



Manfred von Pentz

THE
CRIMSON
GODDESS

In a few Words

“I wish to surrender myself with some circumstance!”

These are Gemma’s words when she finally gives in to a tempestuous courtship set against the looming *Spanish Civil War*, a monumental fratricide that nearly smothers the two lovers on the eve of its eruption. The drama has some magical ingredients: a tiny travelling circus, its spirited director, a shaggy big bear, ponies, a somewhat quixotic young knight, the aforementioned mysterious and ravishing redhead who dances on a high wire, plus occasions that reach from the hilarious to the hideous.

It is also a chilling reminder of what can happen when two segments of a society refuse to reach out over an ever widening abyss.

The Crimson Goddess Synopsis

1936 - a year of dark omen. Laurin O’Leary, a young Irishman from County Kildare, has landed himself in a massive emotional calamity and is persuaded to absolve his obligatory *Grand Tour* as the most convenient means of escape. He roams across the Continent, arrives in Italy and boards a steamer to Republican Spain, there to visit distant relatives and to see the country’s fabled treasures. He makes landfall in Barcelona and lodges in the house of an old classmate, son of the US consul, who accompanies him during an exploration of the vibrant city. Rather unexpectedly he gets embroiled in two erotic adventures, one bizarre, the other melancholic in essence, and both disappointing, since he finds himself still a virgin at their conclusion. On the eve of his departure for Madrid a hideous incident sets in motion the novel’s underlying theme, namely a relentless deterioration of his placid bourgeois attitudes, brought about by events that will lead him through never imagined heights and depths of emotion. In other words, his *Grand Tour* is not only a sensual excursion, but also a spiritual quest that will take him eventually to the outmost confines of human perception. Meanwhile the said incident, two murdered nuns and a priest, provide him with a chilling apprehension of Spain’s explosive political situation. Against this background he continues his journey and meets an illiterate peasant who invites him to his village with the shrewd intention to have him read the subtitles of a film screened the same evening by an ambulant cinema operator. For Laurin the experience is both hilarious and profound. While he tries acoustically to impersonate the various characters, from an unruly toddler to a voluptuous peroxide blonde, he also receives a first-hand insight into the life of Spain’s poorest and most abused social class. On the road again, he walks all day and passes the night by a river.

The following morning he accidentally surprises a lovely girl with flaming red hair as she washes herself in the shallow water. While both behold each other, a synchrony of feeling ignites their young hearts. But for irrational reasons that reach deep into his past, Laurin’s reading of the meeting is utterly confused. He recoils and flees to Granada. There he finds the Alhambra closed because of maintenance works, a fact that darkens his

distraught mood even more. In a pub of doubtful repute he meets a handicapped girl with an intense and compelling demeanour. After hearing his lament, she mentions a friend who works in the Alhambra's gardens and is not averse to a bribe. They visit him the same night, and as a result Laurin and his improbable guide explore the enchanted place and its silent splendour, accompanied only by a full moon that has just risen above the castle's ramparts. A more personal dialogue makes the girl realize what kind of demons beset her protégé. When she tells him of her intimations, he refuses at first to believe her, yet in the end cannot but agree: *Love has overwhelmed him with frightful vehemence!*

The next day he retracts his steps, finds sufficient clues by the river and so comes finally upon the *Circo Pavone*, a tiny travelling circus that consists of a bear, two horses, four ponies and seven artists, the latter including his red-haired girl from the river whose name is *Gemma*. During their first meeting she treats the tall stranger with cold reserve, but a calamity enables him to undermine her defences. Circo Pavone's bear, deeply beloved by the girl, suffers from a bad infection. Laurin's father, a country doctor and surgeon, has taught his son a few basic feats of the medical trade, and with a scary operation Laurin manages to save the huge animal. This is the first cross on his Calvary to Gemma's heart. More are to follow, each with a different flavour: excruciating, amusing, revolting, immensely beautiful, numinous. Under the novel's surface hides furthermore a fine array of archetypes, intentional ambiguities, ancient lore and mythological allusions whose roots are deeply embedded in our great European culture. If this passes undetected, the story's basic drive will remain unchanged, but may imbue the casual reader with a touch of subconscious fascination. As for the young lovers, they celebrate their physical and spiritual union during a sublime midsummer night that mysteriously unties the bonds of space and time. For the next two weeks they are suffused in guileless joy, but meanwhile Spain's political situation has continued to worsen, and one morning the distant thunder of heavy guns augurs a catastrophe everyone has dreaded: the beginning of a civil war that will eventually turn into a monumental fratricide. The company, and above all the Circus' spirited director, Don Rocco, are fully aware of the consequences if caught in the quickly accelerating maelstrom. Should the Circus fall into the hands of the combatants, no matter if Republican or Nationalist, the men will be conscripted, the animals eaten, the women molested or chased away. It is therefore decided to hide in the hills and, at the first opportunity that presents itself, to escape into the general direction of Portugal. In a deserted monastery the company finds shelter, but an unforeseen twist of events has Gemma and Laurin trapped in a sideshow of the war.

What happens next is the story's dramatic culmination. Laurin stumbles accidentally upon a band of crazed and superstitious villagers led by a false priest who accuses him of communing with the devil. Shackled and tortured, he is served with a ghastly example of what awaits those that succumb to a lawless and godless tyranny. Saved first by Gemma and the bear, then by a unit of Republican militia, his humanity put to the final test in an encounter that provokes a cataclysm of Biblical dimensions. As a result he is forced to choose sides and does so by unequivocally endorsing the Nationalist-Christian cause.

Thereafter the tale mellows and ends with Gemma's and Laurin's betrothal, an exquisite little feast supervised by a real priest that takes place under a huge tree on a small hill with an unimpeded view of southern Portugal's gently rolling fields and the sky beyond.