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THE DEATH OF THE ANKOU

by Wyndham Lewis

'And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.'

WILLIAM

SHAKESPEARE.

ERVOANIK PLOUILLLO—meaning the death-god of Ploumilliau; I said over the words, and as I did so I saw the death-god. —I sat in a crowded inn at Vandevennec, in the *argoa*t, not far from Rot, at the Pardon, deafened by the bitter screech of the drinkers, finishing a piece of cheese. As I avoided the maggots I read the history of the Ankou, that is the armorican death-god. The guide-book to the antiquities of the district made plain, to the tourist, the ancient features of this belief. It recounted how the gaunt creature despatched from the country of death traversed at night the breton region. The peasant, late on the high-road and for the most part drunk, staggering home at midnight, felt around him suddenly the atmosphere of the shades, a strange cold penetrated his tissues, authentic portions of the *Néant* pushed in like icy wedges within the mild air of the fields and isolated him from Earth, while rapid hands seized his shoulders from behind, and thrust him into the ditch. Then, crouching with his face against the ground, his eyes shut fast, he heard the hurrying wheels of the cart. Death passed with his assistants. As the complaint of the receding wheels died out, he would cross himself many times, rise from the ditch, and proceed with a terrified haste to his destination.

There was a midnight mass at Ploumilliau, where the Ankou, which stood in a chapel, was said to leave his place, pass amongst the kneeling congregation, and tap on the shoulders those he proposed to take quite soon. These were memories. The statue no longer stood there, even. It had been removed some time before by the priests, because it was an object of too much interest to local magicians. They interfered with it, and at last one impatient hag, disgusted at its feebleness after it had neglected to assist her in a deadly matter she had on hand, introduced herself into the chapel one afternoon and, unobserved by the staff, painted it a pillar-box red. This she imagined would invigorate it and make it full of new mischief. When the priest's eyes in due course fell upon the red god, he decided that that would not do: he put it out of the way, where it could not be tampered with. So one of the last truly pagan images disappeared, wasting its curious efficacy in a loft, dusted occasionally by an ecclesiastical *bonne*.

Such was the story of the last authentic plastic Ankou. In ancient Brittany the people claimed to be descended from a redoubtable god of death. But long passed out of the influence of that barbarity, their early death-god, competing with gentler images, saw his altars fall one by one. In a semi-'parisian' parish, at last, the cult which had superseded him arrived in its turn at a universal decline, his ultimate representative was relegated to a loft to save it from the contemptuous devotions of a disappointed sorceress. Alas for Death! or rather for its descendants, thought I, a little romantically: that chill in the bone it brought was an ancient tonic: so long as it ran down the spine the breton soul was quick with memory. So, *alas!*

But I had been reading after that, and immediately prior to my encounter, about the peasant in the ditch, also the blinding of the god. It was supposed, I learnt, that formerly the Ankou had his eyesight. As he travelled along in his cart between the hedges, he would stare about him, and spot likely people to right and left. One evening, as his flat, black, breton peasants' hat came rapidly along the road, as he straddled attentively bolt-upright upon its jolting floor, a man and his master, in an adjoining field, noticed his approach. The man broke into song. His scandalized master attempted to stop him. But this bright bolshevik continued to sing an offensively carefree song under the nose of the supreme authority. The scandal did not pass unnoticed by the touchy destroyer. He shouted at him over the hedge, that for his insolence he had eight days to live, no more, which perhaps would teach him to sing etcetera! As it happened St. Peter was there. St. Peter's record leaves little question that a suppressed communist of an advanced type is concealed beneath the archangelical robes. It is a questionable policy to employ such a man as doorkeeper, and many popular airs in latin countries facetiously draw attention to the possibilities inherent in such a situation. In this case Peter was as scandalized at the behaviour of the Ankou as was the farmer at that of his farm-hand.

'Are you not ashamed, strange god, to condemn a man in that way, *at his work*?' he exclaimed. It was the *work* that did it, as far as Peter was concerned. Also it was his interference with work that brought his great misfortune on the Ankou. St. Peter, so the guide-book said, was as touchy as a captain of industry or a demagogue on that point. Though how could poor Death know that work, of all things, was sacred? Evidently he would have quite different ideas as to the attributes of divinity. But he had to pay immediately for his blunder. The revolutionary archangel struck him blind on the spot—struck Death blind; and, true to his character, that of one at all costs anxious for the applause of the *muchedumbre*, he returned to the field, and told the astonished labourer, who was still singing—because in all probability he was a little soft in the head—that he had his personal guarantee of a very long and happy life, and that he, Peter, had punished Death with blindness. At this the labourer, I daresay, gave a hoarse laugh; and St. Peter probably made his way back to his victim well-satisfied in the reflection that he had won the favour of a vast mass of mortals.

In the accounts in the guide-book, it was the dating, however, connected with the tapping of owls, the crowing of hens, the significant evolutions of magpies, and especially the subsequent time-table involved in the lonely meetings with the plague-ridden death-cart, that seemed to me most effective. If the peasant were overtaken by the cart on the night-road towards the morning, he must die within the month. If the encounter is in the young night, he may have anything up to two years still to live. It was easy to imagine all the calculations indulged in by the distracted man after his evil meeting. I could hear his screaming voice (like those at the moment tearing at my ears as the groups of black-coated figures played some game of chance that maddened them) when he had crawled into the large, carved cupboard that served him for a bed, beside his wife, and how she would weigh this living, screaming, man, in the scales of time provided by superstition, and how the death damp would hang about him till his time had expired.

I was persuaded, finally, to go to Ploumilliau, and see the last statue of the blind Ankou. It was not many miles away. *Ervoanik Plouillo*—still to be seen for threepence: and while I was making plans for the necessary journey, my mind was powerfully haunted by that blind and hurrying apparition which had been so concrete there.

It was a long room where I sat, like a gallery: except during a Pardon it was not so popular. When I am reading something that interests me, the whole atmosphere is affected. If I look quickly up, I see things as though they were a part of a dream. They are all penetrated by the particular medium I have drawn out of my mind. What I had last read on this occasion, although my eyes at the moment were resting on the words *Ervoanik Plouillo*, was the account of how it affected the person's fate at what hour he met the Ankou. The din and smoke in the dark and crowded gallery was lighted by weak electricity, and a wet and lowering daylight beyond. Crowds of umbrellas moved past the door which opened on to the square. Whenever I grew attentive to my surroundings, the passionate movement of whirling and striking arms was visible at the tables where the play was in progress, or a furious black body would dash itself from one chair to another. The 'celtic screech' meantime growing harsher and harsher, sharpening itself on caustic snarling words, would soar to a paroxysm of energy. 'Garce!' was the most frequent sound. All the voices would clamour for a moment together. It was a shattering noise in this dusky tunnel.—I had stopped reading, as I have said, and I lifted my eyes. It was then that I saw the Ankou.

With revulsed and misty eyes almost in front of me, an imperious figure, apparently armed with a club, was forcing its way insolently forward towards the door, its head up, an eloquently moving mouth hung in the air, as it seemed, for its possessor. It forced rudely aside everything in its path. Two men who were standing and talking to a seated one flew apart, struck by the club, or the sceptre, of this king amongst afflictions. The progress of this embodied calamity was peculiarly straight. He did not deviate. He passed my table and I saw a small, highly coloured, face, with waxed moustaches. But the terrible perquisite of the blind was there in the staring, milky eyeballs: and an expression of acetic ponderous importance weighted it so that, mean as it was in reality, this mask was highly impressive. Also, from its bitter immunity and unquestioned right-of-way, and from the habit of wandering through the outer jungle of physical objects, it had the look that some small boy's face might acquire, prone to imagine himself a steam-roller, or a sightless Juggernaut.

The blinded figure had burst into my daydream so unexpectedly and so pat, that I was taken aback by this sudden close-up of so trite a tragedy. Where he had come was compact with an emotional medium emitted by me. In reality it was a private scene, so that this overweening intruder might have been marching through my mind with his taut convulsive step, club in hand, rather than merely traversing the eating-room of a hotel, after a privileged visit to the kitchen. Certainly at that moment my mind was lying open so much, or was so much exteriorized, that almost literally, as far as I was

concerned, it was inside, not out, that this image forced its way. Hence, perhaps, the strange effect.

The impression was so strong that I felt for the moment that I had met the death-god, a garbled version with waxed moustaches. It was noon. I said to myself that, as it was noon, that should give me twelve months more to live. I brushed aside the suggestion that day was not night, that I was not a breton peasant, and that the beggar was probably not Death. I tried to shudder. I had not shuddered. His attendant, a sad-faced child, rattled a lead mug under my nose. I put two sous in it. I had no doubt averted the omen, I reflected, with this bribe.

The weather improved in the afternoon. As I was walking about with a fisherman I knew, who had come in twenty miles for this Pardon, I saw the Ankou again, collecting pence. He was strolling now, making a leisurely harvest from the pockets of these religious crowds. His attitude was, however, peremptory. He called out hoarsely his requirements, and turned his empty eyes in the direction indicated by his acolyte, where he knew there was a group who had not paid. His clothes were smart, all in rich, black broadcloth and black velvet, with a ribboned hat. He entered into every door he found open, beating on it with his club-like stick. I did not notice any *Thank you!* pass his lips. He appeared to snort when he had received what was due to him, and to turn away, his legs beginning to march mechanically like a man mildly shell-shocked.

The fisherman and I both stood watching him. I laughed.

'Il ne se gêne pas!' I said. 'He does not *beg*. I don't call that a *beggar*.'

'Indeed, you are right.—That is Ludo,' I was told.

'Who is Ludo, then?' I asked.

'Ludo is the king of Rot!' my friend laughed. 'The people round here spoil him, according to my idea. He's only a beggar. It's true he's blind. But he takes too much on himself.'

He spat.

'He's not the only blind beggar in the world!'

'Indeed, he is not,' I said.

'He drives off any other blind beggars that put their noses inside Rot. You see his stick? He uses it!'

We saw him led up to a party who had not noticed his approach. He stood for a moment shouting. From stupidity they did not respond at once. Turning violently away, he dragged his attendant after him.

'He must not be kept waiting!' I said.

'Ah, no. With Ludo you must be nimble!'

The people he had left remained crestfallen and astonished.

'Where does he live?' I asked.

'Well, he lives, I have been told, in a cave, on the road to Kermarquer. That's where he lives. Where he banks I can't tell you!'

Ludo approached us. He shouted in breton.

'What is he saying?'

'He is telling you to get ready; that he is coming!' said my friend. He pulled out a few sous from his pocket, and said: 'Faut bien! Needs must!' and laughed a little sheepishly.

I emptied a handful of coppers into the mug.

'Ludo!' I exclaimed. 'How are you? Are you well?'

He stood, his face in my direction, with, except for the eyes, his mask of an irritable Jack-in-office, with the waxed moustaches of a small pretentious official.

'Very well! And you?' came back with unexpected rapidity.

'Not so bad, touching wood!' I said. 'How is your wife?'

'Je suis garçon! I am a bachelor!' he replied at once.

'So you are better off, old chap!' I said. 'Women serve no good purpose, for serious boys!'

'You are right,' said Ludo. He then made a disgusting remark. We laughed. His face had not changed its expression. Did he try, I wondered, to picture the stranger, discharging remarks from empty blackness, or had the voice outside become for him or had it always been what the picture is to us? If you had never seen any of the people you knew, but had only talked to them on the telephone—what under these circumstances would So-and-So be as a voice, I asked myself, instead of mainly a picture?

'How long have you been a beggar, Ludo?' I asked.

'Longtemps!' he replied. I had been too fresh for this important beggar. He got in motion and passed on, shouting in breton.

The fisherman laughed and spat.

'Quel type!' he said. 'When we were in Penang, no it was at Bankok, at the time of my service with the fleet, I saw just such another. He was a blind sailor, an Englishman. He had lost his sight in a shipwreck.—He would not beg from the black people.'

'Why did he stop there?'

'He liked the heat. He was a *farceur*. He was such another as this one.'

Two days later I set out on foot for Kermarquer. I remembered as I was going out of the town that my friend had told me that Ludo's cave was there somewhere. I asked a woman working in a field where it was. She directed me.

I found him in a small, verdant enclosure, one end of it full of half-wild chickens, with a rocky bluff at one side, and a stream running in a bed of smooth boulders. A chimney stuck out of the rock, and a black string of smoke wound out of it. Ludo sat at the mouth of his cave. A large dog rushed barking towards me at my approach. I took up a stone and threatened it. His boy, who was cooking, called off the dog. He looked at me with intelligence.

'Good morning, Ludo!' I said. 'I am an Englishman. I met you at the Pardon, do you remember? I have come to visit you, in passing. How are you? It's a fine day.'

'Ah, it was you I met? I remember. You were with a fisherman from Kermanec?'

'The same.'

'So you're an Englishman?'

'Yes.'

'Tiens!'

I did not think he looked well. My sensation of mock-superstition had passed. But although I was now familiar with Ludo, when I looked at his staring mask I still experienced a faint reflection of my first impression, when he was the death-god. That impression had been a strong one, and it was associated with superstition. So he was still a feeble death-god.

The bodies of a number of esculent frogs lay on the ground, from which the back legs had been cut. These the boy was engaged in poaching.

'What is that you are doing them in?' I asked him.

'White wine,' he said.

'Are they best that way?' I asked.

'Why, that is a good way to do them,' said Ludo. 'You don't eat frogs in England, do you?'

'No, that is repugnant to us.'

I picked one up.

'You don't eat the bodies?'

'No, only the thighs,' said the boy.

'Will you try one?' asked Ludo.

'I've just had my meal, thank you all the same.'

I pulled out of my rucksack a flask of brandy.

'I have some eau-de-vie here,' I said. 'Will you have a glass?'

'I should be glad to,' said Ludo.

I sat down, and in a few minutes his meal was ready. He disposed of the *grenouilles* with relish, and drank my health in my brandy, and I drank his. The boy ate some fish that he had cooked for himself, a few yards away from us, giving small pieces to the dog.

After the meal Ludo sent the boy on some errand. The dog did not go with him. I offered Ludo a cigarette which he refused. We sat in silence for some minutes. As I looked at him I realized how the eyes mount guard over the face, as well as look out of it. The faces of the blind are hung there like a dead lantern. Blind people must feel on their skins our eyes upon them: but this sheet of flesh is rashly stuck up in what must appear far outside their control, an object in a foreign world of sight. So in consequence of this divorce, their faces have the appearance of things that have been abandoned by the mind. What is his face to a blind man? Probably nothing more than an organ, an exposed part of the stomach, that is a mouth.

Ludo's face, in any case, was *blind*; it looked the blindest part of his body, and perhaps the deadest, from which all the functions of a living face had gone. As a result of its irrelevant external situation, it carried on its own life with the outer world, and behaved with all the disinvolture of an internal organ, no longer serving to secrete thought any more than the foot. For after all to be lost *outside* is much the same as to be hidden in the dark *within*.—What served for a face for the blind, then? What did they have instead, that was expressive of emotion in the way that our faces are? I supposed that all the responsive machinery must be largely readjusted with them, and directed to some other part of the body. I noticed that Ludo's hands, all the movement of his limbs, were a surer indication of what he was thinking than was his face.

Still the face registered something. It was a health-chart perhaps. He looked very ill I thought, and by that I meant, of course, that his *face* did not look in good health. When I said, 'You don't look well,' his hands moved nervously on his club. His face responded by taking on a sicklier shade.

'I'm ill,' he said.

'What is it?'

'I'm indisposed.'

'Perhaps you've met the Ankou.' I said this thoughtlessly, probably because I had intended to ask him if he had ever heard of the Ankou, or something like that. He did not say anything to this, but remained quite still, then stood up and shook himself and sat down again. He began rocking himself lightly from side to side.

'Who has been telling you about the Ankou, and all those tales?' he suddenly asked.

'Why, I was reading about it in a guide-book, as a matter of fact, the first time I saw you. You scared me for a moment. I thought you might be he.'

He did not reply to this, nor did he say anything, but his face assumed the expression I had noticed on it when I first saw it, as he forced his way through the throngs at the inn.

'Do you think the weather will hold?' I asked.

He made no reply. I did not look at him. With anybody with a face you necessarily feel that they can see you, even if their blank eyes prove the contrary. His fingers moved nervously on the handle of the stick. I felt that I had suddenly grown less popular. What had I done? I had mentioned an extinct god of death. Perhaps that was regarded as unlucky. I could not guess what had occurred to displease him.

'It was a good Pardon, was it not, the other day?' I said.

There was no reply. I was not sure whether he had not perhaps moods in which, owing to his affliction, he just entered into his shell, and declined to hold intercourse with the outside. I sat smoking for five minutes, I suppose, expecting that the boy might return. I coughed. He turned his head towards me.

'Vous êtes toujours là?' he asked.

'Oui, toujours,' I said. Another silence passed. He placed his hand on his side and groaned.

'Is there something hurting you?' I asked.

He got up and exclaimed:

'Merde!'

Was that for me? I had the impression, as I glanced towards him to enquire, that his face expressed fear. Of what?

Still holding his side, shuddering and with an unsteady step, he went into his cave, the door of which he slammed. I got up. The dog growled as he lay before the door of the cave. I shouldered my rucksack. It was no longer a hospitable spot. I passed the midden on which the bodies of the grenouilles now lay, went down the stream, and so left. If I met the boy I would tell him his master was ill. But he was nowhere in sight, and I did not know which way he had gone.

I connected the change from cordiality to dislike on the part of Ludo with the mention of the Ankou. There seemed no other explanation. But why should that have affected him so much? Perhaps I had put myself in the position of the Ankou, even—unseen as I was, a foreigner and, so, ultimately dangerous—by mentioning the Ankou, with which he was evidently familiar. He may even have retreated into his cave, because he was afraid of me. Or the poor devil was simply ill. Perhaps the frogs had upset him: or maybe the boy had poisoned him. I walked away. I had gone a mile probably when I met the boy. He was carrying a covered basket.

'Ludo's ill. He went indoors,' I said. 'He seemed to be suffering.'

'He's not very well today,' said the boy. 'Has he gone in?'

I gave him a few sous.

Later that summer the fisherman I had been with at the Pardon told me that Ludo was dead.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

Minor variations in spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

[End of *The Death of the Ankou*, by Wyndham Lewis]