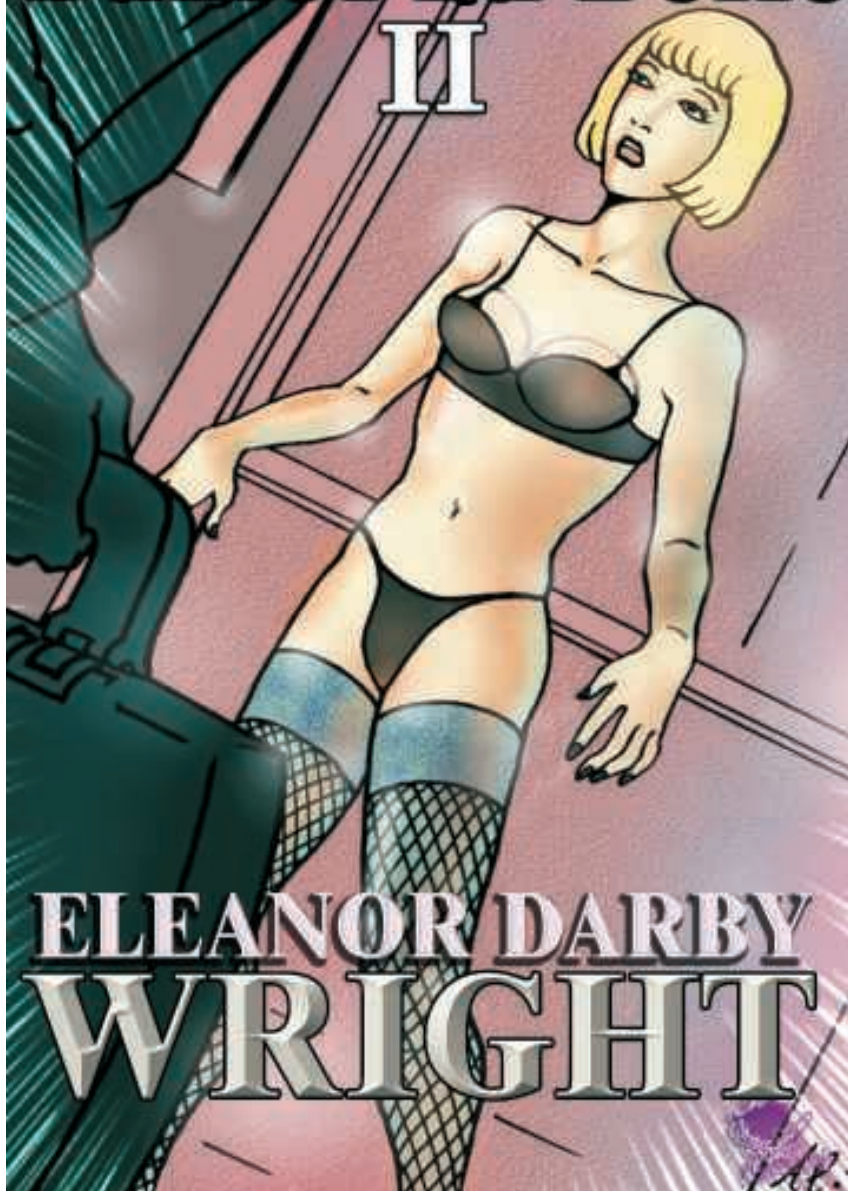


Bambi La Belle

II



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WRIGHT



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Bambi La Belle

Part Two

by Eleanor Darby Wright

IX. Vidal's Daydream

Vidal's smiling question to the blonde girl, to ask her if she'd had a good night, didn't bring a blushing admission that she'd experienced a night of bliss. Vidal had expected her to be nervous, her cheeks flushed. Bambi, however, answering to that name, which Edmond had used for her - all the others had picked up on it - seemed to be out of sorts about what had gone on in her bedroom with Edmond the night before.

Vidal studied the blonde girl in her summery, white dress, the short blonde, pageboy wig suiting her so

well. She wore just a little makeup and looked devastatingly pretty beside Angela and the Countess. The two real women sat at the breakfast table and plied Bambi, quietly posed with crossed legs, with questions about tennis and golf which seemed to be the main activities of the afternoon for the Count's enormous house party. Bambi smiled and answered, in disconcerting, female style, that she wasn't an athlete of any kind. The women gave her knowing smiles, which she ignored.

Belinda Bell was laughing and teasing both of the Narbonne brothers, holding onto both of their arms as she went dancing out of the breakfast room into the gardens where many of the other guests were also going for a short stroll. They were admiring the walks laid out by the Count's father.

"If you don't play tennis and don't golf, what can you do?" asked Angela, glowering after her husband and his brother, to both of whom Belinda was giving kisses as she swayed on their arms and showed herself off. "I hope you're good in bed, at least," she added sourly. The Countess looked at the American woman in disgust.

But Bambi didn't appear disturbed by the vulgar comment, Vidal saw in amazement. "I guess you'll have to ask your husband about that, won't you?" said Bambi with a shrug, spots of color on her cheeks.

Vidal stepped in quickly before the American vented her anger on the blonde travesti. "Hélène," he said quietly, using the name 'Bambi' should have insisted upon. "There are some other folk here I'd you to meet. Would you come with me into the music room?"

Bambi rose gracefully to her high heels and smiled at the women, excusing herself prettily.

"My darling Angela," they heard the Countess saying as they walked away. "That catty remark, my dear, deserved the reply it got."

"But she isn't ..." Angela was responding.

"Oh, Edmond assures me we've all been quite wrong about this girl he calls Bambi," the Countess



said. Vidal put Bambi's arm under his and held it there, shortening his stride, to enable her to walk in womanly fashion beside him.

"In a way, I'm glad to hear you stand up for yourself," said Vidal as he escorted the slender, shapely-looking girl out into the main foyer of the old house. He waved to a mustached man. "That's Guillaume Paget, the father of the Countess," said Vidal. "He oversees the Count's properties in France and overseas."

Vidal could have related the scandal surrounding Paget and girls from *Le Salon Rose* when Fatima owned the club. The hushing up of that scandal had left the family penniless and was the reason why Celia Paget had married Edmond, providing the 'cover' the young count needed for his proclivities. Perhaps that was why she encouraged him with 'girls' like Bambi, letting Edmond know she was the one in their relationship who was indispensable.

"The Count owns a lot of properties?" asked Bambi in her delicate, cultured, female voice. Zolie and Marie-ThérPse must get a bonus, Vidal decided, for working with the girl so religiously, lifting her voice to a credible, female standard in such a short time.

"Oh, yes," said Vidal with a smile. "Your Edmond leases out real estate in almost every city in France. That's where the bulk of his wealth comes from."

"My Edmond told me to tell you," said Bambi, her voice a little stressed, "that you may have all of your leases, all of them, from him. He said you'd know what he meant by that and," she paused and wouldn't have gone on but for Vidal stopping her from entering the music room. A piano was being played very well inside, but Vidal waited for her to complete her sentence.

"And that you would be very pleased with me when I told you," Bambi went on lightly, her face flushed. "You are pleased with me, aren't you?"

Vidal's jaw dropped in surprise as fury rose inside him. He'd selected the sanctimonious, young Comte

d'Embray for Bambi after quite a search through the data base he maintained on men who were fascinated by 'women' with a little extra. The girls Edmond d'Embray had 'entertained' had rated him highly on kindness and consideration of their special needs. He'd had the highest grade as a lover.

So had Edmond's wife for her tolerance and understanding of her husband's needs in which she participated. The Countess apparently had no lack of love and desire in her 'eccentric' marriage. Paulette's report said she'd love to go with the Countess any time as she was such a tease while the Count was pretty bland after a while.

Vidal had noted that with a smile. It told him more about Paulette than it did the Countess. He'd considered the young Count to be a certain kind of fool. What he'd said to Bambi after one night of making love to her, was bound to make her think Vidal had 'used' her to secure a contract. Edmond d'Embray was more than a fool.

Vidal knew the young man was a snob but to treat the precious girl he'd been introduced to deliberately by Vidal, as if she was a courtesan or prostitute earning favors for Vidal as her pimp, well, that was far too much. Vidal was angry with himself for having so misjudged the Count. It would serve Edmond right if Vidal did not do the business with him he'd planned.

Vidal gently led the perplexed Bambi out of the foyer, his mind working feverishly as he thought of new ways to settle his businesses without enriching the Count. He led the blonde girl into the Chateau grounds towards the maze where the shrieks of young ladies, waiting to be found, echoed in lively fashion in and over the high hedges.

"I'm sorry," said H  l  ne with feminine quiver as Vidal held her arm and led her towards a group of several, no longer young, influential men who looked up at the girl with interest.

"You did nothing wrong," said Vidal Mercier promptly, stopping her from going forward to the

men eyeing them. "But I am annoyed with Edmond, le Comte d'Embray. I hope you enjoyed your night with him."

Vidal looked directly into her blue, madeup eyes as Bambi blushed. He scowled inside as 'she' appeared distressed to Vidal's amazement. The girls from the club were never ill-at-ease at making love to other men. They expected that to be their lot in life. They welcomed the sexual unions Vidal planned for them. Vidal had expected Helene to be the same as the other 'girls', thanking him for the 'date' he'd arranged. But Helene was clearly not going to do that.

"You were very late for brunch," Vidal went on slowly. "I hoped that meant your Count was awakening you in the manner for which he is famous, or infamous. You did, when you appeared, seem to be enamoured with Edmond. He was very affectionate outside the breakfast room, wasn't he?"

Bambi blushed deeply. Edmond had awoken her in bed by the simple process of making love to her, drawing her derriere into his groin. She'd learned that her task of letting a man enjoy penetrating her rear was harder in the doing than talking about it with other 'girls' like her. Edmond insisted on bathing with her where he'd had her again, his hands playing with her, making her finally climax and spurt away as he was doing the same thing inside her.

A numbed Bambi had found it so hard to get back into her artificial vagina. Edmond had finally helped lace Bambi into it, kissing her body passionately, even between her legs while she panted and had to hold her breath with the strange, wanton feelings that ran through her, despite how she felt about the whole exchange with the Count. Edmond assisted her lovingly to put on her panties and garter belt. He fitted the breasts to her, his hands and mouth caressing her so much.

Womanly emotions had finally swept over her. She'd felt like a woman. This is what she'd wanted to be. This was what happened to girls like her, she told herself, surprised that she wasn't elated as she'd been,

leaving the club, rustling so prettily in her evening gown, men admiring her. She'd wished so badly to go back to the club, without Edmond, and refuse the tryst Vidal had provided for 'her'.

Edmond wanted her to be aroused, so girlish, both in her clothes and in her manners. That's why he'd taken her into the dark alcove in front of the breakfast room, held her and kissed her against the wall. They could hear the other guests talking and laughing in the room behind them. The sheer terror of it all, however, had made it all the more thrilling as they'd made love, she lifting her stocking leg about him, his hands fondling her panties, lowering them enough to let his fingers caress inside her prosthetic 'vagina'. He'd aroused his enraptured woman coarsely again. Anyone could have seen them but they didn't.

When Edmond had lifted her dress and opened his pants, Bambi, her lips stuck on his, had been terrified someone would see them, fornicating, like a man and a woman. She'd clung to Edmond but, oh, oh, oh, it had been so indescribably feminine to have her panties lowered, to feel so womanly as a man 'entered' her with his hard penis, from the front. Yes, she was a woman. The noise of other people was all around her as she became a woman with her man again, even if only for a little while, pushing himself crudely, as he had all night, into the strange device Vidal had sent for her to wear.

When she realized that they were not going to be seen, Bambi had let go and rocked as her lover kissed her, his manhood trapped against her own. He pumped her as she clutched him to her. His hands on her legs and stockings were so gentle. Her lifted one of her legs about him, his fingers working on her so well. She almost shrieked with the intense pleasure she felt as he came inside her packaged vagina.

Bambi had thought no-one had seen them. She'd been certain of it as she'd re-done her makeup, her lipstick needing to be completely restored. She'd felt so girlish, so sluttish, too, to be walked into the breakfast room and re-introduced to the Countess. The Count-

ess's eyes had gleamed at Bambi. The girl had almost come unglued as the Count stood with his arm about Bambi in front of his wife. Bambi never expected Edmond to kiss her and make the suggestive remarks that he did to his wife.

"Well, I'll let you entertain my friend," Edmond had said. "She'll be such a surprise to you, my love," he had laughed to his wife. "You'll never guess what this lovely girl has between her luscious legs. It really will surprise you!"

Bambi had felt so awful as Edmond bounced off to see to other guests at his weekend. How could he be so crass, Bambi had thought, trembling, but Celia was actually nice to her, inviting H el ene to sit with her. Angela had come strolling in then, looking for Nick Narbonne.

Vidal had joined the women, too, steering Angela away from confronting Nick who seemed to be just as intrigued by his brother's girl friend as Gaston was. Belinda had been bubbling over with infectious femininity. Several men in other groups were clearly interested in her. She waved to Bambi just as Vidal asked her about her evening with Edmond.

How do you think I'd feel? Bambi had wanted to say to him but no-one had seen her last sexual contact with Edmond, she was sure. Her panties were back in place and so was her artificial vagina. She was hurting but only because she was still a little aroused from her sexual escapade with a man. If a man or a woman had put an arm gently about her, Bambi would have melted into their body for sure, she felt.

But luckily no-one had seen her. Save that Vidal was telling her now that he had! Vidal, her employer, had seen her outside with Edmond, pulling his mouth onto hers while she caressed his derriere as firmly as he was caressing hers. Vidal must have seen Edmond entering her little, artificial receptacle.

"You answered me so coldly the first time I asked you about your night," Vidal went on. He gripped her arm tightly so that Bambi could not get her crimson

face away from him, out of his sight, "I thought I'd misunderstood what I'd seen in the foyer alcove. I thought perhaps Edmond hadn't treated you with all the gentleness a woman deserves for her first time."

Bambi felt shivers of ice run through her. She looked even more beautiful, Vidal decided, than when she'd posed for the photographs Vidal had had taken for her portfolio - and for her place on the wall - where the 'girls' of *Le Salon Rose* were displayed. The Count had only passed along the wall once before he'd picked Bambi out as the one he wanted for the weekend in the country he and his friends were planning.

"She is very young and inexperienced," Vidal had told the Count.

"I know how to be gentle with a new girl," Edmond had told Vidal charmingly. "I know how to bring out the woman in one as pretty as she."

Vidal had explained how Bambi had no augmentations or changes in her physique save for padding and attachments to make her appear like a woman.

"All the better," Edmond had said confidently. "I love making it with little cherries, virgins to you, Vidal. It's my speciality. Santiago keeps an eye out for me, you know, at *Madame Georges*, but this one," he indicated Bambi, "I will initiate her into womanhood at my party at the Chateau d'Embray next weekend."

Which is what Vidal had wanted the Count to do, though he was surprised by the regret he'd felt, more so now, for letting it happen. He knew how delicate and adorable H el ene Martin would look in a long, evening dress. And the clean-cut, handsome, French aristocrat was just the man she should have had to initiate her into womanhood. Vidal was sure her cousin hadn't already done that.

Zolie, Marie-Th erPse, and even Janine Duffray, showing motherly feelings to Vidal's surprise, warned him how virginal and unspoiled the girl was. They'd guessed what he saw in her and how he was going to exploit a girl like 'H el ene Martin'. Well, the redoubtable Ahmed, his alterego, had a reputation, didn't he,

for exploiting the travestis who worked for him? And Bambi didn't have a boy friend, not even the handsome André Liebman, though that young man tried to get his hands on her all the time.

No, 'Hélène', Bambi, was going to be a girl, Vidal was sure of it. She wasn't going to work at a travesti club, which her cousin seemed to think was the place for her, for much longer. As a girl, Hélène was going to go places, Vidal had decided. Once she had her breasts augmented, after the hormones worked on her, her derriere would be more rounded. Then she'd have cosmetic surgery to make her even more beautiful.

Hélène didn't know it but Vidal had wanted her to mix with this society of people about the Count d'Embray. She needed to learn the mannerisms of rich, cultured people, as Belinda had. The Countess was a very good teacher. She was attempting to cultivate Angela Narbonne but, to Vidal's eyes and ears, the American woman would never be the woman that Hélène would.

Hélène would be the mistress, even the wife, of a powerful man, Vidal thought, sure in his plans for 'her'. This was just the start, an initiation, and she was doing so well. He couldn't understand, however, why he felt so desolate as he contemplated all the wonderful things he'd do for her so that she could pay him back as Louise, wife now of a high-ranking minister, had done so wonderfully.

"Please, Vidal," Bambi whispered to him. She leaned against him, Vidal enjoying her fragrance. "Please may I go back to the club now? I-I don't want to spend another night with the Count, or the Countess."

Vidal looked at the blushing girl in surprise. Her distress seemed quite genuine.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle," said a tall, good-looking, older man, detaching himself from the group that had been laughing at the girls, 'lost' in the maze. "Is this man bothering you? You seem to be upset with him."

"Oh no," said Bambi, shivering as Vidal let her hand go. Her wide dress skirt shivered with her. She swayed closer to Vidal, tucking her arm again under his. He felt a little pleased when she did that. "Vidal is always nice to me."

"Mmm," said the older man, much taller than Vidal. He looked as if he didn't believe it at all. "Well, sorry to have intruded, Mademoiselle. Oh, may I introduce myself? Antoine de Bourgeon. You might have seen me on the news sometimes. Deputy Minister in the Department of Internal Affairs." His look at Vidal spoke volumes of what he thought of the smaller, dark-haired, pockmarked man whom he knew at least by sight in his ministry. What Vidal was doing with a girl as beautiful as Bambi was clearly beyond the other's comprehension. "And you are, mademoiselle?"

"Mademoiselle H el ene Martin," said Vidal before H el ene could say that she was Bambi. "H el ene is employed by me in one of my companies, Mercier Gonfalon." The business card Vidal presented was merely glanced at by the older man. He was far too busy studying and enjoying looking at the nervous, shy H el ene Martin.

"This fellow might be employing you now, Mademoiselle Martin," said Antoine de Bourgeon with a smile at the girl. "But the Ministry, I'm sure, could find a position for you, more pleasant than anything a financier could provide. You would also be serving your country, too."

Bambi gaped at the older man. She could only think of all the times she'd tried to get someone to employ her as Gerard. She couldn't even get a foot in the door. Well, she could now, particularly if she was wearing high heels like the white sandals she was in at the moment. She felt like laughing hysterically as she thought of being employed by the government. A year ago it was all she, Gerard, had dreamed of.

Vidal smiled as he saw the future. He could almost hear H el ene's cultured voice saying, "Oh, Monsieur de Bourgeon, you don't remember me, do you? We

met at the Count d'Embray's chateau in Normandy. You wanted me to work for you. Yes, I've gone through many changes since you offered me an appointment on your staff.

"Would I like to work for you now? Oh, Monsieur de Bourgeon, I'd love to. I've been dieing to meet you again. I don't meet many elegant, strong, handsome men in Monsieur Mercier's office. Oh, I wouldn't call him homely, a little battered around the edges, maybe. Only, I don't know how I could help a great man like you.

"Oh, I'd love to come with you into the garden and discuss what I can do for you. No, I don't mind your arm about my waist. I've been so hoping you'd do that."

In Vidal's mind, he saw the blonde girl gliding along a twilight-lit path, her head on de Bourgeon's shoulder, raising her face, her lips opening in invitation. She would be kissing the Minister, a man Bambi could exploit for the man really making her a woman.

A shake of his head broke the daydream. Vidal realized he was heading back to the house with H el ene's arm under his, steering him. "Are you all right, Monsieur Nureddin, um, Mercier?" she asked anxiously, the voice from her lipsticked mouth so sweet. Again, her fragrance filled his nostrils as he leaned to her, just an inch taller than she in her graceful, thin, high heels.

"Just a daydream," said Vidal with a chuckle. "I was thinking of you as the mistress of a government minister."

H el ene clutched Vidal's arm desperately. "Me, the mistress of a man like that?" she asked him in a panic. "Oh, Monsieur Nur-Mercier, please don't joke about nightmares like that. I couldn't be any man's mistress!"

"His wife?" teased Vidal.

"Oh no," said H el ene, clinging to him, her fingers white in such a sharp contrast to her painted, red nails. "I can't be that, Monsieur. You know why I can't."

"There is such a thing as a sex change operation," said Vidal. She stiffened against his arm. "But, before we get that far along, there are plenty of men like Edmond d'Embray who love women like you. Since you've appeared in our show and had your picture on the entry wall, our office has been deluged with requests for dates and parties for you. This is just the first of many."

Hélène flushed, shuddering as they reached the chateau but didn't enter.

"You must have heard the other girls talking," said Vidal. "Even Fanny has her fan club, a pair of truckers who, when they hit Paris, have Fanny walking around in her mini-skirts with stars in her eyes."

The thought of big, hefty Fanny in a mini-skirt created an image that made Bambi start a smile again. "I don't want to come to parties like this," she said quite seriously to Vidal. "I know my mother would think I'm improving myself to be in this sort of company, but I don't. I won't tell you I didn't enjoy the night with Edmond because ... because ...I think I confronted some of the d-demons I've been struggling with. Now I know what I am. I'm not going to be the kind of girl you and Armand want me to be."

"Pity," murmured Vidal Mercier.

"I'd like to go home now," the blonde girl said to Vidal, holding back the hair that was being blown across her face. She probably didn't realize, thought Vidal wryly, how feminine the gesture was or how girlish she appeared doing that, her breasts so taut, so high and firm like a young girl's breasts should be. It was such a pity they weren't real.

"Very well," said Vidal with a sigh. "I'll talk to the Countess. I know she'll be very unhappy but I'll make it right with her. I'll escort you to the car made available for my pleasure this weekend. If you wait there for me, I'll drive you home and explain things on the other end as well for you."

X. Madame and Mademoiselle Barrieu

Gerard wasn't used to wearing a nightdress in bed but Vidal, allowing Armand to call 'him' that, had insisted that 'Hélène' take the nightwear case he'd brought to her room with her. Maman had been thoroughly perplexed by Vidal's name change. She kept calling him 'Monsieur Nureddin' which caused Armand to growl finally and tell her to go to bed.

Bambi's, Gerard's, mother crept in to Hélène's bedroom while Vidal was talking to Armand. She'd gone immediately to the open bag. She'd held up the lovely, light blue, beribboned nightdress and beamed as she showed it to the girlish figure sitting at her mirror, removing the makeup from her eyes.

"Oh, this is so lovely," Madame Barrieu said to her blonde-wigged 'daughter'. "I must see you in it, Hélène, I must."

Gerard wasn't sure about his mother. She seemed so delighted to have a daughter around the house and not a son. She was enchanted with the idea of Hélène being a guest of a nobleman for an evening in his home. She ignored the obvious embellishment of Gerard's chest, the way his hair was dyed and his wearing girl's earrings all the time.

Gerard shuddered as he took off his dress and his lingerie. His mother watched him unfasten his garter belt and roll his stockings from his so smooth legs. She was the one, when he started to put on the nightie, who suggested he take off his bra. He did, watching for her to be repulsed by the artificial attachments about his chest.

But Gerard's mother only smiled and told him what a good girl he was as he stored the bra away in one of the shelves of his chest of drawers. It was full of women's clothing as well, much of it brought home daily from the club, as he was brought home as a girl by Armand, even though he left as a boy each day. Madame Barrieu hadn't really seen him as a girl as Armand had every day.

"So beautiful," said Maman as the nightie shivered and shimmered its way over Hélène's smooth, tantalized body. 'She' didn't dare to think of removing her panties, not when she knew what was beneath those panties. No, Maman didn't need to see the artificial vagina or to have Gerard explain why he was wearing such a device.

"Let me tuck you in bed, my darling," said Maman. Gerard had to shiver more. Maman hadn't done that for years, since he was quite a little boy. She wanted to talk as well about the dancing her daughter had done with the Count. Maman wanted to know all about the chateau and the people who were there. She recounted her own adventures as a young woman. Gerard was amazed as his mother spoke of parties she'd attended and weekends she'd spent with many different men.

"Le Comte d'Embray phoned us already this evening, you know," said Maman. "He was most insistent on speaking to me, not Armand. Such a proper, young gentleman, isn't he? He was really annoyed, he said, that Monsieur Mercier had taken you away. I was as well but I didn't realize who he was until Armand told me Monsieur Mercier uses that other horrible name at the club. So, I didn't know who it was who'd taken you away. I just hoped it was someone nice.

"The Count wanted to send a car to take you right back to the chateau if you were here but, of course, you weren't. Then he said he was coming to town to search for you but Armand interrupted and told him not to. Armand was quite rude to him. But the Count insisted you and he had got along famously all night long! It was only when he left you in Mercier's clutches, while he had business to conduct, that he discovered you were ill. But you aren't, are you?"

"No, Maman," Gerard managed to say at last as his mother leaned over him, and hugged him as if he was a girl, kissing his soft, flaming cheeks, not knowing that Gerald was thinking of how he, as a 'she', had succumbed to the Count 'famously', all night long.

"You're warm, though, darling," said his mother. "It was nice of Monsieur Mercier to call, wasn't it, and

let us know he was bringing you home. Armand thought he'd take you back to *Le Salon Rose* but I knew Monsieur Mercier wouldn't. He sounds like a real gentleman on the phone, doesn't he, even if he doesn't look like one."

Gerard winced at that. So Vidal looked a little foreign. He couldn't help that. What would it have mattered, anyway, if he wasn't a native Frenchman, as he actually was? As I am, Gerard thought miserably, as he was tucked into bed by his mother, his earrings replaced by studs. He'd forgotten to replace his long earrings until his mother reminded him.

"You're so warm," Maman said. "Are you going into the club in the morning?"

"No," Gerard was able to whisper in his Hélène voice. "Monsieur Mercier has given me the day off tomorrow." So he can see Joanie Guyette in my place, Bambi thought miserably. I hope the little sissy trips on her high heel, breaks her leg and they have to call me in, she thought nastily. Oh, she did sound so catty, almost like Chantal, she thought ruefully, her or a real bitchy girl. A quiver went through her as she thought of describing 'herself' like that, a bitch.

"You're off!" said Madame Barrieu in delight. "I haven't been out in an age! How about I take my daughter out and show her off to all my friends? Oh yes, we must have a wonderful time tomorrow and visit all my favorite places."

Maman's daughter twisted in her nightie as 'she' thought of Maman's 'friends', the old biddies that she visited, many friends of Maman's mother before her. They all knew Maman had no daughter. They knew she had a son. When Maman showed off Hélène, they'd know immediately what a fool Hélène's mother was. Hélène's cheeks flamed again as her mother caressed her face, brought her cool water to drink and told her to be well as the older woman was so looking forward to going out the following day.

Gerard spent a fretful night, waking every so often and reaching for Edmond, sure he was beside her, but

he wasn't. She was alone. Yes, in her fitful dreams, H el ene was 'she'. She finally awoke, hot and shivering, as she threw back the bedclothes. At almost the same moment, her bedroom door swung open. Her mother looked in to see if she was awake.

For the first time in her life, H el ene went down to breakfast in a white negligee left for her in the night case Vidal had brought. Armand leered as she entered the breakfast alcove with her chest tented like a woman. Yes, she still wore the artificial breasts she'd worn at the chateau and home to Armand's house.

"Good that you're here," Armand growled. "You can make breakfast. Your mother is a terrible cook." He said that right in front of Maman who only smiled at the big man.

"You're so much better than me at everything now," said Maman with a warm smile as she sat down, letting Gerard heat water for a pot of tea. "You are the woman of the house now, H el ene."

Armand snorted as a shaken H el ene began to do what she did every day, except that, this day, she did it in panties, a nightie and a negligee and with ribbons still around her braids. Maman insisted she put on a frilly apron to cook. It was a nervous, trembling girl who served Maman and Armand as she'd done almost every day since Armand came to live with them.

H el ene was busy making eggs and toast as Armand liked them, croissants for her mother and herself rising in the oven, when Armand suddenly gave a great snorting laugh. "You want to see your daughter, Madame?" he asked Gerard's mother, leering once more at the trim, feminine figure swishing about the kitchen, making his breakfast. "Well, here she is in the newspaper."

"Oh, doesn't she look so beautiful!" said Maman. "Look, H el ene, it's you!"

Blushing, Gerard edged to the table to look at the huge picture that seemed to extend down most of the paper. She was dancing with the Comte d'Embray and the caption said that. But she was 'the beautiful, new

companion' of the playboy Count, smiling up at him and looking, she was embarrassed to see, as if she adored the man who was pressing her so close to him. And her earrings! How long and incredible they looked in the picture. What had happened to them, she thought in a panic. If only she could talk to Vidal and explain. He might be able to get them back from the room she'd shared with Edmond.

They were barely finished breakfast, Gerard cleaning up, still in his apron, nightdress and negligee when Vidal arrived again at their door. He had several suitcases, of different shapes and sizes, some clearly wig or hat boxes which he had a chauffeur carry into the house.

"I thought you'd need a change of everything today," said Vidal cheerfully. "And I'd like to offer my services to all of you on this sunny day. I thought you'd enjoy the day out, maybe at Versailles and the Tuileries."

Maman shrieked at that while Gerard trembled. It had been so stressful to be out among women, particularly at the Count's house. Now, Vidal wanted her to go out where there were bound to be thousands of tourists, men and women, to stare at her. Surely, someone who saw her would notice she wasn't a woman at all.

"I was just telling H el ene to hurry up and pretty herself," said Maman. "I had planned to take her out and visit my friends but that can wait another day."

Vidal glanced at the blonde girl, her pinned hair-piece needing a little work, and recognized right away the strain she seemed to be under.

"You've seen this?" asked Armand with a sneer.

"Oh yes," said Vidal with an easy smile. "It doesn't do H el ene justice, does it? She's much more beautiful than she is in any photograph."

The girl looked up at him and blushed. "I'll need a couple of hours to be ready to go out," she said huskily in what Vidal thought of as her 'Bambi' voice.