

Refael and Miriam by Ben
Yitzhak Saserdote, 1910

Translated from Ladino by Devi Mays

Translator's Introduction

The romance novel *Refael and Miriam* was published in Istanbul in 1910. This was a time of unprecedented flourishing in Ladino printing in the Ottoman Empire, propelled by the easing of censorship after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. The novel begins in an unnamed city of the banks of the Danube River, most like Ruse (Ruschuk), a city that was under Ottoman rule until its occupation by the Russian Empire and annexation to Bulgaria in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78). At the time when the novel was published, Ruse had a substantial Sephardic population. The plot follows the love story between Miriam, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and Refael, a poor printer who aspires to make a living from painting. Failing to obtain her father's approval to marry Refael, Miriam decided to run away and live with him in Europe. After traveling across the continent, the couple settles in Vienna, where Refael immerses himself in his art, pursuing his dream of becoming a renowned painter and making a living to support Miriam and, later, their newborn child.

The familiar trope of the young lovers who struggle with their families' disapproval (Romeo and Juliet are even invoked in the text) serves as a foundation for a quintessentially Jewish story that explores a society in flux, undergoing processes of modernization and secularization that profoundly reshaped its communal structures. Unlike the Shakespearean tragedy, the crux of the conflict here is not a long-standing rivalry but social class and the pragmatic view of art as a leisurely rather than commercial endeavor. The dramatic love story between two young Sephardim does not remain in the private sphere; it exposes the fault lines of a crumbling social hierarchy and the struggle to maintain both familial and communal cohesion. It does not shy away from politics either, as the violence of national fermentation brings about one of the main turning points in the plot, when Macedonian separatists murder Miriam's father, a tragedy that ironically empowers her to become independent and marry the man she loves despite the difference in their social status.

Refael and Miriam is one of the most intriguing works of literature published in Ladino, but its author remains unknown. The pen name Ben Yitzhak Saserdote does not appear in other works or newspaper publications, and we have no knowledge of such an author. Our conjecture, based on the novel itself, is that it belonged to a woman, as the text dedicates great attention to the feminine character and details with astounding familiarity occurrences such as postpartum depression. Miriam's character, who is undoubtedly the protagonist of the story, also displays immense agency and fortitude, both in her defiance of social norms and their patriarchal underpinnings and in her successful takeover of the family business after her father's death.

The rich texture of the novel's language exposes the embeddedness of Ladino writing in the multicultural sphere of the Ottoman Empire, employing Turkish and Greek loanwords even for some of the most common expressions, such as *chelebi*, a Turkish honorific that Ladino-speaking Jews used to indicate men of wealth and repute. It also displays intimate familiarity with biblical sources, which are used throughout the novel to reflect on the guilt and anxiety experienced by the young protagonists in their transgressive acts. In this regard, the novel poses significant challenges for the translator, as it requires a balance between the need for clarity and readability with the desire to express the multilingualism of the text and the lives depicted in it. Some of the loanwords, both from Hebrew and from co-territorial Ottoman languages, were maintained in their original form, in an attempt to aptly reflect the different linguistic registers of the diverse set of characters that populate the novel.

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רפאל אי מרים

נוב'ילה די לה ב'יד'ה די לוס ז'וד'יוום
דיל אוריינטי
פור בן יצחק סאסירדוטי

אידיעוויס:
דור חביב. אי ב. הכהן
גאלטטה ייני י'ול צכור הכהן פ'סק'י

נומירו 1

אימפרימיריאה
אבואב' אי כהן
גאלטטה, פירש'יווני צאזאכ, נייולזאדי האן
קונסטאנטינופלה

1910-5670

The front matter of *Refael and Miriam*, 1910.

From Refael and Miriam: A Novel of the Life of the Jews of the Orient

It was one of those cool and tender dawns in the month of September, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Millions of stars still glimmered in the sky, scintillating like a sea of diamonds, vanishing and reappearing over the black field of the heavens, as in a mad and audacious game, a race to enchant the human eye with marvel and admiration.

The great river, sprawling like a wide, silver-colored belt, could be seen from the street that descended from the city to the *mahalé* of the Jews, glittering in the darkness of dawn, a giant mirror reflecting the millions of stars across the sky, a celestial flock of sheep with eyes of diamonds playing in boundless fields.

The city seemed abandoned. The Jewish *mahalé* was deserted and dead. All were still lost in the dreams of daybreak, with no sound, no clamor to trouble the repose of nature. Every living being was still sleeping—even the trees did not sway their branches and leaves.

Two men came from the city and went directly toward the river, passing through the narrow and twisting streets of the *mahalé*.

“I want to see today, Branko, if you are really my true and faithful friend; upon your wit and capacity depends everything. At the moment you see us entering the boat, you should row with all your might for the other side of the river, forward to Romania. As soon as we arrive at the other bank, as soon as we put our feet on Romanian soil, there won’t be anyone who can impede us.”

“You have nothing to worry about, Refael, you can trust me. Make sure that you arrive here safely with your young woman into the boat, and I will deal with the rest. Go with good luck and complete your part. I will be waiting for you in the boat.”

On arriving at the end of the street of the *kahal*, the two men separated. That one who was called Branko took the road for the river, while the other went toward the plaza where the synagogue stood.

Not far from the synagogue stood a house that was taller than the others and appeared to be newer and better constructed. This was the house of the wealthiest Jew of the city, *Chelebi* Gershon

Arditti. In the corner that this edifice formed with another that was half destroyed, the man stopped, as if he wanted to find a hiding place where he could not be seen.

Meanwhile, the stars in the heavens became paler and less visible: a sign that the day with its clear light was about to break. Lights were lit in the synagogue. Bangs and blows were heard from a distance, drawing nearer and nearer the place where the man was hiding. It was the sound of the call of the *shamash* to the religious Jews to come to *Selichot*, to voice those holy and moving prayers that the good Jews say during forty days of the year, between the two lights, before dawn.

One by one Jews came to the synagogue, some with a lantern in hand. Not much time passed before the hidden man began to hear those melancholy and sad songs that he had known so well, those hymns to the glory of the One God of Israel that he himself had sung with his voice of a child ten or eleven years before, when his father had awakened him from his dreams to bring him to *Selichot*. Clearly audible was the voice of the *hazan* who sang, followed by the chant of the entire synagogue.

Where were those times of innocence and song? To Refael Alvo—this was his name—it appeared in that dawn that there had been an entire world, that there had been thousands of years, between then and now. Then he had within him belief and religiosity, he was an innocent and happy child, a child who believed he would see the heavens open when he sang after the *hazan* all those sad and touching melodies of *Selichot*. Now that his father was no longer among the living, now that he himself was twenty-six years old, these same melodies that he heard sung no longer made upon him the impression of before, no longer filled his heart with religious poetry and exalted sentiments; other thoughts, other ideas dominated his spirit, and with a profound exhale, he said to himself, “I am no longer that Refael of the past! All is in vain, past and lost and forgotten . . . Forgotten and lost . . .”

Turning toward that house of Gershon Arditti, Refael Alvo raised his hand in a threatening gesture, and with eyes glinting with rage, he said, “You old man without a heart, it is your fault, if I walk crooked paths following dishonest thoughts! It is your fault that I am

leaving and distancing myself from honesty and legality, you and no other upon which lies the responsibility for this crime that I am committing! Upon you the sin and the dishonor, old wolf who does not know satiation, a man without faith and without feelings! Until today, until this hour, I was honest and innocent and decent, and in spite of this, you have succeeded in making me a criminal and a robber and a rebel!”

As if in response to these violent words that the young man spoke to himself, footsteps could be heard in the courtyard of Gershon Arditti’s house; the door opened and an old man appeared in the street with a blazing lantern in hand. Locking the door behind him, the old man took the path for the synagogue.

Refael Alvo, who had withdrawn into the dark corner so as not to be seen, waited in his hiding place until Gershon Arditti disappeared into the synagogue. He emerged, looked around, and, seeing that there was not a living soul to hear him, clapped three times with his palms and then set himself to listen attentively for a response to the signal.

The young man’s heart was beating violently, as if it wanted to break the chest that enclosed it. The light sound of a woman’s cough was heard from within the courtyard. After a key turned in the lock, the door of the courtyard opened again, and the woman emerged, covered in a thick, large shawl.

“Come quickly, Refael, I beg you. I think my stepmother is awake!”

The young woman’s voice trembled with fright, her figure exuding irritation and nervousness. The two began to walk hastily toward the river. Refael shook no less than she did, the hand of the young woman in his hands. This hand, so small and fine, was frozen like snow.

“Don’t be so afraid, my soul, can’t you see that I am at your side? You are mine, you are my sweet dove, and I will defend you against any danger!”

At that moment, a Jew with a blazing lantern passed beside them. Curious to see who was this amorous pair that walked hand in hand so early in the morning, the Jew lifted the lantern to see them better, but Miriam—this was the name of Gershon Arditti’s

daughter—turned her face to the other direction, tightening the shawl that covered her. The curious Jew could not see who she was, although he saw the young man and he recognized him immediately.

“Good travels, where are you going, Refael, so early and with such haste?” asked the Jew, curiously. But Refael and Miriam walked ahead toward the river without answering. Shouts were heard behind them, coming from the synagogue and from Gershon Arditti’s house.

“It is my stepmother! This is my end!” said the young woman, half faint. Refael Alvo dragged her with force behind him, all but carrying her to the river. The shouts drew nearer to the pair. They were being chased.

“Seize them, seize them! There they are! Oh, what a shameless girl, oh, such shame! See, they are going for the river! Seize them, they are escaping! Such insolence, such wantonness! It is Refael Alvo with Miriam Arditti, the two lovers! They are going to throw themselves in the river, they are going to drown themselves, they are going to escape! Seize them, it is a good deed!”

But the two lovers had a head start of two hundred feet on their pursuers, and they were at most thirty feet distant from the boat when Miriam fainted. Then the young man took the precious cargo in his arms and, within seconds, they were on the boat. Branko, the faithful friend, began rowing forcefully. The boat went into the river. With the strength of his arms, the rower had already gotten the boat to the middle of the river when the pursuers arrived on the shore. The two lovers were safe. Miriam was in a profound daze. “Insolent girl! May shame befall you!” yelled voices behind them.

Jews are curious by nature, but those of my city are certainly the most curious Jews in the whole world; they want to know absolutely everything. When any of them went for employment to Vienna, the first thing they asked was after Refael Alvo and Miriam Arditti.

“Is that sweet couple here? Is it here in Vienna that they have taken a seat, Refael with the dove? Where do they live? What do they do? Have you ever seen them? I would like to visit them. What does Refael Alvo do and with what does he occupy himself? Is he still a printer or a painter? Is he still lost in the pursuit of this madness? Is it possible to live and support yourself in Vienna with paintings? Have the two married or are they still unmarried, living in

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אירה חונה די אקלייאס נואדרוגאלאס פריקקאס
אי טיירנאס אין איל נויס די סיפעיונצרי, אינטרי ראש
השנה אי יום כפור. ניליארדאס די איסטרייליאס רי-
לונצראצאן איינדה אין איל פירנאמינטו, סינטייליאב-
דו קונו חונה נואר די צריליאגטיס גיקוס אי גראכ-
דיס, לוס קי פואיאן אי אפאריסאן די נואיצו בוצ-
רי איל קאנפו פריטו דיבוס קיילוס, קונו אין אול
זוגו לוקו אי אסטריצ'דו, אין חונה קוריטה פארה א-
זיר אינקאנטאר אל אולו דיב אונצרי די נארטצ'יליי
אי אדניראקייין.

The opening page of *Refael and Miriam*,
as originally published in 1910.

concubinage? They are right! Why marry? It is better to live like dogs! Such misfortune for Gershon Arditti. . . for what came to him in this old age! The only daughter escapes from the house of her father with a 'painter,' with a fantasizer who is never going to earn anything! Misfortune for *Chelebi* Gershon! Now he is alone and isolated in that large palace. Dark fortune of the old man! For whom has he been laboring all his life? Thousands and thousands of liras, all these riches, to whom is he going to leave them? Is it not said that in this world there is neither a whole good nor a partial bad. The dark fortune of *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti! What bitter luck, what sadness at that age!"

And another good Jew responded to him: "Don't cry so much for that old dog, cry for those who have seven or eight children who ask for bread when the father has none to give them! Gershon Arditti is not one to cry for, nor to pity so much; do not worry yourself so much, I beg you, he has plenty to live for. Do you not see that he

has not gotten his fill of earning, that he is still laboring from dawn until midnight in the shop like the dog that he is? This man doesn't have a heart; he has a hard and dry stone in his breast. Why did he not concede to giving his daughter to Refael Alvo as a wife? Refael is a good son of a very good family . . . So he's a printer! . . . Not everyone can be buyers and drinkers of blood like he is . . . And printers come first in this world. Why does the old man not want to concede to giving his daughter to Refael when the two love each other so much . . .! This is very good, they did very well in fleeing . . . thus they come out on top of this old man without a heart."

"Did you see him give five *grushes* to some poor man? Did you ever hear that he has helped some beneficent project, given that he possesses seventy thousand liras? This is very good! He deserves that they do to him more still, much more; may eyes be brought to him, so he is overcome! Refael Alvo did very well; he behaved justly in robbing from him his only daughter. Some day the old man will croak and his daughter will inherit all of his goods. Alvo did well, from one day to the next. In the blink of an eye, Refael will become an incredibly rich man."

"Who is going to make him incredibly rich? Who is going to inherit all of the goods? Refael Alvo? The painter? The printer? This fantasizer who doesn't know which world he is in, and to whom it appears that his little paintings are the greatest wealth of this life! It's clear that you don't know anything about what happened: *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti has already done everything possible to disinherit his daughter, and Miriam with her rooster is not going to get a *grush*. Gershon Arditti is not a man to pardon his daughter for the shame and the affront that she gave him. Gershon Arditti no longer has a daughter. You don't know anything!"

"And who, then, is going to inherit all the goods?"

"Do I know who? Some devil, some relatives, of his or of the second wife, maybe Avramiko Pinto who has been in Arditti's shop for so many years . . ."

"You can't believe that Arditti is committing a madness so great to leave seventy thousand liras to a simple manservant."

"May the Devil take him, him and his liras! Come on, let's look after our business. We didn't come to Vienna to absorb ourselves

in the affairs of that old wolf. May the Devil take him, clothed and shoed!”

In truth, Refael Alvo and Miriam Arditti lived in Vienna for five or six months. First, the two lovers lost themselves traveling around Europe. Whether for the desire to know the world or for fear that Miriam’s father would pursue them and make his daughter come back, the young man and his beloved spent an entire year traveling through Italy, France, and Germany, ceaselessly running from one city to the next, from one country to another. Like a pair of birds who began to fly and enjoy the sweetness of freedom, the two did not have any pre-occupation other than enjoying life and the intoxication of first love.

The two loved each other, and they did not tire of saying it, one to the other, every day, every hour, and at every occasion. The people who saw them, so young, so beautiful, and so amorous, smiled. The servers in the hotels, who of course have experience in these things, thought of their own, and they did not tire of recounting to the other travelers the miracles and marvels of this beautiful pair of “Spaniards” who loved each other so much and did nothing but kiss and embrace each other. Refael and Miriam paid no attention to the others, did not see that people looked at them and that hotel workers spied on them. It mattered little to them. For them, there existed no interest other than their love; in this was summed up all of life; this signified everything for them, and the rest, nothing.

Happy days of youth, a beautiful time of the fluorescence of life, sweet time of spring, the flower of life, why do you disappear and flee so quickly, never to turn back, never, nevermore!

One day, Refael Alvo realized that they had no more than several thousand francs left, barely enough to continue another three or four months of the crazy life they had been living. It was then that he had the courage to say to his beloved, “My dear, what do you think about taking a seat in one place? You already know that my great desire is to begin to work, to work for you, my soul, to make grand works, works that will make my name known and celebrated. I also want to make money, to buy riches, all for you, to give you all the pleasures of this life. I want you to have the best outfits in the latest style, the most precious jewels. I want to make you happy and content, as your beauty deserves!”

She herself had already begun to feel the desire to rest a little from this crazy run from land to land and from city to city that had already lasted an entire year. And another motive began then to spread in her, a reason that made her scared and anxious. But she had not yet spoken to Refael about it, whether out of shame or another of those confusing feelings that live in the heart of every woman in a similar situation. Miriam had not revealed to Refael that she felt herself to be a mother, but she was bewildered that the young man hadn't recognized her condition, that he didn't see her face was paler than before, black marks growing below her beautiful eyes. And in secret Miriam had begun to cry sometimes, tears pouring out, still without knowing precisely how to explain the reason for her crying. A burden weighed on her, a black deafness tormented her. But with Refael, she appeared as happy and luminous as before.

She knew that she needed to acquiesce to Refael's suggestion, and she agreed to take a seat in some city and to build a nest. Refael Alvo wanted to live in some small city in Italy. Befitting the artist he was, he yearned to work in peace, in the lustrous and clear sun of Italy. He wanted nothing other than to leave immediately for Rome or Venice or Naples, or to take residence in some smaller place close by.

But Miriam disagreed. She didn't want to live in Italy, and she absolutely did not want to live in a small city, whether because of her pregnancy or because she did not know the Italian language. As a girl, she spent two years in a boarding school in Vienna and spoke German well, and she had a great gusto for living in this beautiful city, where life appeared to her more pleasant and agreeable than in other cities.

Also, who knows? Who can divine the secret ideas of a woman? Could it be that Miriam wanted to live in Vienna because she already knew that many brokers from her city went to Vienna for employment? Could it be that she wanted to be closer to her city, closer to her father . . . ?

Be that as it may, Refael was not one to refuse the desire of his beloved. Although for many reasons he did not want to rest in Vienna, neither did he have the courage to say no, and the two arrived in this city and took a residence in one of those new suburbs that are half

field and half city. The residence was composed of three rooms: a large room to eat, a smaller one to sleep, and a third with two large windows that looked out to an orchard; this last one would be the “atelier”—the room where Refael would work. Here the young man wanted to create grand works that would make his name known and celebrated; from here would come the paintings of an artist of talent, here Refael wanted to make money, to earn riches, jewels, and outfits, and all the pleasures for his “white dove,” as he sometimes called Miriam.

[. . .]

It was a winter day, and the streets of Vienna were dirty and covered with the mud of the snow that had fallen only to be melted immediately under the feet of passersby. A dense and heavy smoke hung over the great city and gave it a sad and dark appearance. It was one of those days when the heart of a man inadvertently saddens and is filled with melancholy impressions. In a house in the Döbling neighborhood was a very young woman, pale but beautiful. Her large and sad eyes were fixed on a corner, where a newly born infant slept. She had in her hands a book, but it appeared as though she wasn't reading, all her attention seemed to be concentrated on the little infant in its small cradle.

Just as the little child wriggled in its sleep, the mother began to rock her, wiggling the little cradle back and forth. From her lips resounded a song in German. A simple and sad song: it was a song about a poor laundress who gave birth and was abandoned by the man who deceived her. The sad mother cried over the fate of the small child who did not have a father, who did not have a name, and who would suffer who knows how many ills and shames in life. It was a somber and agonizing song, like the unfolding day itself, and Miriam Arditti was crying, her warm tears falling as she sang and rocked her baby.

Her newborn daughter in the cradle also had no father, no name, and who knows how much shame and how many ills this innocent little child would have to suffer . . . for the sin of her own mother, for the sin that she herself, Miriam Arditti, had committed.

Some women, after giving birth, are melancholy and anxious. Miriam found herself in a similar situation. Day in, day out, she felt a profound sadness, a heaviness in her heart that became even more

unsupportable when Refael was not in the house and she stayed alone with her infant. She felt alone and abandoned, and she did not know how to alleviate her heart in any manner other than crying. The fate of the woman reached her, the curse of God against the first woman. *In hardship shall you bear children*, and with what hardship did she bear this child. She was still so young, so small, not even eighteen years old.

And what pains! Her father did not want to hear from her; all the letters Miriam had written to Gershon Arditti remained unanswered. Refael was working day and night, losing his eyesight to bring bread home, but his efforts bore no fruit. And the worst part was that this young child had just come into the world, exacerbating her father's sadness and her mother's despair. Nonetheless, there was this innocent little child, the fruit of a guilty love! This little child without a name!

How had she come to fall so low? She, Miriam Arditti, the only child of *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti, the most beautiful, the richest and the most sought-after of all the young women of the city! And now, a lost woman, a dishonest woman, the most shameful, the last of all women! The lover of a man, the concubine without a name, the mother of a little girl without a name! Alone in a foreign city, abandoned by her own father, alone and forgotten.

She asked her father for his permission to marry Refael Alvo. His permission was absolutely indispensable according to the laws of Austria, seeing that she was still a minor, and her father, in his cruelty, did not respond to her letters. Her old father did not want to know of his only daughter; he did not want to forgive the wounds that she had caused. This feeling burned in her like a flaming fire; her own father no longer wanted to know of her, did not consider her as his daughter, no longer named her among the living. To her father, to Gershon Arditti, she was dead and forgotten.

[. . .]

They killed *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti. The *komitadjis*¹ spilled the blood of the old man. One fine day they found the richest Jew of the city lying on the ground, next to an iron box where he kept his riches, in his chancellery, covered in blood, with a terrible cut in his chest. The killer's knife had penetrated the depths of his heart. From

the terrible blow, it was clear that the killer was a sharp master of his occupation.

At that time there was a secret committee of Macedonians that was known by the formidable name of “Terror and Salvation.” This committee’s goal was to send bands to Macedonia to save Christianity from Turkish tyranny. The most hopeless elements of the population—people who had nothing more to lose—gathered together under the flag of “Terror and Salvation.” They formed companies and groups large and small. They received from the committee guns, ammunition, and money, and they put themselves under the command of some officer or chief. They passed at night, through mountains and unknown roads, to the Turkish frontier. Once in Turkey, these bands were burning villages, killing without pity innocent villagers who did not agree with them, especially the Greek, Turkish, and Serbian villagers. Woe to the village to which those *komitadjis* come! In a day, in several hours, all was turned into dust and ashes, blood and sadness and abomination, until the Turkish army came to their aid, to persecute the killers, those who are already in fields and mountains, who have already fled and saved themselves. They didn’t want to enter into action with the army; they fled from any kind of engagement with the Turkish soldiers. Their principal work was to kill, to burn, and to destroy. And this was called “saving Christianity from the Turkish tyranny.”

For this work, the *komitadjis* were lent money; they were lent significant sums. They acquired these sums with contributions from the rich people of the country. The committee, which knew all the rich people of the land, taxed each according to what appeared good to it with sums that these rich men should pay in aid to the work of “Terror and Salvation.” One fine day so-and-so rich merchant would receive a letter with the picture of a dead man, signed with blood in the name of the committee. In this letter, they demanded of him to pay within eight days such-and-such sum, depositing in some place the exact amount that was indicated. If the recipient of the letter did not respond to the demand and did not deposit within eight days the sum that was imposed upon him, he received a second letter in which they demanded an even higher sum to be paid within three days, otherwise he would be condemned to death. Woe to that

person who availed himself of the police! Suddenly some killer would appear before him and sheath the knife in his gut. At home or on the square, in bed or in church, the vengeance of the committee reached him. The police showed themselves to be entirely incapable of impeding this formidable secret committee. Many said that the police were in the same game as the Macedonians, that they were in bed with those daring saviors of Christianity.

One day, Gershon Arditti also received the nefarious letter with the picture of the head of a dead man and signed with blood. The committee had taxed him with the sum of three thousand liras in aid to "Terror and Salvation." In the first two days, the old Arditti told no one about this letter. On the third day, he spoke with the attorney doctor David Albahri. Upon reading the letter, the latter turned white as a ghost; he for his part had also received a warning for a contribution of a thousand liras and was trembling for his life. Gershon Arditti was an Italian subject, and the attorney gave him the advice of addressing himself to the Italian consul to ask for protection. Thus it went. The consul, who showed himself to be very enraged and revolted to see that the brigands of the committee had the audacity to ask for contributions even from foreign subjects, recommended that old Arditti neither respond nor give a single cent. He, as consul, wrote immediately to the ministry demanding energetically every protection for his subject. The government and consulate corresponded about this case, when Gershon Arditti received a second letter from the committee, in which they demanded a sum of five thousand liras, payable in three days, under the threat of death. And this second letter was turned over to the Italian consul. The consul again asked the ministry for protection and all the guarantees for the security of its subject. The ministry responded that the police had taken all the necessary measures to guarantee the safety of Gershon Arditti and all that belonged to him. For close to two weeks secret police agents were seen near his residence and shop.

On the third week, when Gershon Arditti was in his chancellery in front of his safe, alone as was his custom, doing the accounts of the incomes and expenses of the day, a villager entered to pay for a pair of clothing that had been ordered by a client from a small city in the interior. The employees of Arditti saw that villager enter and watched

him leave without raising any suspicion. Not half an hour had passed since the villager had left when one of the employees entered the Arditti's chancellery and found him dead, bathed in his blood.

In the country house that belonged to Gershon Arditti, in a place that was called "Las Vinias," half an hour from the city, a young woman dressed in black was speaking with a man of fifty years in the orchard. Not far from them was a young girl of about four years, busy playing with the governess. The young woman was Miriam Arditti. Her companion, who is also known to us, was the attorney Fintzy, brother-in-law of Refael Alvo.

In the three and a half years that had passed since Miriam Arditti separated from Refael Alvo and returned back to her old father, she had become even more beautiful and gracious than before. Elevated characters have the particularity that the sufferings of life spread over their faces and over all their appearance like a fine veil of generosity and nobility. As fine gold always becomes more elastic and soft the more the hammer hits it and the fire burns it, so Miriam Arditti had become in these three and a half years a woman of high and noble sentiments, a fine and sensitive woman, an intelligent and enlightened woman, a heart that knew how to partake in the anxieties and sadnesses of each of her secrets without showing the world her own pain.

The first months after her return to the house of her father were truly infernal for Miriam. Her anxieties were so great and numerous that, at different times, the young woman was on the cusp of ending her days, of finding the deepest place in the great river to drown both herself and her shame, all her evil and all the pains of her heart. If it were not for the little girl who she was then still maintaining with the milk of her bitter breast, Miriam Arditti would certainly already be lost and forgotten in the depths of the river. But on the one hand, there was this little child, the only precious token of the most unfortunate love, and on the other hand, there was that most miserable of men, that blind man, who was surely crying in a strange land over his bitter fortune, cursing himself and his own bitter life, and cursing her, who abandoned him after having everything taken from him, even his sight. And there was also the consideration that she owed to her aging father, although this same father was the cause of all the ills. These three people, who were the most precious in the world for

Miriam, made her resist the desire to put an end to her days, to find in death the rest that life refused to give her.

The anxieties of the first months were so great and profound that Miriam marveled how she had not lost her mind, how she had not gone crazy. After all the letters that she had written Refael Alvo were returned unopened and with the remark from the Italian post that “the addressee refused to receive them,” she learned that Refael Alvo was completely blind and that he was in the “Asylum of Peace” near the city of Florence. When this unfortunate news reached her, she wanted to drop everything and rush to his side, to spend her life with the man whom she herself had brought ill luck. But the warnings that she had received from Branko Kapitanovitch forced her to abandon this idea. The doctor at the “Asylum of Peace” wrote that the state of Refael Alvo did not permit him any excitement. Doctor Bruzante kept writing that for Refael Alvo, there was no cure other than forgetting, complete rest, and solitude. Once Doctor Bruzante wrote to Branko, “Heartache was the reason your friend lost his sight. If you come again to trouble him and awaken these old pains, he could lose his wits—he could go insane. Three or four years of time should pass for your unfortunate friend to revert to occupying himself with the people and the questions that interest him. Before that, it is impossible.”

Therefore, there was no way for Miriam to act on her burning desire. She could not draw near to Refael Alvo, could not consecrate her whole life to him, all the blood of her heart, to the last drop. Patience, patience, three or four years! To Miriam, this seemed like an eternity.

And the good people of the city, the good Jews pointed at Miriam and did not tire of saying, “See, she has come back to us, the damsel, the . . . the hussy; she fled from the house of her father in the middle of the night with her beau, spent a year living in fields and scurrying like dogs, she very well bled dry that unfortunate man, she spent him down to the last *grush*, she bled him dry even of the sight of his eyes, she left him blind and alone in foreign lands, and, look, she has now come back to us with a little child at her breast, with a bastard that she bore into the world. She neither ate garlic nor did her mouth stink. Did you see her? . . . Look! . . . That’s her, the pretty one—her father’s great Jewel, the hussy, the . . .! Poor stepmother who lost her

head for love of this shameless girl, poor Rachel who was so alive and so young! I should be as lucky as you, Miriam . . .! As the refrain says, 'My father's fortune covers my humps.' And she is also going to find a mate, her money is enough, there are men who will take her even with five bastards, not just one . . ."

Gershon Arditti received his daughter without complaint. It seemed that his heart of stone felt neither irritation nor bitterness from the affront that this only daughter had done to him. As before, the old man treated Miriam like she was an instrument that should serve to secure his wealth. Also as before, Miriam was in his eyes the daughter that the heavens presented him to take a good son-in-law and to hand over to him all his worth, saying, "It was I who collected all of this until today; I hand it over to you so that you will multiply it and that you gather with your own labor much more, so that you also pass it to your son." Still, in truth, Gershon Arditti felt much less amity toward Miriam than before. And this was understandable: before her flight, in the eyes of Gershon Arditti, no young man seemed worthy to be his son-in-law and inherit his worth. But now he told himself that any young man from a good and rich family should refuse the honor of being the son-in-law of *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti and take as a wife who was living in concubinage with that printer. He should therefore lower his expectations; he should content himself with some young man from a middle-class or poor family or some widower. All of this seemed to him like degradation, like debasement and dishonor, and that is why he did not forgive his daughter's affront. It was not for any higher or nobler feeling that Gershon Arditti was enraged at Miriam, but rather for feelings of pride and materialism.

With Miriam's little daughter, old Arditti acted as if she were a stranger to him. He never touched her or spoke to her. When the toddler began to speak several words, one of the maidservants taught her to say "*papu*." His terrible rage cut the word from the little girl's lips. Miriam had not seen so much enmity from her father in front of a small, innocent, and gracious child. She hid her little daughter when she could so that she would not appear before the eyes of the old man. Poor and unfortunate mother!

In the first months, Gershon Arditti did not have much trust in Miriam. He would always start trembling at the idea that his

daughter might still be pining after that “printer.” It was when he learned that Refael Alvo was completely blind that his heart began to rest from this fear. A blind man is three-quarters dead; there was no reason to fear that Miriam would have the crazy pretension of attaching her fate to a man blind in both eyes.

[. . .]

The sudden death of her father was for Miriam Arditti a new and formidable blow that had engulfed her without her ever thinking, without her ever imagining that such a thing could happen. Like lightning when it splits a clear and cloudless sky and pours out its fire at your feet with a frightening thunderclap to make you lose your mind, so was the effect of the murder of Gershon Arditti on his only daughter. In the first days, Miriam didn’t know where she was or what was happening around her. Her father who left in the morning healthy and strong was brought back to the house that night stiff and dead. The Italian consul and other functionaries of the consulate, functionaries of the police, the attorney Doctor Albahri, and other people came and went around her in those terrible days. They spoke to her of things that were entirely unknown to her, they wrote protocols that she did not understand, and they wanted to discuss questions and affairs that were entirely foreign to her.

Little by little, Miriam began to come to herself. Her father was no longer among the living, and she was now truly alone, with a small child of four years and a heart full of disappointment and sadness, without a single person close to counsel her, to tell her what she should do and how she should go about it. The truth was that Gershon Arditti was not the kind of father to earn and be worthy of his daughter’s affection, and he alone was the cause of her sadness. Nevertheless, she had a noble heart and she saw her misfortune as a punishment from the heavens. She did not blame her father nor feel enmity toward him. On the contrary, she hoped that he would one day be able to forget all that had happened and seek to recover geniality toward his disgraced daughter. Her only hope was that Gershon Arditti would one day retire from the fatigues of his working life and spend time near his daughter and his granddaughter, who was innocent of everything that had happened. Instead, they found her father dead, enveloped in his blood.

The Italian consul, who was a distinguished and noble man, considered it his duty in these circumstances to be near Miriam and to help her, since the young woman did not know and did not understand anything of the affairs of her father and of the procedures of her inheritance. It was he himself who was taking all the necessary steps to protect the interests of Miriam, who was the sole heir of all the worth of Gershon Arditti.

There was no will. Gershon Arditti still felt healthy and strong; he did not think of death. He did not concede to making a will even when his second wife was still alive and did everything in her power to convince him to make his testament. All the books found after his death were in the best order. The old man did not owe anyone even a single cent; everything he purchased was with cash. He, in contrast, was owed large sums. More than a quarter of a million in cash, aside from a large deposit of clothing that also represented a very important sum. In insurance papers, in money and in buildings, in clothing and in assets, the capital of Gershon Arditti surpassed more than two million francs.

Miriam was therefore quite rich. At the same time, she was also a disgraced woman. How could these riches serve her? What good could she see in them, when all her hopes were dead, when her future was covered by a dark and heavy veil, like that darkness that obscured the vision of that unfortunate youth, blind and disgraced for life, without a ray of light, without a shade of hope.

[. . .]

Miriam turned over all the affairs to the attorney Fintzy, Refael Alvo's brother-in-law, a quiet and intelligent man who was also like family to her. Why would she not allow him to earn money in this affair? The attorney Fintzy had gotten everything in order, with such precision and knowledge that the Italian consul did not stop praising him. On that day Fintzy had already given all the accounts to Miriam Arditti on certain collections and other questions. Before departing from the young woman, the attorney stayed several minutes longer, as if he had something on his heart but not the courage to utter what weighed upon him. It was Miriam who said to him, with a tone of friendship and with that sad little smile on her lips, which made her beautiful as an angel:

“Do you still want to say something to me, *Sinior Fintzy*? I’m ready to hear it.”

“Yes, it’s true. I read a piece of news in a gazette, but I don’t know if it is proper to speak with you about it. It does not concern business, but rather it concerns that . . . unfortunate . . . the father of this little girl.”

“It concerns the father of my child, and you don’t know if it is proper to speak with me about it . . . ! I beg you, *Sinior Fintzy*, tell me absolutely everything. There cannot be a question in life that has so much interest for me as that which concerns Refael Alvo,” she said with a trembling voice, choked with emotion.

“It’s a very extraordinary thing,” replied Fintzy, taking out of his pocketbook an edition of an important journal from Vienna. “For a week now all the newspapers of Europe have been publishing long articles on Refael and his paintings. It seems that there is an exhibition of these paintings that is about to be opened that is making great noise in the art world. This journal recounts the entire sad history of my brother-in-law, with great sympathy for the unfortunate Refael.”

Without letting him finish, Miriam, like a dead woman, took the newspaper and began to read. The paper contained a long article written and signed by one of the best known authors of German literature on the exposition of Refael’s paintings. The article was titled “The Blind Painter.” In it was recounted all the history of Refael Alvo—who Alvo was, where he was born, where he studied, and what difficulties he had to overcome to be able to consecrate himself to the art of painting. The history of Refael Alvo with Miriam Arditti was told in depth—their flight, their journeys, the misery in Vienna, and Miriam’s betrayal, when she left Refael to return to her father. Her name was not mentioned. The author merely stated that she was the daughter of a millionaire. With harsh words, the author castigated “the daughter of a millionaire” and condemned her behavior toward the unfortunate painter who lost everything because of a heartless woman. The author also condemned the parsimony of soul and the unkindness of Gershon Arditti, who had acted with such cruelty toward Refael Alvo but was not as much to blame as his daughter, as the daughter of the millionaire.

Then the author recounted the marvels of the works of “the blind painter.” The article was full of praise for his mastery, for

the force and nature of his pencil, for the grace of his use of color. Among more than ninety paintings that were exhibited, some were truly the works of a great master. One by one, Refael's works were described in all their details, and the author did not tire of expressing his admiration. Above all, there were three paintings of Jewish life and history that deserved the greatest attention. One of them showed a group of Jews gathered at night in a courtyard, saying the blessing for the new moon. The second painting showed "Hannah" and "Eli" (from the book of Samuel) in the Temple. Hannah was on her knees in front of the sanctuary, her eyes full of tears and her mouth open, as if begging the God of Israel that her soul's desire would come to pass. In front was Eli the *kohen*, looking at the young woman with curiosity and defiance. The third painting, the most beautiful and the greatest of all, was that which we know as Refael Alvo's last work before he became completely blind, and which carried the name *The Last Night*. The author described in his article the art, the bitter inspiration, and the pain that the painter expressed in this great work; he claimed that every man of high feelings was driven to tears in the presence of this sublime work. The author then expressed his admiration for other paintings by Refael, and the article finished in saying that Refael Alvo would have been one of the most important painters of our epoch, if he had not become blind at such a young age, that is to say, if "the daughter of a millionaire" had not come along to disgrace him for his entire life.

Miriam was bathed in tears when she finished reading the article. Everything that was written in the paper, all the bitter complaints and severe accusations against her, she had never tired of making them against herself. If the four walls of her room could speak, they would tell of all the pains that crushed her heart during those four years. Only God and her own heart knew the tears that she had cried alone, without anyone seeing. Yes, a thousand times yes, everything that the author had written was true. She, Miriam Arditti, "the daughter of a millionaire," was the cause of all of the misfortune of Refael Alvo, she was the reason why the painter lost his career and lost his vision, but not for infidelity, not for impulsiveness and lack of feelings, as the author blamed her with such severe words. No, and a thousand times no! If she had committed some fault, it was only because she

wanted to save her beloved, because she wanted to abrogate the terrible fate that threatened Refael, because she thought it was her duty to also console her father in his old age, to not let Gershon Arditti die with the curse of his only daughter on his lips. It seemed to her that in returning to her father's house, she would alleviate Refael's bitter fate, perhaps even convince her father to concede to their legitimate union, so that her little daughter could carry the name of her father, without taint and without repudiation.

Yes, she knew herself to be guilty and sinful, but not for impulsiveness and not for betrayal, save for the excess of love that her heart felt for Refael. All while crying warm tears, Miriam Arditti also felt profound satisfaction and happiness to see that Refael's art began to be met with the approval and recognition of the world. She knew of the fame of that author who wrote this article about "the blind painter," and she told herself that when a man of this competency wrote such praise about the works of her beloved, there was no longer doubt that Refael was in truth a great artist, an extraordinary talent, a genius who deserved the honors and respect of the whole world. And this flooded her with happiness mixed with her profound pain; it made the light of her beautiful eyes scintillate by the way of the tears that filled them. Little did she care that the author of the article condemned her with such harsh words; Refael Alvo and his art began to gather their well-deserved approval.

With a ray of happiness in her eyes, Miriam Arditti translated for the attorney Fintzy word for word what the author of the article had written about Refael Alvo, about his works and the role she herself played in the tragedy of "the blind painter." Then the young woman said, "I myself don't know why my heart begins to recover, as a breath of hope; it is insanity on my part to believe that clear days could still come to bring light to the dense darkness of my life. All the same, even without wanting to, I feel myself as if my heart wants to recover new hopes and a secret voice comes to tell me that all is not lost yet, that things could still take a turn for the better. Not even I myself know what to say, how to explain to myself how or in what manner, but it still seems to me that we should not despair entirely."

"It is always good not to abandon yourself to hopelessness," responded Fintzy, "not to lose courage entirely. Man lives with hope."