

ADE GEORGE

THE SLIM
PRINCESS

George Ade

The Slim Princess

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George Ade The Slim Princess



I consented to deliver a message for him

I

WOMAN IN MOROVENIA

Morovenia is a state in which both the mosque and the motor-car now occur in the same landscape. It started out to be Turkish and later decided to be European.

The Mohammedan sanctuaries with their hideous stencil decorations and bulbous domes are jostled by many new shops with blinking fronts and German merchandise. The orthodox turn their faces toward Mecca while the enlightened dream of a journey to Paris. Men of title lately have made the pleasing discovery that they may drink champagne and still be good Mussulmans. The red slipper has been succeeded by the tan gaiter. The voluminous breeches now acknowledge the superior graces of intimate English trousers. Frock-coats are more conventional than beaded jackets. The fez remains as a part of the insignia of the old faith and hereditary devotion to the Sick Man.

The generation of males which has been extricating itself from the shackles of Orientalism has not devoted much worry to the Condition of Woman.

In Morovenia woman is still unliberated. She does not dine at a palm-garden or hop into a victoria on Thursday afternoon to go to the meeting of a club organized to propagate cults. If she met a cult face to face she would not recognize it.

Nor does she suspect, as she sits in her prison apartment, peeping out through the lattice at the monotonous drift of the street life, that her sisters in far-away Michigan are organizing and raising missionary funds in her behalf.

She does not read the dressmaking periodicals. She never heard of the Wednesday matinée. When she takes the air she rides in a carriage that has a sheltering hood, and she is veiled up to the eyes, and she must never lean out to wriggle her little finger-tips at men lolling in front of the cafés. She must not see the men. She may look at them, but she must not see them. No wonder the sisters in Michigan are organizing to batter down the walls of tradition, and bring to her the more recent privileges of her sex!

Two years ago, when this story had its real beginning, the social status of woman in Morovenia was not greatly different from what it is to-day, or what it was two centuries ago.

Woman had two important duties assigned to her. One was to hide herself from the gaze of the multitude, and the other was to be beautiful—that is, fat. A woman who was plump, or buxom, or chubby might be classed as passably attractive, but only the fat women were irresistible. A woman weighing two hundred pounds was only two-thirds as beautiful as one weighing three hundred. Those grading below one hundred and fifty were verging upon the impossible.

II

KALORA'S AFFLICTION

If it had been planned to make this an old-fashioned discursive novel, say of the Victor Hugo variety, the second chapter would expend itself upon a philosophical discussion of Fat and a sensational showing of how and why the presence or absence of adipose tissue, at certain important crises, had altered the destinies of the whole race.

The subject offers vast possibilities. It involves the physical attractiveness of every woman in History and permits one to speculate wildly as to what might have happened if Cleopatra had weighed forty pounds heavier, if Elizabeth had been a gaunt and wiry creature, or if Joan of Arc had been so bulky that she could not have fastened on her armor.

The soft layers which enshroud the hard machinery of the human frame seem to arrive in a merely incidental or accidental sort of way. Yet once they have arrived they exert a mysterious influence over careers. Because of a mere change in contour, many a queen has lost her throne. It is a terrifying thought when one remembers that fat so often comes and so seldom goes.

It has been explained that in Morovenia, obesity and feminine beauty increased in the same ratio. The woman reigning in the hearts of men was the one who could displace the most atmosphere.

Because of the fashionableness of fat, Count Selim Malagaski, Governor-General of Morovenia, was very unhappy. He had two daughters. One was fat; one was thin. To be more explicit, one was gloriously fat and the other was distressingly thin.

Jeneka was the name of the one who had been blessed abundantly. Several of the younger men in official circles, who had seen Jeneka at a distance, when she waddled to her carriage or turned side-wise to enter a shop-door, had written verses about her in which they compared her to the blushing pomegranate, the ripe melon, the luscious grape, and other vegetable luxuries more or less globular in form.

No one had dedicated any verses to Kalora. Kalora was the elder of the two. She had come to the alarming age of nineteen and no one had started in bidding for her.

In court circles, where there is much time for idle gossip, the most intimate secrets of an important household are often bandied about when the black coffee is being served. The marriageable young men of Morovenia had learned of the calamity in Count Malagaski's family. They knew that Kalora weighed less than one hundred and twenty pounds. She was tall, lithe, slender, sinuous, willowy, hideous. The fact that poor old Count Malagaski had made many unsuccessful attempts to fatten her was a stock subject for jokes of an unrefined and Turkish character.

Whereas Jeneka would recline for hours at a time on a shaded veranda, munching sugary confections that were loaded with nutritious nuts, Kalora showed a far-western preference for pickles and olives, and had been detected several times in the act of bribing servants to bring this contraband food into the harem.

Worse still, she insisted upon taking exercise. She loved to play romping games within the high walls of the inclosure where she and the other female attaches of the royal household were kept penned up. Her father coaxed, pleaded and even threatened, but she refused to lead the indolent life prescribed by custom; she scorned the sweet and heavy foods which would enable her to expand into loveliness; she persistently declined to be fat.

Kalora's education was being directed by a superannuated professor named Popova. He was so antique and book-wormy that none of the usual objections urged against the male sex seemed to hold good in his case, and he had the free run of the palace. Count Selim Malagaski trusted him implicitly. Popova fawned upon the Governor-General, and seemed slavish in his devotion. Secretly

and stealthily he was working out a frightful vengeance upon his patron. Twenty years before, Count Selim, in a moment of anger, had called Popova a "Christian dog."

In Morovenia it is flattery to call a man a "liar." It is just the same as saying to him, "You belong in the diplomatic corps." It is no disgrace to be branded as a thief, because all business transactions are saturated with treachery. But to call another a "Christian dog" is the thirty-third degree of insult.

Popova writhed in spirit when he was called "Christian," but he covered his wrath and remained in the nobleman's service and waited for his revenge. And now he was sacrificing the innocent Kalora in order to punish the father. He said to himself: "If she does not fatten, then her father's heart will be broken, and he will suffer even as I have suffered from being called Christian."

It was Popova who, by guarded methods, encouraged her to violent exercise, whereby she became as hard and trim as an antelope. He continued to supply her with all kinds of sour and biting foods and sharp mineral waters, which are the sworn enemies of any sebaceous condition. And now that she was nineteen, almost at the further boundary of the marrying age, and slimmer than ever before, he rejoiced greatly, for he had accomplished his deep and malign purpose, and laid a heavy burden of sorrow upon Count Selim Malagaski.

III

THE CRUELTY OF LAW

If the father was worried by the prolonged crisis, the younger sister, Jeneka, was well-nigh distracted, for she could not hope to marry until Kalora had been properly mated and sent away.

In Morovenia there is a very strict law intended to eliminate the spinster from the social horizon. It is a law born of craft and inspired by foresight. The daughters of a household must be married off in the order of their nativity. The younger sister dare not contemplate matrimony until the elder sister has been led to the altar. It is impossible for a young and attractive girl to make a desirable match leaving a maiden sister marooned on the market. She must cooperate with her parents and with the elder sister to clear the way.

As a rule this law encourages earnest getting-together in every household and results in a clearing up of the entire stock of eligible daughters. But think of the unhappy lot of an adorable and much-coveted maiden who finds herself wedged in behind something unattractive and shelf-worn! Jeneka was thus pocketed. She could do nothing except fold her hands and patiently wait for some miraculous intervention.

In Morovenia the discreet marrying age is about sixteen. Jeneka was eighteen—still young enough and of a most ravishing weight, but the slim princess stood as a slight, yet seemingly insurmountable barrier between her and all hopes of conventional happiness.

Count Malagaski did not know that the shameful fact of Kalora's thinness was being whispered among the young men of Morovenia. When the daughters were out for their daily carriage-ride both wore flowing robes. In the case of Kalora, this augmented costume was intended to conceal the absence of noble dimensions.

It is not good form in Morovenia for a husband or father to discuss his home life, or to show enthusiasm on the subject of mere woman; but the Count, prompted by a fretful desire to dispose of his rapidly maturing offspring, often remarked to the high-born young gentlemen of his acquaintance that Kalora was a most remarkable girl and one possessed of many charms, leaving them to infer, if they cared to do so, that possibly she weighed at least one hundred and eighty pounds.



Papova rejoiced greatly

These casual comments did not seem to arouse any burning curiosity among the young men, and up to the day of Kalora's nineteenth anniversary they had not had the effect of bringing to the father any of those guarded inquiries which, under the oriental custom, are always preliminary to an actual proposal of marriage.

Count Selim Malagaski had a double reason for wishing to see Kalora married. While she remained at home he knew that he would be second in authority. There is an occidental misapprehension to the effect that every woman beyond the borders of the Levant is a languorous and waxen lily, floating in a milk-warm pool of idleness. It is true that the women of a household live in certain apartments set aside as a "harem." But "harem" literally means "forbidden"—that is, forbidden to the public, nothing more. Every villa at Newport has a "harem."

The women of Morovenia do not pour tea for men every afternoon, and they are kept well under cover, but they are not slaves. They do not inherit a nominal authority, but very often they assume a real authority. In the United States, women can not sail a boat, and yet they direct the cruise of the yacht. Railway presidents can not vote in the Senate, and yet they always know how the votes are going to be cast. And in Morovenia, many a clever woman, deprived of specified and legal rights, has learned to rule man by those tactful methods which are in such general use that they need not be specified in this connection.

Kalora had a way of getting around her father. After she had defied him and put him into a stewing rage, she would smooth him the right way and, with teasing little cajoleries, nurse him back to a pleasant humor. He would find himself once more at the starting-place of the controversy, his stern commands unheeded, and the disobedient daughter laughing in his very face.

Thus, while he was ashamed of her physical imperfections, he admired her cleverness. Often he said to Popova: "I tell you, she might make some man a sprightly and entertaining companion, even if she *is* slender."

Whereupon the crafty Popova would reply: "Be patient, your Excellency. We shall yet have her as round as a dumpling."

And all the time he was keeping her trained as fine as the proverbial fiddle.

IV THE GARDEN PARTY

Said the Governor-General to himself in that prime hour for wide-awake meditation—the one just before arising for breakfast: "She is not all that she should be, and yet, millions of women have been less than perfect and most of them have married."

He looked hard at the ceiling for a full minute and then murmured, "Even men have their shortcomings."

This declaration struck him as being sinful and almost infidel in its radicalism, and yet it seemed to open the way to a logical reason why some titled bachelor of damaged reputation and tottering finances might balance his poor assets against a dowry and a social position, even though he would be compelled to figure Kalora into the bargain.

It must be known that the Governor-General was now simply looking for a husband for Kalora. He did not hope to top the market or bring down any notable catch. He favored any alliance that would result in no discredit to his noble lineage.

"At present they do not even nibble," he soliloquized, still looking at the ceiling. "They have taken fright for some reason. They may have an inkling of the awful truth. She is nineteen. Next year she will be twenty—the year after that twenty-one. Then it would be too late. A desperate experiment is better than inaction. I have much to gain and nothing to lose. I must exhibit Kalora. I shall bring the young men to her. Some of them may take a fancy to her. I have seen people eat sugar on tomatoes and pepper on ice-cream. There may be in Morovenia one—one would be sufficient—one bachelor who is no stickler for full-blown loveliness. I may find a man who has become inoculated with western heresies and believes that a woman with intellect is desirable, even though under weight. I may find a fool, or an aristocrat who has gambled. I may stumble upon good fortune if I put her out among the young men. Yes, I must exhibit her, but how—how?"

He began reaching into thin air for a pretext and found one. The inspiration was simple and satisfying.

He would give a garden-party in honor of Mr. Rawley Plumston, the British Consul. Of course he would have to invite Mrs. Plumston and then, out of deference to European custom, he would have his two daughters present. It was only by the use of imported etiquette that he could open the way to direct courtship.

Possibly some of the cautious young noblemen would talk with Kalora, and, finding her bright-eyed, witty, ready in conversation and with enthusiasm for big and masculine undertakings, be attracted to her. At the same time her father decided that there was no reason why her pitiful shortage of avoirdupois should be candidly advertised. Even at a garden-party, where the guests of honor are two English subjects, the young women would be required to veil themselves up to the nose-tips and hide themselves within a veritable cocoon of soft garments.

The invitations went out and the acceptances came in. The English were flattered. Count Malagaski was buoyed by new hopes and the daughters were in a day-and-night flutter, for neither of them had ever come within speaking distance of the real young man of their dreams.

On the morning of the day set apart for the début of Kalora, Count Selim went to her apartments, and, with a rather shamefaced reluctance, gave his directions.

"Kalora, I have done all for you that any father could do for a beloved child and you are still thin," he began.

"Slender," she corrected.

"Thin," he repeated. "Thin as a crane—a mere shadow of a girl—and, what is more deplorable, apparently indifferent to the sorrow that you are causing those most interested in your welfare."

"I am not indifferent, father. If, merely by wishing, I could be fat, I would make myself the shape of the French balloon that floated over Morovenia last week. I would be so roly-poly that, when it came time for me to go and meet our guests this afternoon, I would roll into their presence as if I were a tennis-ball."

"Why should you know anything about tennis-balls? You, of all the young women in Morovenia, seem to be the only one with a fondness for athletics. I have heard that in Great Britain, where the women ride and play rude, manly games, there has been developed a breed as hard as flint—Allah preserve me from such women!"

"Father, you are leading up to something. What is it you wish to say?"

"This. You have persistently disobeyed me and made me very unhappy, but to-day I must ask you to respect my wishes. Do not proclaim to our guests the sad truth regarding your deficiency."

"Good!" she exclaimed gaily. "I shall wear a robe the size of an Arabian tent, and I shall surround myself with soft pillows, and I shall wheeze when I breathe and—who knows?—perhaps some dark-eyed young man worth a million piasters will be deceived, and will come to you to-morrow, and buy me—buy me at so much a pound." And she shrieked with laughter.

"Stop!" commanded her father. "You refuse to take me seriously, but I am in earnest. Do not humiliate me in the presence of my friends this afternoon."

Then he hurried away before she had time to make further sport of him.

To Count Selim Malagaski this garden-party was the frantic effort of a sinking man. To Kalora it was a lark. From the pure fun of the thing, she obeyed her father. She wore four heavily quilted and padded gowns, one over another, and when she and Jeneka were summoned from their apartments and went out to meet the company under the trees, they were almost like twins and both duck-like in general outlines.

First they met Mrs. Rawley Plumston, a very tall, bony and dignified woman in gray, wearing a most flowery hat. To every man of Morovenia Mrs. Plumston was the apotheosis of all that was undesirable in her sex, but they were exceedingly polite to her, for the reason that Morovenia owed a great deal of money in London and it was a set policy to cultivate the friendship of the British.

While Jeneka and Kalora were being presented to the consul's wife, these same young men, the very flower of bachelorhood, stood back at a respectful distance and regarded the young women with half-concealed curiosity. To be permitted to inspect young women of the upper classes was a most unusual privilege, and they knew why the privilege had been extended to them. It was all very amusing, but they were too well bred to betray their real emotions. When they moved up to be presented to the sisters they seemed grave in their salutations and restrained themselves, even though one pair of eyes, peering out above a very gauzy veil, seemed to twinkle with mischief and to corroborate their most pronounced suspicions.

Out of courtesy to his guests, Count Malagaski had made his garden-party as deadly dull as possible. Little groups of bored people drifted about under the trees and exchanged the usual commonplace observations. Tea and cakes were served under a canopy tent and the local orchestra struggled with pagan music.

Kalora found herself in a wide and easy kind of a basket-chair sitting under a tree and chatting with Mrs. Plumston. She was trying to be at her ease, and all the time she knew that every young man present was staring at her out of the corner of his eye.

Mrs. Plumston, although very tall and evidently of brawny strength, had a twittering little voice and a most confiding manner. She was immensely interested in the daughter of the Governor-General. To meet a young girl who had spent her life within the mysterious shadows of an oriental household gave her a tingling interest, the same as reading a forbidden book. She readily won the confidence of Kalora, and Kalora, being most ingenuous and not educated to the wiles of the drawing-room, spoke her thoughts with the utmost candor.

"I like you," she said to Mrs. Plumston, "and, oh, how I envy you! You go to balls and dinners and the theater, don't you?"

"Alas, yes, and you escape them! How I envy *you*!"

"Your husband is a very handsome man. Do you love him?"

"I tolerate him."

"Does he ever scold you for being thin?"

"Does he *what*?"

"Is he ever angry with you because you are not big and plump and—and—pulpy?"

"Heavens, no! If my husband has any private convictions regarding my personal appearance, he is discreet enough to keep them to himself. If he isn't satisfied with me, he should be. I have been working for years to save myself from becoming fat and plump and—pulpy."

"Then you don't think fat women are beautiful?"

"My child, in all enlightened countries adipose is woman's worst enemy. If I were a fat woman, and a man said that he loved me, I should know that he was after my bank-account. Take my advice, my dear young lady, and bant."

"Bant?"

"Reduce. Make yourself slender. You have beautiful eyes, beautiful hair, a perfect complexion, and with a trim figure you would be simply incomparable."

Kalora listened, trembling with surprise and pleasure. Then she leaned over and took the hand of the gracious Englishwoman.

"I have a confession to make," she said in a whisper. "I am not fat—I am slim—quite slim."

And then, at that moment, something happened to make this whole story worth telling. It was a little something, but it was the beginning of many strange experiences, for it broke up the wonderful garden-party in the grounds of the Governor-General, and it gave Morovenia something to talk about for many weeks to come. It all came about as follows:

At the military club, the night before the party, a full score of young men, representing the quality, sat at an oblong table and partook of refreshments not sanctioned by the Prophet. They were young men of registered birth and supposititious breeding, even though most of them had very little head back of the ears and wore the hair clipped short and were big of bone, like work-horses, and had the gusty manners of the camp.

They were foolishly gloating over the prospect of meeting the two daughters of the Governor-General, and were telling what they knew about them with much freedom, for, even in a monarchy, the chief executive and his family are public property and subject to the censorship of any one who has a voice for talking.

Of these male gossips there were a few who said, with gleeful certainty, that the elder daughter was a mere twig who could hide within the shadow of her bounteous and incomparable sister.

"Wait until to-morrow and you shall see," they said, wagging their heads very wisely.

To-morrow had come and with it the party and here was Kalora—a pretty face peering out from a great pod of clothes.

They stood back and whispered and guessed, until one, more enterprising than the others, suggested a bold experiment to set all doubts at rest.

Count Malagaski had provided a diversion for his guests. A company of Arabian acrobats, on their way from Constantinople to Paris, had been intercepted, and were to give an exhibition of leaping and pyramid-building at one end of the garden. While Kalora was chatting with Mrs. Plumston, the acrobats had entered and, throwing off their yellow-and-black striped gowns, were preparing for the feats. They were behind the two women and at the far end of the garden. Mrs. Plumston and Kalora would have to move to the other side of the tree in order to witness the exhibition. This fact gave the devil-may-care young bachelors a ready excuse.

"Do as I have directed and you shall learn for yourselves," said the one who had invented the tactics. "I tell you that what you see is all shell. Now then—"

Four conspirators advanced in a half-careless and sauntering manner to where Kalora and the consul's wife sat by the sheltering tree, intent upon their exchange of secrets.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Plumston, but the acrobats are about to begin," said one of the young men, touching the fez with his forefinger.

"Oh, really?" she exclaimed, looking up. "We must see them."

"You must face the other way," said the young man. "They are at the east end of the garden. Permit us."

Whereupon the young man who had spoken and a companion who stood at his side very gently picked up Mrs. Plumston's big basket-chair between them and carried it around to the other side of the tree. And the two young men who had been waiting just behind picked up Kalora's chair and carried *her* to the other side of the tree, and put her down beside the consul's wife.

Did they carry her? No, they dandled her. She was as light as a feather for these two young giants of the military. They made a palpable show of the ridiculous ease with which they could lift their burden. It may have been a forward thing to do, but they had done it with courtly politeness, and the consul's wife, instead of being annoyed, was pleased and smiling over the very pretty little attention, for she could not know at the moment that the whole maneuver had grown out of a wager and was part of a detestable plan to find out the actual weight of the Governor-General's elder daughter.

If Mrs. Plumston did not understand, Count Selim Malagaski understood. So did all the young men who were watching the pantomime. And Kalora understood. She looked up and saw the lurking smiles on the faces of the two gallants who were carrying her, and later the tittering became louder and some of the young men laughed aloud.

She leaped from her chair and turned upon her two tormentors.

"How dare you?" she exclaimed. "You are making sport of me in the presence of my father's guests! You have a contempt for me because I am ugly. You mock at me in private because you hear that I am thin. You wish to learn the truth about me. Well, I will tell you. I *am* thin. I weigh one hundred and eighteen pounds."

She was speaking loudly and defiantly, and all the young men were backing away, dismayed at the outbreak. Her father elbowed his way among them, white with terror, and attempted to pacify her.

"Be still, my child!" he commanded. "You don't know what you are saying!"

"Yes, I do know what I am saying!" she persisted, her voice rising shrilly. "Do they wish to know about me? Must they know the truth? Then look! *Look!*"

With sweeping outward gestures she threw off the soft quilted robes gathered about her, tore away the veil and stood before them in a white gown that fairly revealed every modified in-and-out of her figure.

What ensued? Is it necessary to tell? The costume in which she stood forth was no more startling or immodest than the simple gown which the American high-school girl wears on her Commencement Day, and it was decidedly more ample than the sum of all the garments worn at polite social gatherings in communities somewhat to the west. Nevertheless, the company stood aghast. They were doubly horrified—first, at the effrontery of the girl, and second, at the revelation of her real person, for they saw that she was doomed, helpless, bereft of hope, slim beyond all curing.

V HE ARRIVES

Kalora was alone.

After putting the company to consternation she had flung herself defiantly back into the chair and directed a most contemptuous gaze at all the desirable young men of her native land.

The Governor-General made a choking attempt to apologize and explain, and then, groping for an excuse to send the people away, suggested that the company view the new stables. The acrobats were dismissed. The guests went rapidly to an inspection of the carriages and horses. They were glad to escape. Jeneka, crushed in spirit and shamed at the brazen performance of her sister, began a plaintive conjecture as to "what people would say," when Kalora turned upon her such a tigerish glance that she fairly ran for her apartment, although she was too corpulent for actual sprinting. Mrs. Plumston remained behind as the only comforter.

"It was a most contemptible proceeding, my child. When they lifted us and carried us to the other side of the tree I thought it was rather nice of them; something on the order of the old Walter Raleigh days of chivalry, and all that. And just think! The beasts did it to find out whether or not you were really plump and heavy. It's a most extraordinary incident."

"I wouldn't marry one of them now, not if he begged and my father commanded!" said Kalora bitterly. "And poor Jeneka! This takes away her last chance. Until I am married she can not marry, and after to-day not even a blind man would choose me."

"For goodness' sake, don't worry! You tell me you are nineteen. No woman need feel discouraged until she is about thirty-five. You have sixteen years ahead of you."

"Not in Morovenia."

"Why remain in Morovenia?"

"We are not permitted to travel."

"Perhaps, after what happened to-day, your father will be glad to let you travel," said Mrs. Plumston with a significant little nod and a wise squint. "Don't you generally succeed in having your own way with him?"

"Oh, to travel—to travel!" exclaimed Kalora, clasping her hands. "If I am to remain single and a burden for ever, perhaps it would lighten father's grief if I resided far away. My presence certainly would remind him of the wreck of all his ambitions, but if I should settle down in Vienna or Paris, or—" she paused and gave a little gasp—"or if anything should happen to me, if I should—should disappear, that is, really disappear, Jeneka would be free to marry and—"

"Oh, pickles!" said Mrs. Plumston. "I have heard of romantic young women jumping overboard and taking poison on account of rich young men, but I never heard of a girl's snuffing herself out so as to give her sister a chance to get married. The thing for you to do at a time like this, when you find yourself in a tangle, is to think of yourself and your own chances for happiness. Father and Jeneka will take care of themselves. They are popular and beloved characters here in Morovenia. They are not taking you into consideration except as you seem to interfere with their selfish plans. I have made it a rule not to work out my neighbor's destiny."

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