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NORSE TALES AND SKETCHES

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Norse Tales and Sketches

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In an elegant suite of chambers in the Rue Castiglione sat a merry party at dessert.

Senhor José Francisco de Silvis was a short-legged, dark-complexioned Portuguese, one of those who usually come from Brazil with incredible wealth, live incredible lives in Paris, and, above all, become notorious by making the most incredible acquaintances.

In that little company scarcely anybody, except those who had come in pairs, knew his neighbour. And the host himself knew his guests only through casual meetings at balls, *tables d' hôte*, or in the street.

Senhor de Silvis laughed much, and talked loudly of his success in life, as is the habit of rich foreigners; and as he could not reach up to the level of the Jockey Club, he gathered the best company he could find. When he met anyone, he immediately asked for the address, and sent next day an invitation to a little dinner. He spoke all languages, even German, and one could see by his face that he was not a little proud when he called over the table: Mein lieber Herr Doctor! Wie geht's Ihnen?'

There was actually a live German doctor among this merry party. He had an overgrown light-red beard, and that Sedan smile which invariably accompanies the Germans in Paris.

The temperature of the conversation rose with the champagne; the sounds of fluent and broken French were

mingled with those of Spanish and Portuguese. The ladies lay back in their chairs and laughed. The guests already knew each other well enough not to be reserved or constrained. Jokes and *bons-mots* passed over the table, and from mouth to mouth. 'Der liebe Doctor' alone engaged in a serious discussion with the gentleman next to him—a French journalist with a red ribbon in his buttonhole.

And there was one more who was not drawn into the general merriment. He sat on the right of Mademoiselle Adèle, while on the left was her new lover, the corpulent Anatole, who had surfeited himself on truffles.

During dinner Mademoiselle Adèle had endeavoured, by many innocent little arts, to infuse some life into her right-hand neighbour. However, he remained very quiet, answering her courteously, but briefly, and in an undertone.

At first she thought he was a Pole—one of those very tiresome specimens who wander about and pretend to be outlaws. However, she soon perceived that she had made a mistake, and this piqued Mademoiselle Adèle. For one of her many specialties was the ability to immediately 'assort' all the foreigners with whom she mingled, and she used to declare that she could guess a man's nationality as soon as she had spoken ten words with him.

But this taciturn stranger caused her much perplexed cogitation. If he had only been fair-haired, she would at once have set him down as an Englishman, for he talked like one. But he had dark hair, a thick black moustache, and a nice little figure. His fingers were remarkably long, and he had a peculiar way of trifling with his bread and playing with his dessert-fork.

'He is a musician,' whispered Mademoiselle Adèle to her stout friend.

'Ah!' replied Monsieur Anatole. 'I am afraid I have eaten too many truffles.'

Mademoiselle Adèle whispered in his ear some words of good counsel, upon which he laughed and looked very affectionate.

However, she could not relinquish her hold of the interesting foreigner. After she had coaxed him to drink several glasses of champagne, he became livelier, and talked more.

'Ah!' cried she suddenly; 'I hear it in your speech. You are an Englishman!'

The stranger grew quite red in the face, and answered quickly, 'No, madame.'

Mademoiselle Adèle laughed. 'I beg your pardon. I know that Americans feel angry when they are taken for Englishmen.'

'Neither am I an American,' replied the stranger.

This was too much for Mademoiselle Adèle. She bent over her plate and looked sulky, for she saw that Mademoiselle Louison opposite was enjoying her defeat.

The foreign gentleman understood the situation, and added, half aloud: 'I am an Irishman, madame.'

'Ah!' said Mademoiselle Adèle, with a grateful smile, for she was easily reconciled.

'Anatole! Irishman—what is that?' she asked in a whisper.

'The poor of England,' he whispered back.

'Indeed!'

Adèle elevated her eyebrows, and cast a shrinking, timid glance at the stranger. She had suddenly lost much of her interest in him.

De Silvis's dinners were excellent. The party had sat long at table, and when Monsieur Anatole thought of the oysters with which the feast had begun, they appeared to him like a beautiful dream. On the contrary, he had a somewhat too lively recollection of the truffles.

Dinner was over; hands were reaching out for glasses, or trifling with fruit or biscuits.

That sentimental blonde, Mademoiselle Louison, fell into meditation over a grape that she had dropped in her champagne glass. Tiny bright air-bubbles gathered all round the coating of the fruit, and when it was quite covered with these shining white pearls, they lifted the heavy grape up through the wine to the surface.

'Look!' said Mademoiselle Louison, turning her large, swimming eyes upon the journalist, 'look, white angels are bearing a sinner to heaven!'

'Ah! *charmant*, mademoiselle! What a sublime thought!' exclaimed the journalist, enraptured.

Mademoiselle Louison's sublime thought passed round the table, and was much admired. Only the frivolous Adèle whispered to her obese admirer, 'It would take a good many angels to bear you, Anatole.'

Meanwhile the journalist seized the opportunity; he knew how to rivet the general attention. Besides, he was glad to escape from a tiresome political controversy with the German; and, as he wore a red ribbon and affected the superior journalistic tone, everybody listened to him.

He explained how small forces, when united, can lift great burdens; and then he entered upon the topic of the day—the magnificent collections made by the press for the sufferers by the floods in Spain, and for the poor of Paris. Concerning this he had much to relate, and every moment he said 'we,' alluding to the press. He talked himself quite warm about 'these millions, that we, with such great self-sacrifice, have raised.'

But each of the others had his own story to tell. Numberless little touches of nobility—all savouring of self-denial—came to light from amidst these days of luxury and pleasure.

Mademoiselle Louison's best friend—an insignificant little lady who sat at the foot of the table—told, in spite, of Louison's protest, how the latter had taken three poor seamstresses up to her own rooms, and had them sew the whole of the night before the *fête* in the hippodrome. She had given the poor girls coffee and food, besides payment.

Mademoiselle Louison suddenly became an important personage at table, and the journalist began to show her marked attention.

The many pretty instances of philanthropy, and Louison's swimming eyes, put the whole company into a quiet, tranquil, benevolent frame of mind, eminently in keeping with the weariness induced by the exertions of the feast. And this comfortable feeling rose yet a few degrees higher after the guests were settled in soft easy-chairs in the cool drawing-room.

There was no other light than the fire in the grate. Its red glimmer crept over the English carpet and up the gold

borders in the tapestry; it shone upon a gilt picture-frame, on the piano that stood opposite, and, here and there, on a face further away in the gloom. Nothing else was visible except the red ends of cigars and cigarettes.

The conversation died away. The silence was broken only by an occasional whisper or the sound of a coffee-cup being put aside; each seemed disposed to enjoy, undisturbed, his genial mood and the quiet gladness of digestion. Even Monsieur Anatole forgot his truffles, as he reclined in a low chair close to the sofa, on which Mademoiselle Adèle had taken her seat.

'Is there no one who will give us a little music?' asked Senhor de Silvis from his chair. 'You are always so kind, Mademoiselle Adèle.'

'Oh no, no!' cried Mademoiselle; 'I am too tired.'

But the foreigner—the Irishman—rose from his corner and walked towards the instrument.

'Ah, you will play for us! A thousand thanks, Monsieur ——.' Senhor de Silvis had forgotten the name—a thing that often happened to him with his guests.

'He is a musician,' said Mademoiselle Adèle to her friend. Anatole grunted admiringly.

Indeed, all were similarly impressed by the mere way in which he sat down and, without any preparation, struck a few chords here and there, as if to wake the instrument.

Then he began to play—lightly, sportively, frivolously, as befitted the situation. The melodies of the day were intermingled with fragments of waltzes and ballads; all the ephemeral trifles that Paris hums over for eight days he blended together with brilliantly fluent execution.

The ladies uttered exclamations of admiration, and sang a few bars, keeping time with their feet. The whole party followed the music with intense interest; the strange artist had hit their mood, and drawn them all with him from the beginning. 'Der liebe Doctor' alone listened with the Sedan smile on his face; the pieces were too easy for him.

But soon there came something for the German too; he nodded now and then with a sort of appreciation.

It was a strange situation: the piquant fragrance that filled the air, the pleasure-loving women—these people, so free and unconstrained, all strangers to one another, hidden in the elegant, half-dark salon, each following his most secret thoughts—thoughts born of the mysterious, muffled music; whilst the firelight rose and fell, and made everything that was golden glimmer in the darkness.

And there constantly came more for the doctor. From time to time he turned and signed to De Silvis, as he heard the loved notes of 'unser Schumann,' 'unser Beethoven,' or even of 'unser famoser Richard.'

Meanwhile the stranger played on, steadily and without apparent effort, slightly inclined to the left, so as to give power to the bass. It sounded as if he had twenty fingers, all of steel; he knew how to unite the multitudinous notes in a single powerful clang. Without any pause to mark the transition from one melody to another, he riveted the interest of the company by constant new surprises, graceful allusions, and genial combinations, so that even the least musical among them were constrained to listen with eager attention.