

A Masked Ball

ACT I

Scene one – A room in the king's palace Officers and courtiers outwardly praise their noble sovereign Gustavo and pledge fidelity. The king reviews petitions and a party guest list, on which he sees the name of his secret love Amelia. He is at once lost in private reflection. After the retinue leaves, Anckarström, the king's secretary, observes his sad demeanor. Gustavo cannot reveal his inner thoughts to his friend, for Anckarström is also Amelia's husband. The count knows of a covert plot, hatched by Counts Horn and Ribbing, and advises caution. Gustavo shuns his friend's concern.

The chief justice Armfelt and the page Oscar bring another issue before the king, the proposed expulsion of Mam'zelle Ulrica Arvidson, a dangerous gypsy. Pleading for an acquittal, Oscar sings her praises, claiming her ability to tell one's fortune knows no peers. Gustavo agrees to visit her incognito in order to validate these claims.

Scene two – Ulrica's dwelling Women gather as Ulrica prepares to reveal their fortunes. Gustavo quietly enters, disguised. Christian, a sailor, breaks through the crowd and demands to know his destiny. Gustavo secretly writes a naval commission and slips it in his pocket with some gold. The gypsy promises wealth and advancement, and Christian empties his pockets to joyously discover that the truth has been foretold. Gustavo spots the livery of Amelia's servants and lingers in the shadows after the others are dismissed. Amelia unburdens her heart as the gypsy listens – she is tormented by an uncontrollable love. Ulrica advises her to pick and consume an herb that will control her ardor. Unfortunately, it can only be obtained in a place of horror, the gallows beyond the city gates. Amelia vows to undertake the ghastly mission and leaves by a side door.

The disguised king's entourage enters and demands that Ulrica tell Gustavo his fate. Sensing danger, she hesitates, but on the king's insistence she discloses that he will soon be murdered by a friend, the next person to shake his hand. Gustavo extends his hand to the crowd, but no one dares to take it. When Anckarström enters and greets his friend warmly, Gustavo will not believe he could be killed by his closest comrade. As the gypsy's magic is now suspect, he banishes her from the kingdom, though Ulrica still warns treachery is among them in that very room.

ACT II

A desolate field on the outskirts of Stockholm As the clock strikes midnight, Amelia trembles at the task before her while surrounded by the spirits of so many dead. Gustavo emerges from the darkness, attempting to frustrate her plans to obtain the suppressing potion – their love must endure – and Amelia is eventually convinced. Suddenly Anckarström enters, unaware of what has just transpired between the two lovers or even his wife's identity. He has come to save the king, for the conspirators are closing in. They exchange cloaks and Gustavo extracts a promise from his friend – he must quietly escort the mysterious hooded lady back to safety without asking any questions. As Ribbing and Horn move in, they realize that Anckarström is not the king. In the ensuing skirmish, Amelia's identity is revealed, much to everyone's surprise.

ACT III

Scene one – A room Anckarström berates his adulterous wife, promising to put her to death for her crimes. Amelia pleads for her life and begs to see her son one last time as she leaves the room. Anckarström vows to be avenged and agrees to join Horn and Ribbing in their quest to murder their sovereign, demanding to be the one to strike the fatal blow. Both Horn and Ribbing lay claim to that right, for they too have been wronged, and the three men agree to draw lots. Amelia reenters and senses evil is afoot when her husband insists that an “innocent” hand draw the winning name. Nervously, Amelia complies and Anckarström is chosen as the proud victor.

Oscar enters, inviting all to attend a masked ball at the palace that very evening. Amelia fears for her lover as the others savor the perfect opportunity to extract their revenge.

Scene two – A room in the palace Gustavo’s mind is clouded by guilt. With painful resolve, he has decided to appoint Anckarström as ambassador to Finland, thus removing Amelia from Sweden and the potential for any further transgressions. Oscar arrives with a cryptic note warning Gustavo of danger at the party, but the king refuses to be intimidated – he must see Amelia one last time.

Scene three – A resplendent ballroom in the palace The conspirators fear Gustavo will not come to the masked ball. Oscar recognizes Anckarström and confirms the king is among them, but will not divulge his true identity (at least, not without compensation). Anckarström counters by claiming his message is urgent, and Gustavo would find it derelict if the page does not follow his duty.

Across the room, Amelia pleads for Gustavo to leave the party, or face death at the hands of his enemies, but he will not be persuaded. As they share a final, tender moment, Anckarström comes out of the crowd and stabs the king. Oscar identifies the murderer, but in his dying breaths, Gustavo confirms that Amelia is blameless and pardons his longtime friend.