

The Dreams of the Prophet

By Lord Dunsany

I

When the gods drave me forth to toil and assailed me with thirst and beat me down with hunger, then I prayed to the gods. When the gods smote the cities wherein I dwelt, and when Their anger scorched me and Their eyes burned, then did I praise the gods and offer sacrifice. But when I came again to my green land and found that all was gone, and the old mysterious haunts wherein I prayed as a child were gone, and when the gods tore up the dust and even the spider's web from the last remembered nook, then did I curse the gods, speaking it to Their faces, saying: —

“Gods of my prayers! Gods of my sacrifice! because Ye have forgotten the sacred places of my childhood, and they have therefore ceased to be, yet may I not forget. Because Ye have done this thing, Ye shall see cold altars and shall lack both my fear and praise. I shall not wince at Your lightnings, nor be awed when Ye go by.”

Then looking seawards I stood and cursed the gods, and at this moment there came to me one in the garb of a poet, who said: —

“Curse not the gods.”

And I said to him:

“Wherefore should I not curse Those that have stolen my sacred places in the night, and trodden down the gardens of my childhood?”

And he said “Come, and I will show thee.” And I followed him to where two camels stood with their faces towards the desert. And we set out and I travelled with him for a great space, he speaking never a word, and so we came at last to a waste valley hid in the desert's midst. And herein, like fallen moons, I saw vast ribs that stood up white out of the sand, higher than the hills of the desert. And here and there lay the enormous shapes of skulls like the white marble domes of palaces built for tyrannous kings a long while since by armies of driven slaves. Also there lay in the desert other bones, the bones of vast legs and arms, against which the desert, like a besieging sea, ever advanced and already had half drowned. And as I gazed in wonder at these colossal things the poet said to me:

“The gods are dead.”

And I gazed long in silence, and I said:

“These fingers, that are now so dead and so very white and still, tore once the flowers in gardens of my youth.”

But my companion said to me:

“I have brought thee here to ask of thee thy forgiveness of the gods, for I, being a poet, knew the gods, and would fain drive off the curses that hover above Their bones and bring Them men's forgiveness as an offering at the last, that the weeds and the ivy may cover Their bones from the sun.”

And I said:

“They made Remorse with his fur grey like a rainy evening in the autumn, with many rending claws, and Pain with his hot hands and lingering feet, and Fear like a rat with two cold teeth carved each out of the ice of either pole, and Anger with the swift flight of the dragonfly in summer having burning eyes. I will not forgive these gods.”

But the poet said:

“Canst thou be angry with these beautiful white bones?” And I looked long at those curved and beautiful bones that were no longer able to hurt the smallest creature in all the worlds that they had made. And I thought long of the evil that they had done, and also of the good. But when I thought of Their great hands coming red and wet from battles to make a primrose for a child to pick, then I forgave the gods.

And a gentle rain came falling out of heaven and stilled the restless sand, and a soft green moss grew suddenly and covered the bones till they looked like strange green hills, and I heard a cry and awoke and found that I had dreamed, and looking out of my house into the street I found that a flash of lightning had killed a child. Then I knew that the gods still lived.

II

I lay asleep in the poppy fields of the gods in the valley of Alderon, where the gods come by night to meet together in council when the moon is low. And I dreamed that this was the Secret.

Fate and Chance had played their game and ended, and all was over, all the hopes and tears, regrets, desires and sorrows, things that men wept for and unremembered things, and kingdoms and little gardens and the sea, and the worlds and the moons and the suns; and what remained was nothing, having neither colour nor sound.

Then said Fate to Chance: “Let us play our old game again.” And they played it again together, using the gods as pieces, as they had played it oft before. So that those things which have been shall all be again, and under the same bank in the same land a sudden glare of singlight on the same spring day shall bring the same daffodil to bloom once more and the same child shall pick it, and not regretted shall be the billion years that fell between. And the same old faces shall be seen again, yet not bereaved of their familiar haunts. And you and I shall in a garden meet again upon an afternoon in summer when the sun stands midway between his zenith and the sea, where we met oft before. For Fate and Chance play but one game together with every move the same, and they play it oft to while eternity away.