**The Thief and His Little Daughter**

**By Raul Brandao**

The daughter of Death’s-Head and the Orphanage Girl grew up in the alley amid the screams of prostitutes and the obscene jests of soldiers and thieves. She was four years old, and she slept in corners or in the arms of the Fat Girl or the Deaf Girl. The Old Man, who had been a ditch-digger, would set her on his knee, and to amuse her would open his enormous mouth that had not a tooth inside it. The Landlady was very good to her, and the “girls” would shower her with frenzied kisses; and then for days at a time she would see nothing of them; they would forget all about her, and she would cry herself to sleep in the beds or on the doorsteps. Her mother was the only one who avoided her always.

“I can’t bear the sight of her!”

Yet she grew up. She grew up as chance would have it, in that realm of hallucination in which human beings are transformed as in a dream into figures of truth which, at certain hours only, come to the surface, from out of that world of pain and tragedy to which we all belong….

Death’s Head, the thief, said to his sweetheart: “Why can’t you bear the sight of the child?”

“I can’t! That’s all…”

“You’re worse than the nanny-goats!”

And then he would beat her. She would be silent, her eyes full of malice and of fear.

“You may beat me if you like, but I can’t bear to look at her. Take her out of my sight. Leave me alone!”

The thief would cover the child with old rags and draw her to his bosom, and in winter would give her an old overcoat to keep her warm.

“The brat isn’t dead yet?” the Orphanage Girl would ask, thinking possibly that Death’s Head would give her a beating.

The brat did not die. With her eyes ever on her father, she would clasp his leg and wait to follow him when he left. And so she continued to grow up in that dark alleyway, amid the screams and the insults and the sad little songs that the women sang.

“But why do you beat the little one?” the other women would ask.

“I don’t know! I don’t know!”

At the beginning of winter, the Orphanage Girl was taken to the hospital, and before she went, she embraced her daughter, weeping desperately. It was all they could do to wrest the child from her arms. The “girls” had to take care of the little one now, and she slept either with them or with the thief. One morning they said to the latter: “It’s all up with your sweetie now; they are burying her today.”

For hours Death’s Head remained alone, lost in thought. Then he heard laughter outside. Lifting the door curtain, he went directly up to the old ditch-digger, who was sitting there with the little girl on his knees. All the others were silent as he snatched her roughly from the old man’s arms, looking him fiercely in the face as the old fellow laughed back with his great toothless mouth, which was like that of a wild beast. Death’s Head left with the child and did not return until afternoon, when he turned her over to the Fat Girl.

“Keep her for me until night.”

When night came, he called his daughter and held her closely for a long time. At that moment, it may be, he understood the horror which the Orphanage Girl had felt for her offspring, and the tenderness she displayed just before they took her to the hospital – she had, perhaps, seen the Old Man with the child in his arms and that monstrous gaping mouth of his.

“Come with me.”

“Where are we going, Daddy? For a walk?”

“For a walk.”

The little one laughed. “Now?”

“Now.”

And taking her by her little hand, he led her down to the river, to the exact spot where he had met the Orphanage Girl for the first time. Climbing into a boat with her, he unmoored it and began rowing.

“Where are we going, Daddy?”

“You’ll see. Go to sleep.”

The thief now felt the same unconscious horror that had gripped the mother. He did not reason it out. It was not hatred for the alley, which was the only life that awaited the child; it was not seeing her in the ditch-digger’s brutal hands or those of the squint-eyed soldier who gazed at her with silent ferocity. There was something that pained him, made it hard for him to breathe. That thing could not go on existing at his side – he had to put an end to it. He felt this, to the very depths of his being, as the mother had felt it without being able to explain it. In the thief’s soul was a savage horror at the thought of inflicting all this upon the child. It was necessary to kill her, absolutely necessary.

“Now –“

But the child looked up at him and laughed – and he was afraid.

“Go to sleep!”

The little one began stammering – “Oh Daddy! Daddy!” – began uttering those disconnected and extraordinary words that children are in the habit of speaking, and along with them, the obscenities which she had heard from the Old Man in the alley as she clung to his neck. The thief was shaken by the profundities of life.

“O Daddy! Daddy!” she cried suddenly, “what is up there?” And the little one, who had never had a glimpse of stars in that tragic alleyway, pointed to the sky.

“Stars.”

“Ah, stars! Stars! – And the childish monologue was resumed. Charming words, words so often repeated, yet always new and fresh on lips the color of roses; it was as if life were always awakening for the first time when a child spoke. Terrible words as well, words that belonged to the tragic life of the alley and which she unconsciously mingled with the others.

At last she fell asleep in the bottom of the boat, gazing up at the sky. But sleeping she inspired as much fear in him as when awake. Very slowly, he put out his hands and fastened a rope about her waist. The little one stirred, awoke, smiled up at him, opened her mouth to say “Daddy,” and then dropped back into innocent slumber. The thief for a long time gazed at her quietly. The child could not go on living. Before his eyes always was the toothless mouth of the Old Man, and the women with their obscenities. He knew what fate was in store for her. The child was the thing that was troubling him. He would have peace on this earth only when he had thrown her into the river and seen her going down there, down, down to the very bottom, far from this life of pain and tragedy.

For the first time he felt that he was committing a crime against something immense and extraordinary, something huge and invisible – felt with horror that he was poisoning the wellsprings of life. It was necessary to kill her….Yet even now there came over him another fear, without real existence….Noiselessly, holding his breath, he tried to steal forward, to sink his nails into her throat and strangle her. He could not….He had a mission to fulfill, and he could not fulfill it.

“Am I going to be afraid? Am I going to be afraid?” And he wrung his hands, his enormous hands, his hands that were so cold.

He had come up against a living wall of tenderness. His soul was writhing in the tremendous silence of the night, crushed between two contradictory forces that weighed upon him like mountains. He glanced up at the sky – to the stars of no avail. The child was sleeping in the bottom of the boat. And those two forces, he could almost see them advancing upon him, looming larger all the while. The drama took place in the silence of the night, without his being able to separate his feeling of tenderness from the fierce and necessary act that he meditated.

Finally, he laid his hands upon her and she awoke.

“Daddy! Daddy!”

Thinking that he was playing, she nestled her head against him and exclaimed, “The stars! The stars! O Rosa! O Rosa! O Rosa! O Rosa! Daddy, you are my friend, yes, you are….How pretty it is up there! Daddy!”

Through that pure and innocent mouth the world to which we all belong, we and the thieves of the streets, was speaking. It was too much for him. He could not go through with it. He was paralyzed with pain and horror as he listened to her and felt that little hand in his enormous ones. The thief tried to speak but the words would not come. What he had thought would be easy was impossible. It was better to kill her, but he could not. There was nothing to do but accept her fate: the squint-eyed soldier, the Old Man who waited for her with the joy of the wild beast that scents it prey near at hand and opens its frightful jaws. Slowly, he undid the cord, rowed the boat back to land, and, leaving it adrift, with the child in his arms he returned to deliver her to the fate of the alley.