

Bindweed's Lover

My dear Farina,⁸ here is something for you – not a story, but a sketch for a story. It does at least have the merit of being very brief and also historical – a human document, as they say nowadays, of some interest to you perhaps, and to all those who study the great book of the heart. I shall repeat it to you just as I heard it on the paths through the fields, in almost the same simple and picturesque words as the people use in telling it, and you certainly will prefer to find yourself face to face with the bare and unadorned fact, without having to look for it between the lines or through the writer's lens. The simple human fact will always provide food for thought. It will always have the virtue of what has actually happened, of the real tears, the fevers, the sensations that have agitated the flesh. The mysterious process by which the passions intertwine, interweave, mature, develop in their underground journey and in their often apparently contradictory comings and goings – all this will for a long time to come constitute the powerful attraction of that psychological phenomenon which is known as the theme of a story, and which modern analysis strives to follow with scientific exactitude. I shall only give you the beginning and the end of the story which I am telling you today, and for you that will suffice, and one day perhaps it will suffice for everyone.

We are those who repeat – but with a different method, more meticulous and more intimate – that artistic process to which we owe so many glorious monuments. We are willing to sacrifice the effect of the catastrophe, of the psychological outcome, glimpsed with an intuition which was almost divine by the great artists of the past, to the necessary and logical

development of the story, which thus becomes something less unexpected, less dramatic, but no less fatal. We are more modest, if not more humble, but the psychological truths which we reveal will be no less useful to the art of the future. Will we never reach such perfection in the study of the passions that it will be pointless to proceed with that study of the inner man? Will the knowledge of the human heart, the fruit of these new artistic endeavours, develop the resources of the imagination to such an extent and so generally that the only novels that will be written in the future will be *news items*?

Meanwhile it is my belief that the novel, the most complete and human of all works of art, will triumph when the attraction between all its parts and their cohesion are so perfect that the process of its creation will remain as mysterious as the development of the human passions. Then the harmony of its form will be so perfect, the sincerity of its content so obvious, its style and its *raison d'être* so inevitable, that the hand of the artist will be absolutely invisible, and the novel will bear the stamp of a real happening, and the work of art will seem to have been made by itself, to have matured and arisen spontaneously like a natural occurrence, without keeping any point of contact with its author. It will therefore not preserve in its living shape any stamp of the mind in which it germinated, any trace of the eye which glimpsed it, any hint of the lips which murmured its first words like the Creator's fiat. May it exist for its own sake, simply because it is as it must be and has to be, throbbing with life and yet as immutable as a statue in bronze whose author has had the godlike courage to be eclipsed by and disappear into his immortal work.

It is several years ago now that, down there along the River Simeto, they were hunting a brigand, a certain Bindweed, if I am not mistaken. He was as accursed as the weed which bears

his name, and his fearful fame had spread from one end of the province to the other. *Carabinieri*, soldiers, and militiamen on horseback had pursued him for two months, without ever managing to get their claws into him. He was alone, but he was worth ten men, and this evil weed was threatening to take root. In addition, harvest-time was approaching, the hay was already spread out in the fields, the ears of wheat were nodding and inviting the reapers who already had their sickles in their hands, and yet no farmer dared to poke his nose above his own hedges, for fear of encountering Bindweed stretched out in the furrows with his carbine between his legs, ready to blow the head off the first man who came to see what he was doing. And so everyone was complaining. Then the prefect called together all the officers from police headquarters, from the *carabinieri*, and the armed police, and said a few short words which were enough to make them prick up their ears. The next day it was like an earthquake everywhere. There were patrols, squads of armed men, and lookout men in every ditch and behind every low wall. They drove him before them like a savage beast through the whole province, by day, by night, on horseback, by telegraph. Bindweed slipped between their fingers, and responded with rifle shots when they were too close on his heels. In the fields, in the villages, in the farms, under the inn signs, in the meeting-places, they spoke of nothing but him, of Bindweed, of that relentless pursuit, that desperate flight. The horses of the *carabinieri* sank down, utterly worn out, all the stables were full of exhausted militiamen who had thrown themselves down there, and the patrols were asleep on their feet. Only Bindweed, he alone, was never tired, never slept, always fled, clambered over precipices, slipped through the grain, ran on all fours through the thick clumps of prickly pears, slunk away like a wolf along

the dried beds of the streams. The main topic of conversation, when people were in little groups, on doorsteps in the village, was the devouring thirst which the fugitive must be suffering from, on that immense, dried up plain, under the June sun. Idlers opened their eyes wide at the very thought.

Peppa, one of the most beautiful girls in Licodia, was at that time about to marry Finu, 'Tallow Candle', who owned land and had a bay mule in his stable, and was a tall young fellow, as bright as the sunlight, who carried the banner of St Margaret without bending his body, as upright as a pillar.

Peppa's mother used to weep with joy at her daughter's good luck, and spent her time going through the bride's trousseau in its chest, 'all white things in sets of four', fit for a queen, and Peppa had as much gold in her ears as St Margaret, and they were going to get married on St Margaret's day, which fell in June, after the hay harvest. Every evening when Tallow Candle came in from the fields, he left his mule outside Peppa's door, and came in to tell her that the crops were marvellous, if Bindweed did not set fire to them, and that the wicker basket opposite the bed would not contain all the grain from this harvest, and that it seemed to him like a thousand years before he could take his bride home on the back of his bay mule. But one fine day Peppa said to him, 'Forget your mule. I'm not going to get married.' Poor Tallow Candle was astounded, and the old woman began to tear her hair when she heard that her daughter was refusing the best match in the village. 'I love Bindweed,' the girl said to her, 'and I don't want to marry anyone but him!'

'Ah!' screamed the mother, as she ran through the house with her grey hair streaming in the wind, so that she looked like a witch. 'Ah, that demon has even got in here and bewitched my daughter!'

‘No!’ replied Peppa, with her staring eyes as hard as steel. ‘No, he’s not been here.’

‘Where did you see him then?’

‘I’ve not seen him. I’ve heard people talk about him. But listen to me! I feel him here inside me, burning me!’

In the village the matter gave rise to some talk, even though they tried to keep it dark. The women who had envied Peppa the fruitful fields, the bay mule, and the fine young man who carried the banner of St Margaret without bending his back, went around telling all sorts of nasty tales – that Bindweed visited her in the kitchen at night, and that they had seen him hidden under the bed. Peppa’s poor mother had lit a lamp for the souls in Purgatory, and even the parish priest had come to the house to touch Peppa’s heart with his stole and drive out that devil Bindweed who had taken possession of it. She however went on to say that she did not know the fellow even by sight, but she saw him in her nightly dreams, and in the morning she got up with her lips parched as if she too had experienced all the thirst which he must be suffering.

Then the old woman shut her up in the house, so that she would hear no more talk of Bindweed, and she covered up all the cracks in the door with pictures of saints. Behind the holy pictures Peppa listened to what they were saying in the street, and she kept changing colour, as if the devil were blowing all hell into her face.

Eventually she heard them say that Bindweed had been run to earth in the prickly pears at Palagonia. ‘They’ve been firing for two hours!’ they said. ‘There’s one *carabiniere* dead, and more than three militiamen wounded. But they’ve fired such a hail of bullets at him this time that they’ve found a pool of blood where he’s been.’

Then Peppa made the sign of the cross at the old woman’s

bedside, and escaped through the window.

Bindweed was among the prickly pears at Palagonia, for they had not been able to root him out from the undergrowth there, which was swarming with rabbits. There he was – ragged, covered with blood, pale from two days of hunger, burning with fever, with his carbine still levelled. When he saw her coming, resolutely, through the bushes of prickly pears, in the first light of dawn, he wondered for a moment whether he should open fire. ‘What do you want?’ he asked. ‘What have you come here for?’

‘I’ve come to be with you,’ she said to him, looking at him fixedly. ‘You are Bindweed?’

‘Yes, I am Bindweed. If you’ve come to get the reward money, you’ve made a big mistake.’

‘No, I’ve come to be with you!’ she answered.

‘Go away!’ he said. ‘You can’t stay here with me, and I don’t want anyone with me! If you’ve come looking for money, you’ve made a big mistake, I tell you. I’ve nothing. Look! For two days I haven’t even had a piece of bread.’

‘I can’t go home any more now,’ she said. ‘The road’s full of soldiers.’

‘Go away! What’s it matter to me? Everyone has to save his own skin!’

She was just turning her back, like a dog that has been driven away by kicks, when Bindweed called out, ‘Look, go and fetch me a flask of water, from the stream over there. If you want to stay with me, then you’ll have to risk your skin.’

Peppa went off without saying anything, and when Bindweed heard the rifle shots he gave a vicious laugh, and said to himself, ‘That was meant for me!’ But when he saw her reappear shortly afterwards, with the flask under her arm, well, first he threw himself at her to snatch the flask, and then when

he had drunk so much that he was almost out of breath, he asked her, 'You escaped then? How did you manage that?'

'The soldiers were on the other bank, and there were thick bushes on this side.'

'But they've pierced your skin. Are you bleeding under your clothes?'

'Yes.'

'Where are you hit?'

'In the shoulder.'

'That doesn't matter. You can walk.'

And so he let her stay with him. She followed him, with her clothes all torn, running a temperature with her wound, and without shoes. She would go to get him a flask of water or a crust of bread, and when she returned empty-handed, through the rifle fire, her lover, consumed with hunger and thirst, beat her. At last, one night when the moon was shining on the prickly pears, Bindweed said to her, 'They're coming!' And he made her lean back against the rock at the bottom of the hollow, and then fled away. Among the bushes the rifle shots came thicker and faster, and the darkness was lit up here and there with quick flashes. Suddenly Peppa heard a trampling nearby, and she saw Bindweed coming back, dragging a broken leg, and leaning against the trunks of the prickly pears to reload his carbine. 'It's over!' he told her. 'Now they've got me.' And what froze her blood more than anything was the glitter in his eyes, which made him look like a madman. Then when he fell down on the dry branches like a bundle of wood, the militiamen were on top of him in a flash.

The next day they dragged him through the streets of the village, on a cart, all ragged and bloody. The people who crowded to see him started to laugh when they saw how tiny he was, and pale and ugly, just like Mr Punch. And this was

the man for whom Peppa had left Finu, Tallow Candle! Poor Tallow Candle went and hid himself away, as if he had something to be ashamed of, and as for Peppa, they led her off between the soldiers, handcuffed, like another thief, she who had as much gold as St Margaret! Peppa's poor mother had to sell 'all the white things' of the trousseau, and the gold earrings, and the rings for her ten fingers, to pay a lawyer to represent her daughter, and then take her back into her home again, poor, sick, disgraced, as ugly now as Bindweed, and with his son in her arms. But when they gave her back to her mother, at the end of the trial, her mother said a Hail Mary, in the bare, dark guardroom, among the *carabinieri*. It seemed to the poor old woman that they were giving her a treasure, for she had nothing else, and she wept like a fountain in sheer relief. Peppa, on the other hand, seemed to have no more tears left to shed, and she said nothing, and no one saw her in the village any more, despite the fact that the two women had to go and earn their bread with their own hands. People said that Peppa had learnt her trade among the prickly pears, and that she went out at night to thieve. The truth was that she stayed in a corner of the kitchen like a wild beast. And she only came out when the old woman died of hard work, and the house had to be sold.

'Look!' said Tallow Candle, who still loved her. 'I could knock your head against the wall because of the harm you've done to yourself and other people.'

'That is true!' replied Peppa. 'I know. It was the will of God.'

When the house was sold, and those odds and ends which she still had, she went away out of the village, by night just as she had returned to it, without looking back at the roof under which she had slept for such a long time. She went away to do

the will of God in the city, with her boy, near to the prison in which Bindweed was locked up. She could see nothing but the dismal shutters on the great silent façade, and the sentries drove her away if she stood still to look to see where he might be. At last they told her that he had not been there for some time, that he had been taken away, beyond the sea, handcuffed and with the basket hanging from his neck. She said nothing. She did not move away from the city, because she did not know where to go, and there was no one waiting for her. She earned a miserable living doing jobs for the soldiers and for the warders, as though she herself were part of that great, gloomy, silent building. For the *carabinieri*, since they had captured Bindweed in the thick of the prickly pears and broken his leg with their bullets, she felt a sort of respectful tenderness, a sort of admiration of brute force. On feast-days, when she saw them with their plumes and their gleaming epaulettes, stiff as ramrods in their dress uniforms, she devoured them with her eyes, and she was always about in the barracks, sweeping the big rooms and shining the boots, so that they called her 'the *carabinieri*'s duster'. Only when she saw them fastening their weapons on when night had fallen, and going out in pairs, with their trousers rolled up, their revolvers lying against their stomachs, or when they were mounting their horses, under the street lamp which made their carbines glitter, or when she heard the trample of the horses' feet die away in the darkness, together with the rattle of their sabres, then she always went pale, and she shuddered as she closed the stable door. And when her brat was playing with the other lads on the open space in front of the prison, running between the soldiers' legs, and the other lads were shouting after him, 'Bindweed's boy, Bindweed's boy!' then she lost her temper and chased them off with stones.