



A MUMMER'S TALE by ANATOLE FRANCE: New Edition

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The 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 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 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.

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