

“A Very Original Dinner”

Tell me what thou eatest and I'll tell thee what thou art.

—SOMEBODY

I.

It was during the fifteenth annual session of the Gastronomical society of Berlin that the President, Herr Prosit, made the famous invital to its members. The session was of course a banquet. During the dessert a very great discussion had arisen concerning originality in the art of cooking. The period was bad for all arts. Originality was in decay. In gastronomy also there was a decay and a weakness. All productions of the cuisine which were called “new” were but variations on dishes already known. A different sauce, a slightly diverse way of spicing or of seasoning—in this way the latest dish was different from the one before it. There were no real novelties. There were but innovations. These things were all deplored at the banquet in a unity of voices, with a variety of intonations and with various degrees of vehemence.

While warmth and conviction were poured into the discussion, yet there was among us one man who, although he was not the only man who was silent, was nevertheless the one man who noticeably did not speak; for from him, most of all, intervention might have been expected. This man was of course Herr Prosit, president of the Society, chairman at this meeting. Herr Prosit was the only man who gave no heed to the discussion—he was quiet more than inattentive. His voice's authority was lacking. He was thoughtful—he, Prosit; he was silent—he, Prosit; he was serious—he, Wilhelm Prosit, president of the Gastronomical Society.

The silence of Herr Prosit was, for most men, a rare thing. He resembled (let the comparison pass) a storm. Silence was not of his essence. Quietness was not his nature. And like a storm (to follow the simile), if silence were ever with him, it was as a rest and as a prelude to an outburst greater than all. Of him was this opinion held.

The President was a man remarkable in many ways. He was a merry man and a social, yet all this with an abnormal vivaciousness, with a noisiness of bearing

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that seemed a perpetual unnaturalness of disposition. His socialness seemed pathologic; his wit and jokes, while appearing not in any way forced, seemed compelled from within by a faculty of the spirit which is not the faculty of wit. His humour seemed falsely true, his restlessness naturally assumed.

In the society of his friends—and he had many—he kept up a steady current of mirth, he was all joy and all laughter. Yet it is remarkable that this strange man should not bear in his habitual countenance an expression of mirth or of joy. When he ceased to laugh, when he forgot to smile, he seemed to fall, by the contrast which his face betrayed, into an unnatural seriousness, as of something sister to pain.

Whether this were due to a fundamental unhappiness of character, or to sorrows of earlier life, or to any other ill of the spirit—I who tell this could hardly presume to say. Besides, this contradiction in his character, or, at least, in its manifestations, was perceived only by the observant; the others did not see it, nor was there any need that they should.

As in a night of storms following one upon another yet with intervals, he who is witness calls the whole night a night of storm, forgetting the stops between the outbursts, and naming the night after that character of it which struck him most; even so, following an inclination of mankind, men called Prosit a merry man because what struck most in him was his noisiness in mirth, the uproar of his joy. In the storm the witness forgot the deep silence of the intervals. In this man easily did we forget, in his wild laughter, the sad silence, the sullen heaviness of the intervals of his social nature.

The President's countenance, I repeat, also bore and betrayed this contradiction. That laughing face lacked animation. Its perpetual smile seemed the grotesque grin of those on whose faces the sun is striking; the natural contraction there of the muscles before a strong light; here, as a perpetual expression, most unnatural and most grotesque.

It was commonly said (among those who knew him to be thus) that he had taken to a merry life to escape a kind of family nervousness of nature, or, at most, morbidity, for he was the son of an epileptic and had had as forefathers, not mentioning many over-extravagant rakes, several unmistakable neurotics. He himself might have been a sufferer by his nerves. But of this I speak with no certainty.

What I can give as true beyond doubt is that Prosit had been brought into the society of which I speak by a young officer, also a friend of mine and a merry

fellow, who had picked him up somewhere, having been extremely amused at some of his practical jokes.

This society—that in which Prosit moved—was, truly to speak, one of those dubious side-societies, which are not uncommon, formed of high and of low elements in a curious synthesis, ever of the nature of a chemical change, for they have often a new character, of their own, different from that of their elements. This was a society whose arts—arts they must be called—were that of eating, that of drinking, and that of making love. It was artistic, no doubt. It was coarse, less doubt. And it united these things without discord.

Of this group of people, socially useless, humanly rotting, Prosit was the leader, because he was the coarsest of them. I cannot enter, obviously, into the psychology, simple yet intricate, of this case. I cannot explain, here, the reason of the fact that the leader of such a society should have been chosen from its lowest part. All through literature much subtlety, much intuition has been spent over cases of this kind. They are manifestly pathologic. Poe gave to the complex sentiments that inspire them, thinking they were but one, the general name of *perverse*ness. But this case I chronicle, and no more. The feminine element of the society came, conventionally speaking, from below; the masculine element from above. The pillar of this arrangement, the hyphen of this compound,—nay, better, the catalytic agent of this chemical change, was my friend Prosit. The centres, the meeting-places of the society were two: a certain restaurant or the respectable X hotel, accordingly as the feast was a revel empty of thought, or was a chaste, masculine, artistic session of the Gastronomical society of Berlin. As to the first, suggestion is impossible; not a hint is possible within a hair's breadth from indecency. For Prosit was not normally coarse, but abnormally; his influence lowered the aim of his friends' lowest desiring. As to the Gastronomical society, that was better; it represented the spiritual side of that group's concrete aspirations.

I have just said that Prosit was coarse. It is true; so he was. His exuberance was coarse, his humour coarsely manifested. I inform of all this with care. I write neither praise nor calumny. I am sketching, as neatly as I can, a character. As well as my mind's vision permits, I follow on the tracks of truth.

But Prosit was coarse, no doubt. For even in the society where, by being in touch with elements socially high, he was sometimes forced to live, he did not lose much of his native brutality. He indulged in it half with consciousness. His jokes were not always inoffensive nor pleasant, they were almost all coarse,

though, to those who could appreciate the "point" of such performances, they were funny enough, witty enough, sufficiently well contrived.

The better aspect of this vulgarity was its impulsiveness, in so far as it was ardour. For the President entered with ardour into all things which he undertook, especially into culinary enterprises and into love affairs; in the first he was a poet of gustation, daily gaining inspiration; in the last his lowness of character was ever at its horrible best. Nevertheless his ardour, as the impulsiveness of his mirth, could not be doubted. He carried others along with him by the violence of his energy, created ardour in them, animated their impulse without consciousness that he did so. Yet his ardour was for himself, to himself, was an organic necessity; it was not meant for a relation with the world outside. This ardour could not, it is true, be long sustained; but, while it lasted, its influence as an example, however unconscious, was immense.

But, let it be noticed, though the President was ardent, impulsive, at bottom coarse and rude, yet he was a man who was never cross. Never. No man could put him into a rage. Besides, he was always ready to please, always ready to avoid a quarrel. He seemed ever to desire everybody to be well with him. It was curious to observe how he restrained his ire, how he held it in hand with a firmness no one had given him credit for, least of all those who knew him impulsive and ardent, his most intimate friends.

It was chiefly on account of this, I conjecture, that Prosit was such a favourite. Perhaps, indeed, taking into consideration the fact that he was coarse, brutal, of impulse, yet never behaving brutally in the showing of rage and of aggressiveness, never impulsive in ire—perhaps we, unconsciously considering this laid on this the basis of our friendliness. Besides, there was the fact that he was always ready to please, to be pleasant. As for being rough, with men that mattered little, for the President was a good fellow.

It is obvious therefore, and now, that Prosit's attractiveness (so to call it) was in this: in his being unsusceptible to rage, in his earnestness to please, in the peculiar fascination of his coarse exuberance, perhaps even, ultimately, also in the unconscious intuition of the slight enigma which his character presented.

Enough! My analysis of Prosit's character, perhaps excessive in details, is nevertheless defective, because, as I suppose, it has missed or left invident the elements that point to a final synthesis. I have ventured beyond my ability. My comprehension cannot be matched to the clearness that is my desire. Wherefore I shall say no longer.

One thing remains nevertheless, on the superficialities of all I have said: the external view of the President's character. It remains clear that, for all conceivable intents, for all imaginable purposes, Herr Prosit was a merry man, an odd fellow, a man who was merry habitually, who impressed other men with his mirth, a man prominent in his society, a man who had many friends. His coarse tendencies, as they gave the character to the society of men in which he lived, that is to say, as they were creators of environment, disappeared by excessive obviousness, passed gradually into the domain of the unconscious; became unperceived, ended imperceptible.

The dinner was already at an end. The conversation grew, in the number of those who spoke, in the noise of their combined, discordant, interpenetrated voices. Prosit was still silent. The principal speaker, Captain Greiwe was discoursing lyrically. He insisted on the lack of imagination (so he called it) unproductive of modern dishes. He grew enthusiastic. In the art of gastronomy, he observed, new dishes were always needed. His manner of comprehending was narrow, restricted to the art he knew. He contended falsely, gave to understand, that in gastronomy alone newness was of preëminent value. And this may have been a subtle way of saying that gastronomy was the only science and the only art. "Blessed art," the Captain cried, "whose conservatism is a perpetual revolution!" "Of it I could say," he continued, "what Schopenhauer says of the world, that it preserves itself by its destruction."

"Why, Prosit," said a member from the extreme end of the table, noticing the silence of the President; "Why, Prosit, you have not yet given your opinion! Say something, man! Are you absent-minded? Are you melancholy? Are you ill?"

Everybody looked towards the President. The President smiled upon them in his usual way, his usual smile, malicious, mysterious, half-humourless. Yet *this* smile had a meaning; it foreboded in some way the strangeness of the President's words.

The President broke the silence which was made for his expected answer.

"I have a proposal to make, an invital," he said. "Have I your attention? Can I speak?"

As he said this, silence seemed to grow more profound. All eyes looked towards him. All actions, gestures, stopped where they were, for attention seized upon all.

"Gentlemen," began Herr Prosit, "I am about to invite you to a dinner, the like of which, I contend, none of you have ever attended. My invital is at the same time a challenge. Afterwards I shall explain."

There was a slight pause. No one moved, except Prosit, who finished a glass of wine.

"Gentlemen," he repeated in a manner eloquently direct, "my challenge to any man is contained in this, that, ten days from now, I shall give a new sort of dinner, a *very original dinner*. Consider yourselves invited."

Murmurs for explanation, questions, poured in from all sides. Why that sort of invital? What did he mean? What had he proposed? Why that obscurity of expression? What, clearly speaking, was the challenge which he had made?

"At my house," said Prosit, "in the square."

"Good."

"You are not going to transfer to your house the meeting-place of the society?" inquired one member.

"No; it is only on this occasion."

"And is it going to be something so very original, Prosit?" inquired obstinately a member who was inquisitive.

"Very original. A complete novelty!"

"Bravo!"

"The originality of the dinner lies," said the President, as one speaking an after-thought, "not in what it conveys or appears, but in what it means, in what it contains. I defy any man here (and I could say "any man anywhere," for the matter) to say, having finished it, in what it is original. No one, I assert, will guess. This is my challenge. Perhaps you thought it would be that no man could give a more original banquet. But no, that is not it; it is as I have said. As you see it is much more original. It is original beyond your expectation.

"May we know," a member asked, "the motive of your invital?"

"I am urged to this," Prosit explained, and his face was sarcastic in its determined look, "by a discussion which I had before dinner. Some of my friends here present may have heard the dispute. They can inform those who desire to know. My invital is made. Do you accept?"

"Of course! of course!" came in shouts from all parts of the table.

The President nodded, smiled; nursing amusement at some inner vision, he relapsed into silence.

When Herr Prosit had made his astonishing challenge and invital, conversations, separately maintained among the members, fell upon the real motive thereof. Some were of the opinion that this was another joke of the President's; others that Prosit had desired to make another assertion of his culinary skill, rationally gratuitous, since (said these) no one had challenged it, but pleasant to any man's vanity in his art. Others again were certain that the invital was indeed made because of certain young men of the city of Frankfort between whom and the President there was a rivalry in gastronomy. It turned out soon, as those who read this will see, that the end of the challenge was certainly this third—the immediate end, I mean, for, as the President was a human being, and, especially, a very original one, his invital bore psychologically traces of the three intentions that were imputed to him.

The reason why it was not immediately believed that Prosit's true reason for the invital was the dispute (as he himself had said) was that the challenge was too vague, too mysterious, to seem but a reply to a provocation, to appear a vengeance and no more. At last, however, it had to be believed.

The discussion the President had mentioned had been (said those who knew) between him and five young men from the city of Frankfort. These were no particular young men, except that they were gastronomers; that was, I believe, their only title to our attention. The discussion with them had been long. Their contention had been, as far as was remembered, that some dish which one of them had invented, or some dinner which they had given, was superior to some gastronomic performance of the President's. Over this the dispute had come; round this centre the spider of contention had spun with industry its web.

The discussion had been hot on the young men's part; soft and moderate on Prosit's. It was his custom, as I have said, never to yield to rage. On this occasion, however, he had been almost angry on account of the heat of his opponents' retorts. But he remained calm. It was thought, now that this was known, that the President was about to play some gigantic joke on the five young men, to have in his usual manner the revenge of that harsh dispute. On this account expectation soon was high; whispers of a giant joke were set running, tales of a striking originality in the vengeance. Given the case, and the man, these rumours suggested themselves; they were built clumsily upon truth. They were all, sooner or later, told to Prosit; but, as he heard them, he shook his head and, while seeming to do justice to their intention, lamented their coarse appearance.

No one, he said, had guessed aright. It was impossible, he said, that anyone should guess aright. All was a surprise. Conjecture, guess, hypothesis were ridiculous and without use.

These rumours, of course, were of later occurrence. Let us return to the dinner at which the invital had been made. It had just ended. We were going towards the smoking room when we came across five young men, of fairly refined appearance, who saluted Prosit with some coldness.

"Ah, my friends," the President explained turning to us, "these are five young gentlemen of Frankfort whom I once defeated in a challenge in matters gastronomical . . ."

"I hardly think you defeated us, you know," retorted one of the young men, with a smile.

"Well, let that be as it is, or as it was. As a matter of fact, my friends, the challenge which I have now made before the Gastronomical Society" (with a wide sweep of his hand he designated us) "is of a much larger import and of a nature much more artistic." He explained it to the five. They listened as impolitely as they could.

"When I made this challenge, just now, gentlemen, I was thinking of you!"

"Oh! you were, were you? And what have we got to do with it?"

"Oh, you'll soon see! The dinner is on the week after next, on the seventeenth."

"We don't wish to know the date. We don't need to."

"No; you are right!" chuckled the President. "You don't. It won't be necessary. Nevertheless," he added, "you will be present at the dinner."

"What!" cried one of the three young men. Of the other two, one grinned and the other stared.

The President grinned back.

"Ay, and you will contribute to it most materially."

The five young men manifested physiognomically their doubt of this and their half-interest in the matter.

"Come, come!" said the President as they were going. "When I mean a thing I mean it, and I mean you to be present at the dinner, I mean you to contribute to its appreciation."

This was spoken in a tone of such obvious and pointed sneering that the young men were angered and hastened down stairs.

The last one turned round.

"We will be there in spirit, perhaps," he said, "thinking of your failure."

"No, no; you will be there right-enough. You will be there in body—in body, I assure you. Don't trouble about that. Leave everything to me."

A quarter of an hour after, all proceedings being over, I followed Prosit downstairs.

"Do you think you can make them be present, Prosit?" I asked him as he put on his overcoat.

"Certainly," he said, "I am sure of it."

We went out together—I and Prosit—parting at the hotel-door.

II.

The day soon came when Prosit's invital was to be fulfilled. The dinner took place at Prosit's house at half-past-six in the evening.

The house—that of which Prosit had spoken as being "in the square"—was not, properly speaking, his house, but was of an old friend of his who lived out of Berlin and who lent the house to Prosit when the President desired. It was always at his disposal. Yet he rarely needed it. Some of the earliest banquets of the Gastronomical Society had been held there, until the superior convenience of the hotel—comfort, appearance, locality—had been ascertained. In the hotel Prosit was well known; it was after his directions that the dishes were made. His inventive skill had there as much scope as at the house, with cooks either of his, or of the members, or imported from some restaurant; and not only had his skill as much scope, but the execution of his designs was prompter, better; they were more neatly and more accurately accomplished.

As to the house in which Prosit lived—no one knew it, nor did any one care to know. For some banquets the house was used of which I have just spoken, for love affairs he had a small suite of rooms; he had a club—nay, two clubs—, and he was often to be seen at the hotel.

Prosit's house, I say, none knew; that he had one, apart from the places mentioned, which he frequented, was a matter of vulgar certainty. But where the house was, none suspected. The people with whom he there lived were also unknown to us. Who the associates of his retirement were, Prosit had never given us to understand. That they existed, not even this had he said. It was merely the conclusion of our reasoning, simple and homely in the matter. Prosit had been,

we knew—though I remember not by whom—in the Colonies—in Africa, or in India, or elsewhere—and had there made a fortune upon which he lived. Thus much being known, the rest only idleness could research.

The reader now knows sufficiently the state of things to dispense my further observations, either on the President or on the house itself. I pass on therefore to the scene of the banquet.

The room in which the banquet table had been spread was large and long, though not lofty. On the sides there were no windows but only doors, leading off to several rooms. At the top, on the side facing the street, a high and wide window was cut, splendid, that of itself seemed to breathe the air it allowed to enter. It took the place of three ordinary large windows and filled it well. It was divided into three parts by mere partitionings of its casement. Though the room was large this window was sufficient; it gave light and air to the whole; every corner was not robbed of Nature's most natural things.

In the middle of the dining-hall a long table had been set for the banquet; at the head of this the President sat with his back turned to the window. I, who write, as the oldest member, sat at his right hand. Other details are inessential. The attendance was fifty-two.

The room was lighted by chandeliers placed above the table, three in number. By a skilful arranging of their ornaments, the lights were singularly concentrated on the table, leaving rather in the dark the spaces between it and the walls. It seemed, by its effect, the lighting arrangement over billiard tables. However as here it was not obtained, as there, by a device the end of whose use was manifest, what existed in the mind, at most, was a sensation of strangeness with regard to the lights in the dining-hall. Had there been other tables, collaterally, the sense of the darkness between them had been of something obtrusive. As there was but one table no such thing happened. I myself only noticed this later, as the reader who follows me will see. Although I, as all who were there, when I first entered looked everywhere for strangeness, yet this was unperceived, somehow.

How the table was laid, dressed, ornamented, partly I cannot remember, partly it needs not to remember. What difference there may have been from other dinner-tables was a difference within normalness, not a difference because of originality. Description in this case were sterile and to no end.

The members of the Gastronomical Society—fifty-two, as I have said—began to turn up at a quarter to six. Some three, I remember, came only within a min-

ute of the dinner hour. One—the last one—appeared as we were sitting down to the table. In these things, in this part of the session, as was proper among artists, all ceremonial was set aside. By this late coming no one was offended.

We sat down to the table in a contained fever of expectation, of inquiry, of intellectual suspicion. This was to be, each man remembered, a *very original dinner*. Each man had been challenged—this to discover in what was the originality of the dinner. This was the difficult point. Was the originality in something inapparent, or in an obvious thing? Was it in some dish, in some sauce, in some arrangement? Was it in some trivial detail of the dinner? Or was it, after all, in the general character of the banquet?

As is natural, being every one of us in this state of mind, every possible thing, everything vaguely probable, everything sanely improbable, impossible, was a cause of suspicion, of self-inquiry, of bewilderment. Was the originality in that? Did that contain the joke?

Thus all of us, the guests, as soon as we had sat down to dinner, began minutely, curiously, to scan the ornaments and flowers on the table, nay, not only these, but also the patterns of the plates, the disposition of the knives and forks, the glasses, the bottles of wine. Several had already examined the chairs. Not a few had, with the appearance of unconcern, paced round the table, round the room. One had looked under the table. Another had felt with his fingers, rapidly and carefully the under side of the same. One member dropped his table-napkin and bent very low to pick it up, which he did with half ludicrous difficulty; he had wished to see, he told me afterwards, whether there were not a trapdoor which, at a given moment of the banquet, might not swallow us up, or the table only, or us and table together.

I cannot now accurately call to mind what my suppositions were, or my conjectures. I remember distinctly however that they were sufficiently ridiculous, of the same kind as I have shown in others. Fantastic and extraordinary notions succeeded each other in my mind by a purely mechanical association of ideas. Everything was, at the same time, suggestive and unsatisfactory. Well considered everything contained a singularity (so will anything anywhere contain). But no one thing presented clearly, neatly, indubitably, the sign of its being the key to the problem, the hidden word of the enigma.

The President had defied any of us to find the originality in the dinner. Given this challenge, given the capacity for jokes for which Prosit was renowned, no one could say how far the confounding went, whether the originality was ridic-

ulously insignificant, on purpose, or hidden in excessive obtrusiveness, or, for such a thing was possible, consisting in there being no originality at all. This was the state of mind in which the guests in their totality—I say it without boldness of expression—sat down to the eating of a *very original dinner*.

Attention was on all things.

The first thing to be noticed was that the service was done by five black servants. Their countenances could not be well seen, not only on account of the somewhat extravagant costume in which they were dressed (which included a peculiar turban), but also on account of that singularity in the light-arrangement by which, as in billiard saloons, though not by the same device, the light was turned upon the table and left darkness all around.

The five black servants were trained well; not excellently, perhaps, but well. They betrayed this in many things, perceptible most especially to men such as we who were in relation with such people daily and importantly, on account of our art. They seemed to have been very well trained, outside, for a dinner which was the first at which they served. This was the impression which their serving made on my experienced brain; but I, for the moment, dispelled it, seeing in it nothing extraordinary. Servants could not be found anywhere. Perhaps, I thought, on the moment, Prosit had brought them with him from where he had been, abroad. That I did not know them would be no reason to doubt this, because, as I have said, Prosit's more intimate life, as well as his place of dwelling, were not known to us, were kept private by him, for reasons which he probably had and which it was no business of ours to search for or to appreciate. My thoughts of the five dark servants, when first I noticed them, were these.

The dinner was then begun. It puzzled still more. The peculiarities which it offered were before reason so meaningless that it was in vain that an interpretation of any kind was put upon them. The observations which one of the guests made, humorously, towards the end of the dinner, gave fit expression to all this.

"The only thing which my attentive and acute mind can perceive here of original," said, with assumed pompousness, a titled member, "is, *primò*, that our attendants are dark, and more or less in the dark, though it is we that are decidedly so; *secundò*, that this, if it mean[t] anything, means nothing at all. I see nowhere anything fishy, unless, in a decent sense, the fish."

These light-minded observations met with approval though their wit was poorer than poor. Everybody, however, had noticed the same things. But no one

believed—though many were vague in mind—that Prosit's joke was this and no more. They looked towards the President to see if his smiling countenance betrayed any sentiment, any indication of a sentiment, anything—but the smile was on it, usual and inexpressive. Perhaps it grew slightly wider, perhaps it implicated a wink, when the titled had made those observations, perhaps it grew more sly; but there is no certainty of this.

"In your words," Prosit said at length, to the member who had spoken, "I am pleased to see an unconscious recognition of my ability in concealing, in making a thing appear other than it is. For I see that you have been deceived by appearances. I see that you are yet far from knowing the truth, the joke. You are far from guessing the originality of the dinner. And I may add that if there be anything fishy in it—which I do not deny—it is certainly not the fish. Nevertheless I thank you for your praise!" And the President bowed in mockery.

"My praise?"

"Your praise, because you did not guess. And, not guessing, you proclaim my ability. I thank you!"

Laughter put an end to this episode.

Meanwhile I, who had been reflecting during the whole time, arrived suddenly at a strange conclusion. For, as I considered the reasons of the dinner, calling to mind the words of the invital and the day on which it had been made, I remembered suddenly that the dinner was considered by all as the result of a discussion of the President's with the five gastronomers from Frankfort. I recalled Prosit's expressions of the time. He had told the five young men that they would be present at his dinner, that they would contribute to it "*materially.*" This was the very word he had used.

Now these five young men were not guests . . . At this moment the sight of one of the black servants put me naturally in mind of them and immediately after of the fact that they were five. The discovery startled me. I looked up to the places where they were, to see if their faces betrayed anything. But the faces, themselves dark, were in darkness. It was at this moment that I perceived the extreme skill with which the lighting arrangement threw the whole glare upon the table, leaving in comparative night the room around, most especially at the height from the floor at which were the heads of the five servants who attended. Strange, bewildering as the matter was, no doubts remained with me. I was absolutely certain that the five young gentlemen of Frankfort had become, for the

moment, the five black servants at the dinner. The entire incredibility of the whole thing detained me awhile, but my conclusions were too well-drawn, too obvious. It could not be but as I had found.

Immediately did I remember that, five minutes or so before, at the same banquet, the black servants having naturally attracted attention, one of the members, Herr Kleist, an anthropologist, had asked Prosit what was their race (he being entirely unable to see their countenances), and where he had got them from. The contrariety which the President had shown may not have been absolutely manifest; nevertheless I saw it clearly, perfectly, though I had not yet then the stimulus to attention of the discovery which afterwards I made. But I had seen Prosit's confusion, and had wondered. Shortly afterwards—as I had subconsciously noticed—one of the servants holding the dish by Prosit, the latter had said something in a low voice; the result of this had been the five “blacks” keeping further in the shadow, exaggerating perhaps the distance, to one who paid attention to the stratagem.

The President's fear was, of course, quite natural. An anthropologist like Herr Kleist, one familiar with human races, with their types, with their facial characteristics, would, perforce, were he to see the faces, discover at once the imposture. Hence Prosit's extreme unrest at the question; hence his order to the servants to keep well in the darkness. How he evaded the question I forgot; I have suspicions, however, that it was by declaring the servants not his and protesting his ignorance of their race and of their manner of coming to Europe. In making this reply he was, however, as I noticed, considerably ill at ease; this with the fear that Herr Kleist might, precisely to know the race, wish suddenly to examine the blacks. But he could not, obviously, have said not denying that they belonged to him: “this race” or “that race,” for being ignorant of races, and knowing himself to be so, he might venture on a type one of whose most elementary and most apparent characteristics, as, for instance, stature, might be in open contradiction to that of the five black attendants. I remember vaguely that, after this reply, Prosit had covered it with some material incident, by diverting attention to the dinner, or to gastronomy,—to something, I know not what, which was not the servants.

The elaborate seasoning of the dishes, their superficial newness of presentation—if that these were not legitimate in the President as culinary artist apart from the end of the dinner—I regarded as trifles made on purpose to turn aside the attention, so manifest was, I considered, their character of petty absurdity,

the five black attendants. I remember vaguely that, after this reply, Probst had covered it with some material incident, by diverting attention to the dinner, or to gastronomy, - to something, ^{I know not what} (which was not the servants.

~~If there were any~~ The elaborate seasoning of the ^{plus to the} particulars with regard to dishes, their ^{antiqua} number of ^{invention} ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~subject~~ ^{had made to} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~President~~ ^{as} ~~an~~ ^{unhappy} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~supper~~ ^{with} a little, I regarded ~~###~~ as trifles made ~~on~~ on purpose to turn aside the attention, so manifest was, I considered, their character of petty absurdity, of striking littleness of willed unconvention ^{and more} ~~there~~ ^{of} ~~anything~~ ^{directly} ~~bearing~~ ^{on} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~fact~~ ^(Verso).

The fact in itself was, it is true, exceedingly, unutterably strange; the more reason then, I said to myself, to contain the originality of Probst's.

"The five black attendants," manuscript page, "A Very Original Dinner," BNP/E3, 79A-52^r.

Some had pretended to find certain out
of the way things, details in the
designs, such as ~~the~~ the peculiar
black, grape-like ornament of the chandelier.

No one, I may add, ~~took them~~ ^{took} ~~them~~ ^{them} ~~for~~ ^{for} ~~important~~ ^{important} ~~at~~ ^{at} ~~all~~ ^{all}
after considering ~~them~~ ^{them} ~~things~~ ^{things}, ~~took~~ ^{took}
them for important ~~at all~~ ^{at all}
~~they~~ ^{they}

"No one, I may add, after considering them, really took them for important,"
manuscript page, "A Very Original Dinner," BNP/E3, 79A-52^v.

of striking littleness, of willed unconvention. No one, I may add, after considering them, really took them for important.

The fact in itself was, it is true, exceedingly, unutterably strange; the more reason then, I said to myself, to contain the originality of Prosit's. It was indeed bewildering, I reflected, that it should have been accomplished. How? How could five young men absolutely hostile to the President be induced, trained, obliged to act the part of servants at a dinner, a thing repugnant to every man of a certain social condition? It was a thing that startled grotesquely like the reality of a woman's body on a fish's tail. It made, in the mind, the world to tread on its own heels.

As to their being black, that was easily explained. Obviously Prosit could not present the five young men, before the members of the Society, with their own countenances. It was natural that he should avail himself of the vague knowledge which he knew we had of his having been in the Colonies to cover his joke with their blackness. The torturing question was how this had been done; and that only Prosit could reveal. I could understand—and yet could not very well—a man acting a servant's part, for a great friend and in a joke, and as a very great favour. But in this case!

The more I reflected the more extraordinary the case appeared, but, at the same time, given all the proofs it had, given the character of the President, the more probable, the more certain that Prosit's joke was contained therein. Well might he challenge us to discover the originality of the banquet! The originality, as I had found it, was not, it is true, properly in the dinner; still it was in the servants, in something connected with the dinner. At this point of my reasoning I wondered that I had not seen this before: that the banquet being given on account of the five young men (as was now known) could not but bear upon them, as a revenge, and bearing upon them obviously could not do so in anything more directly connected with the dinner than in the servants.

These arguments, reasonings, which I have here taken a few paragraphs to set forth passed in a few minutes through my mind. I was convinced, bewildered, satisfied. The rational clearness of the case dispelled its extraordinary nature from my brain. I saw lucidly, accurately in the matter. Prosit's challenge had been won by me.

The dinner was almost at an end, on the before-side of the dessert.

I resolved, that my ability might be recognized, to tell Prosit of my discovery. I re-considered, that I might make no failure, no mistake; the strangeness of the

matter, as I conceived it, creeping through my sureness of fact. At length, I bent my head towards Prosit and said in a low tone:

"Prosit, my friend, I have the secret. These five black people and the five young men from Frankfort . . ."

"Ah! You have guessed that there is some connection between them." He said this half sneeringly, half in doubt, yet I could see that he was put out and inly irritated by the acuteness of my reasoning, which he had not expected. He was ill at ease and looked on my face with attention. "Certainty," I thought, "is mine."

"Of course," I replied, "they are the five. Of that I have no doubt. But how on earth did you do it?"

"Brute force, my dear fellow. But don't say anything to the others."

"Of course not. But how by brute force, my dear Prosit?"

"Well, that's a secret. It cannot be told. It's as secret as death."

"But how do you manage to keep them so quiet. I am astonished. Won't they get away or revolt?"

The President was convulsed inwardly with laughter. "There's no fear of that," he said, with a wink that had more than meaning. "They won't run away—not they. Absolutely impossible." And he looked at me quietly, slyly, mysteriously.

At length the end of the dinner was reached—no, not the end of the dinner—another singularity, apparently purposed for effect—when Prosit proposed a toast. Everybody was astonished at this toast just after the last dish and before the dessert. All wondered, excepting myself, who saw in this another eccentricity, meaningless in itself, to divert the attention. Nevertheless the glasses were all filled. As they were being filled, the President's bearing was extremely altered. He shifted about in his chair in great excitement, with the ardency of a man who will speak, of one who must reveal a great secret, who must make a great revelation.

This demeanour was at once noticed. "Prosit has some joke to reveal—the joke. It's Prosit all through! Out with it, Prosit!"

As the moment of the toast approached the President seemed to go mad with excitement; he moved about in his chair, he writhed, he grinned, smiled, made faces, chuckled meaninglessly and without end.

The glasses had all been filled. Every man was ready. A profound silence was made. In the tension of the moment I remember hearing two footsteps in the street and feeling angry at two voices—one a man's, another a woman's—that

held converse in the square below. I lost them from attention. Prosit rose to his feet; nay, rather, he bounded, almost upsetting the chair.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I am going to reveal my secret, the joke, the challenge. It's very amusing. You know how I said to the five young men of Frankfort that they would be present at this banquet, that they would aid it most materially? The secret's there, in this, I mean."

The President spoke hurriedly, incoherently, in his haste to arrive at the point.

"Gentlemen, this is all I have to say. Now the first toast, the great toast. It concerns my five poor rivals . . . Because none guessed the truth, not even Meyer (this is I); not even he."

The President paused; then, lifting his voice into a shout; "I drink," said he, "to the memory of the five young gentlemen of Frankfort, who have been present in body at this dinner and have contributed to it most materially."

And haggard, savage, completely mad, he pointed with an excited finger to the remains of flesh in a dish which he had caused to be left upon the table.

These words had no sooner been spoken than a horror that laughs at expression fell with weird coldness upon all. All were for the moment crushed by the unthinkable revelation. It seemed, in the intensity of horror, in its silence, as if no one had heard, no one understood. Madness above all dreams was horrible in the nest of reality. A silence that lasted a moment yet seemed by sentiment, by significance, by horror, to have the duration of ages, was on all, a silence the like of which has never been dreamt nor thought. I conceive not with what expression each one was, all of us were. But those faces must have had looks such as no vision has yet met.

This for a moment—short, aging, profound.

My own horror, my own commotion cannot be conceived. All the humorous expressions and innuendoes, which I had naturally, innocently connected with my hypothesis of the five black servants, yielded now their deeper, their most horrible meaning. All the malicious undertone, all the suggestiveness of Prosit's voice—all this, I say, appearing now to me in its true light, thrilled and shook me with a fear that cannot be spoken. The very intensity of my terror seemed to prevent me from fainting. For a moment I, like the others, but with greater fear, and with more reason sat back in my chair and stared at Prosit with a horror no words can express.

For a moment this, for a moment and no more. Then, excepting some of us, the weaker-hearted, who had fainted, the guests all, beside themselves with a

just and uncontrollable rage, rushed maniacally at the cannibal, at the mad author of this more than horrible exploit. It must have been, to a pure spectator, a horrible scene, these well-bred, well-dressed, refined, semi-artistic men animated by a fury of more than beasts. Prosit was mad, but, at that moment we were mad also. He had no chance against us—none at all. Indeed, at this instant, we were madder than he. Even *one* of us, in the rage we were, had sufficed to punish horribly the President.

Myself, first of all, bore a blow against the offender. With a rage so terrible it seemed some one else's, and seems now so, for my memory of it is as of ought impossibly true I seized the wine-decanter which was near me and hurled it, with a horrible exultation of ire, at Prosit's head. It struck him full in the face, mixing blood and wine upon it. I am mild, sensitive, abhorrent of blood. Thinking upon it now, I cannot realise how it is possible that I should have done an act to my usual self of such dreadful cruelty, however just, for, mostly by the passion that inspired it, it was a cruel, a most cruel deed. How great then must have been my rage and my madness! And that of the others, how great!

"Out of the window!" cried a terrible voice. "Out of the window!" shrieked a formidable chorus. And it is characteristic of the brutality of the moment that the way of opening the window was by breaking it entirely. Someone put a strong shoulder to it and dashed the central part (for the window was divided in three) into the square below.

More than a dozen animal hands were eagerly, disputingly laid upon Prosit, whose madness was thrilled by his ill-speakable fear. With a nervous motion he was hurled towards the window, but he did not pass it for he contrived to hold on to one of the partitions of the casement.

Again those hands clutched him, more firmly, more brutally, more savagely still. And with a Herculean joining of strength, with an order, with a combination perfectly diabolic in such a moment, they swung the President in the air and hurled him from them with incalculable violence. With a thud that had sickened the strongest, but which was the maker of calm in our eager and expecting hearts, the President fell into the square, four or five feet beyond the pavement.

Then no word, no sign exchanged, each man locked in the horror of himself, each of us departed from the house. Once outside, the fury past and the horror that made it like a dream, we experienced the inenarrable horror of meeting naturalness again. All without exception were turned sick and many fainted soon or late. I fainted at the very door.

The five dark servants of Prosit—they were really dark, being old Asiatic pirates, of a murderous and abominable tribe—these, who, understanding the affair, had fled during the fray, were caught—all with the exception of one. It appears that Prosit, for the consummation of his great joke, had, with an adroitness perfectly diabolic, bit by bit awakened in them their brutal instincts which slumbered in civilization. They had been in everything the President's coadjutors. They had been ordered to stand as far as they could from the table in dark places, on account of Prosit's ignorant and criminal fear of Herr Kleist, the anthropologist, who, for all Prosit knew of his science, might have been able to see in the black faces the ill-determined stigmas of criminality. The four of them who were caught were punished fitly and well.

June, 1907