

## UNDER THE ROYAL OAK

**W**HEN AS A BOY I WOULD GO BY, on donkey-back, on Pascha, St George's Day, and May Day,\* I would enter a sweet reverie, and could never have my fill of admiring a most beautiful tree standing there alone, immense, a royal oak. What grandeur it had! Its boughs grey-green, ample, and robust, its branches aquiline as an eagle's profile, shaggy as a lion's mane — they stretched forth bound into regal crowns. And the tree was indeed a sovereign lady of the forest, mistress of a wild beauty, queen of a refreshing coolness...

From her leaves there dripped and flowed all round 'the manna of life, a cooling sweetness, honey from the rock'.<sup>1</sup> Her life-bearing hollows gave warmth to love at its divine height, her wondrous foliage breathed a longing for unalloyed ease. And her towering tresses rose like a virginal crown, a divine diadem.

I would feel an inexpressible emotion at the sight of that majestic tree. It struck the eye, soothed the ear, and whispered to the soul sounds of ineffable charm. Her branches, her sprays, her foliage, seemed in the quivering of the breeze to be chanting some hymn of praise, some Magnificat. 'How great are Thy works, O Lord'.<sup>2</sup> It enchanted me, bewitched me, beckoned to me. I longed to leap from the saddle, run to the tree's side, and have my fill of it; to embrace the bole, which it would have taken five boys my size to stretch their arms around, and kiss it. To attempt to scramble up the immense trunk, sturdy and dark, to ascend to the meeting place of her boughs, to scale her branches, to ascend to her outermost

<sup>1</sup> From the second canon of the feast day of the Three Hierarchs, Ode 4, hymn 2.

<sup>2</sup> Psalms 92 : 5.

ramifying sprays... And if she would not have me, if she would cast me from her body and hurl me to the ground, then might I tumble only to find myself rolling in her shaded verdure, sheltered by her shade, beneath the boughs' pediments that so resembled the crown of the divinely-inspired David.

It was for this I longed; but the party of my relations, with whom I made those excursions into the hills, would never have allowed it. But one year, it was during the holidays of the year of grace 186\_, just as we had passed by the tree, we reached Great Fold — Great Fold was a small settlement, a summer abode of local shepherds. Its inhabitants were seven or eight families of country folk. Two of these families were related to my parents by ties of baptism, confraternity and the like, and all were friends and fellow islanders.

We would usually come that way on the days around Pascha, or then again on St George's Day or May Day, or else for the feast of St Constantine<sup>1</sup> or the Ascension.<sup>2</sup> On a delightful hillock stood the chapel of St John the Theologian, in which we would take part in the liturgy.

There would be dancing and feasting; refreshment and recreation and delight held sway. Lambs and kids were sacrificed, and there were libations of fragrant muscat wine. Contests took place — throwing the discus and jumping. The voices of pipe and lyre struck up gentle sounds by way of accompaniment to the rhythmical step of the maidens in their circular dance. And fair-haired, red-kirtled shepherdesses leapt, flew, warbled.

Each year on arrival, I was struck more vividly than ever by the magical impression of the tree. On each occasion we would pass close by the tree at some half hour's distance from Great Fold. Our path was on a slope, a little above where the tree stood, cutting at

<sup>1</sup> 21 May.

<sup>2</sup> A moveable feast celebrated forty days after Pascha.

an angle across the hill...the magical oak, as I had it continuously in view for no little time, would start to bewitch me and call to me as if it were an animate creature, a maiden daughter of the mountain.

With the journey's various undulations over the hollows or protuberances of the terrain, and with the donkey's eccentric, stubborn motions, as I first spied the oak on my way in her direction or away from her, the tree would take on any number of different forms, aspects, and phases. From the side and at a distance she bore the aspect of a clear-voiced Grace; from close up and viewed full face, she presented herself in all her ripe fullness: bosky, dark green, imposing as a nymph.

All night, asleep or wakeful, I would dream of the oak, that numinous tall creature... On that morning of Easter Saturday, when the little chapel had taken on the fragrance of laurels and incense, and the little bell above the tiled roof's parapet had been rung wildly by childish arms, by way of greeting to the 'Arise, O God'\* that was sung by the priest as he sprinkled the faithful with rose and lily petals...at that very point, before the service was over, I disappeared.

By an oblique and hidden pathway discovered the previous day, I began the ascent of the ridge of the hill...my destination the spot where the royal oak stood. I thought I was quite familiar with the way.

It was an uphill journey all the way, and on I ran and ran in order to get there in good time to embrace my beloved — for the oak was the beloved one of my childhood — and then in good time return, imagining as I did that my absence would go unnoticed, and that I would not have to hear my relations' chidings.

In advance of me, a small number of shepherds had set off from their pastoral abode for the little town to take lambs and cheese to their co-tenants, and to bring back with them town goods. They would be returning in the evening, and it was unlikely that I would encounter any of them on my way. Only unexpectedly did I spy in

the distance another group of people coming in this direction, with women and children and beasts of burden; they were on their way from town to join in the country festival with their relatives, the shepherds.

I turned at once from my path, and hastened to hide behind some dense bushes. If those people were to encounter me all on my own, far from my parents, on my way who knew whither, they would be puzzled, and, if they did not prevail on me to come with them right away, they would assuredly inform on me to my parents, whom they would find down at Great Fold. I was but a boy of eleven.

They passed quickly by, and I set off again, but soon lost my way. On reaching a crossroads, I took the left track, the upper of the two, and short of breath reached the hill mountaintop. But the great oak was my benefactor and guardian. It was she who saved me out of the snare, and seemed to be beckoning to me from afar, leading me in her direction.

Once I saw her lower down to the right, at some fair distance, I left the little pathway I had been rushing along, and turning westward I began to descend through the plots, leaping stone walls, ditches, hedges of bush and thorn, tearing my flesh, bloodying my hands and feet... At last I reached the side of the longed-for wood nymph.

I was exhausted, perspiring, breathless. On reaching my goal, I cast myself down on the turf and lolled among the poppies and the little flowers. And yet I felt a secret happiness, a dreamy enjoyment. I fell into a reverie as I looked up at her mighty boughs, and passionately opened and shut my lips to the soft air of her breathing, to the rustling of her leaves. Hundreds of birds were at ease in her boughs, singing wild songs... Coolness, sweet scents, and joy began to caress my soul.\*

I was dead tired, and I had not slept well that night. I needed my sleep. In the shade of the gigantic tree, in the midst of blood-red



poppies, Morpheus came and lulled me, and showed me pictures, as if to an inquiring child.

It appeared to me that the tree — for I kept the impression of the tree in my sleep — little by little changed aspect, form and shape. In a trice its roots came to appear to me as a pair of shapely calves folded one over the other; then they gradually parted; the trunk appeared to me to take on the mould and form of a waist, a belly, and a chest with generously sculpted breasts; the two biggest boughs appeared to me as two arms, hands stretched forth to the infinite, then deigning to descend earthward where I lay; and the dark gray evergreen foliage appeared to me as a girl's fine head of hair, bound up, and then released in waves, floating free.\*

The conclusion I drew from the dream and formed in a kind of delirious syllogism, was this: 'Yes! It is no tree, it is a maid; and all the trees that we see are women!'

When shortly I awoke, I had in mind, by way of a sequel to the dream, the recollection of the story of the blind man whom Christ healed, as I had heard our Scripture master relate it: 'In the beginning he saw men as trees; but then he saw them clearly...'<sup>1</sup>

But I was not to wake before I heard what the phantom said: the maid — the oak — had found a voice and was saying to me:

'Tell them to spare me, not to cut me down...lest unwittingly I do wrong. I am no immortal nymph: I shall live only as long as this tree...'

I awoke in terror and fled... It was already the middle of the day, and the sun was at its height... It was ablaze up there, over the oak's crown, which formed an impenetrable shade... From the hill opposite I heard a voice calling my name.

It was a little shepherd with his cape and crook, and with ten goats under his stewardship. He called out to me that my father was in search of me, and worried, and that I should hurry back.

<sup>1</sup> Mark 8 : 24-5.

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I understood not a whit of the prophetic dream. Later I learned from a handbook of mythology that a hamadryad dies with the tree in which she is made flesh...

Many years later, when after a long sojourn away from home I returned to my village and visited those haunts, those places of pilgrimage of childhood memories, I could no longer find even the spot where the Royal Oak had once stood, loveliest and grandest of trees, the nymph who held sway over the woods.

An old woman with her distaff and two milk ewes grazing in a nearby plot was to be found, sitting in front of her little shack.

When I asked what had become of the 'Great Tree' which had once stood there, she replied:

'The late departed Vargenis cut it down...he never showed any mercy with his axe: what great trees they were, true landmarks... From the time he cut it down never did he fare well or prosper. He sickened, he did, and in a few days he was dead... The Great Tree was haunted.'\*

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*Translated by David Ricks*