The Statue

by Marcel Aymé
translated by C. P. Boyko

THERE WAS AN inventor named Martin who was believed to be long dead, and to whom a statue had been erected in a small square in Paris. This full-length effigy was so lifelike that its bronze overcoat seemed often to ripple in the breeze. The plinth carried an inscription: "Martin, 1877–1924. Inventor of the pandemonium mirabile."

To tell the truth, no one remembered what this invention was, and Martin himself had forgotten. It might have been a combination clothes and waffle iron, or perhaps a thimble that polished your fingernail while you sewed, or a gadget that had revolutionized both the wick-lighter and razor industries at once. Over his long career he had invented so many things, and the motors, batteries, coils, springs, rods, and machines of all sorts had become so confused in his memory that he often didn't recognize them. He had even, without realizing it, reinvented a few devices, giving to the world things he'd already given it a decade or two earlier.

Several years after his presumed death, Martin took up residence in the neighborhood of the statue. He lived in a cluttered garret workshop, quite alone amid his tools, scrap iron, and delicate handiwork. Children's toys, trains, cars, dancing puppets, and leaping animals lay alongside mechanical brooms, machines for extracting square roots, automatic scales, corrugators, extinguishers, and a thousand other inventions, most of them under a layer of dust. The walls themselves were encumbered with curious objects, including a steam clock that had won him an honorary degree at the 1900 Expo. No visitors troubled his solitude, and even the concierge refused to enter his atelier since being brushed by the sordid wing of a mechanical bat. Without fear of disturbance, he worked all day, ceaselessly inventing, sketching, filing, drilling, adjusting. Even his sleep teemed with inventions, some

of them so clamant that he had to leave his bed and continue working by lamplight.

HE DESCENDED FOR his main meal of the day when evening fell; but, before finding a restaurant, he would go and visit his statue. This was his only recreation, and, when the season and weather permitted, he would linger in the little plaza, seated on a bench, and contemplate with pleasure his likeness, which overlooked from its pedestal the traffic and passersby. Others came to sit and rest—lovers, a mother with her infant, a tramp dreaming of shelter and grub—but no one took any notice of the object of his gaze. The man of bronze, supporting his inventive head with two fingers of his left hand, seemed to brush dust from his overcoat with the other hand, supervising the operation with the profound stare of statues.

Martin felt no sense of glory, but a keen satisfaction in this concrete testimony to his genius; and he treated his evening stroll to the small square as an opportunity to study himself as reflected in bronze. He was awed and appalled by the importance he assumed in his own eyes. Sometimes the statue's posture of deep thought embarrassed him. Sometimes he could not look himself in the face, as it were, without a feeling of remorse at his redundancy, and he would apologize under his breath for having cheated death. In fact, he was proud of the statue but not of himself.

As the years passed, his pride became more exacting. Martin was distressed by the indifference of the passersby. None of the people crossing the plaza spared a glance for the statue, no one paused to decipher the illustrious name of the inventor, and the chattering groups that gathered in the evening never mentioned it. The crowd passed by, self-centered and brutish, practically shoving the statue aside in their haste. With heart clenched, Martin searched faces for a sign of sympathy or even acknowledgement, but always in vain. And when someone did happen to gaze absent-mindedly at the pensive head, Martin was only offended by the ignorance he read in their eyes.

Sometimes, in the quiet hours, he would strike up a conversation with some chance neighbor seated next to him on the bench. Leaning forward

shyly, he would point at the statue and say, "That's Martin." His neighbor would reply with a vapid smile, or shrug her shoulders and mutter, "Yes, and?"

And sometimes, like a stranger to the neighborhood, he accosted a passerby: "I beg your pardon, but can you tell me what that statue is for?" But never could anyone enlighten him. Even the shopkeepers on the square, when he asked them the same question, were quite incapable of providing an answer.

WOUNDED BY SO much ignorance and ingratitude, Martin worked with less vigor than formerly. He was often distracted.

When he thought of the solitude of his statue, the tools fell from his hands and he sat there in his garret, brooding and numb. At other times, seized by pity, he hurried to the square to give his image the meager alms of a friendly presence. Little by little, his life lost the orderliness that his vocation had imposed upon it. He went out now at all hours, without even troubling to find a pretext. He acquired bad habits like smoking and reading the newspaper. His inventions languished as his mind grew torpid and his fingers less nimble. He invented almost joylessly, merely to earn a living. In the past, he'd never had to worry about survival; with his basic needs met, he was free to develop inventions with no practical application—like the gas-powered pencil sharpener, a work of pure art. Now increasingly he limited himself to saleable items, although without great success. The creative spark flared up less often, and he was less attentive.

In the summer months, he spent most of his time in the square, wallowing in a reverie of alternating melancholy and bitterness. He no longer questioned passersby. The ignorance and fatuity of humankind were for him established facts. Seated on his bench, he began to soliloquize as if he were the man of bronze speaking from the top of his plinth. "Go on," he murmured, glaring at the pedestrians, "scurry past, you idiots. I despise you. I spit on your lowliness. I empty my bronze bladder upon your heads. There'll come a day, gasping imbeciles, when you'll all perish and sink beneath the weight of your stupidity into the dirt. But me, I'll still be standing on my stone,

watching your remains decay, with the prospect of endless life before me. By my work, my intelligence, my genius, I've raised myself onto a pedestal. I've become a rock of the world. I don't need your admiration. It would add nothing to my immortality. It wouldn't keep me from laughing at your pitiful faces of flesh ..."

Such diatribes did not improve his peace of mind. And when thus berating the passersby, he did not always bother to imagine that he was the statue. At such times he expressed his contempt in a more personal and more direct fashion—shouting, for example, "Go to hell!," and surprising several people. One day, he was given cause to regret his vitriol, at least briefly. Beside him on the bench sat a woman of about fifty, dowdily dressed and holding a bouquet of violets. Unaware of her presence, he breathed his invective at the occasional person crossing the plaza. When she realized that she was the only one who could hear him, she rose to her feet, and looking down at him, said, "Sir, you are a boor." Martin was bemused. He had been hurling his abuse generally, almost philosophically, and in no case at any individual, but it was difficult to explain that these exclamations expressed only a point of view. In any case, the lady gave him no time to explain; after again sizing him up with a look, she turned and walked away. His bemusement turned to rueful astonishment when he saw her stop before the statue in a posture of reverent meditation. Emotion paralyzed him; he thought he would faint. At last regaining the use of his legs, he crossed the square at a gallop. The lady was standing on tiptoe, scattering her violets about the bronze feet on the pedestal. Martin mumbled timidly behind her. She turned and, letting out a startled cry at the sight of the boor, gripped the handle of her umbrella. Apologizing, he said that he was an old friend of Martin's, and that his angry words had only been directed at the ingrates who had forgotten him. Her expression changed and tears came to her eyes.

"Tell me about him," she pleaded. "I need to hear someone talk about him ..."

"He was a great man," said Martin.

"Wasn't he? And he had a great heart, too, as I know better than anyone. Oh, if you had any idea, sir ..."

She clutched his arm and gazed desperately into his eyes. He looked back sympathetically, but could not deny that he found her rather pinched and shabby-looking.

"Since you were friends," she said, "he must often have spoken of me?"

He made a vague gesture. Letting go his arm, she drew herself up to her full height.

"I am Mademoiselle Pinton," she informed him. "Julie Pinton." Then, relaxing, she smiled in confident expectation.

"In fact," murmured Martin, searching his memory, "I do seem to recall ..."

"Naturally, he spoke to you of me? Of course he did. Mademoiselle Pinton. When I think ... It was before the war. We were but children. He was thirty-four, I was thirty-two. I'd already rejected half the town, even young Moudru. Then he came along."

Mademoiselle Pinton closed her eyes as if in ecstasy. Martin began to feel disappointed. He would have preferred a loftier, chaster devotion.

"Two years in a row, he came to spend Easter holidays in the house across from ours. We met at a friend's. He came to visit us. When I was at the piano, he turned the pages of my score, and spoke in my ear: 'What a musician you are ...' And I could feel his hot breath on the nape of my neck ... You know, when I'm alone, and I think back, I can still feel that hot breath, that burning breath ... One day, while going down the front steps, I tripped, and he caught me. I clutched him tight. Ah! how I clutched him!"

She shivered at the memory, her nostrils flaring. Suddenly she threw herself at the pedestal and, with all her body pressed against the stone, grasped a leg of the statue.

"Cut it out," cried Martin. "Don't be ridiculous. Come on, you'll break your fingernails."

He managed to prise her free and lead her to a bench, where she burst into tears. Irritated, he let her weep, and gazed malevolently at her thin grainy face and her long red nose. Besides disappointment, he felt displeasure at seeing young love revived in the unprepossessing features of an aging woman. Only a residue of curiosity kept him from fleeing. There floated into

his confused memory the silhouette of a woman bearing an uncertain resemblance to Mademoiselle Pinton. When her tears had dried up, he asked her:

"So? How did it all end?"

"He loved me, but he married another. When he returned to Paris, he married a rich widow ..."

Martin tried to interrupt, but she went on feverishly.

"... A millionairess. He married her for her fortune. He had a mansion, fifteen servants, cars, a castle in the Touraine, seaside villas. He bought himself a monocle. He spent gold by the handful."

"You're dreaming," said Martin. "He never married and he always lived practically in poverty. I was close enough to him to know it."

"I received my information," Mademoiselle Pinton replied, "from a trustworthy source whom I've known a very long time ..."

Martin did not insist. His memories grew no clearer. He could recall perfectly the little town where he had passed his Easter vacations, the house and even the room he had stayed in, but nothing of Julie Pinton. No doubt she had been so insignificant that he'd hardly paid her any attention. Fed-up with the game, he asked impatiently:

"You say Martin loved you?"

"Absolutely."

"It's possible. But you haven't told me ... I don't remember, myself ... That is, well, tell me—did you sleep with him?"

Mademoiselle Pinton leaped to her feet, her face turning purple, and cried:

"Vile pig! I suspected as much. You're nothing but a filthy lecher!"

Putting her umbrella under her arm, she strode away across the square. Martin watched her go with a twinge of regret.

A week after this incident, Martin finally abandoned the project he had been working on for several months, a self-concealing snap fastener which he'd hoped would resuscitate his ailing business. But the thought of Mademoiselle Pinton left him languid and incapable of serious effort. He forgot her ugliness, and gradually overwrote her image with that of a graceful girl, which he imagined he'd disinterred from the depths of his memory, but

which was in fact the latest and most lovely of his inventions. He spent hours perfecting the shape of her nose, the color of her eyes, the capaciousness of her blouse, and when he had achieved what seemed a familiar form, he undertook to dedicate a few verses to her. He conceived in his mind a vast poem, of which, however, he wrote down only the four final lines:

I invent for my love a mechanical box
Made of springs, cogs, and counterweights tempered by nightshine,
Dewdrop dynamos, rainbow belts, and pendulum clocks
Ringing melodies flashed from my sweetheart's bright eyne.

This quatrain cost him eight days' effort, but he was well satisfied with the result. He sat on his bench and murmured it to Julie. He found the square the most natural setting in which to place her. He had her sit next to him, he inhaled her violets' perfume, he whispered in her ear, breathed on her neck. Together they circled the statue, pausing occasionally to exchange a few words. She was charmingly youthful, with a child's smile, a mischievous gaze, and a Peter Pan collar.

But at times a more vivid picture invaded his imagination. With pain he recalled Mademoiselle Pinton's gracious body pressed against the stone plinth, her hands clutching the bronze pantleg, her girlish face flushed with passion. At the thought, his own face reddened in shame and anger as the poison of jealousy seeped through him. He began, when entering the square, to eye the statue apprehensively, as if afraid to find Julie prowling around it, cheeks flushed with lust. One day, he addressed the man of bronze with a scornful smile:

"It's not inventions that Julie finds enchanting; she hardly gives a damn about inventions! What she loves is my hot breath. She said it herself ... It's not you she loves, it's me! Me!"

In uttering these words, Martin was also defending himself against his inventor's conscience, which reproached him for laziness. Indeed, he worked less and less, and with a disgust that he could no longer deny. Perhaps, in fact, Mademoiselle Pinton's simulacrum was nothing more than a ruse to

help him forget the destitution that threatened him. He had failed to pay last month's rent, and saw no prospect of being able to pay next month's; his concierge, he imagined, was already sniggering in triumph. Martin was weary of inventing, weary and at his wits' end. The machine, clogged and worn down, no longer functioned. And the statue had become a burdensome witness to his decline.

AS THE PROBLEM of feeding himself became more urgent, the image of Mademoiselle Pinton lost much of its charm. Martin soon found himself reduced to selling his old inventions to a dealer in bric-a-brac. Every morning, he descended with an armful of metal, for which he received barely a dozen francs. The day he was offered only forty sous for his steam clock, bitterness at last made him see Julie Pinton in her true aspect: a bony, middle-aged woman with a red nose and a shrill voice.

"I leave her to you," he told his statue.

She joined in his memory the dusty marionettes that he'd invented and which he now tried to unload as knickknacks. Young or old, she ceased to haunt both the little square and Martin's heart. The cogs and springs tempered by nightshine had tarnished. He was still, however, profoundly jealous of the man of bronze, and envied his ability to stop time and to remain frozen in a glorious moment, while he himself, sunk in humiliating poverty, was caught up inescapably in the habit of living. He blamed the statue for having stolen his luck and deprived him of his strength.

One morning while he was seated on his bench, he saw some tourists approach the statue, bend to read the inscription, and step back to get a better view. Jealousy and victimhood made him squeeze his fists in fury. He wanted to run over and cry out that they were mistaken, that he was the real inventor Martin. But the statue stood so tall, and he felt so tiny before it, that his courage failed him. When the tourists had gone, he fixed upon the statue a look of hatred. That same afternoon, a journalist, assigned to write a survey of Paris's statues, paused before that of the inventor and jotted a few notes. Martin thought he would burst with rage. And that evening, during the busiest hour before dinner, it seemed to him that the gaze of every

passerby was lifted to the thoughtful bronze head, and that there arose from the crowd a murmur of veneration.

DAY BY DAY, the murmur grew more distinct. Soon it became a veritable hubbub of worship, coming from all the streets and squares throughout Paris. Church bells rang constantly, ostensibly for some funeral or angelus. Martin, shriveling beneath this onslaught of devotion, began to view his statue less with hate than fear. When he came to sit on his bench, it was often with an empty, growling stomach. His face and clothes were unkempt, and the soles of his shoes were splitting. He looked so like a beggar that one day, when he placed his hat beside him, a woman dropped a coin into it. There was now between himself and his statue such a wide gap that he no longer dared contemplate the link that united them. Bit by bit, he grew accustomed to his degradation, and at last accepted it.

Only once did Martin attempt to rebel. The night before his rent was due, he writhed in bed, dreaming of his impending eviction. A group of drunken men passed in the street, bawling a song. He could not discern the words, but knew it could only be a paean to the statue. Such fervor seemed an insult to his despair. He dressed, trembling with wrath, and hurried to the little plaza. All was still and silent. The man of bronze's brilliant skull shone with moonlight; the folds of his overcoat were richly filled with shadows. Martin cursed him loudly, calling him a scoundrel, a robber, a traitor, an egomaniac, a show-off.

"I'm the one who put you there!" he cried. "Without me, you'd be nothing ..."

His voice faltered and lost its assurance, for the statue, in the emptiness of the night, seemed larger than ever. A cloud swallowed the moon, grew larger, and extended towards him a deadly shadow. He shrank back, taking refuge beneath a street lamp. With clenched teeth and drumming heart, he watched as the statue's silhouette dissolved and disappeared. He was terrified but determined to resist, and in an effort to regain his poise, he scrambled onto his usual bench.

His pedestal gave him a degree of self-confidence. He was amazed that

he hadn't thought of it earlier. He realized that it was the stone plinth that had given the man of bronze his strength and authority; placed on the ground, he would have been far less intimidating. Martin regretted his earlier imprecations, by which he had only belittled himself. The situation had changed; he saw that it was largely a question of level. Now he had only to affect a statue's firm, serene dignity. Martin applied himself to remaining perfectly still, and, to give himself every advantage, adopted the stance of a thinker, his head propped upon two fingers. The pose was tiring, almost painful, and he was harassed by a cold and penetrating wind. But when the first fifteen minutes had passed, he felt his courage buoyed by an upsurge of hope. He felt his legs and thighs harden; his numb feet became heavy, and adhered solidly to the pedestal; his chin and supporting fingers, stung by the cold, grew nearly devoid of sensation. At last he thought he heard his overcoat resound metallically in the breeze. As his metamorphosis progressed, he felt inflated with an immense joy. He almost called out to the statue in exaltation—but bit his tongue in time. He felt ponderous and magnificent. Only one thing worried him: he had left his apartment in slippers, and wondered if the bronze would deign to transfigure such informal footwear.

But after an hour of scrupulous immobility, he began to grow anxious. A pang of rheumatism shot through his hip, and he could scarcely suppress a yelp. Doubt crept into his mind. Statues, after all, could not be susceptible to rheumatism. The pain returned, and became so acute that he had no choice but to shift his leg. This movement, contrary to his hopes, cost him no special effort. The muscles moved in their normal way, aside from a slight stiffness probably caused by nothing more than fatigue. Martin tried to resume his former pose, but he had lost his faith. The glacial wind blew more cruelly, cutting him to the bone and making him waver. He began to shiver, as much from exhaustion as cold. Defeated at last, he sat down on his bench and sobbed.

A FEW MONTHS later, Martin had sold his scrap iron, his tools, and his meager furniture, and could be found, homeless and penniless, begging in the streets. He held out his hand most often in the little square—not to revive

old memories, but simply from force of habit. During the busy hours, he sat at the foot of the statue, muttering his piteous appeal. At first, he was well aware of the irony of the situation, but as time went by, he ceased to think about it—or about much of anything. His memory became cloudy, and his thoughts moved ever more slowly. He had learned the art of mindlessness, of taking interest in the most trivial things, and could meditate indefinitely over a button coming loose from his trousers. During the empty hours, he sat on his bench, and so hardly left the square all day long. His presence began to upset certain shopkeepers, and complaints were made to the police. Martin received several warnings, but was too lazy to heed them.

One day, shortly before noon, he was at his post, his back against the plinth and his hand held out for alms. An officer crossed the square and came straight toward him. Martin did not at first understand what was happening.

"Too bad for you," growled the officer. "You've been warned often enough. Come on, I'm taking you to the station."

The word "station" frightened Martin, evoking, in what remained of his bourgeois conscience, images of ignominy. With a glance behind him, he lifted his hands to the statue in a pleading gesture.

"Enough monkeyshines," said the officer. "Let's go."

"Leave me alone! I'm the inventor Martin! I'm the man in the statue! I'm the statue! Look here ... Read!"

He bent over the inscription and pointed at the letters spelling out the name of Martin. The officer took him by the arm, and, when Martin clung to the pedestal's moldings, roughly yanked him loose. At the station, a sergeant subjected him to a perfunctory interrogation. The officer who had brought him in reported:

"He didn't want to come along. Get this: he said he's the inventor Martin. You know, the man of the statue ..."

"Aren't we hoity-toity," grunted the sergeant, eyeing the offender with disgust.

"I said nothing of the sort," Martin protested. "The good officer must have misunderstood me. I said simply that my name was Martin, like the

statue."

"That'll do," said the sergeant to his subordinate. "Lock him in number three. And he better make nice—or I'll chew his head."

Martin was released late in the afternoon, and told to stay away from the square unless he wanted to get his face kicked in. The threat was superfluous. He left the quarter on springed heels. He felt no temptation to look back, not even with his mind's eye. He felt relieved of a loathsome burden, and possessed of a fresh vitality which made him smile in his grey beard. After half an hour of walking, he stopped in a busy street, held out his hand, and muttered: "Have pity on a poor old man. I have a sick daughter and three grandchildren who depend on me."

He passed his days aimlessly, and found that he was almost happy. Life no longer required that difficult equilibrium, the mere memory of which, though ever fading, now made him shudder. Crawling about in animal solitude, he experienced a feeling of perfect security. The worst that could happen to him was to die, and that would require no great effort; in any case, he never thought about it. He had no head for inventions anymore, and on the whole lived as easily in the present as a dog. He made friends whom he forgot as soon as they were out of sight. One night, three of them were seated in a café squalid enough that the proprietor was not embarrassed by their presence. Glasses of brandy cost fifteen sous, and each of them had drunk a couple. Glowing with fuddled warmth, they took turns speaking of their pasts. The rule seemed to be that each must accept the others' lies, however enormous. Martin, with a sincerity that cowed his companions, began his story thus:

"I don't know anymore if I was happy. At the age of thirty-four, I married a rich widow, a millionairess. I had a mansion, servants, cars, a castle in the Touraine, seaside villas. I wore a monocle. I spent gold by the handful ..."

A few days later, Martin entered by chance the little square where he had sat so often. He crossed it without recognition, and without taking any notice of the statue; and only an obscure unease made him quicken imperceptibly his pace.