

Interlude

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TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY AUDREY ALDEN.

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PERSONS

THE MARQUISE.
THE POET.

INTERLUDE

BY FEDERICO MORE

Scene: A Salon.

MARQUISE [*entering*].

It is chic yet full of peril to be a marquise, betrothed
And on the brim of nineteen, with two whole years'
Devotion at the convent behind her. Well may the man
I am to marry place his faith in me.
And yet, I am obsessed with the sweet indecision
Of having met a poet who will shrieve me in verse,
Drape my life with the vigor of his youth
Yet never kiss me.

POET [*entering*].

I was looking for you, madame.

MARQUISE.

Well, here I am.

POET.

Does the dance tire you or the music displease?

MARQUISE.

It has never before displeased me, and yet--now--

POET.

In a life
Happy as yours, joy is reborn,
Your moods are versatile, and charming, marquise....
Bad humor de luxe ... perhaps mere caprice....

MARQUISE.

Perhaps mere caprice ... perhaps; but I am prey
To something more profound, something warmer....

POET.

Have I not told you
That in happy lives such as your high-placed life
There is nothing of ennui, nothing to lead astray,
Nothing to spur you on, nothing to unfold,
Nor any dim wraith stalking by your side?

MARQUISE.

Ah, you have uttered my thought. I feel as though a ghost walked
with
me.

POET.

And I could almost swear

You do not feel your grief molded as the phantom wills.

MARQUISE.

I do feel it. There is a spell,
An echo from afar.

POET.

Nerves ... the dance ... fatigue!
Too many perfumes ... too many mirrors....

MARQUISE.

And the lack of a voice I love.

POET.

Oh do not be romantic. Don't distort life.
Romance has always proved an evil scourge.

MARQUISE.

But you, a poet ... are not you romantic?

POET.

I? Never.

MARQUISE.

Then how do you write your verse?

POET.

I make poems
The way your seamstresses make your dresses.

MARQUISE.

With a pattern and a measure?

POET.

With a pattern and a measure.

MARQUISE.

Impossible! Poets give tongue to truth sublime.

POET.

Pardon, marquise, but it is folly
To think that poems are something more than needles
On which to thread the truth.

MARQUISE.

Truly, are they no more than that?

POET.

Ephemeral and vain, in this age
Poetry is woven of agile thought.

MARQUISE.

What of the sort that weeps and yearns most woe-begone?
Poignancy that is the ending of a poem?

POET.

All that
Is reached with the noble aid of a consonant
As great love is reached with a kiss.

MARQUISE.

And what of the void in which my soul is lost
Since no one, poet ... no one cries his need for me....

POET.

Do not say that, marquise. I can assure you....

MARQUISE.

That I am a motif for a handful of consonants?

POET.

Nonsense! I swear it by your clear eyes....

MARQUISE.

Comparable, I suppose, in verse to two clear diamonds....

POET.

You scoff, but love is very serious....

MARQUISE.

Love serious, poet? A betrothal, it may be, is serious,
Arranged by grave-faced parents with stately rites;
Yawns are serious and so is repletion.

POET.

But tell me, whence comes this deep cynicism?

MARQUISE.

Oh, do not take it ill. I say it but in jest,
Merely because I like to laugh at the abyss,
What do you think, poet?

POET.

Well, marquise, I must confess

That I am capable of feeling various loves.

MARQUISE.

Then you were born for various women.

POET.

No, I was born for various sorrows.

MARQUISE.

Or, by the same token, for various pleasures.

POET.

Sheer vanity! Women always presume
That their mere earthly presence gives men pleasure.

MARQUISE.

You are clear-witted
And a pattern of such good common-sense.
Who would believe
That a poet, dabbler in every sort of folly,
May turn discreet when mysterious love beckons?

POET.

Mysterious love? Marquise, that is not so.... Love has abandons
Irrestrainable.

MARQUISE.

And shame restrains them.

POET.

But what has shame to do with poetry?
It has no worth, it is a social value,

Value of a marquise, par excellence.

MARQUISE.

None the less, shame is a resigned and subtle justice,
The justice of women, poet.

POET.

Which is no justice at all.

MARQUISE.

Poet, the stones you throw
In your defeat, will fall upon your head.

POET.

That is my destiny. Your rising sun
Can never know the splendor of my sun that sets.

MARQUISE.

The fault is nowise mine....

POET.

True.... I am insane
And a madman is insane, marquise, although he reason.

MARQUISE.

Oh, reason, poet. I would convince you
That even a marquise may be sincere.

POET.

And I, my lady, I would fain believe it.

MARQUISE.

Believe it then, I beg of you.

POET.

But there is this:
A marquise might also lose her head.

MARQUISE.

True she might lose her head ... but for a rhyme?

POET.

Which, no matter how true, will always be a lie.

[*Pause.*]

MARQUISE.

But why did you protest against my skepticism?

POET.

I riddled your words, but protested for myself.

MARQUISE.

So vain a reason, and so selfish?

POET.

A prideful reason.... I stand aghast before the abyss.

MARQUISE.

I see that all your love has been in verse.

POET.

No, marquise, but life
Cradles crude truths which the poet disdains.

MARQUISE.

And amiable truths which passion passes by.

POET.

But about which the dreamer's world revolves.

MARQUISE.

I do not dream, I wish....

POET.

I know well what I wish....

MARQUISE.

Well then, we wish that it should not be merely a consonant.

POET.

No, rather that it should be poetry.

MARQUISE.

Suppose that it were so, would it content you?

POET.

It is enough for me, and yet I fear
That this pale poetry, untried, unlived,
Can have no driving urge.

MARQUISE.

Why then should we refuse to live it?

POET.

I shall tell you. It is not in high-born taste
To trifle with a heart.
The love of a marquise is the problematic
Love of elegance and froth,
And like other love a sort of mathematic
Love of addition, subtraction and division.
It is not rude passion, fierce, emphatic,
Song and orchestral counterpoint of life.
It is what the world would name platonic,
Love without fire, without virility,
With nothing of creation, nothing tonic,
One-step love, love of society.
And I will have none of this love sardonic,
None of its desperate futility.

MARQUISE.

I do not fear you though you are a poet,
And I say things to you, no other ears would endure.
You were not born, poor anchorite,
To say to a woman: "Be mine."
And such is your secret vanity,
You are a servile vassal of your own Utopia.
You pretend to transform women
Into laurel branches meaningless,
And with your cynic's blare
You thread upon the needle of your pride
Dregs from the utter depths of the abyss.

POET.

Marquise, a poet's love has led you astray.

MARQUISE.

Oh, don't be vain and fanciful. I swear
That in my placid life, happiness brings no joy.

What I longed for was a love, profound and mature,
The profound love of a poet come to being,
And not the incongruities of adolescence in verse....
The radiant synthesis of a pungent existence
And not the disloyalties of a dispersed dream.
What woman has not dreamed of loving a poet
Who would be conqueror and conquered all in one?
What woman has not wished to be humble and forgiving
With the man who sings the great passions he has known?
We need you poets.... We are tormented by the desire
Of a harmonious life, filled with deep sound,
With the vigor and strength of wine poured out
Into bowls of truths, deep with the depth of death.
We crave no water, lymphatic, pure,
In glasses of wind, frail as life.
Better the vintage of the rich
Served in vile glasses of gold. And if the mind be coarse,
Perchance the hands will glitter with many stones.
And if I may not have a fragrant and well-ordered nest
Filled with clear rhythm and little blond heads,
Then let me have my palace where luxurious pleasure
Lends to love of earth, grief and deep dismay.
Why do you not love living, poets? Why is it,
The dullard who nor loves nor lives poaches your kisses?

POET.

I do not comprehend, marquise. Why love living,
If that is to live loving? We know that life and love
Are wings forever fledging out
In a bird neither swan nor hawk.
I am resigned to my unequal destiny, for I know
That my two eyes cannot perceive the same color.
For even when there is calm, anxiety arises
And then, I am not master, not even of my pain.
I would be your friend, but there are obstacles,
Captious dynamics, that put a check upon my words.
I yield to the dumb pride of my huge torment,
The song without words, the sonorous silence,
And I do not desire any one to penetrate

The garden wherein flowers the mystery I adore.

MARQUISE.

Conserve your mysteries, poet; they will have no heirs.

POET.

Death is the heir of everything impenetrable.

MARQUISE.

But only during life do the words of the sphinx
Possess a meaning for our ears.

POET.

I am terror-stricken by the sphinx.

MARQUISE.

Coward! The sun blinds him who cannot hearken to the sphinx.

[Sounds of music in the distance.]

POET.

Does not the music tempt you?

MARQUISE.

It does, and I feel sure
My lover must be waiting. Will you come with me?

POET.

No, thanks. I shall remain and think of what has died.

MARQUISE.

May you have the protection of my defunct illusion.

[She goes out.]