

THE IMMORTAL MAN

“To be immortal... that is my greatest desire,” Giuseppe murmured in a voice scarcely audible, as though he feared the very air might betray his confession. The glass trembled in his hands, and the wine-stained crystal, slick with sweat, seemed on the verge of fracturing beneath the feverish pulse of his fingers. The tavern wherein he sat rose around him like a refuge for ruined souls: the ceiling perspired dampness, the floor exhaled the stench of stale alcohol, and the air, saturated with smoke and the odor of desperate bodies, suffocated any man foolish enough to breathe too deeply.

Across from him, wrapped in a penumbra that did not seem to originate from the dying lamp overhead, sat a man of spectral physiognomy: sunken eyes — so deeply sunken they resembled caverns where light itself had perished centuries ago — and a crooked smile more akin to an open wound than any human expression. The stranger slowly raised his glass, and within the deliberate movement there lingered a sickly delight.

For an instant — merely a lapse, an imperfection within the mask — his smile appeared to distort into something improper, too wide, too tense, as though there existed within it something that did not entirely correspond to the architecture of a human face.

But the expression dissolved before it could fully affirm itself.

He drank, and only afterward allowed a grave voice, clothed in unspeakable pleasure, to emerge.

“How curious...” he murmured, with the faintest trace of a smile. “What an... interesting desire.”

“There are men who drink to forget... others to remember... but very few truly understand what it is they desire.”

He observed Giuseppe carefully.

“And yet... you seem quite certain.”

“To be immortal...”

He repeated the words with strange softness, as though tasting them.

“They say the truly unbearable thing is not pain... but that which cannot be forgotten. That which persists. That which neither time... nor will... succeeds in erasing.”

“Perhaps, after all, what you desire is not to live forever...”

“but to become something... impossible to forget.”

He paused.

“As for me... I am known for another sort of profession.”

“Let us say I possess a certain... affinity for the desires of others.”

“I listen to them.”

“I understand them.”

His smile sharpened slightly.

“And, on occasion...”

“I make them real.”

Giuseppe suppressed a shudder that nevertheless traveled through his spine like heated iron. Drunkenness, however, furnished him with a counterfeit courage; laughter escaped his mouth like a hollow noise, almost alien to him, for he believed himself seated before yet another madman among the countless wretches inhabiting that miserable establishment.

But the illusion shattered in the following instant.

The man placed his glass upon the table with a sharp crack, a sound that expanded through the foul stillness of the tavern like a gunshot.

“I can grant your desire,” he whispered, like a man delivering a fatal secret.

Then he slid across the table a folded yellowed piece of paper whose mere presence seemed to exude an immaterial repugnance.

“Go to this address. Ask for Frederick. Tell him you come on my behalf.”

Giuseppe, whose naïveté bordered upon madness itself, seized the paper with trembling hands and, blinded by ambition, nodded with childish enthusiasm.

Days later, after a pilgrimage that seemed infinite to him, Giuseppe arrived at the address written in feverish script. It was a mansion in ruins, a relic defeated by weather and abandonment. Its windows, coated in soot and dust, resembled blinded eyes no longer capable of weeping for their own decay. When the door opened, it emitted a prolonged lament, like an ancient body disturbed within its rest.

Inside awaited Frederick, the artist.

He possessed the appearance of a deranged jester: a long mustache trembling with each word, and hands stained with oil paint and with another substance darker, denser, than any oil paint had ever known. Those hands intertwined and rubbed together with sacrilegious anxiety, as though anticipating a ritual long awaited.

“Before we begin, you must sign this,” he declared, offering a dusty contract whose ink had already cracked with age.

Giuseppe, deprived of judgment and blinded by the promise of eternity, did not read a single word. He took the pen — whose nib still perspired a black liquid resembling coagulated blood — and signed his name with feverish fervor.

“The first step,” Frederick murmured with barely concealed delight, “is to bind you.”

Giuseppe hesitated — a minuscule instant — yet the greed consuming him soon suffocated every remnant of prudence.

He surrendered himself.

The iron received him without ceremony.

First at the wrists: a glacial contact of almost surgical purity which, within the same heartbeat, became oppressive. The shackles closed with an irrevocable click, and the metal — rough, imperfect — began methodically tearing at the skin.

Then the ankles.

The weight was incongruous, excessive, as though each link dragged behind it an ancient density foreign to all logic.

Giuseppe lowered his gaze.

He looked upon them.

They were not clean.

Dark incrustations nested within the fissures of the metal, clinging with the obstinacy of something refusing to disappear. He did not know — or refused to know — their origin.

But the odor...

was unmistakable.

And yet he smiled.

There existed within those chains a sort of sacrilegious ornamentation. They wrapped themselves around his body with the precision of a grotesque adornment, not intended to exalt the figure, but to subjugate it.

When the final ring tightened around his neck, the metal rose until it settled against his Adam's apple. It remained there one second too long.

A fractured exhalation escaped his lips.

He felt the pressure insinuating itself inward, as though the iron aspired toward an intimacy to which it held no right.

His hands convulsed.

His limbs yielded beneath the weight.

And deep within — there where flesh ceases to remain surface — he believed he perceived a dull, ambiguous crack.

And still...

he smiled.

Because this — he persuaded himself — was necessary.

And because, beyond the pain, his fulfilled desire awaited him.

With solemn gesture, Frederick drew aside a velvet curtain.

Behind it, the stage awaited: brushes stained with the lives of others, torn canvases, a sacrilegious altar dedicated to an art nourished by flesh and groans.

“Now... close your eyes. I shall make you immortal.”

Giuseppe obeyed.

Silence extended itself, abyssal.

Footsteps.

The whistle of a blade.

And then—

pain.

He opened his eyes amid spasms. He saw blood pouring from his abdomen, a torrent robbing him of strength. He raised his gaze: Frederick plunged the brush into the wound and, with every stroke, painted not Giuseppe's figure, but the very substance of his agony.

Beside him, the man from the tavern — or that which had once pretended to be such — decomposed into an impossible grin.

He laughed.

And within that laughter filtered something that did not belong to laughter.

His reddened face vibrated in minute spasms; the features no longer appeared to answer to a singular will. There was something of the jester within him, though not of those who entertain, but of those who reveal what ought to remain concealed.

He lifted the sword.

He did not clean it.

He contemplated it.

And then, with almost reverential slowness, dragged his tongue along the blade.

His eyes settled upon Giuseppe.

“Your wishes are commands...” he murmured.

And repeated it.

“Your wishes are commands...

Your wishes are commands...”

The laughter returned, fractured.

“Do you still not understand?...”

But he did not await an answer.

Giuseppe attempted to scream, yet his throat returned only a dark gurgling.

The resulting painting was exhibited years later in one of the most prestigious salons in France.

From its very first appearance, it awakened a fascination difficult to name.

There existed within it something that defied representation itself: within every brushstroke seemed to pulse a genuine suffering. It was not the image of a man...

but the persistence of his torment.

The crowds came.

Some turned away.

Others remained longer than they should have.

And yet they returned.

With time, fascination degraded. The work was reproduced, trivialized.

But the face...

the face remained.

Unaltered.

Suspended within the precise instant in which pain ceases to remain human.

No one remembered his name any longer.

And yet his desire had been fulfilled.

For there exist forms of immortality that grant no relief whatsoever.

Some are not inscribed within glory, but within the endless repetition of an instant refusing to die.

Across the centuries, humanity has known that permanence: in displayed bodies, in gestures fixed forever by violence.

Not every eternity is a gift.

Some...

are merely the infinite prolongation of an error.

And within that face there persisted something more than an image.

His condemnation persisted.

Something time itself does not erode.

Something which, even now...

continues to defy forgetting.