

The Bad Old Woman in Black

by Lord Dunsany

The bad old woman in black ran down the street of the ox-butchers.

Windows at once were opened high up in those crazy gables; heads were thrust out: it was she. Then there arose the counsel of anxious voices, calling sideways from window to window or across to opposite houses. Why was she there with her sequins and bugles and old black gown? Why had she left her dreaded house? On what fell errand she hastened?

They watched her lean, lithe figure, and the wind in that old black dress, and soon she was gone from the cobbled street and under the town's high gateway. She turned at once to her right and was hid from the view of the houses. Then they all ran down to their doors, and small groups

formed on the pavement; there they took counsel together, the eldest speaking first. Of what they had seen they said nothing, for there was no doubt it was she; it was of the future they spoke, and the future only.

In what notorious thing would her errand end? What gains had tempted her out from her fearful home? What brilliant but sinful scheme had her genius planned? Above all, what future evil did this portend? Thus at first it was only questions. And then the old grey-beards spoke, each one to a little group; they had seen her out before, had known her when she was younger, and had noted the evil things that had followed her goings: the small groups listened well to their low and earnest voices. No one asked questions now or guessed at her infamous errand, but listened only to the wise old men who knew the things that had been, and who told the younger men of the dooms that had come before.

Nobody knew how many times she had left her dreaded house; but the oldest recounted all the times that they knew, and the way she had gone each time, and the doom that had followed her going; and two could remember the earthquake that there was in the street of the shearers.

So were there many tales of the times that were, told on the pavement near the old green doors by the edge of the cobbled street, and the experience that the aged men had bought with their white hairs might be had cheap by the young. But from all their experience only this was clear,

that never twice in their lives had she done the same
infamous thing, and that the same calamity twice had never
followed her goings. Therefore it seemed that means were
doubtful and few for finding out what thing was about to
befall; and an ominous feeling of gloom came down on the
street of the ox-butchers. And in the gloom grew fears of
the very worst. This comfort they only had when they put
their fear into words -- that the doom that followed her
goings had never yet been anticipated. One feared that with
magic she meant to move the moon; and he would have dammed
the high tide on the neighbouring coast, knowing that as the
moon attracted the sea the sea must attract the moon, and
hoping by his device to humble her spells. Another would
have fetched iron bars and clamped them across the street,
remembering the earthquake there was in the street of the
shearers. Another would have honoured his household gods,
the little cat-faced idols seated above his hearth, gods to
whom magic was no unusual thing, and, having paid their fees
and honoured them well, would have put the whole case before
them. His scheme found favour with many, and yet at last
was rejected, for others ran indoors and brought out their
godstoo, to be honoured, till there was a herd of gods all
seated there on the pavement; yet would they have honoured
them and put their case before them but that a fat man ran
up last of all, carefully holding under a reverent arm his

own two hound-faced gods, though he knew well -- as, indeed, all men must -- that they were notoriously at war with the little cat-faced idols. And although the animosities natural to faith had all been lulled by the crisis, yet a look of anger had come into the cat-like faces that no one dared disregard, and all perceived that if they stayed a moment longer there would be flaming around them the jealousy of the gods; so each man hastily took his idols home, leaving the fat man insisting that his hound-faced gods should be honoured .

Then there were schemes again and voices raised in debate, and many new dangers feared and new plans made.

But in the end they made no defence against danger, for they knew not what it would be, but wrote upon parchment as a warning, and in order that all might know: "*The bad old woman in black ran down the street of the ox-butchers.*"