” said the fair-haired Marianne, even more affected in his speech mannerisms than ‘her’ friend, Yvonne. “Thith ith only to get the playthings, ithn’t it?”

Zolie hated the voice that emanated from Marianne. It was as if she couldn’t say any word with the sound of an ‘S’ any more since she’d taken on the role of a professional female impersonator.

Zolie looked at Chantal, standing with one arm on her hip, tapping her high heel in disgust at the newer chorus girls' unprofessionalism. "Don't do it again," said Zolie as he placed Marianne and Yvonne on stage, in their sort of boyish street clothes, and went through the moves with them. The other girlish figures watched, posed like fashion models. All the 'girls' liked to stand that way. After Zolie had finished the example, the 'girls' brought in the real boys, who smirked at Andre and Gaetan who had to hold onto the still masculinely dressed Marianne and Yvonne.

The big man had moved back slightly, into the shadows at the side of the stairs but Zolie could feel him, anyway, watching the whole rehearsal, his body seething through with intensity. Finally, the man sat down at one of the tables, his face drawn and tense, watching what Zolie wanted the girls to do.

Zolie wanted the ending to be a kiss on the cheeks or lips of their male companions. The girls all gave a high-pitched shriek and got to it, the boys pretending to back off from such debauchery. Of course, Yvonne wasted no time with Gaetan, who held her away in mock distaste. In the show, however, Gaetan would be a real professional, Zolie had no doubt of that.

Yvonne would be the one to be carried away in the kissing, once the show started and she was properly dressed. She always was. She was just learning how to be a professional, the swirl of her dresses and wig sure to make her so-o-o excited. Well, the other girls loved that from 'her'. It excited and stirred them up a little as well. It was a much

livelier troupe of feminine dancers and singers since they'd added Yvonne to the group.

With the big man settled, Zolie retreated to the wings. The band was not there, the extra expense for them to sit in not worth it, not when a tinny tape recorder could produce the rhythms the girls had to learn. The sound of their high heels soon drowned out any melody anyway.

The big man sat where Zolie would normally have sat but there was no way Zolie was going to move from the security of the wings now he'd reached them. He fumed, however, as the boys, with fewer changes than the girls, went through their moves in such a desultory fashion. Some of the mimics were awkward as well, Claudine quite deliberately.

Claudine, like many of the others, hated early rehearsals. Denise and Frou-Frou were making rude gestures instead of the graceful, girlish gestures Zolie had showed them. They saw Zolie glowering at them and began to over-exaggerate the feminine gestures they made, smiling at their partners who, of course, encouraged them.

Zolie wished he'd insisted Yvonne and Marianne dress in something female as what they were doing looked so obscene, men dancing with men that way. Zolie had a moment of introspection as he thought of himself doing what these so-called 'girls' were doing with their men. Did he look just as obscene when he was doing a pirouette with Andre as Marianne was attempting to do? Surely not, Zolie sniffed to himself. Whether he was in drag or not, Zolie was always classy. He knew it.

Denise noticed the other presence just off the stage and started playing to the attention of a man

she didn't know. She was way off the beat as she began to improvise what she clearly thought were sexy, girlish movements. Zolie swore and scampered forward to turn off the tape. The rehearsal run-through mercifully came to an end.

"Who is that?" asked Denise with a smile at Zolie. Her voice was low but sultry like many contralto women. She flicked her long hair back over what was, for a man, a very effeminate face.

"He's here to speak to Ahmed," said Zolie in an equally, quiet tone. He raised his voice, criticising all the impersonators until, finally, lifting her bobbed nose high in the air, Chantal stalked off in a huff. Paulette and Andre said that they'd talk to Chantal and would bring her back. Of course, they didn't do that, just disappearing as well.

All in all, thought Zolie in frustration, it had been a completely wasted afternoon. It was all the big man's fault. He had flustered Zolie all afternoon. And yet, he'd done nothing. He'd just walked into the club and watched them try to rehearse, such a baleful look on his face that the other girls were twittering about it now. They headed off with hops, skips and sashays, some stopping to look back at the grim invader from the safety of the curtains.

Vidal Mercier, often called simply Vidal or Vee, or, known by some as Ahmed, Ahmed Nureddin, also paid a visit to the Club that afternoon. Cesar, the doorman, was back at his post. He gave Vidal a shrug as if to say that he couldn't help it. Vidal had a little warning as he walked into the club and saw a stranger watching the ragged performance on the stage.

At first, Vidal thought the dark, bushy-haired man was a friend of Zolie's, so avidly was he watching the rehearsal. Vidal stepped over to the bar to help himself to a drink, wondering where Rioux was. As he'd hoped, he got a much better view of how Zolie's new presentation was supposed to work. Seeing Vidal, however, Zolie came running from the stage, his arms in the air, wrists bent, the girls disappearing by then, to tell 'Monsieur Nureddin', in his so mannered drawl, how the stranger had ruined his afternoon.

The dark eyes of the big man stared at Vidal as he moved, frowning, to the table where the stranger sat. "You came to see me, monsieur?" asked Vidal in his best, Parisian accent.

The big man eased himself into a new position. The man appeared to be lame in one leg, Vidal saw.

"I was in Lebanon," the dark-haired man growled, his jaw set defiantly.

Vidal Mercier had never been to Lebanon. Had 'Fatima' Nureddin, the drag queen who'd owned this place before him and insisted Vidal maintain her 'family name' in the business, had a connection to the Middle East? He doubted it but suspected the stranger would claim a family connection. Vidal sighed, guessing that a contribution was being asked for. He reached into his pocket for his cheque book. He must seriously think about ending the Nureddin connection. It wasn't as if it brought in any new business these days anyway.

The big man scowled when he saw what Vidal was doing. He shook his head emphatically. "No," he said bitterly. "I didn't come to lean on you for that."

But Vidal noted that the big man's eyes hungrily followed the cheque book's return to Vidal's pocket.

"You need a job?" asked 'Ahmed Nureddin'. Vidal had continued the masculine names at least from the last owner of *Le Salon Rose*. 'She' had wanted him to keep the Fatima as well but Vidal had pointed out that keeping the male name was keeping to the letter of their contract.

Vidal didn't know that a drag queen would have known so many demeaning, drag queen and gay words for what she thought of him then. Now Vidal answered to the name 'Nureddin' as his own though he would never answer to 'Fatima'. That name was the alter-ego of the departed queen who'd once owned this now much improved night club. 'Fatima' had departed with 'her'.

'Ahmed' fitted the part of a swarthy North African. It was a perfect disguise to terrorize the 'girls' on occasion, or even the boys, or Zolie. Now, with a big guy like this one beside him, even with a bum leg, thought Vidal with a wry smile, the suave, slender 'Ahmed Nureddin' would look like a force on the street to be reckoned with. Even as a bouncer, this big guy would be fine.

Despite his looks, Vidal had actually never been to North Africa. The nearest had been when he had taken female impersonator shows on tours of night clubs in Italy. It had been a very special tour and had raised a lot of ready cash for him. It had been very lucrative until the police came and bounced them all out of the country, threatening to prosecute him, Ahmed as a pimp, which would have put him in jail.

Luckily, a highborn, powerful and influential Italian had made the authorities make a deal with Ahmed. He and his 'girls' left but all of them had lined their pockets and learned valuable lessons as well. He was never going to go road tripping like that again even though the girls kept badgering him for another. They'd enjoyed themselves so much.

"I'm not the one who needs a job," said the big man, glancing back to the stage where Paulette, skirt slit to reveal smooth, panty-hosed legs, had emerged and was doing a very sexy wiggle across the stage. Zolie preceded her, showing her how to do it, rehearsing Paulette. Paulette seemed to be smiling, Vidal noted, as Zolie moved so girlishly; yet, he still had a male aura about him because of the way he was dressed in his white, tight pants and shirt.

It had been the previous owner's rule, Fatima's rule, that all the performers arrive at the club in male clothes, no matter how they dressed 'chez elles', in their own apartments.

"After all," declaimed the original Madame Nureddin, over sixty, and still, in the club, dressing as Fatima, a slave girl, one of the most wrinkled of her kind Vidal had ever seen, "this is a female impersonator club. Here, men impersonate women. I insist that my performers arrive and depart as men!"

The older performers still lived up to the old queen's rules. Vidal hadn't changed them but, when Chantal had arrived one day in a tight skirt, her hair permed and primped, carrying her insufferable little dog, Vidal, the new Ahmed, hadn't objected. Nor had he objected to her breast augmentation. Now he had, what, ten, no twelve, heck all but two or three of them with bouncy boobies as the Swedish Mai called them.

Laura had been the latest to have herself 'improved', to become one of the girls who could work bare-breasted. It was quite a sight to see a whole line of moving breasts on what were men and one of the reasons why the clientele of *Le Salon Rose* was expanding so greatly among those of refined taste in Paris.

On stage, Zolie clapped in time and put his hands on Paulette's, making her wiggle and swish even more femininely. Paulette smiled as she got it right, causing Zolie to applaud her.

The big man shifted in the chair beside the one Vidal had pulled up to his table. While Vidal had introduced himself, the other had said nothing. Now he turned away from the spectacle of the pretty Paulette to face Vidal more squarely. "I have a cousin," he said, his face grim and tense. "His mother has been very indulgent with him."

"He likes to dress up in her clothes?" suggested Vidal into the pause that followed the announcement. The big man seemed to be groping for the right words to express what he wanted to say. "Your cousin is a transvestite?" He didn't say 'travesti' which might have implied that the kid was a performer like Paulette.

Vidal knew that, soon, he'd have to explain to this, this enforcer, yes, that was the word for him, that just because a boy liked to put on women's clothes, it didn't make him a travesti, a performer, a female impersonator. That had to be learned. Most of the girls here had come to him after long careers, through their teens, of trying to be straight, boy dancers.

A flush spread over the big man's face. He looked away, towards the darkly shrouded tables and the long bar beyond. He looked quite ashamed of himself as if talking of such things in public, of private family scandals, was something a man shouldn't do and definitely not to a person like Ahmed Nureddin.

The big hand on the pink tablecloth trembled slightly as the gruff voice framed a reply to Vidal's suggestion. "He, he looks very good in women's clothes," said the big man. "I, I thought he was her daughter when I first moved in here. My aunt cries a lot, worrying what will become of them if anything should happen to me again." He grimaced and shifted his leg.

"She worries," he went on, "if, if, he," the big man had a hard time saying that, "will ever earn a sou," he grimaced again, "with the way he is. I've assured the sister of my mother that I'll look out for her son, if, if anything does happen to her, and he does not have her widow's pension to support him any more.

"I've enquired about places where he," again the choking came at that word, "he could work. He is an artist, you know, but that would never support him, not the way he is, after his mother is gone."

Vidal made a few gentle, conciliatory noises, wondering how to get rid of this big, big man, who seemed very averse to giving out any names at all.

The man brushed aside the condolences and prattle Vidal made that 'it might not come to that.'

"Officially, all I have is my disability pension, after Lebanon," the big man said. "But, as you might guess, I do have other income, a great deal more than it might appear. I would not be ungrateful when the time came, when you might need some-

thing from me, Monsieur Nureddin. I would want you to know that.”

Vidal felt a chill creeping through him as the big man looked at him. Whoa, he wanted to shout out. What sort of business do you think I’m in to need the services of a strongarm like you? But the look on the man’s face was so fierce that Vidal quaked and kept his mouth tight shut.

“I saw pictures of this club in *Le Soir*,” the man went on. Vidal knew what he meant, the publicity shots he’d had to pay an arm and a leg for. It had been a slow news day or the story wouldn’t have run at all. But in the end, the expense had been worth it. That week, attendance at *Le Salon Rose* had peaked. Vidal was trying to think of other ploys he could use to get his ‘girls’ into the papers but in a less expensive manner.

“It made me think,” grunted the big man. “I asked around.” He tried to smile but that chilled Vidal inside even more. The smile on the somber face that the man had presented in the main so far was frightening. “I got a few odd looks. I visited other drag clubs like yours. A couple of them,” the best, the most expensive, the ones with police protection, Vidal guessed, “told me to get lost, without even the courtesy of at least seeing my cousin. I didn’t like that.”

A chilling, alarming thought went through Vidal’s mind then. He had phoned the owners of his rival clubs to commiserate with them. The kitchen fire of unknown origin that had closed down *Les Filles Naturellement* and the second accident that had befallen Santiago Dufarge now didn’t seem unexplained or accidental, Vidal thought with coldness seeping through him.

It had happened to *Madame Georges's* as well. *Girls Talk* was a lesser club, really no more than a stand-up bar and three to six performers. It was where Denise and Laura had come from to *Le Salon Rose*. *Girls Talk* had been fire-bombed, he'd just heard, which is why he'd headed to his club for a quick check but nothing seemed to be wrong, save for this big stranger, sitting where Zolie normally did.

Where do they get the names from, Vidal wondered idly as he waited for the big man to go on. Now he expected threats against himself and *Le Salon Rose*. He was shaking again as he recalled the ambulance hurtling through Montmartre with the owner of the *Madame Georges* inside.

"Then, I checked into this place," said the big man finally with that terrifying smile again. "You are not the original Ahmed Nureddin." He almost leered. "I've seen pictures of Fatima from years ago." Vidal shivered, wondering what the original Ahmed must have looked like in drag as a younger man. "I served with the Ninth in Lebanon."

Vidal guessed that he ought to know what that meant. He had no idea but he raised an eyebrow and nodded.

"So I thought I should let you know how serious I am," said the big man. Vidal didn't doubt that he was. "All I ask of you is a viewing to see if I am right. I think that he belongs in a place like this, my cousin."

The big, injured man paused. There were beads of sweat on his forehead, Vidal saw in surprise but the man pressed on determinedly. He seemed to be suffering from something. It clearly wasn't his leg as

he was now propping himself up with all his weight on it.

"It wasn't you, but it might have been a relative of yours," went on the big man cryptically. Vidal had no idea what he was talking about. "He won't remember me, Armand Martin, such a forgettable name. I could never forget the name, Ahmed Nureddin, though, and what he did to get us out of Suk-el-Gaib." He grimaced. "Then I got this in East Beirut."

Vidal nodded sagely. No need to disillusion the man that he'd never been in Lebanon, or that his real name was Mercier, the most common of last names in all France.

"What does he do, this cousin of yours?" Vidal asked with a little smile. He was going to have to see 'her' after all, he knew.

"Do?" asked Armand Martin blankly. "Do? I just told you. He dresses up in women's clothes."

Vidal Mercier nodded. "Yes, of course," he said as Zolie began again with all of the girls in dresses and wigs, even Marianne and Yvonne, running through the entry they should make at the start of the show, to stun the audience with the excellence of their impersonations, to set a tone for the whole show. All the girls held their dresses up as Zolie demonstrated and curtsied, circling then to the positions that Zolie wanted them to take. Their legs looked like girls' legs. Vidal was a stickler for that. If he had been running a real night club with female dancers, it would have been the same. He wanted no thick-legged or sinewy dancers. The male dancers moved in behind the 'female' dancers.

“All our impersonators wear women’s clothes, Monsieur Martin,” said Vidal calmly. “But also, like women, they dance, they sing, they mime, they perform in skits. What does your cousin do when he is a woman? Why should I hire him for *Le Salon Rose*?”

Armand Martin’s face took on a deep flush. His jaw was clenched tightly. He stood then and stumbled away from the table towards the entrance to the night club.

What an ingenuous, bumbling fool, thought Vidal Mercier, admiring Chantal’s legs as she did her patented high kick. She smiled down at him, in his familiar viewing spot. Vidal felt a stirring in his loins as Chantal, his star, smiled brilliantly at him. It was a real pleasure for him to see her so sweet and femininely charming in the show.

Chantal really was easy to please. All he had to do was treat her as if she was the woman he was married to and, more than anything, arrange for her to attend parties as a woman. That was what they all craved. Vidal had the contacts to make dreams come true for some of his ‘girls’ at least.

Vidal stood, blew a kiss to Chantal, and went back to the front of the club to see Cesar. He wanted to tell him that Armand Martin was not to come into *Le Salon Rose* ever again. As Vidal half expected, Cesar almost cowered away from the door as the big man stood there, possessing it.

“I will bring my cousin to see you,” Armand grunted. Vidal groaned inwardly. What if the cousin resembled this man in any way? Well, Vidal shuddered but bowed to the inevitable.

"I can always use a new female impersonator, if he's pretty, in the chorus," said Vidal, looking at the cringing Cesar. Vidal could understand the bouncer. Armand Martin looked like an ex-para. Vidal couldn't think of any three men he knew who would be willing to tackle this force of nature, even together. "Bring him around at nine o'clock tonight for Zolie and me to look at. I can at least do that for an old comrade-in-arms of my family."

II. La Cousine

Vidal Mercier had actually forgotten, in the bustle of getting ready for the first evening show, placating Thomas, the maitre d', and encouraging the kitchens, that he had an audition to conduct later that night. He was fully engrossed in ensuring that the sissies who served as waitresses, that was what the club had always called them, were properly scented and primped with makeup and fingernails, ribbons and bows. Yes, they were all ready to serve the growing crowd at the best of Paris's female impersonator shows. They could claim that for a while as *Madame Georges* and *Les Filles Naturellement* were closed for a least a week.

Cesar had already shown the pair into Vidal's inner office before Vidal remembered he was going to have them called and put off for one night at least.

"A thousand pardons," Vidal said, bustling into his office, where the pair, perfectly punctual, sat, quiet and very tense, waiting for him. "As always, a new show, changes, a thousand things going wrong at the same time and I have to solve them all per-

sonally. The special guests always phone in so late and Thomas cannot seat them where they wish.”

Vidal went on and on, gossiping about the people who’d be in the club, rich and famous names. The thin, young man beside Armand Martin seemed barely to hear him.

In fact, Vidal rattled on to cover his inspection of the young man. It was hard to tell his age. Eighteen might be right, or Vidal could be off by two years in either direction.

Vidal hadn’t expected someone totally unsuitable and he wasn’t disappointed. The young man sat quietly, hands folded in his lap, dark-fringed eyes downcast. He was very pale and clearly under great stress by the way that he sat. His face was smooth and clear, his dark hair neatly parted and combed. He was a thin, handsome boy, but there was, too, a delicacy about him, a too-thin nose, lips a little too full and curvaceous to be appreciated as masculine.

“Now, if you will stand up, monsieur,” Vidal said. He went on about the number of auditions he conducted each week. The boy looked up, startled, from blue, blue eyes. He looked at Armand for guidance.

“Stand up, Gerard,” snapped Armand Martin. He now wore a dark suit, one he would wear to a funeral, thought Vidal grimly. ‘Her’ agent or manager, Vidal thought in amusement.

The boy stood. Vidal looked him directly in the eye. “Good,” he said with a smile of encouragement. “Not too tall. In high heels, you should be perfect.”

The smooth-skinned face blushed so quickly that Vidal was surprised. He wasn’t used to reticence in the few ‘girls’ he found it necessary to inspect before hiring them.

"I shall, of course, wish to see you dressed as a woman," said Vidal, returning to his natural, easy, courteous manner. "Did you bring your own makeup, panties, lingerie, dress, with you?"

The boy's face went an even deeper red. His head slumped to his slender chest.

"We didn't tell his mother," began Armand Martin.

"No matter," said Vidal, "though we do prefer our travestis to wear their own panties. Are you wearing panties by any chance under your jeans, Gerard?"

Gerard shook his head, his hands twitching nervously at his sides.

"We can fake almost anything," Vidal went on, standing and taking the boy's hand who shuddered at a man touching, stroking his hand. Yes, it was soft and girlish, not a boy's working hand, thank goodness. Vidal signalled to Armand to stay. "But I like to see good legs. It makes such a difference to see shapely legs in silk stockings."

Vidal tugged on the boy. They went out into the passage where shrill noises came from the open door where the 'girls' were getting ready. Strange, the boy almost shrank back behind Vidal as he led him into the place where he should have been long-ing to enter. It was where the buxom Fanny, painting her lips and adjusting her pantyhose as she stared at herself, almost filled the doorway. She swayed on her high heels and turning her head to check how her headdress fitted.

Fanny smiled at them, her face a mask of over-emphasized, feminine lines as Gerard stopped, transfixed. Their nostrils were assailed immediately with a melange of aromas, fragrances and scents.

All that could be seen on all sides were skimpy-dressed feminine figures in the briefest of female costumes.

Blondes with high, feathered headdresses leant before mirrors and adjusted their boobs into the bras they wore. Some openly put pads in their bras to fill out their chests to more striking female proportions. Brunettes leaned before other mirrors, sitting with legs crossed like women, adding more and more lip gloss to already overpainted red lips. Redheads with willowy, feminine figures attached more feathers to their tushes, their tight, sequin laden bras and panties not concealing how rounded like women they were in many parts of their anatomy.

Fishnet stockings were on most legs, female-shaped legs. If you ignored some of the deeper voices and the loud drawls, you'd think yourself in a dressing room for a chorus line of beautiful women, thought Vidal, looking at the agony and amazement on the face of Gerard. Not one person in the room, of course, was a 'real' woman. This was *Le Salon Rose*, after all, specializing in the best of female impersonation.

"Come on," said Vidal with a smile to the wide-eyed, shaking, scarlet-faced boy. "Here is Janine Duffray." An elegant, blonde-wigged 'girl' turned from powdering her nose and began to drape a loose-fitting, almost transparent woman's negligee about her female-contoured figure. "Janine, I would like you to initiate Gerard for me!"

Janine looked at the owner of *Le Salon Rose* in disgust. Gerard tried again to hide behind Monsieur Nureddin as one of these fantastic female, scented figures paid attention to him.

Janine looked on the point of saying 'No' to the owner of the club but then she remembered the advance on her wages she'd asked 'darling Ahmed' for, the night before. He'd smiled and said that he'd think about it. Janine looked at the weedy kid, hiding behind Ahmed and sighed. Clearly, the boss had thought about it.

"My dear," said Janine, her pink lips parting in a forced smile. "So you want to be a pretty girl like me, do you?"

Janine put out long-nailed fingers, bright with red, gleaming nail polish and took one of Gerard's trembling hands. Gerard jumped at the touch but didn't dare to look at the 'woman' in front of him. He didn't dare to look anywhere but down. He flushed coyly as all he saw were what appeared to be women's legs in stockings and high heels.

"The other, the other girls," Gerard began desperately as the long, shaped fingernails flicked the knot in his tie open and then the buttons on his shirt. He spoke so quietly that Vidal could barely hear him in the feminine hubbub around the pair of male-dressed figures.

"Oh, darling," said Janine, arching on the stool on which she was perched as if she was indeed a glamorous model. She batted her eyelashes at Vidal and dropped her voice into a normal male, baritone range. "There are no real girls in here, you know. Only wannabes like us two."

Gerard could barely move. He stood clutching Janine's hand, his mouth open as he looked at her at last, at the painted, female face smiling at him and yet speaking to him like his Cousin Armand.

Janine stood and directed the young boy to take her place, leaning over him so that her breasts were almost entirely out of the golden bra she wore. Certainly, Gerard could not fail to see how they wobbled and how real they were on the baritone's chest. His cheeks were crimson. He sat with his legs pressed together, casting fearful glances at the other lovelies about him.



At any moment, Vidal could see, the young boy would bolt from the room so full of primping, gossiping, female figures. Many were adjusting the skimpy bras which they wore in the first production number after all. Zolie had decided to stick with the routines they'd followed for the last month and save the new beginning.

"Janine," said Vidal sharply and wondered why he did that. Did he really care whether this boy, the cousin of that elemental force in his office, could pass an audition as a woman? "Go easy with this little, little cherry."

Vidal would have said 'virgin', as he was sure that Gerard was, but the epithet was clear to Janine. She looked at the boy in surprise. Her blonde wig swirled about her face as she smiled at the boy and stroked his arms, whispering something in a more feminine voice about waiting for the girls to leave when they'd be alone. Janine even tried to look a little demure herself though she was the brassiest of blondes when it came to her individual act.

"In fact," said Vidal, again wondering why he just didn't leave the kid to a barracuda like Janine who'd have him for breakfast, in more than one way, and let fate decide on the kid's future, "some privacy in dressing might be best for our novice." He nodded to the costume storage room which had some mirrors and lights for girls to be measured and fitted for new costumes.

Janine pirouetted femininely on her high heels and smiled sweetly at the owner of *Le Salon Rose*. "About my advance," she said with a bright, red, lipsticked smile, again taking the boy's hand in hers. Gerard looked as if he was going to be sick as

Janine led him through a little group of girls, well travestis, Vidal thought with a nod to Janine, wondering what Gerard must be thinking.

“Amateurs,” said Janine in the sultry voice she did so well as they passed by the travestis, smoothing their hose into place over their rounded tushes. Some adjusted the padding so it would stay where they needed it as they did their feminine sashays across the stage. Gerard disappeared into what seemed a mass of femininely shaped and womanly perfumed globes of girlish flesh.

III. Bambi Labelle

Back in Vidal’s office, Armand Martin had relaxed somewhat, even opening his jacket to show off his long, black and white, spotted tie.

“Well, just the two crises I had to deal with,” said Vidal, putting on the fairly smarmy mannerisms and voice that he thought of as Ahmed’s. It wasn’t at all like the original of course. If he had wanted to sound like the real thing, Vidal would have had to flounce into the office, pout and behave like an aging woman still trying to be a teenager.

The biggest of the crises had been the non-arrival of Belinda Bell, as French as her name was American, like the songs she sang. Belinda was a featured ‘artiste’, a diva in every way, he thought gloomily. The cabaret featured her several times in the show. Just as Vidal was about to order Zolie to change into drag and do some of Belinda’s parts, which Zolie could do but it meant changing the order of

the show in parts, Belinda came prancing in from the stage door.

Gogin, the old man who protected that passage from the stage door johnnies, snarled after Belinda for leaving the door swinging open. There were a lot of johnnies, surprisingly, after the shows, waiting for the girls, just as if this was Broadway in America. Some of the girls loved it, loved the variety of partners they could take up with. Some put even more care into the way they dressed, as females of course, to entertain the men who wanted to treat them as dainty flowers. He'd heard one of the men saying that to Janine, days before. Janine had cooed to him like a little schoolgirl. What was it Paulette had said? Oh yes, the stage door was the best part of working at *Le Salon Rose*.

Vidal had wanted to speak to Belinda but she'd stalked past him, pushing Zolie out of her way. "Men!" she'd said furiously as she strode into the dressing room. Everyone had cleared out of her way as she tossed her fur coat, bought for her by her latest lover, at Vivienne-Marie, the young chorus girl who often served as Belinda's dresser.

"The cabaret is only going to be delayed by about ten minutes," Vidal said, back in his office, sighing in mock relief as he poured another glass of wine for the big man. He studied Vidal just as hard as Vidal had studied his cousin.

Vidal offered a cigar but Armand Martin declined. Vidal lit up and sat in the comfortable rocking chair behind his desk. Despite the flap over Belinda Bell, he knew that the show, and the front service, would run like clockwork now. The sissies were so reliable. They expected to be 'punished' girlishly for any errors they made. Of course, they acted out their 'ter-

ror' of Thomas so well that their 'nerves' necessarily caused them to make errors, when they needed to, around the maitre d'.

Thomas was always ready to oblige in disciplining his corps of workers whom he inspected like a drill sergeant each night, from makeup and wigs to the straightness of stockings and the perfection of the frilly panties. The sissy waitresses were already famous in the city. They'd loved the second article in *Le Soir*, costing another bundle, that had focussed on them.

Many of the waitresses, like Thomas, Zolie and some of the impersonators, Janine came to Vidal's mind, had worked for the original owner. They were the only ones now to remember to call the original Ahmed Nureddin, 'Fatima', while Vidal was 'Ahmed' to them all. It meant that his other businesses he could run as Vidal. No-one was shaking their head and wondering what the manager of a female impersonator club was doing in financial planning.

Still, Vidal did wonder what all the sissies and the female impersonators thought of him. Probably called him a 'late bloomer' or 'latent'. It was their word for so many men who were interested in girls like them. Well, it takes one to know one, Deirdre, the prettiest of the sissies would say. Regretfully, for her, she would never get to know what it was that made Vidal's motor tick over,

"Tell me, Armand," Vidal began expansively. "How did you ever get Gerard to come with you here tonight?"

"It wasn't easy," growled Armand, his nose wrinkling. With a sigh, Vidal extinguished his expensive

Cuban cigar. "I had to order him to come in the end."

And Gerard wouldn't dare to defy that, I imagine, thought Vidal. He sighed again. It was one of the parts of being Ahmed Nureddin that bored him the most. Well, he was the boss of *Le Salon Rose*. Armand Martin was not the first to suppose he might recruit 'girls' for his club in this way. Well, for a rich customer, Vidal would look a 'girl' over but he never employed them, save for one or two as waitresses.

No, *Le Salon Rose* was one of the best female impersonator clubs in Paris, and that meant the world, in Vidal's estimation. He had Zolie to scout acts in other shows. If Zolie found someone worthwhile, he'd move in and do the actual recruitment.

Zolie was very good, as the way he was making Paulette bloom showed. He could envision the girls in another show in a different setting at *Le Salon Rose*. He'd helped to develop many girls into the talents they were, divas like Belinda Bell, a mere chorus girl until Zolie had taken her under his wing.

"He's here because you wish it, not him, Armand?" Vidal went on, more coldly than he intended but his cigar was out in consideration of the other. "Why are you really foisting this young man on me? True, he likely enjoys dressing up and playing the coquette with you. But, in what I've seen so far, Gerard seems most reluctant to be a girl publicly. What talent does he have that could possibly attract the manager of a drag club into taking him on?"

The tense, stricken look had returned to Armand Martin's face once more. Many thoughts worked

their way across his features as he clearly tried to form some kind of positive reply to Vidal. At least, there were no threats, Vidal thought, but then, Armand probably didn't need to say anything along those lines, not after what Vidal had learned had happened at the other leading travesti clubs in Paris.

When Armand spoke he rumbled on in words that were unintelligible until finally he stopped. An uncomfortable silence settled between them. A sudden tapping on the door made Martin jerk. A hand flew to his pocket. Well, I know where he keeps his weapon, thought Vidal miserably, as he called loudly for whoever was there to come in.

Janine immediately swished into the room, exaggerating her smile and pose as she stood beside the chair where Armand could get a real eyeful of her. Her perfume probably overpowered him as well. Another girl came timidly into the room after Janine. Without even thinking, Vidal stood as he always did when a woman joined a group he was with.

"I didn't know whether you wanted a blonde or a brunette," drawled Janine, sitting on the arm of Armand's chair, her stockinged thigh almost on his hand. "So, I got as close as I could to her natural color."

The dark-haired girl's eyes were downcast. Her cheeks were lightly blushed but Vidal didn't doubt that her color would have been more intense if she hadn't been so professionally made up as it was. Janine was an artiste with makeup for girls off-stage as well as on. Her work on Gerard deserved a bonus, thought Vidal, as he looked at the silent brunette in admiration.