

## 7. *The Last Ballgown*

How cleverly those skilful fingers fly through the clouds of pleats and flounces. And as Antonie sews, her mother and sister Emma lean forward to watch. They all talk, with their faces lit up by the lamp.

Yes – at last there was going to be dancing again – at a proper ball. God knows, it was long enough since the last time. The district seemed almost dead since Pastor Wiberg’s family had left. Just the one Christmas party at the mill, with those eternal games of forfeits, always the same – with the well and passing the hat round ... and then birthday at the vicarage, where you took your needlework along and listened whilst the governess and Fru Hansen played sonatas as duets.

Otherwise not the smallest thing – not even as much as an open-air dance ... . No, the last couple of years had been trying for young girls.

‘The last couple of years’ were actually eight or ten.

But when the days pass as they do for the widow and her daughters – you don’t notice how quickly they pass, and how soon they become years.

When spring arrived, Emma and Antonie would plant their potted plants out in the garden beds, and the two cherry trees on the lawn would be in full flower; the burning question would be whether there were going to be lots of cherries this year. Then the roses would bud, and the buds would flower, and

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the sisters sat through the long afternoons in the vine-covered arbour near the fence.

Out in the fields they were busy – so much to do; the parish clerk and the miller were already gathering in the hay.

Fancy it being so far on in the summer – ah yes, how time passes ... .

The summer passed altogether. The last asters were dashed to the ground by the storm. Emma and Antonie picked rowanberries to decorate the stove through the long winter.

Autumn was not so pleasant. With its eternal rain and fog, so thick that you couldn't even see up as far as the mill. But at least you could always see the road from the window, where Emma and Antonie took turns sitting on the window seat.

They knew every one of the horse teams in the district: the tenant farmer's black ones and the parish clerk's two brown ones and the doctor's gig with Lise. And as they all drove past down on the road, they said almost the same sentences about the same people every day.

It gets close to Christmas – Christmas with all its small secrets and joys – and the New Year arrives: white snow lies gleaming over the fields, the days grow longer and longer ... . And then it's spring again ... .

Yes, who would believe it? Can it really be coming up for thirty years since the widow with her two small girls moved into that little house – it's exactly twenty-six years.

Emma was eight years old at that time, and little Antonie was just four. They had gone to school in the vicarage with the Wibergs' governess. Then Emma was confirmed, and one fine day Antonie's turn came round as well – 'the little one', and now they were both 'grown up' ... .

Those were happy days – back then.

When the students came home for Christmas and summer holidays, it was like one giddy round of balls and picnics in the woods and amateur dramatics and fun.

And it may well be that the hazel walk in the vicarage garden could tell a tale or two; about a kiss, quickly stolen, a couple of words whispered by excited voices, and two hands which had sought each other hesitantly.

Then one winter's day they were down in the vicarage visiting Fru Wiberg, who was quite beside herself with joy and offered them wine and cakes – because they really must drink to *that* ... .

At last the vicar's wife told them what it was: 'Such happiness – just think what good news: our Otto has got engaged ... and what a match ... but little Frøken Emma, do take a cake – oh yes, what a match ... Wiberg says that the consul has sixty thousand a year ... ?

Emma spilt a little of her wine when they clinked glasses; and she and Antonie did not stay long. They walked quietly homewards side by side, without

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speaking. But when they reached the crossroads where they were concealed by the fence, Emma sat down on a stone and sobbed quietly.

Antonie knelt down on the frozen earth, took her sister's head in her hands, and she cried as well; she could think of no words of comfort.

Emma sobbed convulsively for a long time; then she controlled herself and stood up.

'Antonie,' she said, 'don't say anything to Mother ... she doesn't need to know ... why should we upset her?'

Antonie bowed her head in silence, and the two sisters walked home.

From that day on, everything was about Antonie – about 'the little one,' as she was still always called. It was as if Emma too had become her mother, and every shilling they saved was spent on Antonie alone; they spoke constantly about her future.

Yes, when 'the little one' gets her own home ... and when 'the little one' gets married, they would say. Mother would live with 'the little one,' and would be so comfortable and be looked after all day long ... . But Emma would leave home ... as a housekeeper or a teacher for small children (you don't need to know all that much in order to teach little creatures like that spelling and arithmetic).

But during the holidays she would visit.

No, no, she didn't want to live with them all the time ... a man doesn't get married to a whole family ... but in the holidays she would come.

So they spoke and made plans ... and the years passed ... .