

A Seder Incident

A Short Story

By

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THE thriving little city of Nie-daarsdorp was somewhat astir at the significance of the visit of the McGilvie Opera Company. The company was to stay at the newly-built Imperial Theatre for three days, and the Nie-daarsdorpians were not going to show any lack of interest in the visit to them by the famous opera company, which had gained its laurels in the larger cities of South Africa.

Maitland, the tenor of the company, walked leisurely along the main street of the little city, viewing with interest the appearance of this out of the way spot. He always enjoyed the first walk in a strange town. There was a sensation of discovery in this experience, which made him feel as if he had appraised a new universe.

Of course he was a dreamer, and perhaps that was why his rendering of the music of the great masters thrilled his audiences. Maitland's voice moved his hearers: there was so much feeling in it.

He found the surroundings in the new town conducive to keen thinking. That morning, particularly, incidents of his past came back to him.

He thought of his early upbringing in the little Ghetto section of Leeds, in England; of his father, Aaron Michaels, a tailor, more or less poor all his life, and now dead;

of his growing up and getting away from the atmosphere in which his father had lived; and of how he began to move in better communal circles. He thought of the kindly disposed Jewish business men in his city who, recognising his possession of a remarkable voice, helped him to secure a training; of his joining the chorus of a small travelling opera company later on; of his working his way up to the position of leading tenor, and of the flattering offer which had brought to and kept him these nine years with the McGilvie Opera Company. He had always hoped and prayed for success. It had come; and he was thankful. He loved his profession; and he adored his audiences, who worshipped him in return and the emoluments were certainly splendid. Thus leisurely contemplating as he strolled, his attention was drawn to a card hanging outside a small provision shop: "Kosher for Passover," it read.

For a moment Maitland stopped in his reverie. His memory tried to locate the last occasion he had come in contact with the Passover celebration; with that festival which Jews still celebrate in commemoration of their liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt.

"What an old custom," thought Maitland.

Then the recollection dawned upon him that fifteen years had passed since he had taken part in the Seder service. And suddenly, as the dreamer, in a moment of resolution acts impulsively, he entered the little shop.

An old man came in from the rear.

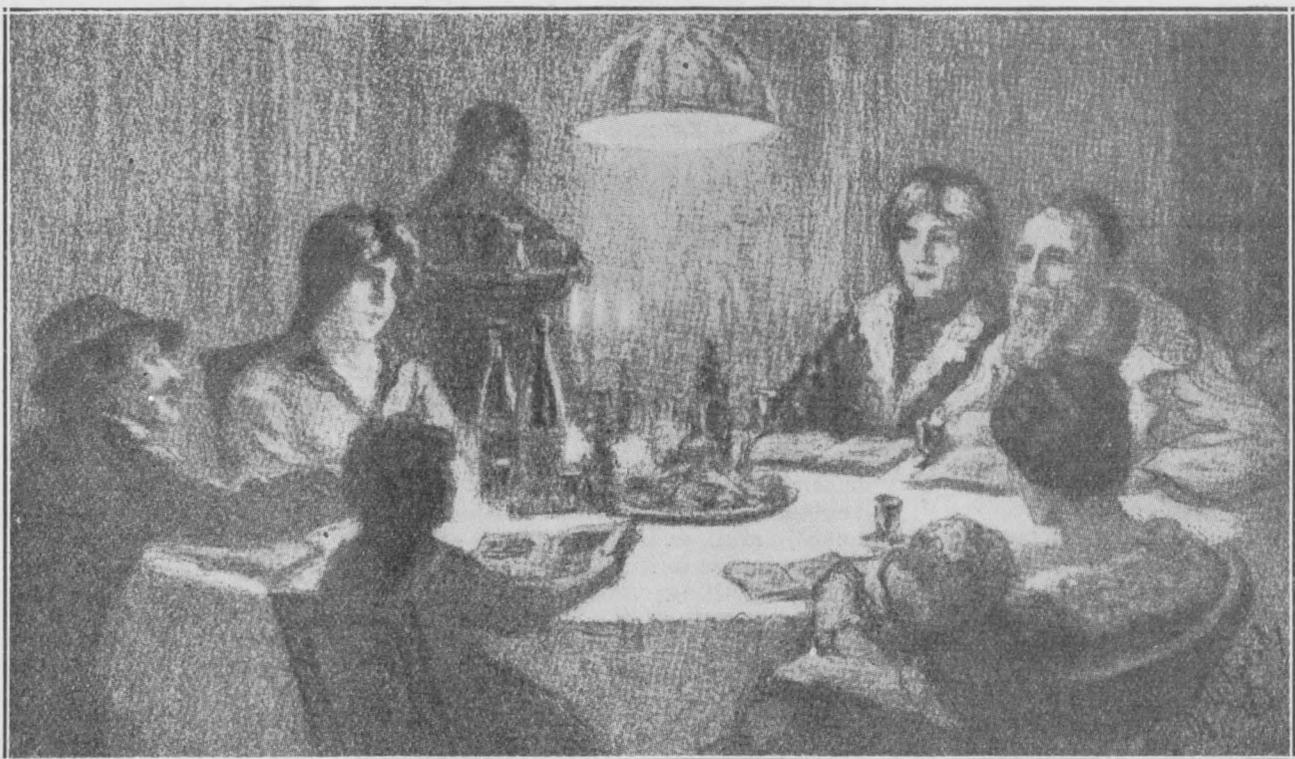
"When does Passover begin, my friend?" Maitland asked in German.

"This evening," replied the old man in Yiddish.

"To-night," murmured Maitland, as he walked out of the shop. The recollections of happy moments spent in his not too happy childhood at the Seder services came back to him. He vividly saw his old father, happy in all his glory, as he was proceeding with the programme of Seder on those evenings. His mother's worn but happy face as he (Maitland) asked the four questions, arose before him, and, as if a force was working within him, over which he had no control, he felt that on that evening he must take part in the Seder service.

He thought furiously. To-night his part in the opera would free him at nine o'clock. After that he could still attend the Seder service in a Jewish home. On enquiry he discovered that the Rabbi

(Continued on next page.)



Drawing by M. Lubovsky.

At The Seder Table.

A SEDER INCIDENT.

(Concluded from previous page.)

of Nidaarsdorp lived but two minutes' walk from the shop.

The Rabbi met him with a cordial "*Sholem Aleichem*," and received Maitland's Seder request with a welcome interest.

"Come friend, to-night, and eat at my table," he said.

Maitland went away happy in having accomplished so appropriate a deed at a moment's inspiration.

As a dreamer's ideas wander, so Maitland's thoughts the next moment were coloured by the picture of the beautiful Henrietta Grenville, the famous young English prima donna, who had lately joined the McGilvie Opera Company. Outside the only large store of any pretensions which Nidaarsdorp possessed, he saw coming out and walking towards him none other than Miss Grenville. He reminded himself that she had been the donor of the gold-handled ebony stick he now carried in his hand. There had developed between them an intense admiration for each other as artists. Besides which, Henrietta Grenville's figure was of that queenly type which elicited genuine admiration from all—men and women alike. A wealth of soft black hair was visible under the stylish Parisian hat she wore; but the charm for Maitland of Henrietta Grenville lay in the dark luminous eyes, which bespoke a soul of feeling in them. To get at the glorious secret in those eyes seemed to Maitland to be the privilege of some superman.

As the Nidaarsdorprians saw these two meet, they admired the athletic figure of the man, and the stately one of the woman; but they saw naught of the quiet flushing of the cheek, as each cordially greeted the other in genuine pleasure at this unexpected morning meeting.

The agitation of their souls was unnoticed by Nidaarsdorp, for actors both they were, and the stirring within them was polished over by a light remark on the freshness and newness of the little city. They walked, talked, and laughed mutually at some remembered anecdote in the previous town they had visited.

When he left her at her hotel, however, Maitland's heart as he wended his way to his own, was sad. It was true that for fifteen years he had entirely cut himself off from Jewish life; his work, profession, and aims had carried him in other directions. But at this step—he paused. To marry out of

the faith. He knew what that meant, and felt in his heart that he dared not face the future as an outcast of his race. Somehow, through all these years, the faint hope always clung to him that he would one day return to the membership of the flock in which he was born, the faith of which still saturated him with its influence.

But he loved Henrietta Grenville. The thought of her for a moment crushed all else from his consciousness. He dare not go to the Seder that evening—it would revive old memories. It would weaken him in his love for her for whom he yearned.

Yet, yet—something called within him. Maitland never could describe it quite.

It was inevitable that he should go to the Seder. And if the memories of his past Jewish life would conquer his love, then his love must suffer. He would meet whatever portended.

And with a clash of feelings and emotions beating in his heart, Maitland walked up the steps of his hotel which he had by this time reached.

The Rabbi sat in the recumbent position demanded of the head of the Jewish house on this night of Passover. On his right sat his wife; on his left his guest. Around the table were the Rabbi's children, all bright South African Jewish girls, their eyes devouring the whole atmosphere of the Seder in wonderment and love.

The Rabbi was orthodox. He had been an emigrant some twenty years previously to South Africa, and still spoke with a foreign accent. His wife was South African born. That she loved him was evident in the happy life they lived. Maitland sat eagerly watching the Rabbi, and doing as he was bid in the different duties incumbent on the participators in the Seder service.

The three thick Matzos wrapped in a napkin were laid upon the Seder dish. Maitland noticed the parsley and the bowl of water, which, he dimly remembered, represented the blood of the Passover of Egypt. There was some green vegetable which served as bitter herbs, and even *Charoseth*—he knew at once it was *Charoseth*. In fact everything came back to his memory, and as the service proceeded the long interval of his neglect of religious observance began to grow smaller, the bridge of time disappeared from his horizon, every moment brought him nearer

and nearer to the inner self he remembered when he loved the Seder and the synagogue. He noticed the roasted egg on the table in memory of the freewill offering. Palestinian wine had found its way to the Rabbi's table.

In a beautiful tone the Rabbi recited the "Kiddush"; then Maitland and he washed hands, dipped the parsley into the water and after a short prayer of thanks they handed some of it to those who sat around them. Then Maitland noticed the Rabbi break off one-half of the middle-cake, which he placed away. This puzzled Maitland somewhat. But the next moment this word clearly stamped itself on his memory—*Afikomen*.

Oh, the fun they had with the *Afikomen*, he recollected. Then he heard the Rabbi's wife say, during an interval in the service, "She is not here yet," and wondered what the lady meant.

He sipped his glass of wine and recited the blessing: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who createth the fruit of the vine."

At that moment a bell rang at the front door. The Rabbi's wife went out to greet the visitor. Voices were heard outside, the utterances of expressions of pleasure and welcome. From the hall passage the Rabbi's wife cried:

"Aaron, Miss Greenberg has really come."

The Rabbi's face and those of his little girls lit up with pleasure in expectancy at the joining in the Seder of a new guest.

Maitland's features turned deathly pale, as the visitor entered. But it was for a moment only. In that moment he had gone through a world of experience.

Miss Greenberg sat down at the table.

"Of course," said the Rabbi, smiling, "I observe you have met before."

Maitland turned towards Henrietta Grenville; her eyes looked into his and their souls met.

They stood in the moonlight on the open veld, near the Grand Hotel of Nidaarsdorp.

"Darling," he said. "We were just artists and we never discussed our antecedents. But we must always remember the Seder. It was then you and I really met."

"The struggle has been great," she replied, "but it has made us stronger for each other."