

Ogrin the Hermit

Edith Wharton

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Vous qui nous jugez, savez-vous quel boivre nous avons bu sur la mer?

Ogrin the Hermit in old age set forth
This tale to them that sought him in the extreme
Ancient grey wood where he and silence housed:

Long years ago, when yet my sight was keen,
My hearing knew the word of wind in bough,
And all the low fore-runners of the storm,
There reached me, where I sat beneath my thatch,
A crash as of tracked quarry in the brake,
And storm-flecked, fugitive, with straining breasts
And backward eyes and hands inseparable,
Tristan and Iseult, swooning at my feet,
Sought hiding from their hunters. Here they lay.

For pity of their great extremity,
Their sin abhorring, yet not them with it,
I nourished, hid, and suffered them to build
Their branched hut in sight of this grey cross,
That haply, falling on their guilty sleep,
Its shadow should part them like the blade of God,
And they should shudder at each other's eyes.

So dwelt they in this solitude with me,
And daily, Tristan forth upon the chase,
The tender Iseult sought my door and heard
The words of holiness. Abashed she heard,
Like one in wisdom nurtured from a child,
Yet in whose ears an alien language dwells
Of some far country whence the traveller brings
Magical treasure, and still images
Of gods forgotten, and the scent of groves
That sleep by painted rivers. As I have seen
Oft-times returning pilgrims with the spell

Ogrin the Hermit

Of these lost lands upon their lids, she moved
Among familiar truths, accustomed sights,
As she to them were strange, not they to her.
And often, reasoning with her, have I felt
Some ancient lore was in her, dimly drawn
From springs of life beyond the four-fold stream
That makes a silver pale to Paradise;
For she was calm as some forsaken god
Who knows not that his power is passed from him,
But sees with tranced eyes rich pilgrim-trains
In sands the desert blows about his feet.

Abhorring first, I heard her; yet her speech
Warred not with pity, or the contrite heart,
Or hatred of things evil: rather seemed
The utterance of some world where these are not,
And the heart lives in heathen innocence
With earth's innocuous creatures. For she said:
"Love is not, as the shallow adage goes,
A witch's filter, brewed to trick the blood.
The cup we drank of on the flying deck
Was the blue vault of air, the round world's lip,
Brimmed with life's hydromel, and pressed to ours
By myriad hands of wind and sun and sea.
For these are all the cup-bearers of youth,
That bend above it at the board of life,
Solicitous accomplices: there's not
A leaf on bough, a foam-flash on the wave,
So brief and glancing but it serves them too;
No scent the pale rose spends upon the night,
Nor sky-lark's rapture trusted to the blue,
But these, from the remotest tides of air
Brought in mysterious salvage, breathe and sing
In lovers' lips and eyes; and two that drink
Thus onely of the strange commingled cup
Of mortal fortune shall into their blood
Take magic gifts. Upon each others' hearts
They shall surprise the heart-beat of the world,
And feel a sense of life in things inert;
For as love's touch upon the yielded body
Is a diviner's wand, and where it falls
A hidden treasure trembles: so their eyes,
Falling upon the world of clod and brute,
And cold hearts plotting evil, shall discern
The inextinguishable flame of life
That girdles the remotest frame of things
With influences older than the stars."

Ogrin the Hermit

So spake Iseult; and thus her passion found
Far-flying words, like birds against the sunset
That look on lands we see not. Yet I know
It was not any argument she found,
But that she was, the colour that life took
About her, that thus reasoned in her stead,
Making her like a lifted lantern borne
Through midnight thickets, where the flitting ray
Momently from inscrutable darkness draws
A myriad-veined branch, and its shy nest
Quivering with startled life: so moved Iseult.
And all about her this deep solitude
Stirred with responsive motions. Oft I knelt
In night-long vigil while the lovers slept
Under their outlawed thatch, and with long prayers
Sought to disarm the indignant heavens; but lo,
Thus kneeling in the intertidal hour
'Twixt dark and dawning, have mine eyes beheld
How the old gods that hide in these hoar woods,
And were to me but shapings of the air,
And flit and murmur of the breathing trees,
Or slant of moon on pools — how these stole forth,
Grown living presences, yet not of bale,
But innocent-eyed as fawns that come to drink,
Thronging the threshold where the lovers lay,
In service of the great god housed within
Who hides in his breast, beneath his mighty plumes,
The purposes and penalties of life.
Or in yet deeper hours, when all was still,
And the hushed air bowed over them alone,
Such music of the heart as lovers hear,
When close as lips lean, lean the thoughts between —
When the cold world, no more a lonely orb
Circling the unimagined track of Time,
Is like a beating heart within their hands,
A numb bird that they warm, and feel its wings —
Such music have I heard; and through the prayers
Wherewith I sought to shackle their desires,
And bring them humbled to the feet of God,
Caught the loud quiring of the fruitful year,
The leap of springs, the throb of loosened earth,
And the sound of all the streams that seek the sea.

So fell it, that when pity moved their hearts,
And those high lovers, one unto the end,
Bowed to the sundering will, and each his way
Went through a world that could not make them twain,
Knowing that a great vision, passing by,
Had swept mine eye-lids with its fringe of fire,

Ogrin the Hermit

I, with the wonder of it on my head,
And with the silence of it in my heart,
Forth to Tintagel went by secret ways,
A long lone journey; and from them that loose
Their spiced bales upon the wharves, and shake
Strange silks to the sun, or covertly unbosom
Rich hoard of pearls and amber, or let drip
Through swarthy fingers links of sinuous gold,
Chose their most delicate treasures. Though I knew
No touch more silken than this knotted gown,
My hands, grown tender with the sense of her,
Discerned the airiest tissues, light to cling
As shower-loosed petals, veils like meadow-smoke,
Fur soft as snow, amber like sun congealed,
Pearls pink as may-buds in an orb of dew;
And laden with these wonders, that to her
Were natural as the vesture of a flower,
Fared home to lay my booty at her feet.

And she, consenting, nor with useless words
Proving my purpose, robed herself therein
To meet her lawful lord; but while she thus
Prisoned the wandering glory of her hair,
Dimmed her bright breast with jewels, and subdued
Her light to those dull splendours, well she knew
The lord that I adorned her thus to meet
Was not Tintagel's shadowy King, but he,
That other lord beneath whose plummy feet
The currents of the seas of life run gold
As from eternal sunrise; well she knew
That when I laid my hands upon her head,
Saying, "Fare forth forgiven," the words I spoke
Were the breathings of his pity, who beholds
How, swept on his inexorable wings
Too far beyond the planetary fires
On the last coasts of darkness, plunged too deep
In light ineffable, the heart amazed
Swoons of its glory, and dropping back to earth
Craves the dim shelter of familiar sounds,
The rain on the roof, the noise of flocks that pass,
And the slow world waking to its daily round. . . .

And thus, as one who speeds a banished queen,
I set her on my mule, and hung about
With royal ornament she went her way;
For meet it was that this great Queen should pass
Crowned and forgiven from the face of Love.