

The Avaricious President

By Gerasimos Stergiou

Summer 1978 Samarina, Greece. Samarina is an old place with long history and significant culture. It is a village on the mountain chain 'Pindos' at the west part of Greece the so called 'Epirus'. It is at a high altitude from the sea level and consists of luxuriant greenery and vegetation. The fragrance of the mallow and the oregano is interwoven with the life of the people there. Most of the houses are made of hewn stone and are built with the same architectural structure. They are high-ceilinged and surrounded by paved yards. Climbing plants branch out on the stony walls and give a distinguished beauty to each one of the houses.

Those times, the bigger house you had the more aristocrat and rich you were. Furthermore, the more rich you were the more consideration you received by the others. Such a mansion belonged to Marialena, the daughter of Konstantis who used to be the richest man of the village. However, he was ill-fated, as during the birth of his third child he lost his wife and he was left alone to raise Marialena, who was the oldest, her sister Thaleia, and her brother Leuteris who was the youngest of the three. As years passed by, the children were growing up in their father's care until one day lightning killed Konstantis while he was working at the fields. Then, sorrow overcame the family and especially Marialena who, from then onwards, would be responsible for the care of the household and for the growth of her brother and sister.

Marialena was a strapping woman, with red chubby cheeks as most women in such mountainous places were because of the climatic conditions and the abundant oxygen. She was also well-mannered and hard-working, very capable in the rural occupations. Leuteris was hesitant and was always under Marialena's orders. Thaleia

was mostly concerned with the housekeeping and she was proud of being a good hostess. Above all she was thinking about marriage and she a bit anxious that it would not come soon until one fine day she fell in love with Giannis. Giannis was a young man from the next village. He was a handsome and substantial adult with shaggy black hair and bright blue eyes. Nevertheless he was a lazybones and his purpose was to turn Thaleia's head with his sweet words because she had come into a fortune after her father died. Thaleia, being mad about Giannis, was taken in and a marriage was soon arranged.

Obviously, Marialena and Leuteris, who kept a cautious attitude towards Giannis, opposed the idea of marriage. However, Thaleia insisted on her choice and finally got married to her beloved. On the day of her marriage, the whole village participated on the razzle and revelry. Thus, Thaleia left her household and went to leave with Giannis at the next village. Marialena and Leuteris continued living in their paternal house as they used to. As it was expected, the marriage did not last long. Giannis man-handled Thaleia and demanded that she sell her property so that he could live comfortably without much working and struggling. Hence, Thaleia, ashamed of her choice and embittered by her fate, came back to the mansion and to her brother and sister. There she continued her life, isolated and away from any social activities or relations.

One July afternoon, while Marialena was scratching and watering at her farm, saw three foreigners standing at her fence. They were thin and tall, with blonde hair and rucksacks on their backs. They were looking curiously at her as if they wanted to talk to her. As she bent down she looked at them occasionally and smiled. This kept happening for some time when Marialena, embarrassed and baffled by the strangers, offered to them some ripe deep red tomatoes. They thanked her in their tongue and

with gestures they asked her something that she was not able to understand. Such an event caught the neighbourhood kids' attention who were playing in a small distance away. They gathered at Marialena's fence curious to see what the foreigners wanted. When they finally understood they informed Marialena. The foreigners kept trying to communicate with the kids asking for information about the old traditional buildings of the village. The kids, unconcerned and without having a clue of what would follow, said everything that they knew or had been taught in school.

What was this that the foreigners wanted from Marialena? They wanted to see the old church of the village with the Byzantine dome and the old icons, works of important painters and artists. The keys were kept by the two sisters, Marialena and Thaleia. They had no family and therefore they spent many hours every day taking care of the old church. They also wanted to ask her about the numerous traditional houses of Samarina. 'In the morning, in the morning!' replied Marialena. 'The church opens for the public by the first light of day. Then you will have the chance to see all our relics.'

Those words she spoke in a snappish manner and then she left following the narrow, rising, cobbled road which led to her house. In both sides of the road, women were sitting at their doorsteps in small groups, chattering and gossiping about things that happened in the village. The oldest women were knitting warm clothes for the winter. Men, who had come back from a tiring day in the fields, were gathered in the local coffee-shop. They would have the standard ouzo accompanied by backgammon or cards and of course by some cigarettes of pure tobacco from their own plantations. Further on, at the small village square under the huge plane-tree, kids were playing, their happy voices adding to the peaceful atmosphere of the village.

On her way home, Marialena met the president of the village, Mr Petros. They greeted each other but the president, non content with that, made a rude comment, one of those that he usually went on making. In an ironic way he said to Marialena:

‘Why are you tired out? Whom do you work so hard for? You are just a lonely person!’

Those words hurt Marialena, such an emotional person that she was, and the rising road that led to her house seemed like a Calvary to her. Marialena had always wanted to see her own children playing at the yard of her house. She often dreamed that she was playing with them while listening to the birds singing or to the sound of the streams or that she was enjoying with them the companionship of the fireplace, during the cold days of winter. There they would sit altogether and she would narrate stories and fairy tales to them.

As Marialena was walking bent and aggrieved from the president’s words, she heard footsteps behind her. It was the president again. He said that he would like to meet her and her brother and sister and talk to them about a very important matter. The president’s family was one of the oldest in Samarina. In the beginning they were a humble and poor family. From year to year, the family made money and the fellow-villagers elected Mr Petros as chairman even though he was rough-mannered and uninterested in public affairs. Marialena, who knew about all the above, pondered over the fact that her own family used to be of a high standing. ‘Now it is Mr Petros’ turn!’ she thought. Marialena had a foreboding that something bad would happen. She could not calm down and she spent the whole night sleepless turning over in her bed.

However, the famous Greek hospitality was deeply-rooted in Marialena’s family and to her accordingly. Hence, the next day, Marialena, Thaleia and Leuteris

started to get ready for the president's visit. They wore their best clothes and jewellery, they decorated the house with the festive heirloom carpets and shined the silverware. The president came with the three foreigners that Marialena had met in her farm the day before. Thaleia offered house-made sweets to the visitors and chilled fresh water. Then the conversation started:

‘So Leuteris,’ said the president. ‘These people are very rich and they are interested in buying your land at the east part of the village. Just say how much you want and they will pay you, they would not mind! The village will change Leuteris, you will see! They will make modern hotel business and every summer Samarina will throb with tourist life!’ he said enthusiastically. ‘I, myself, will sell a big part of my land! Money Marialena,’ he continued raising the tone of his voice, ‘you will make a lot of money; more than your forefathers had!’

At the sound of such words Marialena went red with anger. Leuteris, furious too, felt like he would kick them out of the house. Thaleia was standing there astonished. ‘You ought to be ashamed of yourself!’ Marialena said loudly. ‘How dare you come into my house and you speak such words!’ she continued. ‘Our forefathers had money because they worked hard in the plantations and grazed their cattle in the pastures! They felt no fatigue! Such hard-workers they were! Apart from that, they were distinguished for their dignity! Now tell to these ‘gentlemen’ that what we inherited from our ancestors we will retain with piety and we will hand over to the next generations, as we are obliged to do. The village must remain as it is in order to remind to those who will follow, the life and culture of their forefathers! Money come and go!’ she shouted. ‘History and civilization remain and distinguish nations from one from another!’

The president, humiliated by Marialena's words but mostly because it seemed to the foreigners that he was unable to satisfy their wishes, was trying to disparage Marialena and her family. Moreover, his foolishness and his greediness made him continue to act imprudently. Without asking himself any questions but doing it out of spite he set about transforming the small traditional village to a big city. 'We will become rich and our life will change,' he kept thinking. 'We will leave the agricultural life and we will open modern stores, bars, pubs etc.' The idea of money seemed very interesting to the inhabitants of Samarina who, to the great majority, were uneducated. For a long period of time the main theme in their between discussions was nothing else but the village's development and riches. They could not understand how bad this would be for the tranquillity and peacefulness of the place and for their own peace of mind.

Indeed, after a few years, things happened as the president had wished. The trees were cut day by day and huge hotels were rising at their place. The spring water stopped flowing and modern amusement grounds such as swimming pools and fountains were built instead. Samarina became very crowded, especially in the summer when it was filled with tourists. Nevertheless, the indigenous, honest and good-hearted people of the village disappeared. The birds were not there to sing as there were no trees for them to build their nests. The carriages and the horses or the donkeys were substituted by big noisy cars. Finally, the president, satisfied from such changes in the village, set up a marble plaque, in the entrance of Samarina, with the following words on it: 'The village was renovated by the president Petros Ioannidis in 1978-1980.'

After many years, when the president's children became old enough to enter the university, they left Samarina for the capital, Athens. There were three of them.

The oldest became an officer, the other became a doctor and the youngest became a teacher. They all loved Samarina, the place that they grew up, and they often thought about it. They could not wait for the time to come when they would go back for their holidays. There, they expected to find their old friends, to walk on the cobble roads and to wander over the forests; to collect chestnuts from the chestnut-trees or apples from the apple-trees or tea for the cold winter days.

But the president's sons soon realised that in Samarina they could not find those things that they were looking for. Nothing was the same as it used to be. The tradition, the genuine element that made Samarina a distinguished place was missing. The history of the place was trampled. Everything had been sacrificed on the altar of money. People did not talk to each other and their relationships became remote. Their only purpose was to make money. In the same way, the president had built a luxurious cottage for his sons in order for them to spend there their summer holidays. He believed he would make them feel happy and that he would contribute to their relaxation from the anguished life of the capital.

However, the president's sons were not interested in the new form of the old village and every time that they visited Samarina they seemed sceptical. The day of retribution for the uncultured president was drawing near. His sons started looking for another place for relaxation. After a few years, instead of going to Samarina for their holidays they would visit the next village, Metsovo. In Metsovo, the president of the village had estimated the value of the tradition. He had also estimated the importance of nature and for this reason he protected as much as he could the environment and the uniqueness of the landscape. Obviously, this worried Mr Petros' sons who wondered why their father did not protect Samarina, a place that their ancestors fought to death to protect from any foreign conquerors that had attempted to seize it.

By protecting Samarina, their homeland, their ancestors were protecting their ideals and principles. The presidents' sons received the answer to their questioning from their father whom, years later, they had gone to visit. Mr Petros, lying down on a bed as an old man, weak and feeble was asking forgiveness.

'I did not know my sons, I did not know!' he muttered. 'I was not concerned with the history of our village!' Please, will you and our fellow-villagers forgive me?'

Having said these words, he looked at the sky for a last time and died.