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## FRANCISCO AND THE FORTY-FIRST THIEF

*William G. Ryan*

**A**FTER MIDNIGHT we went to the Ali Baba. In truth the place ought not be called this, for it had no real name and was one of those that opened without license in forbidden hours. Francisco Deli called it the Ali Baba because of a circle of tall olive jars which curved around the tables, and perhaps because it was hidden from all but knowing eyes. Also it was in many ways like a cave. When you stepped through the shadowed entrance your feet thudded softly against bare earth and you felt pressing upon you a clinging weight of languid air—still, damp air like that which is found walled away from the sun by mountains and tall trees.

Many things suggested the name to many of us. But as usual it was Francisco Deli who spoke for the rest. When he first came to our rendezvous he said at once, "Henceforth this place will have a name. It shall be called the Ali Baba."

Often many of us went quietly and stealthily to the Ali Baba in our proscribed time. We liked this place where we could roar and roister in defiance of authority. We liked the rattle of glasses, the thump of sturdy fists on stout tables, the raucous rasp of boastful words, and all the bold sounds and sights which were here safely separated from the outside stillness. We liked the mellow wine which flowed freely and swept bits of song into our throats. We liked these things, and we liked the hollow wall of big-bodied olive jars around us.

Francisco Deli said that these jars were the very ones in which the Forty Thieves had suffered cruel agonies, and he said that the spirits of the murdered dead returned to dwell in the places where death had found them. Often he told us these and other like tales which

brought vague or clear connotations into our minds and sometimes sent into our hearts syllables of essential truth.

Sailors and scribblers, workers in steel and song, the hard-muscled and keen-minded, those restless with large desires had come to this far country to strike their blows for the things which stood and for those which might arise; and of these builders and destroyers the most daring and rebellious quaffed the red wine of the Ali Baba.

Among the many unusual ones who came to the Ali Baba from all lands and levels Francisco Deli was foremost in the qualities that urge remembrance. He was, in his own words, "a man of three lands and three lives." In Boston, U.S.A., the place of his nativity, he had been called Frank Daly. In the green isle of Eire and in its true tongue he would have been known as *Fraincis Ua Dealeigh, Ceolaire*, the Warbler. Here by his own choice and command and because of his desire to unite in sound as well as in struggle with the people of a travailing land he became Francisco Deli.

There were men among us who bulged with oaken knobs of muscle; there were those who had sinews of wire and whipcord. Likewise we had other strengths. Some could send thoughts like swords of sunlight through the deepest and darkest philosophies of men. Many were strong beyond usual, but in the powers granted with life and living no one of us equaled Francisco Deli. When he stood carelessly straight and willow-slim before us with the fingers of his comely hand curved into the rosy aura of a high-lifted wineglass, we could feel smooth currents of nonchalant force flowing coolly about us. If he chose to sing in wailing Erse some sorrowful song of sufferers, the high tenor notes carried undefinable meanings to our minds. In the voice of Francisco Deli was all joy and sorrow. There were tears and tempers behind his rippling smile.

Francisco Deli was strong in many ways and in the totality of strengths. Once he crossed arms in our tried test of muscular power with LaChance, the mighty Quebec woodsman, who could with a single sweep of stalwart shoulders bury a wide axe blade to its hilt in a tough oak log. Elbow to elbow and right hand to right hand across the table each strained, after the manner of the contest, to level the arm of the other prone and prostrate beneath his own. At this game seldom seriously challenged was ape-chested LaChance, the champion. Robust men and game men, thick-muscled from mine, mill, forest, and ship, had felt the strength milked from their fingertips by

his constricting grasp, and had watched their proud right arms crumple under his as helplessly as reeds struck down by a toppling tree.

We laughed lustily, thinking the act yet another of his keen jests, when Francisco Deli dared to parallel his frail right arm to that of the mighty champion. When in a second, two, and three, the Warbler's fist stood straight and upright, we thought that LaChance in the gay spirit of the moment was playing the clown for our amusement, and this belief continued true until we saw veins spurt finger-thick on the Champion's temples and drops of sweat coil a glistening crown above the deep bisecting wrinkle on his narrow brow. Francisco's slender arm quivered and swayed, but remained fixed as the calm smile on his dark face. After a moment the Champion's hairy fist curved backward and dropped with a heavy thud on the rough table; in his eyes fear wrestled with wonder.

Francisco was grand magnanimous in victory. He leaped lightly to his feet and lifted high a brimming glass. "A toast to you, Frenchy!" he cried. "You're a bold lad and a stout lad, and you've done right well. But you had no chance at all against the odds. You can be proud this night that you strove mightily with four mighty men. For behind my hand pushing hard were my friends, Brian Boru, John L. Sullivan, and Michael Collins—sturdy lads all, and one by one a match for the best."

After this feat many knew that Francisco Deli possessed powers beyond understanding. But there were still skeptics among us. These believed that Francisco would fail on the rifle range. They called attention to the fact that his brown eyes blinked dazedly when the thinnest beam of light played upon his thick horn-rimmed spectacles. The doubters said that on the rifle range Francisco Deli would be no more than a weak and fallible mortal, and they wagered heavily with the believers that his score would make this manifest to all.

At the hour of trial Francisco achieved grandeurs of scorn and confidence. Waving lightly aside with a lithe gesture the fears and advices of his backers he toasted his own success by draining at two long single draughts a liter of white and a liter of red wine. Then he strode to the rifle range, took the firing post, casually removed his glasses, and without these seemingly necessary aids to his weak vision and despite a sharp slant of sun in his blinking brown eyes, sent four out of his five allotted bullets into the distant bullseye and one to the inner edge of the first circle. Francisco explained the miss

by remarking that the good fairies who guided his rifle barrel had caused a shot to go slightly astray in order to preserve the virtue of humility in their favored one.

Next to Francisco Deli the most memorable ones at the Cafe Ali Babe were El Viejo, the proprietor, and his young wife. Through all the boisterous hours of our revels the Old One sat on a high stool beside the tallest jar and looked down upon us with eyes that resembled small black currants set in thick brown crust. While he watched, deep-bosomed Morgiana, his buxom wife, moved swiftly among the tables in answer to the never-stilled demands of the hungry and thirsty. Her sandalled heels, impelled by quick firm strides, struck the earthen floor with sharp jolts that sent inviting quivers through the soft swells of her supple body. When she leaned over us to pour our wine we sometimes felt a warm weight of plump breast on our tingling shoulders.

We were rough men and virile men and we were eagerly alive to the powerful allurements which Morgiana carried in her person and transmitted through her lissom motions. We thought of her in the manner that vagrant, brawling men are wont to think of the women who chance in their wandering way. But we did not touch her body with our hands, or speak to her the thoughts that came to our minds. This, we knew, El Viejo would not permit. The Old One cherished his sturdy young *companera* beyond all else. When she passed near him, his dim black eyes flared briefly, and tiny pleasure wrinkles criss-crossed the deep slashed scars of age which lined his leathery countenance.

El Viejo had laws and rules for the guests of the Ali Baba, and two of these were inviolable. No man could sully the dignity of Morgiana by word or act, and each must settle his wine score in full on the regular days when the soldiers received their pay. Between these days the Old One extended credit to those who had flung their substance into the wine vats too hastily. When Morgiana brought to his perch the coins, crumpled bills, and promises of the drinkers, he gravely chalked the names of those who had pledged on the tall olive jar beside him and set after them the amounts owed. On payment these scrawling white letters and figures were erased ostentatiously. Now and again a man would chalk up a heavy score and then fail to appear for settlement. At such times El Viejo would inquire querulously and often, "Where is this *camarada*? Why does he not return?"

It was our custom to reply to these queries, "*El frente. Muerto*. He has gone to the front. He is dead." Whereupon he would mutter, "*Muerto. Muerto. Malo! Malo! Bad! Bad!*" But he did not erase the names or the numerals.

Until the coming of Francisco Deli no man had broken the inflexible financial rules of the Ali Baba and then dared to return. But Francisco scorned tradition. Soon his name was marked in the largest letters at the top of the debtors' list and the figures after it grew greater than any ever before recorded there. We knew that Francisco would never be able to pay this huge score at the appointed time and we speculated keenly on his probable manner of meeting the difficulty that had led to the disappearance of many well-known faces from the festive boards of the Cafe Ali Baba. But Francisco did not fade quietly from our midst like the others before him. Instead he came boldly to the Ali Baba with a gay song on his lips. Loudly he ordered wine for all, and carelessly he announced his desire for further credit. We waited tensely for the wrath of El Viejo to descend upon him. But this failed to occur. With a senile chuckle the Old One chalked a new and larger total after the highest name. His egg-bald skull bobbed freely from side to side and he giggled shrilly, "Francisco Deli. Ah! Francisco Deli." From this time forward Francisco never paid. Nightly he broke with impunity a sacred law of the Cafe Ali Baba.

Francisco Deli it was who gave to sloe-eyed Morgiana the name by which we came to know her, and the occasion of the bestowal was one to be long remembered by the now living who then caroused in the Cafe Ali Baba. On this vivid night Francisco Deli was in a mood exalted beyond even his own towering level of spirit. He flung between the curved red lines of his lips beaker after beaker of his favorite white wine; from his throat burst song upon song in the syllables of the three lands that he claimed as his. At a certain moment when roister and revel had reached grand summits, Francisco Deli rose royally tall and lithe to stretch out two steadfast white hands for a grip upon silence. Into the stillness thus obtained he hurled momentous phrases.

"Comrades," he said in a voice more serious than usual, "Comrades, it has been revealed to me by sources with which I am in periodic communication that matters of considerable import are in the immediate offing. Intelligence has come to me, I say, that our delightful association in this pleasant place may soon be terminated finally and completely. In view of these portending events it seems

fitting and proper that some slight ceremony should be observed. I therefore make known to you that Francisco Deli will now provide wine without stint to soothe the parched and pulsing throats of each and every living soul in this grand and illegal Cafe Ali Baba."

With a solid blow his right fist smote the table before him heartily and his clear voice rang out in penetrating command, "*Vino blanco! Vino tinto!* Red and white wine for all at the largesse of Francisco Deli."

When a brimming tankard stood before each man, Francisco Deli looked about him with a full smile on his red lips. A gleam of considerable satisfaction glinted from his brown eyes through the mist curtain which covered their protecting glasses. "This is well," he said calmly and decisively. "'Tis well, but it is not wholly well. Wine is in the outright possession of all of you, my good friends. But mine enemies, who are here, have not yet been served. The spirits of the Thieves in yonder jars are still unwarmed by the rich wine of this fine wayfarer's resort. But they will be adequately cared for; a tumbler of red and of white wine and a pinch of salt will go at once into each and every jar."

It was immediately after this amazing declaration and its implementation that Francisco bestowed her name on Morgiana. When she had poured the last drop of wine and flung the last pinch of salt into the last tall jar, Francisco strode toward her, purposefully clasped her sturdy body close to him and pressed deep on her glowing lips a long, full kiss. Then he held her at arm's length from him. With two confident hands he gently gripped her plump, trembling shoulders as his peculiarly grave voice intoned:

"Thou wilt now and henceforth be called Morgiana, the Protectress, the one among all cognizant that there is an enemy here who has refused my salt and wine, a thief who waits with a dagger under his coat and evil intent in his heart, one who is seen by two and is invisible to the rest. Some night when I am elsewhere in the flesh, Morgiana, thou wilt dance a dance of deception for this assassin and match your hidden dagger against his in my behalf."

With taut apprehension we surveyed El Viejo, whose lusterless black eyes had seemingly mirrored this memorable scene. For a moment we thought we could detect in his expression a dotard ghost of awareness and perhaps a shadow of resentment. But at the instant of our highest imagining he slapped his shriveled thigh weakly and

chuckled in a doddering falsetto, "Francisco Deli. Ah! Francisco Deli."

In our knowledge Francisco Deli never came to the Cafe Ali Baba again. From time to time news marched from the front, and we heard almost incredible tales of his gallant exploits there. At length arrived the night when we went to our well-loved rendezvous soberly, shook our heads sadly, and murmured, "Francisco Deli. *El Frente. Muerto! Muerto!*" El Viejo giggled and mumbled, "Francisco Deli. *Muerto. Muerto. Muy Bien. Muy Bien. Very Good.*" He squirted a mouthful of good red wine on the corner of his black sateen jacket and with this bit of thus moistened cloth slowly wiped out the topmost name on the tall olive jar and the magnificent string of numerals which followed it.