

The People's Ghost

by Arthur Ogilvy Hasting

II.

In the eighteen years that had elapsed since the death of the Count's beloved wife, his apathetic and intolerant approach to civic policy had become widely known. As such, his public approval had largely deteriorated, and general unrest was now climbing above desirable levels. Odessa, hoping to defuse tensions, put forth a motion to revive a popular Montresian holiday—the Summerwinds Festival, a citywide series of celebrations lasting no less than a tenday. She found majority support with the council despite the usual financial concerns, and Count Jean, though he was ever disinclined towards social merriment, saw its political value and did halfheartedly assent to it. Thus, for the first time in twenty-five years, the great city of Montrais and its citizens welcomed visitors from near and far for a bit of crown-sponsored revelry. All were glad to lay down their labors in favor of drinking, feasting, dancing, song, buffoonery, and games that culminated in a grand tourney featuring the greatest warriors and heroes of the realm.

Though the Count weathered all aspects of the festival with minimal complaint, he found the tourney to be most excruciating, for he was bound by ceremony to attend the twelve-hour contest in its entirety. Worse, he spent most of that time in the company of his honored guests—the Duke and Duchess. Jean and Darragh were by this time thoroughly estranged, for the years had done little to reward the Duke's patience with his cousin, and they had done even less to relax the Count's defenses. High Lady Silvia, pained by the loss of love between the two of them, tried to steer their conversation in a productive direction—alas, their bullheadedness frustrated her, as it always did, and inevitably she left them in their deadlock. Indeed, they seemed mutually content to sit in tense silence, broken now and then by the briefest exchanges of bland commentary as the games unfolded before them. The only other sound was the intermittent fussing of servants—the serene voice of Odessa, too, as she chatted cordially with the Duke and Duchess, a distraction for which she knew her lord was grateful. Apollo soon took his midday perch in the clear sky, and as the air grew hot and stale on the viewing balcony, the Count felt a familiar loneliness welling up within him. Memories of his wife flooded in—how

much more bearable her presence would have made this dreadful day! He wanted nothing more than to quit the arena and retreat to his castle chambers, retreat into himself—but tradition had him trapped, and his spirit strained against the snare. Desperate for any sort of escape, he drifted into daydream, letting the world around him go out of focus.

And when his returned from reverie, clarity retaking his senses, what did he see of a sudden? His gaze had wandered over the field below him, alighting on the figure of a warrior seated on horseback. As he watched, she lifted her lance and leaned forward into the charge, tilting head on to hit her mark. The sun played upon her plate armor like the glimmer of the summer sea, and the horse carried her forward like a cresting wave as she crashed against her opponent's shield. Her weapon's wooden tip burst like a thunderclap, scattering and settling like windblown sand as the roaring applause rolled in. She threw down the splintered haft and raised her fist in triumph as the ceremonial bell rang out, announcing a decisive end to the joust. As she paraded before the crowd, a young peasant woman reached out to her over the railing, offering up a long, green shawl. The rider brought her horse to a stop, removed her helm, and accepted the garment with a gallant bow, wrapping it about her steely shoulders with pride as the woman looked on adoringly.

This display made quite an impression on the Count, and he found himself newly excited by the games as the warrior-woman went on to win victory after victory. The High Lord and Lady took notice as well, and they were quick to claim her as a champion of Shannoway, boasting of her exploits to a patiently attentive Odessa. Though the Count managed to ignore most of their babbling, he could not help but overhear certain details by way of his proximity to them. Her name was Lady Amanda O'Hennessey, and she was reputedly the very model of an upstanding noblewoman, beloved by both her king and her subjects. Jean had heard her name before—he recalled that she had been a subject of conversation on more than one social occasion, and that most who had spoken of her had spoken pleasantly, at least superficially so. There were those, of course, who had commented on her marital status—what a shame it was, after all, that such a wonderful woman was unable to find a suitable

husband among even the best families! The Count could hardly judge for himself, for he had never been personally acquainted with Amanda or her kin—indeed, by virtue of his general aversion to upper-class fraternity, he would never have sought out the opportunity to know them. But now, hoping that a splash of novelty might deliver him from boredom, he wondered if an introduction to Lady O’Hennessy might be just the thing.

The Count did not give voice to his desire—nor did he need to, for his spymaster was nearby. Odessa took note of the subtle shift in his disposition—the leavening of his grumpish face and forward tilting of his posture—and she quickly deduced that the lady from Shannoway must be the cause. How unlike her lord to show interest in a fellow aristocrat—and a woman, no less! Odessa was intrigued, and once her curiosity was piqued, scheming was never long away. She waited, coiling in her cleverness, until Lady Amanda had advanced to the final bout and won it magnificently. Then, while the crowds were still cheering, Odessa stole away from the balcony and approached the Count’s youngest daughter, Lady Hannah—no longer a sickly babe, but a grown woman of eighteen years. She asked if Hannah might go and make introductions to the joust champion, for her father had requested an audience, and it would surely not be declined if it was presented by a proper noblewoman of House d’Garte. Odessa knew, of course, that the girl was ever eager to feel the importance of her family name, and so she would see the appeal in an opportunity to greet the star of the tourney in official capacity. Naturally, she was correct—Hannah left straight away to deliver the message, and the Temperhand returned to her lord’s viewing balcony, smiling to herself.

Lady Hannah found the champion easily, for she was still receiving her ovation in the arena. The peasant woman who had gifted her the green shawl had apparently been invited to join the fun—she sat sidesaddle behind Lady Amanda, overjoyed and terrified, as the two of them took slow turns about the field. Waiting out of sight in one of the arched entryways, Hannah watched the pageantry with some impatience. Celebration was all well and good, but this seemed extravagant—putting the commoner up on horseback, especially, that was akin to mockery. But the longer she watched, the less

certain she became of her preconceptions. There was an infectious quality to the theatrical mirth, and she felt herself swaying in favor of it. The champion soon dismounted, assisting the peasant woman as she followed suit, trembling with thrill. Still holding her hand, Amanda knelt in gratitude before the woman and all the masses there assembled, for they had steadied her lance and braced her shield, and her triumph to every one of them belonged. This final gesture proved too much for many of those present—tears fell freely over their cheeks as they cheered anew. Hannah, too, felt a mist gathering in her eyes, though she could not say just why. Determined to regain her composure, she brushed the sentimentality aside and straightened up, preparing to address the Lady O’Hennessy as she retired from the field.

Amanda was surprised to be greeted by the youngest of House d’Garte, and when mention was made that the Count had asked for her company, she became astonished and—it must be said—a bit nauseated. She knew little of Jean d’Garte beyond his title—she had heard that he was temperamental, and that he was generally unpopular with the people of Montrais. She knew also that he was a long-time widower, which suggested to her an unsavory motivation for his sudden interest. Had the man truly sent such a summons through his own daughter, who was close enough in age to be her sister? Embarrassed by what the girl must be thinking, Amanda felt a flare of indignation in her cheeks, and she struggled momentarily to keep her temper in check. No, it must be something else, she reasoned—the Count was some sixteen or seventeen years her senior, an unthinkable gulf even by the lopsided standards of upper-class courtship. It was more likely that the Duke and Duchess merely wished to congratulate her, and that the Count had asked his daughter to personally fetch her out of deference or flattery to his cousin. Formality was preferable to lechery, she supposed, if only by a slim margin—and Amanda was not one to ignore her king and queen when they called. She doffed her armor, dressed herself as best she could on short notice, and followed Lady Hannah to the viewing balcony.

Had he been paying attention, Count Jean’s first inkling of something gone amiss might have been Odessa’s absence—or, certainly, the sly half-smile hiding on her lips when she returned. Alas, so

immersed was he in his thoughts that he did not sense the danger until his servants had dragged another cushioned chair into the room and brought it to rest beside him. Before he could demand an explanation, the Duke and Duchess asked Odessa if additional company was expected, and she replied that yes, the Count's guest would be joining them shortly. Darragh and Silvia were both taken aback and delighted—it was so uncharacteristic of Jean to socialize outside of obligation. How extraordinary must this person be, they wondered, to have earned his approval? Jean, no doubt, was wondering the very same thing. They had not long to wait before their curiosity was satisfied, for in the next moment Lady Hannah and Lady Amanda appeared in the doorway. The Duke and Duchess rose at once to their feet with much commotion, crossing the room to welcome their niece and their champion.

The Count stared wordlessly at Odessa, seeking an answer to the obvious question. There was no trace of apology in her placid expression as she leaned up and whispered, “Was this not your wish, my lord? If I am mistaken, then I shall send them away at once.”

She was teetering on the edge of insolence, and his restraint was already worn thin by the heat and the long day—he had half a mind to upbraid her, dismiss his company, and leave the festivities entirely. But then he saw the elation on his king and queen's faces as they stood there praising Lady Amanda's exemplary performance, and he saw the proud gleam in his daughter's gentle green eyes—how much she resembled her mother! His fury softened, and he stood from his seat, ready to play the part of gracious host. He and his spymaster would have discourse later.

High Lord Darragh was only too happy to introduce them, and while they were observing the decorums of first meeting, Jean and Amanda observed each other as well. She had drawn his attention from a distance, but up close, the effect was striking. It is true there was little of classical beauty in her features or her bearing—she was a seasoned warrior, after all, and so she could not fairly be described as demure or delicate. There was, however, still much to find appealing—her raven hair tied back in its long battle-braid, her snowy skin and freckled face, the kindness of her countenance. And yet, what Jean found most fascinating about her was the quality at which so many men had balked, and which

even to him might have seemed brazen, if it had not so clearly suited her. It was her integrity, her confidence in her own honest strength, that flickered like quiet fire in her eyes and lent a warmth to her presence, no less felt for its intangibility—and he felt it instantly, though he did not know its depth.

Steadily returning his gaze, she saw plenty that pleased her as well—beyond belief for some, perhaps, but true. He was quite handsome, even if age had dulled his finer points, and he carried himself with all the cultured grace that might be expected of a regent. His stature was impressive, almost intimidating, the broadness of his shoulders suggesting that he had been a warrior himself in his youth—or, at least, that he might have fared well as one. His dress and taste were exquisite, essentially impeccable—nothing on his person was out of place or season. In all ways, he appeared to embody the ideal Kendrish leader—all ways save for one, which most intrigued her. She became aware of a gloom about him, a weariness in the eaves of his face where, she imagined, genuine joy might once have tarried. Now a civil smile stood guard there, deflecting attention, discouraging others from lingering too long. But linger she did, seeing surface traces of a lonely ache deeper within—and she was touched by it, for she herself knew something of such pain:

An eager eye that sees itself shall stay

and forge from dusty brass a diamond band.

What red moon rose that fated summer day?

What star-flung fires roared at whose command

to make a song of life, as lovers may?

Fast friends by head and heart—and, soon, by hand.

“I must confess, my lord,” said Amanda as they took their seats by the balustrade, “I was more than a little surprised to hear that you had requested my presence.”

“No more surprised than I, Lady O’Hennessy,” he replied somewhat absently. He was glowering at Odessa, who was busy pretending not to notice. Amanda’s silent, perplexed expression invited him to elaborate. “What I mean to say,” he continued, “is that I was surprised at myself, my own audacity. We have never spoken before, you and I—it would have been more appropriate if His Majesty had sent for you instead. You had reason to think me the overly familiar sort, no doubt. Yes, it must have been a unpleasant shock.”

“Not entirely unpleasant,” she assured him. “Merely unexpected. You must know that people say you are unsociable, my lord. I see now they have misjudged you.”

He allowed himself a slight smile. “Oh no, they have judged me accurately, I promise you. I chafe at companionship. Your company, I think, is likely to have me break out in hives.” They both laughed a moment, and then he added, “And they are right about you, too, of course.”

“Oh?”

“Oh, certainly. They say you are blunt to the point of rudeness, that you have no patience for pretense or nicety—especially with men.”

She smiled as well, nodding slowly. “Well, yes, that is true—although, I suppose it is mostly men who say such things?”

“Predictably, yes. Would you like to know their names?”

“No, I have known them already, and I shall be glad to never know them more intimately.”

He heard the hint of bitterness in her voice, but he knew better than to address it directly. “Yes, you’re right, of course—we noblemen are hardly worth the bother. Common folk, on the other hand—you might fare better with them, Lady O’Hennessy. They are fond of you, are they not? I imagine there must be a long line of modest men eager to throw themselves at your feet. Any one of them would tolerate your gruffness better than a thin-skinned aristocrat.”

This time she laughed aloud. “I daresay they would fancy you as well, my lord, if only they knew how crass you can be.”

“No,” he said with a wave of his hand. “No, I’m much too sensitive for their ilk. Besides, it would be unfair to the lads—I am already married.”

She did not grasp the meaning of his casual mention at first, and when she did, she was quite unsure of how to respond—she knew nothing of Lady Beryl, and she knew even less of spousal grief. She chose to approach the heart of the matter at hand, as was her way.

“Why did you ask me here today, my lord?”

“Just Jean will do—it clearly pains you, referring to me by title.” He gazed down at the dusty arena below where two knights were treading slow circles around each other, sabers raised high. After a brief pause, he said, “Your heroism is well-known, Lady O’Hennessy. I am in danger of expiring from boredom and ceremony, and I was hoping that you might save me.”

“Just Amanda will do, Jean—especially if it pains you.”

“Indeed! Cheeky.”

“I am not accustomed to rescuing the gentry from their prodigious hardships, but since I am here, I suppose I will try.”

“Good of you, Amanda. Unfortunately, your noble intentions have led you into a trap—laid by my own advisor, devious as she is. I am afraid she is the one who summoned you, not I.”

Amanda eyed him, unsure whether she heard candor or irony in his voice. “Is that right?”

“It is, yes, quite. Not that you should feel any less welcome, mind you—I *was* hoping that we could meet. But I was hoping silently to myself, and before I could express it—well, there you were, already arrived. Sometimes, I swear the woman is a witch. She must have me hexed by the score.”

“Perhaps you should have her burned,” Amanda suggested.

“Oh, I might,” said Jean, “if I could be sure she would not turn the flames upon me with a flick of her wrist.”

“Drowning, then?”

“Yes,” he mused, “drowning is good. She would drag me with her, of course, but I should be able to swim free of her gnarled clutches.”

“Unless she managed to hook you with her nose. Then there would surely be no escape.”

“An excellent point—the nose will have to come off first. My grandfather’s old axe would do the trick, I think.”

“A dozen or so swings to fell that tree, I reckon.”

They both cast a glance across the room toward Odessa—whose appearance, it must be said, was not the least bit cronish—and shared another laugh.

“So, what is the nature of this trap?” asked Amanda. “I don’t feel particularly ensnared.”

“Ah, but you are, Amanda,” he replied. “We both are—nobility binds us. Because I rule this city, I must sit here on this balcony and observe the remainder of these incredibly drawn-out games. And because you are a polite and compassionate soul, you must not abandon me to suffer my fate alone. If only you were less worthy of your sterling reputation, you might yet save yourself.”

“Today could be the day I fall from grace,” she smirked.

“Don’t think of it. How many pining plebeian hearts would break? Unconscionable.”

“Then we will be doomed together, it seems.”

“As the gods intend—or, at least, our resident witch. We may as well have some wine, then.”

And have some wine they did. The king and queen were busy chatting with young Hannah, leaving the Count and his guest to amuse each other famously. They were occasionally interrupted by courtiers and other personages who popped in to pay their royal respects—Jean and Amanda derived further entertainment from the poorly disguised bewilderment on those faces. The hours could not last, and together they whiled away the day—the first of many.

Odessa looked on furtively, satisfied with the outcome. Her lord seemed content with his new companion, and for this she was glad—but the preservation of his power remained her foremost objective. The festival had temporarily soothed the populace, but their restless anger would soon

rekindle. An alliance with the popular champion of House O’Hennessy would likely exert a more durable sway over public opinion—indeed, if all proceeded as it should, Amanda’s cooperation—in concert with other judicious measures—would preclude any serious challenge to the Count’s rightful rule.

Perhaps Odessa was correct, as she often was—or perhaps she refused to read the signs, hoping she could chase away the ill wind whistling in off the sea.

Revolution marched ever nearer, and it blew a mighty horn.