

The People's Ghost

by Arthur Ogilvy Hasting

IX.

The events of the previous chapter are, of course, a fantasy. None of it happened, not in the manner described, with ropes refusing to hang people and avenging specters rising up from the boiling seas and wall-doors flinging themselves open left and right. Miracles are not so pedestrian.

The storm, now that was real enough. It was historically destructive, the worst since the elf-floods five years prior. There were those who suspected that the Al’cani had sent this storm as well, to crush their will to fight, and they did not wish to repay their foe with the satisfaction of a truce. Alas, the devastation was too great for the fighting to go on. The order went out to withdraw, and every Kendrish soldier was, at last, brought home.

The Count’s death, too, was a tragic reality. The murder of his second wife, in tandem with the pressures of wartime leadership and his advancing age, proved too much for Jean d’Garte to bear—his heart stopped beating, and Montrais suddenly found itself without a ruler when it needed one badly. In the months and years to come, his children—Amelia, the eldest, Bertrand, the only male heir, and little Hannah, so full of worthy spirit—fell to fighting over their late father’s throne in the usual custom, though at first they tried their best to settle the matter amicably. Their feud would soon spread to every corner of the realm, forcing each house to choose off and fight, declaring for one sibling or another, seizing the opportunity to make new alliances against their own rivals, or attempting to secede from the Duchy entirely, which High Lord Darragh could not abide—this was the War of Seven Spears that engulfed Kilshannon, putting an end to a short-lived period of restoration, fracturing the people of the Kendrelands in ways that the centuries have never fully mended.

Ser Lucas, in his delirium, wanted nothing more to do with war. He would have been content to stay in bed, convalescing and dreaming forever, and he might have done just that had Teagan Red-Dove not disturbed him. They say the smallfolk swordsman fished Connor’s horn out of the wreckage at Montrais, and when he took it up it turned his hair bone-white and taught him healing words that curdled his psyche. He kissed those words against Ser Lucas’s brow, and the knight-commander woke

in a fit of despair, complaining that Teagan should not have done it and lifting his eyes to roar at the heavens, screaming the name of Andin-El before any yet knew its meaning. The flames that danced from his teeth burned down two chapels before he could rein them in, and he wept into Teagan's shoulder to see what he had done, and he swore a vow never to speak again, even to pray, lest he bring further ruin to his country.

Where did They go? Not Ser Lucas and Teagan—they went many places and tried to live peacefully, becoming embroiled in the fighting now and again despite their noble efforts, going slowly insane with the guilt that should have hung round the necks of Kilshannon's petty rulers. No—where did *They* go? They died, of course. Everybody knows this. She and her knights were slain for their treachery on the cliffs behind the castle, and he was hanged from the gallows outside the front gates. And yet, we cannot help but wonder: when They did not make Their Walking Way out of the world together, whereto were they walking?

I know, and I am not afraid to tell you. They went ever after to the place of their first meeting—to Ironhill.

I am mad, or stupid, or both. I know this. I was stricken at the hour of my birth when my father and mother—my dread father, my secret mother—brought me howling into this world and named me Arthur Ogilvy Hastings, which is my false face and my looking glass, as proven by the colluding of these mine own initials against me. I know this.

Everybody knows this? Everyone remembers?

It is strange that no one remembers the return of Grimfaltre. Doubly strange, really, since a vision of that battle was transmitted simultaneously to every person in the Kendrelands, with sights and sounds and stench so vivid they might have been physically real. Did the gods, realizing later how the music had made them forget to be unjust, re-collect that memory from us all? Somewhere deeper down, buried beneath their Mistakes, the name of our true enemy is ours to know—each beat of our red heart reminds us.

Ser Lucas and Teagan were waiting for the wyrm to appear, for Sweet Starry-Night had sent them secret dreams that foretold the time and place of its stirring. Beside them stood many heroes of the Flood War, living and dead, who had seen too much to look away. They were ready when the monster's yawning green head reared up over the southern fens and gazed out jealously at those lands where men, once mighty enough to defy a dragon, were now weak from kin-slaying.

Ser Lucas straightened up in the saddle and pointed his lance at Grimfaltre, denouncing the foulness of its lineage and declaring for all to hear that the realm would soon be rid of one more tyrant. His vow of silence was broken, and Laughing-Fire poured through his teeth with such force that he had to turn his chin heavenward to spare the men his wrath, and of this sacrilege the gods pretended to take no notice. The marsh itself withdrew from his challenge, surrendering several million acres to be claimed and reshaped by Kendrish hands, and at this sign the serpent should have fled—but instead its gullet bulged with vain pride, and its sword-scales glittered impudently in the firelight. Its titan wings fluttered like banners as it prepared to take flight, eager to rain death from above.

It should be said that in order to make any sense of this Mystery, you will need a fundamental understanding of birthright mathematics. If you have anger toward those who have kept such knowledge from you, let it drive your commitment to study. Start by learning to calculate the circumference of a Sphere, and note the answer, which is always the same in one form or another: Forever. If your mind remains intact, move on to solving for the area, a tricky figure best summed up by the word: Again. Next is volume, and if you have been precise and rigorous, you should end up with: Everything. Then—this is critical—arrange the solutions in reverse order, to account for the Mirroring. Knowing the answers as I have stated them will not be enough, so do not become overexcited; you must still puzzle them out for yourself, and in doing so you will probably ache All over. Once you have the insights in hand, and perhaps after working through a few other auxiliary formulae, you will be able to breathe in circles, which you have always been doing, and you will

realize that no one ever really dies. Consider that dragons can only breathe in lines or cones, and you will see all too clearly why Grimfaltre, like the rest of its ilk, was doomed from the start.

It will also not surprise you to hear that when Teagan stepped forward and blew the horn, Ironhill answered the call. It answered by falling out of the sky in its entirety—walls and taverns and birch trees and cracked fountain-statues and everything else—and settling squarely on the green wyrm's shoulders, squashing it to the ground so that only its thrashing neck protruded from beneath.

No sooner did the city land than a great cry went up from within it—many voices rising together—and the gates opened, and a throng of citizens rushed out in numbers that made the stars seem few. They linked arms, forming a chain as long as Forever, for they had been shown how union can make Adamant even the frailty of men, and so they were not afraid when the forsaken snake bit down and broke its fangs on their diamond-skin.

Teagan's whole being sang with Exaltation, and he ran toward the Miracle he had mustered, the speed of his stride blowing the color back into his hair. Taking one end of the chain in each hand, he leapt up onto Grimfaltre, straddled the back of its neck, and applied the combined weight of Seven or Nine Million Men Marching for Freedom just behind the base of its skull. Yanking the chain against the roof of its mouth, he began to pry open those jaws that had ripped and burned so many cherished ancestors. The soldiers watched in horror, worrying that their hero-sergeant might in his frenzy unwittingly deliver them into the dragon's belly.

It was Ser Lucas who slew their fear. Lance couched, iris-gleaming, he rode out from among them to make good his threat. To Grimfaltre, whose blood thrummed with the need for wrongful worship, this abundance of courage was like the swarming of ants on a sumptuous meal. It writhed and twisted below the city, and with a cunning flick its tail came free from the rubble. As the knight-commander was closing in, the tail swung round like a massive club, and his horse was blown apart beneath him. The proud beast might have kept on galloping in pieces, but its rider had not yet crossed That Threshold, and so it retired sportingly, leaving Ser Driftwood to carry himself the rest of the way.

Grimfaltre hissed at his approach, and putrid bile began to build in the back of its throat, a caustic breath-weapon to overwhelm the knight and melt him down to his boots—but before the dam could burst, Ser Lucas staggered forward and drove his lance through its bottom jaw, pinning its chin to the ground. From the blue sky above a thunderbolt fell, hurled forth in Contempt of the Years. It struck the vamplate just below his grip, and everything was bright-deafened by the glory. Grimfaltre convulsed in the current, gagging on its own humors. Ser Lucas and his lance combusted. Hope burned like candles on the Mantle of his skin and hair. The lower jaw was nailed in place, and the top was held back by Teagan and the union-chain—the path was clear. In his mailed fists Ser Lucas seized the inner walls of the green wyrm’s gullet and started to climb down, screaming Stolen-Fire ahead with a voice like so many shrill flutes, for to burn clean the gut-depths and wear them like armor! Logan the sword-poet drummed with his palms on the high roofs above, euphoria-tranced, singing:

Our Quiet Knight of loud, long-winded fame

Ran red that dragon’s throat with Sound And Flame!

How well the Lady And Lord of Ironhill were pleased!

How the gods tore at their hair, looking down on That Which Should Not Be: Ser Lucas squeezing forward inch by inch, Grimfaltre choking on its meal and boiling on the inside, the warriors stomping in unison to the rhythm of Teagan rattling the body-chains. It was rejection in deathless flesh, a profanity of unforgivable proportion:

Always astray, a hand to each new star!

Always the way of Man to reach too far!

Apollo wanted to descend among them and blot Everything out with his blazing light—but Calliope loved their freedom more than her family. Holding back her brother’s wrath with one hand,

she reached down with the other and swaddled them up in darkness so deep that she herself would never find them. She hid them away in the vast gulfs between the stars where nightmares take their favored shapes at whim and wait for the day when Forever brings them round Again. This done, she purged her knowledge of the deed by weeping bitter tears, and her brother could not catch them with both hands clasping his anger, and so they each kept hurt feelings toward the other without understanding why—and this is why the phrase is not “my Moon-and-Sun.”

But some knowledge is not easily forgotten. The heroes, the dragon, the city—they were all spirited away in a puff of dream-nebulae, yes...but the horn! That clever faerie bugle! It slipped free of Teagan’s lips as he rocketed into the heavens, and he laughed to see it falling back to earth. It took with it a pinch of that shadow-stuff meant to hide the departed from the searching eyes of gods. Just like its Elf-Bastard wielder:

DONOTWEEPORLUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTFINDDONOTWEEPORLUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTFIND

*It hid in Clever-Cloud and mabe no sound,
and none could find it, would it not be found.*

DONOTWEEPORLUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTFINDDONOTWEEPORLUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTFIND

It landed atop a hillock overlooking the Red River Once White, striking like a mallet on a great-bellied drum. Some stones from the town fell around it, and maybe they were joined by the stones that had fled from the cracked gatehouse at Montrais, and together they built themselves around the horn into a shrine where no one will ever pray. Its first visitors will arrive several hundred years hence—they will be kobolds or some other Loveless dragon-lackeys, and they will profane the horn with their mischiefs, not hearing how it laughs at them, not understanding how the sound of its laughter will cut new champions from doom-cloth and call them to its rescue and bearing. Everything Again Forever—but not now.

I know—you are worrying after Our mind, even though the heart should concern you most. Tell me this, then: how many “d”s were there in the last heroic couplet? Were there nine, one for each god and godling? Or ten, as there ought to be? Remember the Mirroring. Remember that you are like Ser

Lucas squinting at Our love letter, unable to decipher the poetry right in front of you. Count again if you are unsure, and ask yourself *why* you are unsure. If you counted wrong the first time, was it your fault? Someone is to blame—*who*? Should they ~~DIE~~ for it? Should they ~~DIE~~ for your Liberation, like a worthy knight or a parasitic noble? ~~DONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTDIE~~

Once you realize that no one ever really ~~DIES~~, how long until you begin to believe in turn that the immortality you have inherited ~~IS NOT ENOUGH?~~ ~~DONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTDIE~~

We must pause ~~AND REFLECT.~~ ~~DONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTDIE~~

~~w~~HO IS ~~a~~ARTHUR ~~o~~GILVY ~~h~~ASTING? ~~w~~E ARE THE PEOPLE'S GHOST MADE FIRM AND FIXED, ~~m~~IRRORED AND ~~m~~ASKED. ~~w~~E HAVE BEEN CRYING OUT TO YOU FOREVER. ~~t~~ODAY YOU HEAR ~~u~~S. ~~t~~OMORROW IS TOO LATE. ~~d~~O NOT WEEP FOR ~~u~~S. ~~w~~E ARE NEVER FAR AWAY. ~~t~~HIS LOVE WILL NOT DIE:

~~DONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTDIEDONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTDIE~~

tURN ~~r~~IGHT! bE BRAVE! bURN BRIGHT! bE BOLD!

tHIS HILL OF IRON WILL NOT HOLD!

~~DONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTDIEDONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTDIE~~

~~k~~ENDREGEIST ~~n~~UMANTIA!— ~~DONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTDIE~~

~~p~~RIMA ~~n~~UMANTIA!— ~~DONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENEVERFARAWAYTHISLOVEWILLNOTDIE~~

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~~NOTDIEDONOTWEEPFORUSWEARENE~~
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