

The Idle City

By Lord Dunsany

There was once a city which was an idle city, wherein men told vain tales.

And it was that city's custom to tax all men that would enter in, with the toll of some idle story in the gate.

So all men paid to the watchers in the gate the toll of an idle story, and passed into the city unhindered and unhurt. And in a certain hour of the night when the king of that city arose and went pacing swiftly up and down the chamber of his sleeping, and called upon the name of the dead queen, then would the watchers fasten up the gate and go into that chamber to the king, and, sitting on the floor, would tell him all the tales that they had gathered. And listening to them some calmer mood would come upon the king, and listening still he would lie down again and at last fall asleep, and all the watchers silently would arise and steal away from the chamber.

A while ago wandering, I came to the gate of that city. And even as I came a man stood up to pay his toll to the watchers. They were seated cross-legged on the ground between him and the gate, and each one held a spear. Near him two other travellers sat on the warm sand waiting. And the man said:

“Now the city of Nombros forsook the worship of the gods and turned towards God. So the gods threw their cloaks over their faces and strode away from the city, and going into the haze among the hills passed through the trunks of the olive groves into the sunset. But when they had already left the Earth, they turned and looked through the gleaming folds of the twilight for the last time at their city; and they looked half in anger and half in regret, then turned and went away for ever. But they sent back a Death, who bore a scythe, saying to it: ‘Slay half in the city that forsook us, but half of them spare alive that they may yet remember their old forsaken gods.’

“But God sent a destroying angel to show that He was God, saying unto him: ‘Go into that city and slay half of the dwellers therein, yet spare a half of them that they may know that I am God.’

“And at once the destroying angel put his hand to his sword, and the sword came out of the scabbard with a deep breath, like to the breath that a broad woodman takes before his first blow at some giant oak. Thereat the angel pointed his arms downwards, and bending his head between them, fell forward from Heaven's edge, and the spring of his ankles shot him downwards with his wings furled behind him. So he went slanting earthward through the evening with his sword stretched out before him, and he was like a javelin that some hunter hath hurled that returneth again to the earth: but just before he touched it he lifted his head and spread his wings with the under feathers forward, and alighted by the bank of the broad Flavro that divides the city of Nombros. And down the bank of the Flavro he fluttered low, like to a hawk over a new-cut cornfield when the little creatures of the corn are shelterless, and at the same time down the other bank the Death from the gods went mowing.

“At once they saw each other, and the angel glared at the Death, and the Death leered back at him, and the flames in the eyes of the angel illumined with a red glare the mist that lay in the hollows of the sockets of the Death. Suddenly they fell on one another,

sword to scythe. And the angel captured the temples of the gods, and set up over them the sign of God, and the Death captured the temples of God, and led into them the ceremonies and sacrifices of the gods; and all the while the centuries slipped quietly by, going down the Flavro seawards.

“And now some worship God in the temple of the gods, and others worship the gods in the temple of God, and still the angel hath not returned again to the rejoicing choirs, and still the Death hath not gone back to die with the dead gods; but all through Nombros they fight up and down, and still on each side of the Flavro the city lives.”

And the watchers in the gate said, “Enter in.”

Then another traveler rose up, and said:

“Solemnly between Huhewazi and Nitcrana the huge grey clouds came floating. And those great mountains, heavenly Huhewazi and Nitcrana, the king of peaks, greeted them, calling them brothers. And the clouds were glad of their greeting, for they meet with companions seldom in the lonely heights of the sky.

“But the vapours of evening said unto the earth-mist, ‘What are those shapes that dare to move above us and to go where Nitcrana is and Huhewazi?’

“And the earth-mist said in answer unto the vapours of evening, ‘It is only an earth-mist that has become mad and has left the warm and comfortable earth, and has in his madness thought that his place is with Huhewazi and Nitcrana.’

“‘Once,’ said the vapours of evening, ‘there were clouds, but this was many and many a day ago, as our forefathers have said. Perhaps the mad one thinks he is the clouds.’

“Then spake the earth-worms from the warm deeps of the mud, saying ‘O earth-mist, thou art indeed the clouds, and there are no clouds but thou. And as for Huhewazi and Nitcrana, I cannot see them, and therefore they are not high, and there are no mountains in the world but those that I cast up every morning out of the deeps of the mud.’

“And the earth-mist and the vapours of evening were glad at the voice of the earth-worms, and looking earthward believed what they had said.

“And indeed it is better to be as the earth-mist, and to keep close to the warm mud at night, and to hear the earth-worm’s comfortable speech, and not to be a wanderer in the cheerless heights, but to leave the mountains alone with their desolate snow, to draw what comfort they can from their vast aspect over all the cities of men, and from the whispers that they hear at evening of unknown distant gods.”

And the watchers in the gate said, “Enter in.”

Then a man stood up who came out of the west, and told a western tale. He said:

“There is a road in Rome that runs through an ancient temple that once the gods had loved; it runs along the top of a great wall, and the floor of the temple lies far down beneath it, of marble, pink and white.

“Upon the temple floor I counted to the number of thirteen hungry cats.

“‘Sometimes,’ they said among themselves, ‘it was the gods that lived here, sometimes it was men, and now it’s cats. So let us enjoy the sun on the hot marble before another people comes.’

“For it was at that hour of a warm afternoon when my fancy is able to hear silent voices.

“And the awful leanness of all those thirteen cats moved me to go into a neighbouring fish shop, and there to buy a quantity of fishes. Then I returned and threw them all over

the railing at the top of the great wall, and they fell for thirty feet, and hit the sacred marble with a smack.

“Now, in any other town but Rome, or in the minds of any other cats, the sight of fishes falling out of heaven had surely excited wonder. They rose slowly, and all stretched themselves, then they came leisurely towards the fishes. ‘It is only a miracle,’ they said in their hearts.”

And the watchers in the gate said, “Enter in.”

Proudly and slowly, as they spoke, drew up to them a camel, whose rider sought entrance to the city. His face shone with the sunset by which for long he had steered for the city’s gate. Of him they demanded toll. Whereat he spoke to his camel, and the camel roared and kneeled, and the man descended from him. And the man unwrapped from many silks a box of divers metals wrought by the Japanese, and on the lid of it were figures of men who gazed from some shore at an isle of the Inland Sea. This he showed to the watchers, and when they had seen it, said, “It has seemed to me that these speak to each other thus:

“ ‘Behold now Oojni, the dear one of the sea, the little mother sea that hath no storms. She goeth out from Oojni singing a song, and she returneth singing over her sands. Little is Oojni in the lap of the sea, and scarce to be perceived by wondering ships. White sails have never wafted her legends afar, they are told not by bearded wanderers of the sea. Her fireside tales are known not to the North, the dragons of China have not heard of them, nor those that ride on elephants through Ind.

“ ‘Men tell the tales and the smoke ariseth upwards; the smoke departeth and the tales are told.

“ ‘Oojni is not a name among the nations, she is not know of where the merchants meet, she is not spoken of by alien lips.

“ ‘Indeed, but Oojni is a little among the isles, yet is she loved by those that know her coasts and her inland places hidden from the sea.

“Without glory, without fame, and without wealth, Oojni is greatly loved by a little people, and by a few; yet not by few, for all her dead still love her, and oft by night come whispering through her woods. Who could forget Oojni even among the dead?

“For here in Oojni, wot you, are homes of men, and gardens, and golden temples of the gods, and sacred places inshore from the sea, and many murmurous woods. And there is a path that winds over the hills to go into mysterious holy lands where dance by night the spirits of the woods, or sing unseen in the sunlight; and no one goes into these holy lands, for who that love Oojni could rob her of her mysteries, and the curious aliens come not. Indeed, but we love Oojni though she is so little; she is the little mother of our race, and the kindly nurse of all seafaring birds.

“And behold, even now caressing her, the gentle fingers of the mother sea, whose dreams are far with that old wanderer Ocean.

“And yet let us forget not Fuzi-Yama, for he stands manifest over clouds and sea, misty below, and vague and indistinct, but clear above for all the isles to watch. The ships make all their journeys in his sight, the nights and the days go by him like a wind, the summers and winters under him flicker and fade, the lives of men pass quietly here and hence, and Fuzi-Yama watches there—and knows.”

And the watchers in the gate said, “Enter in.”

And I, too, would have told them a tale, very wonderful and very true; one that I had told in many cities, which as yet had no believers. But now the sun had set, and the brief twilight gone, and ghostly silences were rising from far and darkening hills. A stillness hung over that city's gate. And the great silence of the solemn night was more acceptable to the watchers in the gate than any sound of man. Therefore they beckoned to us, and motioned with their hands that we should pass untaxed into the city. And softly we went up over the sand, and between the high rock pillars of the gate, and a deep stillness settled among the watchers, and the stars over them twinkled undisturbed.

For how short a while man speaks, and withal how vainly. And for how long he is silent. Only the other day I met a king in Thebes, who had been silent already for four thousand years.