The People's Ghost

by Arthur Ogilvy Hasting

I.

There was a time when the Kendrelands were young. In those days, the Red River ran white through the dales, unsoiled by kin-spilled blood. Men warred with elves more than each other. The bards were many in number and still true to their audience, singing our earliest and most celebrated songs. Trading ships seldom voyaged beyond local waters, and thus was duly limited the influence of foreign kings. The gods were good—Strong Apollo guarded our wholeness by day, and Sweet Calliope charmed our wonder by night. The lords ruled rightly, and the shameful turbulence of the Seven Spears War was yet far off. The hearts of our countrymen beat red and one in their breasts, and their spirits did swell and soar with pride unfettered—and if they ever languished, they never languished long.

In those days, Fionn Kilshane was High Lord of the Duchy of Kilshannon. He was the bravest and wisest of those great men who drove out the green wyrm Grimfaltre and made safe the forests and skies, and all agreed that he should be named Duke for the founding of a new realm. The Duke envisioned a great city that would rival the high walls and broad streets of old Montrais. It would be his family's seat of power for generations to come. He laid the first stones along the banks of the Red River and named it Shannoway, and he devoted himself to the overseeing of its growth. When Fionn's eldest son Liam inherited the throne, he dutifully continued his father's work, and Shannoway prospered.

In the thirty-sixth year of High Lord Liam's reign, a remarkable woman was born. She was the long-awaited first child of Lord Emil O'Hennessy and his wife Lady Brenna. They named her Amanda after her mother's mother, and they cherished her dearly. Alas, the delivery had been grueling, and every reputable apothecary, healer, and priest had come to the same conclusion: the good lady would not likely survive a second childbirth. Lord Emil was crestfallen, for he badly wanted a son to carry on the family name. His fears were allayed when his younger brother Lord Aymer announced the birth of his own son several months later, but still the obligation weighed heavily on him—as the elder brother, he was troubled by his failure to produce an heir. Other discreet solutions were suggested, but Emil would entertain none of them—he was a man devoted to his wife, and he could not blame her for what

he keenly felt were his own shortcomings. The patriarch of House O'Hennessy, it seemed, would have one child and one child only.

This misfortune by no means diminished the lord's adoration for his daughter, whose proper rearing he and his wife oversaw with careful attention. Even in her earliest years Amanda O'Hennessy was much like her father—indeed, perhaps in answer to his prayers, she had inherited many qualities that are prized in young men yet in young women are cause for alarm. She shied away from the trappings and toys of girlhood, preferring swords and horses over dresses and jewelry. She had conviction of principle and sureness of thought, and as such she was a willful child. She had a strong sense of justice and was quick to challenge bullies, especially the ones who were much older and ought, she reasoned, to know better. She was inquisitive as a rule and was amazed when people were so easily frustrated by her questions. For these offenses she was chided by well-meaning servants and caretakers, but their disapproval only made her more stubbornly determined.

For all of this, she was not entirely ungovernable, and some traditions did make their mark on the girl, as traditions do. She had an excellent education, with an emphasis on history and law. She learned all about the workings of the aristocracy, and while she came to appreciate the necessity of guarding one's own lineage against ruin, she felt a growing distaste for the conventions of the ruling class. The role of marriage, in particular, was highly unappealing to her; frankly, the idea of it made very little sense at all. She would one day give away her name to the man she loved, and he would treasure her forever—like a pretty jewel or a nice painting. If she did not love him, odds were she could at least identify a redeeming quality or two in him, and she would certainly love her children if not her husband, and at any rate the political benefits would be some consolation. A perfect load of rubbish.

Experience confirmed many of her suspicions about betrothal. She played the matchmaking game reluctantly, mostly to appease her aging parents who insisted that she think of her future. But how could her future possibly lie with any of these supposedly eligible men? Sitting across from her through dinners unending, ploughing through conversation—fumbling questions, regurgitated compliments,

puerile boasting! She approached these encounters with a sort of morbid fascination, marveling time and again at how people could be so full of empty words. Her partners, no doubt, were equally amazed when their careful courting tactics produced no effect upon the irregular lady. Rare is the man who can engage a woman without condescending to her, and when she makes no effort to disguise the fact that her intellect is more than a match for his own…well. It is known that many harsh and unfair claims, which bear no repeating here, were made about Lady Amanda in private circles. She was unsurprised by the gossip and believed all the more that she had been wise to reject her suitors. It stung at her to be the subject of rumors, but she had her father's love and her mother's, and such love can do much to shield a girl against the jealous cruelties of petty men.

Against the years, however, even a stout heart may waver. As her adolescence faded behind her, noble custom endured in spite of Amanda's disdain for it, and her defiant anger began to mellow into frustration. Perfunctory wedding invitations, which she was obligated by etiquette to accept, arrived month after month. She attended the ceremony of nearly every man whose affections she had repulsed, quietly loathing the small part of herself that now felt envious as she politely looked on. What she really wished for, of course, was not marriage; alas, her breeding blinded her to this truth, persuading her instead that she now desired the sort of union she had once so proudly eschewed. Doubt crept in, and then fear. Time had already etched its first lines into her face, and the most tolerable bachelors had long been claimed. Who among those remaining could she even want, and who among them would want her? Lord Emil and Lady Brenna were of declining health, and their prospects of living to see their daughter's wedding seemed to dwindle by the day. Futility closed over the road ahead like a cold fog, and more than once did it bring Amanda to tears.

She found purpose and comfort in her duties to the people. Having learned from her mother to rule with a kind and even hand, she sought to be gentle with common folk and to bring their abusers to justice—and how many were her ways! When bandits needed to be swept from the highways, it was Lady Amanda and Ser Lucas Montel, her staunch knight-commander, who most often led the charge.

She frequently enforced the Duke's law personally in matters of civil dispute, and her magistrates enjoyed plentiful holidays. She remembered the names of those whom she had only met in passing, and she amazed them by sending generous gifts on their birthdays. In the grand tourneys she dedicated her victories to those who stood all day in the sun just to cheer her name, and glad she was to raise them above their birth even briefly by the might of her sword and lance. In short, Amanda O'Hennessy was adored by the public, for they saw how she championed them with her every word and deed. Never could they have known how grateful she felt for their devotion, and never could she have realized how worthy she was of it. She clung dearly to the color it shone on her gray fate, letting it bolster her against the deep yearning within—and if she ever languished, she never languished long.

And then the stars aligned, and in the twenty-ninth year of her life, Lady Amanda chanced to meet a rather important man.

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In those days before the Duchy was founded, a proud chieftain was expected to serve no greater lord than himself—and Lord Hugon of House d'Garte was an especially proud chieftain. He ruled over the storied city of Montrais and the surrounding lands, a handsome fief that was the envy of many a rival clan. His wealth and status made him a haughty man in most respects, and he was generally disliked, though rarely did anyone ever tell him so. All the same, he was not a bad sort really, and if you were patient enough with his self-importance you would find him to be fiercely loyal. Fionn Kilshane was more patient than most, and so the two were friends—they fought side-by-side in many battles, competed at hunting and hawking, and brought their kin together often for feasts. It is even said that Lord Hugon sometimes sought out his younger friend for counsel, despite his reputation as a man who never accepted advice—not even his own, if he could help it!

Hugon would have been the most vocal supporter of Fionn's nomination for High Lord, if only he had lived to see it. He was one of the seventy-nine who died bravely in the terrible battle against Grimfaltre, as told by the warrior-poet Logan of Ironhill:

Unforested, the serpent fled to fen,

but by its blood were dug the graves of men.

Our fathers fell! So many heroes famed

that damnedest dragon's savage guile claimed!

Fionn grieved the loss of his friend and did all he could to honor his sacrifice. When he rose to power, he bestowed the title of Count upon Hugon's son Colin, ensuring that the boy would inherit Montrais and the rest of his father's lands uncontested. The Duke's privy council largely approved of his decision, but he would have seen it done even had they all been unanimously opposed. He loved Colin, and he made certain to mentor and provide for the lad as Hugon would have wanted. His own son Liam treated Colin like a brother, and they were true friends for all of their days. They grew older, assumed their fathers' positions, and raised their eldest boys Darragh and Jean as cousins so that the alliance would continue into the next generation—and well it was, for such bonds are the bedrock upon which all Kendrish decency is built.

Alas, it is in our careless nature to neglect those foundations. Why and when Count Jean began to distance himself from High Lord Darragh is a matter of debate among historians. It is easy enough to blame the Count—after all, he was at fault for more than his share of the miserable events that followed. Still, a man's worst moments viewed in hindsight may not represent the most factual illustration of his character—reserving judgment, we will live better, and the dead will rest easier. No, in fairness, the disconnection between the Duke and the Count was more mutual than one-sided. Each man had his duties, and these crowded out most opportunities for social calls. The week-long ride from Montrais to Shannoway, a trip once so easily taken in younger days, now proved difficult for their schedules to accommodate. Once or twice a year they managed a visit, typically during holidays, but no more. Time marched on, and they soon took wives and started families of their own. They were glad at

least to be merry at each other's weddings, even knowing that their lives were becoming, in the most blessed way, forever busier.

Count Jean found himself especially preoccupied by domestic life. Lady Beryl, his beloved wife, had a frail constitution and was frequently ill. He spent many worried nights by her bedside, and they both tried to make the most of the days when she was well enough to be up and about. They were eager to have children, but the healers advised delaying until her illness had entered lasting remission. She, however, felt there was little hope of her condition improving, and the thought of her childbearing years slipping away was intolerable. Thus, she did beseech her husband to disregard the wise women's warnings, and he could not refuse her.

Pregnancy and delivery were terribly taxing, but the Count and Countess soon welcomed young Amelia and Bernard into the world. It seemed at first that the babes had inherited their mother's poor health, for sickness prevailed in their earliest years—but the gods were kind, and the children slowly grew stronger. With much relief, Count Jean and Lady Beryl awaited the arrival of little Hannah.

But calamity had not yet struck its cruelest blow against House d'Garte. The Countess took a sudden and precipitous downturn as her expecting day approached. The healers made their best efforts, but she continued to worsen. A pall hung over Castle Blueshadow, whose dread walls were no strangers to sorrow. A grim sort of calm overtook the Countess in those waning days—she seemed to know that the birth of her third child was to be the last act of her life. When she finally succumbed, she wore a sad smile of resignation on her weary lips. The Heavens will never know the rare and radiant grace of a more resilient woman than Lady Beryl d'Garte:

May angels sing her softly e'er to sleep,

a lifelong rightful rest—yet longer keep.

A popular misconception—one that has proven venomously persistent—is that Count Jean did not mourn his wife's passing. It is true that he did not make a grand showing of his grief, for he was never an outwardly emotive man. He honored Lady Beryl with the appropriate ceremonies, but he attended in silence, leaving the orations to the funereal priests. He received condolences with a terse formality that could have been mistaken for callousness, and it left people largely unimpressed—but Jean d'Garte did not care for the impressions of others just then, not because he was invulnerable to feeling, but because he was overwhelmed by it. The household servants heard his private sobbings, though he tried always to conceal them. His heart had no room for anguish beyond his own, and he made no pained display because no display could suffice—this was the reality of his bereavement, poorly understood by all save the bereaved.

So afflicted, the Count began to unravel. His relationships with his children were first to suffer. Amelia and Bertrand were much too young to comprehend what they had lost, but they knew enough to hurt. Had they seen their father shedding tears, they might have learned how best to grieve; faced instead with his emotional distance, their sadness, fear, and confusion emerged as anger. Their tantrums were recurrent and violent, and they seldom cooperated with even the most routine tasks. Their behavior predictably earned their father's brittle disapproval, which of course did nothing to soothe them—and so the outbursts continued, and the nursemaids were run ragged. Then there was little Hannah: she had thankfully survived the complications of her birth, but she more so than her siblings had inherited her late mother's infirmities, and the healers were kept busy looking after her. It weighed oppressively on the Count, worrying that he might lose his daughter to the same illness that had taken his wife.

Hoping to ease his burdens, the heavy-handed among Jean's advisors suggested a second marriage—it was, after all, perfectly within his rights, and his children were clearly in need of a mother. The Count's curt response brooked no further discussion—the children had a mother, and she was dead. Those who persisted in counseling him to the contrary were sacked, and the rest fell silent on

the subject. He was harsh, perhaps, but only when they trampled on his heartbreak in the name of pragmatism. He was otherwise melancholic and preferred to be alone in his chambers, emerging only when duty called him to address some matter or another, then retreating at the first opportunity. Isolation did little to lift his spirits or guard him against the darkness of his thoughts; it sapped his motivation, leaving him with less and less tolerance for the bitter pressures of his life. He sank deeper into solitude, seeking relief but finding none—and if he ever languished, did he ever languish long.

High Lord Darragh was gravely concerned for his cousin and made several attempts to comfort and encourage him. Jean endured out of respect for the Duke's longstanding friendship and superior position; anyone else he would have rebuffed outright. Even so, politeness and good intentions quickly soured. Offered insistently, a friend's sympathy can ring with the overtones of shame. The Count in his sensitive state of mind began to rankle at the condescension he heard in the Duke's words. Reminders of his responsibilities—to his subjects, his children, his wife's memory—implied that his grief was a shortcoming, a failure of emotional control on his part, and he had better pull himself together and soldier on. Resentment took hold. He found himself thinking unfavorably of the other man, who enjoyed supreme authority, a living spouse, and healthy heirs. He wondered how Darragh could possibly relate to him—indeed, the more they spoke, the less he hoped of ever being understood.

Unable to criticize the Duke, the Count resorted to passive strategies: evasive conversation, forgotten advice, unanswered invitations, flimsy excuses. Through these gestures Jean's displeasure was made known, and His Grace, interpreting correctly, was hurt and offended. He felt compelled to address it at once, but his council cautioned him against any action that might further inflame tensions. Patience was needed now, they said, and deference to his old friend's wishes. Darragh knew they advised him well, and though it galled him to do so he refrained from direct confrontation. He prayed that peace would find Jean soon.

And ere long, the gods seemed to answer his prayers. After three months sequestered in his chambers, Count d'Garte began to roam the castle grounds once more. He exchanged pleasantries with

his servants and subjects, asking after their welfare. He played with his children, and their conduct improved notably with his attention. He returned to council meetings, and his ministers were grateful for the efficiency reimposed by his presence. He heard petitions from the commoners and ruled decisively. In all ways, he seemed to have regained himself—and yet, something was not quite the same. Some quiet change had possessed him, and though it was too vague to name, it produced upon all who spoke with him an unnerving effect. It draped about him like an unseen mantle, followed him through the corridors like a chill draught. It could almost be glimpsed in his eyes, as if, although he exuded a renewed sense of enthusiasm for life, his fire had actually gone out. He performed the motions of his role with precision, practiced socialite that he was, but behind his easy manner he was numb. He cultivated the numbness, for it sustained him—what else is a man to do when he must be strong, yet his heart will not stop breaking?

It broke anew with every waking breath,
lying dying in their empty bed.
For seven thousand days did he touch death
before his living ghost could strike him dead.

Grief is a ghost that no grave can hold down; it will always rise. So it was for Count Jean—try as he might to appear indifferent, he was suffering in his soul. He went about in muted agony, and as each season gave way to the next, he became colder to the misfortunes of others as well—but by inches, so that not even his few close confidants noticed the gradual darkening of his mien.

Well, there was one advisor who might have known. Odessa Temperhand was one of the smallfolk—known affectionately as “halflings” to some—whose mother and father had been Jean’s caretakers and tutors in his youth. Like her parents, Odessa was absolutely loyal to House d’Garte. She strove to distinguish herself through service, quickly earning her place as one of his most dependable

agents. She was sharp-eyed and silver-tongued, and she had a calculating mind. The Count listened thoughtfully to her opinions, which she voiced with much confidence, and more often than not he was persuaded. She was always thinking of how to defend him and his interests, and he could depend on her to support his judgment when others doubted it. In the years that followed Lady Beryl's passing, Odessa became his most invaluable ally and friend. It is fair to say she loved him, as an elder sister loves her brother. He entrusted her with enormous authority (it is now known that she secretly operated as his spymaster), and she wielded it with brutal efficiency. She had little patience for freethinking subjects—dissidence was a threat to be quashed. By the end of her tenure, Odessa Temperhand had orchestrated many of the events that ultimately fomented rebellion among the people. Such was her dedication to the Count and his lawful rule that she did not shy away from those deeds which shall stain our history until its end.

Of course, it was also she who arranged the first meeting of Count Jean d'Garte and Lady Amanda. Some would consider this to be the crowning tragic achievement of her career, and they would be half correct to say so—remarkably insightful by the measure of men, half-possessed of truth as they always are.