

The God of Small Things

Short Story by S.P. Belov



A small group of “cosmopolitan” explorers laughingly climbed the sloping hills of the Summer Palace, or summer resident near Peking, of the former Emperor of the Celestial Empire. The rolling hills sprinkled with all kinds of temples, palaces and elegant pagodas piercing the green of the trees and the blue of the sky; winding paths with arched bridges and, in the foothills—the magnificent Summer Palace, were the enchanting exploration ground for visitors and tourists. So this small group was “discovering” Peking.

As usual, the Americans were in the lead. Nancy Hall climbed with the easy grace of an athlete. Her golden hair waved in the light breeze from the lake. Her blue-grey eyes looked at everything with frank curiosity, friendliness and animation. Even the few freckles on the bridge of her slightly turn-up nose only increased her allure.

Side by side, and definitely affected by her, Frank Webber struggled up rather clumsily. Frank did not have a too prepossessing mien – not one to touch girls’ hearts in general, or Nancy’s in particular. Dressed with too studied casualness, he cultivated gold-rimmed glasses which gave a scholastic appearance to his otherwise nondescript personality.

Right behind Nancy, nonchalantly and effortlessly, ascended the graceful figure of Baron Rene de Rouffe, a favorite of capricious Dame Fortune of the “monde” and sporting “demi-monde” of Shanghai. His appearance was one of deliberately exaggerated elegance, slightly too supercilious, slightly too arrogant. Unlike Frank, who instead of watching the magnificent view before him, was absorbed in the contemplation of Nancy’s eyes and those adorable freckles. Baron Rene concentrated his attention on her hips and on the graceful shapely legs, glimpsed through her light skirt, when the sun’s rays obligingly outlined their alluring contours for him. Oh, well, he was a true son of his country.

Next to him, and a little apart, a youngish Dutch chemist, Sept Van Daning, climbed pensively. Slightly built, but lithe and sure in his movements, he stepped lightly from one stone to another, absorbed in the enchanting view before him.

At the rear, impervious to the heat and the steep ascent, a tall monk moved quietly in black robes with a gold dross on a golden chain hanging on his breast. Father Nathaniel was a priest of the Russian Orthodox Mission near Peking. Formally an officer of a crack cavalry unit in the Russian White Army, a man of great culture and considerable musical talent, after the tribulation and anguish of the Russian Civil War, he had deliberately cut all his ties with the world, entered the Monastery in Peking and, with time, had become one of the outstanding

spiritual leaders among the Russians in China, and also one of the outstanding specialists in Chinese history and religion, and of the environments of Peking. As a courtesy to his Dutch friend, Van Daning, he had agreed to guide the little group around Peking and the Summer Palace. Speaking several languages fluently, he could switch effortlessly from one to another. He, too, watched Nancy. He did not have to watch the beautiful panorama – he knew it by heart – but he admired the golden nimbus about her head when the sun’s rays, passing through her hair, crowned her with miraculously golden light. Actually, he did not see an American girl, Nancy Hall, but an early martyr defying the enemies of Christ, and receiving the halo of martyrdom and sanctity for her pain.

After having inspected all the “musts” of Peking and the Summer Palace itself, Father Nathaniel wanted to show the group some of the ancient temples, once beautifully quaint, now neglected and in ruins.

During the Boxer uprising at the end of the previous century, Peking had been occupied by the forces of the Great Powers—Russia, Germany, France and England. According to rumors among the troops of all these nationalities, the statues of the ancient Chinese gods, enshrined in their temples, held hidden precious stones of great value. Consequently, all the temples around Peking had been thoroughly ransacked, the statues of the gods had been wrenched from their altars and demolished in the search for the supposedly hidden treasures. Not finding any, the soldiers felt cheated and expressed their feelings by wrecking and destroying the temples. Then the revolution came, and the new Chinese rulers never bothered to restore their ancient gods, permitting the temples and the gods alike to fall into decay.

The “explorers” had already visited several temples of interest where they found one and the same picture—cracked walls, caved-in roofs, dust and shame. For over thirty years the gods of China had been lying in the dust, dispossessed, forgotten and neglected.

At last the group reached the top of the hill and stopped before a small temple at the end of a tiny plateau, covered with wild flowers, vines, and shrubs. The small temple was perched picturesquely nearly over the steep precipice. As usual it was in bad shape. Half of the roof had fallen in long before. The rest was ready to cave in at any moment. The slanting rays of the low sun, passing through the innumerable cracks in the walls and the roof, painted a moving pattern upon the dusty floor. In the middle of the temple its altar stood lost under the cheerfully green leaves of the climbing ivy. At the noise of the approaching party a pair of lizards glided swiftly into the sanctuary of the crumbling walls.

Nancy entered first, took several steps, and stopped. The rest filed in.

Baron Rene walked to the farthest corner of the temple, squinted at the object on the floor, wrinkled his delicate nose and, in mock despair, turned to the monk.

“Mon pere, who is this funny looking blighter?” and with the tip of his elegant shoe,

Baron Rene prodded a small, badly damaged god, turning the figure over.

It was surprising how well the face of the god on the floor had been preserved. Father Nathaniel answered from the threshold, even without looking at the object. He had known this god only too well.



Photo of Ten Thousand Buddhas Temple behind the hill in The Summer Palace

“Mon che Baron, his is the God of Small Things. That is why his temple is so small and in this far-away part of the Summer Palace grounds.”

Driven by a strange curiosity, Nancy and Van Daning went and leaned over the fallen god. He was not much to look at—just a funny, little figure. Van Daning turned away and went to a big crack in the wall and gazed through it at the graceful pagoda of the Ten Thousand Buddhas way below. After a long look, Nancy turned to Frank.

“Oh, I don’t know, but I’m sorry for him. Some time ago he was a real god, was he not? Worshipped and all that? And now look at him. What a shameful end.”

“Now, now, chere Nancee, “Baron Rene remonstrated. “You are a Christian, are you not? You should not be sorry for this block. It is an idol, a piece of clay a what-not. Is it not so, mon pere?”

The tall monk looked at him and in his quiet blue eyes, the eyes of a man from the “Other World,” a shadow passed.

“It depends on the point of view, mon chere Baron, the point of view of Christ, or the Church?”

“But is it not the same?” queried the surprised Baron.

“Not at all times, and not in all places. The great tolerance of Christ has not always been observed by his servants.”

“My, my,” Frank cut in, “we are late as it is. Come on, folks. Let us move on or we will be too late for our dinner.”

Nancy looked again at the dusty statue on the dirty floor and, bending slightly, left the temple through the big crack in the wall. Baron Rene took note again of the fluid motion of her streamlined hips.

Van Daning was still absorbed in his thoughts and, when he started to leave the palace in his turn, he too looked once more at the fallen god. As if compelled by some unaccountable whimsical impulse, he crossed the floor rapidly, picked up the statue, placed it back on its altar and, with his handkerchief, wiped the face of the God of Small Things. He started to follow the rest of the party, tripped slightly over a small chunk of something and turned his head to see what it was. At this moment the slanting rays of the setting sun, slipping in through one of the numerous chinks, fell on the face of the statue, illuminating it and giving it a new expression. Naturally it was a delusion, but it seemed to Van Daning that the lips of the god were smiling. He frowned and gave the statue another careful and searching look. The smile was gone, but the funny face of the god looked severe and mischievous at the same time.

“I have to do something about my nerves. I’m starting to see things in broad daylight. Van Daning said aloud and without even looking at the temple, he hurried to rejoin his party.

It was a mild Shanghai autumn, about two years or so later, when Van Daning was proceeding leisurely along the crowded Nanking Road up toward the Bund. He liked Shanghai with its hustle and its bustle, its cosmopolitan, noisy crowd; excited Chinese, always in a hurry; reserved Westerners, well-dressed, self-assured and unhurried. He liked to watch cars and rickshaws rolling by in one big continuous stream. He was well satisfied with himself, with his life and, as usual, was strolling toward the Palace Hotel for his habitual five o’clock tea.

“Eh, bien, mon cher Van Daneeng!” a disembodied voice called from the crowd.

Van Daning stopped, surprised, and after nearly being knocked down by several rushing Chinese, spotted Baron Rene de Rouffe waving at him from the steps of Whiteway & Laidlaw. He was glad to see the volatile Frenchman.

Baron Rene shook his hand warmly, and bombarded him with questions:

“Comment allez vous, mon cher Van Daneeng? Where do you go now?”

“Thanks, cher Baron. I’m fine, and I’m going to the Palace Hotel for a martini and a cup of tea.”

“Bien! I go with you, yes?”

“I would be glad to have your company. Come with me and let’s have a talk. Where have you been all this time?”

“Oh, I had to travel. Business, vous savez! But lately I’ve been staying mostly home.”

Van Daning inspected the still immaculate person of Baron Rene. He was elegant as usual, but at the same time there was something different, something unhealthy in his appearance. The former natural arrogance was gone, having been replaced by some kind of artificial gaiety. His skin looked unhealthy, too. The corner of his mouth had a tired bitter droop. Van Daning tried to describe the Baron to himself in one word and automatically, the word “dejected” flashed through his mind. Yes—there was something dejected in the Barron’s whole appearance.

Soon they were sitting at a specially reserved, snug table by the famous Palace Hotel window.

“Well, dear Baron, how is everything with you? Van Daning asked his long-lost friend, after ordering martinis to begin with, and then some tea with an appropriate snack.

Baron Rene leaned against the back of his chair and closed his eyes. He looked tired. After a pause he opened his eyes again, picked up his martini and drained it in one gulp.

“Well in general, I cannot complain. Nothing is really wrong. But at the same time, I am not too well, either. You know, small annoying things keep cropping up all the time. Things like eating a nice lobster, and then getting poisoned slightly; like walking about my own home, tripping and having my ankle strained; or my number one boy running off with my favorite gold cigarette case and cuff link. Oh, so many really insignificant things like that. But popping up constantly, they can make life miserable. Well, enough about myself. How is everything with you?”

Van Daning caught the eye of his serving boy for another round of drinks and, for a second, looked abstractedly through the lofty window at the jolly, jostling human stream passing by below. Sipping his cool martini contentedly, he answered the question:

“I cannot complain, either. I would not say that I have done anything big, really. No. But, at the same time, I am satisfied with things as they are now. You know, a small thing here, a small contract there, a little article in the “North China Daily News” about my new chemical process landed me a nice few customers, not too many, but steady ones. They are bringing more.

That give me a nice income. Like most of us, I like to make occasional bets on horses and at the Canidrome. Funny, but I've been rather lucky with my small bets. Yes, I have been quite lucky. No complaints. I don't bet high but, you know, these small bets help a lot, too"

Van Daning picked up his fork and started to trace the pattern of the tablecloth. A new thought came to him. He raised his head and, looking at the tired face of the Baron said:

"You know, the really big things seldom, if ever, happen in our lives - but the small, insignificant ones that happen every day - they really are important for they can make us, or they can break us."

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