

# Pan's Wand

By Richard Garnett

Iridion had broken her lily. A misfortune for any rustic nymph, but especially for her, since her life depended upon it.

From her birth the fate of Iridion had been associated with that of a flower of unusual loveliness—a stately, candid lily, endowed with a charmed life, like its possessor. The seasons came and went without leaving a trace upon it; innocence and beauty seemed as enduring with it, as evanescent with the children of men. In equal though dissimilar loveliness its frolicsome young mistress flourished by its side. One thing alone, the oracle had declared, could prejudice either, and this was an accident to the flower. From such disaster it had long been shielded by the most delicate care; yet in the inscrutable counsels of the Gods, the dreaded calamity had at length come to pass. Broken through the upper part of the stem, the listless flower drooped its petals towards the earth, and seemed to mourn their chastity, already sullied by the wan flaccidity of decay. Not one had fallen as yet, and Iridion felt no pain or any symptom of approaching dissolution, except, it may be, the unwonted seriousness with which, having exhausted all her simple skill on behalf of the languishing plant, she sat down to consider its fate in the light of its bearing upon her own.

Meditation upon an utterly vague subject, whether of apprehension or of hope, speedily lapses into reverie. To Iridion, Death was as indefinable an object of thought as the twin omnipotent controller of human destiny, Love. Love, like the immature fruit on the bough, hung unsoliciting and unsolicited as yet, but slowly ripening to the maiden's hand. Death, a vague film in an illimitable sky, tempered without obscuring the sunshine of her life. Confronted with it suddenly, she found it, in truth, an impalpable cloud, and herself as little competent as the gravest philosopher to answer the self-suggested inquiry, "What shall I be when I am no longer Iridion?" Superstition might have helped her to some definite conceptions but superstition did not exist in her time. Judge, reader, of its remoteness.

The maiden's reverie might have terminated only with her existence, but for the salutary law which prohibits a young girl, not in love or at school, from sitting still more than ten minutes. As she shifted her seat at the expiration of something like this period, she perceived that she had been sitting on a goatskin, and with a natural association of ideas—

"I will ask Pan," she exclaimed.

Pan at that time inhabited a cavern hard by the maiden's dwelling, which the judicious reader will have divined could only have been situated in Arcadia. The honest god was on excellent terms with the simple people; his goats browsed freely along with theirs, and the most melodious of the rustic minstrels attributed their proficiency to his instructions. The maidens were on a more reserved footing of intimacy—at least so they wished it to be understood, and so it was understood, of course. Iridion, however, decided that the occasion would warrant her incurring the risk even of a kiss, and lost no time in setting forth upon her errand, carrying her poor broken flower in its earthen vase. It was the time of day when the god might be supposed to be arousing himself from his afternoon's siesta. She did not fear that his door would be closed against her, for he had no door.

The sylvan deity stood, in fact, at the entrance of his cavern, about to proceed in quest of his goats. The appearance of Iridion operated a change in his intention, and he courteously escorted

her to a seat of turf erected for the special accommodation of his fair visitors, while he placed for himself one of stone.

"Pan," she began, "I have broken my lily."

"That is a sad pity, child. If it had been a reed, now, you could have made a flute of it."

"I should not have time, Pan," and she recounted her story. A godlike nature cannot confound truth with falsehood, though it may mistake falsehood for truth. Pan therefore never doubted Iridion's strange narrative, and, having heard it to the end, observed, "You will find plenty more lilies in Elysium."

"Common lilies, Pan; not like mine."

"You are wrong. The lilies of Elysium—asphodels as they call them there—are as immortal as the Elysians themselves. I have seen them in Proserpine's hair at Jupiter's entertainment; they were as fresh as she was. There is no doubt you might gather them by handfuls—at least if you had any hands—and wear them to your heart's content, if you had but a heart."

"That's just what perplexes me, Pan. It is not the dying I mind, it's the living. How am I to live without anything alive about me? If you take away my hands, and my heart, and my brains, and my eyes, and my ears, and above all my tongue, what is left me to live in Elysium?"

As the maiden spake a petal detached itself from the emaciated lily, and she pressed her hand to her brow with a responsive cry of pain.

"Poor child!" said Pan compassionately, "you will feel no more pain by-and-by."

"I suppose not, Pan, since you say so. But if I can feel no pain, how can I feel any pleasure?"

"In an incomprehensible manner," said Pan.

"How can I feel, if I have no feeling? and what am I to do without it?"

"You can think!" replied Pan. "Thinking (not that I am greatly given to it myself) is a much finer thing than feeling; no right-minded person doubts that. Feeling, as I have heard Minerva say, is a property of matter, and matter, except, of course, that appertaining to myself and the other happy gods, is vile and perishable—quite immaterial, in fact. Thought alone is transcendent, incorruptible, and undying!"

"But, Pan, how can any one think thoughts without something to think them with? I never thought of anything that I have not seen, or touched, or smelt, or tasted, or heard about from some one else. If I think with nothing, and about nothing, is that thinking, do you think?"

"I think," answered Pan evasively, "that you are a sensationalist, a materialist, a sceptic, a revolutionist; and if you had not sought the assistance of a god, I should have said not much better than an atheist. I also think it is time I thought about some physic for you instead of metaphysics, which are bad for my head, and for your soul." Saying this, Pan, with rough tenderness, deposited the almost fainting maiden upon a couch of ferns, and, having supported her head with a bundle of herbs, leaned his own upon his hand, and reflected with all his might. The declining sun was now nearly opposite the cavern's mouth, and his rays, straggling through the creepers that wove their intricacies over the entrance, chequered with lustrous patches the forms of the dying girl and the meditating god. Ever and anon, a petal would drop from the flower; this was always succeeded by a shuddering tremor throughout Iridion's frame and a more forlorn expression on her pallid countenance: while Pan's jovial features assumed an expression of deeper concern as he pressed his knotty hand more resolutely against his shaggy forehead, and wrung his dexter horn with a more determined grasp, as though he had caught a burrowing idea by the tail.

"Aha!" he suddenly exclaimed, "I have it!"

"What have you, Pan?" faintly lisped the expiring Iridion.

Instead of replying, Pan grasped a wand that leaned against the wall of his grot, and with it touched the maiden and the flower. O strange metamorphosis! Where the latter had been pining in its vase, a lovely girl, the image of Iridion, lay along the ground with dishevelled hair, clammy brow, and features slightly distorted by the last struggles of death. On the ferny couch stood an earthen vase, from which rose a magnificent lily, stately, with unfractured stem, and with no stain or wrinkle on its numerous petals.

“Aha!” repeated Pan; “I think we are ready for him now.” Then, having lifted the inanimate body to the couch, and placed the vase, with its contents, on the floor of his cavern, he stepped to the entrance, and shading his eyes with his hand, seemed to gaze abroad in quest of some anticipated visitor.

The boughs at the foot of the steep path to the cave divided, and a figure appeared at the foot of the rock. The stranger’s mien was majestic, but the fitness of his proportions diminished his really colossal stature to something more nearly the measure of mortality. His form was enveloped in a sweeping sad-coloured robe; a light, thin veil resting on his countenance, mitigated, without concealing, the not un-gentle austerity of his marble features. His gait was remarkable; nothing could be more remote from every indication of haste, yet such was the actual celerity of his progression, that Pan had scarcely beheld him ere he started to find him already at his side.

The stranger, without disturbing his veil, seemed to comprehend the whole interior of the grotto with a glance; then, with the slightest gesture of recognition to Pan, he glided to the couch on which lay the metamorphosed lily, upraised the fictitious Iridion in his arms with indescribable gentleness, and disappeared with her as swiftly and silently as he had come. The discreet Pan struggled with suppressed merriment until the stranger was fairly out of hearing, then threw himself back upon his seat and laughed till the cave rang.

“And now,” he said, “to finish the business.” He lifted the transformed maiden into the vase, and caressed her beauty with an exulting but careful hand. There was a glory and a splendour in the flower such as had never until then been beheld in any earthly lily. The stem vibrated, the leaves shook in unison, the petals panted and suspired, and seemed blanched with a whiteness intense as the core of sunlight, as they throbbed in anticipation of the richer existence awaiting them.

Impatient to complete his task, Pan was about to grasp his wand when the motion was arrested as the sinking beam of the sun was intercepted by a gigantic shadow, and the stranger again stood by his side. The unbidden guest uttered no word, but his manner was sufficiently expressive of wrath as he disdainfully cast on the ground a broken, withered lily, the relic of what had bloomed with such loveliness in the morning, and had since for a brief space been arrayed in the vesture of humanity. He pointed imperiously to the gorgeous tenant of the vase, and seemed to expect Pan to deliver it forthwith.

“Look here,” said Pan, with more decision than dignity, “I am a poor country god, but I know the law. If you can find on this plant one speck, one stain, one token that you have anything to do with her, take her, and welcome. If you cannot, take yourself off instead.”

“Be it so,” returned the stranger, haughtily declining the proffered inspection. “You will find it is ill joking with Death.”

So saying, he quitted the cavern.

Pan sat down chuckling, yet not wholly at ease, for if the charity of Death is beautiful even to a mortal, his anger is terrible, even to a god. Anxious to terminate the adventure, he reached

towards the charmed wand by whose wonderful instrumentality the dying maiden had already become a living flower, and was now to undergo a yet more delightful metamorphosis.

Wondrous wand! But where was it? For Death, the great transfigurer of all below this lunar sphere, had given Pan a characteristic proof of his superior cunning. Where the wand had reposed writhed a ghastly worm, which, as Pan's glance fell upon it, glided towards him, uplifting its head with an aspect of defiance. Pan's immortal nature sickened at the emblem of corruption; he could not for all Olympus have touched his metamorphosed treasure. As he shrank back the creature pursued its way towards the vase; but a marvellous change befell it as it came under the shadow of the flower. The writhing body divided, end from end, the sordid scales sank indiscernibly into the dust, and an exquisite butterfly, arising from the ground, alighted on the lily, and remained for a moment fanning its wings in the last sunbeam, ere it unclosed them to the evening breeze. Pan, looking eagerly after the Psyche in its flight, did not perceive what was taking place in the cavern; but the magic wand, now for ever lost to its possessor, must have cancelled its own spell, for when his gaze reverted from the ineffectual pursuit, the living lily had disappeared, and Iridion lay a corpse upon the ground, the faded flower of her destiny reposing upon her breast.

Death now stood for a third time upon Pan's threshold, but Pan heeded him not.