



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A Tragedy

Antonio Maré

It was a great city in the far North, a gloomy city with pointed roofs that seemed to have been carved out of the fog. The birds that hurried past it on their journey south said to themselves that it looked like a forest of steeples. Under one of these pointed roofs lived two young people whom the coldness of emigration had huddled together in a closer intimacy. They were very unconscious of the fog, and it never occurred to them that the city looked like a forest of steeples; in fact, they never thought of the city at all, and would scarcely have been surprised if they had heard it spoken of as an orange grove—for they were lovers. The little nest they had built themselves under the pointed roof was bright with the sunshine that came from them; and the few people who entered there became intoxicated with a strange aroma of tenderness that surged to their brains like the fumes of old wine, in sweet reminiscences or disturbing suggestions.

It would not be perfectly correct to say that these young people lived entirely alone; and had they not been so absorbed in each other, living that life of double selfishness peculiar to lovers, they could scarcely have helped feeling a soft blue gaze fixed upon them, evening after evening, as they took their accustomed places before the hearth.

On the mantelpiece which overhung the hearth was a small black marble clock, a statuette of Psyche with butterfly wings made of plaster, a little Italian shepherd of very primitively tinted clay, and a bisque vase. Now, this vase was the gem of the drawing-room. On its bosom was painted a running stream that broke into cataracts here and there over glossy brown stones. Its pitch was amazingly abrupt. It started at the brim of the vase and disappeared under it. On its banks, far away in a misty perspective of pink and violet trees, were a number of shadowy little shepherdesses, some carrying tender lambs, others dancing the minuet, but all very blithe and merry. At some distance from them, and at the very front where the cataract roared its loudest, stood a much larger shepherdess in clear relief, thrusting herself boldly forward as though she meant to leap from the parental vase, to which she was bound only by the tip of her flowered skirt and the heel of her slippered foot. She held her crook high in the air as if to balance herself in her flight. In her other hand was a wreath of cornflowers, with which she shaded a pair of dreamy blue eyes that gazed in perpetual wonder at the world below. Her sisters were simple little things,

content to play with a lambkin all day long in the sun or dance the minuet under the trees, but who had absolutely no ideas. Now, this particular little shepherdess had not only ideas; she had thoughts, and what was more, she was conscious of them.

It was not to be wondered at that all things fell in love with each other in this peculiar little room; nor was it surprising that most things fell in love with the little shepherdess. The wonder was that she, on the other hand, fell in love with nothing. This superiority of thought was very isolating, and her aloneness would have been unendurable but for the gratifying nature of its cause. The clock was an unpleasant neighbor—childless and critical, which sometimes means the same thing. Its conversation invariably took the form of a colloquy, stiff with rules, bristling with maxims; besides, having gone through life measuring out time, it had reached that stage of indiscriminate skepticism which is the greatest possible damper on the open-mindedness of others.

There was the little clay shepherd, to be sure, who was very well thought of by the community at large. The shepherdess liked him—certainly she liked him—and she sometimes spoke her thoughts to him, but she never could have loved him, had the drawing-room been the Sahara Desert and he its only other inhabitant. She was always perfectly frank with him whenever he broached the subject.

"In the first place, I do not believe that you are really in love," she said to him kindly; "you only think you are, because everybody else seems to be. Reflect a little, and I am sure you will agree with me—for my part, I have given it a great deal of serious thought. The air seems full of thrills for all of you lately, but you should be very careful; a thrill is a dangerous prism through which to look at life." And to herself she said, "Poor little fellow! He thinks he can build a bonfire out of two straws."

She could not associate love with his healthy plumpness. He was even-tempered and had an occasional idea, but no theories; he wanted things without longing for them; his love was tender but not invariably delicate. She felt the fault to be in his head rather than in his heart; he always acquiesced, but seldom understood.

On the table in the center of the room was a Chinese mandarin who was also in love with the little shepherdess, but she absolutely abhorred him. To her mind he was coarse and repulsive, in spite of his wealth. His jokes never amused her. Still, he was a humorist, and had a way of wobbling his head and poking out his tongue that threw the whole drawing-room into convulsions of laughter. Poor little shepherdess! Well, she did what we all do under similar circumstances. She built herself a world of her own—a little intellectual laboratory into which she dragged bits of careful observation to be submitted to the tests of her theories.

So, poised like a sparrow on a twig, she continued to peer over the edge of the mantelpiece, where she saw quite enough to set her thinking.

Her master and mistress were a source of constant study to her. Late in the evening, when he sat on a broad, low chair before the fire and she on the floor resting her head against his knees, the little shepherdess's eyes fairly glowed with concentrated attention. "So that must be love," she thought, as she made a note of something indefinable that quivered on their lips, or trembled on their eyelids and made them droop. "I wonder how they feel! I wish I knew!"

She was watching her mistress with peculiar interest one night, when she saw her slip her hand into her husband's coat pocket and draw out an envelope with no stamp upon it. This she held for a second or two, undecided as to whether she would read its contents. She looked up inquiringly at her husband, then with a quick movement thrust it back unopened, and laughingly threw her arms about his neck to drive away the unpleasant impression.

"That is a grave mistake," thought the little shepherdess. "Why should there be anything that he should not want her to know? As a principle, it is wrong. It is because people build their love on illusions that they fear revelations. Why are they so cowardly? I do not believe the truth to be as black as it is painted. We should love, knowing—that is the way. There must be such a thing. Oh, when I love—" and her eyes grew misty at the very thought, and the lace on her little bodice rose and fell.

The days came and went, and found her growing ever more dainty, and more thoughtful too. At last she opened her blue eyes, one Christmas Eve, upon what struck her at first as something alarming. It was midnight; and a stealthy sound of creaking boots awoke her from her first sleep and in the very midst of a wonderful dream. Her little heart was beating very fast. At first she thought it might be a burglar who had heard of her cleverness and her philosophies, and who had broken into the house to steal her away, but in a second a match was struck and she understood her mistake. Her master stood before her in the middle of the room. She saw him tiptoe to the door, close it tightly, then stand listening for a moment before lighting the gas. What could he be so mysterious about? She rubbed her eyes and watched him attentively. She soon discovered that he held a bundle under his arm, and she smiled to herself knowingly. "A Christmas present," she said; and she leaned so far forward that she almost tipped off the mantelpiece.

Her master sat down, laid the package on his lap, and cut the strings with his penknife; then he removed the wrappings as noiselessly as possible. Though the little shepherdess had entirely recovered from her alarm, she began to experience a sensation entirely new to her. She felt as though there were a tight band around her waist that kept her from breathing freely. Her head grew hollow; and a sickened sense of misery—physical and mental anguishes writhing and knotting themselves in the pit of her stomach—made her feel strangely faint. What could this mean? Was it a foreboding?



When the last wrapping was carefully laid aside, she opened her eyes with a great effort and looked upon the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. On the little table directly opposite her stood a figure about eight inches high—exquisite, dazzling! "A prince!" she thought at first; for he was richly dressed, had a noble air, and on his short dark curls he wore a crown. But no; he was not a prince.

As she looked at him again she realized that his crown was made of laurels; then she saw too that he held a violin in his hand. He was something greater than a prince; he was an artist. The master stood off and looked at him with beaming joy, and the little shepherdess felt her admiration increase with corroboration. Then he drew from his pocket a pink wax taper, which he fitted into the laurel crown. When it was lighted it shed a soft radiance. "What a beautiful idea!" thought the shepherdess. "That is the halo of art, glorifying, transfiguring everything." The master then blew out the light, and smiling complacently, reached up to the chandelier. Just as he was about to turn out the gas, the little artist looked up and saw the shepherdess—one long look of surprise and eagerness; their glances met, and in that look they understood each other.

Through the darkness of that whole night he played her beautiful strains of dreamy music that opened to her visions of blue skies and balmy orange groves; for he came from Italy, where the very air must be heavy with poetry and love, she thought. He told her wonderful tales with his violin. He alternately flooded her mind with moonlight and fairies, or peopled her fancy with vague forms of sorrow that filled her little breast with sobs. What a rapturous night that was! A bewitched moonbeam that peered in through a broken slat in the blind lay there entranced. In the pauses of the music the plaster wings of the little Psyche quivered audibly. As for the shepherdess, something had permeated her soul like a subtle essence, and opened one by one great vistas of feeling of which she

had never dreamed even in the boldest flights of her imaginings. All her senses seemed suddenly to have grown exquisitely acute. "What a bursting heart there must be behind it all!" she thought. "What a fund of sentiment! What must he feel who, with a stroke of his bow, can change the aspect of the world! It is he! It is he at last!"

Christmas morning dawned upon the world. The first rays of light that penetrated into the drawing-room brought with them the muffled sound of carriages hurrying over the snow, and the occasional shout of a belated reveler mingling with the faint murmur from groups of early churchgoers. But what was this to the little shepherdess? The day that had dawned for her was more momentous than Christmas. She was almost surprised to find that it was not a dream. No, there he stood; and he smiled at her with the eager smile of those who meet again after a separation.

"You look as though you were about to take flight, you beautiful, blue-eyed thing. Fly down to me. I will catch you in my arms," he said, at which the little shepherdess blushed crimson. "Perhaps you do not love me now that you see me in the light of day."

She was just about to answer something very clever about not fearing revelations because she had all her life scorned illusions, when the door suddenly opened and her master entered on tiptoe. He walked over to the table, stood looking at his purchase with satisfaction for a few seconds; then taking it up in his hand, he discovered that the pink taper did not fit tightly enough into the little laurel crown. In moving the figure it was apt to topple first to one side, then another. So he stood it down, and twisting the upper part carefully, he screwed it off—crown and taper—from the pretty head, and carried them both into the next room.

During this incident a thought flashed through the little shepherdess's mind, and like a flash too she determined to execute it. She pulled her left foot with a jerk and gave a little tug at her gown, and there she stood on the edge of the mantelpiece, free. She threw a hasty glance at the little shepherd, who looked on with a parched throat; it is even possible that she smiled a kindly smile upon the black clock. Then she gathered her skirts with both hands and jumped down. It was a supreme moment. The lovers stood looking into each other's eyes.

"My precious one," he said, "you are mine at last. I have waited for you through the ages, and you have come!"

And the little shepherdess, stepping up on a book, held her wreath of cornflowers over his head.

"I have no laurels to bring you," she said, "but I will crown you with my trusting love." And she rose on her tiptoes and leaned forward to lay her cornflowers on

his brow. But what was it? Why did she start, and then lean farther forward and look again? What could she have seen to make her eyes grow suddenly dim—those clear eyes that meant to see everything?

The fact of it was that under the laurels it was all hollow, hollow down to his belt. Where his heart should have been, she saw a little dust that exhaled a musty odor, and the wings of several dead flies. Her brain reeled. Was this all, then? And the music—where had the wonderful music come from, or was the music all? This was the shepherdess's last speculation. She felt the book sinking beneath her little feet; she grasped her crook nervously; then there was a blank in her thoughts; she tottered, and crash! she fell and broke into a thousand pieces at the feet of her lover.

At first he felt that he would die too. Then he composed himself, and when he came to understand how it had all happened, he shrugged his shoulders. "Women are all alike," said he. "They fancy they are thinking when they are only brooding. They want to be analytical, and they are only captious." And he tuned his violin, while his eyes rested on the little plaster Psyche.

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