

# *The People's Ghost*

*by Arthur Ogilvy Hasting*

### III.

The budding affections of Count Jean and Lady Amanda progressed—much like their first acquaintance—in earnest, and with blissful disregard for propriety. Their fellow nobility were generally scandalized by the news of their courting, and gossip abounded with more enthusiasm than usual. With distinct unoriginality, their chattering revealed in pitiful fashion the personal deficits common among those who are quick to speak false ugliness when faced with real beauty. As before, this author shall resist the impulse to recite the exact words which gave shape to their petty jealousies—a dead and rotting fish, after all, does not freshen when preserved. Instead, he will invite his audience to pause briefly and consider how compromising it must be for one’s reputation to depend so heavily upon the charitable discretion of others rather than one’s own good sense.

It had been years since the Count had ventured beyond the walls of his city, but now he traveled the roads between Montrais and Shannoway even more frequently than he had in youth. High Lord Darragh had long hoped for such a change in his old friend, and he was much gladdened by it. Jean spared only a few necessary moments for his king when he visited, preferring to spend the majority of his time abroad with Amanda at her estate. Many important matters demanded their attention, as might be imagined. The horses were in need of meandering through idyllic meadows and secluded forest trails. There were sweaty bouts of sword-sparrring to resolve, and invariably these ended in the lady’s favor, excepting those few occasions when mercy persuaded her to spare his pride. There were wines to taste, sweets to savor, bantering wits to exchange—and, certainly, parents to impress. Though their health continued to deteriorate, Lord Emil and Lady Brenna were no less invested in their daughter’s welfare than they had ever been. Understandably, they regarded the Count with skepticism, but they were quick to see the genuine friendship blooming between he and Amanda—a joy she had scarcely known—and they were not so narrowly insensitive as to oppose it.

She visited him in Montrais just as often, setting herself to the daunting task of becoming familiar with his family, his advisors, and all the servants and staff of Castle Blueshadow. Her sincerity,

as ever, prevailed—one by one, they fell to her gracious charms. The children were not so readily won over—they had been motherless for most of their living memory, and it was strange to see their father courting while they were considering betrothals of their own. But as the months went by, they warmed to Amanda—even young Hannah, who was known to be more intractable than her elder siblings—and soon they began to await her visits almost as eagerly as the Count himself. In that castle where weary grief had long darked the halls, she was a welcome light.

One heart, however, she could not win. Odessa was all courtesy, of course—she received Lady O’Hennessy pleasantly, almost to the point of deference. And yet, there was a reticence about her, the sort that could only have been intentional. All attempts to befriend her were parried, and with such politeness, too, that to acknowledge it openly would have been impossibly rude. There was a cultivated gulf between them, and no bond could grow to span it. Amanda was troubled by this, and she spoke in confidence to Ser Lucas, her knight-commander and comrade most loyal. Thinking always of her safety, he advised her not to broach the matter forthrightly, as was her wont, but instead to guard her feelings and watch the Temperhand warily. Spiders spin many strands while they wait, he reminded her, but they wait for naught if we walk round the web. Unsatisfying though it was, this wisdom had steered her capably before, and she would keep it handy when dancing with Odessa.

Jean and Amanda married within a year—a length of time which they knew would seem inconceivably short to their peers, and which therefore seemed perfectly suitable to both of them. The ceremony and festivities were opulent enough to appease their guests, yet modest enough for husband and wife to retain their shared sense of tact. They exchanged vows on the salted cliffs behind the castle, with the light of Apollo shining above and the windy sea applauding below. The recitations were nothing new, their phrasing and cadence familiar to anyone who had ever attended a Kendrish wedding—although, this time, they might have rang more authentically.

But there was one remarkable detail about the union of Count d’Garte and Lady O’Hennessy, a streak of color on the grey face of tradition, which was, quite simply, that even after they were joined,

she remained the Lady O’Hennessy. Those who knew Amanda could hardly have been surprised by her decision—and the ensuing outrage made it clear that many did not know her at all. Some were quite vocal in their ignorance, though never courageously so—most distressingly, those women, common and noble alike, who were wildly convinced that their sister’s liberty was an affront to their own bondage. They denounced her almost fanatically, demonstrating the same zeal with which they habitually effaced themselves in defense of their captors, and presuming, as ever, the virtue of their personal subservience. They joined their menfolk in heaping condolence upon the Count, who, they imagined, must have been beside himself with humiliation. But if Jean objected to Amanda’s choice, he never did so publicly. Neither did he outright condemn or silence her detractors—who were, as a rule, much quieter in his presence and hers—for he knew that a woman who preserves her name is a woman who need not be sheltered from the flailing irrelevancy of her fragile inferiors.

And yet, there were two who managed to wound Amanda deeply. Despite his failing health, Lord Emil was still just as headstrong as his daughter, and though he and his wife stood in awe of her courage and her loyalty to their family name, the older parts of them saw empty immaturity in her gesture—another self-gratified spurning of noble institution, this time utterly excessive. Heated words went back and forth in ways that all three regretted bitterly—and with little time left to make amends. It is thought, or perhaps hoped, that they did reconcile before Lord Emil and Lady Brenna passed away the following winter. We all should hope for such closure, lest we take up a heavier misery than we can bear:

*For peace, I fear, is long away  
beyond a mountain of a mile  
whose road wends without hedge to hide  
the blighted, brutal view beside  
where all my failures, flanked in file,*

*strung up like live exhibits, stay.*

*They watch me while I wander past,*

*each step the end—but not the last.*

No, it was certainly not the last hardship that awaited Jean and Amanda. Had they seen the future revealed before them, the Count and the Lady might never have stepped forward in their new lives together—and all true Kendrish sons and daughters give thanks to the gods that it were not so. What was bought dearly has left us rich, and we would be poor beyond measure without its purchase.

In talking of their hardships, one matter must here be addressed, if only because there is no more suitable place for it in this chronicle, and also because it has been the subject of much speculation and hearsay, and therefore it demands an authoritative response. Many historians, learned or otherwise, have lent credibility over the years to the belief that the love of Count d’Garte and Lady O’Hennessy was passionless—that, because of their difference in age, or because they never produced an heir, or because later events would seem to suggest it, anything of genuine desire could not have unfolded between them. While a detailed rebutting of this notion would be most improper, it would also be improper to let it stand, and so, be assured—the claim is flatly untrue. It is known, and should be remembered, that their contemporaries who observed the smoldering looks between Jean and Amanda often caught fire themselves—some were so impassioned that they were driven to compose love poetry, many having never before penned a verse in all their days. These poems provide more proof of passion than is sufficient, such that their sheer volume renders their inclusion here entirely impractical. So, too, does their tendency to favor heavy-handed sensuality over sophistication to an unusually cheek-flushing extent—an endearing quality in its own right, but one that is sadly incompatible with the ample yet sexless charm of historical report.

The absence of an heir is the most sober of the aforementioned arguments—accordingly, it has a sobering explanation. Infertility and impotence are known to follow families. Amanda’s mother had

endured difficulties during her first childbirth such that a second would have invited death. The Count was an only child himself, his parents having quietly struggled with similar frustrations. And, although the ill fate of his first wife could not have physiologically influenced him, the tragedy of her loss was never far from his thoughts, a reminder of how easily death enmeshed itself with precious life—a ghost as much as any other, and how could he not be haunted? Taken together, these factors suggest the very likely probability that Count d’Garte and Lady O’Hennessy were unable to conceive, not unwilling. We wonder, certainly, how profoundly they felt this misfortune—the lady, especially, for unlike her husband, she had no prior children of her own. No doubt she had been raised to expect that motherhood would be an inevitable part of her life, whether or not she had anticipated it gladly, or with gladness only. But these details shall not be discussed. On such tender and nuanced matters of the heart, public sentiment is often grossly myopic—to the point of unfeeling sociopathy, really—and seeing as neither man nor god has yet devised an artifice that can steer it to adequate sympathy, we must not pretend that these words alone can eclipse the sum of their efforts.

And besides, there are other hardships to recount, no less significant to the lovers or their people, whose suffering was far-reaching and slow-soothed. Odessa’s revival of the Summerwinds Festival had hushed their outcries only temporarily—by the time it came round again, matters were worse than they had been the year prior. A rainy springtime had never been unusual for the Duchy of Kilshannon, but this season a series of unrelenting storms fell over the land, which was already soaked with snowmelt. Rain poured for weeks and weeks with little reprieve, and well before the clouds were emptied out, the White River and its tributaries ran over their shores, as did the many greater and smaller lakes of the region. In the countryside, homes and wagons floated like shipwrecks in the drink, and vast tracts of farmland were lost. Highways and bridges crumbled, severing the cities from their outlying settlements. The city of Montrais itself fared better than most—the sea swelled, swallowing the beaches and flooding swaths of the harbor, but the walls held strong against the high winds. Shannoway, sadly, had been built along the River’s banks, and those sustaining waters now tested the

very foundations of Fionn Kilshane's proud jewel. Whole neighborhoods sank and were as swamps—the waterfront and other homes of the poor, always most vulnerable to calamity, overflowed with refuse from the sewers. The filth brought plague, and brothers and sisters held each other apart for fear of catching their deaths. All souls were heavy with sorrow, and the Kendregeist, that unbowed flame of man that burns without end, labored like a sputtering candle to stay alight.

High Lord Darragh looked out on the suffering of his kingdom, and he tore at his hair in grief, for all of his royal authority was powerless to assuage the wrath of the elements. He and High Lady Silvia saw to it that their ministers of state were managing the crisis as capably as they could, and they ordered their council to draft and fund the relief measures to be undertaken once the storms were spent. As a vassal state, County Montrais was called upon to contribute a large share of the resources needed to address the disaster. Darragh had every confidence that the Count and Countess would comply honorably, and he was right to think so, for Jean was loyal to his old friend despite the coldness between them, and Amanda was loyal to all the people of Kilshannon and yearned to help them now more than ever. The realm had weathered a crippling blow, but its ruling lords and ladies were united in their determination to see it survive.

But when the storms returned in autumn to ruin the harvest, hope flagged anew. Whispers began to spread—the kingdom had been cursed. Had the High Lord drawn the ire of the gods? Or were his enemies somehow setting the tempest against him—the elves weaving their sorcery, perhaps, or the loathsome dragon Grimfaltre drowning his former dominion out of spite? Paranoia and discontent festered like sick sores as Kilshannon faced a bleak and hungry winter.

And then, in the spring, the storms returned again.

It was more than most could bear, and in their rage and terror they looked to their king for answers. Darragh could not see how to comfort his people, for the gods were silent despite his many prayers and offerings, and it seemed that the blight would never end. Those nearest to him advocated for swift, decisive action, that he might prevent outright insurrection. Among his court and council, the

opinion prevailed that the most popular explanation was, in this case, likeliest to be true—the elves of eastern Al’can must be to blame. No doubt they were planning a fresh offensive, aiming to reclaim the territory they had lost during the previous war, and the floods were a magically conjured means of softening the west for easier conquest. There was no proof, to be sure, yet those who disagreed were soon obligated by the climate of desperation to change their stance—firstly, because renewed conflict with the elves would provide opportunities to pillage enemy food stores and stave off famine, and secondly, because the stratagem of displacing domestic anger onto a foreign enemy was notoriously effective. The public would be easily convinced, regardless of the truth of the matter. If the Al’cani were responsible, then the policy would be both tactically and morally justified. If not, then the duchy would at least avoid collapse until the actual cause of the storms could be determined, or until they abated naturally, if the storms were, in fact, simply a series of disastrous coincidences.

High Lord Darragh brought this message before his people, and he rallied them, starving and frightened, to war. The various noble houses stood unanimously in support of their king—except for one, the humblest of them all. House O’Hennessy was divided. Lord Aymer, who had assumed his role as head of family upon his brother Emil’s death, would never have dreamt of dissenting—he and his wife and sons held with the host. But Lady Amanda could not abide the reckless inhumanity of unjust engagement—she held her uncle in contempt, and he wished more than most that she would have abandoned the name O’Hennessy. For a time, she openly criticized the king’s decision, that she might use her power to prevent atrocity.

For his part, Jean was deeply torn—inflamed by his wife’s righteousness, yet unable to abandon his oath of fealty. Ever in his ear, Odessa urged him to remain unmoved, for Kilshannon teetered on the brink of rupture, and he must not endanger it further for the mere sake of peace in his marriage. As always, he saw the sense in what she said, and a coldness mantled him, sad and familiar. He spoke firmly to Amanda, his words all but an order, insisting that if she loved the Kendrish people as they loved her, then she would spare less compassion for their mortal enemy, and she would instead wave



the flag that would win their future. She stood aghast as she heard him, feeling for the first time that he was a stranger to her. Had she married a devil dressed in the skin of an honest man? An anger erupted between them, never to wholly cool—but House d’Garte officially endorsed the war.

The first two months of the conflict proceeded favorably—the king’s armies encountered scant resistance as they marched east, advancing rapidly and raiding several dozen villages. But the elves mounted a fierce counteroffensive, and the Kendrish were forced to consolidate, giving back some ground in order to secure their overall position. Lines were drawn, and the valleys were scarred by the early battles of the bloody Flood War, chaotic and grueling, with much brutality visited upon both sides. One year flowed into the next, and the next after that. Whether by providence or circumstance, the storms did not darken the skies a fourth time, but the war they had incited would linger long past its welcome, as wars always do.

In the homeland, agitation and discord were escalating. The nobility maintained the appearance of unity, but the common folk saw that the fighting had done little to alleviate famine, and many were growing weary beneath the burden of wartime tax and buried loved ones. Anti-war sentiment began to circulate, mostly in County Montrais, whose citizens felt they were being unfairly compelled to shed gold and blood for the benefit of those living in the Duke’s lands to the south, where the flooding had been more severe. Public estimation of Count d’Garte, which had never been soaring, reached new lows. Acts of protest, small and disorganized, arose in the towns and villages farthest from the capital—tax collections were late or short, and conscription notices went unanswered. The Count viewed this challenge to his authority as another threat to the stability of his realm, and he responded with force, dispatching guardsmen to the countryside to ensure compliance. This seemed to quell the defiance in some cases, but in others it had an exacerbating effect—couriers, collectors, and other royal emissaries were harassed or beaten, and aggression between wary villagers and outnumbered guardsmen left several men badly wounded. Reinforcements were sent, and further violence was bred. The guard was spread too thin, and there was talk of redirecting soldiers from the front lines, though it was known that

none could be spared. Surrounded by his scrambling advisors, the Count fumed silently as control slipped slowly from his grip.

Amanda looked out on the suffering of her people, and though she felt her heart breaking, she took up her sword and lance, for she was resolved that if she could not stop her brothers and sisters from slaughtering elves, then she would at least stand in the way of them slaughtering each other. Ser Lucas mustered her loyal knights and their squires, fine warriors all, and they went forth like the warm summer wind, making to slay the daemons that plagued their nation. Lady Amanda herself rode at the helm of their company, leading them on their journeys along the perilous country roads. Upon arriving at a settlement, it happened more often than not that the residents, seeing that she and her knights traveled beneath the hated banner of Count d'Garte, would make it known that their presence was unwanted. They typically did so passively—brusque mannerisms, indifference in place of proper reverence, and perhaps the occasional off-color comment—but there were also times when they gathered at the edge of town in protest, hurling insults like spears and refusing entry. It mattered not—wherever she went, her love for them was an armor impervious that turned aside all hateful rage, and she wore it proudly when she approached, and the people saw that their champion would not be denied.

Tales of Lady O'Hennessey's questing are numerous, varied, and—like all the best stories—rife with embellishment. Though her greatness was undeniable, it is beyond belief that she led the charge against a half-dragon bandit lord and vanquished him in single combat, or that the gods supposedly empowered her to perform a wide range of miracles—healing the dying with a touch of her hand, summoning clean water from thin air, and restoring the soil with her heartfelt tears, to name a few. These are not factual accounts, uplifting as they are—they are the exalting inventions of grateful folk who were fortunate enough to have a hero when they needed one. Her mundane accomplishments, however, were themselves miraculous—all across the county, she organized village militias, negotiated allowances and relief from the war tax, pardoned non-violent deserters and advocated for alternative conditions of service, mediated land disputes, fostered local trade coalitions and mutual defense pacts,

and brought scores of (non-draconic) highwaymen to justice. Lady Amanda and her knights worked tirelessly for Kilshannon, such that their deeds were rightly said to rival even the legacies of the most prestigious Kendrish families. Those who witnessed their valor named them Liberty Guard, for to see them ride was to be free from despair.

From his throne in Castle Blueshadow, Jean watched Amanda's efforts in amazement. He was awash with admiration for her, as always—yet her success contrasted harshly with his earlier mishandling of the situation, and it shamed him to have been so wrong. Odessa sensed his self-reproach, and she encouraged him to adopt a different view, for he had been wise to delegate to his wife on these matters—her strengths clearly lay in the management of domestic affairs. War, on the other hand, did not suit her—she was too kind for its callous necessities. Let her manage the home front, the Temperhand advised, while he turned his attention fully to the battlefield, taking care to check her benevolence whenever it infringed upon foreign policy. Once more, the Count—though it pained him—could not help but agree.

Thusly did those warring days wear on—Jean and his generals fought the High Lord's enemies, while Amanda and her Guard fought the enemies of the people. Busied as they were, the Count and the Lady were rarely together, and whenever they did meet, it was because of a dispute between their conflicting political initiatives. Even when they were alone with each other, words were carefully chosen, and much went unsaid. Resentments piled like bodies between them, buried but not forgotten, a rift that widened like a river running over.

And then the stars crossed, and during the fifth year of the Flood War, which was the thirty-sixth year of her life, Amanda O'Hennessey chanced to meet a rather extraordinary man.