

# The Lady Takes a Walk

A story you'll read twice

by WILLIAM BEVERLY

THE late afternoon sun broke through the clouds, swept across the gardens of the Tuilleries and filled the book-lined room with a warm, tawny glow. A few moments before she had thought it empty. As she made the usual round, watering the potted plants and ferns, she came upon the Comtesse Freya stretched out, eyes closed, on the *petit point* couch which faced the half-opened French windows.

"Tiens . . . tiens . . ." Louise muttered disapprovingly under her breath.

As the heavy door closed behind Louise, the Comtesse Freya stirred and stretched her lovely body in the sunlight, grateful for its warmth and cheerfulness. Well, indeed, might Louise have muttered, "*Tiens . . . tiens . . .*" under her breath. But Louise's shocked sensibilities or her problems of household management were of little concern to the Comtesse Freya.

It was good to lie in the sun on Pierre's sofa, in Pierre's book-filled room, with his things all about her. The years she had spent with Pierre had not dulled the pleasure she found in just being surrounded by his possessions. Next to being with him, to be with his things gave her a sense of security and joy.

And yet today she was afflicted with a vague unease. Why was Pierre away so long? Whenever he went out she was always impatient for his return, but today his absence seemed longer than usual.

Did Pierre still find her lovely? Would he always want to caress her sleek soft throat with his fingertips? Did he still find joy in her chiseled features?

The Comtesse Freya drew her shoulders together and her long slim face quivered slightly as she looked across the Seine. Where was Pierre? Why did he not return? Perhaps it was foolish, she pondered, to let her happiness be wrapped up so completely in one human being, but Pierre had never betrayed her faith.

Her thoughts, as she lay there, wandered back to her husband with a complete lack of emotion. Hers had been a marriage of convenience. Thorwald had been a good fellow, but not overly intelligent. The supreme passion of his life had been his army corps. For it he had lived and in it he had died.

She had really never known fulfillment until she came to live with Pierre. How well she remembered the day they had first met! She had been staying at the old General's palace. He had been her guardian from her earliest youth, and the guardian of her children. His ideas were strict, and he took his guardianship as seriously after Thorwald's death as he had before her marriage.

Of course she had a deep affection for the old General, but she was still young then, and romance still beckoned to her.

On that particular day, heady with the scents of spring, she had stolen, alone and unobserved, from the palace. She could remember with pleasure, even now, how soft and springy and free the turf had felt beneath her feet as she walked along the tree-shaded alleys of the *bois*. She had come to a little hidden place in the forest, where a grassy bank ran down to a little pool circled by sweet flowering shrubs.

She must have been lost in the spirit of the forest, trying to understand herself and the things that were surging within her, when she came upon Pierre.

How well she could recall that first sight of him, sitting on a bench in that enchanted spot, looking so lonely and so appealingly young. She had passed him self-appealingly and been slightly shocked to realize that she half hoped he would speak to her. She was forever being spoken to on the street, but always she had been superior to such encounters.

She realized, though, that if this man spoke to her . . . She turned and repassed him, and a sudden wild impulse led her to the bench where he was seated; beside him she sat down.

How had it all begun? How do such things spring into being? Something had stirred

within her, like no emotion she had ever felt before.

Her breath had quickened, as it was destined always to quicken when she thought of Pierre. Something swept over her that set her every nerve tingling.

She had gone to him boldly, like a waif from the streets. At the last moment it seemed that her courage must fail her; the sudden thought that he would despise her for the way she was throwing herself upon him recalled some of her long-schooled reserves.

But only for a moment. It had been lonely and she . . . she . . . It seemed as if he were the one person in the world she had always been waiting for. She had gone with him, unquestioning and armed only with a great faith.

The next morning Pierre telephoned the General's palace. There had naturally been considerable agitation about her failure to return and the news of it had reached Pierre through a mutual friend. Pierre spoke to the General himself. Their words were few:

Illustrated by  
Marshall Frantz

"Your Excellency, I should prefer to tell you the details of my person . . . Yes, your Excellency, I am in my rooms and will wait until you call."

She had realized that the interview with the General would be difficult, terribly difficult. Even now a tremor ran through her body as she remembered those long minutes while she and Pierre waited for the General to come to the Hotel Metropole. In those minutes she had made the decision which completely changed the course of her life.

She had sat and moved not a muscle when the General was announced into Pierre's rooms. The General was very polite but reserved, completely the master of himself and the moment. He and Pierre went into the sitting room and talked for a long time, in low, modulated tones. At times Pierre's voice seemed to be pleading, but the General's was firm. Finally the General returned, bowed curtly in his military fashion to Pierre, went to the door, opened it and turned to the Comtesse Freya. "Comtesse Freya," he said. It was an invitation, but the words were spoken as a command. Freya even now trembled at the memory of her abrupt independence. The General, her guardian, had dominated her from her earliest days, but not even he could bring her to leave Pierre.

There had been words, stormy words, words of outright command, but she had kept her courage and her determination. No word of the old General's penetrated to her heart, which was brimming over with love.

She was sorry for him. She could see that he was hurt and chagrined, that his pride and his affection were touched to the quick.



The General was terribly firm. Flatly he denied Pierre's demand

And then he went to the door and his last words to her were:

"Freya, you have made your choice. I have the power to force you to come with me, but that I will not do. This man you love. I had hoped that you and I . . . but I realize all too well that it is my fate only to have been your guardian. *Adieu, ma chère petite Freya!*"

There had been tears in the old General's eyes as he closed the door. The Comtesse Freya almost went to him, but she could not. When they were alone, once again, she went to Pierre. Close beside him, in the circle of his arm, she had thought that perhaps the pain of so much mingled joy and sadness might be lessened by his love. But it never had been.

The door opened and Pierre came into the study. Freya raised her head but he did not look toward the couch. He threw a bundle of books upon his desk and muttered to himself in a tired way: "What a rotten day!" Then he came to her and seated himself on the couch beside her.

"Oh, my lovely one!" he murmured as he stroked her throat and she kissed the fingers that caressed her. "You are so always beautiful." He smiled fondly. "And for news, I have

a treat for you. Tonight there will be no guests. We shall spend the evening here alone together. Louise will serve us our dinner before the fire. We will watch the lights of Paris. And tomorrow. Ah, tomorrow, we go to the country. To Normandy. There'll be rabbits to hunt and the sea to swim in."

The Comtesse Freya gave a little cry of delight and nestled closer beside him.

"And now *chérie*, if it would please you, a walk before dinner."

A moment or two later Louise, who always kept the kitchen door open (except when she cooked cabbage) that she might better know what went on in the house, heard Pierre say:

"But no, after you, *Madame la Comtesse.*" And the front door closed.

"*Madame la Comtesse . . . humph!*" Louise sniffed. "*Madame la Comtesse* to him! She's just a big overgrown person, the way he treats her. Why, you know when my mother died and I had to go home he dismissed the girl who came to take my place because she tied up that dog in the pantry to keep her off the library couch!"

The End