

En Plein

By Doug Kenck-Crispin

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The crumpled antiquarian barely noticed his environs, encumbered with his studies. Jacketed in tweed and distressed elbow patches, he was a tourist in the bustling town's midst. Passenger or Portlander, it mattered not. His unbridled curiosity had led him to this spot, and he peered over his open books and selected, also crumpled, papers. Over his spectacles, he frowned at the McDonald's restaurant.

It was near this location that the most fabled Palace of Bacchus in Astoria's debaucherous past had been placed. Consumed by fire in the 1930s, the antiquarian hoisted hope that a remnant of that opulent edifice may have survived.

Alas, he saw nothing. Freshness and gentrification prevailed. Yet as he was turning away to walk towards the gray river, a strange metal trapdoor, obviously aged, caught his glimpse. He strolled over to the sidewalk and looked down at the filigreed portal. Noting a rather curious, wrought iron handle, the antiquarian bent, grabbed the appendage and pulled up. Much to his surprise, the trap door rose.

A flickering light, reminiscent of gas lanterns, spilled from the aperture. He heard jaunty jingles, boasts and a forced guffaw, glasses clinking together. Our subject noticed a ladder at the lip. Caught with curiosity, he descended, underground.

The ladder led to an oak paneled parlor, with artistic flourishes carved into the woodwork. In the low glimmer, he saw it was a crowded place, with customers clad in costumes that appeared styled after the finery from the turn of the twentieth century. Most were playing games of chance, and all appeared to be drinking intoxicating spirits. The room seemed almost misty, almost ethereal—surely a result of the fine cigars that proliferated the parlor.

A tuxedoed, mustached man stood at the base of the ladder and greeted the antiquarian, extending his white gloved hand. Elk regalia displayed on his lapel like was popular in older times.

"Welcome to the Louvre, Sir! I am the proprietor of the establishment, Mr. Erickson, of Portland." Erickson did not sound "of Portland." He spoke with a thick Scandinavian accent.

As the antiquarian looked about the establishment, he saw the period props, well chosen, all. He was stumped at how these aged accoutrements of the saloon (the gas cigarette lighter, the silver chandeliers, the cheery nickelodeon) seemed so... modern. One could spend a lifetime inspecting them, each and every one, if only one had the time.

He shook the host's hand. "Thank you, Mr. Erickson! Thank you! My interest is in the history and artifacts of Astoria. I must say, I am glad I descended into your lounge!"

Erickson, still engaged in the handshake, pulled the man's hand close to him and a booming laugh emerged from deep in his chest, gold watch and chain jiggling. "Well, unfortunately, my fine sir, I am afraid that you shall not find much held over from by-gone eras in my gaming hall. Just all the state-of-the-art contrivances. Not a cent spared on the appointments!" Erickson paused a moment, reflected,

and then tugging on the visitor's hand, began to lead him deep into the dark room. "Perhaps, instead, I could interest you in my little French wheel? The contest itself is at least a century in antiquity..."

As Erickson guided him through the swarming, smoky lounge, the antiquarian savored the spectacle. While all the mixologists, dealers, waiters and staff were costumed in the period early 1900s "uniform," as it were, and indeed, most of the guests too, there did seem to be a few unique standouts in the dimly lit crowd. One man was dressed in a World War Two-era Coast Guard uniform, that appeared authentic. Another looked as if he could have come right from the Haight-Ashbury with his sandals, tie-dye and beaded necklace. A woman in 1970's style feathered hair and platform boots. They seemed almost trapped in a different period. But all were vintage attired and done quite well. The charade was impressive and accurate to the finest, albeit misty detail. The flickering lantern light added that *je nous se qua* in spades.

"Ah! Here we are, my friend of things yesteryear! An exciting game of chance to entice one versed in custom and tradition!" Erickson pulled out a leather backed chair for the antiquarian, who then sat at the roulette table. He settled in the luxurious seat and carefully placed his scholarly effects on the carpeted floor.

"Rogue et Noir, Passe et Manque, Douzaine, Transversal or Voisins du Zero: what strikes your fancy, Monsieur?" Erickson's French was well delivered, without a hint of his native accent.

The antiquarian dug into his pockets and retrieved a few coins. He moved his eyes across the layout, looking for a lure, trying to divine where he should rest his... fate. Yes, "fate" was the peculiar word that came to mind as he scrutinized the demarcations. After some consideration, he placed them on black 22.

The Scandinavian smiled widely and patted his waist-coated stomach. "En Plein! I will be truthful – I had not expected such panache! A man who embraces such risk must be prepared for the consequences of his most desired reward."

With a wave of his white glove, the host dismissed the croupier, who left the roulette table, profusely thanking the proprietor. "If you don't mind..." Erickson suggested as he took his place behind the table and spun the wheel. He dropped the little white ball into the mix and waved his gloved hand over the layout. Erickson looked the antiquarian in the eye and said, "no more bets." Heads turned, the ball clicked as the wheel spun, and a nearly audible hush was perceived over the nickelodeon.

The red and black pockets were turning, seeming to mix in an ardent, visual mash-up. The white ball spun in the opposite direction, appearing to pick-up speed, impossibly, as it circled the wheel. It was all too fast, and the antiquarian felt uncomfortable, disjointed. The mist, thick about his ankles, seemed to restrain him and also rise to the table, reaching for the ceiling, collecting in copious clumps about him.

As the mist rolled about him, revolving faster than the spinning little wheel, the antiquarian heard a voice; "Dostoevsky said, 'Is it really not possible to touch the gaming table without being instantly infected by superstition?'" He wasn't sure who it was that had quoted the novelist; Erickson, a costumed patron, a voice in his mind. Mist clouded all: sounds became staccato. Adrift in the revolutions, twisting clouds billowing in the room, he lost track of time...

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How long was it until he came to? Chronology was not important. His tuxedo jacket was crisp and new, and he enjoyed the feel of the turret and the dolly in his white gloved hand. It was an honor to caretake for such a beautiful table, in this storied establishment, opulent in timeless modernity. The antiquarian smiled as he surveyed the misty yet convivial club, content in his permanent placement in the parlor.

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