

The Psyche

Hans Christian Andersen

At dawn, when the clouds are red, a great star shines, the beautiful morning star. Her beams tremble on the white wall, as if she would like to write there the story of all she has seen during the thousands of years she has watched our revolving earth.

Listen to one of her stories.

A little while ago - a few centuries ago, which, though a long time to you men, is just a little while to me - my beams watched a young artist. He lived in the papal state, in one of the world's great cities, Rome. Many things there have changed since those days, but they haven't changed as quickly as the human being changes from childhood to old age. The eternal city was then, as it is now, a city of ruins. The fig tree and the laurel tree grew among the overturned marble columns and over the destroyed baths, their walls still inlaid with gold. The Coliseum was a ruin. Church bells rang, and fragrant incense filled the air, while processions with magnificent canopies and lighted candles passed through the streets. It was a beautiful church service honoring the great and inspired arts. The world's greatest painter, Raphael, and the greatest sculptor of his time, Michelangelo, lived in Rome then. The Pope himself admired them both and honored them with his visits. Indeed, art was acknowledged, honored, and rewarded; but not all great and noble things were known and seen in those days, any more than they are now.

In a little, narrow street stood an old house that had formerly been a temple, and here lived a young artist; he was poor, and he was unknown. Of course, he had plenty of friends, other artists, young in mind and thought, who kept telling him he was blessed with ability and talent and that he was a fool for having no more self-confidence. Anything he formed out of clay he always broke into pieces; he was never satisfied with what he did; nor did he ever finish anything, which, of course, one must do to become known, acclaimed, and to earn money.

"You're a dreamer!" his friends said. "And that's your misfortune. That is because you haven't enjoyed life the way life should be enjoyed. Youth and life go hand in hand. Look at the great master Raphael, whom the Pope honors - does he live the way you do?"

Yes, they had much to say, all of them, aroused by their youth and outlook. They wanted the young artist to join them in riotous pleasures, and sometimes he would succumb to a moment of desire; his blood would become warm; he would join in the lively talk and laugh loudly with the others. But the thought of the "life that Raphael lived," as they called it, disappeared like morning dew when he saw that master's great pictures before him and felt the power of God's holy and divine gift. And when he stood in the Vatican among the noble and beautiful figures that great masters had shaped from marble so very long ago, his breast would heave with joy and longing. He could feel some power stirring within him, great, good, holy, and uplifting, and he longed to create such forms, to carve them out of marble. He wanted to create an image of what he felt in his heart - but how, and in what shape? The soft clay molded easily under his fingers, but the next day he would always break his work to pieces.

One day he happened to pass by one of the rich palaces, of which Rome has so many; he paused at the large open gates and inside saw colonnades adorned with statues, surrounding a little garden that was filled with the loveliest roses. Large calla lilies with rich green leaves grew about a fountain in a marble basin, where clear water splashed. A young girl, daughter of that princely house, glided through the garden and past the fountain. How beautiful, how graceful and delicate she was! He had never seen such a beautiful woman before. Yes, once! He had seen one painted by Raphael, painted as

Psyche, in one of Rome's palaces. Yes, her portrait was there - and here she was alive!

He carried her image away in his heart and thoughts; and when he had returned to his humble room he molded a Psyche in clay. The figure was the rich, noble young daughter of Rome, and for the first time he was satisfied with his work. It had expression and feeling; no longer was his ideal vague and shadowy. And when his friends saw his work they were delighted. Here was the work of a true genius, they knew, and the world would acknowledge.

Clay is lifelike, but it has not the whiteness or durability of marble; Psyche must receive her life from the precious block. This would not be too costly for the young artist, since a large block had been lying in the yard for many years; it had belonged to his parents. Broken glass, stalks of cabbage, and pieces of artichoke had been flung over it, soiling its purity; but inside it was still as white as the mountain snow. From this block Psyche would lift her wings.

Now, it happened one day - the morning star didn't tell me this, for she never saw it, but I know it, anyway - that a party of Roman nobles visited the narrow, humble street. The carriage stopped a little way off, and the visitors came to inspect the young artist's work, having heard of it by accident. And who were these distinguished strangers? Poor young man! Or should we say happy young man? The young maiden herself stood in his room, and how she smiled when her father said, "Why, it's you, to the life!" That smile, that strange look she gave the young artist! It cannot be described; it was a look that uplifted, ennobled, but at the same time crushed him!

"Psyche must be completed in marble," said the rich gentleman. These were words of life for the heavy marble block, and in a sense for the dead clay, just as they were words of life for the young man. "When you have finished it I shall buy it," added the noble gentleman.

Now a new life began in that humble studio. Life and happiness shone there, and the hustle and bustle of business kept them company. The twinkling morning star watched the progress of the work. It seemed that the clay had taken on life while *she* had been there and bent in loveliness over her image with its familiar features. "Now I know what life is!" beamed the artist. "It's love! It is being lifted above yourself, the rapture of losing yourself in beauty! What my friends call life and pleasure is unreal and as fleeting as a bubble; they know nothing of the pure, heavenly altar wine that initiates us into life!"

The marble block was placed, and the chisel cut away large pieces. Careful measurements were made, and the work proceeded. Little by little, the stone was transformed into a figure of beauty, Psyche, as beautiful and perfect as God's own image in the young girl. That weighty stone was changed into a light, dancing, aerial form, a charming Psyche, with the smile of divine innocence that had captured the young sculptor's heart.

The morning star saw it and understood all that was stirring in the young man's mind, understood the changing color of his cheeks, the look in his eyes, while he strove to utilize the gift God had granted him.

"You are a master like those in the time of the Greeks," said his friends. "Soon the whole world will be admiring your Psyche!"

"My Psyche!" he repeated. "Mine! Yes, she must be mine! I am an artist like the mighty ones of olden times! God has given me this gift in order to raise me to the level of the nobility!" He fell upon his knees and cried in gratitude to God; but he soon forgot Him and thought only of her and her image in marble, his Psyche who stood there as though carved from snow, blushing in the morning sunlight.

He went to see the living, moving Psyche, whose words were like music; he could bring

her the news that the marble Psyche was completed at last. He walked through the courtyard, with its fountain trickling through dolphin shapes into the marble basin, where the calla lilies and fresh roses bloomed, and into a great, lofty antechamber, its walls splendid with tapestries and coats of arms. Handsomely dressed servants, haughty, and strutting like sleigh horses with their bells, passed to and fro; some were even stretched out lazily and overbearingly on the carved wooden benches, as much at their ease as if they were the masters of the house.

He explained his errand and was led up the carpeted marble staircase. Statues lined either side. He passed through splendid apartments hung with magnificent pictures and paved with shining mosaic; the wealth and show about him left him almost breathless. But his courage soon returned when he was kindly, almost cordially, received by the dignified, courteous old prince who, after a brief talk, bade him visit the young *signorina*, his daughter, who wished to see him. Again he was conducted by servants through beautiful halls and chambers, until he was ushered into a room whereof she herself was the pomp and splendor.

She spoke to him, and no solemn, churchly music could have greater power to melt the heart and raise the soul. He took her hand and pressed it to his lips; no rose could be so soft, but that light touch seemed to overpower him with a strong, magical spell. Words he never thought to speak rushed from his lips. He did not know what he was saying; is the volcano conscious when the burning lava flows from it? He told her of his love.

She drew herself up before him, astounded, offended, and haughty; then an expression of disgust, as though she had accidentally touched a wet, slimy frog, passed over her features; her cheeks flushed, and her lips grew pale; her eyes flashed and yet were as dark as the night.

"Maniac!" she said. "Away! Out of my sight!" And as she turned her back on him, her lovely face had the look of that legendary beauty with the stony face and the snakes in her hair.

Like a sleepwalker, he made his way downstairs, into the streets, and at last reached his home. Then a fit of wild rage and pain swept over him; he seized his hammer and, raising it on high, was about to smash his beautiful marble image into a thousand pieces. But in his madness he had not noticed that his friend Angelo stood right behind him. With a strong grip he caught his arm, crying, "Are you crazy? What's the matter?" They wrestled, but Angelo was the stronger. Breathing heavily, the young

sculptor flung himself into a chair.

"What has happened?" asked Angelo. "Pull yourself together! Tell me!"

But what could he tell him? What could he say? And since Angelo was unable to make him talk, he gave him one of his usual lectures.

"Why don't you stop your eternal dreaming! Be a man like your friends. Don't be an idealist; if you do you'll have a breakdown. Get a little tipsy; then you'll sleep well. Let a beautiful girl be your doctor. The girl from the Campagna is as beautiful as your princess in the marble castle. They are both daughters of Eve, and you can't tell them apart. You follow your Angelo - your angel and me, your angel of life! The time will come when you're old; your body will crumble, and some sunny day when everyone is laughing and gay, you'll lie like a withered straw. I don't believe what the ministers tell us about life beyond the grave; that's a beautiful imagination, a fairy tale for children, and pleasant enough if you can make yourself believe it. I do not live in imagination; I live in reality. Come along! Be a man!"

And he was able to drag him along, for at that moment the young artist felt a desire to tear himself loose from his old self; there was fire in his blood, a change in his soul. And so he

followed Angelo. "

In the outskirts of Rome there was a tavern frequented by artists. It was built in the ruins of an old Roman bath chamber. Large yellow lemons hung down among dark, shining leaves, partly covering the old red-yellow walls. The tavern was in the form of a deep vault, almost like a cave in the ruins. A lamp burned inside before a picture of the Madonna. A large fire blazed in the fireplace, and food was being fried, cooked, and roasted. Outside, under the lemon and laurel trees, stood two tables, all prepared.

The two young men were happily, gaily received by their friends. They all had a little to eat but a lot to drink. They sang and played the guitar, and then the dancing started. A couple of young girls from Rome, who worked for the artists as models, joined in the dancing and festivities - two charming girls, not so lovely as Psyche, not fine, beautiful roses, but fresh and colorful carnations.

How warm the weather was, even at sunset! There was fire in the blood, fire in the air, fire in every look! The air was swimming with gold and roses; life was gold and roses!

"Come now, enjoy yourself, now that you have finally joined our company."

"I've never felt so happy!" said the young artist. "You're right - you're all right - I have been a fool, a dreamer. Man belongs to reality, not to fantasy."

To the accompaniment of singing and the playing of guitars, the young artists left the tavern and then walked through the narrow streets in the clear, starlit evening. The two girls, the colorful carnations, were with them.

In Angelo's room, their voices became quieter but no less fiery.

"Apollo! Jupiter! Into your heaven and glory I am carried! The flower of life has blossomed forth in my heart this very moment!"

Yes, it blossomed - broke, withered, and a nauseating fume whirled from it, blinding his sight; his thoughts went blank as the firework of truth burned out, and everything was dark.

He reached home and flung himself down on his cot. "Shame!" This came from his own mouth, right from the bottom of his heart. "Away! Out of my sight!" These, his living Psyche's words, resounded in his heart as they came from his lips. Overcome with fatigue, he buried his face in the pillow and slept.

Next morning when he arose he tried to collect his thoughts. What had happened? Had it all been a dream - her repulse, his visit to the tavern, and the evening spent with his friends and their girls? No, it had all happened; facts hitherto unknown to him were now revealed. The bright morning star shone through the purple-colored air onto the marble Psyche. He felt unworthy to look upon the symbol of immortality and drew a curtain over the statue; he could no longer look at his own work.

He was silent, gloomy, lost in reverie, the entire day. He never knew what might be going on outside, and no one knew what stirred within that human heart.

Days passed and weeks passed, and the nights were endless. At last one morning the twinkling star saw him rise from his bed, pale, and, trembling with fever, go to his marble statue, lift the veiling curtain, gaze on his work with one last, sad, yearning look, and then, staggering under its weight, drag the statue down into the garden. Here was a ruined, dried-up well or hole, and he lowered his Psyche into it, threw dirt over it, then scattered a lot of dry sticks and nettles over the spot, so that no one could tell the earth had been disturbed. "Away! Out of my sight!" This was his brief burial service.

The morning star looked down through the rose-colored sky, and her beams quivered on two big tears on the young man's pale cheeks. Fever-stricken, deathly ill, he lay on his bed.

From a near-by convent, Brother Ignatius came to see him daily as physician, nurse, and

friend. He brought to the sick man the consolation of religion, spoke about the peace and happiness of the church, spoke of man's sin and the peace and blessings of God. And his words were like warm sunbeams falling on the wet, fermented ground. They lifted the mist and showed him life in all its reality, with its missteps and disappointments. The Goddess of Art is a witch who carries us toward vanity, toward earthly pleasures. We are untrue to ourselves, to our friends, and to God. "Taste and ye shall be as gods," the serpent always says within us.

Everything was clear to him now; he had found the road to truth and peace. In church, God's light and wisdom were ever present, and in the monastery he would find the peace where the tree of humanity could grow through all eternity.

His mind was made up, and Brother Ignatius supported him in his decision. The young artist became a servant of God. How kindly, how cordially, he was received by the brethren; how festive it was when he took his vows! And when he stood in his little cell at sunset that evening, and looked through his open window over old Rome with its ruined temples and its wonderful but dead Coliseum, and saw the spring blossoms of the acacias, the fresh shoots of the evergreen, the multitude of roses, the shiny citron and orange trees, and the fanlike palms, he was thrilled with a calm happiness he had never felt before. The wide, still Campagna stretched as far as the bluish, snow-capped mountains, which seemed painted on the sky; the whole landscape in its quiet beauty seemed a floating dream.

Yes, life in a cloister is a life of long, monotonous years. He realized that temptation came from within rather than from without. Why did worldly thoughts always come over him? He punished his body for it, but that was of no avail.

One day, after many years had passed, he met Angelo, who recognized him.

"Man!" he said. "Yes, it *is* you! Are you happy now? Why, you have sinned against God and thrown away His divine gift, wasted your wonderful talent! What have you gained? What have you found? Are you not living a dream, a religion that's simply in your head? Why, it is all a dream, a fantasy, only beautiful thoughts!"

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" said the monk, and walked away from Angelo.

"He is a devil, a devil in flesh and blood!" mumbled the monk. "Once I gave him my little finger, and he grabbed my whole hand! But," he sighed, "the evil is within me as it is within him."

Torn and conscience-stricken, he cried out, "Oh, Lord, Lord! Be merciful and restore in me my faith!"

His weary eyes grew dim. The church bells tolled for him - the dead. He was buried in earth brought from Jerusalem, his dust mingling with the dust of pious pilgrims.

Many years later the bones were disinterred, a rosary was placed in the fleshless hands, and the skeleton was set up in a niche, with other similar ghastly forms, to make room for newcomers, as is the custom in convent graveyards. And the sun shone down on the grisly sight, while inside Mass was read and incense burned.

With the passing of years, the bones of the skeletons crumbled. And in time the skulls were gathered and placed along the outside church wall. There they stood, his among them, in the burning sunlight. Nobody knew his or their names. And look! Something alive was moving in the eye socket of his skull! What was it? A spotted lizard slipped in and out of the hollow skull, back and forth through the big empty eyeholes. It was now the only thing alive where once great thoughts, happy dreams, and love for the arts had been, and where hope for eternity had lived. The lizard played, then disappeared. The skull crumbled to dust.

Centuries passed, but the bright morning star still shone, big and clear, as it had for thousands of years, and the dawn clouds were still as fresh as roses, as red as blood.

A stately convent now occupied the site of the ruined temple on the little narrow street. It happened that a young nun, one of the inmates of this convent, died, and at early dawn her grave was dug in the garden. Suddenly the spade struck against what seemed to be a stone, and a dazzling whiteness gleamed through the dirt - it was white marble rounded into the perfect form of a shoulder. The spade was guided with tender care, until the head of a woman was uncovered, then butterfly wings. From the grave in which the young nun was to be buried there was lifted into the rosy light of dawn the form of lovely Psyche, chiseled from white marble. "How beautiful, how perfect it is!" people cried. "It is the work of some great master!" But whose work could it have been? No one could say; no one knew anything about it save the morning star that had twinkled for so many thousands of years; it alone had witnessed the sculptor's earthly life, his sufferings, and his weakness.

The sculptor's body had long since returned to dust, but the work in which God's gracious gift to him had found expression - the masterpiece on which he had lavished the treasures of heart and soul - remained, lived still, to be known, admired, and loved by people who never heard his name.

And in the rose-colored sky the bright morning star twinkled down upon Psyche, upon the innocent smile parting her lips, and upon the admiring eyes of the crowd gathered around to gaze on that glorious symbol of the immortal soul.

What is earthly will crumble and be forgotten; only the eternal star will remember it. What is heavenly will shine through ages to come. And so will Psyche.