The Weeping (Pardo Bazán)

How beautiful the little princess was! Steal from springtime the shades of its pale roses, and you will have her complexion; from the southern sea its liquid azure, and you will have her pupils; from raw silk its golden, fine fleece, and you will have the mass of her hair. And take (if you know where to find them) the sweet and fresh virtues of a flower-soul: piety, tenderness, generosity, ideal love toward all humankind, and you will have the heavenly spirit of the beautiful little princess.

This perfection was precisely what made the king, her father, very uneasy. He had no other daughter but that one, and he had obtained her late in life, when he was reaching the limit that separates maturity from old age; for which reason he would have liked to shelter the little princess under a glass bell, raise walls of steel around her and, above all, cover her tender heart, throbbing with forebodings and sacred emotions, with the triple corselet of beaten leather of selfishness, indifference, and pride.

"Father and lord," said the little princess one day, hanging from the king's neck, "if it is true that you love me, that you wish to please me and make my life happy, allow me to devote it to consoling so much misfortune as must exist in the world. I have not seen it, because you surround me with splendor and joy and around me rises the bustle of laughter and songs, but I guess that what is usual out there will be misfortune, and that I might perhaps mitigate it by drawing near to it."

"Do not even imagine it!" cried the king with loving violence. "You would remedy nothing, and you would suffer infinite pain instead. Believe my experience, and live above the wretched crowd: live high, live far away; do not look at it or listen to it. Have you no faith in your father? Well, this very moment the wise men are going to come so that you may consult them. You will see whether their advice agrees with mine!"

The wise men did indeed arrive, and they formed a semicircle before the little princess, who contemplated with some astonishment their faces withered by study, their unkempt gray beards, their sunken eyes, with baggy eyelids protected by silver spectacles, and their wrinkled foreheads, which baldness made vast and bright as moons.

"Man," opined the professor of Anthropology, "does not deserve that anyone should trouble about him. Man still bears multiple traces and stigmata of his primitive

animality; man is a wolf to man, and his instinct and law is the war of all against all for existence. Natural and true man is the savage, a criminal beast."

"Man," opined the professor of Sociology, "is still at the beginnings of his evolution, slow and most laborious, toward a state less imperfect than the present one. What is done to improve his condition is the equivalent of letting a trickle of fresh water into the waves of the Ocean to take away their salt. Incalculable transformations, the action of countless centuries, will be required by the work of remedying in part the deficiencies of our present social organization. And who knows whether many of these deficiencies are irremediable? True science fears to affirm too much."

"Man," opined the professor of Psychology and Morals, "repays with ingratitude and sometimes even with hatred the good that is attempted on his behalf. His instinct, in this particular often a shrewd one, dictates to him that selflessness is exceedingly rare, and that charity is generally exercised with some useful end in view for the benefactor himself. And the wholly altruistic benefactors he despises in the depths of his soul, because reason cries out to him: 'You would not be so innocent.'"

"Man," opined the professor of Hygiene, "is a sewer and a bilge. To preserve health, our advanced age has been able to devise nothing better than what our grandfathers devised: isolation. Happy is he who can, like our enchanting little princess, dwell far from all infection and all contagion, breathing air in torrents, embalmed and pure, drinking rosewater conveyed by crystal pipes. Where poor people gather, the baleful germ lurks, the deadly bacillus."

"Man," opined the professor of Aesthetics, "is the most repulsive thing imaginable if he lacks the means to beautify and strengthen his organism from childhood. Greek education was the only rational one. The needy multitude would cause horror to the divine princess if she had the bad taste to approach it. Let her recreate herself in art, in the eternal, noble and pure beauty of paintings and statues, in the harmony of instruments, in the cadence of verses that link together and flee like pairs of skillful dancers… Let her not profane her eyes by resting them on the baseness and degradation of forms, on ugliness, on disproportion, on the rabble."

"Have you heard?" the king warned his daughter, who, with downcast eyes, her hands pressing her heaving breast, her lips closed, listened to the sentence in silence.

That very night the old nurse of the little princess, when she came near her bed to arrange the covers, noticed that abundant tears were running down the virgin's smooth cheeks, a river of weeping.

"Who has hurt you, child?" asked the old woman affectionately.

"No one... No one has wanted to hurt me."

"Yet you are weeping... It is the first time I have seen you weep like this."

"The thing is that I am infinitely sad, nurse..." answered the little princess. "And I weep for the wicked, for the ugly, for the dirty, for those who have nothing to eat."

And, without restraining her tears, she added:

"I weep for the wise men too... And every night, nurse, I must weep like this. I can do nothing else; they do not let me share in suffering in any other way... No one can prevent me from weeping."

And the little princess did indeed weep without respite, now leaning on the railing of her balcony when the moon rose, now hiding her face in the lace pillow, now kneeling at her prie-dieu for the night prayer. No one at the king's court could explain the mysterious illness that consumed the little princess in a year, wasting her body and drying up her blood. The wise men, consulted daily, heaped remedy upon remedy, without any result. The life of the little princess melted away, dissolved in the thread of her tears of ideal love and supreme pity, and today in the royal gardens they show a fountain that they say was formed from that precious weeping. Those who drink from it contract the madness of doing good.