The King of the Wood

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I.

He kept in the shadow of the grove. It was bright moonlight, but he did not walk there. He walked so that it was impossible to discover his object. Even in the murk of the grove one could see the great head thrust forward, and imagine the intensity of the eyes, as he paced restlessly among the trees. Apparently, then, he was seeking something. Yet he passed again and again over the same places. Once he came near to a pool of moonlight in the glade, near enough for a sudden flash to strike into the depth of the darkness; one could divine that in his hand was a drawn sword. The stealth and vigilance of his manner now gave the clue to his mind's one thought; he was on guard; he expected attack. But whence? No scene could be more mirrored peace.

The moon shone brightly on the hills to the north of the grove; to the south a declivity led to an embowered lake, set in the cup of an old crater, so deep that even the wanton winds of the hills rarely ventured to tease its silver with their breath, as maids may with a glass.

Part of this slope had been cut away, and a great terrace wall extended some two hundred yards or more; the water lay against its foot. Upon this terrace stood a small and silent temple adorned with Doric columns of peperino. The cornices were more elaborate, and carved of marble; there were also friezes of terra cotta, while under the moonlight the tiles of gilded bronze which roofed it returned her silver kiss with a ruddier glow.

This shrine was set in a great mass of woodland, absolutely still on that windless night, save where, bubbling from the basalt, a spring ran over the pebbles, and fell in a series of cascades into the lake. No other sound broke in upon the night, for the tread of the watcher was muted; it was spring; there were no fallen leaves, but moss and violets were soft and fragrant for his foot.

Presently the strange man gave a wild gesture, as of impatience. He stepped deliberately into the moonlight where a marble statue stood among the beeches and the oaks, to mark the place, perhaps, of some fallen monster of the forest. He raised his great head to the moon and shook his sword — was it in triumph or in agony? Muttering strange words. One could see the sweat upon his forehead as he lifted it to that clear light.

It was a marvellous head. Browning might have used it as a model for his John the Pannonian.

> "Here's John the Smith's rough-hammered head.
> Great eye,
> Gross jaw and griped lips do what granite can
> To give you the crown-grasper."

For every mark of the self-made man was stigmatized in him. The arms were long, the hands enormous, powerful and sinewy, knotted and calloused. The figure was gigantic in height, but lean and ill-proportioned; the back was bent as if from years of toil. The head itself was almost absurdly large; the jaw was thrust forward like a gorilla's, and the expression of the mouth was in keeping. The eyes expressed cunning and savagery as well as resolution and pride. This last quality was written all over the man.

His carriage was the incarnation of self-esteem; and yet — ? Yes, there was agony mingled with the triumph of his gesture. His eyes were tired with watching; fear had crept in to mar their brilliance.

Was it that a leaf rustled? In an instant the man leaped from the side of the statue, and was lost in the blackness of the wood.

A moment later, through a little avenue, came a woman running and gasping for breath. At every opening in the wood she stopped and cried aloud. Her fear, witnessed by loose tresses and disordered raiment, quivered in her voice; but it also lent her unnatural keenness of perception, for she saw the man with the sword when he was still many yards distant. Instantly she changed her course and dashed toward him, falling at his feet in an attitude of intense supplication. Her gasps repressed themselves enough for her to utter one loud cry, “Sanctuary, O King!”

The strange man answered “You are safe here; go on into the temple” in an even untroubled voice, as if the incident were common and formal. He seemed to redouble his vigilance. The woman rose to her feet, as if to obey his directions, then staggered and fell. “My strength is gone,” she cried. “Lead me to the temple.”

The King looked yet more intently towards a certain tree that stood by itself in the glade in an oval space of green-sward. It was an aged oak towering and massive. He thought he saw a movement in the trees that encircled it at a respectful distance, like courtiers about a king. For all answer to the woman, he cut her to the earth with a single sweep of his sword, and bounded forward.

The movement that he had seen turned instantly to frantic flight; but those long limbs had paced every alley of the wood by night and day for many a year; the fugitive had no chance of escape. Before he had gone twenty yards, the king was on him; a sword-thrust pierced him back to breast, and he fell headlong. The other never stooped; he was sure of his sword-work; he turned instantly on his heel and resumed his restless pacing.

Yet presently an idea seemed to strike him; he dragged the bodies into the open; and, drawing a piece of cord from his garment, swung them from a low branch of the great oak. He gave a low grim laugh; then settled himself at the foot of the tree; in a moment he was fast asleep.

II.

Elsewhere there was another man on guard that night, but he took his duty less seriously. He was a short burly slave, immensely strong, with a round brutal head and thick bull neck, his hair so short and curled, and his complexion so dark, that one might have guessed an admixture of Afric blood. He leaned on the short Roman pilum with its broad blade and heavy shaft, and he was frankly bored with life. From time to time he sat down and rested on the steps of the villa which he guarded, and looked across toward the moon over the woods that lay below him. He could just see the lake and the temple upon the terrace above it, for the moon lit them to life, although they were some miles away. But he had no thought towards them but as scenery; he had no idea of the tragedy even then being enacted in those distant groves.

So dull was he that he lost all sense of his duty; he was awakened smartly by a light touch upon his shoulder. Before he could turn, a figure wrapped and muffled in a dark robe flitted past him from the house, and made toward the woods that sheltered it upon the west. He followed it with his eyes.

The figure turned, made a single gesture of beckoning, sped on to the shelter of the trees. The slave hesitated. He looked up at the villa; all was dark. I'll risk it, he thought, and moved swiftly toward the shadow where the mysterious one had now disappeared.

Before he had taken three paces within the darkness, he came up with it. A white hand came from the vestue,

caught his and pressed it, led him some ten yards further where a statue of Pan stood in a circular basin in which a fountain played. Around the basin the ground was terraced, and thick grown with moss. The figure moved to the one spot where moonlight fell, and took a seat, drawing the slave down also. There was a moment's pause.

The slave seemed bewildered; the other evidently enjoyed the fact. Then, with a sudden movement, the white hand drew away the cloak from the face, and showed it. The mouth moved in three words: "I have thee."

But the slave grovelled on the moss in an ecstasy of terror. He could only murmur "Lady! Lady!" again and again. "I am thy slave," he gasped out at last.

The face of the lady, that was even and rounded, with crisp ringlets set about it, and an expression of sternness and even harshness fixed on the thin firm curled lips of her long mouth as from strong habit, softened with laughter. "Am I not thine, rather?" she said softly, and, stooping down, caught the head of the slave in her arms, and began to eat it up with kisses. . . .

Suddenly she perceived that dawn was about to break. She disengaged herself, and went swiftly and silently to the house. On the steps she staggered twice.

The slave had slept. He woke in consternation to find the sun up, and he away from his post. He dashed back; there was nobody stirring. Discipline in that house was lax, now that the master had been away a month at the war. When he was at home, dawn saw every man at work; things were easier now.

The slave's mind went back to the events of the night; he cast his eyes to the distant temple. Diana save me! he cried; I have had a wondrous dream.

III.

It was the first of many such dreams. Night after night, in one way or another, the lady of the villa pursued her fancy. As the summer grew on the woods, she seemed to wax in her infatuation, but the first leaves that fell were no warning to her. Rather she glanced at the fruits that ripened in the orchard, and took them for the omens of her perfected passion. There was only one hint of winter in her year, a rumor that news had come to Rome of a great battle in the North, and of the utter defeat of the barbarians.

Intrigue has many demerits, and is (besides) morally indefensible; but it has this advantage, that it makes men proud, and, so, ambitious. Many a career has begun with an infringement of the moral law. So, as the summer passed, the slave became unhappy in his happiness.

Till now he had been contented to be a slave; he had never considered the possibility of any escape from that condition; but now, although the Lady Clodia had managed to confer many a sly favor, he was ill content. Her very gifts only served to quicken the new-born spirit of freedom. But she never spoke of asking for his freedom when the master returned; he knew instinctively that she would not dare to do so; and the rigid social system of the Republic gave no hope of any issue from his strait by any efforts of his own.

One passionate night in September the lovers were again by the fountain of Pan where first they had given and taken all that heart would. The nightingales were silent, though, and the moon, far in her wane, was not yet in the East.

The slave was melancholy, and the quick insight of her strange love understood.

“I am the slave of a slave,” she whispered in his ear, so low that the fountain flowed in her words like an accompaniment, “and I would be the slave of a king.”

"You have made me a king," he answered, "I have all the passions of a king. I can hardly hold my hand when Caius orders me to do his bidding." "I am glad," she said simply. "I knew you were worthy. Listen: I am going to hurt you. I have had bad news. Letters came today from the army; my lord is on his way home after the victory; he will be here in two nights more. If you dare, you shall be a king!" The slave looked up in sudden horror. "Oh, no," she laughed, "we are not to play Aegisthus and Clytemnaestra; if I ruled Rome it could be done, but not in times like these. No; but you shall be a king — the King of the Wood! and I shall be the most pious of all the votaries of Diana!" She said it lightly; but his eyes were fixed in fear and horror upon her.

The Roman look came fierce into her face. "You dare!" she cried, "for me you dare!" and with a single movement she threw an arm about his neck and fastened her mouth on his, while with the other hand she drew a sword from beneath her cloak, and put it in his hand. Tensely he gripped it, and returned her caress with fury. "I will do it," he cried; "may great Diana aid!" She tightened her clasp on him. "I am condemning you to death," she hissed, "I am your murderess. My mouth drinks up your blood. I love you." The slave was silent; he abandoned himself more fiercely than he had ever yet done to her caresses; they had sealed their guilty love by the one passion on earth that is mightier than that — the lust of blood!

IV.

The next day the hue-and-cry was up; for the slave had run away. But in a day the news came back that search was useless; he had taken sanctuary with Diana at Nemi across the lake.

The Lady Clodia consoled her husband easily. "He was a worthless fellow, idle and impudent," she said;

“he was not worth his keep. If he had not run off, I should have asked you to sell him.”

But the slave only remained in sanctuary three days; in that time he learnt all that he wanted to know. He disappeared, and none knew whither.

He was in Rome itself. Clodia had furnished him with an ample purse, and with the disguise which had served him on his journey. He had taken lodgings with a shoemaker, representing himself as a sailor from Sicily. Here he led an austere life, refusing the temptations of Rome. He spent many hours every day with famous swordsmen, and trained his hands to war, and his fingers to fight. He kept his body in admirable condition by constant attendance at the gymnasia and the baths, and his soul by unwearying attendance at the temple of Diana.

The only thing that he neglected was his purse; and though Clodia had been royally liberal, it became clear to him at the feast of the Sun, which we now call Christmas, that he must take the giant step which led back to Clodia — or on to death.

Accordingly, on the very next day, he left Rome, and took his way across the Campagna to the Alban Hills. He was a very different man to the slave who had sat drowsing on the steps of the villa. Not only was he alert and active, every inch an athlete, but the months of love and of freedom had kindled his eye; he threw back his head as he marched, and sang aloud the war songs of the Romans.

Almost had he come to the first foot of the spur when he espied an old woman by the wayside. She asked him alms, and offered to tell his fortune. He remembered his poverty; then with a laugh bethought him that he would never need money again, and tossed his purse with its few golden coins to the beldam. She grasped it eagerly, amazed. “I see a wonderful fortune for you, my lad,” she cried. “You are going to be a prosperous farmer; you will have love, you will have

honor and fame and every blessing, for many a year. But beware of going to Nemi; if you go there, you will die there." With that, and confused benedictions from Jupiter and Diana and Mars and many another, she hobbled off.

An ill omen! thought the youth. But he kept sturdily on his way. Yet revolving it in his mind, now a thousand times more active than it had been in his slave-days, he suddenly saw a secret meaning to the oracle. He actually was going to be a farmer — of sorts; he meant to gather one of the fruits of earth. He must succeed, else love and honor could never come to him; and as for dying at Nemi, why, of course he would die there!

But not now! "It was Diana herself, who came to hail me!" With that he quickened his pace, and breasted joyously and confidently the slopes of the hills.

As night fell, he began to come to the neighborhood of the temple. His step became wary. Presently he came to a point long since marked down by him, where an avenue in the trees permitted a sight of the shrine, and of the pathway trodden by the dreadful king on that night of spring which saw the two corpses, fruit of the fatal oak. Here he buried the sword that Clodia had given him, for none but the king himself might bear arms in that sacred wood. He then crept a little — a very little — further along the avenue to where there was a mound of turf beneath a great beech. Here he hid himself, covering his body with fallen leaves, and waited.

It was a fearful night. Snow lay here and there upon the ground. The trees were sombre and spectral, black and jagged against a lowering and stormy sky, and the rising wind made melancholy music in the branches, its own howl like a wolf's. It eddied in the hollows of the hills, and even stirred the icy waters of the lake that lurked in the black crater. The moon rose early; already she was high mid-heaven, as the watcher saw when the wind tore the clouds apart, and let her pallid witch-

glamour fall on the staggering earth. As on that fatal night of spring, her ray fell also on the glint of steel. The king still kept his lonely vigil, still prowled in darkness and in terror of storm.

The hours passed with infinite stealth; the wind now loosed its fury from the Apennines, and rocked the forest impotently. The moon went down; besides, the clouds, black with snow, now covered all the heaven.

The watcher could no longer watch; he could not see his own hand. Impatience spoke in him; he changed his plan, and creeping forward, came by degrees — he had measured the distance to an inch — to the edge of the clearing where the great oak stood on whose boughs the king had hanged the bodies of his victims eight or nine months earlier. He could see nothing and hear nothing; but he knew the king was there; he thought he detected something rhythmical which might be his pace. For about half an hour he kept still; the wind died down a little; and he could hear the king, who was singing to himself a savage hymn of war and triumph. Now snow began to fall thickly, and a silhouette was visible against the gray background. It grew bitter cold.

The watcher had not foreseen any of this. He had imagined the scene as it had been three months before, glowing in autumn beauty. The present murk seemed to him a direct miracle of Diana.

For now he saw his opportunity. The king began to shiver with the cold; he laid his sword at the foot of the great oak, and swung his long arms upon his breast. It was pure inspiration for the other; he could see enough to be sure that the man's back was turned to him; he broke out and rushed on him, like a bull. The king turned by instinct, but too slowly, for his first thought had been to grasp his sword. Before he knew it, the sturdy lad had got him by the waist, and flung him far into the wood. For a second he lay half stunned; then he picked himself up, only to find his assailant gone.

For he, the moment that the king's body left him free, had sprung into the air, caught at a bough of the great oak, and torn away a branch. With this trophy he had run madly through the darkness to the temple.

The king was on his feet in a flash; he picked up his sword and dashed in pursuit. But the shock had been great; and fear clutched at his heart. He stumbled as he ran, and fell once more. This time he knew pursuit was useless; he raised his sword, and cried aloud upon Diana.

Then, with drooping weapon, he went slowly and tragically towards the temple.

V.

Nine days had passed. The weather was brilliantly cold and clear. Snow still lay on the ground, but the sun, already rejoicing to run his new race through the heavens, laughed gladly upon the terrace of the temple.

There was a great crowd of persons of all ranks; Rome had turned out in force to witness the event of the day.

On the steps of the temple stood a high official, surrounded by many patricians; by his side was the King of the Wood; alone, as one awaiting judgement, a few yards in front of him, stood the hero of the recent adventure.

"Romans!" proclaimed the official, turning from the little altar where he had inaugurated the proceedings by offering sacrifice to Diana. "Romans! we are here to investigate the claim made nine days ago by the slave Titus now here present before us to succeed to the honor, rank, and dignity of Priest to Diana our Lady, and King of the Wood. The conditions of succession are too familiar to all of you for me to weary you by repeating them. It is necessary that the claimant should be a runaway slave. Can this be testified?"

The husband of the Lady Clodia stepped forward. “The rascal is my slave,” said he.

“And you did not sell him, or free him?” “The rogue ran away two days before I came back from victory. He had been insolent to the Lady of my house, and deserved a cudgelling. We shall soon know whether he did wisely.”

“Good,” replied the orator. “The second essential is that unarmed he should have surprised the vigilance of the King of the Wood, and plucked a bough from the sacred oak of Diana. I have personally compared this bough, presented by the slave Titus, with the holy tree; and it was certainly torn thence by him in the approved manner. The King admits that Titus had no weapon, as by his oath before Diana he was bound. The third condition is that the slave should conquer the King in single combat. Are you ready for the battle?”

“With no less ambition would I have left so noble, kind, and excellent a master,” replied Titus firmly, lifting the sword that Clodia had given him.

“That’s truth enough,” laughed her husband, “for there’s my missing sword! Well, be fortunate as you are brave!” he added kindly. Clodia took the opportunity; she gave a sidelong smile. The youth’s heart leapt higher than ever; from that moment he knew he could not fail.

“Let us proceed!” exclaimed the official, and led the way to the sacred oak.

The battle was not of long duration. The elder man had lost his nerve; the nine days of preparation for the fight, so far from strengthening him, had weakened him. The omens had been continuously evil. He had never fought an armed man since the day he had won for himself the fatal office; and his predecessor had been an old gray man with feeble arm and failing sight. He knew no cunning of sword play; and Titus had taken care to boast that for three months he had been trained by the first masters in Rome. He could only hope to win by

length of reach and speed of foot. The first blow would settle all, with deadly Roman swords and no defensive armour.

So he leapt madly at Titus, who with quick eye caught the blade on his own, and, thrusting himself under the King's leap that lost him balance, he plunged his sword hilt-deep into the breast of his opponent, who fell dead without a word.

Instantly the populace broke into cries of joy. Titus, his bloody sword held high, was carried in triumph to the temple. "Hail, Priest of Diana!" they cried, "Hail, King of the Wood of Nemi!" The Roman ladies vied in their excitement to touch the sword; but Clodia conquered. Willingly the new King lowered the blade, and let her slake her mouth on its red stain.

They brought the King finally to the shrine. There he offered his sword to Diana, and there he took before the people the vows of priest and king.

A month later Clodia's husband died, and, inconsolable, she became the devotee of Diana, making pilgrimages almost daily to the shrine.

So Titus lived, and so she lived, in that base imitation of true happiness which sin sometimes vouchsafes to those who do not understand that a pure and noble life is the sole key to felicity. So they lived, many a year, until — Until? That happened which always happened on the fair land that lies about

> "The still glassy lake that lies
> Beneath Aricia's trees —
> Those trees in whose dim shadow
> The ghastly priest doth reign,
> The priest who slew the slayer,
> And shall himself be slain."

Indeed, their love was sealed a second time in blood.

(Author's note. In writing this story, I have borrowed a few epithets and even phrases from Dr. J. G. Frazer's Golden Bough. My story obliged me to describe the scene of the tragedy, and it would have been presumptuous, and have exposed me to ridicule, had I attempted to rival his magical prose. To borrow seemed the lesser crime.)