



C. F. Hibbard

Eleanora Vilanese caught my eye as a tantalizing ingenue, when Paolo first brought her to the stage. Although he played down to her at the outset, her ability to communicate the subtle intensities soon won her recognition as his peer, and the evolution of their love scenes from naive intimacy to consuming passion became legendary. Do you remember her as Mrs. Armitage in *The Fickle Bishop*? Only a husband, and wife with child, could have carried it off.

When Paolo died, as you know, she carried on bravely for many years, rising by virtue of her stunning presence and unfaltering youth to new pinnacles of triumph in the theater. As a result, she was continually caught up in a coterie of distinguished admirers, amongst whom she chose with great care. Word got about that she was curiously aloof in the bedchamber, and that Paolo was a hard act to follow, but the gossip did nothing to abate the fascination of the media for her peccadillos. A great actress was expected to have a train of disconsolate suitors, and her image as a loving woman was of the utmost importance to her career.

As a drama critic who had watched the tender image building, at

A Small Island

first dispassionately and then with the growing realization that she had captivated me entirely, I sensed the hopelessness of trying to replace Paolo in her life. Because I, who adored her, had always treated her work warmly in my reviews, I was admitted to a closer confidence than was her custom, yet I had always sensed a certain remoteness, a guarded withdrawal, when we were alone together. Perhaps she understood, was even prepared to tolerate, the depth of my feeling for her, as a measure of defense against those who sought her favors. In any event, I was the one she picked to stand in for Paolo at the wedding of their daughter, Carol.

She sat alone in the cathedral, on the right, presenting the exquisite profile atop a graceful white throat, the tawny hair gleaming under a tiny veil in the candlelight, and watched us out of one unblinking eye, like a bird, as we came down the aisle.

"Isn't she perfectly breathtaking?" whispered the bride, trembling on my arm.

"Incredibly," I whispered back, because it was true.

The dearly beloved had crowded the nave to the vestibule, where there was standing room only, because Eleanora Vilanese had invited the world to watch her play the gallant mother in this sensitive drama of young love. It was her wedding in a sense, not her daughter's, since she was the one they had come to see. The rest of us had only walk-on parts.

"She detests me, you know," murmured the beauty at my side, but there was no time to deny her. The dean was already intoning as we reached the steps to the choir.

"Into this Holy Estate these two persons come now to be joined . . ."

The radiant bride and the solemn groom exchanged a message of transparent secrecy in a glance.

"If either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together . . ."

Eleanora was staring straight ahead, but the famous ruby lips were quivering, like any good mother's.

"Wilt thou have this Woman . . .?"

The groom spoke out full throat, with eager resolve.

"Wilt thou have this Man . . .?"

"Oh, yes!" said Carol, her heart in her eyes. "Yes, I will!"

"Who giveth this Woman to be married to this Man?"

I handed away the bride with my most benign air, and seated myself beside her fabled mother. It was a little like sitting at the foot of a marble Aphrodite, I thought, for I was aware that all eyes were fixed on the statue.

So was Eleanora.

She dabbed daintily at her eyelids with a bit of lace, and swayed against me.

"Isn't it revolting?" she shuddered, without turning her head.

I was shocked.

"Whatever do you mean, my dear? They're obviously mad about each other."

"That's precisely what I mean, David," said Eleanora through her kerchief. "The little beast is actually in love with that oaf!"

I spoke soothingly into her ear, and tendrils of her fragrant hair brushed the tip of my nose.

"What a pity Paolo can't be here to see how happy she is."

She turned on me a look of utter incredulity.

"But how can she love him, David?" she hissed. "He's a nothing—a silly computer engineer, if you can imagine it, and she might have made a very rich marriage."

"I pronounce that they are Man and Wife," the dean droned on relentlessly.

"Perhaps they've found something of what you and Paolo had," I ventured, as an usher came forward to lead us up the aisle.

Again, the look of incredulity.

"She's an idiot," she breathed. "She's something Paolo did to me, and I can never forgive her for it. Not content with rupturing my body at birth and obliging me to stand by for weeks as a milch cow, she must make a mockery of my life by marrying a—a *computer* engineer!"

Then, becoming aware of her audience, she began to smile brilliantly from side to side and fluttered her fingertips in regal acknowledgement. It was time to strike the proper balance between gaiety and bereavement for the cameras clustered at the door, and Eleanora Vilanese was up to it. She played the role beautifully—beautifully, if you know what I mean.

She maintained a thoughtful silence as we were driven to the reception, but did offer me her gloved fingertips to hold.

"Dear David," she said, as I handed her out of the car. "You're such a comfort. I do wish I could love you."

It was hopeless, you see.

She was surrounded at once by a host of admirers, and the cameras clicked and spun as she was swept into the ballroom. When the bride and groom arrived later, the cameras were inside, gorging themselves on a feast of celebrities.

I fell into conversation at the punch bowl with a stolid executive I recognized as the chairman of a great corporation.

"Didn't I see you with Eleanora Vilanese at the wedding, Grimes?" he demanded enviously. "How on earth did you manage that?"

"We've been good friends for some time," said I casually. "I knew her when Paolo first took her under his wing."

He raised an eyebrow.

"What a stroke of luck for that nincompoop! I've always wanted to have a woman like that under my wing."

He strolled away.

The orchestra struck up on the dance floor, and the crowd at the punch bowl thinned out. To my astonishment and delight, Eleanora appeared magically out of the throng, which gave way in awe before her, and laid a hand on my arm.

"Come, my dear," she said. "The reception line is just forming, and I must have you by me to fend off the groom's parents."

She had acquired a fresh bouquet from some lovesick wretch at the door, and held it poised under her chin as she smiled up at me, wide-eyed and appealing.

"Dear David," she glimmered. "You must remind me to tell you about Paolo some time."

The insidious chores of the reception line did nothing to dampen her charm. She had a gracious word for everyone, and was even pleasant to her daughter.

"I've been thinking about the poor creature, David," she confided to me later, "and I've decided I've been difficult with Carol. She's really a harmless little thing, and I do believe she's devoted to me."

I took her up quickly.

"I know she is, Eleanora. It shows in her eyes."

"Her eyes are nice. She gets them from me, fortunately. But are you sure it's not just my—my notoriety that impresses her?"

"She'd love you if you were a charwoman."

The actress bit her lip in puzzlement.

"She was crying in the powder room, David, and she said it was for me."

"She loves you."

We were interrupted by one of her most persistent suitors, a power in Wall Street, but she sent him off for a glass of champagne.

"There goes a man not greatly different from all the rest, David, except for his wealth," she declared. "He's in a perfect dither over my body."

"One can scarcely blame him," I replied, and she looked at me askance.

"*Et tu, Brute,*" she said softly.

"I'm a man," said I.

A young fellow with flowing hair came up and swooned over her hand. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and shooed him away.

"That one's so young—too young," she lamented, "and very adept with his hands. He worships me, I think, but he doesn't excite me."

The banker returned with her champagne, and threw a proprietary arm about her waist.

"It was such a beautiful wedding, Eleanora," he prattled, with a salacious wink for me. "Doesn't it give you ideas?"

"Yes, Victor," she said primly, detaching his arm. "I'm resolved never to marry again."

He leaned toward her with a hungry leer, and his eyes nearly popped out on his cheeks.

"Marriage is not really essential," he chuckled.

She dismissed him with a look.

"If you'll excuse us, Victor. I'm having a little talk with David."

"Best of luck, Grimes," said he sarcastically, and backed off with a bow.

Eleanora drained her glass at a gulp, and beckoned to a waiter with a full tray.

"Let's face it, David," she observed grimly. "Marriage is a farce that demands the subtlest of acting skills. The whole idea of giving a woman to a man is comical. A happy woman is one who lives for herself."

She looked at me for reassurance, but I balked.

"Didn't you see Carol's face?" I protested. "She wasn't given. She gave herself, with love."

Her eyes found her daughter on the dance floor, where she swirled from one partner to another, head thrown back and pony tail tossing, laughing with abandoned delight.

"She looks happy enough," Eleanora mused, sipping delicately, "but I've given myself to the stage. Love is an illusion fostered by men to bolster the deception of wedlock. Thank God I've a career that absorbs me completely!"

"Too completely, perhaps," I suggested ruefully.

"Is it not enough to be famous and beautiful?" she gasped, twirling about airily, a little tipsy with the champagne. "You must admit I'm beautiful, David."

"I admit it," said I, as the waiter hurried up with a fresh glass.

She downed it and giggled at me through the bubbles. Her hair was coming undone in the back, and she was altogether desirable.

It was hopeless.

A handsome brute in an impeccable morning coat whirled her off, breathless, to the waltz, and the stolid executive returned to the punch bowl. He was obviously yearning to be presented to her.

"You've let her get away from you, Grimes," he wheezed. "Are you mad? I think she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!"

"In all probability, she is," I assented readily. "Have you seen her latest play?"

"Three times," said he. "I like the part in the nightgown. I've always wanted to know a woman who could love like that."

"She's a great actress," said I.

Eleanora returned alone from the dance floor, adjusting her velvet skirt. She was not quite sure of her footing.

"Take me home, David," she commanded imperiously. "If I've

told that son of a bitch once, I've told him a hundred times. I'll not be stroked like one of his prize mares."

"This is Edward MacIvor, the chairman of UDK, Eleanora," I offered uncomfortably, and the stolid executive put down his cigar hastily and advanced on her with a lascivious grin.

"I don't care if it's God," she snapped, weaving slightly. "Please take me home."

At the penthouse, she dismissed the servants, let down her hair and kicked off her flimsy slippers. She had lovely feet, and was never reluctant to show them off.

"Now I shall tell you about Paolo," she said.

Stretched languorously on the chaise longue, her arm pillowing her tawny head, she studied me in solemn silence for some time, every elegant contour of her body an unspoken invitation.

"You're tired," said I. "Perhaps I should be going."

"Dear David," she sighed, wriggling her long toes in silk. "It's such a pleasure to have you about, because you demand nothing."

"To be with you is enough," I answered humbly.

She watched quietly while I lit a cigarette, affecting a carelessness I didn't feel.

"Are you really so impregnable?" she asked lightly.

"Tell me about Paolo," I said.

Suddenly her face was drawn.

"He was a stud!" she spat. "He loved no one but himself!"

"Did you love him?"

Once more, her gaze was incredulous.

"Not even his women loved him, nor he them."

"How in the world did you come to marry him, then?"

She brooded.

"Before I knew him, he was attractive to me, and he had a great presence on the stage. He told me he needed someone very—very beautiful!" She bit off the word. "Surpassingly was the word he used. A surpassingly beautiful woman, to enable him to fulfill himself. He offered to kiss my feet if I would throw in with him, and I fell for it."

"I trust you didn't let him."

"He never tried."

"What about Carol?"

"Poor little thing! She's the one who survived to carry the blame."

"There must have been something between you at the time."

"The child was a mistake. We were both drunk."

"He found you irresistible."

"He found me irresistible, but he did not love me."

Her voice was hoarse with anger and contempt, and I sought to comfort her.

"You certainly never let your true feelings show on the stage with him, Eleanora," I said.

"Am I not Eleanora Vilanese?" she asked haughtily.

"I thank God for that!" said I, moving toward her hesitantly.

"He insisted that I have an abortion, because a child would cloud our image, but I refused."

"The bastard! He was only a player."

"That's it," she murmured. "A player at love. He never slept with me again."

I got down clumsily on the floor beside her.

"Then he gave you absolutely nothing, Eleanora."

"Nothing," she said flatly, "except the realization that there is no such thing as love."

"But there is!" I retorted passionately. "Only today, you watched your daughter, Carol, make love to her husband with her eyes. Couldn't you sense that there was something almost palpable between them?"

She stroked the top of my head with a silken toe.

"If there is something between them, David, I'm glad, but I simply don't understand what it is, and don't want to."

I looked up to see that her eyes were closed. The lashes which guarded them were incredibly long, but they were her own.

"The stage is everything to me," she went on. "I do love the cheers and the applause, but they're for me, you see."

As I searched her still face for a flicker of warmth, I could tell that she was blind, love-blind, to the devotion in my own eyes. It was hopeless, if you know what I mean.

"You must be aware that love is something one gives," I mumbled disconsolately. "It's not to be taken up like a collection, Eleanora."

She regarded me with amusement, and patted my cheek.

"You've become a philosopher, David," she beamed. "You must write a play."

"I know what I'm talking about," said I, "because I happen to love you very much."

Her cool fingertips toyed with my ear.

"You're different, David. I believe you do," she said, "It's too bad

you didn't catch me before Paolo did, because it's barely possible I could have learned to love you."

I yearned up at her.

"It's not too late," I pleaded.

"It is too late!" she replied heatedly. "Don't you understand that to be without the power to love is like wanting desperately to see, or to hear, and simply being unable to? It's an infirmity I can't do a damned thing about, though God knows I've tried!"

I took her slender wrists in my hands and kissed her palms.

"Let me be your eyes and ears, then," said I. "I love you more than enough for both of us."

She was gay again.

"Do you find me irresistible, David?"

"No. I love you."

She leaned over me and gently took my head in her arms, to cuddle my face in the parting of her breasts.

"Poor thing!" she whispered. "You shall have a reward for your suffering."

She got to her feet and drew me up insistently. The warmth of her body against me was maddening, and I could feel her sweet breath on my lips.

"You would do this for me?" I wondered.

"If I didn't think I'd enjoy it, David, I shouldn't throw myself at you," she gleamed.

"But you will do it just for me?"

Her lips brushed mine.

"Isn't it what you've always wanted?"

"I have wanted your love."

Her face was a study.

"I'm truly sorry I've none to give you. Paolo has tutored me too well."

"Love is an illusion," I quoted her bitterly, "and I'm only a man."

She stamped a stockinged foot.

"I'll give you what I can, David. You had best take me while I'm in the mood."

I sat down heavily on the chaise and put my head in my hands.

"That's not enough, Eleanora. I need all of you. Couldn't you act just a little?"

There was a long silence. My temples throbbed agonizingly as I sought to get my thoughts straight. Then she drew my hands away from

my face and peered down into my eyes.

"For you, David," she beguiled me, "perhaps just a little."

"But I must remember it's just acting."

"I'm afraid so. Yes."

I got up deliberately and turned away from her.

"Really, I must go, my dear," I said.

She watched me as far as the door, then stole up behind me and put her arms about my neck, feeling for my lips with her fingers.

"It needn't *all* be acting, dear," she temporized.

I spun about and took her furiously in my arms.

"See here," I said gruffly. "You're not compromising your ideals, Eleanora. Simply by being with me and being loved as you are, you're giving me something very precious in spite of yourself. Will you marry me?"

Her face was buried in my shirtfront. She stiffened, but did not draw back. I think she was taken with the idea.

"I've been terribly selfish," she said, her voice muffled.

"You're learning to love," said I.

She looked up appealingly, and there were tears in her eyes.

"It's something I could do for you and Carol, David."

"Then you will marry me!" I cried, my heart singing.

"Yes, dear," she said, raising the ruby lips for my kiss. "as soon as my play has run its course. We shall find a small island, where I can have you all to myself."

