

The bond of friendship

We've recently made a little journey, and already we want to make a longer one. Where? To Sparta, or Mycenae, or Delphi? There are hundreds of places whose names make the heart pound with the love of travel. On horseback we climb mountain paths, through shrubs and brush. A single traveler looks like a whole caravan. He rides in front with his guide; a pack horse carries luggage, tent, and provisions; a couple of soldiers guard the rear for his protection. No inn with soft beds awaits him at the end of a tiring day's journey; often the tent is his roof in nature's great wilderness, and the guide cooks him his supper—a pilau of rice, fowl, and curry. Thousands of gnats swarm around the little tent. It is a miserable night, and tomorrow the route will head across swollen streams. Sit tight on your horse lest you are washed away!

What reward is there for these hardships? The greatest! The richest! Nature reveals herself here in all her glory; every spot is history; eye and mind alike are delighted. The poet can sing of it, the painter portray it in splendid pictures; but neither can reproduce the air of reality that sinks deep into the soul of the spectator, and remains there.

The lonely herdsman up on the hills could, perhaps, by the simple story of an event in his life, open your eyes, and with a few words let you behold the land of the Hellenes better than any travel book could do. Let him speak, then! About a custom, a beautiful, peculiar custom. The shepherd in the mountains will tell about it. He calls it the bond of friendship, and relates:

Our house was built of clay, but the doorposts were fluted marble pillars found on the spot where the house was built. The roof almost reached the ground. Now it was black-brown and ugly; but when it was new it was covered with blooming oleander and fresh laurel branches fetched from beyond the mountains. The walks around our house were narrow. Walls of rock rose steeply up, bare and black in color. On top of them, clouds often hung like white living beings. I never heard a bird sing here, and never did the men dance here to the sound of the bagpipe; but the place was sacred from olden times. Its very name reminded of that, for it was called Delphi. The dark, solemn mountains were all covered with snow. The brightest, which gleamed in the red evening sun the longest, was

Parnassus. The brook close by our house rushed down from it, and was also sacred, long ago. Now the donkey makes it muddy with its feet, but the current rolls on and becomes clear again.

How well I remember every spot and its deep sacred solitude!

In the middle of the hut a fire was lit, and when the hot ashes lay high and glowing, the bread was baked in it. If the snow was piled up high round our hut and almost covered it, then my mother seemed to be her brightest. She would hold my head between her hands, kiss my forehead, and sing the songs she never sang at other times, for our masters, the Turks, did not like them. And she sang: "On the summit of Olympus, in the fir tree forest lived an old stag; its eyes were heavy with tears. It wept red, yes, and even green and light-blue tears. Then a roebuck came by and said, 'What ails you, that you cry so, that you weep red, green, yes, even light-blue, tears?' The stag replied, 'The Turk has entered our city. He has fierce dogs for the hunt, a goodly pack.' I will drive them away across the islands," said the young roebuck. "I will drive them away across the islands into the deep sea!" But before evening the roebuck was slain, and before nightfall the stag was hunted and killed."

When my mother sang this her eyes became moist, and a tear hung on the long lashes. But she concealed it, and turned our black bread in the ashes. Then I would clench my fists and say, "We'll kill the Turks!"

But she repeated the words of the song, "I will drive them across the islands into the deep sea!" But before evening the roebuck was slain, and before nightfall the stag was hunted and killed."

For several days and nights we had been alone in our hut, and then my father came home. I knew he would bring me sea shells from the Gulf of Lepanto, or maybe even a sharp gleaming knife. But this time he brought us a child, a naked little girl whom he had carried under his sheepskin coat. She was wrapped in a fur, but when this was taken off and she lay in my mother's lap all that she possessed was three silver coins fastened in her dark hair. And father explained to us that the Turks had killed her parents, and told us so much about it that I dreamed about it all night. Father himself had been wounded, and my mother dressed his

arm. His wound was deep, and the thick sheepskin was stiff with blood.

The little girl was to be my sister! She was so beautiful, with clear, shining eyes; even my mother's eyes were not gentler than hers. Yes, Anastasia, as they called her, was to be my sister, for her father was united to mine, united in accordance with an old custom we still keep. They had sworn brotherhood in their youth, and had chosen the most beautiful and virtuous girl in the whole country to consecrate their bond of friendship. I had often heard of the queer and beautiful custom.

So now the little girl was my sister. She sat in my lap; I brought her flowers and feathers of the field birds. We drank together of the waters of Parnassus and slept head to head beneath the laurel roof of the hut, while many a winter my mother sang of the red, the green, and the light-blue tears. But still I didn't understand it was my own countrymen whose thousandfold sorrows were reflected in those tears.

One day, three Frankish men came, dressed differently than we were. They had their tents and beds packed on horses; and more than twenty Turks, armed with swords and muskets, accompanied them, for they were friends of the pasha, and carried letters from him. They only came to view our mountains, to climb Parnassus through snow and clouds, and to see the strange, steep black rocks surrounding our hut. There was no room for them inside our home, nor could they stand the smoke rolling along the ceiling and out at the low door; so they pitched their tents in the narrow clearing outside our house, roasted lambs and birds, and drank strong, sweet wine, which the Turks did not dare to drink.

When they left, I went with them for some distance, and my little sister hung in a goatskin on my back. One of the Frankish gentlemen had me stand before a rock, and sketched me and her, so lifelike as we stood there, so that we looked like one being-I had never thought of it before, but Anastasia and I were really one person. She was always sitting in my lap or hanging on my back in the goatskin, and when I dreamed she appeared in my dreams.

Two nights later other men came to our hut, armed with knives and muskets. They were Albanians, brave men, said my mother. They stayed only a short while, wrapping tobacco in strips of paper and smoking it. My sister Anastasia sat on the knees of one of them, and when he was gone she had only two silver coins in

her hair instead of three. The oldest of the men talked about which route they should take; he was not sure.

"If I spit upward," he said, "it will fall in my face; if I spit downward, it will fall in my beard!"

But they had to make a choice, so they went, and my father followed them. And soon afterwards we heard the sound of shots! The firing increased; then soldiers rushed into our hut and took my mother, myself, and Anastasia prisoners. The robbers, they said, had stayed with us, and my father had gone with them; therefore we had to be taken away. Soon I saw the robbers' corpses, and I saw my father's corpse too, and I cried myself to sleep. When I awoke we were in prison, but the cell was no worse than the room in our hut. And they gave me onions to eat and musty wine poured from a tarred sack, but ours at home was no better.

I don't know how long we were held prisoners, but many days and nights went by. It was our holy Eastertime when we were released. I carried Anastasia on my back, for my mother was ill and could only walk slowly, and it was a long way down to the sea, to the Gulf of Lepanto. We entered a church magnificent with pictures on a golden background. They were pictures of angels, oh, so beautiful! but I thought our little Anastasia was just as beautiful. In the center of the floor was a coffin filled with roses. "The Lord Christ is symbolized there as a beautiful rose," said my mother; and then the priest chanted, "Christ is risen!" Everybody kissed each other. All the people had lighted tapers in their hands; I received one, and so did little Anastasia. The bagpipes played, men danced hand in hand from the church, and the women outside were roasting the Easter lamb. We were invited to share it, and when I sat by the fire a boy older than I put his arms around my neck, kissed me, and cried, "Christ is risen!" Thus we met for the first time, Aphtanides and I.

My mother could make fishing nets, which gave her a good income here in the bay, so for a long time we lived beside the sea-the beautiful sea that tasted like tears, and whose colors reminded me of the song of the weeping stag, for its waters were sometimes red, sometimes green, and then again light-blue.

Aphtanides knew how to guide a boat, and I often sat in it with Anastasia while it glided through the water, like a cloud over the sky. Then, as the sun set and the mountains turned a deeper and deeper blue, one range seemed to rise behind the other, and behind all of them was Parnassus, covered with snow. Its summit

gleamed in the evening rays like glowing iron, and it seemed as though the light shone from within it; for long after the sun had set the mountaintop still glittered in the clear, blue shimmering air. The white sea birds touched the water's surface with their wings, and indeed everything here was as calm as among the black rocks at Delphi.

I was lying on my back in the boat while Anastasia leaned against my chest, and the stars above shone more brightly than our church lamps. They were the same stars, and they were in exactly the same position above me, as when I had sat outside our hut at Delphi, and at last I imagined I was still there. Then there was a splash in the water, and the boat rocked violently! I cried out loud, for Anastasia had fallen overboard, but just as quickly Aphtanides had leaped in after her, and soon he lifted her up to me. We undressed her, wrung the water out of her clothes; and then dressed her again. Aphtanides did the same for himself. We remained on the water until their clothes were dry; and no one knew about our fright over the little adopted sister in whose life Aphtanides also now had a part.

Then it was summer! The sun blazed so fiercely that the leaves on the trees withered. I thought of our cool mountains and their fresh-water streams, and my mother longed for them too; so one evening we journeyed home. How quiet it was and how peaceful! We walked on through the high thyme, still fragrant though the sun had dried its leaves. Not a shepherd did we meet; not a single hut did we pass. Everything was quiet and deserted; only a shooting star told us that in heaven there still was life. I do not know if the clear blue air glowed with its own light, or if the rays came from the stars, but we could plainly make out the outlines of the mountains. My mother lit a fire and roasted the onions she had brought with her; then my sister and I slept among the thyme, with no fear of the wolf or the jackal, not to mention fear of the ugly, fire-breathing smidraki, for my mother sat beside us, and this I believed was enough.

When we reached our old home we found the hut a heap of ruins, and had to build a new one. A couple of women helped my mother, and in a few days the walls were raised and covered with a new roof of oleander. My mother braided many bottle holsters of bark and skins; I tended the priests' little flock, and Anastasia and the little tortoises were my playmates.

One day we had a visit from our dear Aphtanides, who said how much he had longed to see us; he stayed with

us for two whole days.

A month later he came again, to tell us he was taking a ship for Corfu and Patras but had to bid us good-by first; he had brought our mother a large fish. He talked a great deal, not only about the fishermen out in the Gulf of Lepanto, but also of the kings and heroes who had once ruled Greece, just as the Turks rule it now.

I have seen a bud on a rosebush develop through the days and weeks into a full, blooming flower before I was even aware how large, beautiful, and blushing it had become; and now I saw the same thing in Anastasia. She was now a beautiful, fullgrown girl, and I was a strong youth. I myself had taken from the wolves that fell before my musket the skins that covered my mother's and Anastasia's beds. Years had passed.

Then one evening Aphtanides returned, strong, brown, and slender as a reed. He kissed us all, and had many stories to tell of the great ocean, the fortifications of Malta, and the strange tombs of Egypt. It all sounded wonderful, like a priestly legend, and I looked at him with a kind of awe.

"How much you know!" I said. "How well you can tell about it!"

"But after all, you once told me about the most wonderful thing," he said. "You told me something that has never been out of my thoughts-the grand old custom of the bond of friendship, a custom I want very much to follow. Brother, let us go to church, as your and Anastasia's fathers did before us. Your sister is the most beautiful and innocent of girls; she shall consecrate us! No nation has such beautiful old customs as we Greeks."

Anastasia blushed like a fresh rose, and my mother kissed Aphtanides.

An hour's walk from our house, where loose earth lies on the rocks, and a few scattered trees give shade, stood the little church, a silver lamp hanging before its altar.

I wore my best clothes. The white fustanella fell in rich folds over my hips, the red jacket fitted tight and snug, the tassel on my fez was silver, and in my girdle gleamed my knife and pistols. Aphtanides wore the blue costume of the Greek sailors; on his chest hung a silver medallion with a figure of the Virgin Mary, and his scarf was as costly as those worn by rich men. Everyone could see that we two were going to some ceremony.

We entered the little empty church, where the evening

sunlight, streaming through the door, gleamed on the burning lamp and the colored pictures on the golden background. We knelt on the altar steps, and Anastasia stood before us. A long white garment hung loosely and lightly over her graceful figure; on her white neck and bosom a chain of old and new coins formed a large collar. Her black hair was fastened in a single knot and held together by a small cap fashioned of gold and silver coins that had been found in the old temples. No Greek girl had more beautiful ornaments than she. Her face beamed, and her eyes were bright as two stars.

The three of us prayed silently, and then she asked us, "Will you be friends in life and in death?"

"Yes," we replied.

"Will each of you, whatever may happen, remember: my brother is a part of me! My secrets are his secrets; my happiness is his happiness! Self-sacrifice, patience, every virtue in me, belongs to him as well as to me!"

Then she placed our hands together and kissed each of us on the forehead, and again we prayed silently. Then the priest came through the door behind the altar and blessed the three of us; the singing voices of other holy men sounded from behind the altar screen. The bond of eternal friendship was completed. When we arose I saw that my mother standing by the church door was weeping tenderly.

How cheerful it was now in our little hut by the springs of Delphi! The evening before his departure Aphtanides sat with me on the mountainside, his arm around my waist, mine around his neck. We spoke of the suffering of Greece, and of the men the country could trust. Every thought of our souls was clear to each of us, and I took his hand. "One thing more you must know, one thing that till this moment only God and I have known! My whole soul is filled with a love-a love stronger than the love I feel for my mother and for you!"

"And whom do you love?" asked Aphtanides, his face and neck turning red.

"I love Anastasia," I said-and then his hand trembled in mine, and he turned pale as a corpse. I saw it and understood, and I also believe my hand trembled. I bent toward him, kissed his brow, and whispered, "I have never told her this. Maybe she doesn't love me. Consider this, brother. I've seen her daily; she has grown up by my side, grown into my soul!"

"And she shall be yours!" he said. "Yours! I cannot lie to you, nor will I. I love her too, but tomorrow I go. In

a year we shall meet again, and then you will be married, won't you? I have some money of my own; it is yours. You must, and shall, take it!"

Silently we wandered across the mountain. It was late in the evening when we stood at my mother's door. She was not there, but as we entered Anastasia held the lamp up, gazing at Aphtanides with a sad and beautiful look. "Tomorrow you're leaving us," she said. "How it saddens me!"

"Saddens you?" he said, and I thought that in his voice there was a grief as great as my own. I couldn't speak, but he took her hand and said, "Our brother there loves you; is he dear to you? His silence is the best proof of his love."

Anastasia trembled and burst into tears. Then I could see no one but her, think of no one but her; I threw my arms around her and said, "Yes, I love you!" She pressed her lips to mine, and her arms slipped around my neck; the lamp had fallen to the ground, and all about us was dark-dark as in the heart of poor dear Aphtanides.

Before daybreak he got up, kissed us all good-by, and departed. He had given my mother all his money for us. Anastasia was my betrothed, and a few days later she became my wife.

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