# The First of May

## GEORGIOS VIZYINOS (1849–1896)
## translated by SUSAN MATTHIAS

During a short stay in a provincial district in Thrace, I found myself occupied with matters so pedestrian and crude that my spiritual side had become like that sea monster of ancient Greek mythology, whose god-like form could no longer be discerned because of the mass of shells and seaweed that had accumulated upon its body.

But you will readily understand that such a degrading situation could only be tolerated by my spiritual side with continuous objections and protests, and therefore from time to time, especially when some external circumstance allied itself with my inner tendencies, my aforementioned spiritual side would shake off its material pollution, as the mule its burden, and would run light and free upon the blossoming meadows of the imagination, until once more becoming aware of worldly concerns, I burdened my spiritual side with twice the weight it was carrying before.

A tug of war of this sort between spirit and matter, between the banal and the poetic, was taking place within me during the evening which I intend to describe, and I call my reader's attention to the fact because otherwise he will be unable to comprehend from what follows how one person, I the writer, shifts in the course of this narrative from one mood to another, nor will he be able to perceive when, by turns, I deliver myself to the inspiration of the imagination and when I reason as the most cold-blooded of schoolmasters, nor how one moment I write in tones of poetic exaltation and the next descend to satire.

Barely had I found lodgings in the capital of the province than the local Bishop put at my disposal Old Moscos so that he might be of use to me as a guide, a bodyguard, a servant and an interpreter as the circumstances might demand. I hasten to add that at first I took this favour as an obligation arising from my old acquaintance with the Bishop; I soon realized, however, that His Holiness showed the same courtesy to each and every man in need of a servant, either because of some particular empathy for the helpless or because Old Moscos pleased his master only by his absence.

If the truth be told, Old Moscos, a limping, effeminate and superstitious man, was no fit company for a person of taste. To me, it is true, the man proved very useful, and – I mention it to his credit – on the very evening in question, he rendered me a great service by guiding me, on our return from the fields, to the place called Cold Spring, one of the most abundant and limpid springs that spurt up fairly close to each other all around the capital.

It was near dusk and I was exhausted; for I had spent that entire day running hither and thither to locate my grandfather's fields, not because they had changed location, but because they had got lost among the neighbouring farms, thus bearing out the truth of that well-known proverb according to which the big fish devours the small ones.

It was there, then, by the crystal streams of Cold Spring, under the spreading shade of a plane tree, that I stretched out my poor tired body and allowed my spiritual side a sigh of relief.

Above my head, cool breezes borne as though on silent wings could be heard, rustling the tender young leaves ever so slightly, like invisible daughters of Nature cradling to sleep their younger sisters. The gurgling waters of the spring, rippling at my feet in quick impatient wavelets spreading away from the rock cavity from where they bubbled up, would collide a bit further down both with the white pebbles of the stream-bed and with each other, spreading as if from crystal keys so sweet and voluptuously lulling a sound that the anemones and tulips blooming on the stream's banks seemed lazily to bend their flowery heads and reverently to bow to the rhythm of the waters flowing by their roots.

The sun had already descended so low to the west that only the cracked ramparts of the Byzantine castle, suspended in mid-air before me as of old, at the depth of the town's perspective, were bathed in its golden hue. The Christian dwellings around the hills were darkening ever more in the night shadows, especially because that evening by way of exception the shutters were closed as though they were the lids of sleepy eyes.

Even the joyous rural hymnodes, the winged inhabitants of the forests, could scarcely be heard adding in reverent brevity the closing refrain to the song of the day, could barely be seen flying like silent arrows in search of their nocturnal sanctuary.

Only the people in the valleys and on the hills were not growing sparser, heading silently homeward as usual; rather, their number was increasing as they left the town in merry groups, with a din and a hum like bees from hives, scattering around the banks of the brooks, the fields, and the gardens.

Old Moscos, sitting at some distance from me, was following furtively with curious eye now one now another of the passing throngs, as if trying to

recognize their members individually; but, as for me, I was preoccupied once more with thoughts on the matters that concerned me.

'How many miles is it from here to the railroad, Old Moscos?'

'Ten, by your leave.'

'And when does the train for Constantinople pass by?'

'When the sun has risen two or three flagstaffs high, by your leave.'

'Very well, Old Moscos, tomorrow I must be in Constantinople. So hire me a coach and bid the coachman to be ready to leave on time so we don't miss the train.'

Old Moscos looked at me askance for a few moments as though trying to make sense of my words. Then, with a knowing smile, he feigned a fake dry cough and began to hum a strange tune while tracing circles in the sand with the tip of his walking stick.

'Did you hear what I said to you, Moscos?'

'I heard, by your leave,' he answered, 'but I didn't understand.'

'On the morrow I must be in Constantinople,' I said somewhat peremptorily.

'Oh God and Virgin Mary!' Moscos cried out, crossing himself repeatedly. 'Tomorrow is a feast day, by your leave, and people in their senses don't go on a journey.'

'Did I perchance ask you what sort of day it is tomorrow, my good man? My business is more important to me than all of your feast days and it brooks no delay. So as soon as we get home, your first order of business is to find me a sturdy carriage with two strong horses, so that they don't give out on me along the way, as they did the last time.'

Old Moscos, as he was wont to do, gave vent to a stream of cries and lamentations, because I was unwilling to keep tomorrow's feast day and because he realized that he was getting nowhere.

'Is that it, then?' he said menacingly. 'Are you setting out tomorrow?'

'Most certainly! I just told you so.'

'Well, I'm giving you fair warning, by your leave, that whoever travels tomorrow will run into bad luck. He'll turn back mid-way through the journey.'

I opened my mouth to reprimand him for the thousandth time for his superstition, but right then from the bush across from us there emerged a jolly multitude of children of both sexes, some bare-headed, some barefoot, but all wearing the local costume, most picturesque in its variety, and all holding great bundles of wild flowers.

I barely had time to get a closer look at them before this little army surrounded me, clamouring, howling, jumping up and down, but always vying

with each other in hunting for anemones and tulips and any other kind of flower that could be found blossoming by the banks of the limpid stream.

When a little while later the sun's disc was altogether hidden behind the mountains to the west, the eldest of the children suddenly lifted aloft a great wreath of flowers, in the middle of which there was a cross also woven of flowers, and the rest of the children, taking places around him in a circle began to dance with enthusiasm, while lustily singing some folk song the first lines of which, if my memory does not deceive me, were:

The month of May has just come in, come in the month of May,
With blossoms and with flowers and with roses here to stay.

And this most colourful scene unfolding before me in miniature was repeated over and over in all its idyllic delight by all the groups wandering about in the country, for indeed the air was resounding from all directions near and far, as now the words, now just the tune of the song chanted by the children, could be discerned.

I confess in all sincerity that the moment I beheld the white-haired, lame Old Moscos chanting and bounding, as though electrified, among this swarm of children who were showering him with flowers, I felt my cheeks aflame with shame because, for the above-mentioned reasons, I had forgotten that this was the eve of the First of May.

And yet, when that joyful company, arranged in formation, began to proceed toward the town, in order to announce in songs and joyful cries to anyone perhaps sick or invalid who had remained at home, in order to proclaim, one would almost say, even to the dead, that

The month of May has just come in, come in the month of May,
With blossoms and with flowers and with roses here to stay,

I, in spite of all the importance implicit in the spectacle, was unable to control my laughter. Because, behind the children, I spied Old Moscos tagging along, *by your leave*, who didn't bother to ask my permission to go, but who took great pains while he was singing and dancing to hide from the children's sight his limping gait.

But when those mellifluous and joyful voices faded beyond the depth of the horizon and I was left all alone, no longer hearing anything but the babbling of the stream before me and life's melancholy lament in the distance, then my soul was shaken to its depths, I felt my breast fill with sadness, and

my eyes flooded with tears.

So, it was I alone who did not partake of the general merriment and jubilation of this great celebration of Nature. Only I and the dead did not greet the return of May, the month of roses and of nightingales, the month of loves and kisses! Only I and the dead, who had no one to decorate their tombs tonight with a few flowers, so that they too might learn that

> The month of May has just come in, come in the month of May,
> With blossoms and with flowers and with roses here to stay.

And yet – there was a time long, long ago when, there, by the shores of the Bosporus, or upon the pine-covered seashore of Chalki – there – who awaited more impatiently than I the first days of May? Who celebrated their arrival more joyfully? Who enjoyed them more poetically than I? And leaning on the root of the plane tree, I gave vent to the stream of my memories and I began to see those oh so distant yet so fresh images of former Mays parading in my imagination.

And I could see before me, under the magical half-light of dawn, the girls of the Bosporus and of the gem-like Prince's Islands, girls fresh as morning dew, now seeking flowers, now clustered together, embodiments of fragrant Paradise, rushing to meet their lovers. And I listened spellbound to their honey-sweet songs, to their silver-toned laughter, to their mordant and at times perilous pleasantries. And I delighted in their disarray and I marvelled at the beauty of their faces and their Venus-like bearing. And I would run confidently toward them, now presenting to an unknown maiden a flower and a little couplet, now stealing a kiss from some girl of my acquaintance, needless to say at an unguarded moment. And yet one would think that those pleasure-filled images were parading now before my fancy just as those cool, playful and singing waters of the nearby brook flowed past the unfeeling rock. Because, in fact, the pedestrian side, the one concerned only with what is useful and practical, had once more prevailed within me and was asking in a stern and strident voice, 'Really now, to what end this waste of time and money? What does the First of May really mean? Was His Lordship the Month of May perchance created in a saintly mould? And by what rhyme or reason?' So in the midst of this most romantic reverie, compelled so unexpectedly for better or worse to give an answer to these questions, I began like the most insignificant among the schoolmasters of Thrace to harbour thoughts which I put forth here solely to gratify the curiosity of my readers.

The feasting of the First of May – just like some of our other spring customs, such as the dyeing of Easter eggs, the arrival amidst children's songs

of the swallow, the stork, the cuckoo and other migratory birds – is undoubtedly an ancient relic of nature-worship among our first ancestors who – unprotected as they were against the harshness of winter and sustained exclusively by the produce of the earth, but, for psychological reasons as well, responding emotionally to natural phenomena – were downcast and saddened upon the arrival of winter but were exultant and rejoicing upon the return of spring, receiving with joyful spirit spring's first heralds, the swallows and the blossoms.

When paganism, having personified the various aspects of the setting sun, worshipped them as specific gods, then those initial rites of spring were apportioned among Isis, Dionysus, Demeter, Apollo, Chloris (Flora), and any other god that was perchance considered to preside over the bounty of nature or to be responsible for the growth of plants.

And thus it came to pass that in place of that initial and spontaneous elation of people upon the sight of life's rebirth in nature, our ancestors thereafter celebrated as rituals holidays such as the Advent of Flowers, the Blossoming of Spring, the Sprouting of Grass, the Freshness of Foliage, and finally those Dionysiac revels the springtime splendour of which was extolled by the greatest lyric poets of Greece. The exalted Pindar hymned their vernal glory as follows:

> Whensoever, at the opening of the chamber of the purple-robed Hours, the fragrant Spring bringeth the nectar-breathing plants. Then, oh then, are flung on the immortal earth the lovely tresses of violets, and roses are entwined in the hair; then ring the voices of songs to the sound of flutes; then ring the dances in honor of diadem-wreathed Semele.

However, the other spring-time celebrations of Ancient Greece were by no means lacking by comparison, either in splendour or in merriment. Because while on the one hand religious veneration gathered the celebrants in majestic piety, on the other the relaxed innocence of morals, the free attitude prevailing in the upbringing of ancient Greeks, adorned the behavior of the celebrants toward each other with such flexibility and grace that no one felt the oppressiveness of religion, no one craved to return to that ancient manner of nature worship.

It is true that the free attitude and mirth that have always characterized those feasts degenerated by degrees into debauchery. And from the playful bantering brought forth in an intangible manner by true gladness of heart, there emerged by degrees obscenities and jeers such as are haughtily hurled under

the mask of religious authority, while on the other hand from the night-long revelries in honor of the god Iacchus within the folds of blossoming meadows, revelries in which not even Aristophanes himself ever allowed anyone to participate –

> whoever is impervious to such upright promptings is either of impure thought or he neither witnessed nor danced in rites suitable to the noble Muses

– there evolved over time the feast in honor of Chloris (Flora), the deity of vegetation, who as *mater florum ludis celebranda jocosis* (the mother of flowers celebrating with joyful games), allowed to her adorants on the Eve of the First of May any moral laxity, any debauchery in matters of love.

No wonder therefore that Christianity in its moral severity condemned, among other manifestations, the feast celebrating the fertility of nature, intent first and foremost upon devaluing in the conscience of the faithful the material world and upon turning their gaze away from the life of Nature, dragging them away into deserts of deprivation.

Nonetheless, it is not easy to separate the child from its mother. That psychological attraction between the inner man and the multi-faceted outer world could neither be checked by even the most severe asceticism nor be replaced by the communion of hermits with angels. And since Christianity lacked the wherewithal with which to satisfy so innocent but so powerful a passion within our soul, mankind, consistent with its own nature, returned to the state of things that had prevailed prior to idolatry, a state which perhaps had never vanished from memory. And that is why people began to celebrate May, at times like the children in Thrace and at times in a more dramatic fashion, representing the victory of spring against winter and the triumphant entry of May into the land with various symbols.

The Church at first turned a blind eye; subsequently she sanctified the revived custom by blessing the floral wreaths in honor of the new year and by allowing the faithful to make of the first fruits of spring 'offerings of elation to the gardener of creation.' And, to cap it all, the monks of the north get the 'largest share' of the branches (twigs which they call Maie) that May brings with its arrival from the forests on a four horse drawn chariot. And they blanket with leaves and flowers the grounds around the church on the First of May, just as we ourselves do at Easter and Pentecost even today.

Thus indeed mankind is proven consistent with itself in matters concerning its innate or god-given tendencies and weaknesses and is not turned away from

those inclinations either by the passage of time or by religion or by differences in degrees of civilization and culture. Such was the conclusion arrived at by the schoolmasterly side of me. And yet, he remarked to himself – although within the church and among the children in the provinces, the First of May retained that primordial naiveté and purity of nature-worship, along the banks of the Bosporus – and, if I am not mistaken – in glorious Athens, it sank once more to the level of eroticism and took on a Roman character. Is there perchance some consequence couched even within this inconsequence? And surprised by his own philosophical ingenuity, the schoolmaster within me sat up like a man who has suddenly discovered how to square the circle and is pondering how he might possibly utilize this discovery to his eternal fame and glory. But suddenly a strange noise perturbed the cycles of these ideas, reminding me that I was still sitting by the spring on the outskirts of the town in Turkish territory, a territory which is not particularly famous for its public safety. So I jumped up right away and surveyed my surroundings, I admit, not without some suspicion.

Quite some time must have elapsed since Old Moscos had taken off dancing with the flower-bedecked children, leaving me his master, *by your leave*, stuck right there on the trunk of the plane tree. Because now all around the country, a deep silence prevailed and the nearly full moon, risen majestically behind the picturesque hills to the east, bathed everything beneath it with a truly magical sheen.

But, really, what was that noise which had perturbed me? It seemed to me like a forceful rustle of branches being broken, followed first by a whisper and next by a woman's sigh. Then I remembered that I was indeed in the land of the 'Sighs' and of the 'Witches,' that is to say the birthplace of the Bacchae and the Maenads, who in days of yore in the frenzy of their orgies tore the body of the unlucky Orpheus to pieces and threw his dead head along with his broken lyre into the waves of the river Hebrus. An awful shiver ripped through my nerves. For at that very moment, the bushes across and beyond the stream were noisily and forcefully agitated and a pale-faced individual dressed in a white ankle-length robe, with its naked arms stretched forth, with its small head and loose hair blown back by its own momentum, threw itself with lightning speed into the brook, crossed the waters, and with frantically wandering eyes, shot past the plane tree in the shadow of which I happened to be standing and disappeared behind it. I do not remember if I tried to scream, but I confess that a ridiculous horror held me rooted to the spot.

For a few moments, nothing could be heard but the rhythmic noise of a violently beating heart, which however I cannot assert was my own. That

previous noise was now repeated in precisely the same spot among the bushes on the other side of the stream, but weaker than the first noise; and a second individual emerging from within the bushes carefully crossed the stream, following the footsteps of the first without noticing me.

'Calm down, my love. It was nothing,' whispered the second in a voice, betraying a lovestruck but courageous youth.

'You'll be the very end of me, you rascal. It was my husband,' the other voice now answered from right behind the plane tree from where you could hear the pounding heart.

'Oh, to hell with the . . .,' interrupted the lover through clenched teeth, meaning either that the flattering adjective he was about to utter was exclusively applicable to her husband or that he too had become conscious of the screams of a man who now could be heard wailing and lamenting from afar.

'Oh, my God and my Lord, what misfortune has befallen me! Oh, better to have broken both my legs rather than this. There's no hope now. The bishop will skin me alive. All is lost now. The witches have got hold of him.'

And just as I was straining to hear the rustle of the pair rushing away behind me with all speed and caution, I saw by the spring the outline of a man whom I could barely recognize as my own servant, Old Moscos. For not only was his voice distorted with terror, I suppose, but his appearance, as well, on account of the flowers covering his head, several of which were protruding from his temples, producing an unearthly effect.

I leave it to my reader to imagine the joy of that simple man when, after much hesitation and precautions, he was finally reassured that the person standing under the plane tree was indeed I, very much myself, and not some ghost or goblin, and that I his master was just as Old Moscos had left me – that is, *by your leave*, untouched by the witches and therefore safe and unharmed and harmless.

When Old Moscos was relieved of all these worries, he proceeded to blame himself in a most comical manner for having taken off, leaving me prey to the witches roaming through the night. But he reproached me yet more sternly because instead of returning to town, dancing along with him and the children, a flower wreath upon my head, as any good Christian would have done, I had stayed there, like a log, exposed to the temptations of the devils.

It's a good thing, he kept saying, that he went to town himself and hung the wreath of May, with the cross in the middle, just in time over my entrance door, because otherwise the entire assembly of devils would be jumping around and carrying on orgies right in my house.

When Old Moscos finished enumerating his utterly imaginary fears, looking anxiously about him as he limped towards me, I said,

'Did you make sure to place a May wreath over the door to your own house, Old Moscos?'

'There's no need, by your leave.'

'And how so?'

'Hmm! My wife is in there and she's really a fine figure of a woman. Who'd dare to stick his nose inside?'

'Do you mean to say your wife is not afraid of sorcery?'

'Are you joking? For you information, master, it would be nothing for her to put a spell even on the bishop – may we have his blessing! And here you're talking about being scared of Laegissa and Trelloxanthi, or any other of those witches who play the saint and harbor the devil inside them?'

'And so you think that your wife is one of them, Old Moscos?'

'You're not serious, master. It's just a manner of speaking, by your leave. After all, didn't she work her charms on me to get me to marry her? Think of it! Was I up for marriage, a man of my age and a lame one at that? But how could I resist? The little vixen is so young and pretty. And I, who had some money aside, figured I wouldn't live long enough to spend it all on myself.'

'And now?'

'Now, you'd think she put a spell on the money, and it vanished right out of the money boxes and the tin cans and the knotted handkerchiefs, where I had it all hidden. Hurts to think of it. Just the same, may God protect the bishop who married us, at least he doesn't let me sit around and guard the house door like so many others with nothing to do.'

And Old Moscos was saying all that with such a naive sense of pleasure that it would seem a crime for one to disrupt his happiness by advising him that he had better guard the door of his house rather than wear flowers as he wore them on his head, high on his temples, so that the witches would not touch him.

Entering the town, I noticed by the bright moonlight that in fact every one of the houses had a good-sized flower wreath, with a cross in the centre, attached to its carefully closed front door. The windows of the houses were also carefully closed and there was no one in the streets.

Still, Old Moscos kept cautioning me that if perchance we should encounter someone, I should neither look him in the face nor greet him, not even return his greeting.

'And if he happens to be an acquaintance, Old Moscos?'

'Not even then, by your leave.'

'You rogue! And what if you see your wife in front of you? Won't you greet her?'

'God forbid! How in the world would I know whether or not she has the devil in her tonight? Because, look, only the women possessed by the devil run around in the streets tonight, they and their devil-spouses. God forbid you should talk to them in the street or that they should find a door without a wreath and a cross. You talk to them, and they take away your voice. You touch them, and woe betide the moment! That's how my foot went lame when I was still a little boy. When they find a door to come in, they take the health and wealth right out of the house.'

'Look! I think that a coachman lives here, Old Moscos, and I see his door is wide open.'

'This one's a Turk, by your leave, and Greek witchery doesn't get to him.'

'So much the better. He'll take me to the train, then.'

After making a deal with him and arranging the details of my trip, I instructed Moscos to wake me up very early – in spite of all his objections and protestations, his constant reiterations of the threat that 'whoever travels on the First of May will turn back midway through the journey'; because all the crossroads and passes are straddled by the witches.

When upon the morrow we harnessed the horses, the town was still asleep and the streets deserted. It was early dawn. However, our coach was soon rolling through the plain among dense wheat fields, and the skylarks, wakened by the sound of the tinkling bells around the necks of my horses, rose into the clear air warbling their first song of the day, perhaps earlier than usual.

At first, I thought I might fall asleep in the coach; I was so very tired. But the ever-increasing luminosity of dawn, the song of the birds, the cool morning breezes encircling my face, quickly revived my depleted energies and once more opened the eyes of my soul to the surrounding beauties of Nature.

Old Moscos maintained a respectful silence by my side. Still, an inner anxiety was reflected on his face, most evident whenever we reached crossroads or narrow passes, which he invariably began to scrutinize from afar, as if he were afraid lest the witches might have buried somewhere near there a devilish pot of dynamite in order to blow us up.

After a short while, the sun decked the horizon with that majesty of light and colour about which many of us in Athens wax poetic in speech and writing, but few of us ever are up early enough to witness with our own eyes. The horses were cooperatively galloping along the smooth road, becoming ever more lively, and the coach was now traversing an immense field in which the dense, long stalks of wheat were bent in places towards the earth, more

than would seem natural, either because of their own weight, or because it had just rained there, or even perhaps because people or animals had just passed through the field.

'Oh, my Lord and my God!' Moscos cried out in fright when he saw this.

'The witches crushed it. It was the witches!'

'How did the witches crush it, Moscos?'

'With their broomsticks, by your leave. With the broom they use to clean the oven before putting in the loaves.'

And Moscos said this in such an expressive manner that he attracted the attention of the coachman seated beside us, who happened to know our language.

'Just how with the broomstick, Moscos?' I asked, barely able to hold back laughter at the comical expression of anger and fear reflected on Old Moscos's face.

'Oh,' Moscos answered in despair, 'you learned people who know so much, in fact you don't know anything. So listen to this...'

The coachman, his curiosity aroused, came still closer to Moscos, leaving the horses to guide themselves. And Moscos, having taken a careful look around him to make certain that no witch nearby was listening to him, said,

'During the night of the First of May, the witches rise up in their chemises from the mattress where they were sleeping next to their husbands, ride their broomstick, they give it a whack with a cold snake that they hold for a whip – and off they go. With their hair standing on end and barefoot, they run so fearsomely and quickly you'd think their feet don't touch the ground. And riding this way on their broomsticks, they fall upon the villagers' fields, dragging behind them the cloth end of the broom. And with it, they gather up the moisture of May from the stalks. Wherever the broomstick passed by, where there were wheat stalks, nothing but ashes remains; wherever the witch wrings out the moisture she stole, the farmers thresh grain and winnow out gold.'

The way this man clove to superstition filled me with so much spite that I was ready to inform him that from what I had seen yesterday by the 'Cold Spring' with my very own eyes, the witches of which he spoke ride anything but broomsticks and the gold they sift is that which they take from late-marrying old fuddy duddies like himself, *by your leave*. But suddenly, I felt a powerful quake and a jolt from behind me, on account of which I nearly bit my tongue in two. A hair-raising din and rumble! The coach swayed like a sinking ship, and we inside were hurled helter-skelter in mid-air and fell in a heap upon the ground in danger of being crushed by the rear wheels if the horses had moved.

'Sh.. on your witchcraft,' moaned Old Moscos from under me, barely able to breathe. 'Didn't I tell you? The witches crossed this pass!...'

The truth is that the coachman, his attention riveted on Moscos's narration, had neglected to guide the horses, which advanced as they pleased, until one of the rear wheels, having fallen with great momentum into a deep ditch, broke, hurling us all out of the coach.

After the inevitable cries and lamentations, Old Moscos loaded our things on his shoulders and returned on foot with me to the town, albeit very happy, thinking that at last I had been convinced by the facts that 'whoever travels on the first of May will turn back midway through the journey.'