

A Tale of London

by Lord Dunsany

"Come," said the Sultan to his hasheesh-eater in the very furthest lands that know Bagdad, "dream to me now of London."

And the hasheesh-eater made a low obeisance and seated himself cross-legged upon a purple cushion brodered with golden poppies, on the floor, beside an ivory bowl where the hasheesh was, and having eaten liberally of the hasheesh blinked seven times and spoke thus:

"O Friend of God, know then that London is the desiderate town even of all Earth's cities. Its houses are of ebony and cedar which they roof with thin copper plates that the hand of Time turns green. They have golden balconies in which amethysts are where they sit and watch the sunset. Musicians in the gloaming steal softly along the ways; unheard their feet fall on the white sea-sand with which those ways are strewn, and in the darkness suddenly they play on dulcimers and instruments with strings. Then are

theremurmurs in the balconies praising their skill, then
arethere bracelets cast down to them for reward and golden
necklacesand even pearls.

"Indeed but the city is fair; there is by the sandy ways
apaving all alabaster, and the lanterns along it are of
chrysoprase, all night long they shine green, but of
amethystare the lanterns of the balconies.

"As the musicians go along the ways dancers gather about
themand dance upon the alabaster pavings , for joy and not
for hire. Sometimes a window opens far up inan ebony
palaceand a wreath is cast down to a dancer or orchids
showeredupon them.

"Indeed of many cities have I dreamt but of none fairer,
throughmany marble metropolitan gates hasheesh has led me,
butLondonis its secret, the last gate of all; the ivory
bowl has nothing more to show. And indeed even now the imps
thatcrawl behind me and that will not let me be are
pluckingme by the elbow and bidding my spirit return, for
well they know that I have seen too much. `No, notLondon ,'
theysay; and therefore I will speak of some other city, a
cityof some less mysterious land, and anger not the imps
with forbidden things. I will speak of Persepolis or famous
Thebes."

A shade of annoyance crossed the Sultan's face, a look of
thunderthat you had scarcely seen, but in those lands they
watchedhis visage well, and though his spirit was wandering

faraway and his eyes were bleared with hasheesh yet that
storyteller there and then perceived the look that was
death, and sent his spirit back at once to London as a man
runs into his house when the thunder comes.

"And therefore," he continued, "in the desiderate city,
in London, all their camels are pure white. Remarkable is
the swiftness of their horses, that draw their chariots that
are of ivory along those sandy ways and that are of
surpassing lightness, they have little bells of silver upon
their horses' heads. O Friend of God, if you perceived
their merchants! The glory of their dresses in the
noonday! They are no less gorgeous than those butterflies
that float about their streets. They have overcloaks of
green and vestments of azure, huge purple flowers blaze on
their overcloaks, the work of cunning needles, the centres
of the flowers are of gold and the petals of purple. All
their hats are black --" ("No, no," said the Sultan) --
"but irises are set about the brims, and green plumes float
above the crowns of them.

"They have a river that is named the Thames, on it their
ships go up with violet sails bringing incense for the
brazier that perfume the streets, new songs exchanged for
gold with alien tribes, raw silver for the statues of their
heroes, gold to make balconies where the women sit, great
sapphires to reward their poets with, the secrets of old

cities and strange lands, the learning of the dwellers in
far isles, emeralds, diamonds, and the hoards of the sea.
And whenever a ship comes into port and furls its violet
sails and the news spreads through London that she has come,
then all the merchants go down to the river to barter, and
all day long the chariots whirl through the streets, and the
sound of their going is a mighty roar all day until evening,
their roar is even like--"

"Not so," said the Sultan.

"Truth is not hidden from the Friend of God," replied the
hasheesh-eater, "I have erred being drunken with the
hasheesh, for in the desiderate city, even in London, so
thick upon the ways is the white sea-sand with which the
city glimmers that no sound comes from the path of the
charioteers, but they go softly like a light sea-wind."

("It is well," said the Sultan.) "They go softly down to
the port where the vessels are, and the merchandise in from
the sea, amongst the wonders that the sailors show, on land
by the high ships, and softly they go though swiftly at
evening back to their homes.

"O would that the Munificent, the Illustrious, the Friend
of God, had even seen these things, had seen the jewellers
with their empty baskets, bargaining there by the ships,
when the barrels of emeralds came up from the hold. Or
would that he had seen the fountains there in silver basins
in the midst of the ways. I have seen small spires upon

their bony houses and the spires were all of gold, birds
strutted there upon the copper roofs from golden spire to
spire that have no equal for splendour in all the woods of
the world. And over London the desiderate city the sky is
so deep a blue that by this alone the traveller may know
where he has come, and may end his fortunate journey. Nor
yet for any colour of the sky is there too great heat in
London, for along its ways a wind blows always from the
South gently and cools the city.

"Such, O Friend of God, is indeed the city of London,
lying very far off on the yonder side of Bagdad, without a
peer for beauty or excellence of its ways among the towns of
the earth or cities of song; and even so, as I have told,
its fortunate citizens dwell, with their hearts ever
devising beautiful things and from the beauty of their own
fair work that is more abundant around them every year,
receiving new inspirations to work things more beautiful
yet."

"And is their government good?" the Sultan said.

"It is most good," said the hasheesh-eater, and fell
backwards upon the floor.

He lay thus and was silent. And when the Sultan
perceived he would speak no more that night he smiled and
lightly applauded.

And there was envy in that palace, in lands beyond

Badgad, of all that dwell inLondon.