

Psyche

At dawn, in the rosy morning sky, a large, bright star burns. Its ray trembles upon the white wall, as though wishing to trace upon it tales of all it has seen here and there on our revolving earth. Listen, then, to one of its stories!

"Not long ago (for a star, 'not long ago' means for us humans an event that occurred several centuries past) my rays followed a young artist; he lived in the papal capital, in the universal city of Rome. Much has changed there with the passage of time, although such changes occur far less swiftly than a man grows from a child into an old man. The imperial palace was already in ruins then; among marble columns cast into dust and above the gold-painted walls of half-destroyed baths rose fig trees and laurels. The Colosseum too presented nothing but ruins. Yet church bells rang; incense smoked; processions passed through the streets with candles and shining canopies. Rome was a city of ecclesiastical splendor, yet art also flourished there and was held in high esteem. In Rome lived the world's greatest painter, Raphael, and the greatest sculptor of the Middle Ages, Michelangelo. The Pope himself honored both, deeming them worthy of his visits. Art was acknowledged, revered, and rewarded. But, of course, not everything deserving was noticed or granted reward.

In a small, narrow street stood an old house, once a temple. In this house lived a young sculptor, poor and unknown. Yet he had friends, of course, also young artists, youthful in soul, rich in hopes and thoughts. They told him he possessed great talent and that he was simply foolish if he could not believe it himself. And indeed, he constantly shattered to pieces what he had created the day before, was never satisfied with his work, and never brought it to completion—which is necessary, for otherwise who would see it, acknowledge it, and pay money for it?

"You are a dreamer!" his friends told him. "And therein lies your misfortune! All this happens because you have not yet lived as one should, have not tasted life, have not drunk life's nectar in greedy draughts. Yet precisely in youth must one merge with life into unity! Here is an example—the world's greatest painter, Raphael; the Pope himself honors him, the whole world marvels at him, yet he eats and drinks like everyone else, refusing nothing!"

"Even from the baker's daughter herself, the beautiful Fornarina!" said Angelo, one of the foremost merry-makers among the young company.

And much more they spoke! They said what their youth, reason, and desire prompted them to say, wishing to draw the young artist into the whirlpool of merriment, pranks—perhaps even follies. At times he himself was not averse to this: his blood was hot, his soul ardent, and he could join in cheerful conversations, laugh heartily no worse than others! And yet the so-called merry life of Raphael seemed to him some kind of intoxicating vapor, a fog, compared with the divine brilliance radiating from the great master's paintings. And how his breast stirred when he stood in the Vatican before images of imperishable beauty, carved from marble by artists of ancient times! What elevation of spirit did he feel then, what strength, what sacred fire burned in his heart! A desire ignited within him to create from marble similar images. He wished to embody in marble that feeling which strove from the depths of his soul to ascend toward the Eternal and Infinite. But how to recreate it, in what form? Soft clay obediently accepted beneath his fingers beautiful shapes, yet the next day he, as always, destroyed what he had created the day before.

Once he passed by one of the numerous luxurious Roman palazzi, stopped before large open gates, and saw inside the courtyard, behind painted arcades, a little garden full of fragrant roses. Juicy green leaves of snake grass bathed in a marble basin filled with transparent water. Just then a vision flashed before him—a young girl, the daughter of the house's owner. How tender, ethereal, lovely she was! Never in his life had he seen such a woman! Ah, no, he had seen her in one of the Roman palazzi, in a painting by Raphael, in the image of Psyche. There she was rendered in colors; here she appeared to him alive.

She imprinted herself vividly upon his heart and thoughts; returning to his poor workshop, he began molding from clay Psyche—a noble young Roman woman—and for the first time remained satisfied with his work. She held significance in his eyes—for it was her likeness!

His friends, seeing the statue, loudly rejoiced: in this work his artistic talent expressed itself with extraordinary brilliance; until now only they had acknowledged him, but now the whole world would acknowledge him!

Clay wonderfully conveys the vitality of the body, yet lacks the whiteness and durability of marble; Psyche must come to life in marble, and the artist even possessed this precious material: in the courtyard lay for many years a block of marble belonging once to his parents. Upon it lay various refuse, shards of glass, vegetable trimmings; all this soiled and stained its exterior, yet inside the marble shone with snowy whiteness; from this very block Psyche must arise.

On one fine day—the star tells nothing of this, it did not see it, but we know it happened thus—the narrow, poor street was visited by distinguished company; the visitors left their carriage not far from the house and walked on foot to the artist's dwelling. They had come to see his work, of which they had accidentally heard. Who were they? Poor youth! Or rather: too happy youth! In his studio stood she herself, the young beauty! And how she smiled when her father said: "Why, this is you, alive!" That smile could not be conveyed, that gaze of astonishment could not be depicted! It lifted up, ennobled, and—cast into dust!

"Psyche must be sculpted from marble!" said the distinguished visitor. And these words brought to life the dead clay and the heavy marble block, as well as the artist himself, greatly agitated. "When the work is finished, I shall buy it!" added the noble Roman.

As though a new era had dawned in the poor workshop; life, merriment, and labor boiled within it. The radiant morning star beheld how the work advanced. The clay itself seemed to come alive since she had been there, obediently accepting beneath the artist's hand the desired forms, conveying familiar features. Soon they shone with higher, most perfect beauty.

"Now I know what it means to live!" exulted the artist. "It means to love, to be enraptured by the sublime, to admire the beautiful! That which my companions call life is deception, bubbles rising upon fermenting dregs, not the pure, heavenly drink that unites man with true life!"

The marble block was raised onto a pedestal, and piece by piece began to be chipped away from it. The artist measured, made marks and dots, and gradually the rough work was accomplished; the stone began taking the forms of a living body, the outlines of a divinely beautiful image of a young girl. The heavy stone transformed into an airy, fluttering, lovely Psyche, smiling with a heavenly smile forever imprinted upon the young sculptor's heart.

The star shining in the rosy morning sky saw all this and, truly, understood what transpired in the young man's soul, understood both the blush flaring upon his cheeks and the brilliance in his eyes as he embodied in marble God's creation.

"You are a master such as lived in the times of the ancient Greeks!" his admiring friends told him. "Soon the whole world will marvel at your Psyche!"

"My Psyche!" he repeated. "Mine! Yes, she must be mine! And I am just as much an artist as my great predecessors. Merciful God has granted me talent, exalted me as His chosen one! I am no lower than born aristocrats!"

And he fell upon his knees and with tears thanked God, then again forgot Him for her sake, for the sake of her marble image, for the sake of Psyche, as though molded from snow and flushed by the morning sun.

But he was destined to see her alive, beautiful, ethereal, destined again to hear her musical voice! He must appear at the luxurious palazzo with news that the marble Psyche was completed. And he went there; he passed through the courtyard, past the marble basin where water ran from the mouths of dolphins and where snake grass grew in abundance along with fresh, lush roses, and then entered

into a spacious, high antechamber. Its walls and ceiling were painted with pictures and coats of arms; gorgeously dressed servants, proud and bedecked with jingling bells like horses during carnival, walked up and down the staircases; some lounged lazily on carved benches; it seemed as though they were the masters of the house! The young man stated his purpose, and they led him up a smooth marble staircase covered with soft carpets; statues stood on both sides of it; then the young man passed through an enfilade of luxurious rooms adorned with paintings, featuring gleaming mosaic floors. At the sight of all this splendor he felt somewhat uneasy, his breath caught, but soon he overcame this feeling, and again he felt at ease. The old noble gentleman received him very kindly, almost friendly, and after speaking with him, invited him to go to the young signora—she too wished to see the artist. The servants once more led him through luxurious rooms and halls, and suddenly he found himself in the signora's chamber, whose finest ornament was herself.

She began to speak to him; no Miserere, no church hymn could have so shaken the heart, so stirred the soul! He seized her hand and pressed it to his lips; the hand was softer, more tender than a rose petal, yet from that petal issued fire! It burned through the young man, lifted him high, ever higher!... And words poured from his lips which he himself did not understand. Does a crater know what molten lava it ejects? He confessed his love to her. She stood astonished, indignant, proud, with such an expression of loathing contempt upon her face as if she had suddenly touched a wet frog. Her cheeks burned with fire; her lips turned completely white; her eyes, black as night, flashed lightning.

"Madman!" she said. "Away! Away!"—and turned her back to him. Her beautiful face took on the expression of the famous petrified head with snakes instead of hair.

Dejected, haggard, helpless, he wandered through the streets like a sleepwalker. He came to his senses only upon reaching home, and there, in a surge of fury and despair, he seized a hammer, raised it, and meant to shatter the beautiful marble

statue. He did not notice that his friend Angelo stood behind him. Angelo forcefully grabbed his arm.

"Have you gone mad?! What is wrong with you?"

A struggle ensued; Angelo was stronger, and the young sculptor, breathing heavily, threw himself onto a chair.

"What happened?" Angelo continued. "Come to your senses! Speak!"

But what could he say? What could he tell? Angelo got nothing out of him and waved his hand.

"Your blood has simply thickened from your endless dreaming! Be a man like the rest of us; do not live by ideals alone—you will not endure! Drink some wine, and you will see how wonderfully you sleep! Take yourself a pretty girl as a doctor. The girls of the Campagna are lovely, no worse than princesses from marble palaces: both are daughters of Eve, and in paradise one cannot distinguish them! Come with me! I shall be your guardian angel! And when the time comes—you will grow old, your body will weaken, and one fine day, when everyone around is rejoicing in the sun and exulting, you will lie wasted like a dried-up blade of grass that can grow no more! I do not believe what the priests say—that another life awaits us beyond the grave; it is a beautiful dream, a childish tale, quite comforting if one believes in it. But I do not indulge in dreams; I live in reality. Come with me! Be a man!"

And he drew him along; he succeeded in this at that moment: in the young sculptor's blood burned a fire, a revolution occurred in his soul, an irresistible desire awakened to break with everything old and familiar, to detach himself from his former self. That is why he followed Angelo.

On one of the outskirts of Rome stood a favorite little tavern of the artists; it was situated in a surviving part of ancient baths; old yellow-red walls were hidden behind dark, shining greenery of lemon trees, through which golden large fruits sparkled. The tavern lay beneath a deep vault, so that it resembled a cave. Inside, before an image of the Mother of God, a lamp burned; in the hearth a fire blazed; there they roasted, boiled, and baked; in the garden, under the shade of lemon and laurel trees, stood several set tables.

Friends greeted the newcomers with open arms, and merriment erupted. They ate a little, drank considerably—this cheers and encourages—and began to sing and play guitars. A saltarello sounded, and dancing commenced. Two young Roman women, models for the artists, whirled in the dance. Two lovely bacchantes! Yes,

they were not like Psyche, not tender, beautiful roses, but fresh, juicy, lush carnations.

What heat prevailed that day! It continued even after sunset! Fire in the blood, fire in the air, fire in the glances! The air shimmered with gold and roses; it seemed as if all life was full of gold and roses!

"Well, at last you are with us! Surrender to the current of life!"

"Never have I felt so healthy and cheerful!" said the young artist. "You are right, you are all right; I was a fool, a dreamer! Man belongs to real life, not to fantasy!"

Singing to the accompaniment of guitars, the young men left the tavern and made their way through the city alleys; the evening was clear and starry. Both magnificent carnations, daughters of the Campagna, accompanied them.

In Angelo's room, cluttered with sketches, sheets, and pictures scattered everywhere, depicting scenes full of beauty and passion, voices sounded deeper, yet just as cheerfully and passionately. Drawings lay strewn across the floor, portraying daughters of the Campagna in every conceivable guise; the drawings breathed life and beauty, but the girls themselves were far more beautiful. A six-branched candelabrum blazed with all its fires, and by their light the beauty of the girls appeared even brighter: from the bodily form shone forth the image of divinity.

"Apollo! Jupiter! I ascend to you, to heaven! In my heart it seems as though the flower of life is blooming!"

Yes, it bloomed... faded and fell, spreading intoxicating vapors. His face grew pale, thoughts became confused... The fireworks of passion extinguished, and darkness descended.

He reached his home, threw himself onto the bed, and only then gathered his thoughts somewhat. "Phew!" escaped from his lips, from the depths of his heart. "Wretch! Away! Away!" And he sighed bitterly, deeply.

"Away! Away!"—these words of the living Psyche ceased not to resound in his heart, to fall from his lips. He dropped his head upon the pillow, his thoughts became tangled, and he fell asleep.

At dawn he woke and began to recall the previous day. What had happened yesterday? Was it all a dream? And her cruel words, and the revelry in the tavern, and the evening spent in the company of the crimson carnations of the Campagna?... No, all this had been real, had been reality, a reality new to him!

In the reddening sky shone a bright star; its rays fell upon the sculptor and upon the marble Psyche. And he trembled, gazing upon this immortal image: it seemed to him that his impure gaze dared no longer look upon her. Hastily he threw a veil over the statue; then again he meant to remove it and uncover Psyche, but no! He was no longer able to behold his own creation!

Quiet, gloomy, entirely withdrawn into himself, he sat through that long day, unaware, unconscious of what transpired around him, and no one knew what was happening within him.

Days followed days, weeks followed weeks; especially long dragged the nights. One morning the bright star saw how he, deathly pale, trembling as if in fever, leapt from his bed, rushed to the marble statue, tore off its veil, gazed long and sorrowfully upon his creation, and then, almost collapsing under its weight, dragged it into the garden. There was a deep, dried-up well, rather a pit; into this he lowered his Psyche, covered her with earth, and hid the fresh grave with brushwood and nettles.

"Away! Away!"—short was the funeral oration.

The star saw all this from the rosy horizon, and its rays trembled in two large tears rolling down the pale cheeks of the young man, who had fallen ill with fever—mortally ill. So they spoke of him as he lay in bed.

A monk, Brother Ignatius, became his friend and physician. He came to the sickbed with words of religious consolation, spoke of the peace and happiness granted by the Church, of human sinfulness, of God's mercy and salvation through Him.

His words were sunbeams falling upon wet, plowed soil, and from it rose vapors turning into clouds—mental images that were at the same time real. From these airy islands gliding through space, the young man began to look down upon human life; all of it was deception, disappointment, at least for him! Art itself was a sorceress luring us into the sin of vain earthly pride! We lie to ourselves, to our friends, and to God. The serpent hidden within us whispers: "Taste, and you shall become like God!"

Only now—it seemed to him—did he understand himself, comprehend the path of truth and peace. In the church was God's light and clear tranquility; in the monk's cell—rest; there alone could the tree of human life grow for eternity!

Brother Ignatius strengthened these thoughts within him, and he made his decision: the child of light became a servant of the church, the young sculptor renounced the world and entered the monastery.

How heartily, how lovingly, did the brethren welcome him! How solemn was the consecration! The Lord Himself, it seemed to him, was present in the church, in the sunbeams illuminating it, in the radiance surrounding the faces of the saints and the crosses. And standing in the evening, at sunset, by the open window of his small cell, he gazed upon old Rome, the ruined temples, the majestic yet dead Colosseum, seeing all this adorned in spring's attire of blooming acacias, fresh green ivy, lush roses, golden oranges, and luxurious fan palms; and he felt within his breast such fullness of bliss as he had never known before! The open, quiet valley of the Campagna stretched away toward shining, snow-covered mountains, as if painted upon the sky. Everything merged, breathed peace and beauty; everything seemed to dream, dissolving into reverie; the whole world was a dream!

Yes, the world was a dream, and a dream may conquer a person for an hour or two, then return again for some time, but life in the monastery was meant to last for years—many, long years!

And he was forced to admit that much proceeds from within a man that defiles him! What fire was this that burned him at times? What source of evil was this within him that burst forth despite his resistance? He scourged his flesh, yet the source of evil did not dry up. What was it that caused his mind to coil like a serpent around his conscience and creep with it beneath the cloak of Divine love? Whose voice whispered to him: "The saints pray for us, the Mother of God too, and Jesus Christ Himself gave His flesh and blood for us!" Was it due to childishness or frivolity that he surrendered himself under the protection of Supreme Mercy and felt exalted above other men? Of course! Had he not pushed worldly vanity away from himself, becoming a son of the church!

Once, after many years, he met Angelo; the latter recognized him.

"Well!" said Angelo. "So it is you! Are you happy now? You have sinned against God, cast aside His gift, destroyed your talent. Read the parable of the entrusted talents! The Teacher who told it brought truth into the world! Well, what have you achieved, what have you attained? Have you not created for yourself the life of an idle dreamer? Have you not fashioned your own religion, like all monks? And what if all this is merely a dream, a fantasy, beautiful fictions?"

"Get behind me, Satan!" said the monk, turning away from Angelo. "It is the devil himself! I saw him today with my own eyes!" whispered the monk. "I once offered him my finger, and he seized my entire hand!... No!" he sighed afterward, "the evil is within myself! In this man too there is evil, yet he does not fall beneath its burden; he holds his head high, he is happy! But I seek happiness in the consolations of religion... And what if this indeed is only consolation?... What if

this, like all that from which I renounced in the world, is merely a beautiful fiction, a deception, like the beauty of rosy evening clouds, like the blue trembling distance beyond the mountains?! For up close, everything proves different! O eternity! You, like a great, boundless, tranquil ocean, allure us, call to us, fill our souls with presentiments, yet when we reach you, perhaps we shall plunge into the abyss, vanish, die... cease to exist! Deception! Away! Away!

Without tears, plunged deep within himself, he stood upon his hard bed, kneeling—but before whom? Before a stone crucifix embedded in the wall? Mere habit forced him to kneel!

The deeper he peered into his soul, the darker it seemed to him: emptiness within, emptiness without! "In vain have I destroyed my life!" And thoughts rolled and grew like a snowball, grew, pressed, wiped him from the face of the earth.

"And I dare not reveal to anyone this worm gnawing at my soul!

My secret is my prisoner; should I release it, I shall become its prisoner!"

And the particle of divine spirit within him continued to suffer and struggle.

"Lord, Lord!" he prayed in despair. "Have mercy upon me, send me faith!... I have buried Your gift—my talent—in the earth! I lacked strength; You did not give it to me! Immortal Psyche within my breast... Away, away!... She too shall be committed to the earth, like that finest gleam of my life!... Never shall she rise from her grave!"

A star shone in the rosy sky. It too would someday extinguish, vanish, yet souls shall live and shine forever! Its trembling ray fell upon the white wall but traced upon it nothing of God's greatness, of His mercy and love, whose echoes resound in the soul of every believer.

"No, Psyche is here, within me; she shall never die!... To live consciously?... Can the inconceivable come to pass?... Yes, yes! Inconceivable is my self! Inconceivable art Thou, O Lord! Thy whole world is inconceivable! It is a miracle of Thy power, magnificence, and... love!..."

His eyes sparkled and extinguished forever. The sounds of the bell accompanied him to the grave. He was buried in earth brought from Jerusalem and mixed with the dust of pious deceased monks.

After several years, the skeleton was exhumed, like the skeletons of all monks who had died before him; it was wrapped in a dark robe, beads were placed upon its hand, and it was set into a niche constructed from human bones found in the

monastery cemetery. There the sun shone, fragrant incense smoke drifted, and the sounds of prayers were heard.

Many years passed.

The bones of the skeletons crumbled; the skulls were gathered and arranged in rows so that they formed an entire enclosure around the church. Among others lay there, beneath the scorching rays of the sun, the skull of the sculptor; there were many, many of them, but no one knew to whom they belonged, nor did anyone know his name. And then one day, in the sunlight, something living flickered within the eye sockets of the skull. What was it? A colorful lizard had crept into the empty skull and darted back and forth through the open eye sockets. Thus, life was once again in the head—the very head where once great thoughts wandered, dreams sparkled, love for art and all things beautiful resided, whence burning tears flowed, where hope for immortality lived! The lizard leaped out and disappeared; the skull decayed; it became dust among dust.

Centuries passed. The bright star shone as before, just as luminous, just as large as it had been for millennia; the sky glowed with purple, tender as the purple of roses, crimson as blood.

Where once ran a narrow street on which stood the ruins of a temple, there was now a square, and upon it rose a convent for women. In the garden, a grave was being dug; a young nun had died, and that morning they intended to bury her. Suddenly the spade struck a stone gleaming with dazzling whiteness. White marble appeared; it rounded into a shoulder, then revealed an entire arm. They worked more carefully with the spade, and from the earth emerged a woman's head, then butterfly wings... From the grave wherein they had intended to bury the young nun's body, they extracted, in the light of the rosy morning dawn, a wonderful statue of Psyche, carved from white marble. "How lovely she is! What perfection! A monument of art from the finest times!" people said. "Who created her?" No one knew this, no one except the morning star that has shone for millennia. She alone knew the earthly life of Psyche's creator, his trials, his faith in human dignity and weakness. His mortal shell ceased to live, disintegrated into dust, as it must, but the result of his strivings, the embodiment of the divine spark hidden within him—Psyche remained!... And she shall never die; she will outlast even the memory of her creator, serving here on earth as a reflection of his immortal soul! And thus she was found, appreciated, and loved! The clear morning

A star, burning in the rosy sky, bathed Psyche in its trembling light and illuminated the blissfully smiling lips and eyes of the spectators, who gazed in silent rapture upon a soul sculpted from marble.

All that is earthly decays, crumbles into dust, is forgotten; only the star, witness to endless ages, remembers it; yet all that is heavenly shines of itself and lives in memory. But even this memory may fade, whereas Psyche lives forever!