

## THE CENTAUR.

(FROM THE FRENCH OF MAURICE DE GUERIN.)



I was given me to be born in the caves of these mountains. As with the river of this valley, whose first drops flow from some rock weeping in a deep recess, the earliest moments of my life fell upon the gloom of a secluded abode, and that without disturbing its silence. When the mothers of our race feel themselves about to be delivered, they keep apart, and near the caverns; then, in the most forbidding depths, in the thickest of the darkness, they bear, without a cry, offspring as silent as themselves. Their mighty milk enables us to surmount the early straits of life without languor or doubtful struggle; nevertheless we leave our caverns later than you your cradles. For it is generally received among us, that one should withhold and every way shield existence at the outset, counting those days to be engrossed by the gods. My growing-up ran almost its entire course in that darkness wherein I was born. Our abode at its innermost lay so far within the thickness of the mountain, that I should not have known on which side there might be an issue, if, turning astray through the entrance, the winds had not sometimes driven in thither freshets of air and sudden commotions. Also, at times, my mother returned, having about her the perfume of valleys, or streaming from waters which she frequented. These home-comings, which she made without ever instructing me about glens or rivers, but followed by their emanations, disquieted my spirit, so that, much agitated, I roamed the darkness. "What are they," I said to myself, "these *without*s whither my mother betakes herself, and what is it that reigns there of such power as to call her to itself so frequently? But what can that be, which is experienced there, of nature so contrarious, that she returns every day diversely moved?" My mother came home, now animated by a deep-seated joy, then again sad, trailing her limbs, and as it were wounded. The joy which she brought back announced itself from afar in certain features of her walk and was shed abroad in her glances. It was communicated throughout my whole being; but her prostration gained on me even more and drew me much farther along those conjectures into which my spirit would go forth. At such moments I was perturbed on account of my own powers, and used to recognise therein a principle that could not dwell alone; then betaking myself either to whirl my arms about, or to redouble my galloping in the spacious darkness of the cavern, I spurred myself on to discover, by the blows which I struck in the void and the rush of the pace I made, that toward which my arms were intended to reach out and my feet to carry me... Since then I have knotted my arms about the bust of centaurs, and the bodies of heroes, and the trunks of oaks; my hands have gained experience of rocks, of waters, of the innumerable plants, and of subtlest impressions from the air: for I lift them up, on blind calm nights, in order that they may take knowledge of any passing breaths and draw from thence signs of augury to determine my path. For my feet, behold, O Melampus! how they are worn away! And nevertheless, all

numbered as I am—subject to the extremities of old age, there are days whereon, in broad daylight upon the hilltops, I start off on those racings of my youth in the caverns—to the same end brandishing my arms and putting forth all that remains of my fleetness.

Those fits of turbulence would alternate with long periods of cessation from all unquiet movement. Straightway, throughout my entire being, I no longer possessed any other sensation save that of growth, and of the gradual progress of life as it mounted within my breast. No more caring to career about, recoiled upon an absolute repose, I used to savour in its integrity the good effected by the gods while it worked through me. Calm and darkness preside over the secret charm of conscious life. Ye glooms, which dwell in caverns of these mountains, to your tendance I owe the underlying education that has so powerfully fostered me, and this, also, that in your keeping I tasted life wholly pure, such as it flows at first, welling from among the gods. When I descended from your fastnesses into the light of day, I staggered and saluted it not. For it laid hold on me with violence, making me drunk as some malignant liquor might have done, suddenly poured through my veins; and I felt that my being, till then so compact and simple, underwent shaking and loss, as though it had been destined to disperse upon the winds.

O Melampus, by what design of the gods have you, who desire knowledge of the life led by centaurs, been guided to me, the oldest and saddest of them all? It is now a long while that I have ceased from all active share in their life. I no longer leave the heights of this mountain whereon age has confined me. The point of my arrows serves now only to root up tenacious plants. Tranquil lakes know me still, but the rivers have forgotten me. To you I will impart certain things concerning my youth; but such memories, issuing from a dried-up source, lag like the streams of a niggard libation, falling from a damaged urn. I easily pictured for you my earliest years, because they were calm and perfect; simple life, and that only, slaked all craving. Such things are both retained in the mind and recounted without difficulty. If a god were besought to narrate his life, it would be done in two words, O Melampus.

My youth was of wont hurried and full of agitation. I lived for movement and knew no limit to my going. In the pride of my unfettered powers, I wandered about, visiting all parts of these wildernesses. One day as I was following a valley little frequented by centaurs, I came upon a man making his way along by the river, on its opposite bank. He was the first my eyes had chanced upon; I despised him. "There at most," said I, "is but the half of me! How short his steps are, and how uneasy his gait! His eyes seem to measure space with sadness. Doubtless it is some centaur, degraded by the gods, one whom they have reduced to dragging himself along like that."

Often, for relaxation after the day, I would seek some river bed. One half of me, beneath the surface, was exerted to keep me up, while the other raised itself tranquilly, and I carried my arms idly, out of reach of the waves; becoming oblivious thus in the midst of the waters, and

yielding to the sweep of their course, which would bear me far away, and escort their wild guest past every charm of their banks. How many times, overtaken by night, have I not followed the stream under the spreading darkness, that let fall, even to the depths of the valleys, the nocturnal influence of the gods! Then my headlong life would become tempered till there was left but a faint sense of existence, equably apportioned throughout my whole being; even as throughout the waters in which I was swimming, there was a glimmer infused, shed by that goddess who traverses the night. Melampus, my old age yearns after the rivers; peaceful and monotonous for the most part, they take their appointed way with more calm than centaurs, and with a wisdom more beneficent than that of men. On coming up out of them I was followed by their bounties, which would continue with me for whole days, and take long in dispersing, after the manner of perfumes.

My steps used to be at the disposal of a wild and blind waywardness. In the midst of the most violent racings it would happen that my gallop was suddenly broken off, as though my feet had stopped short of an abyss, or as though a god stood upright before me. Such sudden immobility would allow me to savour my life thrilled through in the very heat of a present access. In those days, too, I have cut branches in the forest, that, while running, I have held above my head; the swiftness of my motion would suspend the restlessness of the foliage, which no longer caused any but the faintest rustle; but on the least pause, the wind and tumult re-entered the bough, which again resumed the volume of its wonted murmur. Thus my life, on the sudden interruption of the impetuous rush that I could command across these valleys, quivered throughout me. I used to hear it course, all boiling, as it drove on the internal fire which had been kindled by passage through space so ardently traversed. My flanks, exhilarated, opposed the tides by which they were crushed from within, and savoured, during such storms, that luxury, only known else to the shores of the sea, of shutting in, without chance of escape, a life raised to acme pitch and goaded still. Meanwhile, with head inclined to the breeze, which brought me a cool freshness, I contemplated the summits of mountains, distant since a few minutes only—I considered too the trees on the banks and the waters in the rivers, these borne on by a lagging flow, those fastened into the bosom of the earth and only so far endowed with movement as their branches are submissive to the breath of air that compels them to sigh. "Mine only," I said, "is free motion; at will, I transport my life from one end of these valleys to the other. I am happier than torrents that descend mountains never to re-ascend. The sound of my going is more beautiful than the sighing of woods, or than the noise of waters, and, with a voice as of thunder, bespeaks the wandering centaur, who is his own guide." Thus, while my flanks were still possessed by the intoxication of the race, higher up I indulged its pride and, turning my head, remained so for some time, in contemplation of my smoking crupper.

Similar to green and leafy forests teased by winds, Youth heaves to every

every side with the rich dower of life, and some profound murmur continuously prevails throughout its foliage. Abandoning myself to existence as rivers do, ceaselessly inhaling the effluence of Cybele, were it in the lap of valleys or upon the summit of the mountains, I bounded along every-whither, a mere life, blind and at large. But when the night, replete with the calm of the gods, found me upon the mountain slopes, she constrained me to seek the threshold of some cavern, and soothed me there as she soothes the billows of the sea, permitting survival of such gentle undulations as kept sleep aloof, without however flawing the perfection of repose. Couched on the threshold of my retreat, with flanks hidden in its lair and head under the sky, I followed the pageant of the dark hours with my eyes. Then it was that the foreign life, which interpenetrated me during the day, detached itself little by little, returning to the peaceful bosom of Cybele, as, after the downpour, fragments of rain, caught in the foliage, fall, they too, and rejoin the runnels. It is said that the gods of the sea, during the night-watches, quit their palaces in the deep, and, seating themselves on the promontories, gaze out over the waves. Thus did I keep watch, having at my feet a live expanse resembling a sea drowsed to torpor. Rendered back to full and clear consciousness, it would seem to me as though I came forth from a womb, and that the deep waters, which had conceived me, were but just returned from depositing me upon the height of the mountain, even as a dolphin is left stranded on quicksands by the waves of Amphitrite Goddess of the Shore.

My gaze roved freely and pierced to immense distances. Like an ever humid sea-beach, the range of mountains in the west retained traces of a glory but ill expunged by the darkness. Out there in the wan clearness, persisted, live yet, peaks naked and pure. There I used to watch coming down, now the god Pan, habitually solitary; now a choir of occult divinities; or else a mountain nymph would pass, intoxicated by the night. Sometimes the eagles of Mount Olympus traversed the highest heaven and melted away among remote constellations, or vanished, dipping under the inspired woods. The potency of the gods, suddenly rousing into activity, troubled the calm of the old oaks.

You pursue wisdom, O Melampus, wisdom which is science concerning the will of the gods; and you wander among the nations like a mortal turned from his true path by the destinies. There is hereabouts a stone which, so soon as it is touched, gives forth a sound like to that of the snapping chord of an instrument, and men tell how Apollo, having set down his lyre on this stone, left therein that melodious cry. O Melampus, the wandering gods have rested their lyres upon stones, but none—none has ever forgotten his there. Of old, when I used to keep the night-watches in the caverns, I have sometimes believed that I was about to overhear the dreams of sleeping Cybele, and that the mother of the gods, betrayed by a vision, would let secrets escape her; but I have never made out more than sounds which dissolved in the breath of night, or words inarticulate as the bubbling hum of rivers.

“O Macareus,” said to me one day the great Chiron, whom I was accustomed to follow in his old age, “both of us are mountain-bred centaurs, but how diverse are we in our habits! As you see, all the solicitude of my days is spent upon research among plants, but you resemble those mortals who have picked up on the waters or in the woods, and carried to their lips, fragments of some reed-pipe broken by god Pan; thenceforth those mortals, having inhaled from such relics of the god a zest for wild life, or being seized on by some occult frenzy, enter the wilderness, plunge into forests, keep company with running waters, or become involved among the mountains, restless, and carried forward on some unconscious enterprise. Mares, paramours of the wind in farthest Scythia, are not wilder than you, nor more downcast at nightfall, when Aquilo has withdrawn himself. Search you after the gods, O Macareus, inquisitive as to whence men are derived, animals and the mainsprings of universal fire? But the old Ocean, father of all things, keepeth these secrets to himself, and, chanting, the nymphs ring him round in an eternal choir, that they may drown whatever might else escape from his lips parted in slumber. Mortals, who by reason of virtue draw nigh to the gods, have received from their hands lyres wherewith to charm nations, or the seeds of new plants wherewith to enrich them; but from their inexorable lips, nothing.

“In my youth Apollo inclined my heart towards the plants, and taught me how to despoil their veins of cordial juices. Since then I have remained faithful to these mountains, my grand abode, restless, but turning with ever renewed application to the quest for simples, and to making known the virtues that I discover. Do you see yonder the bald crown of Mount Oeta? Alcides stripped it in order to construct his pyre. O Macareus! that heroes, children of the gods, should spread out the spoil of lions upon their pyres, and burn themselves to death upon the mountain tops! that the infections of earth should so ravage blood derived from the immortals! And we, centaurs, begotten by an insolent mortal in the womb of a cloud which had the semblance of a goddess, what help should we look for from Jupiter, whose thunderbolt struck down the father of our race? By the god’s decree a vulture eternally tears at the entrails of him who fashioned the first man. O Macareus! men and centaurs alike recognise, in the authors of their race, subtractors from the privileges of immortals, apart from whom, perhaps, all that moves is only a petty theft—mere dust of their essence, borne abroad, like seed that floats in the air, by the almighty current of destiny. It is noised about, that Ægeus, father of Theseus, hid, under the weight of a boulder by the sea-side, remembrances and tokens by which his son might, on a future day, recognise his parentage. Somewhere the jealous gods have buried the evidences of universal descent; but by the shore of what sea have they rolled to the stone that covers them, O Macareus?”

Such was the wisdom toward which the great Chiron inclined my heart. Brought down to the extreme verge of old age, that centaur used still to foster in his spirit the loftiest discourse. His bust, vigorous yet, had but  
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little settled back upon his flanks, slightly inclined o'er which, it rose like an oak saddened by the winds ; and the firmness of his step had scarcely been shaken in the course of years. One might have said that he still kept some remnants of the immortality received by him in time past from Apollo, but which he had delivered back to the god.

As for me, O Melampus, I decline into old age calmly, as do the setting constellations. Though I preserve vigour enough to enable me to gain the summit of the crags, whereon I belate myself at nightfall, be it to consider the restless and inconstant clouds, be it to watch mounting up from the horizon the rainy Hyades, the Pleiades or the giant Orion ; none the less I perceive that I dwindle away and suffer loss rapidly, even as a clot of snow floating on a stream, and that in a little I shall make hence, to be mingled with the rivers that take their way across the vast bosom of the earth.

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