

SIN'S SPECTRE

(A SHORT STORY)

HOW WELL WE USED TO GET ON, poor dear cousin Machoula and I, my cousin seven times removed! Judged by the strictest standards, I was not, I find, worthy of the trust she placed in me. She would confide in me all her sorrows, all her troubles and woes. She would tell me that she had not for her part ever wanted to get married, but that her parents made her. She would rather have become a nun. But she had daughters, now, of marriageable age, and sons, and she was getting on for fifty.

On the evening of Friday September the 25th, we were walking together across the vine-covered valley, making our way toward the little chapel of St John the Divine, which belonged to the holy Community of the Annunciation. They were celebrating there a small festival. There was to be a vigil from nine until three in the morning, following which, after a two-hour break, a liturgy would be celebrated.

We had not arranged that we should go together. But we used almost always, without making ever any definite arrangement, to go together. Nor was this the only all-night vigil at which we were present. On September the 8th, in the third hour of the morning, after matins had been concluded, on the feast of the Virgin Limnia,* cousin Machoula and I were tottering together down the slippery cobbled street, that which starts at the big house of Captain Nikolas Mataronas and runs down as far as the coastal market. Now and then, the moon would come out, though mostly it was dark as pitch. But its soft glow suffused only the houses' roofs and was shared, like a meagre patrimony, between the rooms,

the balconies and pots of plants. For us on the cobbles down below, no kindly ray reached to come down.

And so, in attempting to hold on to my cousin Machoula and keep her from falling, I would frequently slip myself.

She was heavy and fat, pallid and sickly. Was it the pregnancies, I wonder, had left her with all that bulk, which completely ruined her figure... and coming behind us carrying a lantern was the barber's wife, Andreola, an old and pious woman. Ahead of us a bulky shape could be seen blocking the narrow lane. It was Blichas's old wife, Despinio. The wind had blown out her candle end, which had come from the candelabrum in the chapel, and finding herself plunged in the sudden dark, she stood, rooted to the spot, in the middle of the road, unable to walk either right or left.

On one such night of the 8th of September — I can't remember the year — we were involved together, my cousin Machoula and I, in a rather curious minor incident. My cousin still continued, for all that she belonged to the modern generation, to cling to and cultivate the old ways. She prided herself on being a woman of the 'old school'. For all that it was by then deserted, she did not want to go through the coastal market, not under cover of night even, because it was not considered proper for women to do so. She insisted that I escort her by the inner road to her home. So we left our other companion behind and turned toward the inner road. There, as we were passing beneath a balcony, above which bed linen had been hung out to dry, a long, snow-white sheet detached itself, I can't say how, from the rope from which it hung; it fell on our heads; it tumbled over our shoulders, and we were 'hitched', so to speak, together in it, or shrouded in it, as though it had been cast over our heads by an unseen hand. I laughed involuntarily, although it seemed to me, if anything, an ill omen. My cousin Machoula made the sign of the cross, and whispered:

'We'll have the same luck, you and I... the same luck!'

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That year, we were walking of a Friday evening to the little chapel of St John the Divine. These were always the places closest to my heart, though I was absent from them physically most of the time, and would be reminded sometimes of that line of the Scottish bard's: 'My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here'.¹

We went past the sandy shore, which the waves kiss as they play, and skirted the Gardens and the blue-black Lagoon. Then we left behind us the 'Monkish Dart', the long and narrow field of that name. Next, we came to Avramis's various farms, where it took many a turn for us to find our way, because the owner had proclaimed a socialistic doctrine there: 'If my neighbour's a good-for-nothing too idle to work his land, don't blame me if I take it from him.' And we set out across the open fields, which were planted at one time with muscat vines, from which the magnificent 'Carefree Wine' was made, entitled on two counts to be so called; on one, after Carefree, its producer, and on another, because it used maybe to render life free from care... *

Finally, we arrived at the small church. The chapel of St John, simple, fragrant with the cypress-wood iconostasis and with the flowers brought there by Markos's wife, Soultanio, old woman Pantechou, and Alexaina's daughter, Katerinio, and two or three other pious women, who were all that came. From the monastery of the Annunciation, *Papa-Daniel* had come, together with that great wanderer, Joachim, who during almost all the festivals would come back to the monastery, and Old-Theoklitos, full of amusing and eccentric ways, with whom thrice was it my privilege to wrangle over dinner.

Machoula, when she had offered up her prayers and presented her flowers, incense and oil, sat in a corner outside the small church, together with her basket and her little pitcher. She was at the foot of the olive tree, which, with its branches weighed down with fruit, garlanded and shaded the doorway of the little chapel,

¹ A poem and song written by Robert Burns in 1789.

recalling the line of the prophet-king: 'like a fruited olive tree in the house of God'.¹

I was thirsty, and, catching sight of the small water-jug standing next to Machoula's little basket, I asked for a drink, but I found that it was empty.

'That lad, Stamatis, never came, you see,' my cousin told me. 'Who else can go to the spring and fill it?... I can't, I'm ready to drop...'

Stamatis was an orphan boy who was always eager to be of service wherever religious outings and gatherings took place. So filled was he with pious zeal, that, on perceiving a diminution in the devotion of the faithful, he was so grieved, he decided he would help the saints work miracles himself. And so, on one occasion, he daubed oil on all the icons in the iconostasis of an isolated chapel, in consequence of which it was given out, and by many actually believed, that the saints were 'sweating', or perhaps weeping, and the poor priests of our village reaped from this initiative of his the benefit of not a few oblations. At the time, Stamatis was twelve years of age.

I looked to see whether Stamatis were about, but he was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was engaged with other duties. Machoula was not just, as she was saying, ready to drop, but was almost certainly afraid to go. The spring was as much as ten minutes' walk away and lay in a deep ravine, which would by now be dark. The sun had set and left behind a melancholy autumn half-light.

I decided I would turn my own hand to 'Stamatean' tasks. I took up the pitcher and set off.

'You're not going yourself, are you?... Not your good self,' cried Machoula. 'Whatever next?'

I wanted to go, not just because I was thirsty, but also out of a desire to be of service to my kind and companionable cousin.

¹ Psalms 52 : 10.

'Don't fret,' I said to her. 'I'll go. I'll be back in next to no time...'

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It was a small, yet deep, ravine, between an olive grove, which occupied the entire side of the hill on the right, and a lemon grove, ringed by walls, which adorned the plain on the left. At the outset, cut in its side and plummeting downward till it dropped down low, was a narrow track, a footpath hidden by bushes and brambles. After that, one climbed gently uphill till one came to the spring, which issued from an old stone wall, with large stones in it that were moss-covered and green. There were two ledges or stone benches there, one on each side of the spring, which stood at the highest point in the entire ravine.

Only when I had entered the deep ravine and set foot on the narrow path which leads toward the spring, only then did I begin to reflect on what I had done, until then I hadn't thought.

Suddenly I felt afraid. This was the first time in twenty years that I had gone into that ravine, all alone, at the twilight hour, and with night approaching...

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I climbed toward the spring with trembling knees. I kept crossing myself the whole time and trying to pray. But my tongue would falter and my palate would go dry. I felt that, whether out loud or only to myself, I wasn't worthy to whisper the sacred words.

I arrived nonetheless at the spring. When, in order to fill it, I went to put the little jug under the spout, it slipped from my hands. It stood upright in the basin of water of its own accord and didn't break.

Above the spring I saw, with my eyes, some airborne thing hover. It was not as yet completely dark. But the thing that was visible was so white, that it twinkled, so to speak, in the little valley, like a nearby star come somehow down to light up depths unworthy

of the light. But this white thing, though, was dragging on top of it, or was having dragged above it a huge black blot, blacker even than pitch, darker even than night, issuing from the innermost darkness of conscience and destined to sink swiftly into the outermost darkness of all — that of Gehenna.¹ A deep and unspeakable stain, a great and indescribable blackening of the pure, of the white as snow, on which the midnight dark had fastened. The apparition had a twofold aspect. Fastened upon the flower of the field, upon the pure white lily of the valley,² was the loathsome worm.

The white was like a sparkling white smock, like a fifteen-year-old girl's unsullied frock. The black was like sin's spectre.

God in Heaven! And that worm, what was it? Is it true that the departing soul is filled with loathing, when it sees its maggot-ridden, mortal frame? And fallen victim to the evil eye, that innocent lamb, that god-created form, had lain asleep these twenty years in the sleeping-place of the dead.

Yes; on her death-bed I had wreathed about her fair head a virginal crown. But that crown had become a crown of thorns. And the roots of the flowers, like thorns, were penetrating her white skin.

Oh, her life had been a dream and she had once been 'manna of life, dew of delight, the honey from the rock'.³ And the misshapen worm had eaten away her chaste, her unsullied beauty.

Alas! Why from all this luxuriant growth, so varied and many-hued and flower-filled, should thorns emerge and hissing tongues and vipers? And how came it that the beauty of nature was defiled, and that the unclean spirit entered into God's creation, which he himself inspected, 'and, behold, it was very good'?⁴... Whence the dominion of sin?

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¹ Matthew 22 : 13, 25 : 30.

² Song of Songs 2 : 1.

³ Ode four from the second canon of the feast of the Three Hierarchs.

⁴ Genesis 1 : 31.