

TRANSLATED
FROM THE FRENCH BYROBERT
WATERHOUSE

Trajan Grimaldi had the cares of the world upon him.

"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, during the feast, many believed on his name, beholding his signs which he did. But Jesus did not trust himself unto them, for that he knew all men, and because he needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man."

Gospel according to
St John, 2, 23-25

When, on his thirty-fifth birthday, his tyrannical mother presented him with a glossy edition of Mérimée's novel *Colomba* he sighed, locked himself in his library and set about reading, quite without enthusiasm, the book which was to change his life. Madame Grimaldi, worried when he failed to re-emerge after twelve hours, knocked on his door; but her son, reading the story for the third time without stopping, didn't bother to respond. She forced the door and, together with the petrified locksmith, discovered Trajan draped in a blanket, his eyes bulging with fever. At first she was delighted to see her lacklustre only son interested in something. But she couldn't help being struck by the obsessive manner in which he read. She feared that he was being engulfed by the madness that, tucked away in the hidden corners of Casatorra, leapt out with every second or third generation of Grimaldi. As he didn't choose either to reassure her or explain himself, she put on a plucky show of indifference.

Trajan was hypnotised by this story of the sister who pushes her brother, softened by the French way of life, into avenging their assassinated father. A large number of Grimaldis had died in an incomprehensible vendetta at the end of the nineteenth century. This banal episode had never roused in him

anything more than a vague disgust for bloodletting and a feeling of endless ennui. Suddenly he realised that he'd been blind to the truth and that he, Trajan Grimaldi, just hadn't understood the tragic sighs, the incredible lyrical beauty found in dirges of ritual butchery. Any of these dead forefathers could become fictional heroes (and what fiction, My God!) while he himself, Trajan, thought he felt the clouds of glory trailing from his disfigured ancestors settling on his shoulders. He was the last, the only Grimaldi; it was to him that fell, in this modern world devoid of tragedy, the incredible honour of recreating a destiny worthy of them all.

He left the library, went to find his mother who was quietly agonising in a room on the fifth floor, and told her resolutely: "Mother, I think it's time that I married". The old dame opened her eyes, shot up from her deathbed, dressed herself and pronounced with all the fresh energy of a lineage which is going to survive: "My dear, I've waited thirty five years to hear you say a sensible word. I'm so happy. I'll look after everything".

Following many a family caucus, and negotiations conducted with an iron fist by the old crone, a well-born young lady was plucked from Erbalunga convent to meet her future husband on



ANNA DE TAVERA, « J. F. »

the church porch. Trajan (who since military service hadn't been near a woman) put his head into top medical textbooks for hints on efficient if painful ways of effecting procreation in one session. He imbued multi-coloured potions, practised pelvic rhythm, prayed on moonless nights and in general left no stone unturned to ensure a male son and heir.

The wedding night was roundly celebrated and the young wife was too well brought up to wonder why her husband copulated chanting Hindu mantras or why he slapped her briskly four times each quarter of an hour while invoking Lucifer.

A month after the wedding night Trajan's wife told him that the mystery which had troubled her life every 28 days since she was 14, causing womb pains and soiling her underwear, was well behind schedule. A few days later she confirmed that she was pregnant. Mad with joy but quite incoherent, Trajan rushed to the church where he lit 50 candles to praise the Lord. Then he ordered his wife to take a complete rest and locked himself back in the library to re-read *Colomba*, stating expressly that he should only be disturbed to see his son. The old lady, overwhelmed with it all, went back to her fifth floor bedchamber and, picking up her agony where she had left off, died happy.

The pale new Madame Grimaldi survived a silent pregnancy in the immense, frightening castle turret. Watching her belly swell by the day she murmured words of love to her unborn child. (In his sleep, Orso heard this constant murmur from an uncertain source more distinctly than the dry words of his father).

Trajan, who hadn't noticed the time pass, was astonished to see his wife enter the library carrying a silent baby staring out at the room, its grey eyes full of boredom. He didn't even bother to ask her if it was a boy (it had to be a boy) but murmured "You must call him Orsu-Antone" before shutting the library door behind mother and child.

According to Trajan's calculations Mérimée ordained a gap of some five years between Orso-Antonio and Colomba, a difference which he respected scrupulously. Assured of fathering boy and girl when ever he chose, he had no wish to compromise his ambitions by approaching the bed of the female creature who lived under his roof. What's more, babes-in-arms, dumb, dirty and unconscious to the conjugal splendours of honour or literature, remained for a long while beings too pathetic to deserve even a brief moment stolen away from the analysis of an absolute masterpiece.

Wishing, all the same, to ensure his son had an identifiable and omnipresent ancestral lineage, he set about repairing the disaster caused by the 1903 fire which had reduced the family portraits to ashes. With the help of old parchments he punctiliously resurrected Grimaldi history. Armed with scissors and an encyclopaedia he recreated their faces, carefully searching out what information matched which grandfather. He framed everything and hung them in the Red Gallery, a prestigious if hardly truthful line-up. For good measure he placed, in a corner of the room, a photo of Prince Rainier of Monaco who – though from a minor and insignificant branch of the family – might make a good impression on the young Ors'Antone.

Colomba served marvellously to pass what remained of the four years and three months of the monastic life he had opted for. He read, reread, annotated and made commentaries on the masterpiece. When the given moment arrived he left his retreat and pushed open the door of his wife's chamber. She was sitting in a large armchair stroking the brown locks of a very handsome little boy whose grey eyes stared back at his father without curiosity. Trajan recognised his son straight away but was momentarily speechless before the old woman who smiled at him. In the end he discerned signs of youth under the white hair and the age spots speckling her hands.

He picked up Orso and shut him in the library. Then he returned and lay beside his wife on her bed. This time the prayers were in Greek and the slaps spaced at half-hourly intervals – the only serious way to conceive a girl in one go, as the sages of Samarkand and those initiated in the Mystery of Being confirm. He got dressed again and, to ensure he wasn't disturbed, he notified her there and then: "You must call her *Colomba*".

On the baby girl's birth Trajan instinctively returned to his wife's bedchamber. He waited until *Colomba* was a year old before deciding it was time to begin his son's education. He spent a moment wondering what he should do next with his wife – before deciding to banish her to the room on the fifth floor and forbid her to go anywhere near her son. In this room where the Grimaldis went to die she mused for a whole week about her son's grey eyes and made sure not to trouble her husband with the sound of wailing. Understanding that she was now seen as a bad omen, and happy to have performed her duty, she did what was expected of her. She died quietly.

However, the night of her death Trajan was woken up by an animal cry which frightened the children. He comforted them, then

climbed to the fifth floor. His wife was dead yet, finding her cold and peaceful on her bed, he could never quite believe it was she who had cried out – ending an exemplary life in such an ugly way. He preferred to think it was one of those unexplained apparitions that disturb old houses from time to time. He buried her absentmindedly.

As Colomba started to grow up, doubt followed by despair struck Trajan: his daughter had green eyes and he had given up hope that they would turn black. Even worse, she had become a striking redhead. A ginger Colomba? Impossible. It was a wicked joke. He thought back to the wedding day; suddenly a maternal uncle of his wife sprang to mind, an abominable carrot-top. Trajan laid several irreversible posthumous curses on his wife for her role in this genetic treason. Then, wounded and humiliated, he courageously chose to carry on with his mission and salvage what he could of it.

He brought up Orso as a lord, reciting stories of ancient vendettas, exalting in the boundless cruelties and the unbending sense of honour. Colomba, who listened in, could not stop herself from sniggering. Trajan, furious, swore that noble behaviour still had its place in this desperately dull and unordered world. He gloried in the island's bloodiest memories, claiming that death was nobility's own backdrop – but he was always up against a snigger and a blank wall of two grey eyes.

The more Orso grew, the more he turned in on himself. As for Colomba, far from becoming the wild avenger of his dreams, she was the image of insouciance. Trajan told them incessantly about people's evil ways, giving them to understand that one day something bad would happen to him and that they, his children, would be the only ones able to revenge him. He taught them to use arms.

Around his fifteenth year, Orso shamelessly picked as his companion the grandson of a tenant farmer, Marc-André Desanti, with whom he should never even have stooped to say a word. They spent their time in the drawing room at Casatorra smoking and chatting without paying the slightest attention to the furious looks of Trajan, who became more and more disillusioned. Orso never left the château. It was unbelievable that he had made such a friendship. However, one fine day Marco had knocked on the door and found himself face to face with a splendid little green-eyed redhead who scornfully looked him up and down. "I've come to see Orso" he explained, trying not to put any other kind of meaning into his words. She stood aside to let him enter and pointed to a stone staircase which would have scared an experienced alpine climber. Marc-André was

dismayed. He rubbed his eyes and entered into a dusty, grandiose universe whose stone walls were covered with a weird collection of objects – surprising curios, rusty old implements, wild-boar heads with red glass eyes, lanterns, assorted arms and stuff you couldn't really say what it was. He started up the staircase. There were no landings. You stepped from the stairs into a series of adjoining rooms on each floor which eventually brought you back to your point of departure in full circle.

Marco found himself in a huge kitchen with baked earth ranges, junked mattresses, rugs, a posse of cats surrounding a fluorescent aquarium, a tapestry of shrivelled love letters, a skull and some reproduction Greek statues. Finally, on the third floor, he came across Ors'Antone smoking, eyes closed, listening to music, wallowing on a sofa deep as the sea, surrounded by a mountain of books whose musty scent perfumed the room.

"This", Ors said without opening his eyes, "is the library. It also serves as a place to smoke and listen to music".

He opened his eyes.

"I find it preferable to my own room. This is my floor, by the way. My sister lives above me. The two floors below are my father's chambers. We don't use the top floor. I'll show it to you."

Marc-André followed him through into another room.

"Lounge, ancestors' gallery" Orso explained magnanimously.

The room had a clavichord, a grand piano, some red wall-hangings and a string of portraits tracing the decline and fall of the Grimaldis from 1328 to modern times. The founding father was an old fogey who greedily fixed his vicious eyes on you. Marc-André struggled to take in the particular oddities of this peculiar group. Above a leather plaque bearing the label "Don Antonio Grimaldi (1401-1455)" sat a portrait of Gilles de Rais; Giacomo Casanova appeared as Don Giovanni Grimaldi (1740-1769) and his wife was none other than the Marquise de Brinvilliers; Marshal Ney had been renamed Jean-Jacques Grimaldi (1758-1815). A few months later Marc-André was cured of his naivety. Coming across a photo of Nietzsche, he asked his teacher why Orso's great-grandfather featured in a philosophy manual aimed at Upper Six A. Ejected humiliatingly from the classroom for such insolence, he was soon joined by a pitiful Orso who owned up to the faking.

He explained that the real Grimaldi portraits had been destroyed in a fire of the early 1900s. His father, who organised the new gallery, had in fact shown intellectual honesty in selecting historical characters sharing points in common with his ancestors. Don Antonio had the same annoying habits as Joan of Arc's ill-fated companion, and moreover met the same tragic end; Don Giovanni fucked everything in sight; and Jean-Jacques was known for his reckless temperament – he was cut to ribbons by an English battalion he charged single-handed at Waterloo. As for his great-grandfather, Orso confessed that although he had never written anything he was very intelligent and completely cuckoo.

Their friendship survived such deceptions as well as general boredom. Trajan became wild with anger, all the more so because he could not fail to notice Colomba's shameless behaviour: when the boys talked together she sat close to them both and fixed Marc-André with a quite perverse expression of total love. As time went by, Trajan realised that this little good-for-nothing of a Desanti ogled her without any regard for her status. It wasn't hard to see what would happen next. Trajan wept with rage and dreamed of a perfect world where mankind engendered beings lacking the immodest orifices that bring dishonour to a family.

He was never to know that, some years later, his son would have the same disembodied, arrogant dream in several close variants. Misled by the deadly strength of love, Orso's mind strayed into a forest of monstrous phalluses, almost engulfed at each step by fields of gaping vaginas. He also dreamed of widespread castration and of legs lissom like those of dolls. Or else, cogitating the copulation which shook the earth each second, he saw all love as petty and contemptible, lying to himself though he knew only too well that such theoretical considerations weren't borne out by his feelings. Love's strength was definitively manifested in universal jealousy. He was jealous of any man who knew how to penetrate a woman, or for that matter a cow or a torn mattress, with his phallus. Rediscovering the myth of Aristophanes in a cranky locksmith's manual he dreamt of sexual organs so complex that a man couldn't couple with just one woman – apart from certain exceptional men, among them himself, who possessed digits like master-keys. But all that Trajan was never to know.

Worn out by his son's defiance, anxious and drained from searching his daughter's face for the appalling happiness which would indicate her downfall, he wasted away alone and miserable in

his chamber. What sense did the world make? He never thought through the inevitable result of his fears and was unaware that this frightening love he saw forming before his eyes would be sealed by a sad copulation spree which remained with Marc-André as an unpleasant memory and an immeasurable feeling of loss.

As a final ploy, Trafan offered his son his beloved novel for his seventeenth birthday. Two days later he went back to Orso's room trembling with anticipation.

"What do you think of it, my son?"

"It's shitty", replied the young man.

Knocked to the ground by a monumental slap which took him quite by surprise, he tried to protect his face from the hail of kicks delivered by his father.

Orso saw him for the last time the day Trajan died. The father had left his bedchamber stealthily, hoping to make the son – who must by now understand his mistakes – relent. He got to the library just as Orso was mounting the young woman who came to clean at Casatorra every Wednesday. Trajan said nothing. He passed his hand in front of his son's empty eyes and realised he had no chance of success. He would have wished to remain a little longer, but that was impossible. His son must, finally, realise his own ambitions.

Trajan took his hunting rifle, stopped at the village café he'd never entered before, explained that he was out walking with a gun because he feared for his life, and left for the maquis.

He sat down on a sunken path, taking from his pocket the notebook in which he planned to write the name of his imaginary assassin in his own blood (detail borrowed from Mérimée which would be bound to make his wastrel son boil with revenge). Then, believing that belly wounds would leave a dying man time to write a few words, he discharged a round of buckshot. Bad luck pursued him to the end: he expired on the spot.

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