

The Golden Doom

by Lord Dunsany

Persons

The King

Chamberlain

Chief Prophet

Girl

Boy

Spies

First Prophet

Second Prophet

First Sentry

Second Sentry

Stranger

Attendants

Scene: Outside the King's great door in Zericon.

Time: Some while before the fall of Babylon.

{Two Sentries pace to and fro, then halt, one on each side
of the great door.}

First Sentry:

The day is deadly sultry.

Second Sentry:

I would that I were swimming down the Gyshon, on the
cool side, under the fruit trees.

First Sentry:

It is like to thunder or the fall of a dynasty.

Second Sentry:

It will grow cool by night-fall. Where is the King?

First Sentry:

He rows in his golden barge with ambassadors or
whispers with captains concerning future wars. The
stars spare him!

Second Sentry:

Why do you say "the stars spare him"?

First Sentry:

Because if a doom from the stars fall suddenly on a
king it swallows up his people and all things round
about him, and his palace falls and the walls of his
city and citadel, and the apes come in from the woods
and the large beasts from the desert, so that you would
not say that a king had been there at all.

Second Sentry:

But why should a doom from the stars fall on the King?

First Sentry:

Because he seldom placates them.

Second Sentry:

Ah! I have heard that said of him.

First Sentry:

Who are the stars that a man should scorn them? Should
they that rule the thunder, the plague and the
earthquake withhold these things save for much prayer?
Always ambassadors are with the King, and his
commanders, come in from distant lands, prefects of
cities and makers of the laws, but never the priests of
the stars.

Second Sentry:

Hark! Was that thunder?

First Sentry:

Believe me, the stars are angry.

{Enter a Stranger. He wanders towards the King's door,
gazing about him.}

Sentries: {lifting their spears at him}

Go back! Go back!

Stranger:

Why?

First Sentry:

It is death to touch the King's door.

Stranger:

I am a stranger from Thessaly.

First Sentry:

It is death even for a stranger.

Stranger:

Your door is strangely sacred.

First Sentry:

It is death to touch it.

{The Stranger wanders off.}

{Enter two children hand in hand.}

Boy: {to the Sentry}

I want to see the King to pray for a hoop.

{The Sentry smiles.}

Boy: {pushes the door; to girl}

I cannot open it. {To the Sentry} Will it do as well

if I pray to the King's door?

Sentry:

Yes, quite as well. {Turns to talk to the other

Sentry} Is there anyone in sight?

Second Sentry: {shading his eyes}

Nothing but a dog, and he far out on the plain.

First Sentry:

Then we can talk awhile and eat bash.

Buy:

King's door, I want a little hoop.

{The Sentries take a little bash between finger and
thumb from pouches and put that wholly forgotten drug
to their lips.}

Girl: {pointing}

My father is a taller soldier than that.

Boy:

My father can write. He taught me.

Girl:

Ho! Writing frightens nobody. My father is a soldier.

Boy:

I have a lump of gold. I found it in stream that runs
down to Gyshon.

Girl:

I have a poem. I found it in my own head.

Boy:

Is it a long poem?

Girl:

No. But it would have been only there were no more
rhymes for sky.

Boy:

What is your poem?

Girl:

I saw a purple bird
Go up against the sky
And it went up and up
And round about did fly.

Boy:

I saw it die.

Girl:

That does n't scan.

Boy:

Oh, that does n't matter.

Girl:

Do you like my poem?

Boy:

Birds are n't purple.

Girl:

My bird was.

Boy:

Oh!

Girl:

Oh, you don't like my poem!

Boy:

Yes, I do.

Girl:

No, you don't; you think it horrid.

Boy:

No. I don't.

Girl:

Yes, you do. Why did n't you say you liked it? It is
the only poem I ever made.

Boy:

I do like it. I do like it.

Girl:

You don't, you don't!

Boy:

Don't be angry. I'll write it on the door for you.

Girl:

You'll write it?

Boy:

Yes, I can write. My father taught me. I'll write it
with my lump of gold. It makes a yellow mark on the
iron door.

Girl:

Oh, do write it! I would like to see it written like
real poetry.

{The Boy begins to write. The Girl watches.}

First Sentry:

You see, we'll be fighting again soon.

Second Sentry:

Only a little war. We never have more than a little
war with the hill-folk.

First Sentry:

When a man goes to fight, the curtains of the gods wax
thicker than ever before between his eyes and the
future; he may go to a great or to a little war.

Second Sentry:

There can only be a little war with the hill-folk.

First Sentry:

Yet sometimes the gods laugh.

Second Sentry:

At whom?

First Sentry:

At kings.

Second Sentry:

Why have you grown uneasy about this war in the hills?

First Sentry:

Because the King is powerful beyond any of his fathers, and has more fighting men, more horses, and wealth that could have ransomed his father and his grandfather and dowered their queens and daughters; and every year his miners bring him more from the opal-mines and from the turquoise-quarries. He has grown very mighty.

Second Sentry:

Then he will the more easily crush the hill-folk in a little war.

First Sentry:

When kings grow very mighty the stars grow very jealous.

Boy:

I've written your poem.

Girl:

Oh, have you really?

Boy:

Yes, I'll read it to you. {He reads}

I saw a purple bird

Go up against the sky

And it went up and up

And round about did fly.

I saw it die.

Girl:

It does n't scan.

Boy:

That does n't matter.

{Enter furtively a Spy, who crosses stage and goes
out. The Sentries cease to talk.}

Girl:

That man frightens me.

Boy:

He is only one of the King's spies.

Girl:

But I don't like the King's spies. They frighten me.

Boy:

Come on, then, we'll run away.

Sentry: {noticing the children again}

Go away, go away! The King is coming, he will eat you.

{The Boy throws a stone at the Sentry and runs out.

Enter another Spy, who notices the door. He examines

it and utters an owl-like whistle. No. 2 comes back.

They do not speak. Both whistle. No. 3 comes. All

examine the door. Enter the King and his Chamberlain.

The King wears a purple robe. The Sentries smartly

transfer their spears to their left hands and return

their right arms to their right sides. They then lower

their spears until their points are within an inch of

the ground, at the same time raising their right hands

above their heads. They stand for some moments thus.

Then they lower their right arms to their right sides,

at the same time raising their spears. In the next

motion they take their spears into their right hands

and lower the butts to the floor, where they were
before, the spears slanting forward a little. Both
Sentries must move together precisely.}

First Spy: {runs forward to the King and kneels, abasing his
forehead to the floor} Something has written on the
iron door.

Chamberlain:

On the iron door!

King:

Some fool has done it. Who has been here since
yesterday?

First Sentry: {shifts his hand a little higher on his spear,
brings the spear to his side and closes his heels all
in one motion; he then takes one pace backward with his
right foot; then he kneels on his right knee; when he
has done these he speaks, but not before}
Nobody, Majesty, but a stranger from Thessaly.

King:

Did he touch the iron door?

First Sentry:

No, Majesty; he tried to, but we drove him away.

King:

How near did he come?

First Sentry:

Nearly to our spears, Majesty.

King:

What was his motive in seeking to touch the iron door?

First Sentry:

I do not know, Majesty.

King:

Which way did he go?

First Sentry: {pointing left}

That way, Majesty, an hour ago.

{The King whispers with one of his Spies, who stoops
and examines the ground and steals away. The Sentry
rises.}

King: {to his two remaining Spies}

What does this writing say?

A Spy:

We cannot read, Majesty.

King:

A good spy should know everything.

Second Spy:

We watch, Majesty, and we search out, Majesty. We read shadows, and we read footprints, and whispers in secret places. But we do not read writing.

King: {to the Chamberlain}

See what it is.

Chamberlain: {goes up and reads}

It is treason, Majesty.

King:

Read it.

Chamberlain:

I saw a purple bird

Go up against the sky

And it went up and up

And round about did fly.

I saw it die.

First Sentry: {aside}

The stars have spoken.

King: {to the Sentry}

Has anyone been here but the stranger from Thessaly?

Sentry: {kneeling as before}

Nobody, Majesty.

King:

You saw nothing?

First Sentry:

Nothing but a dog far out upon the plain and the
children of the guard at play.

King: {to the Second Sentry}

And you?

Second Sentry: {kneeling}

Nothing, Majesty.

Chamberlain:

That is strange.

King:

It is some secret warning.

Chamberlain:

It is treason.

King:

It is from the stars.

Chamberlain:

No, no, Majesty. Not from the stars, not from the stars. Some man has done it. Yet the thing should be interpreted. Shall I send for the prophets of the stars?

{The King beckons to his Spies. They run up to him.}

King:

Find me some prophet of the stars. {Exeunt Spies} I fear that we may go no more, my chamberlain, along the winding ways of unequalled Zericon, nor play dahoori with the golden balls. I have thought more of my people than of the stars and more of Zericon than of

windy Heaven.

Chamberlain:

Believe me, Majesty, some idle man has written it and passed by. Your spies shall find him, and then his name will be soon forgotten.

King:

Yes, yes. Perhaps you are right, though the sentries saw no one. No doubt some beggar did it.

Chamberlain:

Yes, Majesty, some beggar has surely done it. But look, here come two prophets of the stars. They shall tell us that this is idle.

{Enter two Prophets and a Boy attending them. All bow deeply to the King. The two Spies steal in again and stand at back.}

King:

Some beggar has written a rhyme on the iron gate, and as the ways of rhyme are known to you I desired you, rather as poets than as prophets, to say whether there was any meaning in it.

Chamberlain:

'T is but an idle rhyme.

First Prophet: {bows again and goes up to the door. He
glances at the writing} Come hither, servant of those
that serve the stars.

{Attendant approaches.}

First Prophet:

Bring hither our golden cloaks, for this may be a
matter for rejoicing; and bring our green cloaks also,
for this may tell of young new beautiful things with
which the stars will one day gladden the King; and
bring our black cloaks also, for it may be a doom.
{Exit the Boy; the Prophet goes up to the door and
reads solemnly} The stars have spoken.

King:

I tell you that some beggar has written this.

First Prophet:

It is written in pure gold. {He dons the black cloak
over body and head}

King:

What do the stars mean? What warning is it?

First Prophet:

I cannot say.

King: {to Second Prophet}

Come you then and tell us what the warning is.

Second Prophet:

The stars have spoken. {He cloaks himself in black}

King:

What is it? What does it mean?

Second Prophet:

We do not know, but it is from the stars.

Chamberlain:

It is a harmless thing; there is no harm in it,

Majesty. Why should not birds die?

King:

Why have the prophets covered themselves in black?

Chamberlain:

They are a secret people and look for inner meanings.

There is no harm in it.

King:

They have covered themselves in black.

Chamberlain:

They have not spoken of any evil thing. They have not spoken of it.

King:

If the people see the prophets covered in black they will say that the stars are against me and believe that my luck has turned.

Chamberlain:

The people must not know.

King:

Some prophet must interpret to us the doom. Let the chief prophet of the stars be sent for.

Chamberlain: {going toward left exit}

Summon the chief prophet of the stars that look on Zericon.

Voices off:

The chief prophet of the stars. The chief prophet of
the stars.

Chamberlain:

I have summoned the chief prophet, Majesty.

King:

If he interpret this aright I will put a necklace of
turquoises round his neck with opals from the mines.

Chamberlain:

He will not fail. He is a very cunning interpreter.

King:

What if he covers himself with a huge black cloak and
does not speak and goes muttering away, slowly with
bended head, till our fear spreads to the sentries and
they cry aloud?

Chamberlain:

This is no doom from the stars, but some idle scribe
hath written it in his insolence upon the iron door,
wasting his hoard of gold.

King:

Not for myself I have a fear of doom, not for myself;
but I have inherited a rocky land, windy and
ill-nurtured, and nursed it to prosperity by years of
peace and spread its boundaries by years of war. I
have brought up harvests out of barren acres and given
good laws unto naughty towns, and my people are happy,
and lo, the stars are angry!

Chamberlain:

It is not the stars, it is not the stars, Majesty, for
the prophets of the stars have not interpreted it.
Indeed, it was some reveller wasting his gold.

{Meanwhile enter Chief Prophet of the stars that look
on Zericon.}

King:

Chief Prophet of the stars that look on Zericon, I
would have you interpret the rhyme upon yonder door.

Chief Prophet: {goes up to door and reads}

It is from the stars.

King:

Interpret it and you shall have great turquoises round
your neck, with opals from the mines in the frozen
mountains.

Chief Prophet: {cloaks himself like the others in a great
black cloak} Who should wear purple in the land but a
King, or who should go up against the sky but one who
has troubled the stars by neglecting their ancient
worship? Such a one has gone up and up increasing in
power and wealth, such a one has soared above the
crowns of those that went before him, such a one the
stars have doomed, the undying ones, the illustrious.

{A pause.}

King:

Who wrote it?

Chief Prophet:

It is pure gold. Some god has written it.

Chamberlain:

Some god?

First Sentry: {aside to Second Sentry}

Last night I saw a star go flaming earthward.

King:

Is this a warning or is it a doom?

Chief Prophet:

The stars have spoken.

King:

Is it, then, a doom?

Chief Prophet:

They speak not in jest.

King:

I have been a great King -- Let it be said of me "The stars overthrew him, and they sent a god for his doom." For I have not met my equal among kings that man should overthrow me; and I have not oppressed my people that man should rise up against me.

Chief Prophet:

It is better to give worship to the stars than to do good to man. It is better to be humble before the gods than proud in the face of your enemy though he do evil.

King:

Let the stars hearken yet and I will sacrifice a child
to them -- I will sacrifice a girl child to the
twinkling stars and a male child to the stars that
blink not, the stars of the steadfast eyes. {To his
Spies} Let a boy and a girl be brought for sacrifice.
{Exit a Spy to the right looking at footprints.} Will
you accept this sacrifice to the god that the stars
have sent? They say that the gods love children.

Chief Prophet:

I may refuse no sacrifice to the stars nor to the gods
whom they send. {To the other Prophets} Make ready
the sacrificial knives.

{The Prophets draw knives and sharpen them.}

King:

Is it fitting that the sacrifice take place by the iron
door where the god from the stars has trod, or must it
be in the temple?

Chief Prophet:

Let it be offered by the iron door. {To the other
Prophets} Fetch hither the altar stone.

{The owl-like whistle is heard off right. The Third
Spy runs crouching toward it. Exit.}

King:

Will this sacrifice avail to avert the doom?

Chief Prophet:

Who knows?

King:

I fear that even yet the doom will fall.

Chief Prophet:

It were wise to sacrifice some greater thing.

King:

What more can a man offer?

Chief Prophet:

His pride.

King:

What pride?

Chief Prophet:

Your pride that went up against the sky and troubled
the stars.

King:

How shall I sacrifice my pride to the stars?

Chief Prophet:

It is upon your pride that the doom will fall, and will
take away your crown and will take away your kingdom.

King:

I will sacrifice my crown and reign uncrowned among
you, so only I save my kingdom.

Chief Prophet:

If you sacrifice your crown which is your pride, and if
the stars accept it, perhaps the god that they went may
avert the doom and you may still reign in your kingdom
though humbled and uncrowned.

King:

Shall I burn my crown with spices and with incense or
cast it into the sea?

Chief Prophet:

Let it be laid here by the iron door where the god came
who wrote the golden doom. When he comes again by
night to shrivel up the city or to pour an enemy in
through the iron door, he will see your cast-off pride
and perhaps accept it and take it away to the neglected
stars.

King: {to the Chamberlain}

Go after my spies and say that I make no sacrifice.

{Exit the Chamberlain; the King takes off his crown}

Good-bye, my brittle glory; kings have sought you, the
stars have envied you. {The stage grows darker}

Chief Prophet:

Even now the sun has set who denies the stars, and the
day is departed wherein no gods walk abroad. It is
near the hour when spirits roam the earth and all
things that go unseen, and the faces of the abiding
stars will be soon revealed to the fields. Lay your
crown there and let us come away.

The Sentries: {kneeling}

Yes, Majesty.

{They remain kneeling until after the King has gone.

King and the Chief Prophet walk away.}

Chief Prophet:

It was your pride. Let it be forgotten. May the stars
accept it. {Exeunt left}

{The Sentries rise}

First Sentry:

The stars have envied him!

Second Sentry:

It is an ancient crown. He wore it well.

First Sentry:

May the stars accept it.

Second Sentry:

If they do not accept it what doom will overtake us?

First Sentry:

It will suddenly be as though there were never any city
of Zericon nor two sentries like you and me standing
before the door.

Second Sentry:

Why! How do you know?

First Sentry:

That is ever the way of the gods.

Second Sentry:

But it is unjust.

First Sentry:

How should the gods know that?

Second Sentry:

Will it happen to-night?

First Sentry:

Come! we must march away. {Exeunt right}

{The stage grows increasingly darker. Reenter the Chamberlain from the right. He walks across the Stage and goes out to the left. Reenter Spies from the right. They cross the stage, which is now nearly dark.}

Boy: {enters from the right, dressed in white, his hands out a little, crying} King's door, King's door, I want my little hoop. {He goes up to the King's door. When he

sees the King's crown there, he utters a satisfied}

O-oh! {He takes it up, puts it on the ground, and,
beating it before him with the sceptre, goes out by the
way that he entered.}

{The great door opens; there is light within; a furtive
Spy slips out and sees that the crown is gone. Another
Spy slips out. Their crouching heads come close
together.}

First Spy: {hoarse whisper}

The gods have come!

{They run back through the door and the door is
closed. It opens again and the King and the
Chamberlain come through.}

King:

The stars are satisfied.

{Curtain}