

OUR SATURDAY SHORT STORY

THE BEST MAN

By Gouverneur Morris.

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Stanislas Odeskalki, the best man, and O'Goshi, the interpreter, helped, as did old man O'Goshi. But young Orlorf Odeskalki and Olenka were really married by the mayor. He made Orlorf kiss Olenka; shook hands with them; said that he hoped they would be a loving couple; made the remark that everybody's name began with O, and wished them good-day.

Orlorf, Olenka, Stanislas Odeskalki, and old man O'Goshi went uptown by the Elevated, and hurried to the rooms in East 123rd street, near the river, which Orlorf had hired for himself, his bride, and his father to live in. It was a bitter afternoon in January. In many windows lights already glowed. Old man O'Goshi walked ahead, giving his arm to Olenka, who was so rosy that men turned their heads to look after her. The best man and the groom brought up the rear. The bride-groom's face was bright and smiling, and he kept his eyes steadily on the bride; but the best man scowled continually. Only once did he speak of anything.

"You should have told me," he said, "what a pretty girl she is. You must look out or some fellow will take her from you."

He cheered up when the four flights of stairs leading to the Odeskalki's new rooms had been surmounted.

"Now we are going to feed," he said.

Old man O'Goshi unlocked the door, and, motioning to the others to wait, crossed the threshold, turned and held out his hands.

"Walsh," he said. He affected the English language with ostentation, but the others clung to Polish. Olenka hesitated, and looked at her husband, blushing.

"But, go in," he said, he pushed her gently. "This is no time to hang back."

Old man O'Goshi embraced her when she had crossed the threshold.

Olenka pushed Odeskalki into the room, followed and closed the door.

"Well, here we are," he said. "What do you think of it?"

Odeskalki began to look about critically. "It is easy to see that a woman

ate and drank as much as he could get.

"But you mustn't mind his dark looks," said Olenka. "At heart he is not an ill-natured fellow."

Odeskalki only scowled the more, and, nipping his glass, tossed Olenka a look.

"May you be happy," he said, and shook his head gloomily.

"It is always so with him when he drinks," said Olenka. "You would think him a dragon, but at heart he is not an ill-natured fellow."

"I had said do more," said old man Olenka, suddenly. He rose and placed himself with his back to the stove, and Odeskalki drew out a fat silver watch, and scowled at it.

"Time for us to be off," he said to Olenka.

"It is really too bad," said Olenka to the bride, "but I could not seem to understand. And if I were to stay with you I should lose my place. But next week I shall be put on the day shift. It was all I could do to get off this afternoon to be married."

"When do you think you will come back," said Olenka.

"Perhaps, not before one or two o'clock," said Olenka.

"Tonight," said Odeskalki, sulkily, "there is to be a large dinner for the middle of the table, with banks of ferns and red roses, and live ducks swimming in it. It is impossible to say when the chair will break up, for there will be a great deal of hard drinking."

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and champagne. Several times during the dinner Odeskalki and Olenka found themselves alone behind the screen. On one occasion Odeskalki filled two glasses with champagne, and said:

"Quick, man, to Olenka!"

Olenka hesitated.

"Curse you," said Odeskalki, in a fierce whisper. "I will not be friends with a man who will not drink to his own wife."

Olenka had a weak head, and that one glass stimulated him wonderfully. It was not difficult for Odeskalki to persuade him to take another.

The third glass Olenka drank at his own instigation.

A few minutes later Olenka dropped an armful of plates, and the other waiters cursed him and made his appearance with the oysters. Signs of drunkenness were now beginning to be evident among the others. The waiters were receiving considerable presents of money, and secret directions to keep particular glasses filled.

Men left their places, and carried their chairs to more airy neighborhoods. Little groups surrounded the humorists, and roared with laughter whenever they spoke. Men whom the champagne affected to seriousness drew aside in pairs, and with heads nodding close together, emptied their hearts of matters which for the moment seemed of paramount importance. Sometimes they sniffled and shed tears.

John Tombs snatched a coffee-pot

and poured its contents into the contents of the floor. Olenka, from whose hands the coffee-pot had been snatched, giggled. He was also drunk.

The dinner began to break up. The young gentlemen left the room by twos and threes. Downstairs in the main hall, putting on of hats and coats; many of the latter were lined with expensive fur. Electric bannisters received drunken caresses of more pleasure bent. And, like the geese in the song,

"One flew east and one flew west, and one flew over the cuckoo's nest."

But the future groom came back to the dining-room. He was a big man, and with his immense fur-lined coat and high silk hat looked positively mountainous. His face was red and shiny with hard drinking, but he was not drunk.

"Where is the other waiter?" he said, in a loud, assured voice. "I've got something for all of you."

A swishing door was pushed open, and voices began to call for Olenka to come back.

Olenka, very unsteady on his feet, and sure of only one thing—that he wanted to go home—had just reached the top of a flight of stairs. Hearing the name called, he turned, slipped and fell to the bottom of the stairs.

Those in the dining-room heard the sounds of a fall, mingled with a sudden burst of foolish laughter, and then a deep groan. Afterward there was silence.

The groom hurried with the others, to the bottom of the stairs.

Olenka had already picked himself up. His face was white and drawn with pain, but he did not seem to have received any serious injury. He kept feeling the small of his back with one hand and taking quick, sniffling breaths.

"He's all right," said the groom, and he began to distribute greenbacks among the waiters.

The others, all but Odeskalki and Olenka, hurried back to the dining-room for the remnants of the feast.

"What a stupid fellow you are," said Odeskalki, "to get drunk and fall down stairs. You might have broken your neck. Come, let us go."

"I have hurt my back," said Olenka.

"Where?" said Odeskalki, brutally. He prodded Olenka's spine with his thumb. Tears of anguish ran out of Olenka's eyes, and he staggered.

"Curse you!" he cried.

Odeskalki was taken aback for a moment. "Don't be a fool, little man," he said presently. "Put yourself to gether, and don't curse your betters."

"I am sorry for what I said, Odeskalki," said Olenka meekly. "But you shouldn't have punched me so hard."

"Punch you?" said Odeskalki scornfully. "I punch you! Man, if I punch you you'd know it. My fist would come out of the other side."

Olenka went uptown by the Third Avenue Elevated, and got out at 123rd street, but his back hurt him so that he could hardly walk. The pain made him cold and sober.

Olenka was sound asleep. Olenka stood looking at her until the match which he

had lighted burned his fingers. Then, walking on tiptoe, he crept into bed with his father. All night the old man slept and snored. All night the young man lay awake and moaned.

The next morning Odeskalki called to find out what had become of Orlorf Olenka. The invalid was asleep. Old man Olenka and Olenka took Odeskalki to the furthest corner of the room, and conversed in low tones.

"He fell down a flight of stairs," said Odeskalki, "and injured his spine. He had just reached the head of the stairs when we called him to come back, and he fell down a flight of stairs. He must have slipped in turning. We heard him fall, and found him at the bottom of the stairs."

"We have drawn the bed close to the stove," said Olenka, "because he complains that his legs are cold."

"It is too bad," said the old man. "Have you consulted a physician?"

Olenka hesitated.

"Yes," said Olenka, "and he said that Orlorf must be still for a long time."

Olenka Olenka stirred in his bed, and asked, "Are you there, Olenka?"

Olenka flew to the bedside. "Yes," she said, "and here is Mr. Odeskalki to ask after you."

"I am very friendly of him," said Olenka. "I hope you are well, Odeskalki."

"I am well," he said, "but it seems that you are not well, my friend. Do you feel any pain, but my legs do not get warm."

Olenka slipped her hand under the bedclothes and felt for his leg. "They are like ice," she said.

"Can you move your legs?" Odeskalki asked.

"Yes," said Olenka. "But if I do it hurts my back."

"Hum," said Odeskalki, and looked very wise.

"What worries me," said Olenka, "is that all our savings will be spent, and that perhaps I shall not be well enough to work even then."

"But I shall find something to do," said Olenka, "and here you are, not to speak of that. Could you drink a cup of soup?"

"I am not hungry," said Olenka. "I think I feel a draught."

"No," said Odeskalki. "Both windows and both doors are shut."

"Perhaps," said Olenka, "one of the windows in the other room is open, and the door does not fit tightly enough to keep the cold air out."

"I will see," said Odeskalki. He returned in a moment.

"No," he said, "the windows are closed. That room is more cheerful than this. Mrs. Olenka, there is an outlook."

"But do not stoke," said the old man.

"If you turned your prides today," said Odeskalki, "and he added, "Some day you will be setting the house on fire."

Odeskalki laid his hand on Olenka's pillow, and patted it lightly.

"It is your duty to do so," he said. "I must go, but I will come every day to inquire about you. Mrs. Olenka, will you speak with me a moment?"

She went with him to the head of the stairs, closing the door behind her.

"Do you think he is seriously ill?" she asked.

"Do not know," said Odeskalki. "But I am afraid so. What I want to say is this: Do not hesitate to call on me if you run short of money. I have saved nearly a thousand dollars. Furthermore, it would be a pleasure for me to do you a good turn. I will come again tomorrow. But you must not confine yourself entirely to the house. Perhaps I will make you go for a walk with me. Is it permitted?"

He had taken her hand and raised it to his lips. If he kissed it with more ardor than mere friendship permits, Olenka did not know. She was very grateful to him for his offers of help and for the kind tone which he had adopted.

"How I have misjudged this man!" she thought.

Olenka was waiting her return with great eagerness.

"But what did he say to you?" he asked almost curiously.

"He spoke altogether kindly," said Olenka, "offering help, and even a loan if necessary. I tell you, he does away with that scowling habit when people are in trouble."

"Didn't I always tell you he was a good fellow at bottom?" said Olenka.

Odeskalki came nearly every day. For the most part he wore a smiling mask. Sometimes he insisted on taking Olenka for a walk. Sometimes he read the papers to Olenka, and he read them with interest.

Olenka got a little better, but he could not use his legs without suffering torment, and his savings were nearly all gone.

The weather was bitter cold; provisions were scarce, and the wood went up the stove chimney in the form of smoke that Olenka cared to think about. But through it all she preserved her charm and her cheerfulness. But Odeskalki, if he had wished, could have told of moments, very fully screened from the Olenkas, when the anxiety which was torturing her came to the surface. Once, as they were mounting the last flight of stairs, having returned from a short visit to the bank, he sobbed. Odeskalki caught her in his arms and held her until she panted for breath. She seemed preoccupied and not concerned with what had happened.

That same day Odeskalki informed the Olenkas that in the future he would have to work on the day shift, and that it would not be possible for him always to come up early enough in the evening to find them awake.

"It is a pity," said Odeskalki, "why I do not live with you and bear a portion of the expenses. But do not invite me unless you wish."

Two nights later Stanislas Odeskalki came for the first time to pass the night under the same roof which covered Olenka, and old man Olenka whispered to his son:

"I do not like him."

On a certain evening, when old man Olenka was sleeping heavily, Odeskalki spoke to the young couple of matters which were troubling him.

"Will either of you deny," he said, "that you reached the end of your resources two days ago, and that I am bearing all the expense?"

Neither Orlorf nor his wife were able to deny this.

"It is nothing," continued Odeskalki. "Let things be as they are until Orlorf is well. But the one thing which I cannot endure much longer, and that is the hostility shown by Orlorf's father. He, who is nothing but a burden, constantly shows his teeth and passes sarcasms. Let him only show a proper gratitude, and I will not complain. He is a trial not easily borne."

Orlorf and Olenka knew there was much truth in what their benefactor said. Old man Olenka hated Odeskalki and showed his teeth at him whenever there was opportunity.

"I am sorry that you have noticed," said Olenka.

But I will speak to him myself. He does not realize, perhaps, that he is living at your expense. Fur-

thermore, father is old. It is better to laugh at his sarcasms. But after this everything will be better."

Consternation seized even Odeskalki when at this point it was noticed that the old man had opened his eyes. He scowled malignantly at Odeskalki and said shrilly:

"Id bill dod be pedder. I was dod sleepig."

He rose, took his overcoat from the peg and put it on.

"I bill dot gum bag," he said. "I ab dot wanted."

Olenka tried to hold him, but he shook her off and made for the door. She threw her arms about him, but he struck her in the face and the bosom. Odeskalki hurried the old man aside.

"Let him go," he cried. "He will come back soon enough. It is cold, and he will be hankering for the stove."

"I bill dot gum bag!" shouted the old man.

Odeskalki closed the door.

"Go into the other room," he said to Olenka, "and put cold water on your face." He turned to Olenka. "I will just go and see if she is hurt," he said.

Olenka poured water into the basin, but for the moment she was using it only as a receptacle for her tears.

"Don't cry," said Odeskalki gently. He took her by the shoulders and turned her so she faced him. "Your cheek is bruised," he said, "but that is a trifle. Did he hurt you when he hit you?" She did not answer. And Odeskalki began to draw her to him, but there must have been some good in the man, for he suddenly drew back.

Olenka's tears ceased.

"I was frightened only," she said. "If it had not been an old man," said Odeskalki, "I would have struck him dead. You do not feel any pain?"

"No, but everything is going round."

Odeskalki caught her as she fell and carried her to a chair. He kissed her unresisting mouth. Then he brought cold water and began to bathe her temples.

Meanwhile Olenka had turned his head so he could see the door leading into the other room.

"He ought not to have closed the door," he said querulously. "He ought to come back and tell me if she is hurt."

In a few moments anxiety for Olenka began to torment him.

"Maybe father really hurt her," he said.

Then he began to call for Odeskalki loudly.

Suddenly the door opened, and Odeskalki, looking like a man on fire with anger, appeared in the frame.

"Don't scream so," he shouted angrily. "Mrs. Olenka has fainted. I am doing what I can."

He disappeared, slamming the door. Half an hour passed. Orlorf Olenka began to cry. Another half-hour passed. He got out of bed and crept to the door, for he could not stand. He reached the knob, turned it and pushed. The door did not open. Strength came to him. He stood and beat upon the door with his fists and hurled his light body against it again and again. In his frenzy it did not occur to him that in order to open the door he should have pulled and not pushed.

He desisted after a while and leaned wearily against the door. It was then that his father, slinking shamefacedly back, found him.

"We must go," said Olenka quietly. "They are in there. We are not wanted here. Help me put on my clothes."

"But you can't walk."

"Oh, yes, I can walk."

Old man Olenka helped his son down one flight of stairs. Then he said:

"Wait for me. I had forgotten something."

He was gone a long time.

And when he returned he carried the key of the outer door in his hand. When they reached the street he was still carrying it. Coming to a drain opening he dropped the key into it.

"I had locked the door," he said, "and emptied the stove. Look!"

The windows of the room which they had quitted glowed in the night like coals. Olenka fell face downward in the gutter.

"Her heart must have been weak, and the old man's blow practically killed her," thought Odeskalki, after he had labored vainly for nearly an hour and a half to bring Olenka back.

"She is certainly dead, I must tell Olenka."

He pushed open the door and sprang back from a storm of flames. The door closed with a bang.

Odeskalki ran to the window, threw it open, and looked out, right, left, down and up. There was nothing for it. If the worst came to the worst, but to jump, unless he could make a rope out of bedding. He began to tear the bedding into broad strips. He worked with frantic haste, but not so fast as the fire in the next room. The intervening door sprang inward from its hinges as if it had been hit by a locomotive. Flame and smoke poured through the opening. Cries began to rise from the street below, and the reverberations of fire-bells.

Odeskalki thrust himself half out of the window and screamed for help. In that moment of agony and fear, he saw, among the upturned faces in the street, the face of old man Olenka convulsed with ghastly merriment. And the old man's shrill voice was borne up to him, clear and horrible:

"I had punned your prides behind you, Odeskalki!"

Odeskalki sprang from the window. The cries and the reverberations of the fire-bells seemed to combine in one awful rushing shudder. The crowd fought cruelly to get back from the place where Odeskalki would land. Old man Olenka did not move. He did not seem to realize his danger. He stood as if rooted, with upturned, malevolently smiling face.

It seemed to those who saw the catastrophe that the old man was literally driven into the street.

It happened that the train for which Orlorf Olenka was waiting at the New York Central's One Hundred and Twenty-fifth street station was carrying two young people to Greenwich on the first stage of their honeymoon. It was curious that the bridegroom was the very man whose generosity had been the cause of Olenka's fall and of all his subsequent disasters.

If the bridegroom had known this he might have been moved to tears for he was big and gentle and kind. But he did not know it, and Olenka did not give it a thought. He was waiting on the very edge of the platform for the train. He did not know where he had passed the night, for the morning, nor how he had come to the edge of the platform. He considered to have gotten there as the only piece of good luck he had ever had. That was all.

"Heavens!" cried the bride. "What's happened?"

"You wait here, dear, and I'll go and find out."

The bridegroom hurried to the end of the car and looked out. He saw the corpse of a man lying beside the tracks. The sight made him feel sick, but he

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