

# *The People's Ghost*

*by Arthur Ogilvy Hasting*

## VII.

“Ah, then...you have not read it yet?”

Connor knelt on the wet stone and gazed down at the scroll. Amanda stood imperiously over him, her face betraying no emotion as she replied:

“I *have* read it, and I can hardly believe what it says. Repeat it out loud, that I may have your meaning made perfectly clear.”

He blinked at her through the rain. “Are you sure? I wrote it down for you in the hopes of removing all doubt. I thought you would not believe me if I merely said it to you. I say so many pretty things, you know—I did not want my voice to cheapen this one.”

She made no response, her silence pressing him to go on.

His eyes wandered to the saber in her hand. “And I suppose you are going to knight me once I have finished?”

“Do not concern yourself with what happens next. You will own your words. Right now.”

“Hardly reassuring of you, dear lady...but I can see you are determined to have your way.”

He did not unfurl the scroll but held it gently to his chest. Looking only at her, he recited from memory and with much emphasis the sixteen lines he had written:

*Beloved lady, warrior-lord,  
I wear my armor loose,  
the better to throw down my sword  
and breathe the peace of truce.  
My rank-and-vile gender  
with their sour victories brag,  
but I pray my sweet surrender  
may yet waive the winning flag:*

*for though the charge of conquest calls,  
my triumph would retreat;  
my hardened heart's war-hammered halls  
are softened in defeat;  
my castle stands tall, pole to pole,  
but all my walls are doors;  
your name is written on my soul,  
and all my halls are yours.*

He bowed politely. The churning sea and the pattering rain offered up their applause.

Some minutes passed before she spoke:

“So you are earnest, then. This is what you have to say? You stand by it?”

“I have said it, Lady O’Hennessy, and now that I have, I must not keep babbling on.”

“But why?”

“Have I not been perfectly clear, as requested?”

“Not in the least. What are you trying to accomplish, Connor?”

He kept his head lowered and said nothing, cradling the scroll in his arms.

“Have you truly no shame? Is there nothing you will not say or do?”

He sighed. “You know I am ashamed of my conduct towards you—and I know that you forgive me for it. Could you have possibly realized how much I needed kindness? As much as you needed respect, maybe? We understand each other, you and I. How incredible to be known and wanted just the way you are! For that kind of love, I would forever make an ass of myself—for the love of you, Amanda O’Hennessy.”

“No—it is this country that you love, not me.”

“You *are* the country. You’re all that’s good and gold about it, and everyone knows it.”

Grasping for a retort, she was amazed by the words she found even as they left her lips:

“If I am, then so are you.”

Quiet settled over the both of them, reverent and expecting. Through the cloudy pall overhead all the stars held their breath and watched. Then, at last:

“Say...say more.”

“Come again?”

“Say something more!” She grew flustered at having to repeat herself. “You choose now of all times to start holding your tongue?”

“I...W-what more is there to say? Those were my Last Words—as in, final?”

“So read them again!”

“Read them *again*?”

“Won’t you?” Her voice almost trembled to ask it.

There are times when one simply must do as one is told.

“Y-Yes, of course,” he stammered. “As many times as you like, if that is your, um...yes.”

And so he knelt there and recited the verse again, and she stood there listening, and their hands shook, and their faces were wet...and when he had finished she stepped forward and lowered herself to embrace him. As she raised him up, the irons around his wrists and ankles suddenly hung slack, loosened as if by unseen hands. He was free to run, with only her arms to keep him there.

He returned her embrace, smiling into her shoulder and saying:

“We *are* in trouble now, don’t you think? And yet, somehow, I have never felt safer.”

She held him a little tighter in reply. The scroll purred approvingly.

But the moment was not to last. Through the trees behind them could be heard the clamor of hoofbeats and men shouting to one another.

“We have been followed,” he whispered to her. “You must not be seen with me. Is there any other way back to the castle?”

She shook her head, looking grimly toward the treeline. “The cliffs are too steep. The trails are the only way. But it matters not—they are already upon us. We will meet them here. It is a fitting spot.”

“I-Is it?” He looked at her searchingly.

Before they could exchange another word, lantern-light began to appear through the trees. The riders came into view—the knights of the Liberty Guard and their squires, one and all, looking bedraggled and hurriedly roused from sleep. Ser Lucas led them to a halt, flung himself down from his horse, and squinted through the darkness, calling out:

“Who goes there? By order of the Crown, identify yourself!”

Amanda was slow to respond. Keeping one concerned eye on her, Connor took a few shuffling steps forward out of the shadows.

“Is that you, Ser Sanctimony? Ever the dogged lawman, eh? Even so, the great Lady O’Hennessy is swifter and more vigilant than you! I should have known better than to try my luck on her watch—but alas, I had to chance it! Such is the desperation of a wicked man in his final hours!”

As he spoke, gesturing with his hands for emphasis, the chains fell fully away from his wrists and landed in a pile at his feet.

The knights, stupefied momentarily, realized all at once that the traitor was unbound. They reached for their blades and rushed forth in a panic.

But then the voice of the Countess rang out with a warning:

“Stay your hands, all of you—lest you perform a misdeed that cannot be forgiven!”

They staggered to a stop several paces away, looking to their lady and to each other in utter bewilderment. Ser Lucas was possibly the most bewildered of them all. Taking one more uncertain step forward, he asked:

“My lady, what is the m-”

But she stamped the heel of her boot on the hard stone and shouted over him:

“I tell you to hold there, Knight-Commander!”

He came no closer, but stared at her in amazement.

“My lady, please, tell us what has happened! Our enemy stands loosed before us—why must we not act? And the dungeons—they are empty! The conspirators have all escaped!”

“No, Luc,” she said evenly, “they have not escaped—they have been freed by my writ. I have commuted their sentences. They have served time enough.”

“You...you have pardoned them?”

“No, their crimes are not forgotten, but...they have been punished too harshly already.”

“Too harshly for *treason*?”

“Do you disagree, my knight?” She was gazing sternly at him. “The color is leeching from your face. Are you so horrified by clemency? Or, perhaps, you think me quite mad.”

There was a cold venom in her last remark, and all the men felt it. Ser Lucas fell silent, his mind whirling.

Then Ser Conall stepped forward from the assemblage. Kneeling solemnly before his lady, he addressed Ser Lucas:

“Commander, I must make a clean breast of this, that every member of our fellowship may know the truth! It was I who went down to the dungeons and freed the prisoners! My own weakness is to blame! I could not bear to see good men hanged, traitors though they might be! But I tell you this—I have never felt so glad to be weak, and I regret only that I did not liberate them sooner! If for this reason my lords will not suffer me to live, then may the gods be kind!”

Ser Lucas was gaping like a fish. The Countess softened visibly, and she said:

“Your compassion distinguishes you, Ser Conall, as does your loyalty—you have done only what I have asked of you. Rise. Your ancestors are smiling proudly at their little Wolf.”

Ser Conall rose to his feet as ordered, holding back his tears.

“So there are real heroes among us after all,” said Connor, mostly to himself.

Ser Lucas, having momentarily forgotten the bard, remembered him now and rounded on him with so much fury.

“This is your doing, you infernal witch—it must be! Only you and your fell charms could tempt a knightly heart thus!”

Connor bowed in appreciation of the compliment. Lady Amanda, however, was none too pleased. Matching Ser Lucas’s temper, she shouted:

“Whose heart is tempted, Knight-Commander? The orders Ser Conall has followed are mine and mine alone! He has upheld his vow! I ask you once again—and you would do well to answer plainly—*whose heart is tempted?* Perhaps you refer to my own?”

Ser Lucas’s voice very nearly died in his throat as he replied:

“I-I would never have believed it, my lady, but...what else *can* I believe? Should I doubt my own eyes? You have freed them! You have freed *him!* I wait to hear you say the words that will lift my confusion—but the more you speak, the less I understand!”

“Then your ears are failing you, Ser Lucas—it is them you should doubt, not your eyes! Listen closely, all of you, and hear this truth which I myself had forgotten: to serve a warmongering tyrant is to betray kin and country; to rebel against such a lord may be a crime, but it could never be treason! Remember your oath!”

Her words struck like a hammer, rattling their hearts. Still Ser Lucas pleaded:

“Amanda, think of what you are saying! We are at war!”

“War is our enemy, Luc! It is a blight upon us! It bleeds us dry! Has any hearth been spared the ravaging? Is any family left unbroken? The people cry out for relief, and I can deny them no longer! Connor and I, we ride now to the castle in the name of peace! Do not stand in the doorway, my old friend—come in with us! All of you, come in with us!”

Exhorted thusly, the Liberty Guard was conflicted as never before. Each man stood at the crossroads, wrestling with himself. Only Ser Conall had set his resolve, staunch even as he trembled

with emotion—he would stand with Lady O’Hennessy, come what may. With a nod of solidarity, Ser Declan soon reached the same decision. Ser Brian and the others were still of two minds.

Ser Lucas was shaking his head incredulously. “It is too much, my lady...it is all too much! Are we to summarily decide the fate of the realm? Here, now, on this rainy bluff, in the dead of night? Do we expect the Count will have nothing to say?”

“I call on you to act for our people, and instead you are fussing over my husband? Well, be at ease—he will be convinced of our mandate, and his advisors will fall in line! How many among them think only of preserving themselves? They are watching always to see when the tide might turn—and it is turning now!”

“I...It may be true what you say, my lady, but please, let us be sensible! We must keep our heads! There is too much at stake! Let us return to the castle, as you say, to call a council in the morning—or this very night, if you wish it! But let Connor wait in the dungeons where the law has rightly placed him! Then we may properly do your will, with clean conscience!”

There was a long pause. When she finally spoke, a baleful chill had crept into her voice.

“What you have just said—it is indefensible. I am your Countess. I have granted clemency, but you presume to return the prisoner to his chains? To affirm my husband’s authority and disregard my own? On my father’s name, I swear I shall not allow it.”

Desperately Ser Lucas looked to Connor.

“Stop this!” It was more of a plea than an order. “This can only end in ruin for both of you! If you care a whit for her, release her!”

Connor spread his hands helplessly in front of himself, but before he could speak, Amanda raised her voice with new fire:

“Enough! Will you stand down, Knight-Commander?”

“S-Stand down...?”

“Amanda-” Connor spoke to her softly, but she would not be soothed.

“I repeat, will you stand down?”

“I...I cannot.”

“Then there is nothing for it—we must duel. Draw your sword, Ser Lucas.”

“My lady, please-”

“My lady, indeed!” she cried. “I am a knight of the Kendrelands! My honor compels me—what of yours? You dare to undermine me, to accuse me of womanly foolishness for all your fellows to hear, but when the moment arrives to stand firm, you shrink from your manful convictions? That you would spit on the graves of your forebears—I did not think you so small! A pity the name of Montel shall be forever tarnished!”

Even the high-minded Ser Lucas could not brook such an insult. Torn between indignation and grief, he took up his saber.

The other knights moved off to give room and bear witness. Ser Brian and his squire kept a firm grip on Connor, for even in his infirmity he was trying to intervene.

And how they clashed, the righteous lady and her finest knight! Over and over they came together and apart, dancing with blade-mastery, steel singing on steel. Yet neither wished to kill the other, so how could a final blow be struck? Both stood un-slain by their wounds, and Many Miracles were hiding in plain sight. On and on they fought while Calliope thundered and thrashed the heavens in her heartbreak.

How long was it before they had battled themselves to a standstill? How many minutes elapsed, or hours, or days? Time lazed like a serpent in the morning sun, long enough for the Count, accompanied by six dozen soldiers and his most trusted advisor, to finish climbing the trail.

What must have passed through the mind of Jean d’Garte when he arrived on that spot? To see his wife and Ser Lucas in open combat, confirming everything Odessa had told him... He called out for the duel to stop, and they both yielded, though it was their exhaustion rather than his order that made them do so. He dismounted and took a few steps forward—but then he saw.

There, not far from the duelists, stood Connor Kildenny. The traitor. The witch. The source of every blight upon his rightful rule. The orchestrator of his humiliation.

Execution would not wait until the morrow. Count d’Garte drew his sword and advanced with purpose, stopping for no one, his ears deaf to their protesting.

He swung down once, a vicious stroke—but it caught on the guard of an intercepting blade. Reflexively he pressed against it, heaved it aside, and delivered a furious thrust into the unarmored chest of its wielder.

She was exhausted and could not defend in time.

Count d’Garte opened his bloody eyes wide, and all the devils in Hell chattered with glee. Connor shrieked.

Lady Amanda O’Hennessy stood between them, the rapier buried in her heart. Her eyes, already clouding over, sought his gaze. She whispered:

“I loved you...traitor...”

And then, suddenly, a gust of wind came roaring in off the sea—a bitter gale so fierce that the trees bent low before it. Wild and unrelenting, it flattened every man against the ground, sparing only two among them.

Amanda O’Hennessy—paragon, the people’s liege death-standing in the squall, her husband’s blade blown free from the whistling ruddy wound on her breast, bloodied but unbowed.

And Connor Kildenny—renegade, the torch in the rising hand, wraith-fading already as the wind wound around him in unknowable shapes and lifted him dance-like over the cliff edge, a feather falling softly to the shore below.

Though his cries were drowned out by the howling storm, Amanda seemed to hear him go—her head turned, and her legs followed after him.

Jean reached for her, but like the others he could not stand against the tempest. His eyes were tearing, and she became a blur in his vision.

Amanda, all shambles, approached the precipice. The wind and rain quietly subsided as she stepped out into the air, plummeted, and disappeared into the roiling sea.

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What happened next on that benighted bluff shall stain our history until the end of days.

Steady Odessa, loyal Odessa! While the others were still reeling from shock, how ready she was to act! How quickly she hurried to her lord's side, taking the bloodied sword gently out of his hands, whispering comfort and counsel. No, it was not his fault, of course not—he had been betrayed. The Countess had been led astray by wicked magic. It was Connor who had killed her, and all those present would swear to the truth of it. Numbly the Count agreed—hiding his shaken nerves away behind his stoic mask, he drew himself up to do what must be done.

Ser Lucas had fallen unconscious and could not be roused, but he had been seen dueling valiantly against his lady, and so his loyalty to the Crown was fairly assumed. The other knights of the Liberty Guard stood before the Count, forced now to choose.

The order was given: kneel and swear to the truth—that the villainous rebel Connor Kildenny had ensorcelled and murdered the Countess of Montrais—and renew the vow of fealty for the good of the realm.

First Ser Conall the Wolf, then Ser Declan of the Dew, then mighty Ser Brian, and so on—one by one, each knight looked his lord in the face and said it was a lie. Lady O'Hennessey was of her own sound mind to the very end, and she was murdered by her husband. No honorable man could deny it.

The lines were drawn, and a terrible battle ensued. The Liberty Guard were the greatest men-at-arms in all the land, but on that night they were unarmored and outnumbered four to one. Count d'Garte paid a heavy price to be rid of them—seventy of his soldiers lost their lives in the fighting—but when it was over, all the knights and their squires lay slain on those bloody cliffs. They died defending their lady's honor and their country, a fate apportioned too often to the good souls among us.

A detachment was sent down to that rocky beach to discover what had become of Connor. When they arrived, they found him crumpled and prostrated with his arms outstretched towards the sea, screaming her name into the cold sand.