

The Vengeance of Men

By Lord Dunsany

Ere the Beginning the gods divided earth into waste and pasture. Pleasant pastures They made to be green over the face of earth, orchards They made in valleys and heather upon hills, but Harza They doomed, predestined and foreordained to be a waste for ever.

When the world prayed at evening to the gods and the gods answered prayers They forgot the prayers of all the Tribes of Arim. Therefore the men of Arim were assailed with wars and driven from land to land and yet would not be crushed. And the men of Arim made them gods for themselves, appointing men as gods until the gods of Pegana should remember them again. And their leaders, Yoth and Haneth, played the part of gods and led their people on though every tribe assailed them. At last they came to Harza, where no tribes were, and at last had rest from war, and Yoth and Haneth said: "The work is done, and surely now Pegana's gods will remember." And they built a city in Harza and tilled the soil, and the green came over the waste as the wind comes over the sea, and there were fruit and cattle in Harza and the sounds of a million sheep. There they rested from their flight from all the tribes, and builded fables out of all their sorrows till all men smiled in Harza and children laughed.

Then said the gods, "Earth is no place for laughter." Thereat They strode to Pegana's outer gate, to where the Pestilence lay curled asleep, and waking him up They pointed toward Harza, and the Pestilence leapt forward howling across the sky.

That night he came to the fields near Harza, and stalking through the grass sat down and glared at the lights, and licked his paws and glared at the lights again.

But the next night, unseen, through laughing crowds, the Pestilence crept into the city, and stealing into the houses one by one, peered into the people's eyes, looking even through their eyelids, so that when morning came men stared before them crying out that they saw the Pestilence whom others saw not, and thereafter died, because the green eyes of the Pestilence had looked into their souls. Chill and damp was he, yet there came heat from his eyes that parched the souls of men. Then came the physicians and the men learned in magic, and made the sign of the physicians and the sign of the men of magic and cast blue water upon herbs and chanted spells; but still the Pestilence crept from house to house and still he looked into the souls of men. And the lives of the people streamed away from Harza, and whither they went is set in many books. But the Pestilence fed on the light that shines in the eyes of men, which never appeased his hunger; chiller and damper he grew, and the heat from his eyes increased when night by night he galloped through the city, going by stealth no more.

Then did men pray in Harza to the gods, saying:

"High gods! Show clemency to Harza."

And the gods listened to their prayers, but as They listened They pointed with their fingers and cheered the Pestilence on. And the Pestilence grew bolder at his masters' voices and thrust his face close up before the eyes of men.

He could be seen by none saving those he smote. At first he slept by day, lying in misty hollows, but as his hunger increased he sprang up even in sunlight and clung to the chests of men and looked down through their eyes into their souls that shrivelled, until almost he could be dimly seen even by those he smote not.

Adro, the physician, sat in his chamber with one light burning, making a mixing in a bowl that should drive the Pestilence away, when through his door there blew a draught that set the light a-flickering.

Then because the draught was cold the physician shivered and went and closed the door, but as he turned again he saw the Pestilence lapping at his mixing, who sprang and set one paw upon Adro's shoulder and another upon his cloak, while with two he clung to his waist, and looked him in the eyes.

Two men were walking in the street; one said to the other: "Upon the morrow I will sup with thee."

And the Pestilence grinned a grin that none beheld, baring his dripping teeth, and crept away to see whether upon the morrow those men should sup together.

A traveller coming in said: "This is Harza. Here will I rest."

But his life went further than Harza upon that day's journey.

All feared the Pestilence, and those that he smote beheld him, but none saw the great shapes of the gods by starlight as They urged Their Pestilence on.

Then all men fled from Harza, and the Pestilence chased dogs and rats and sprang upward at the bats as they sailed above him, who died and lay in the streets. But soon he returned and pursued the men of Harza where they fled, and sat by rivers where they came to drink, away below the city. Then back to Harza went the people of Harza pursued by the Pestilence still, and gathered in the Temple of All the gods save One, and said to the High Prophet: "What may now be done?" who answered:

"All the gods have mocked at prayer. This sin must now be punished by the vengeance of men."

And the people stood in awe.

The High Prophet went up to the Tower beneath the sky whereupon beat the eyes of all the gods by starlight. There in the sight of the gods he spake in the ear of the gods, saying: "High gods! Ye have made mock of men. Know therefore that it is writ in ancient lore and found by prophecy that there is an END that waiteth for the gods, who shall go down from Pegana in galleons of gold all down the Silent River and into the Silent Sea, and there Their galleons shall go up in mist and They shall be gods no more. And men shall gain harbour from the mocking of the gods at last in the warm moist earth, but to the gods shall no ceasing ever come from being the Things that were the gods. When Time and worlds and death are gone away nought shall then remain but worn regrets and Things that were once gods.

"In the sight of the gods.

"In the ear of the gods."

Then the gods shouted all together and pointed with Their hands at the High Prophet's throat, and the Pestilence sprang.

Long since the High Prophet is dead and his words are forgotten by men, but the gods know not yet whether it be true that THE END is waiting for the gods, and him who might have told Them They have slain. And the gods of Pegana are fearing the fear that hath fallen upon the gods because of the vengeance of men, for They know not when THE END shall be, or whether it shall come.