

The Satyr

Clark Ashton Smith

Raoul, Comte de la Frenaie, was by nature the most unsuspicious of husbands. His lack of suspicion, perhaps, was partly lack of imagination; and, for the rest, was doubtless due to the dulling of his observational faculties by the heavy wines of Averoine. At any rate, he had never seen anything amiss in the friendship of his wife, Adele, with Olivier du Montoir, a young poet who might in time have rivalled Ronsard as one of the most brilliant luminaries of the Pleiade, if it had not been for an unforeseen but fatal circumstance. Indeed, M. le Comte had been rather proud than otherwise, because of the interest shown in Mme. la Comtesse by this erudite and comely youth, who had already moistened his lips at the fount of Helicon and was becoming known throughout other provinces than Averoine for his melodious villanelles and graceful ballades. Nor was Raoul disturbed by the fact that many of these same villanelles and ballades were patently written in celebration of Adele's visible charms, and made liberal mention of her wine-dark tresses, her golden eyes, and sundry other details no less alluring, and equally essential to feminine perfection. M. le Comte did not pretend to understand poetry: like many others, he considered it something apart from all common sense or mundane relevancy; and his mental powers became totally paralysed whenever they were confronted by anything in rhyme and metre. In the meanwhile, the ballades and their author were gradually waxing in boldness.

That year, the snows of an austere winter had melted away in a week of halcyon warmth; and the land was filled with the tender green and chrysolite and chrysoprase of early spring. Olivier came oftener and oftener to the chateau de la Frenaie, and he and Adele were often alone, since they had so much to talk that was beyond the interests or the comprehension of M. le Comte. And now, sometimes, they walked abroad in the forest about the chateau the forest that rolled a sea of vernal verdure almost to the grey walls and barbican, and within whose sun-warm glades the perfume of the first wild flowers was tingeing delicately the quiet air. If people gossiped, they did so discreetly and beyond hearing of Raoul, or of Adele and Olivier.

All things being as they were, it is hard to know just why M. le Comte became suddenly troubled concerning the integrity of his marital honour. Perhaps, in some interim of the hunting and drinking between which he divided nearly all his time, he had noticed that his wife was growing younger and fairer and was blooming as a woman never blooms except to the magical sunlight of love. Perhaps he had caught some glance of ardent or affectionate understanding between Adele and Olivier; or, perhaps, it was the influence of the premature spring, which had pierced the vinous muddlement of his brain with an obscure stirring of forgotten thoughts and emotions, and thus had given him a flash of insight. At any rate, he was troubled when, on this afternoon of earliest April, he returned to the chateau from Vyones, where he had gone on business, and learned from his servitors that Mme. la Comtesse and Olivier du Montoir had left a few minutes previously for a promenade in the forest. His dull face, however, betrayed little.

He seemed to reflect for a moment. Then:

‘Which way did they go? I have reason to see Mme. la Cormtesse at once.’

His servants gave him the required direction, and he went out, following slowly the footpath they had indicated, till he was beyond sight of the chateau. Then he quickened his pace, and began to finger the hilt of his rapier as he went on through the thickening woods.

‘I am a little afraid, Olivier. Shall we go any farther?’

Adele and Olivier had wandered beyond the limits of their customary stroll, and were nearing a portion of the forest of Averoigne where the trees were older and taller than all others. Here, some of the huge oaks were said to date back to pagan days. Few people ever passed beneath them; and queer beliefs and legends concerning them had been prevalent among the local peasantry for ages. Things had been seen within these precincts, whose very existence was an affront to science and a blasphemy to religion; and evil influences were said to attend those who dared to intrude upon the sullen umbrage of the immemorial glades and thickets. The beliefs varied, and the legends were far from explicit; but all agreed that the wood was haunted by some entity inimical to man, some primordial spirit of ill that was ancients than Christ or Satan. Panic, madness, demoniac possession, or baleful, unreasoning passions that led them to doom, were the lot of all who had trodden the demesnes of this entity. There were those who whispered what the spirit was, who told incredible tales regarding its true nature, and described its true aspect; but such tales were not meet for the ear of devout Christians.

‘Prithee, let us go on,’ said Olivier. ‘Look you, Madame, and see how the ancient trees have put on the emerald freshness of April, how innocently they rejoice in the sun’s return.’

‘But the stories people tell, Olivier.’

‘They are stories to frighten children. Let us go on. There is nothing to harm us here, but much of beauty to enchant.’

Indeed, as he had said, the great-limbed oaks and venerable beeches were fresh with their new-born foliage. The forest wore an aspect of blitheness and vertumnal gaiety, and it was hard to believe the old superstitions and legends. The day was one of those days when hearts that feel the urgency of an unavowed love are fain to wander indefinitely. So, after certain feminine demurs, and many reassurances, Adele allowed Olivier to persuade her, and they went on.

The feet of animals, if not of men, had continued the path they were following, and had made an easy way into the wood of fabulous evil. The drooping boughs enfolded them with

arms of soft verdure, and seemed to draw them in; and shafts of yellow sunshine rifted the high trees, to aureole the lovely secret lilies that bloomed about the darkly writhing coils of enormous roots. The trees were twisted and knotted, were heavy with centurial incrustations of bark, were humped and misshapen with the growth of unremembered years; but there was an air of antique wisdom about them, together with a tranquil friendliness. Adele exclaimed with delight; and neither she nor Olivier was aware of anything sinister or doubtful in the unison of exquisite beauty and gnarled quaintness which the old forest offered to them.

‘Was I not right?’ Olivier queried. ‘Is there ought to fear in harmless trees and flowers?’

Adele smiled, but made no other answer. In the circle of bright sunlight where they were now standing, she and Olivier looked at each other with a new and pervasive intimacy. There was a strange perfume on the windless air, coming in slow wafts from an undiscernible source—a perfume that seemed to speak insidiously of love and langour and amorous yielding. Neither knew the flower from which it issued, for all at once there were many unfamiliar blossoms around their feet, with heavy bells of carnal white or pink, or curled and twining petals, or hearts like a rosy wound. Looking, they saw each other as in a sudden dazzle of flame; and each felt a violent quickening of the blood, as if they had drunk a sovereign philtre. The same thought was manifest in the bold fervour of Olivier’s eyes, and the modest flush upon the cheeks of Mme. la Comtesse. The long-cherished love, which neither had openly declared up to this hour, was clamouring importunately in the veins of both. They resumed their onward walk; and both were now silent through the self-same feeling of embarrassment and constraint.

They dared not look at each other; and neither of them had eyes for the changing character of the wood through which they wandered; and neither saw the foul, obscene deformity of the grey boles that gathered on each hand, or the shameful and monstrous fungi that reared their spotted pallor in the shade, or the red, venerous flowers that flaunted themselves in the sun. The spell of their desire was upon the lovers; they were drugged with the mandragora of passion; and everything beyond their own bodies, their own hearts, the throbbing of their own delirious blood, was vaguer than a dream.

The wood grew thicker and the arching boughs above were a weft of manifold gloom. The eyes of ferine animals peered from their hidden burrows, with gleams of crafty crimson or chill, ferocious beryl; and the dank smell of stagnant waters, choked with the leaves of bygone autumn, arose to greet Adele and Olivier, and to break a little the perilous charm that possessed them.

They paused on the edge of a rock-encircled pool, above which the ancient alders twined their decaying tops, as if to maintain forever the mad posture of a superannuate frenzy. And there, between the nether boughs of the alders in a frame of new leaves, they saw the face

that leered upon them.

The apparition was incredible; and, for the space of a long breath, they could not believe they had really seen it. There were two horns in a matted mass of coarse, animal-like hair above the semi-human face with its obliquely slitted eyes and fang-revealing mouth and beard of wild-boar bristles. The face was old—incomputably old; and its lines and wrinkles were those of unreckoned years of lust; and its look was filled with the slow, unceasing increment of all the malignity and corruption and cruelty of elder ages. It was the face of Pan, as he glared from his secret wood upon travellers taken unaware.

Adele and Olivier were seized by a nightmare terror, as they recalled the old legends. The charm of their passionate obsession was broken, and the drug of desire relinquished its hold on their senses. Like people awakened from a heavy sleep, they saw the face, and heard through the tumult of their blood the cachinnation of a wild and evil and panic laughter, as the apparition vanished among the boughs.

Shuddering, Adele flung herself for the first time into the arms of her lover.

‘Did you see it?’ she whispered, as she clung to him.

Olivier drew her close. In that delicious nearness, the horrible thing he had seen and heard became somehow improbable and unreal. There must have been a double sorcery abroad, to lull his horror thus; but he knew not whether the thing had been a momentary hallucination, a fantasy wrought by the sun amid the alder-leaves, or the demon that was fabled to dwell in Averroigne; and the startlement he had felt was somehow without meaning or reason. He could even thank the apparition, whatever it was, because it had thrown Adele into his embrace. He could think of nothing now but the proximity of that warm, delectable mouth, for which he had hungered so long. He began to reassure her, to make light of her fears, to pretend that she could have seen nothing; and his reassurances merged into ardent protestations of love. He kissed her... and they both forgot the vision of the satyr....

They were lying on a patch of golden moss, where the sunrays fell through a single cleft in the high foliage, when Raoul found them. They did not see or hear him, as he paused and stood with drawn rapier before the vision of their unlawful happiness.

He was about to fling himself upon them and impale the two with a single thrust where they lay, when an unlooked-for and scarce conceivable thing occurred. With swiftness veritably supernatural, a brown hairy creature, a being that was not wholly man, not wholly animal, but some hellish mixture of both, sprang from amid the alder branches and snatched Adele from Olivier’s embrace. Olivier and Raoul saw it only in one fleeting glimpse, and neither could have described it clearly afterwards. But the face was that which had leered upon the lovers from the foliage; and the shaggy legs and body were those of a creature of antique

legend. It disappeared as incredibly as it had come, bearing the woman in its arms; and her shrieks of terror were surmounted by the pealing of its mad, diabolical laughter.

The shrieks and laughter died away at some distant remove in the green silence of the forest, and were not followed by any other sound. Raoul and Olivier could only stare at each other in complete stupefaction.

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