

The Parting Genius

By Helen Coale Crew

From *The Midland*

"The parting genius is with sighing sent."

Milton's Hymn on the Nativity.

It was high noon, blue and hot. The little town upon the southern slope of the hills that shut in the great plain glared white in the intense sunlight. The beds of the brooks in the valleys that cut their way through the hill-clefts were dry and dusty; and the sole shade visible lay upon the orchard floors, where the thick branches above cast blue-black shadows upon the golden tangle of grasses at their feet. A soft murmur of hidden creature-things rose like an invisible haze from earth, and nothing moved in all the horizon save the black kites high in the blue air and the white butterflies over the drowsy meadows. The poppies that flecked the yellow wheat fields drooped heavily, spilling the wine of summer from their cups. Nature stood at drowsy-footed pause, reluctant to take up again the vital whirr of living.

At the edge of the orchard, near the dusty highway, under a huge misshapen olive tree sat a boy, still as a carved Buddha save that his eyes stood wide, full of dreams. His was a sensitive face, thoughtful beyond his childish years, full of weariness when from time to time he closed his eyes, full of dark brooding when the lids lifted again. Presently he rose to his feet, and his two hands clenched tightly into fists.

"I hate it!" he muttered vehemently.

At his side the grasses stirred and a portion of the blue shadow of the tree detached itself and became the shadow of a man.

"Hate?" questioned a golden, care-free voice at his side. "Thou'rt overyoung to hate. What is it thou dost hate?"

A young man had thrown himself down in the grass at the boy's side. Shaggy locks hung about his brown cheeks; his broad, supple chest and shoulders were bare; his eyes were full of sleepy laughter; and his indolent face was now beautiful, now grotesque, at the color of his thoughts. From a leathern thong about his neck hung a reed pipe, deftly fashioned, and a bowl of wood carved about with grape-bunches dangled from the twisted vine which girdled his waist. In one hand he held a honey-comb, into which he bit with sharp white teeth, and on one arm he carried branches torn from fig and almond trees, clustered with green figs and with nuts. The two looked long at each other, the boy gravely, the man smiling.

"Thou wilt know me another time," said the man with a throaty laugh. "And I shall know thee. I have been watching thee a long time--I know not why. But what is it thou dost hate? For me, I hate nothing. Hate is wearisome."

The boy's gaze fixed itself upon the bright, insouciant face of the man with a fascination he endeavored to throw off but could not. Presently he spoke, and his voice was low and clear and deliberate.

"Hate is evil," he said.

"I know not what evil may be," said the man, a puzzled frown furrowing the smooth brow for a swift moment. "Hunger, now, or lust, or sleep--"

"Hate is the thing that comes up in my throat and chokes me when I think of tyranny," interrupted the boy, his eyes darkening.

"Why trouble to hate?" asked the man. He lifted his pipe to his lips and blew a joyous succession of swift, unhesitant notes, as throbbing as the heat, as vivid as the sunshine. His lithe throat bubbled and strained with his effort, and his warm vitality poured through the mouthpiece of the pipe and issued melodiously at the farther end. Noon deepened through many shades of hot and slumberous splendor, the very silence intensified by the brilliant pageant of sound. A great hawk at sail overhead hung suddenly motionless upon unquivering wings. Every sheep in the pasture across the road lifted a questioning nose, and the entire flock moved swiftly nearer on a sudden impulse. And then the man threw down his pipe, and the silence closed in softly upon the ebbing waves of sound.

"Why trouble to hate?" he asked again, and sank his shoulder deeper into the warm grass. His voice was as sleepy as the drone of distant bees, and his dream-filmed eyes looked out through drooping lids. "I hate nothing. It takes effort. It is easier to feel friendly with all things-creatures, and men, and gods."

"I hate with a purpose," said the child, his eyes fixed, and brooding upon an inward vision. The man rose upon his elbow and gazed curiously at the boy, but the latter, unheeding, went on with his thoughts. "Some day I shall be a man, and then I shall kill tyranny. Aye, kill! It is tyranny that I hate. And hatred I hate; and oppression. But how I shall go about to kill them, that I do not yet know. I think and think, but I have not yet thought of a way."

"If," said the man, "thou could'st love as royally as thou could'st hate, what a lover thou would'st become! For me, I love but lightly, and hate not at all, yet have I been a man for aeons. How near art thou to manhood?"

"I have lived nearly twelve years."

Like a flash the man leaped to his feet and turned his face westward towards the sea with outstretched arms, and a look and gesture of utter yearning gave poignancy and spirit to the careless, sleepy grace of his face and figure. He seized the boy's arm. "See now," he cried, his voice trembling upon the verge of music, "it is nearly twelve years that I have been a wanderer, shorn of my strength and my glory! Look you, boy, at the line of hills yonder. Behind those hills lie the blue sea-ridges, and still beyond, lies the land where I dwelt. Ye gods, the happy country!" Like a great child he stood, and his breast broke into sobs, but his eyes glowed with splendid visions. "Apollo's golden shafts could scarce penetrate the shadowy groves, and Diana's silver arrows pierced only the tossing treetops. And underfoot the crocus flamed, and the hyacinth. Flocks and herds fed in pastures rosy with blossoms, and there were white altars warm with flame in every thicket. There were dances, and mad revels, and love and laughter"-- he paused, and the splendor died from his face. "And then one starry night--still and clear it was, and white with frost--fear stalked into the happy haunts, and an ontreading mystery, benign yet dreadful. And something, I know not what, drove me forth. Aie! Aie! There is but the moaning of doves when the glad hymns sounded, and cold ashes and dead drifted leaves on the once warm altars!"

A sharp pull at his tunic brought his thoughts back to the present. The child drew him urgently down into the long grass, and laid a finger upon his lip; and at the touch of the small finger the man trembled through all his length of limbs, and lay still. Up the road rose a cloud of dust and the sound of determined feet, and presently a martial figure came in sight, clad in bronze and leather helmet and cuirass, and carrying an oblong shield and a short, broad-bladed sword of double edge. Short yet agile, a soldier every inch, he looked neither to the right nor to the left, but marched steadily and purposefully upon his business. His splendid muscles, shining with sweat, gleamed satinwise in the hot sun. A single unit, he was yet a worthy symbol of a world-wide efficiency.

The man and boy beneath the tree crouched low. "Art afraid?" whispered the man. And the boy whispered back, "It is he that I hate, and all his kind." His child-heart beat violently against his side, great beads stood out upon his forehead, and his hands trembled. "If you but knew the sorrow in the villages! Aye, in the whole country--because of him! He takes the bread from the mouths of the pitiful poor--and we are all so poor! The women and babes starve, but the taxes must be paid. Upon the aged and the crippled, even, fall heavy burdens. And all because of him and his kind!"

The man looked at the flushed face and trembling limbs of the boy, and his own face glowed in a golden smile that was full of a sudden and unaccustomed tenderness. "Why, see now," he whispered, "that is easily overcome. Look! I will show thee the way." Lifting himself cautiously, he crouched on all fours in the grass, slipping and sliding forward so hiddenly that the keen ear and eagle eye of the approaching soldier took note of no least ripple in the quiet grass by the roadside. It was the sinuous, silent motion of a snake; and suddenly his eyes narrowed, his lips drew back from his teeth, his ears pricked forward, along the ridge of his bare back the hair bristled, and the locks about his face waved and writhed as though they were the locks of Medusa herself. Ah, and were those the flanks and feet of a man, or of a beast, that bore him along so stealthily? The child watched him in a horror of fascination, rooted to the spot in terror.

With the quickness of a flash it all happened--the martial traveller taken unaware, the broad-bladed sword wrenched from his hand by seemingly superhuman strength, a sudden hideous grip at his throat, blows rained upon his head, sharp sobbing breaths torn from his panting breast ... a red stain upon the dusty road ... a huddled figure ... silence. And he who had been a man indeed a few brief, bright years, was no more now than carrion; and he who through all his boasted aeons had not yet reached the stature of a man stood above the dead body, his face no longer menacing, but beautiful with a smiling delight in his deed. And then suddenly the spell that held the child was

broken, and he leaped out upon the murderer and beat and beat and beat upon him with helpless, puny child-fists, and all a child's splendid and ineffectual rage. And at that the man turned and thrust the child from him in utter astonishment, and the boy fell heavily back upon the road, the second quiet figure lying there. And again the man's face changed, became vacant, bewildered, troubled; and stooping, he lifted the boy in his arms, and ran with him westward along the road, through the fields of dead-ripe wheat, across the stubble of the garnered barley, fleet-footed as a deer, till he could run no more.

In a little glen of hickory and oak, through whose misty-mellow depths a small stream trickled, he paused at last and laid the boy upon a soft and matted bed of thick green myrtle, and brought water in his two hands to bathe the bruised head, whimpering the while. Then he chafed the small bare feet and warmed them in his own warm breast; and gathering handfuls of pungent mint and the sweet-scented henna, he crushed them and held them to the boy's nostrils. And these devices failing, he sat disconsolate, the curves of his mobile face falling into unwonted lines of half-weary, half-sorrowful dejection. "I know not how it may be," he said to himself, smiling whimsically, "but I seem to have caught upon my lips the bitter human savor of repentance."

Utter silence held the little glen. The child lay unconscious, and the man sat with his head in his hands, as one brooding. When the sun at last neared the place of his setting, the boy's eyes opened. His gaze fell upon his companion, and crowded and confused thoughts surged through him. For some time he lay still, finding his bearings. And at length the hatred that had all day, and for many days, filled his young breast, melted away in a divine pity and tenderness, and the tears of that warm melting rolled down his cheeks. The man near him, who had watched in silence, gently put a questioning finger upon the wet cheeks.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Repentance," said the boy.

"I pity thee. Repentance is bitter of taste."

"No," said the boy. "It is warm and sweet. It moves my heart and my understanding."

"What has become of thy hatred?"

"I shall never hate again."

"What wilt thou do, then?"

"I shall love," said the boy. "Love," he repeated softly. "How came I never to think of that before?"

"Wilt thou love tyranny and forbear to kill the tyrant?"

The boy rose to his feet, and his young slenderness was full of strength and dignity, and his face, cleared of its sombre brooding, was full of a bright, untroubled decision. The cypresses upon the hilltops stood no more resolutely erect, the hills themselves were no more steadfast. "Nay," he said, laughing a little, boyishly, in pure pleasure at the crystal fixity of his purpose. "Rather will I love the tyrant, and the tyranny will die of itself. Oh, it is the way! It is the way! And I could not think of it till now! Not till I saw thee killing and him bleeding. Then I knew." Then, more gravely, he added, "I will begin by loving thee."

"Thou hast the appearance of a young god," said the man slowly, "but if thou wert a god, thou would'st crush thine enemies, not love them." He sighed, and his face strengthened into a semblance of power. "I was a god once myself," he added after some hesitation.

"What is thy name?" asked the boy.

"They called me once the Great God Pan. And thou?"

"My father is Joseph the carpenter. My mother calls me Jesus."

"Ah ..." said Pan, "... is it Thou?"

Quietly they looked into each other's eyes; quietly clasped hands. And with no more words the man turned westward into the depths of the glen, drawing the sun's rays with him as he moved, so that the world seemed the darker for his going. And as he went he blew upon his pipe a tremulous and hesitating melody, piercing sweet and piercing sorrowful, so that whosoever should hear it should clutch his throat with tears at the wild pity of it, and the strange and haunting beauty. And the boy stood still, watching, until the man was lost upon the edge of night. Then he turned his face eastward, whence the new day comes, carrying forever in his heart the echoes of a dying song.

FOOTNOTE:

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