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The Works of Guy de Maupassant

VOLUME III

THE VIATICUM AND OTHER STORIES

STABLE PERFUME

Three ladies belonging to that class of society which has nothing useful to do, and therefore does not know how to employ its time sensibly, were sitting on a bench in the shade of some pine trees at Ischl, and were talking incidentally of their preference for all sorts of smells.

One of the ladies, Princess F——, a slim, handsome brunette, declared there was nothing like the smell of Russian leather; she wore dull brown Russian leather boots, a Russian leather dress suspender, to keep her petticoats out of the dirt and dust, a Russian leather belt which spanned her wasp-like waist, carried a Russian leather purse, and even wore a brooch and bracelet of gilt Russian leather; people declared that her bedroom was papered with Russian leather, and that her lover was obliged to wear high Russian leather boots and tight breeches, but that on the other hand, her husband was excused from wearing anything at all in Russian leather.

Countess H——, a very stout lady, who had formerly been very beautiful and of a very loving nature, but loving after the fashion of her time *à la* Parthenia and Griseldis, could not get over the vulgar taste of the young Princess. All she cared for was the smell of hay, and she it was who brought the scent *New Mown Hay* into fashion. Her ideal was a freshly mown field in the moonlight, and when she rolled slowly along, she looked like a moving haystack, and exhaled an odor of hay all about her.

The third lady's taste was even more peculiar than Countess H——'s, and more vulgar than the Princess's, for the small, delicate, light-haired Countess W—— lived only for—the smell of stables. Her friends could absolutely not understand this; the Princess raised her beautiful, full arm with its broad bracelet to her Grecian nose and inhaled the sweet smell of the Russian leather, while the sentimental hay-rick exclaimed over and over again:

"How dreadful! What dost thou say to it, chaste moon?"

The delicate little Countess seemed very much embarrassed at the effect that her confession had had, and tried to justify her taste.

"Prince T—— told me that that smell had quite bewitched him once," she said; "it was in a Jewish town in Gallicia, where he was quartered once with his hussar regiment, and a number of poor, ragged circus riders, with half-starved horses came from Russia and put up a circus with a few poles and some rags of canvas, and the Prince went to see them, and found a woman among them, who was neither young nor beautiful, but bold and impudent; and the impudent woman wore a faded, bright red jacket, trimmed with old, shabby, imitation ermine, and that jacket stank of the stable, as the Prince expressed it, and she bewitched him with that odor, so that every time that the shameless wretch lay in his arms, and laughed impudently, and smelled abominably of the stable, he felt as if he were magnetized.

"How disgusting!" both the other ladies said, and involuntarily held their noses.

"What dost thou say to it, chaste moon?" the haystack said with a sigh, and the little light-haired Countess was abashed and held her tongue.

At the beginning of the winter season the three friends were together again in the gay, imperial city on the blue Danube. One morning the Princess accidentally met the enthusiast for the hay at the house of the little light-haired Countess, and the two ladies were obliged to go after her to her private riding-school, where she was taking her daily lesson. As soon as she saw them, she came up, and beckoned her riding-master to her to help her out of the saddle. He was a young man of extremely good and athletic build, which was set off by his tight breeches and his short velvet coat, and he ran up and

took his lovely burden into his arms with visible pleasure, to help her off the quiet, perfectly broken horse.

When the ladies looked at the handsome, vigorous man, it was quite enough to explain their little friend's predilection for the smell of a stable, but when the latter saw their looks, she blushed up to the roots of her hair, and her only way out of the difficulty was to order the riding-master, in a very authoritative manner, to take the horse back to the stable. He merely bowed, with an indescribable smile, and obeyed her.

A few months afterwards, Viennese society was alarmed at the news that Countess W—— had been divorced from her husband. The event was all the more unexpected, as they had apparently always lived very happily together, and nobody was able to mention any man on whom she had bestowed even the most passing attention, beyond the requirements of politeness.

Long afterwards, however, a strange report became current. A chattering lady's maid declared that the handsome riding-master had once so far forgotten himself as to strike the Countess with his riding-whip; a groom had told the Count of the occurrence, and when he was going to call the insolent fellow to account for it, the Countess covered him with her own body, and thus gave occasion for the divorce.

Years had passed since then and the Countess H—— had grown stouter and more sentimental. Ischl and hayricks were not enough for her any longer; she spent the winter on lovely *Lago Maggiore*, where she walked among laurel bushes and cypress trees, and was rowed about on the luke warm, moonlight nights.

One evening she was returning home in the company of an English lady who was also a great lover of nature, from *Isola Bella*, when they met a beautiful private boat in which a very unusual couple were sitting; a small, delicate, light-haired woman, wrapped in a white burnoose, and a handsome, athletic man, in tight, white breeches, a short, black velvet coat trimmed with sable, a red fez on his head, and a riding whip in his hand.

Countess H—— involuntarily uttered a loud exclamation.

"What is the matter with you?" the English lady asked. "Do you know those people?"

"Certainly! She is a Viennese lady," Countess H—— whispered; "Countess W——."

"Oh! Indeed you are quite mistaken; it is a Count Savelli and his wife. They are a handsome couple, don't you think so?"

When the boat came nearer, she saw that in spite of that, it was little Countess W—— and that the handsome man was her former riding-master, whom she had married, and for whom she had bought a title

from the Pope; and as the two boats passed each other, the short sable cloak, which was thrown carelessly over his shoulders, exhaled, like the old cat's skin jacket of that impudent female circus rider, a strong *stable perfume*.