

The Smallest Woman in the World

In the depths of equatorial Africa the French explorer, Marcel Pretre, hunter and man of the world, came across a tribe of pygmies of surprising minuteness. He was even more surprised, however, to learn that an even smaller race existed far beyond the forests. So he traveled more deeply into the jungle.

In the Central Congo he discovered, in fact, the smallest pygmies in the world. And—like a box inside another box, inside yet another box—among the smallest pygmies in the world, he found the smallest of the smallest pygmies in the world, answering, perhaps, to the need that Nature sometimes feels to surpass herself.

Among the mosquitoes and the trees moist with humidity, among the luxuriant vegetation of the most indolent green, Marcel Pretre came face to face with a woman no more than forty-five centimeters tall, mature, black, and silent. "As black as a monkey," he would inform the newspapers, and she lived at the top of a tree with her little mate. In the warm humidity of the forest, which matured the fruits quickly and gave them an unbearably sweet taste, she was pregnant. Meanwhile there she stood, the smallest woman in the world. For a second, in the drone of the jungle heat, it was as if the Frenchman had unexpectedly arrived at the end of the line. Certainly, it was only because he was sane that he managed to keep his head and not lose control. Sensing a sudden need to restore order, and to give a name to what exists, he called her Little Flower. And, in order to be able to classify her among the identifiable realities, he immediately began to gather data about her.

Her race is slowly being exterminated. Few human examples remain of their species which, were it not for the subtle dangers of Africa, would be a widely scattered race.

Excluding disease, the polluted air of its rivers, deficiencies of food, and wild beasts on the prowl, the greatest hazard for the few remaining Likoualas are the savage Bantus, a threat which surrounds them in the silent air as on the morning of battle. The Bantus pursue them with nets as they pursue monkeys. And they eat them. Just like that: they pursue them with nets and eat them. So this race of tiny people went on retreating and retreating until it finally settled in the heart of Africa where the fortunate explorer was to discover them. As a strategic defense, they live in the highest trees. The women come down in order to cook maize, grind mandioca, and gather green vegetables; the men to hunt. When a child is born, he is given his freedom almost at once. Often, one must concede, the child does not enjoy his freedom for long among the wild beasts of the jungle, but, at least, he cannot complain that for such a short

life the labor had been long. Even the language that the child learns is short and simple, consisting only of the essentials. The Likoualas use few names and they refer to things by gestures and animal noises. As a spiritual enhancement, he possesses his drum. While they dance to the sound of the drum, a tiny male keeps watch for the Bantus, who appear from heaven knows where.

This, then, was how the explorer discovered at his feet the smallest human creature that exists. His heart pounded, for surely no emerald is so rare. Not even the teachings of the Indian sages are so rare, and even the richest man in the world has not witnessed such strange charm. There, before his eyes, stood a woman such as the delights of the most exquisite dream had never equaled. It was then that the explorer timidly pronounced with a delicacy of feeling of which even his wife would never have believed him capable, "You are Little Flower."

At that moment, Little Flower scratched herself where one never scratches oneself. The explorer—as if he were receiving the highest prize of chastity to which man, always so full of ideals, dare aspire—the explorer who has so much experience of life, turned away his eyes.

The photograph of Little Flower was published in the color supplement of the Sunday newspapers, where she was reproduced life size. She appeared wrapped in a shawl, with her belly in an advanced stage. Her nose was flat, her face black, her eyes deep-set, and her feet splayed. She looked just like a dog.

That same Sunday, in an apartment, a woman, glancing at the picture of Little Flower in the open newspaper, did not care to look a second time, "because it distresses me."

In another apartment, a woman felt such a perverse tenderness for the daintiness of the African woman that—prevention being better than cure—Little Flower should never be left alone with the tenderness of that woman. Who knows to what darkness of love her affection might extend. The woman passed

a troubled day, overcome, one might say, by desire. Besides, it was spring and there was a dangerous longing in the air.

In another house, a little five-year-old girl, upon seeing Little Flower's picture and listening to the comments of her parents, became frightened. In that house of adults, this little girl had been, until now, the smallest of human beings. And, if this was the source of the nicest endearments, it was also the source of that first fear of tyrannical love. The existence of Little Flower caused the little girl to feel—with a vagueness which only many years later, and, for quite different reasons, she was to experience as a concrete thought—caused her to feel with premature awareness, that "misfortune knows no limits."

In another house, in the consecration of spring, a young girl about to be married burst out compassionately, "Mother, look at her picture, poor little thing! Just look at her sad expression!"

"Yes," replied the girl's mother—hard, defeated, and proud—"but that is the sadness of an animal, not of a human."

"Oh Mother!" the girl protested in despair.

It was in another house that a bright child had a bright idea.

"Mummy, what if I were to put this tiny woman in little Paul's bed while he is sleeping? When he wakes up, what a fright he'll get, eh? What a din he'll make when he finds her sitting up in bed beside him! And then we could play with her! We could make her our toy, eh!"

His mother, at that moment, was rolling her hair in front of the bathroom mirror, and she remembered what the cook had told her about her time as an orphan. Not having any dolls to play with, and maternal feelings already stirring furiously in their hearts, some deceitful girls in the orphanage had concealed from the nun in charge the death of one of their companions. They kept her body in a cupboard until Sister went out, and then they played with the dead girl, bathing her and feeding her little tidbits, and they punished her only to be able to kiss and comfort her afterward.

The mother recalled this in the bathroom and she lowered her awkward hands, full of hairpins. And she considered the cruel necessity of loving. She considered the malignity of our desire to be happy. She considered the ferocity with which we want to play. And the number of times when we murder for love. She then looked at her mischievous son as if she were looking at a dangerous stranger. And she was horrified at her own soul, which, more than her body, had engendered that being so apt for life and happiness. And thus she looked at him, attentively and with uneasy pride, her child already without two front teeth, his evolution, his evolution under way, his teeth falling out to make room for those which bite best. "I must buy him a new suit," she decided, looking at him intently. She obstinately dressed up her toothless child in fancy clothes, and obstinately insisted upon keeping him clean and tidy, as if cleanliness might give emphasis to a tranquilizing superficiality, obstinately perfecting the polite aspect of beauty. Obstinate removing herself, and removing him from something which must be as "black as a monkey." Then, looking into the bathroom mirror, the mother smiled, intentionally refined and polished, placing between that face of hers of abstract lines and the raw face of Little Flower, the insuperable distance of millenia. But with years of experience she knew that this would be a Sunday on which she would have to conceal from herself her anxiety, her dream, and the lost millenia.

In another house, against a wall, they set about the exciting business of calculating with a measuring tape the forty-five centimeters of Little Flower. And as they enjoyed themselves they made a startling discovery: she was even smaller than the most penetrating imagination could ever have invented. In the heart of each member of the family there arose the gnawing desire to possess that minute and indomitable thing for himself, that thing which had been saved from being devoured, that enduring fount of charity. The eager soul of that family

was roused to dedication. And, indeed, who has not wanted to possess a human being just for himself? A thing, it is true, which would not always be convenient, for there are moments when one would choose not to have sentiments.

"I'll bet you if she lived here we would finish up quarreling," said the father, seated in his armchair, firmly turning the pages of the newspaper. "In this house everything finishes up with a quarrel."

"You are always such a pessimist, José," said the mother.

"Mother, can you imagine how tiny her little child will be?" their oldest girl, thirteen, asked intensely.

The father fidgeted behind his newspaper.

"It must be the smallest black baby in the world," replied the mother, melting with pleasure. "Just imagine her waiting on table here in the house! And with her swollen little belly."

"That's enough of that rubbish!" muttered the father, annoyed.

"You must admit," said the mother, unexpectedly peeved, "that the thing is unique. You are the one who is insensitive."

And what about the unique thing itself?

Meanwhile, in Africa, the unique thing itself felt in its heart—perhaps also black, because one can no longer have confidence in a Nature that had already blundered once—meanwhile the unique thing itself felt in its heart something still more rare, rather like the secret of its own secret: a minute child. Methodically, the explorer examined with his gaze the belly of the smallest mature human being. It was at that moment that the explorer, for the first time since he had known her—instead of experiencing curiosity, enthusiasm, a sense of triumph, or the excitement of discovery—felt distinctly ill at ease.

The fact is that the smallest woman in the world was smiling. She was smiling and warm, warm. Little Flower was enjoying herself. The unique thing itself was enjoying the ineffable sen-

sation of not having been devoured yet. Not to have been devoured was something which at other times gave her the sudden impulse to leap from branch to branch. But at this tranquil moment, among the dense undergrowth of the Central Congo, she was not applying that impulse to an action—and the impulse concentrated itself completely in the very smallness of the unique thing itself. And suddenly she was smiling. It was a smile that only someone who does not speak can smile. A smile that the uncomfortable explorer did not succeed in classifying. And she went on enjoying her own gentle smile, she who was not being devoured. Not to be devoured is the most perfect sentiment. Not to be devoured is the secret objective of a whole existence. While she was not being devoured, her animal smile was as delicate as happiness. The explorer felt disconcerted.

In the second place, if the unique thing itself was smiling it was because, inside her minute body, a great darkness had started to stir.

It is that the unique thing itself felt her breast warm with that which might be called love. She loved that yellow explorer. If she knew how to speak and should say that she loved him, he would swell with pride. Pride that would diminish when she should add that she also adored the explorer's ring and his boots. And when he became deflated with disappointment, Little Flower would fail to understand. Because, not even remotely, would her love for the explorer—one can even say her "deep love," because without other resources she was reduced to depth—since not even remotely would her deep love for the explorer lose its value because she also loved his boots. There is an old misunderstanding about the word "love," and if many children are born on account of that mistake, many others have lost the unique instant of birth simply on account of a susceptibility which exacts that it should be me, me that should be loved and not my money. But in the humidity of the jungle, there do not exist these cruel refinements; love is not to be de-

voured, love is to find boots pretty, love is to like the strange color of a man who is not black, love is to smile out of love at a ring that shines. Little Flower blinked with love and smiled, warm, small, pregnant, and warm.

The explorer tried to smile back at her, without knowing exactly to which charm his smile was replying, and then became disturbed as only a full-grown man becomes disturbed. He tried to conceal his uneasiness, by adjusting his helmet on his head, and he blushed with embarrassment. He turned a pretty color, his own, greenish pink hue, like that of a lime in the morning light. He must be sour.

It was probably upon adjusting his symbolic helmet that the explorer called himself to order, returned severely to the discipline of work, and resumed taking notes. He had learned to understand some of the few words articulated by the tribe and to interpret their signs. He was already able to ask questions.

Little Flower answered "yes." That it was very nice to have a tree in which to live by herself, all by herself. Because—and this she did not say, but her eyes became so dark that they said it—because it is nice to possess, so nice to possess. The explorer blinked several times.

Marcel Pretre experienced a few difficult moments trying to control himself. But at least he was kept occupied in taking notes. Anyone not taking notes had to get along as best he could.

"Well, it just goes to show," an old woman suddenly exclaimed, folding her newspaper with determination, "it just goes to show. I'll say one thing though—God knows what He's about."