One

ALICE’S PERPLEXITIES

My name is Alice, even if my friends call me Miss Common Sense. I cannot remember how old I am, although I feel like I have been living for a long time. I lost track of my age the day a rabbit convinced me to celebrate my non-birthday. I like pancakes with syrup, the number 25 and the bluish-green color that some lakes have. I live in a cold, damp country. Sometimes I like it, and sometimes I do not.

Do not worry. I am not going to write about my likes and dislikes, or about my country. So about what am I going to write? A Buddhist saying is that when the wise man points to the moon, the fool looks at his finger. This book is a description of the Buddhist’s finger. But I have an excuse for the foolishness: a good friend told me that I will never understand a juggler if I look at the balls the juggler tosses into the air.

The fact is that since I have had use of reason, whatever that may be, I keep a notebook where I write down anecdotes that leave me perplexed and for which I cannot find an explanation. The notebook’s title is “Perplexities.” What sort of anecdotes does the notebook contain? I will tell you some of them throughout this book.

One day, I showed the notebook to a professor, who was a good friend until she recommended a book to me, or what she believed to be a book. She told me that “a kind of professor, or not, whose name begins with O...,” had written a book some time ago that was called “Slifes.” The problem is that it was a pirated edition and soon became impossible to find.

I do not think a library exists anywhere, public or private, or a book store, be it old, new, or forgotten that does not know my face and my resignation. Nothing. Not a trace. Until a week ago. I was wandering one spring Sunday through a flea market, when I found myself looking at a chest of drawers that was exactly like my grandmother’s. I opened the second drawer and there it was, dusty, old, and worn out.

I did not understand a thing. And then I got angry. I had spent quite a few years looking for the damned book, and now it turns out that the Buddhist was right. The work, if something with only one page of original text can be called that, consisted of a list of aphorisms and a series of bibliographical sources. The aphorisms were incomprehensible or impossible. But the strangest thing was the sources. An endless catalogue of autobiographies, diaries, and chronicles written in the first person. Thousands of them.

I spent a few hours of insomnia tossing and turning in bed, my spirits ruffled, my thoughts weighed down with reproaches. You may say that I was going too far, that it was not such a big deal, that no perplexities exist, and
especially not mine, that warrant such a reaction. You are right. It is not worth all that, but that is the way I am. Somebody must have passed through my childhood and sprinkled me with windows where paradoxes happily peep out. And life appears to cultivate them like flowers in a cemetery; they spring up with no effort.

Since I could not get to sleep, I decided to go out. I wandered the streets of my city for a few hours. I suppose it was the time of day. That moment of the dawn is the time I like most, and the time I enjoy the least. It appears like the city belongs to me. The air barely has consistency, and you can still name the sounds. I felt something, went home, and I went to bed, barely seeing my bed. Then one of those strange things occurred that happen to me sometimes. When I woke up, I was in a different world. Do not ask me how I did it. I do not know why, or how, or when.

The fact of the matter is that this “world” where I landed is a kind of archipelago. Its residents call it Arkadia, which makes them Arkadians. I was awakened by what appeared a fellow disguised as a rabbit who introduced me to the famous stranger, this non-professor O, who was exactly like I had imagined him to be. He was short and had a nasal voice, smoked a pipe and scratched his head a lot, and I had tea with him for a week. Now that I think about it, all I did was have tea. The fact is that the first day I got up at teatime. The fellow disguised as a rabbit took me to the terrace where Non-Professor O was smoking a pipe, and we talked all afternoon, until the sun disappeared below the horizon. Then everyone went to bed. Strangely enough, the next day, the rabbit woke me up again, and strangely enough, it was tea-time again. That is how the whole week went by.

I am telling you this because Non-Professor O convinced me that in order to understand his aphorisms it would be good for me to get to know the Arkadians. Arkadians seem to be different to human beings, he told me. The differences mainly have to do with their way of perceiving the world, of understanding it, of thinking it, if such a thing can be said. It is not very different from the human way, although it works slightly differently.

I am not sure that Arkadia has helped me to explain my perplexities, but it has allowed me to look at them from a different perspective. This book is an attempt to share that perspective with you. I do not know if you have perplexities, but I can lend you mine, because the panorama is definitely worth the trip.

The first thing I will do is present Non-Professor O’s list of aphorisms. I think that will help you. I will continue with the transcriptions of my conversations with Non-Professor O on the seven days that I was in Arkadia, and I will finish by showing you how Arkadia helped me figure out the meaning of the aphorisms.

Before starting, I should caution you about two things. The differences between Arkadians and human beings are extremely slippery, and sometimes
appear trivial. My effort has been aimed at stressing the differences. Many of
the readings will not appreciate them, and others cannot do so. Which is a pity.
Secondly, the only thing that can be derived from this book is a perspective on
a landscape, not a detailed description of it. Thus, everything that is in the
landscape remains to be explored.

Therefore, in the best of cases, this book can only be considered the “tap-
tap” that we give to a compass so that it loosens its lazy needle and effectively
points north. I do not deny that it is perhaps the north of my lunacy. But I bet
that it will not be easy for you to find out the truth.