

THE OREAD.

A FRAGMENT.*

When the Oread awoke by the hill-tarn the great heat of the noon was over. The sweet fresh mountain-air, fragrant with thyme and gale and blossoming heather, balsamic with odours of pine and fir, blew softly across the leagues of ling. The sky was of a deep, lustrous, wind-washed azure, with a vast heart of sapphire, turquoise-tinct where it caught the sun-flood southerly and westerly. A few wisps of thin white vapour appeared here and there, curled like fantastic sleighs or sweeping aloft like tails of wild horses; then quickly became attenuated, or even all at once and mysteriously disappeared. Far and near the grouse called, or rose from hollows in the heather in abrupt flurries of flight, beating the hot air with their wings with the echoing whirr of a steamer's paddles. The curlews wheeled above the water-courses, crying plaintively; whence also came ever and again the harsh resonance of the heron's scream. Echoing along the heights that rose sheer above the tarn rang the vanishing whistling voice of the whaup, and, faint but haunting-sweet as remote chimes, rose and fell in the mountain-hollows the belling of the deer. A myriad life thrilled the vast purple upland. Not a yard of heather that was not as much alive, as wonderful and mysterious, as a continent. The air palpitated with the innumerable suspirations of plant and flower, insect and bird and beast. Deep in the tarn the speckled trout caught the glint of the wandering sunray; far

* "The Oread" is a fragment of a similarly-named section from a forthcoming volume by Mr. Charles Verlayne, entitled "LA MORT S'AMUSE," which, with a fantastic connecting thread of narrative, consists of a series of "Barbaric Studies," in each of which a recreation of an antique type is attempted, but in striking contrast with and direct relation to the life of today. Mr. Verlayne's motive is at least original, if, possibly, in its treatment, as Paul Verlaine said of a certain *pièce de fantaisie* by Rimbaud, *un peu postérieure à cette époque.*

ED. *The Pagan Review.*

upon the heights the fleeces of the small hill-sheep seemed like patches of snow in the sunlight: remote, on the barren scaur beyond the highest pines, the eagle, as he stared unwaveringly upon the wilderness beneath him, shone resplendent as though compact of molten gold inlaid with gems.

Every sound, every sight, was part of the very life of the Oread. All was beautiful: all was real. The high, thin, almost inaudible scream of the eagle: the cluck of the low-flying grouse: the floating note of the yellow-hammer: the wind whistling through the gorse or whispering among the canna and gale and through the honey-laden spires of heather: the myriad murmur from the leagues of sunswept ling and from the dim grassy savannahs that underlay that purple roof: each and all were to her as innate voices.

For a long time she lay in a happy suspension of all thought or activity. Her gaze was fascinated by the reflection of herself in the tarn. Lovely was the image. The soft, delicately-rounded, white limbs, the flower-like body, seemed doubly white against the wine-dark purple of the bell-heather and the pale amethyst of the ling. The large dark eyes dreamed upward from the white face in the water like purple-blue pansies. Beautiful as was the sunshine in the wind-lifted golden hair, that was about her head as a glory of morning, even more beautiful was the shimmer of gold and fleeting amber shot through the rippled surface and clear-brown under-calm of the tarn; where also was mirrored, with a subtler beauty than above, the large sulphur-butterfly that poised upon its yellow wings as it clung to her left breast, ivory-white, small, and firm, immaculately curved as the pale globed shells of Orient seas.

Dim inarticulate thoughts passed through the mind of the Oread as she lay visionarily intent by the mountain-pool. Down what remote avenues of life she seemed to look: from what immemorial past seemed to arise, like flying shadows at dawn, recollections of the fires of sunrise kindling along the mountain-summits, of the flames of sunset burning from the beech-forests to the last straggling pines and thence to the rose-coloured snows of the remotest peaks, of the long splendid

pageant of day and night, of the voicing of the undying wind, and the surpassing wonder of the interchange and outgrowth of the seasons, from equinoctial clamour of the spring to autumnal Euroclydon. Yet ever and again drifted through her mind vague suggestions of life still nearer to herself: white figures, seen in vanishing glimpses of unpondered all-unconscious reverie, that slipt from tree to tree in the high hill-groves, or leapt before the wind upon the heights, with flying banners of sunlit hair, or stooped to drink from the mountain-pools which the deer forsook not at their approach. Who, what, was this white shape, upon whose milky skin the ruddy light shone as he stood on a high boulder at sundown and looked meditatively upon the twilight valleys and darksome underworld far below? Who were these unremembered yet familiar sisters, so flowerlike in their naked beauty, gathering moonflowers for garlands, while their straying feet amid the dewy grass made a silver shimmer as of gossamer-webs by the waterfalls? Who was the lovely vision, so like that mirrored in the tarn before her, who, stooping in the evergreen-glade to drink the moonshine-dew, suddenly lifted her head, listened intently, and smiled with such wild shy joy?

What meant those vague half-glimpses, those haunting illusive reminiscences of a past that was yet unrememberable?

Troubled, though she knew it not, unconsciously perplexed, vaguely yearning with that nostalgia for her ancestral kind which had been born afresh and deeply by the contemplation of her second self in the mountain-pool, the Oread slowly rose, stretched her white arms, with her hands spraying out her golden hair, and gazed longingly into the blue haze of the hills.

Suddenly she started, at the irruption of an unfamiliar sound that was as it were caught up by the wind and flung from corrie to corrie. It was not like the fall of a stone, and it sounded strangely near. Stooping, she plucked a sprig of gale: then, idly twisting it to and fro, walked slowly to where a mountain-ash, ablaze with scarlet berries, leant forward from a high heathery bank overlooking a wide hollow in the moors. A great dragon-

fly spun past her like an elf's javelin. The small yellow-brown bees circled round her and brushed against her hair, excited by this new and strange flower that moved about like the hill-sheep or the red deer. As she stood under the shadow of the rowan and leant against its gnarled trunk, two small blue butterflies wavered up from the heather and danced fantastically above the wind-sprent gold of her hair. She laughed, but frowned as a swift swept past and snapt up one of the azure dancers. With a quick gesture she broke off a branch of the rowan, but by this time the other little blue butterfly had wavered off into the sunlight.

Holding the branch downward she smiled as she saw the whiteness of her limbs beneath the tremulous arrowy leaves and the thick clusters of scarlet and vermilion berries. When the gnats, whirling in aerial maze, came too near she raised the rowan-branch and slowly waved them back : but suddenly her arm stiffened, and she stood motionless, rigid, intent.

On the moor-swell beneath her, a few hundred yards away, browsed a majestically antlered stag and three or four hinds : on the ridge beyond, quite visible from where she stood, half crouched half lay an animal she had never seen before. Her heart leapt within her : for lo, here was another such as herself. No longer was there but one Oread among the high hills. And yet—and yet—there was some difference. It—he—

But here she saw her fellow Oread lift a stick to his shoulder : the next moment there was a flash, a little cloud of smoke, and a terrifying explosive sound. With mingled curiosity and dread she sprang aside from the tree, and stood upon the verge of the slope. But now a new terror came upon her, for almost simultaneously she saw the stag stumble, throw back its head, recover, and then, with a piercing bleating cry, roll over on the heather, dead.

Much she could not understand : who or what this creature like herself was : why he too was not white-skinned, but furred like a fox or the wild cattle : or why and how he dealt death with noise and flame by means of a stick. But suddenly all the passion of love for the wild things of which she was one overcame her

—a fury of resentment against this wanton slayer of the beautiful deer who did no harm, this stealthy murderer who seemed unable to leap or run. With a shrill protesting cry she leapt down the slope, and darted towards the spot where a young man, dazed with bewilderment, stood staring at the extraordinary apparition which the slaying of the stag seemed to have called up.

Strange thoughts flashed through the young man's mind. Was this lovely vision of womanhood a creation of his perverted brain: was she some lost wanderer upon the hills, bereft of her wits: was she, indeed, as she looked, some supernatural creature, to consort with whom, or even parley with, would be certain death?

She stopped when she was about twenty paces from him, suddenly abashed by a new fear, a profound amazement. He seemed, truly, an Oread like herself. Dark though he was, with dark hair and dark eyes, and fair and glad and welcome to look upon as was his face—such a face as she vaguely realised she had been recalling, or dreaming of, when she lay by the tarn—yet was he so extraordinary otherwise. A fur or shaggy hide appeared to cover him from the neck downwards: nevertheless it was as though it hung loosely upon his body. Certainly he was better worth looking at, she thought, than her own image in the mountain-pool: and if only—

As for him, his wild amazement gradually passed into realisation that the beautiful naked girl before him was a real creature of flesh and blood. With this recognition came a surge of passionate admiration for her loveliness.

Dropping his gun, the young sportsman slowly advanced. The Oread looked at him mistrustfully, but at the same time instinctively noted that he moved with infinitely less ease and freedom than she did. Slowly raising the rowan-branch, she waved to him to come nearer; but when suddenly he broke into a run she turned and fled.

Almost immediately she was out of sight. The young man stopped, stared, rubbed his eyes, and then with a muttered exclamation, sprang forward in pursuit.

As soon as he gained the slope where grew the rowan-tree, he caught a glimpse of the Oread again, as she stood motionless amidst a little sea of tall bracken. He approached more cautiously this time, so as not to alarm her; and as he drew nearer tried to allure her by awkward signs of good-will. She greeted his enticements with low, sweet, mocking laughter, and he could see by the mischievous light in her beautiful eyes that she fully realised her ability to evade him, and that she enjoyed his discomfiture.

Then he did a foolish thing. Overcome with heat and excitement, and determined to capture at all hazards this beautiful apparition, whether mortal woman or fay, he rapidly unfastened and threw off his thick tweed shooting coat.

With a shrill cry of terror she took a step or two backward, her lovely body quivering with fear at this awful sight of a creature depriving itself of its hide. The next moment she was off like the wind, her long hair streaming behind her, all ashine in the sun-glow.

With panting breath and shaking limbs her pursuer fled after her in vain chase. From slope to slope and corrie to corrie he raced as though for his life; but at last nature could no longer stand the strain, and he fell forward exhausted. When, stumbling and breathing hard like a driven deer narrowly escaped from the hounds, he looked eagerly beyond and about him, not a sign was there of the lovely vision he had so madly followed. Yet for leagues in front of him and to either side was nothing but the purple moor! He could scarce believe that she could absolutely disappear therein! Still, nowhere was she visible.

Then it was that a great fear came upon him that he had gone mad. Shaking and trembling, he once more scanned the whole reach of his vision, but, seeing nought, turned and made his way downward again. Once, twice indeed, he thought he heard a rumour as of someone following him, and even a sound as of low, mocking laughter. But he would not look behind. Already he feared this *thing*, this phantasm of his brain.

It was not till he came upon his discarded coat that some measure of reasonableness reassured him. He

knew he was not mad: he *knew* he had seen and pursued a real woman; and yet——

Just then he caught sight of the tarn beside which the Oread had rested during the noon heats. With a cry of relief he went towards it, and then, having given one backward glance, threw off all his clothes and sprang into the cool, deep water. What a delight it was, after his fever-heat and weariness: how absurd the idea of madness, as with strong strokes he swam to and fro!

At last, refreshed, and in his right mind, he emerged, and stood, with outstretched arms, among the heather, so that he might the more readily dry in the sunlight and soft wind. So heedless was he that he failed to perceive the slow advance, close behind him, of his flying vision.

With utmost ease the Oread had evaded him: with equal ease she had followed him unobserved during his ignominious retreat, and had watched him from a fern-clump not more than a few score yards away. When he suddenly threw off his clothes, a fresh access of fear had almost made her fly again; but she had controlled herself, as much from contempt of the inferior creature as from passionate curiosity. But when he plunged into the water, and swam like an otter, and came out once more gleaming white as herself, she realised that *here* was the true Oread. He had been ridiculously disguised, that was all; had tried, mayhap, to ape some other animal. All fear left her.

She knew nothing now but a glad, welcoming joy, a rapture of companionship. With outstretched arms, and a sweet, loving look in her eyes, she went forward to greet her longed-for mate.

Warmed by the sun, and with a low, glad laugh of sheer content, the young man turned to where his clothes lay.

He was face to face with the Oread.

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