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The Tale of the Green Silk Purse

By F. M. DENTON

THE Elbe sparkled. Across were the red walls and blackened beams of the houses, that stood up to their thighs in the river. Above the medley of roofs was the green copper dome of Dresden's museum.

This picture, framed in the narrow doorway of the little Weinstube, was shut off suddenly by the tall shadow of a man.

The green light fell in patches after its struggle through the ancient blobbed glass panes of the room's only window. It fell upon the bright wax-polished top of an oaken table, across whose surface centuries of glasses had tinkled "prosit."

I was a London student on a vacation which Caesar threatened to spoil. For I was in arrears with a book or two of "De bello Gallico."

This little room by the river's edge was cool and secluded. It was an ante-room close to the main bar of the house and was seldom visited.

In a week of seclusion there, in which Morpheus had come in for more worship than Bacchus, and a few "zweier Rotwein" had spread themselves asymptotically through unending hours, I had come to think of this room as my own private sanctum.

And so my "guten Tag" had an unfriendly touch of disgust in it.

The intruder seemed inclined to go out again and, relenting, I called him back. His smile was friendly but half fearful.

In order, I thought, to cover shyness, he pretended familiarity, and taking up my book, read aloud a few of its Latin lines. He read fluently but with an accent which reminded me of a like vacation spent in Madrid. His accent

was Castilian. This and his handsome appearance told me my visitor was a Spaniard and I said, "Buenos dias."

It was as though I had struck him. He rose and walked to the door; stood a moment, then turned and said, in Spanish, "That dome is like green silk,—and the glint of the river is like silver and gold. The sun is a red rose, and my brain is on fire again,—and I must tell you."

The odor of beeswax and wine brings back to me the tale that he told:

"I am the son of a Castilian gentleman,—the only son. Ours is a proud family; all its sons enter the army or the priesthood. I was destined for the army. Earnest and ambitious I went gladly to the military school at Segovia. The rules of that school are strict,—punctilious in matters of honor and of honesty.

"All the cadets were rich, but the rules of the school restricted our allowances to a small sum paid weekly. I carried my money in a green silk purse,—a thing such as Shylock must have used,—a tassel at each end and two brass rings to close its slit-like opening.

"Debt was dishonor. Yet generosity is in the blood of every Romanos.

"Always I have loved the sparkle of rivers. We had a leisure hour each evening, but the rules called us back an hour after sunset.

"There were lovely sunsets in Segovia. I used to watch them from the river bank.

"But a red rose may seem lovelier than a sunset, and the sparkle of dark eyes beneath it lovelier still.

"Beautiful she was and the sunlight, as she eclipsed the sun, made around her hair a halo of red fire.

"For many nights the color of the rose in her black hair flooded my dreams. Then, growing more bold, I tried its perfume. And then I spoke to her. She smiled and was kind,—and that night my green silk purse felt very light.

"Was this love? If so why did the thought of debt and its disgrace worry me?"

"Some excuse must be found. Simple enough to have lost one's purse or had it stolen. Better burn the green silk thing with its tassels."

"Thoughts so desultory, so mixed with dreams, became no fixed plan. I entered the common room again. It was autumn and a great fire burned on the stone hearth. The room was deserted. Quickly I threw my green silk purse into a sort of fiery halo that was there, as if made for it, in the midst of the fire. Then I went out through the inner door.

"Why was I pressing with my thumb the ring on my middle finger?"

"It was because I had forgotten the brass rings on that green silk purse. Brass rings do not burn. I must rake them out.

"Returning to the fire I found there the old sergeant, who cared so well for us all,—a good man with a record full of honor.

"There was a devil in the fire. He had a red halo round his head and held out two red-hot rings.

"'Sergeant,' said I, 'Where is the purse I left here on the table?'"

"'I saw no purse.'"

"'You lie; you have taken the money and burned my purse, and there are its brass rings.'"

"So saying I raked out those rings that used to caress my green silk purse. (Is there any difference between caressing and strangling?)"

"As I held them out on the end of the poker I saw, behind the sergeant, two brother officers enter. The old man raised his hand to strike me. The officers seized him and he was taken away.

"The suddenness of events confused me. I had planned no evil. The voice that had accused the sergeant was not mine. Why should I awake from my rose dream?"

"The next day I asked mercy for the man who had robbed and tried to strike me. I was honored by my high-

mindful kindness. And all the while I hated myself and longed to confess.

"But the picture haunted me, of the devil in a halo of sunset, holding two red-hot rings on the prongs of his trident; daring me to go through with the thing he had made me begin. And because I feared and hated the devil I went through with his plan.

"For many days conscience slept within my coma of obstinacy until it seemed dead. Blankly I went on with the thing I had begun.

"In our evening card games I had an unwonted gaiety and an unwonted luck. But gradually came the feeling that I was not in full control of my tongue. There was an urge,—it took the form of a red rose,—to tell the story of the green silk purse. I fought the urge, then I tried to follow it, and all the time the devil prodded my brain with his trident.

"At last, one evening, throwing down the cards, I began excitedly to tell my tale, knowing hardly whether I was obeying the devil or the rose.

"I was incoherent and could hold no one's attention. They said my nerves were shaken by the unwitting part I had taken in the sergeant's disgrace.

"I was sent away for a holiday; then transferred to a distant barracks.

"My recovery seemed complete; I worked hard, won everyone's esteem and obtained advancement.

"One day came the order to revisit Segovia.

"The place had grown smaller, (I expect you know the feeling). My old friends had gone away. Again I played cards. Gaiety came back, and luck, and there was no return of the dreaded urge.

"Suddenly my attention was called. The old sergeant's successor wished to speak with me. He brought the message that a man, lying in the hospital, wanted to see me.

"I went. The old sergeant lay there. He was thin and very weak. I leaned over him and he said, 'I forgive you.' Then he died.

"And over his head floated a red rose, and into my brain came the hot trident, and into my tongue the urge to tell the tale of the green purse.

"Again I scattered the cards, and this time began to tell the tale coherently. But no one knew my history, and no one remembered; the group broke up and I went out into the cool night air.

"I had come of age since the night of the green silk purse and was rich. The return of the urge unnerved me. I would go to a distant country to kill memory and conscience.

"I chose Geneva. For awhile the red rose floated above the white peaks of the Dent du Midi; then it faded and finally was gone in mist. Except that in the evening glow as the sun threw last kisses to the snows and made them blush,—in that glow was here and there a red petal. Then at last the red petals died also and I was free.

"But the devil was only dozing. For, one day, as I sat looking across the lake, there came a man beside me. He recognized a fellow countryman and greeted me in Spanish.

"His hair was black, and there, under the brim of his broad hat was a red rose. It may have been no rose at all but just the red light of the setting sun.

"I told him the tale of the green silk purse. He was bored, but, with the courtesy of Spain, he seemed to listen. Then, rising, he bade me adieu.

"Was I never to be able to conquer the urge of the green silk purse?

"I would go to Germany, the country in which the chance of meeting a Spaniard is small.

"And so I came to Dresden, and you, unhappy man, have revived the red rose. The devil is using my mother tongue as his trident. What shall I do? What do you think of me?"

I sat silent as the tale ended. The man's sin had been black. He was expiating it in pain. What could I say?

I told him that only that man could sink to a deed so low, who was capable of rising to a great height. (Was this nonsense?) He was expiating his sin. Perhaps he had expiated it enough. He should now be strong and should believe the red rose dead.

Thanking me, he departed, and did not disturb me again in my sanctum.

Some weeks later, walking aimlessly in the rich suburbs of Dresden, I came face to face with Don Romanos. He was gay and welcomed me warmly. "You must come," said he, "to my wedding. It takes place tomorrow evening. Here is the announcement. Will you not come? I owe my happiness to you."

I promised and the next evening saw me entering the grounds of a rich house. Don Romanos was marrying into a distinguished German family. Blond locks and a white lily. Was it possible these had eclipsed black tresses and a red rose?

At a long table with a hundred guests, I sat almost opposite Don Romanos. Far at the end, on our left, was his fair bride. There was an air of solemnity.

Toasts were proposed and responded to. Some of the speakers talked of Spain and Don Romanos looked uneasy, turning nervously about as though expecting some blow.

In fluent German he presented to his bride a star set with pearls, accompanying the gift by the words: "Das Meer hat seine Perlen, der Himmel seine Sterne. Gross ist das Meer and der Himmel,—noch groesser ist meine Liebe."

Don Romanos was radiant in spite of his nervous pallor.

Then arose the bride blushing. She had, she said, no gift of jewels to offer to her husband, but something she believed he would value more highly; something which had cost her many hours of labour,—it had been a labour of love. She believed it to be a gift which would bring him closer to her, and then she began to recite: "En lenguaje castellano . . ."

Before two words of Spanish had passed her lips, I saw Don Romanos put his hand to his head. Then he leaned forward, knocking over his glass of red wine. Then, as suddenly, he recovered, rose, and rushed to the door.

Less surprised than the others, I was quick to follow. Don Romanos ran. Out through the grounds and along the deserted street I pursued him. For half a mile I kept him in sight, but he had the advantage of the devil's trident, and I lost him.

"The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small."