

Siesta

By Alexander L. Kielland

In one of those elegant bachelors' lodgings in Rue Castiglione a merry company lingered over the dessert.

Señor Jose Francisco de Silvis was a Portuguese, short in stature, black as a coal. He was one of those Brazilians who are wont to cross the ocean with incredible fortunes, to lead incredible lives in Paris, and to distinguish themselves, above all things, by making the most incredible acquaintances.

At this little dinner-party there was hardly one who was acquainted with his neighbor on the right, or on the left; excepting, of course, those coming together. The host himself had met them either at a ball, or at table-d'hôte, or in the street.

Señor de Silvis laughed loudly, talked loudly, wherever he went, as rich foreigners always do. Not being able to gain *entrée* into the Jockey Club, he collected around himself whatsoever he happened upon. He immediately asked for the address. The next day he sent an invitation for a small dinner-party.

He spoke all languages—indeed, even German. One could see that he was not a little proud when he called across the table, "*Mèin lieber Herr Doktor!—wie geht's Ihnen?*"

And there was, too, a real bodily German doctor in the party, with an exuberant beard, as red as fire, and that smile of Sedan, worn by all Germans in Paris.

The temperature of the entertainment rose with the champagne. Fluent French and murdered French alternated with Spanish and Portuguese. The ladies leaned back in their chairs and laughed. The party was soon sufficiently acquainted to cast aside all embarrassment. Jesting and witty words flew over the table from mouth to mouth. The "lieber Doktor" alone discussed seriously with his neighbor—a French journalist, with a red ribbon in his button-hole.

And there was still another present who did not allow himself to be carried away with the general gayety. He sat at the right of Mademoiselle Adele. On her left sat her new admirer, the corpulent Anatole, who had been eating excessively of the truffles.

During the meal Mademoiselle Adele had attempted, by many harmless little devices, to enliven her neighbor on the right. But he remained quiet, answered courteously, but shortly and in a low voice.

She thought at first that he was a Pole; one of those most wearisome of creatures, who travel about and play the despised. But she soon discovered that she had erred. That annoyed Mademoiselle Adele.

It was one of her many accomplishments to be able to distinguish, at the first glance, the many foreigners whom she encountered. And she was wont to declare that she could guess the nationality of a man as soon as he had exchanged ten words with her.

But this taciturn stranger was the source of much perplexity to her. If he had only been blond! Then she would at once have made him an Englishman, for he spoke like one. But he had black hair, a heavy dark mustache, and a fine petit figure. His fingers were remarkably long, and he had a peculiar way of crumbling the bread and playing with the dessert-fork.

"He is a musician," whispered Mademoiselle Adele to her corpulent friend.

"Ah," replied Monsieur Anatole, "I fear that I have eaten too many truffles."

Mademoiselle Adele again whispered some good advice into his ear, whereupon he laughed and appeared smitten with love.

Meanwhile, however, she could not neglect the interesting stranger. After she had enticed him to drink several glasses of champagne, he became livelier and more talkative.

“Oh,” she suddenly cried out, “I perceive by your speech that you are certainly an Englishman!”

The stranger blushed and hastily replied, “No, madam!”

Mademoiselle Adele laughed.

“Pardon me,” she said; “I know, Americans are always vexed when one takes them for English.”

“I am not an American either,” returned the stranger.

This was too much for Mademoiselle Adele. She bent over her plate and seemed very much embarrassed. Then, indeed, she observed that Mademoiselle Louison, sitting opposite to her, was delighted with her blunder.

The strange gentleman understood this, and added, half aloud: “I am an Irishman, madam.”

“Ah,” uttered Mademoiselle Adele, with a grateful smile, for she was easily reconciled.

“Anatole—Irishman! What is that?” she whispered.

“They are the poor in England,” he whispered in reply.

“So!—hem!” Mademoiselle Adele raised her eyebrows and cast a sly glance at her neighbor on the right. With one stroke he had completely swept away her interest in him.

De Silvis’s dinner was excellent. They had been long sitting at the table. When Monsieur Anatole remembered the oysters, which had introduced the menu, they were to him like a pleasant dream. The truffles, on the contrary, continued to be to him a lasting reality.

The dinner proper was ended. Now and then some one lifted his glass again, or culled from the dish one of the choice fruits or little bon-bons.

Tender hearted, blond Mademoiselle Louison was lost in deep reverie over a grape which she had dropped into her champagne glass.

“Look,” cried Mademoiselle Louison, turning her great, liquid eyes towards the journalist; “see how the white angels bear a sinner towards heaven!”

“Ah, charming! mademoiselle. What a sublime idea!” cried the enraptured journalist in return.

Mademoiselle Louison’s sublime idea made the circuit of the table, and was generally applauded. The frivolous Adele alone whispered to her corpulent admirer: “Really, ’twould take a whole host of angels to carry you to heaven, Anatole!”

The journalist, in the interim, knew how to grasp the opportunity and arrest the general attention of the company. Furthermore, he was happy at the prospect of escaping a wearisome political discussion with the German. And since he wore the red ribbon in his button-hole, and, in addition, had the matchless, important tone of a journalist, the entire party gave him audience.

He explained how small forces, when combined in operation, can bear such great burdens. And then he passed to the topic of the day: The magnificent collections of the press for sufferers from the floods in Spain and for the destitute in Paris.

He had much to relate. Every moment he spoke of the press as “we,” while in the heat of his eloquence he talked of “these millions which we have raised with such enormous sacrifices.”

But each of the others also had his story to tell. Innumerable traits, small or noble, were revealed on these days of festivities and pleasures. And all of them savored somewhat of self-sacrifice.

Mademoiselle Louison's best friend, an unimportant lady, whose place was almost at the foot of the table, related, despite Louison's protest, how three poor sewing-girls had come to her own lodgings, and how she had made them sew the whole night on her gown for the celebration at the Hippodrome. Moreover, in addition to their wages, she had generously given these poor girls coffee and cake!

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

These many noble incidents of benevolence and Louison's liquid eyes inspired the entire company with a feeling of repose, satisfaction, and sympathy for mankind, which was most eminently fitting to the weariness following the fatigue of the meal.

Indeed, this feeling of comfort mounted even a few degrees higher, when they came to rest themselves in the soft arm-chairs of the little cool salon.

There was no other light here than the glow from the open fireplace. Its ruddy brightness stole softly across the English carpet and ascended to the golden cornices of the hangings; it played upon the gilded frames of the paintings, touched the piano which stood near the chimney; here and there it fell also upon a face, wonderfully illumining and reclaiming it from the darkness. Otherwise nothing was visible except the red, glowing tips of cigars and cigarettes.

The entertainment began to flag; only a whisper now and then, or the clink of a coffee-cup disturbed the silence.

Every one seemed inclined to surrender himself undistracted to the still enjoyment of his digestive powers and his philanthropic temperament. Even Monsieur Anatole forgot his truffles, while he stretched himself out in the low easy-chair near the sofa, on which Mademoiselle Adele had seated herself.

"Is there no one present who can give us a little music?" inquired Señor de Silvis. "You are always wont to be so obliging, Mademoiselle Adele."

"Oh dear, no—no!" cried Mademoiselle. "I've been eating too heartily!" at the same time, leaning back upon the sofa, she drew up her little feet, and, with a satisfied air, folded her hands across her breast.

But the stranger, the Irishman, emerged from his corner, and advanced to the piano.

"Oh! you're going to play something for us! Many thanks—Monsieur—hem, Monsieur—" Señor de Silvis had forgotten the name, a thing happening very often, indeed, with his guests.

"You see, he is a musician!" said Mademoiselle Adele to her friend. Anatole answered with a grunt of admiration.

There was something else. The others also perceived it at once, noticing the manner in which he sat down and struck a few chords here and there to awaken the instrument, as it were.

He then began to play—sportively, flightily, frivolously—just as the mood was upon him.

The melodies of the day whirled away into gay waltzes and tuneful glees; all those insignificant popular tunes hummed by all Paris for the past week he snatched up and executed with spirit and fluency.

The ladies cried out with astonishment, sang a few bars in accompaniment, beat time softly on the floor. The entire company followed him with intense interest. He had gained their sympathy, and carried them away with him from the very begin-ning. The "lieber Herr Doktor" alone listened with that Sedan smile. Such things were too simple for him.

But soon there was something for even the German. He nodded now and then somewhat approvingly.

A bit of Chopin burst forth and wonderfully accorded with the general temperament—the pungent fragrantcy filling the air, the gay women, the men so frank, so unconcerned, each strange to the other, lost in the obscurity of the dusky salon, each following his own most secret thoughts, borne along by the mysterious, half-distinct, half-confused music, while the light of the open fireplace brightened now, now sank back again, causing everything golden to glimmer with a faint, trembling glow.

And now there was still more for the doctor. From time to time he turned towards De Silvis and motioned to him whenever the harmonious sounds suggested “our Schumann,” “our Beethoven,” or, indeed, “our famous Richard.”

Meanwhile the stranger continued playing, slightly inclined to the left, though without effort, in order to put more force into the bass. It sounded as if he had twenty fingers—all of steel. He knew how to assemble a multitude of tones, so that the instrument itself produced one powerful, united, distinct sound. Not stopping, not marking the transitions, by ever newly recurring surprises, imitations, happy combinations he fixed their attention so firmly that even the most unmusical person was forced to follow him with rapture.

Wholly unnoticed, the music changed its character. The artist played the deep tones uninterruptedly. He then inclined himself more and more upon the left, and there arose a wonderful commotion in the bass. The anabaptists of the *Prophet* approached with heavy steps; a knight from the *Damnation de Faust* mounted from the depths below with that desperate, hobbling, diabolical gallop.

More and more it rumbled and thundered in the deeper tones, and Monsieur Anatole began to feel the truffles anew. Mademoiselle Adele leaned half forward from the sofa; the music would not allow her to rest in peace.

Here and there the chimney-fire was reflected in a pair of black eyes staringly fixed upon the player. He had bewitched them; they could now no longer detach themselves from him; he led them ever deeper down, down, down, where the sound was muffled and gloomily muttered with lamentations and threats.

“He manages his left hand marvellously,” said the doctor. But De Silvis did not hear him; like the others, he sat in breathless suspense.

A mysterious, oppressive fear stole out from the music and brooded over the whole assembly.

The artist seemed to clench his left hand into a fist, which could never again relax, while with his right he cast hither and thither descants of sounds leaping aloft like sparkling flames. It sounded as if something dismal, horrible had been committed in the cellar, while those up-stairs were dancing, laughing, and amusing themselves under the resplendent candelabra.

There was heard a sigh, a low cry from one of the ladies who felt unwell, but no one took notice of it. The performer was now wholly occupied with the bass, on which he was playing with both hands. His tireless fingers rapidly mingled the sounds together, so that cold chills ran up and down the backs of his hearers.

There was, however, a gradual ascension from the threatening, tumultuous lower sounds to the higher notes. The tones ran into each other, over each other, past each other, upward, ever upward, but never seeming to advance. There arose a wild tumult, a struggle to reach the top. They swarmed like little black demons, fighting, wrangling, full of raging wrath, feverish hurry, climbing, clinging, clinching with hands and teeth, each kicking, crushing the other with its feet, cursing, shrieking, praying—and, meanwhile, his hands glided along the keys so slowly, oh, so painfully slowly!

“Anatole,” whispered Mademoiselle Adele, as pale as a ghost, “he is playing the ‘Poverty!’”

“Oh, dear!—those truffles!” moaned Anatole, beginning to writhe with pain.

The salon suddenly became as bright as day. Two servants entered from behind the portière with lamps and candelabra. At the same moment the strange musician stopped playing, with all the might of his steeled fingers striking a discord so impossible, so startling that the entire party instantly sprang to their feet.

“Away with the lamps!” cried De Silvis.

“No, no!” shrieked Mademoiselle Adele; “come in with the light. I’m afraid in the dark. Oh, the horrible creature!”

“Who was he?—yes,—who was he?” And they involuntarily thronged round their host. Nor did they notice that the stranger had slipped out behind the servants.

De Silvis tried to laugh it off by saying:

“I think it was the devil. Come, let us go to the opera!”

“To the opera? Not for the world,” cried Louison. “I won’t listen to any music for a fortnight. Ugh! think of that crowd on the opera stair-way!”

“Oh, my truffles!” howled Anatole.

The company broke up. They all suddenly realized that they were strangers in a strange place. Each one desired to steal away home and be alone by himself.

On accompanying Mademoiselle Louison to her carriage the journalist said: “There, you see, that’s the result of allowing one’s self to be persuaded to accept the invitations of one of those half-barbarians. One never knows what sort of a crowd one will meet.”

“Oh, dear, yes! He has quite put me out of humor,” replied Louison, plaintively, all the time lifting her liquid eyes appealingly to him. “But won’t you accompany me to Trinity? I know that a quiet mass will be read there at midnight.”

The journalist bowed acquiescence, and took his place beside her in the carriage.

While Mademoiselle Adele and Monsieur Anatole, on the other hand, were passing the English apothecary in Rue de la Paix, the latter bade the coachman stop, and said, “No,” beseechingly to her, “I think I must be put down here and have them give me something for my truffles. You won’t be angry with me? But, you see—the music—”

“Please do not let it trouble you in the least, my friend. To be frank, I think that neither of us is in a specially happy mood to-night. Well, good-night! *Auf Wiedersehen* to-morrow!”

She leaned back in the cushions of the carriage. She felt relieved. She was alone. And the frivolous creature wept, as if she had been whipped! She was then driven home.

Of course Anatole was suffering extremely from the truffles, but it seemed to him that he felt better the moment the carriage rolled away.

Since the time that they had become acquainted they were never so satisfied with one another as at this very moment of parting.

But the one who had best recovered from the affair was the “lieber Herr Doktor,” for, being a German, he had become inured as far as the music was concerned.

Notwithstanding this, however, he resolved to stroll off to the *brasserie* Muller in Rue Richelieu, to drink over it a good square pint of German beer, with a bit of ham, perhaps.