



A MUMMER'S TALE

BY

ANATOLE FRANCE

A TRANSLATION

BY

CHARLES E. ROCHE



CONTENTS

CHAPTER

- I.
- II.
- III.
- IV.
- V.
- VI.
- VII.
- VIII.
- IX.
- X.
- XI.
- XII.
- XIII.
- XIV.
- XV.
- XVI.
- XVII.
- XVIII.
- XIX.
- XX.

A MUMMER'S TALE

CHAPTER I



he scene was an actress's dressing-room at the Odéon.

Félicie Nanteuil, her hair powdered, with blue on her eyelids, rouge on her cheeks and ears, and white on her neck and shoulders, was holding out her foot to Madame Michon, the dresser, who was fitting on a pair of little black slippers with red heels. Dr. Trublet, the physician attached to the theatre, and a friend of the actress's, was resting his bald cranium on a cushion of the divan, his hands folded upon his stomach and his short legs crossed.

"What else, my dear?" he inquired of her.

"Oh, I don't know! Fits of suffocation; giddiness; and, all of a sudden, an agonizing pain, as if I were going to die. That's the worst of all."

"Do you sometimes feel as though you must laugh or cry for no apparent reason, about nothing at all?"

"That I cannot tell you, for in this life one has so many reasons for laughing or crying!"

"Are you subject to attacks of dizziness?"

"No. But, just think, doctor, at night, I see an imaginary cat, under the chairs or the table, gazing at me with fiery eyes!"

"Try not to dream of cats any more," said Madame Michon, "because that's a bad omen. To see a cat is a sign that you'll be betrayed by friends, or deceived by a woman."

"But it is not in my dreams that I see a cat! It's when I'm wide awake!"

Trublet, who was in attendance at the Odéon once a month only, was given to looking in as a friend almost every evening. He was fond of the actresses, delighted in chatting with them, gave them good advice, and listened with delicacy to their confidences. He promised Félicie that he would write her a prescription at once.

"We'll attend to the stomach, my dear child, and you'll see no more cats under the chairs and tables."

Madame Michon was adjusting the actress's stays. The doctor, suddenly gloomy, watched her tugging at the laces.

"Don't scowl," said Félicie. "I am never tight-laced. With my waist I should surely be a fool if I were." And she added, thinking of her [Pg 3] best friend in the theatre, "It's all very well for Fagette, who has no shoulders and no hips; she's simply straight up and down. Michon, you can pull a little tighter still. I know you are no lover of waists, doctor. Nevertheless, I cannot wear swaddling bands like those æsthetic creatures. Just slip your hand into my stays, and you'll see that I don't squeeze myself too tight."

He denied that he was inimical to stays; he only condemned them when too tightly laced. He deplored the fact that women should have no sense of the harmony of line; that they should associate with smallness of the waist an idea of grace and beauty, not realizing that their beauty resided wholly in those modulations through which the body, having displayed the superb expansion of chest and bosom, tapers off gradually below the thorax, to glorify itself in the calm and generous width of the flanks.

"The waist," he said, "the waist, since one has to make use of that hideous word, should be a gradual, imperceptible, gentle transition from one to another of woman's two glories, her bosom and her womb, and you stupidly strangle it, you stave in the thorax, which involves the breasts in its ruin, you flatten your lower ribs, and you plough a horrible furrow above the navel. The negresses, who file their teeth down to a point, and split their lips, in order to insert a wooden disc, disfigure themselves [Pg 4] in a less barbarous fashion. For, after all, some feminine splendour still remains to a creature who wears rings in the cartilage of her nose, and whose lip is distended by a circular disc of mahogany as big as this pomade pot. But the devastation is complete when woman carries her ravages into the sacred centre of her empire."

Dwelling upon a favourite subject, he enumerated one by one the deformities of the bones and muscles caused by the wearing of stays, in terms now fanciful, now precise, now droll, now lugubrious.

Nanteuil laughed as she listened. She laughed because, being a woman, she felt an inclination to laugh at physical uncomeliness or poverty; because, referring everything to her own little world of actors and actresses, each and every deformity described by the doctor reminded her of some comrade of the boards, stamping itself on her mind like a caricature. Knowing that she herself had a good figure, she delighted in her own young body as she pictured to herself all these indignities of the flesh. With a ringing laugh she crossed the dressing-room towards the doctor, dragging with her Madame Michon, who was holding on to her stay-laces as though they were reins, with the look of a sorceress being whisked away to a witches' sabbath.

"Don't be afraid!" she said.

And she objected that peasant women, [Pg 5] who never wore stays, had far worse figures than town-bred women.

The doctor bitterly inveighed against the Western civilizations because of their contempt for and ignorance of natural beauty.

Trublet, born within the shadow of Saint-Sulpice, had gone as a young man to practise in Cairo. He brought back from that city a little money, a liver complaint, and a knowledge of the various customs of humanity. When at a ripe age, he returned to his own country, he rarely strayed from his ancient Rue de Seine, thoroughly enjoying his life, save that it depressed him a trifle to see how little able his contemporaries were to realize the deplorable misunderstandings which for eighteen centuries had kept humanity at cross-purposes with nature.

There was a tap at the door.

"It's only me!" exclaimed a woman's voice in the passage.

Félicie, slipping on her pink petticoat, begged the doctor to open the door.

Enter Madame Douce, a lady who was allowing her massive person to run to seed, although she had long contrived to hold it together on the boards, compelling it to assume the dignity proper to aristocratic mothers.

"Well, my dear! How-d'ye-do, doctor! [Pg 6] Félicie, you know I am not one to pay compliments. Nevertheless, I saw you the day before yesterday, and I assure you that in the second of *La Mère confidente* you put in some excellent touches, which are far from easy to bring off."

Nanteuil, with smiling eyes, waited—as is always the case when one has received a compliment—for another.

Madame Doulice, thus invited by Nanteuil's silence, murmured some additional words of praise:

"...excellent touches, genuinely individual business!"

"You really think so, Madame Doulice? Glad to hear it, for I don't feel the part. And then that great Perrin woman upsets me altogether. It is a fact. When I sit on the creature's knees, it makes me feel as if— —You don't know all the horrors that she whispers into my ear while we are on the stage! She's crazy! I understand everything, but there are some things which disgust me. Michon, don't my stays crease at the back, on the right?"

"My dear child," cried Trublet with enthusiasm, "you have just said something that is really admirable."

"What?" inquired Nanteuil simply.

"You said: 'I understand everything, but there are some things which disgust me.' You understand everything; the thoughts and actions of men [Pg 7] appear to you as particular instances of the universal mechanics, but in respect of them you cherish neither hatred nor anger. But there are things which disgust you; you have a fastidious taste, and it is profoundly true that morals are a matter of taste. My child, I could wish that the Academy of Moral Science thought as sanely as you. Yes. You are quite right. As regards the instincts which you attribute to your fellow-actress, it is as futile to blame her for them as to blame lactic acid for being an acid possessing mixed properties."

"What are you talking about?"

"I am saying that we can no longer assign praise or blame to any human thought or action, once the inevitable nature of such thoughts and actions has been proved for us."

"So you approve of the morals of that gawk of a Perrin, do you? You, a member of the Legion of Honour! A nice thing, to be sure!"

The doctor heaved himself up.

"My child," he said, "give me a moment's attention; I am going to tell you an instructive story:

"In times gone by, human nature was other than it is to-day. There were then not men and women only, but also hermaphrodites; in other words, beings in whom the two sexes were combined. These three kinds of human beings possessed four arms, four legs, and two faces. They [Pg 8] were robust and rotated rapidly on their own axes, just like wheels. Their strength inspired them with audacity to war with the gods, therein following the example of the Giants, Jupiter, unable to brook such insolence — —"

"Michon, doesn't my petticoat hang too low on the left?" asked Nanteuil.

"Resolved," continued the doctor, "to render them less strong and less daring. He divided each into two, so that they had now but two arms, two legs, and one head apiece, and thenceforward the human race became what it is to-day. Consequently, each of us is only the half of a human being, divided from the other half, just as one divides a sole into two portions. These halves are ever seeking their other halves. The love which we experience for one another is nothing but an invisible force impelling us to reunite our two halves in order to re-establish ourselves in our pristine perfection. Those men who result from the divisions of hermaphrodites love women; those women who have a similar origin love men. But the women who proceed from the division of primitive women do not bestow much attention upon men, but are drawn toward their own sex. So do not be astonished when you see — —"

"Did you invent that precious story, doctor?" inquired Nanteuil, pinning a rose in her bodice.

[Pg 9]

The doctor protested that he had not invented a word of it. On the contrary, he had, he said, left out part of the story.

"So much the better?" exclaimed Nanteuil. "For I must tell you that the person who did invent it is not particularly brilliant."

"He is dead," remarked Trublet.

Nanteuil once more expressed her disgust of her fellow-actress, but Madame Douce, who was prudent and occasionally took *déjeuner* with Jeanne Perrin, changed the subject.

"Well, my darling, so you've got the part of Angélique. Only remember what I told you: your gestures should be somewhat restrained, and you yourself a little stiff. That is the secret of the *ingénue*. Beware of your charming natural suppleness. Young girls in a 'stock' piece ought to be just a trifle doll-like. It's good form. The costume requires it. You see, Félicie, what you must do above all, when you are playing in *La Mère confidente*, which is a delightful play — —"

"Oh," interrupted Félicie, "so long as I have a good part, I don't care a fig for the play. Besides, I am not particularly in love with Marivaux — — What are you laughing at, doctor? Have I put my foot in it? Isn't *La Mère confidente* by Marivaux?"

"To be sure it is!"

[Pg 10]

"Well, then? You are always trying to muddle me. I was saying that Angélique gets on my nerves. I should prefer a part with more meat in it, something out of the ordinary. This evenings especially, the part gives me the creeps."

"All the more likely that you'll do well in it, my pet," said Madame Douce. "We never enter more thoroughly into our parts than when we do so by main force, and in spite of ourselves. I could give you many examples. I myself, in *La Vivandière d'Austerlitz*, staggered the house by my gaiety of tone, when I had just been informed that my Douce, so great an artist and so good a husband, had had an epileptic fit in the orchestra at the Odéon, just as he was picking up his cornet."

"Why do they insist on my being nothing but an *ingénue*?" inquired Nanteuil, who wanted to play the woman in love, the brilliant coquette, and every part a woman could play.

"That is quite natural," persisted Madame Doulice. "Comedy is an imitative art; and you imitate an art all the better for not feeling it yourself."

"Do not delude yourself, my child," said the doctor to Félicie. "Once an *ingénue*, always an *ingénue*. You are born an Angélique or a Dorine, a Célimène or a Madame Pernelle. On the stage, some women are always twenty, others are always [Pg 11] thirty, others again are always sixty. As for you, Mademoiselle Nanteuil, you will always be eighteen, and you will always be an *ingénue*."

"I am quite content with my work," replied Nanteuil, "but you cannot expect me to play all *ingénues* with the same pleasure. There is one part, for example, which I long to play, and that is Agnès in *L'École des femmes*."

At the mere mention of the name of Agnès, the doctor murmured delightedly from among his cushions:

"Mes yeux ont-ils du mal pour en donner au monde?"

"Agnès, that's a part if you like!" exclaimed Nanteuil. "I have asked Pradel to give it me."

Pradel, the manager of the theatre, was an ex-comedian, a wideawake, genial fellow, who had got rid of his illusions and nourished no exaggerated hopes. He loved peace, books and women. Nanteuil had every reason to speak well of Pradel, and she referred to him without any feeling of ill will, and with frank directness.

"It was shameful, disgusting, rotten of him," she said. "He wouldn't let me play Agnès and gave the part to Falempin. I must say, though, that when I asked him I didn't go the right way about it. While she knows how to tackle him, if you like! But what do I care! If Pradel doesn't let [Pg 12] me play Agnès, he can go to the deuce, and his dirty Punch and Judy show too!"

Madame Doulice continued to lavish her unheeded precepts. She was an actress of merits but she was old and worn out, and no longer obtained any engagements. She gave advice to beginners, wrote their letters for them, and thus, in the morning or evenings earned what was almost every day her only meal.

"Doctor," asked Félicie, while Madame Michon was fastening a black velvet ribbon round her neck: "You say that my fits of dizziness are due to my stomach. Are you sure of that?"

Before Trublet could answer, Madame Doulice exclaimed that fits of dizziness always proceeded from the stomach, and that two or three hours after meals she experienced a feeling of distension in hers, and she thereupon asked the doctor for a remedy.

Félicie, however, was thinking, for she was capable of thought.

"Doctor," she said suddenly, "I want to ask you a question, which you may possibly think a droll one; but I do really want to know whether, considering that you know just what there is in the human body, and that you have seen all the things we have inside us, it doesn't embarrass you, at certain moments, in your dealings with women? [Pg 13] It seems to me that the idea of all that must disgust you."

From the depths of his cushions Trublet, wafting a kiss to Félicie, replied:

"My dear child, there is no more exquisitely delicate, rich, and beautiful tissue than the skin of a pretty woman. That is what I was telling myself just now, while contemplating the back of your neck, and you will readily understand that, under such an impression—
—"

She made a grimace at him like that of a disdainful monkey.

"You think it witty, I suppose, to talk nonsense when anyone asks you a serious question?"

"Well, then, since you wish it, mademoiselle, you shall have an instructive answer. Some twenty years ago we had, in the post-mortem room at the Hôpital Saint-Joseph, a drunken old watchman, named Daddy Rousseau, who every day at eleven o'clock used to lunch at the end of the table on which the corpse was lying. He ate his lunch because he was hungry. Nothing prevents people who are hungry from eating as soon as they have got something to eat. Only Daddy Rousseau used to say: 'I don't know whether it is because of the atmosphere of the room, but I must have something fresh and appetizing.'"

[Pg 14]

"I understand," said Félicie. "Little flower-girls are what you want. But you mustn't, you know. And there you are seated like a Turk and you haven't written out my prescription yet." She cast an inquiring glance at him. "Where is the stomach exactly?"

The door had remained ajar. A young man, a very pretty fellow and extremely fashionable, pushed it open, and, having taken a couple of steps into the dressing-room, inquired politely whether he might come in.

"Oh, it's you!" said Nanteuil. And she stretched out her hand, which he kissed with pleasure, ceremony and fatuity.

"How are you, Doctor Socrates?" he inquired, without wasting any particular courtesies on Madame Douce.

Trublet was often accosted in this manner, because of his snub-nose and his subtle speech. Pointing to Nanteuil, he said:

"Monsieur de Ligny, you see before you a young lady who is not quite sure whether she has a stomach. It is a serious question. We advise her to refer, for the answer, to the little girl who ate too much jam. Her mother said to her: 'You will injure your stomach.' The child replied: 'It's only ladies who have stomachs; little girls haven't any.'"

[Pg 15]

"Heavens, how silly you are, doctor!" cried Nanteuil.

"I would you spoke the truth, mademoiselle. Silliness is the capacity for happiness. It is the sovereign content. It is the prime asset in a civilized society."

"You are paradoxical, my dear doctor," remarked Monsieur de Ligny. "But I grant you that it is better to be silly as everybody is silly than to be clever as no one else is clever."

"It's true, what Robert says!" exclaimed Nanteuil, sincerely impressed. And she added thoughtfully: "At any rate, doctor, one thing is certain. It is that stupidity often prevents one from doing stupid things. I have noticed that many a time. Whether you take men or women, those are not the most stupid who act the most

stupidly. For example, there are intelligent women who are stupid about men."

"You mean those who cannot do without them."

"There's no hiding anything from you, my little Socrates."

"Ah," sighed the big Doulice, "what a terrible slavery it is! Every woman who cannot control her senses is lost to art."

Nanteuil shrugged her pretty shoulders, which still retained something of the angularity of youth.

"Oh, my great-grandmother! Don't try to [Pg 16] kid the youngsters! What an idea! In your days, did actresses control their—how did you put it? Fiddlesticks! They didn't control them a scrap!"

Noticing that Nanteuil's temper was rising, the bulky Doulice retired with dignity and prudence. Once in the passage, she vouchsafed a further word of advice:

"Remember, my darling, to play Angélique as a 'bud.' The part requires it."

But Nanteuil, her nerves on edge, took no notice.

"Really," she said, sitting down before her dressing-table, "she makes me boil, that old Doulice, with her morality. Does she think people have forgotten her adventures? If so, she is mistaken. Madame Ravaud tells one of them six days out of seven. Everybody knows that she reduced her husband, the musician, to such a state of exhaustion that one night he tumbled into his cornet. As for her lovers, magnificent men, just ask Madame Michon. Why, in less than two years she made mere shadows of them, mere puffs of breath. That's the way she controlled them! And supposing anyone had told her that she was lost to art!"

Dr. Trublet extended his two hands, palms outward, towards Nanteuil, as though to stop her.

"Do not excite yourself, my child. Madame [Pg 17] Doulice is sincere. She used to love men, now she loves God. One loves what one can, as one can, and with what one has. She has become chaste and pious at the fitting age. She is diligent in the practices of her religion: she goes to Mass on Sundays and feast days, she — —"

"Well, she is right to go to Mass," asserted Nanteuil "Michon, light a candle for me, to heat my rouge. I must do my lips again. Certainly, she is quite right to go to Mass, but religion does not forbid one to have a lover."

"You think not?" asked the doctor.

"I know my religion better than you, that's certain!"

A lugubrious bell sounded, and the mournful voice of the call-boy was heard in the corridors:

"The curtain-raiser is over!"

Nanteuil rose, and slipped over her wrist a velvet ribbon ornamented with a steel medallion. Madame Michon was on her knees arranging the three Watteau pleats of the pink dress, and, with her mouth full of pins, delivered herself from one corner of her lips of the following maxim:

"There is one good thing in being old, men cannot make you suffer any more."

Robert de Ligny took a cigarette from his case.

"May I?" And he moved toward the lighted candle on the dressing-table.

[Pg 18]

Nanteuil, who never took her eyes off him, saw beneath his moustache, red and light as flame, his lips, ruddy in the candlelight, drawing in and puffing out the smoke. She felt a slight warmth in her ears. Pretending to look among her trinkets, she grazed Ligny's neck with her lips, and whispered to him:

"Wait for me after the show, in a cab, at the corner of the Rue de Tournon."

At this moment the sound of voices and footsteps was heard in the corridor. The actors in the curtain-raiser were returning to their dressing-rooms.

"Doctor, pass me your newspaper."

"It is highly uninteresting, mademoiselle."

"Never mind, pass it over."

She took it and held it like a screen above her head.

"The light makes my eyes ache," she observed.

It was true that a too brilliant light would sometimes give her a headache. But she had just seen herself in the glass. With her blue-tinted eyelids, her eyelashes smeared with a black paste, her grease-painted cheeks, her lips tinted red in the shape of a tiny heart, it seemed to her she looked like a painted corpse with glass eyes, and she did not wish Ligny to see her thus.

While she was keeping her face in the shadow of the newspaper a tall, lean young man entered the [Pg 19] dressing-room with a swaggering gait. His melancholy eyes were deeply sunken above a nose like a crow's beak; his mouth was set in a petrified grin. The Adam's apple of his long throat made a deep shadow on his stock. He was dressed as a stage bailiff.

"That you, Chevalier? How are you, my friend?" gaily inquired Dr. Trublet, who was fond of actors, preferred the bad ones, and had a special liking for Chevalier.

"Come in, everybody!" cried Nanteuil "This isn't a dressing-room; it's a mill."

"My respects, none the less, Mme. Miller!" replied Chevalier, "I warn you, there's a pack of idiots out in front. Would you believe it—they shut me up!"

"That's no reason for walking in without knocking," replied Nanteuil snappishly.

The doctor pointed out that Monsieur de Ligny had left the door open; whereupon Nanteuil, turning to Ligny, said in a tone of tender reproach:

"Did you really leave the door open? But, when one comes into a room, one closes the door on other people: it is one of the first things one is taught."

She wrapped herself in a white blanket-cloak.

The call-boy summoned the players to the stage.

[Pg 20]