

# *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 hill and dale, unsoiled by kin-spilled blood. Men warred with elves more than each other, determined to drive back the eastern invaders at all costs. The bards were many in number and still true to their audience, before they were seduced by the allure of Al'cani artistry, and they sang first our most celebrated songs. Trading ships seldom voyaged beyond local waters, and thus was duly limited the influence of foreign kings and their overreaching gods. Strong Apollo guarded by day the wellness of the people, Sweet Calliope charmed their wonder by night, and, if ever their need was too dire to meet by faith alone, they petitioned in earnest their rightful ruling lords. The turbulence of the shameful Seven Spears' War was a future far and away, and men could yet revere their lieges without disillusionment. The hearts of our countrymen beat red and one in their breasts, and thus their spirit, the Kendregeist, did swell and soar with pride unfettered in that early age—and if it ever languished, it never languished long.

In that time, Darragh Kilshane ruled as High Lord of the Duchy of Kilshannon, having inherited the title from his father High Lord Liam Kilshane, who himself had inherited it from his father High Lord Fionn Kilshane. High Lord Fionn was the bravest and wisest of those great men who drove out the green wrym Grimfaltre and made safe the forests and skies of the realm, and all agreed that he should lead the kingdom as its founding First Duke. High Lord Fionn envisioned the construction of a new city—a grand capital to serve as his family's seat of power for generations to come. It would rival Montrais, those momentous walls and streets where the stories of so many Kendrish heroes were said to begin, linger, or come to an end. He laid the first stones along the banks of the Red River and named it Shannoway, and he devoted the rest of his days to its growth and governing. As Second Duke, High Lord Liam dutifully followed his father's example, and the city prospered beneath the fairness of his rule. When the time came for young Lord Darragh to assume the throne, Shannoway was flourishing such that his grandfather would have wept to see his dream so perfectly realized.

In the thirty-sixth year of the Second Duke's reign, a remarkable woman was born into his blossoming city. She was the daughter of Lord Emil O'Hennessey and his wife Lady Brenna, who praised the gods for blessing them with their long-awaited first child. They named her Amanda after her mother's mother, and they cherished her dearly. The delivery had been grueling for Lady Brenna, however, and it soon became apparent that she would not likely survive a second childbirth. Every reputable apothecary, healer, and priest in the land was consulted in turn, and each came to the same conclusion. Lord Emil was crestfallen, for he had badly wanted a son to carry on his name. It was not unreasonable that Lord Emil should worry for his line, for the O'Hennessey were least powerful among the great noble families of their day. His fears were allayed when his younger brother Lord Aymer announced the birth of his own son the following year, but obligation to his legacy weighed heavily on Lord Emil—as the elder brother, he was troubled by his failure to produce an heir. It was suggested that a surrogate concubine might be discreetly employed, but Lord Emil would hear nothing of it—he was a man devoted to his wife, and he had no intention of blaming her for what he keenly felt were his own shortcomings. The patriarch of House O'Hennessey, 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 great prudence. Even in her earliest years, it was clear that Amanda O'Hennessey was so very much like her father. From him, she inherited conviction of principle and sureness of her thoughts—accordingly, she was a willful child, and her stubbornness demanded frequent discipline. A firm hand, however, did little to curb in Amanda those qualities that are so prized in young men yet in young women are erroneously called defective. She shied away from the trappings and toys of traditional ladyship, preferring her father's swords and horses over her mother's dresses and jewelry. Well-meaning servants and caretakers often chided her boyish roughhousing and mischief-making, but their disapproval only nourished her determination never to learn her lesson.

She did learn, of course, the value of her family name, for her father could not help but especially emphasize it. She studied her ancestry, felt its heft and its reach among lay folk and

aristocracy alike, and slowly she came to understand the necessity of guarding it from ruin. The role of marriage in this process, however, neither appealed to Amanda nor fully made sense to her. Despite the endangered status of the name O’Hennessy, she would one day give it away to the man she loved—that man would see how she treasured it, and he would treasure her in kind. She treated this enchanted notion of betrothal with acute skepticism, and as she grew, the tiresome ordeals of matchmaking did much to reinforce her vigilant stance towards romance. She participated reluctantly, entertaining suitors for the sake of her aging parents, who insisted that she think of her future. But her future, she believed, could not possibly lie with any of these supposedly eligible men who sat across from her through dinners unending. How they ploughed through conversation with their awkward questions, regurgitated compliments, puerile boasting, and fumbling wit! She came to regard these encounters with an almost morbid curiosity, marveling time and again at how people could be so full of such empty words. Her partners, no doubt, were equally bewildered by this irregular lady who scorned their careful courting tactics. Rare is the man who can engage a woman without condescending to her, and when she is more than his match in swordplay and wordplay, he may as well be myth. It is known that many harsh and unfair claims, which bear no repeating in this recountal, were made about Lady Amanda in private circles by those she had found wanting. She was unsurprised by their vilification of her, and their reactivity did much to assure her that she had been wise to reject them. The exclusion occasionally stung at her, 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 the stoutest heart may waver and wear down. As her adolescence faded behind her, the customs of nobility endured in spite of her distaste for them, and much of her defiant anger mellowed into bitter frustration. Perfunctory wedding invitations, which she was obligated by decorum to accept, arrived month after month. Amanda attended the ceremony of nearly every man whose affections had previously repulsed her, quietly loathing the small part of herself that now felt regret—even envy—as she politely looked on. What she really wished for, of

course, was not marriage—her spirit sought something rather more substantial. Alas, her breeding blinded her to this truth, persuading her instead that she now desired the sort of union she had so proudly eschewed in her youth. Doubt crept in, and then fear. Time had already etched the first of many lines into her face, and the most tolerable bachelors had long been claimed. Who among those remaining could she possibly want, and who among them would want her? Her father and mother 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, as she always had. She had learned kindness and justice from her mother, how to be gentle with common folk and how to reproach their abusers. When bandits and other malfeasants 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 were said to enjoy plentiful holidays. She remembered the names of those whom she had only ever met in passing, and she sent generous gifts on their birthdays, much to their flattered amazement. It was traditional for knights and young lords to perform in grand tourneys to honor High Lord Darragh or whoever was hosting in his stead—Amanda, however, was always sure to dedicate her many victories to the admirers who stood all day in the sun just to cheer her name, for it gladdened her to briefly raise them above their birth by way of her sword and lance. In short, Amanda O’Hennessy was absolutely adored by the citizenry of Kilshannon, for they saw that she was their champion in 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 grey fate, letting it bolster her against the apprehension and 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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Count Jean d’Garte ruled the storied city of Montrais and its surrounding lands. His father was Count Colin d’Garte, first of the Montresian rulers who would bear that title. Count Colin’s father, Lord Hugon d’Garte, ruled in the days before the duchy’s founding, and he swore fealty to no greater lord than himself. To his comrades-in-arms, however, Lord Hugon was fiercely loyal. He was the closest of friends with Fionn Kilshane and sought his counsel often, for although some would claim that the two were equals in every measure, Hugon knew his younger friend to be the wiser between them. Lord Hugon would have undoubtedly supported Fionn’s rise to power, had he survived the fateful campaign against Grimfaltre. The warrior-poet Logan of Ironhill describes it best in his firsthand retelling of the terrible battle that finally saw the demon routed:

*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!*

Lord Hugon d’Garte was among those fallen fathers, and his sacrifice would not soon be forgotten. When Fionn was chosen for High Lord of Kilshannon, his first act was to vassalize young Colin d’Garte as the new Count of Montrais, ensuring that his late friend’s ancestral lands would belong lawfully to his only heir. The Duke’s advisors widely approved of this decision, but he would have seen it carried out even had they all urged him against it. He loved Colin as he loved his own son, and he made certain that the responsibilities of his office did not prevent him from mentoring and providing for the lad as Hugon might have done. Under High Lord Fionn’s guidance, Liam Kilshane

and Colin d’Garte both matured into respectable young noblemen, and, like their fathers, they were true friends to each other for all of their days. They each had a son of their own when the time came, and they raised the boys as cousins. So it was that this most sincere alliance across families—which can make peers even of kings and serfs—would continue between High Lord Darragh and Count Jean, for such bonds are the bedrock of brotherhood upon which all Kendrish decency depends, and they must never be broken.

Alas, it is the ill nature of man to neglect the foundation of his house, preferring to think it indestructible. Why and when precisely the Third Duke and the Second Count began to grow apart is a detail commonly disputed by historians. Teagan Red-Dove and the other surviving rebels famously held that Count Jean was a viper from the start—they believed that his distance from his pure-hearted cousin was a calculated piece of his larger political plan, proof of his inherent moral deficiencies. Teagan and his companions had strong reason to assert this perspective—by the end of his life, Count Jean d’Garte had sown such misery that the gods themselves could not forgive him. It is also known, of course, that the tormented scarcely develop a nuanced opinion of their tormentors, and it is all too easy to presume in hindsight that a man’s worst moments constitute the most honest illustration of his character. To be perfectly clear: the Count’s apologists shall find no solidarity in this chronicle. He was a villain, to be sure—however, like most villains, he probably did not always intend to become one. This is the frightful wisdom we must remember, which we risk losing in our fascination with the erosive absolutism of good and evil—Jean d’Garte was a man, not a monster. Any one of us could have been him, and any one of us could become him still. Let us disabuse ourselves of the need to pretend otherwise—we will live better for it, and the dead will rest easier.

Most scholars agree that the disconnection between the Duke and the Count was more mutual than one-sided. As both young men rose to their respective seats of power, their duties crowded out most opportunities for socializing outside of court. It was several days’ ride from Montrais to Shannoway, a trip once so easily taken at that age when whole weeks could be whiled away on a whim.

Now, schedules and security ordered their hours, and neither lad could reasonably visit the other more than once or twice a year. Time marched ever onward, 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, of course—forever more hectic.

Count Jean found himself especially preoccupied by domestic life, for his beloved wife Lady Beryl possessed a frail constitution and was frequently ill. The Count spent many worried nights by her bedside, and he treasured the fleeting moments when she was well and they could make pleasant memories together. They were eager to have children, but the healers advised the Countess to delay until her illness had entered lasting remission. She, however, had little hope that her health would meaningfully improve. That her childbearing years might slip away while she was waiting to finally feel better—the thought of it was intolerable. Thus, she did beseech her husband to disregard the wise women's warnings, and he could not refuse her, for he knew how badly she would grieve if motherhood passed her by.

Pregnancy was indeed taxing, and the deliveries left her in an almost irreparable state, but the Count and Countess soon welcomed young Lady Amelia and young Lord Bernard into the world. Initially, it seemed that the babes shared their mother's poor vitality, for sickness sadly prevailed in their earliest years—but the gods offered succor, and the children strengthened considerably as they grew. With much relief, Count Jean and Lady Beryl joyfully awaited the arrival of their third heir.

Calamity, however, had yet to strike its cruelest blow against House d'Garte. The Countess's condition took a sudden and precipitous downturn, worsening as her expecting day approached. The healers made their best efforts, but with each failure her outlook became bleaker. 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, and all her servants and ladies-in-waiting agreed that she knew—the birth of her third child was to be the last act of her life. When she finally succumbed to the adversities



arrayed against her, a sad smile of resignation did she wear 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. This callous man who would go on to commit such atrocious crimes against his people—how could he know anything of tender pain? The masses, of course, are prone to seeing only the surface of still waters. Indeed, the Count did not make a grand showing of his grief, for he was not an outwardly emotive man. He honored Lady Beryl with the appropriate funeral ceremonies, but he attended in silence, leaving the orations to the presiding priests. He received condolences with a terse formality that could perhaps be mistaken for cold detachment. These improprieties left the people largely unimpressed. The truth of the matter, though, is that Jean d’Garte cared not at all for the impressions of others—not because he was invulnerable to woe, but because he was overwhelmed by it. Those most immediate to his household witnessed his profound despondency and heard his private sobbings—though he tried always to conceal them, especially from his children. He could not console the funeral guests because his heart had no room for anguish beyond his own. He gave no funerary speech because all words fell short. He made no pained display because no display could suffice. This was the reality of the Count’s bereavement, poorly understood by all save the bereaved.

So afflicted, Count Jean began slowly to unravel. His relationships with his children were first to suffer, strained unimaginably as they were by Lady Beryl’s passing. Amelia and Bertrand were still much too young to fully comprehend what they had lost, but they knew enough to hurt. Had their father shed tears before them, they themselves might have learned how best to grieve—faced instead with his

emotional distance, their sadness and confused fear emerged as anger. Their tantrums were recurrent and violent, and they seldom cooperated with even the most routine tasks. This behavior predictably earned their father's brittle disapproval—a far cry from the firm warmth that might have soothed their troubled rage—and so it persisted, much to the chagrin of the servants and nursemaids. Meanwhile, the castle healers were altogether occupied by the newest member of the royal family—little Lady Hannah had thankfully survived the complications of her birth, but she had inherited more of her late mother's infirmities than her siblings. As such, her condition was highly unstable, and she required constant care. Her fate weighed oppressively on the Count, for it would truly be more than he could bear to give up his youngest daughter to the ghost of his wife's illness.

Hoping to ease his burdens, the heavy-handed among Jean's advisors inevitably 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 dispute—the children had a mother, and she was dead. Those few who persisted in counseling him to the contrary were promptly sacked, and the rest fell silent on the subject, fearing their own unceremonious ejections. With this ruling, Jean d'Garte showed the earliest signs of his authoritarian streak—but that odious trend would not fully take shape for many years. For now, he was harsh only out of heartbreak, and only towards those who trampled pragmatically on his misery. He was otherwise melancholic, preferring always to be alone in his chambers. He would emerge begrudgingly when duty called him to address one matter or another, but he was sure to retreat as soon as a resolution was reached. Isolation did little to lift his spirits or guard him against the darkness of his thoughts—no, it further robbed him of motivation, leaving him with less and less tolerance for the bitter pressures of his life. He sank deeper into solitude, seeking relief, but he felt instead the lengthening of shadow over his soul—and if he ever languished, did he ever languish long.

All this while, High Lord Darragh was gravely concerned for his cousin, and he made several wholehearted attempts to urge him out of despair. Count Jean endured the Duke's efforts out of respect

for their longstanding companionship, extending courtesy to him when anyone else would have received hostility. Regrettably, politeness and good intentions soon soured. With repetition and insistence, a friend's sympathetic encouragements will carry the overtones of shame—and so it was for the Count, who, in his sensitive state, 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—filled him with guilt and inadequacy. His grief was a shortcoming—its intensity, a failure of his emotional endurance. Resentment took hold, and he found himself drawing unfavorable comparisons between himself and his old friend, who enjoyed supreme authority, a living spouse, and healthy heirs. He wondered how the Duke could possibly understand his plight—indeed, the more Darragh spoke to him, the less he hoped to be understood.

The Count could not outright rebuff his cousin because of their engagement as lord and vassal, and so he resorted to passive strategies, which better suited his station and his sullen disposition. Evasive conversations, forgotten advice, unanswered letters, flimsy excuses for declined invitations—collectively, these gestures did convey Jean's displeasure with His Majesty. The Duke's pride was quite wounded, and he felt compelled to redress the offense directly. But he was wise like his forefathers, for he retained the service of men who could guide him back to reason in those rare moments when he abandoned it. They cautioned him against any action that would further inflame the conflict, as his confrontational approach had already agitated the Count. Patience was needed now, and respect for his friend's freedom to lead his life as he saw fit. Though his principles were galled by the recommendation, Darragh knew they advised him rightly, and so he restrained himself, praying that dignity would return to his friend's demeanor and peace be restored to his soul.

And ere long, the gods seemed to answer the Duke's prayers. After three months spent sequestered in his chambers, Count Jean 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, whose conduct improved notably with his attention. He returned to council meetings, and his ministers

were grateful for the regulating influence of his presence on official proceedings. At court, he heard the concerns of his citizenry, and he made his rulings 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 a subtly unnerving effect. It draped about him like an unseen mantle, a chill draft that bristled the skin when he walked by. It was most easily glimpsed in his eyes—while he exuded a renewed sense of enthusiasm for life, a sensitive observer could see that actually the fire had gone out of his gaze. He performed the motions of his role—and his passion for them—with precision, practiced socialite that he was. Behind the appearance of stoic resolve and easy manner, he concealed the cultivated numbness that 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.*

When we bury the deceased, we so often bury our grief with them. But grief is a ghost, and a grave cannot hold it down—it will always rise. So it was for Count Jean, who went about in muted agony, haunted by it. He was cold to himself, regarding the splintered straining of his spirit with more indifference every day. As each season gave way to the next, he became cold to the misfortunes of others as well—but by inches, such that not even his few close confidants could have discerned in his darkening mien the devastation that would eventually befall County Montrais.

Except, perhaps, one such advisor who might have known—Odessa Temperhand. She was one of the smallfolk—known affectionately as “halfings” to some—whose mother and father had served as Jean’s caretakers and tutors in his youth. Odessa shared her parents’ loyalty to House d’Garte, and she

strove always to distinguish herself through service. She was sharp-eyed and glib of tongue, and she had a calculating mind, and many other gifts besides. Jean had not long ruled the realm before she had secured her reputation as one of his most dependable agents—and in the lonely years that followed his wife’s passing, she became an invaluable friend. It is fair to say that she loved him, as an elder sister might love her brother. She thought always of how to defend him from danger, and she was quick to support his judgment when others doubted it. Convinced of her fealty, the Count listened thoughtfully when she voiced her opinions. She had little patience for the willfulness of his subjects, and she urged him to punish dissidence as efficiently as possible. She spoke of these things with much confidence and feeling, and more often than not he was persuaded by her words. He soon entrusted her with the authority to directly enact his will—indeed, it is now known that she operated capably as his spymaster. By the end of her tenure, Odessa Temperhand had orchestrated many of the events that ultimately fomented rebellion among the people rather than preventing it. Such was her dedication to the Count and his lawful rule that she did not shy away from those deeds—and they shall stain our history until its end.

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