

The Iron Gate

by Thomas Owen

Foreword by the translator

Thomas Owen (pseudonym of Gérard Bertot, born 1910 in Leuven, died 2002 in Brussels), was a Belgian francophone writer of fantastic, horror and mystery stories and novels. He also wrote a few psychological novels, and regularly published pieces of art criticism under the pseudonym of Stéphane Rey. He is not very well known, and the rare translations of some of his stories are hard to find. His work has tended to be overshadowed by that of his close friend, the older and more famous Jean Ray, who has been described as the “Belgian Edgar Allan Poe”.

Yet, Owen’s work is remarkable by the precision, realism and subtlety of his descriptions, especially of sensuality, anguish, curiosity and other very private feelings. He typically starts his stories in a very ordinary and recognizable setting, such as a park with old ladies sitting on a bench, a middle class household, or a salesman traveling in his car, but then gradually increases the mystery as weird, and often horrific, events become apparent, culminating in a surprising conclusion.

I have chosen the following short story, which was published as “La grille” in his collection entitled “Le rat Kavar”, to illustrate his general style and method of building up a plot. It is composed out of rather classic ingredients of romance, mystery and horror. But the three-part development is masterly in the way that each part radically alters the atmosphere, while letting the reader empathize with the evolving emotions of the main character.

For those readers familiar with Brussels, it is clear that the action takes place somewhere in the rich neighborhoods bordering the Zoniën forest (forêt de Soignes) on the Southeast of the city. The cemetery of W. may well be the one of Watermael-Boitsfort. The main character, who is an assistant at some “Institute for Advanced Studies”, is probably working for the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

I have translated this story both to bring Owen’s work to the attention of a wider public, and as a personal exercise so as to hone my literary skills in both English and French (neither of which is my mother tongue). Owen is one of my favorite authors, for all the reasons I listed. I moreover have a rather indirect family relationship with him, as he apparently was a cousin-in-law, second cousin, or such, to my maternal grandmother. Since he worked as a factory director in the town (Vilvoorde) where my family lived, he sometimes came to visit my grandmother. I was even introduced to him on one of these occasions, but as a young adolescent who did not know his work, I don’t really remember talking to him. It is only much later that I started to appreciate his, in my view, undervalued work. I hope that my translation will encourage new readers to enjoy this master of the weird and fantastic fiction.

Francis Heylighen

The Iron Gate

*... the youth pined away with desire,
and the pale virgin shrouded in snow,
arise from their graves...*

William BLAKE

Near midnight, she got troubled, said it was high time for her to go home. She had in her hand a little pink scarf, in light silk, which was to serve to cover her head when leaving, so as to protect her hair from the wind, but she held it tightly now, all crumpled up against her chest.

She tilted her head to look at the place where her hand rested and he guessed that she wanted to hide a stain on her white dress.

Not many people in the cloakroom. The party was in full swing.

— You had a little accident? he asked. She smiled, embarrassed.

— It's wine. I'm very clumsy. I should not have sat down at the table of those lovers of Beaujolais wine. To say that I do not even drink!

— Don't think about it anymore!

In order not to embarrass her, he avoided looking at the spot that she carefully concealed. She nonetheless insisted on being driven home and, in the obscurity of the car, did not appear timid when he kissed her on the mouth and caressed her.

She lived out of town, just across the forest. He obediently followed the route that she indicated to him. On several occasions, they stopped to cuddle. He liked to leave the initiative to her and took pleasure in feeling her gently nibble his lip and his tongue. She visibly restrained herself from going further. Thus they advanced with several stopovers, until the moment she declared:

— It's here. Stop.

The moment of separation was approaching. That gave more tenderness to their eyes and made a sudden paleness appear around their mouths.

— I won't let you go like this, he said in a slightly hoarse voice. We will meet again. Where are we here?

She asked him for a bit of paper.

He took two calling cards from his wallet, gave one to her, and invited her to write on the other one. With the pen he had handed her, she traced her initials and her address. Before slipping the little card in his pocket, he added, in order not to forget it, the name she had given him: Anne Sigurd.

She descended nimbly from the car and he did the same on his side. Once again, with the same impulse, their bodies sought each other and she whispered:

— See you soon. I'll give you a sign. Promised!

— I am happy to know that you exist, he said.

She left running, waving her little handkerchief at the end of her raised arm. The sky was dark, but a comforting smell of sweetness and bliss rose from the earth and the trees.

He saw the white dress moving in the dark for quite a while, to the rhythm of her running. Presently, she pushed a gate, in between two small square pavilions, and it made a noise of iron when the gate closed itself. The girl had disappeared in the night of a garden. He stayed for a moment, not knowing whether he was sad or happy. But he soon felt his heart all swollen with well-being.

* * *

All the avenues in this forested suburb of the city had after all the same appearance. Tall, bulky hedges, parks and gardens planted with trees, villas nestled in the greenery, well removed from the curious and the noises of the street. He had to check the map of the neighborhood on several occasions in order to discover the Avenue des Mèlèzes and the property bearing number 38. It did not extend up to the avenue, but was situated farther away, accessible only by a roadway made from small staggered paving stones, rather difficult to find as an invading ivy had rendered the nameplate invisible. The plate, finally discovered, listed under the street number a simple name: Sigurd.

He breathed deeply. He was nearing his goal. He did not really recognize the place where a month earlier he had deposited "his fiancée of one night", as he had named her. But the night had been dark. The trees then were barely budding. The presently flourishing vegetation changed the appearance of the place. He entered the paved driveway and soon found himself in front of an iron gate, openwork and painted white.

He pressed in vain on the button of a doorbell, whose wire he found to be corroded, and pushed with difficulty one of the iron panels of the gate. A cast iron wheel was supposed to run on a flat rail shaped like a circle quadrant. But the weeds hindered, then shortly blocked, the movement. He had to slip through the gap, and, across a garden returned to the wild, he ended up in front of the villa.

No sound, apart from the light noise of the wind in the foliage and the insolent song of an invisible bird.

He rang. He waited. Already he became concerned about finding the door closed and did not know too well what to think. But someone opened. It was a wary old man, with very pale blue eyes, with carefully shaven hollow cheeks, whose taut skin, almost without wrinkles, had an ivory and fragile appearance across the bones of his face.

He seemed surprised and displeased to be intruded upon, manifestly on the alert, but naturally inclined, by courtesy, to treat his visitor with respect.

— Excuse me to disturb you, said the young man, but I would like to have a word with miss Sigurd.

Immediately, the old man dug in his heels.

— I do not see, he said, what you might want from my niece...

Fearing to be sent away before even being able to explain, the visitor carried on very quickly:

— Listen to me, sir, I beg you, and forgive my indiscretion. It is very important to me.

There was in the tone of his voice such anguish, but also such a childish pleading, that the old man listened to him, eyes half closed, a fold of sadness or malice across his mouth.

— Exactly one month ago, I spent the evening in the company of a charming girl who must be your niece. Anne is her name. Anne Sigurd. We were to see each other again within eight days of our encounter. But I was left without news. Is it possible to see her, talk to her? Is she here?

The little man, frail and shriveled by age, stared at him as if to probe the very soul of his interlocutor.

— Your approach, sir, pains me and surprises me. I do not think you are a malicious man, nor a practical joker. But my niece Anne, whom you think you know, has not been of this world for several years. Your coming here is quite cruelly reviving dreadful memories.

The young man had turned pale. He let it be repeated to him what he found difficult to believe and remained overwhelmed, unable to understand, to say one more word. He was ready to turn around, to go away, so as to escape the eerie ambience born from this disordered garden, this deserted house, this old man acting as a messenger of death.

The latter took pity on him and invited him for a moment to enter a quaint living room, where thick drapes maintained a gilded and dusty twilight. He pointed out a seat to the still bewildered visitor and sat down beside him on a low chair, where he seemed to curl up even further.

The young man spoke in a calm and steady voice:

— My name is Irwin Olmen. I am an assistant at the Institute of Advanced Economic and Social Studies. I met your niece at the ball of the Law Faculty, exactly one month ago, day by day.

Followed a description of the girl, so precise, so alive, evoking her thin face, her blue eyes, her black hair, her white dress to such a point that the old man ended up paying an ever more sustained

attention to his interlocutor, as if he were searching to connect to the deepest, most mysterious part of his mind.

— Was this the first time you met my niece? And, on the assurance that it was, he added:

— I will show you some family photographs. There are two of that poor Anne in the lot. If you can identify them, I will believe you. I'll go and fetch them.

During the short absence of the master of the house, Irwin Olmen looked around, trying to situate his disappeared girlfriend within these living quarters from another era. The furniture and the trinkets were of high quality, for as far as he could judge, and would have made the joy of an antique dealer among his friends. But all this seemed a rather poor fit with the style of that fun and free girl.

— Here! said the old Sigurd, returning with a large yellowed envelope that he deposited on a small table. Look at your ease.

And he went to pull the curtain to allow in more light. His gesture was that, ambiguous, of a strange character in a painting by Balthus, whose title he had forgotten, but which had troubled him. The young man felt for him, in this fugitive attitude, a mixture of fascination and repulsion.

— Well? uncle Sigurd asked with a fallacious smile. Irwin Olmen flipped through the photographs and had no difficulty identifying the two announced pictures. Anne appeared there just as he had known her, with her at once lively and grave face, her amused eyes, her pretty mouth with slightly swollen lips. Another print, more ancient, showed her as almost a little girl still, curiously resembling Anne Frank, the little Jew from Amsterdam.

— That is a coincidence, grumbled the old man, whose skepticism would not surrender. Besides, it's impossible!

But he was shaken in spite of himself.

— Even so, you promised to believe me if I identified the two photos. I even found one more that you did not think of.

— If I were to believe you, my dear, what purpose would that serve?

Irwin then remembered the little card that Anne had slipped in his hands when she left. She had written her initials and address on it. It was thanks to it that he had found her trace again. He took it out of his wallet and handed it, without a word, to the incredulous uncle.

The latter became pale as he recognized the handwriting. He had to accept the evidence. He rubbed his eyes, massaged his skull, breathed deeply for several times.

— All this is unbelievable, inexplicable... It troubles me deeply. I would have preferred not to have met you, not to know you. Through your fact, I could almost say "through your fault", I now start to put into doubt a dreadful reality, to erect a jumble of hypotheses, the ones for sure even more foolish than the others. I had gotten used, sir, to my bereavement and my solitude, and there you come to make me call into question reality itself. I am now almost ready to believe, against any logic, in some anomaly, and even to hope for I don't know which miracle...

After a long conversation, Irwin Olmen succeeded in convincing the old Sigurd to speak about the matter to the judicial authorities.

* * *

They obtained, not without difficulty, the authorization to exhume, thanks to various sources of support and under the pretext of an anonymous letter suggesting the hypothesis of the murder of Anne Sigurd.

The old man and the young one, united by the same fever, the same grief and the same determination to discover the truth, went on the agreed date, at the invitation of the public prosecutor, to the entrance of the cemetery of W...

Arriving at the meeting place, Irwin Olmen received a shock that he would never forget. In this location, where he was certain he had never come, where he had attended no one's funeral, he recognized from the outset the gate and the two pavilions that flanked it. Small square buildings, with a slated roof, made out of brown bricks. The right one had its only window broken and someone

had closed it, provisionally, by nailing boards onto it. It was there, the night of the ball, that he had brought back the girl a few weeks earlier and he presently understood why he had felt so out of place, the other day, at the entrance of the Sigurd villa, Avenue des Mélézes.

He took the old man apart and shared his observation with him in a few words. The parchment-colored face of the old man turned reddish-purple and one could have feared that he was going to become sick. There was in his attitude more emotion than disbelief and he was about to say something.

But already, the small group of assistants to the dismal task was walking to the edge of the grave, circumventing the black stone slab deposited across the path on two wooden rollers. There reigned a smell of humus and cut grass. Next to a mound of yellow earth, clayey, freshly excavated, the coffin lay stretched in a surprising state of cleanliness. It was like new and even the copper handles had not undergone any deterioration.

The carpenter committed to this task skillfully made the lid jump open and a howl of bewilderment burst from the small group that had followed the operation. The dead girl rested intact in her long white dress, stained with red at the height of her breast. A fear come from an immemorial past weighed on all the silent assistants. A supernatural reality was imposing itself and throwing everyone into dread and mortification. The voice of the prosecutor had a strangely childish resonance when he asked:

The burial has taken place how much time ago?

— It was five years, said someone who was coughing.

— What spell then has prevented the decomposition of the body?

Doctor, your opinion?

The medical examiner knelt next to the coffin, in the grip of a most disarming perplexity.

— The tissues appear irrigated, he said.

It was at that moment that the old Sigurd, who had just picked up a spade, put its cutting-edge on the throat of his niece. Before even they had understood what he was doing, he pushed down with all his suddenly multiplied strength, and neatly cut the neck of the corpse, as would have done the heavy blade of a guillotine. Scarlet blood gushed abundantly, flooding the thus mutilated body.

The emotion reached its peak and cries of horror mingled with calls for help. In the general dismay the old man was brusquely disarmed. He proudly stood firm, visibly satisfied with his act. Then, almost immediately afterwards, he began to weep, relaxed, bearing a childish and desperate expression across his features.

— It is better like this, he murmured, while tears flowed down his hollow cheeks. You'll see, it is much better like this. The poor girl will finally be able to rest. Already her mother, in the old days...

But they no longer understood the meaning of his disjointed words, mumbled like a prayer.

Irwin Olmen remained petrified with grief and horror. Thus, his gentle companion for an evening... He would have wanted to touch her hand once again, but he did not dare. He regarded her intensely and observed a rapid deterioration. Anne Sigurd was visibly decomposing. Already, she was nothing but a blackish pulp and, immediately afterwards, earthy ash... He heard someone say timidly behind him:

— Do you believe in vampires?

Another voice declared, peremptorily:

— The best means to avoid them is still incineration and the dispersal of the ashes.

What was he still to do there? He slipped away discreetly. He felt wrecked, as if it he had received a long series of punches. He thought about the strange destiny, in this world and in the other, of the beautiful Anne, about the chance that had brought them together, about the old Sigurd and his act that was so brutal and so intent. Him alone would know more about the matter.

They had not noticed his cautious departure. From afar, he saw people that walked away while talking. A police inspector remained on site awaiting further instructions. All this no longer had the slightest importance.

He kept wandering about for a long time still, torn between the desire to look once again at what remained of a desirable girl and the need to flee far away, so that he could try to forget as quickly as possible these horrendous images.

He had seen a black bird that had perched on a branch not far from him, at the moment when the head detached from the body and the blood spurted out, and this bird, fluttering and hopping, was now following him across the alleys of the cemetery.

He began to run and the bird flew after him. When he had passed the gate, this gate that he would never again forget, and had taken place in his car, he saw the black bird distraught, searching to land while describing rapid circles. But when he started the car, he could perceive it in his rearview mirror, gliding and taking up the chase...



La Grille

After the tale of Thomas Owen.
Oil on strengthened panel - 16 x 16 cm.
Stéphan Mourmaux - 1992
Particular collection - Belgium