

The Virgins of the Rocks

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“Una cosa naturale vista in un grande specchio.”

LEONARDO DA VINCI.

With these mortal eyes I beheld within a brief space of time three peerless souls unfold and blossom, and then wither away and perish one by one: the most beautiful, most passionate, and most miserable souls ever embodied in the latest descendants of a haughty race.

From the scenes where their desolation, their pride, and their grace wandered every day, clear and terrible thoughts came to me, such as the most ancient ruins of illustrious cities had never suggested. In hopes of unravelling the mystery of their strange ascendancy, I used to explore the depths of the vast ancestral mirrors, where, often unnoticed by themselves, their three figures were reflected bathed in a pallor like that which heralds dissolution after death; and I gazed long and earnestly at the old, worn-out things which they touched with their chilled or fevered hands, using the same gestures perhaps as had been used by other hands long since crumbled into dust.

Was it thus, indeed, that I knew them in the tedious monotony of daily life, or are they only creations of my yearning desire and perplexity?

It was thus, indeed, that I knew them in the tedious monotony of daily life, and yet they are also creations of my yearning desire and perplexity.

That fragment of the web of my life, unconsciously woven by them, is of such priceless value to me, that I would fain embalm it in the strongest of spices to prevent it from becoming faded or destroyed in me by Time.

Therefore I now try the power of art.

Ah! but what magic could impart the coherency of tangible and durable matter to that spiritual texture which the three prisoners wove in the barren monotony of their days, and embroidered little by little with images of the noblest and most heart-rending things in which human passion has ever been hopelessly reflected?

Unlike the three ancient sisters, because victims rather than daughters of necessity, they seemed nevertheless, as they wove the richest zone of my life, to be preparing the destiny of him who was to come. Together they toiled, scarcely ever accompanying their labour with a song, but less rarely shedding visible tears—tears in which the essence of their unexhausted, cloistered souls was sublimated.

And because from the first hour that I knew them a dark cloud had overhung them, a cruel decree had struck them to the heart, and left them discouraged and gasping, and ready to die—all their attitudes and gestures and lightest words seemed to me heavy with a meaning of which they, in their profound unconsciousness, were ignorant.

Bending and breaking as they were beneath the weight of their own maturity, like autumn trees overladen with bounteous fruit, they were unable either to sound the depth of their

misery or to give voice to it. Their anguished lips revealed to me only a small portion of their secrets. But I could understand the ineffable things spoken by the blood flowing in the veins of their beautiful bare hands.

“E il ricettacolo delle virtù sarà pieno di sogni e vane speranze.”

LEONARDO DA VINCI.

The hour which preceded my arrival in the ancestral garden, where they awaited me, seems to me—as I see it in imagination—illuminated with a light of unaccustomed poetry.

To him who knows what slow or sudden fertilisations, what unexpected transfigurations, are possible to an intense soul communicating with other souls in the vicissitudes of this most uncertain life—to him for whom the whole dignity of existence lies in exerting or submitting to a moral force, and who approaches his kind with a secret anxiety to dominate or be dominated—to every man who is curious about the inner mystery, who is ambitious of spiritual power, or feels the need of slavery, no hour has such a charm as that in which he moves forward, with a vague anticipation, to meet the living Unknown and Infinite, a dim world which he will either conquer, or by which he will be absorbed.

I was about to enter an enclosed garden. There the three virgin princesses were awaiting the friend who had been absent so long, him to whom, as their contemporary in age, they were bound by recollections of childhood and adolescence, him who was sole heir to a name no less ancient and distinguished than their own. And thus they were awaiting the return of an equal,

of a sojourner in great cities, one who should bring them a breath of that larger life which they had renounced.

And each one of them perhaps in her secret heart was awaiting the Bridegroom.

This time of waiting appears to me vehement in its anxiety when I think of the bare and gloomy solitude of the house in which, until that day, they had languished, their beautiful hands overflowing with the treasures of youth, surrounded by a phantom pomp of existence called up by their mother's delirium to people the emptiness of the vast mirrors. There, as if in twilight pools, the raving soul of the mother was wont to be immersed. On the infinite distance of those colourless expanses, had not each one of the maidens beheld the apparition of the youthful, ardent figure of the Bridegroom who was to tear her from this obscure decay, and carry her away in a whirlwind of delight?

Thus each one waited anxiously within her enclosed garden for the coming of him who was only after all to delude her, to watch her perish without possessing her.

“Ah! which of us will be the elect?”

Never perhaps—so I think—were their beautiful dim eyes so earnestly strained as at that hour; those eyes dimmed by melancholy and weariness, the light of inquiry quenched in them by too long familiarity with never-changing objects: eyes dimmed by mutual pity, reflecting the forms of familiar things without mystery or variety, in hard outlines and lifeless colouring.

And suddenly each of them perceived in the other a new creature, armed for combat.

I know not if there be anything sadder than these lightning-like revelations made to tender hearts by the desire for happiness. The virtuous sisters breathed in the same circle of sorrow; the same destiny weighed upon them; and during the evenings, heavy with anxiety, one of them from time to time would lay her brow on the shoulder or the breast of another, while the darkness effaced the diversity of their faces, and fused their three souls in one. But when the prophesied guest—to their waiting hearts already appearing with the gestures of the lover who elects and who promises—was about to set foot on their deserted threshold, they lifted up their heads with a thrill, and loosed their clasped hands, and exchanged a look which had the violence of a sudden flash of lightning. And while from the depth of their troubled souls there welled up an unknown feeling which had none of the old sweetness, that one look brought them consciousness at last of all their waning grace, of the contrast between their three figures coloured by the same blood, of the spirit of night lurking in the mass of hair heaped up like a load on the nape of a white neck, of the marvellous persuasion expressed by the curve of a silent mouth, of the enchantment woven like a net by the ingenuous frequency of some inimitable gesture, and of every other magic power.

And a dim instinct of strife dismayed them.

Thus do I picture to myself those who were waiting for me in that glowing hour.

The first breath of spring, faintly warm, which had touched the dry summits of the rocks, was caressing the brows of the anxious maidens. Within the great cloister, carpeted with jonquils and violets, the fountains repeated the melodious accompaniment which for centuries the waters had made to the thoughts of voluptuousness and of wisdom expressed in the leonine verses on the pediment. On certain trees and on certain bushes the delicate leaves were shining as though coated with gum or diaphanous wax. The ancient and immovable things of time which could only decay were touched with an indefinable softness, communicated to them by the things that had power to renew themselves.

“Ah, which of us will be the chosen one?”

The three sisters, who had secretly become rivals in face of this deceptive offer of apparent life, composed their attitudes according to the inward rhythm of their natural beauty, which time had already begun to threaten. Perhaps not till that day had they understood that beauty in its true sense; just as a sick person, hearing the unaccustomed sound of the blood beating in the ear which presses the pillows, for the first time understands the portentous music which sustains his feeble frame.

But perhaps in them this rhythm had no words.

Nevertheless, I can now distinctly hear the words of that rhythm within me, strengthening the pure outlines of those ideal figures.

“A boundless desire for slavery makes me suffer,” says Massimilla silently, as she sits on the stone seat, her hands, with fingers interwoven, clasped round her weary knee. “I have not the gift of communicating happiness; but my whole being, more than any other creature, more than any inanimate thing, is ready to become the perfect and perpetual possession of a master.

“A boundless desire for slavery makes me suffer. I am devoured by an unquenchable yearning to give myself up entirely, to belong to a higher and stronger being, to dissolve myself in his will, to burn like a holocaust in the fire of his great soul. I envy the frail things which lose themselves, which are swallowed up in an abyss, or carried away by a whirlwind; and I gaze often and long at the drops of water which fall into the great basin, and hardly awake the slightest smile on its surface.

“When a perfume envelopes me and vanishes, when a sound reaches me and dies out, sometimes I feel myself grow pale and almost faint away, for it seems to me that the aroma and the harmony of my life are tending to the same evanescence. And yet sometimes my little soul is straitened within me like a knot. Who shall untie it and absorb it?

“Ah me! perhaps I should not know how to console him in his sadness; but my dumb and anxious face should be always turned towards his, quick to perceive hope reviving in his secret heart. Perhaps I should not know how to let fall on his silence those rare syllables, seeds of the soul, which in a moment can generate a boundless dream; but no faith in the world should surpass the ardour of my faith as I listened, even

when the things I heard were such as must remain inaccessible to my intellect.

“I am she who listens, admires, and is silent.

“From my birth I bear on my forehead between my eyebrows the sign of attention.

“I have learned from the calm and intensity of statues the immobility of harmonious attitude. I can keep my eyes open and turned upwards for a long time, because my eyelids are light.

“The shape of my lips forms the living and visible image of the word 'Amen.'”

“I suffer,” says Anatolia, “from a virtue within me which is wasting itself uselessly. My strength is the last support of a solitary ruin, whereas it might safely guide the current of a river full of all life’s abundance from its source to the sea.

“My heart is inexhaustible. All the sorrows of the world could never succeed in wearying its throbs; the fiercest violence of joy could not break it, nor can it be weakened by this long and slow grief. A vast multitude of thirsty creatures might drink of the well of its tenderness without exhausting it.

“Ah! why should fate condemn me to this narrow duty, to this slow torture? Why should she forbid me that sublime union for which my heart yearns?

“I could guide the soul of a man up to that highest sphere where the value of the act and the splendour of the dream converge to the selfsame apex; from the depths of his

unconsciousness I could extract unseen energies which lie hidden like ore in the veins of rough stone.

“The most hesitating of men would feel secure by my side; he who had strayed from the light would once more see a steady beacon at the end of his path; he who had been buffeted about and maimed would become healthy and whole again. My hands know how to bind up wounds, and how to tear the bandages off heavy eyelids. When I stretch them out—my purest heart’s-blood flows magnetically to the tips of my fingers.

“I possess the two supreme gifts which enrich life, and prolong it beyond the illusion of death: I fear no suffering, and I feel the imprint of eternity on my thoughts and acts.

“And therefore I am troubled by a desire to create—to become through love her who propagates and perpetuates the ideal qualities of a race favoured by Heaven. I could nourish the superhuman within me.

“Once in a dream I kept mysterious watch a whole night long over the sleep of a child. While with deep-drawn breaths his body lay slumbering I upheld his soul in my hands, and it was tangible like a globe of crystal, and my breast swelled with marvellous premonitions.”

Violante says: “I am humbled. When I felt the mass of my hair weigh upon my brow, I fancied myself to be wearing a crown, and beneath that regal burden my thoughts wore a purple hue.

“My childhood’s memories are all lit up by visions of fire and slaughter. Blood ran before my innocent eyes; my delicate nostrils breathed the odour of unburied corpses. A young and

eager queen, hunted from her throne, took me in her arms before she departed into an exile from which there was no return. From that time, therefore, the splendour of great and tragic destinies hangs over my soul.

“In my dreams I have lived a thousand lives of magnificence; I have passed through all sovereignties as safely as one who retraces a well-known path; I have discovered in the aspect of the most dissimilar things secret analogies with the aspect of my own form, and by hidden arts have pointed them out for man to wonder at; and I have found out how to compel light and shade, as truly as robes and jewels, to form the divine and unforeseen adornment of my decline.

“Poets saw in me the ideal apparition in whose lineaments the highest mystery of life is expressed—that mystery of beauty which has been revealed in mortal flesh at intervals of long ages, through all the imperfection of innumerable generations. And they thought: ‘This is doubtless the perfected image of that idea of which the peoples of the earth have had an intuition from the beginning, and which artists have unceasingly invoked in poems, in symphonies, on canvas, in clay. Everything in her is expressive, everything is a symbol. The lines of her form speak a language whose eternal truth would make him that could understand it like unto a god; and her slightest movements produce within the contours of her body ineffable music like the harmony of midnight skies.’

“But now I am humbled—deprived of my kingdoms. The fire in my blood is growing paler and dying out. I shall vanish away, less fortunate than the statues which testified to the joy of life on the brows of the cities of the past. For ever unknown, I shall

dissolve away, whereas they will endure in the safe keeping of mould and darkness among the roots of the flowers, and some day, when unburied, they will seem to the ecstatic soul of kneeling poets as great as the gifts of earth.

“I have now dreamed every dream, and my hair weighs heavier on my brow than a hundred crowns. I have dazed myself with perfumes. I love to linger near the fountains as they go on eternally telling the same tale. Through the thick locks of hair which cover my ears I seem to hear time ebbing away on the monotonous waters.”

Thus when I evoke them do the three princesses speak within my soul, as they wait for the irrevocable hour. Thus, perhaps, believing that a messenger of life had appeared at the gates of their closed garden, did each one recognise her own charm, display her own seductiveness, revive her own hope, quicken the dream within her which had almost died away.

O Hour! lit up by grand and solemn poetry! Most brilliant Hour in which all possibilities emerged and shone on the inward heaven of the soul!

I

“Non si può avere maggior signoria che quella di sè medesimo.”

LEONARDO DA VINCI

“E se tu sarai solo, tu sarai tutto tuo.”

Ibid

After the inevitable tumult of early youth had been controlled, the vehemence of conflicting desires defeated, and a barrier raised against the confused and multifold overflow of sensations, I had sought during the momentary silence that ensued on my consciousness to find out whether life might not become something different from the usual exercise of the faculties of adaptation to changing circumstances; that is to say, whether my will might not be able, by means of selection and exclusion, to build up some new and artistic work out of the elements which life had already stored up within me.

I felt assured, after some self-examination, that my consciousness had reached that arduous point when it becomes possible to appreciate this too simple axiom: The world represents the sensibility and the thought of a few superior men who created it, and in course of time have enlarged and adorned it, and who in the future will continue to enlarge and adorn it more and more. The world, as it appears to us to-day, is a magnificent gift from the few to the many, from free men to slaves, from those who think and feel to those who work. And then I recognised my own highest ambition in the desire to bring some ornament, to add some new value to

this human world which is being eternally embellished with beauty and sorrow.

Face to face with my own soul, I thought again of that dream which came to Socrates several times over, each time taking a different form, but always urging him to fulfil the same mission: "O Socrates, compose and cultivate music." Then I learned that the real duty of a man of worth is to discover in the course of his existence a series of harmonies, varied indeed, but controlled by one dominant motive, and bearing the impress of one style. And so it appeared to me that the ancient sage, who excelled in the art of raising the human soul to its utmost degree of vigour, might teach a great and efficacious lesson to our own age.

By the study of himself and his neighbours, this man discovered what inestimable benefits assiduous discipline bent always to a fixed purpose can confer upon life. His supreme wisdom seems to me most resplendent in this, that he did not place his Ideal out of the reach of daily practice, beyond the sphere of necessary realities, but that he made it the living centre of his being, and deduced his own laws from it; and, in accordance with these laws, he developed rhythmically throughout the course of years, exercising with calm pride such rights as they permitted him, and separating—he a citizen of Athens under the tyranny of the Thirty, and under the tyranny of the plebeians—deliberately separating his moral existence from that of the city. He desired, and he was able to preserve himself for himself until death. "I will be obedient to God only," meant, "I will be obedient only to the laws of that

genius to which, in order to fulfil my conception of order and beauty, I have subjected my free nature.”

Far more subtle as an artist than Apelles or Protogenes, he was able to trace with a firm hand the complete image of himself in one continuous line. And the sublime joy of the last evening came to him, not from the hope of that other life which he had spoken of in his discourses, but rather from the vision of his own image, made one with death.

Ah, why cannot he live again on Latin soil, this Master who understood with such profound and hidden art how to awaken and stimulate all the energies of intellect and soul in those who approached to listen to him?

A strange melancholy used to fall over me in my youth when, reading the Dialogues, I tried to picture to myself that circle of eager and anxious disciples surrounding him. I used to admire the handsome ones, those dressed in the richest garments, and on whom his round and prominent eyes—those *new* eyes of his, in which there was a look *peculiar to himself*—rested oftenest. My imagination prolonged the adventures of the strangers who came to him from afar, like the Thracian Antisthenes, who travelled forty stadia a day to hear him, and like Euclides, who—the Athenians having forbidden the citizens of Megara to enter Athens, and decreed the worst of punishments for the transgressors—dressed himself in woman’s clothes, and thus clothed and veiled, left his own city towards evening, and made a long journey in order to be present at the discourses of the Sage; then at dawn went on his way again in the same disguise, his breast filled with unquenchable enthusiasm. And I felt touched by the fate of the beautiful Elian youth Phaedo, who,

after having been made a prisoner of war in his own country, and sold to the keeper of a house of ill-fame, escaped to Socrates, and by his means obtained redemption and admission to the feasts of pure thought.

It seemed to me, indeed, that this genial master surpassed the Nazarene in generosity. Perhaps the Hebrew, if his enemies had not slain him in the flower of his years, would at last have shaken off the weight of his sadness, found new savour in the ripe fruits of his Galilee, and pointed out a different ideal of good to his followers. The Greek philosopher had always loved life; he loved it, and taught men to love it. Nearly infallible as a prophet and seer, he welcomed all souls in which his penetrating glance had discovered any force, and in each one he developed and elevated that natural force, so that all those inspired by his fire revealed themselves in the power of their diversity. The highest value of his method was that very result of which his enemies accused him: that from his school—where met honest Crito and Plato, the follower of Urania, and the raving Apollodorus, and the kindly Theætetus, who is like a noiseless river of oil—there went forth also the luxurious Cyrenian, Aristippus, and Critias, the most violent of the Thirty Tyrants, and the other tyrant Charicles, and that marvellous breaker of laws, Alcibiades, who put no limit to his premeditated violence. “My heart leaps when I hear his discourses far more than at the sound of the Corybantes,” said the son of Clinia, like a graceful wild animal crowned with ivy and violets, at the close of a banquet where the guests had received from Silenus’ mouth the grand initiation of Diotima. No fairer wreath of praise was ever woven to deify any man upon earth.

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