



Two Lives and a Dream

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“An Obscure Man,” the first of two connected stories, begins in Amsterdam “at the time of Rembrandt.” The protagonist, Nathaniel, is a young man of no real education but enormous good will, who undergoes a variety of adventures that manage to teach him, in his gentle simplicity, the whole range of the human condition. He sails to various ports working on a ship, travels to the islands near Nova Scotia, where he is shipwrecked, then eventually returns to The Netherlands to suffer an unfortunate marriage. Later he comes to serve in the house of a nobleman. Nathanael finally dies of illness while guarding an island home that belongs to his master. His growing self-awareness makes up the real theme of this brilliantly rendered account, reminiscent of the subtleties of Gustave Flaubert, to whose work the author’s has often been compared.

“A Lovely Morning,” a short story, provides a brief glimpse of Nathanael’s young son, who decided to join a troupe of actors to perform in William Shakespeare’s plays. “Anna Soro...”, the novella which concludes his collection, chronicles with superb atmosphere and style the briefly consummated, incestuous relationship between Don Miquel and his beautiful sister Anna. Their passion is intuited by their mother, who tacitly acknowledges her understanding at her death. Their love causes a permanent estrangement from their cruel and unyielding father, himself a prey to strong passions. The story is set in the Baroque period in Italy, and the emotions portrayed are operatic in intensity yet described with a restraint and elegance that represent the highest reach of the storyteller’s art.

All the experiences recounted in these three tales, Yourcenar would seem to suggest, represent a part of the potential of human experience. They can be understood, condoned, forgiven. The translation serves the original French text very well. The book reaches the same level as several earlier well-respected works of the author, such as MEMOIRS OF HADRIAN and COUP DE GRACE, which have given her an enduring reputation.

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