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Un Vilda Dansk

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The yellowed photograph had caught Basse straddling the bow of a small fishing vessel docked in the Copenhagen harbor. With his wet gold hair and Viking physique, my grandpa looked the part of the romantic rover that he was. And carrying along with this, Basse's philosophy is to feel grateful, get down to the heart of things, forget the dangers of the pleasant paths and live for the pure pleasure of living in a world full of adventure.

In 1902, when shore leaves came often, he and the other sailors rushed to Tivoli, an amusement park in the middle of "Kobenhagen," where they found pretty girls eager to share in a good time. This festive gathering place was for Basse! It was gay, bustling and joyous! He could find salty seamen’s taverns at Nyhavn, or Old Harbor street. Here, the streets were lively at all hours with concertina music, and the corners echoed with fights or short-lived brawls. He loved this gay night life, for the "tomorrows" might find him wrecked off the coast of Norway or weak from treading water for eighteen hours after being torpedoed near the coast of Gibraltar. But in time Basse had enough of dangerous living, "und dere vas little vork in Denmark, soo me and Neils ve hear dere vas mooch vork in U.S. so ve packed oop our bags, kissed ladies goot-bye und ve vent to Ellis Island!"
He became a cook on the S. S. Yale and sailed around the Cape and South America where he spread his exhilarating love of life, not to mention 'Frisco, Seattle, and even Candovora, Alaska. He made the Barbary Coast his own Tivoli and Nyhavn and once spent $2000 in twenty-four hours. One night, in a smoky bar on the coast, Basse began a “drinking bout” with what appeared to be a friendly Oriental. But Basse lost, in more ways than one, for “Dat damn Jap took my money—what was left! By gum! I was so mad dat I knocked him down the stairs. But six weeks later dey came to me in jail und said it vas defense for myself! By gum it vas—he took my money!”

Neils Hansen Basse Nielsen feasted, made love, and took part in naval battles with the uncommon zest that he still has for smoking cigars, chewing tobacco, singing, and drinking much coffee and even more beer. But those early adventures occurred “when you work hard while you young and feel goot!”

As he talks now, I see spread before me, like changing screens, the contrast between the dapper Dane of the early 1900's and the silver-haired old gentleman of 79 years who is now as plump as a wine barrel and who bears a striking resemblance to another man from the northland—Santa Claus! He now sits looking out the window like the bronze mermaid who sits on the rock in Copenhagen harbor—ever watching the ships that come and go, looking for the mortal prince who will never return, for Basse’s days of adventure are nearly over.

When Basse was 65 he and his wife Marie started a Danish pastry shop in Dawson Creek, British Columbia. Although he was in the midst of retirement and was living lavishly on old-age pension, he wanted to see if he could spread his wings again as in 1915 when he worked on Alaska’s first railroad and copper mine and panned gold at the Big Delta. “So Marie und me when ve heard dere vas mooch opportunity in Nort, und ve alvays laiked money, you know, und ve opened da bake shop . . . me in da back and Marie in front vit da cashyegiester—Ah! All da pengya (money)! Und joost laik old time when ve hat the tavern in farmer’s market—sooch fun!” Only the second time Basse Nielsen hit the Yukon he didn’t drive sled dogs from his home-made cabin to his gold strike. It was different from those days when he hunted and fished in the biting cold because he had no money even for food, and when he lost two fingers from frost bite while sleeping.

But those adventurous days are past. Grandpa is a little rounder than he was in 1915, and he has grown old. But his eyes do not stop twinkling. He still has that smiling serenity that beams with a desire to please. His natural and direct charm is definitely intact; “Vemen! Umm! I laik someting lively—vun dat tinks und I can talk to—you know I’m not educated und dey is smart. I’m not so dumb you tink
though, I’m joost sneekie!” Women are one of his favorite subjects, and even to this day he can charm the loveliest of ladies into believing that he is the greatest Dane of all! Basse’s devilishly assured eyes have been known to coax the most stubborn horse to water.

He is most insulted when dinner guests refuse his food. He looks at the guest with poison in his eye, or as poisonous as a smiling Dane can look, because the guest has refused a third helping of Danish layer cake. The cake has twelve thin layers of yellow cake with intermittent fillings of strawberry jam, nuts, or custard and topped with a whipped cream icing and maraschino cherries. He is determined to gorge you with food, but he smilingly says, “you know, ve try to mak tings soo nice for our fancy guests un den dey don’t eat! Und ve try so hard to mak it pleasant. Wednesday, you Mam vas here vee hat schicken, rice and curry und all kind of goodies! Cherry caffe kake with cream apple turnover. But she don’t eat noting. It is wasted so ve baen eating every nite—I don’t know but vee never get skinny.”

Basse is a pleasure-loving person who sets a great store in good living and likes to eat fresh, well-prepared food, coffee and pastries swathed in whipped cream, and particularly beer or potent schnapps and smorrebrod. Smorrebrod is an open sandwich with butter smeared over the layers and laid with strips of veal, beef, ham, fish, salmon, spiced herring, etc., accompanied by a drink or two, or three. Now, the Dane begins to “skol!” Having caught the eye of a person whose health he wishes to drink to, he raises his glass of schnapps, and with a nod, drinks it down. Then he roars, “Heep Heep Horray!” three times. But he claims, “I very temperence now, you know. In old days when I drink mooch I mostly sink or fight—now, I joost talk all the teem!”

In full swing, after a few “skois,” Basse declaims in a booming voice about his birthplace, Svenstrop, Denmark, or his mother, the lovely daughter of Baron von Peilsen, or “Kobenhagen the Paris of da Nort!” Then, he will stop, reflect placidly and say “Ah! Und I could tell you tales, Tootsie, dat vould mak you hair set oop! Ya! Dere is no flies on me. I vas cerkiny un vilda Dansk (wild Dane)! Vhy the Germans coult not beat oos in Var II—vhiel ve may live close ve are two minds dat don’t match. Vhy, Tootsie, I don’t know but dey vil never get oos—dey can’t break our spirit—Ve’re Dansk!”