

A DREAMER'S TALES  
AND OTHER STORIES

BY LORD DUNSANY

INTRODUCTION BY PADRIAC COLUM



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## INTRODUCTION

A tall and spare young man wearing incongruous spectacles across most eager eyes was addressing an audience in a literary society in Dublin. Somebody said "He looks like a portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson," and indeed in the sparse moustache, in the eager eyes and in the suggestion of hollowness in the face, there was a resemblance. He was speaking on poetry and by his intense interest in his subject he was able to enliven his audience as though by the spell of poetry itself. Every poem he quoted seemed inspired. He had none of the tricks, but everybody could see he was a natural orator.

He was Lord Dunsany whose plays "The Glittering Gate," and "King Argimines and the Unknown Warrior" had been produced by the Irish Theatre (in 1909 and 1911). He was an officer in the British Army, a notable cricketeer and a good huntsman and had already been through one war. But one could see that what he prized above all were the things of the imagination.

He was praising the work of a young poet who belonged to his own territory in Ireland—the County Meath. He spoke of that county with such gusto that one felt that Dunsany himself would put the fact that he was a Meath man before the fact that he was an Irishman. Meath is Ireland's middle county. It has the richest soil, and for that reason it has been fought for by every conquistadore who broke into Ireland. Before the Normans came Meath had already a thousand years of story. It was the demesne of the Ard-ri, the Imperator of the Celtic-Irish states. In Meath is Tara which was so sacred and venerable that the



idle, unhappy, exorbitant, and like the young Blake admit no city beautiful that is not paved with gold and silver."

From the making of tales he has gone on to the making of plays, and he has brought into the theatre the impressive simplicity of his myths and stories. His kings and beggars and slaves are utterly simple and single-minded; they have nothing but a passion or a vision or a faith. He came to the theatre with little knowledge of what is called dramatic construction, but with an astonishing feeling for dramatic situation. It is by virtue of this feeling for situation that his "Gods of the Mountain," his "King Argimines and the Unknown Warrior," and his "Night at an Inn," are such effective theatrical pieces.

As fundamental as the sense of situation should be the dramatist's sense of exalted speech. There are words, words, words, but no speech, let alone the exaltation of it in the theatre of to-day. Lord Dunsany, with W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge has restored speech to the theatre and has made it exalted. "O warrior spirit," cries King Argimines, apostrophising the dead man whose sword he has found in the slave-fields—"O warrior spirit, wherever thou wanderest, whoever be thy gods; whether they punish thee or whether they bless thee; O kingly spirit that once laid here this sword, behold I pray to thee having no gods to pray to, for the god of my nation was broken in three by night. Mine arm is stiff with three years' slavery and remembers not the sword. But guide thy sword till I have slain six men and armed the strongest slaves, and thou shalt have sacrifice every year of a hundred goodly oxen. And I shall build in Ithara a temple to thy memory wherein all that enter in shall remember thee, so shalt thou be honored and envied among the dead, for the dead are very jealous of remembrance. Aye, though thou wert a robber that took men's lives unrighteously, yet shall rare spices smoulder in thy temple and little maidens sing and new-plucked flowers deck the solemn aisles . . . O but it has a good blade this old

green sword; thou wouldst not like to see it miss its mark, thou wouldst not like to see it go thirsting into the air; so huge a sword should have its marrowy bone. Come into my right arm, O ancient spirit, O unknown warrior's soul. And if thou hast the ear of any gods, speak there against Illuriel, god of King Darniak." This is dramatic speech that is truly exalted and noble. The eloquence which is natural to him when he speaks of imaginative things and which may be his by inheritance has its finest expression in the speeches in his plays.

We are all fictionists nowadays: Lord Dunsany, however, is that rare creature in literature, the fabulist. He does not aim at imposing forms on what we call reality—graceful, impressive or significant forms; he aims at transporting us from this reality altogether. He is like the man who comes to the hunters' lodges and says "You wonder at the moon. I will tell you how the moon was made and why." And having told them about the moon he goes on to tell them about marvellous cities that are beyond the forest and about the jewel that is in the unicorn's horn. If such a one were rebuked for filling the folk with dreams and idle tales, he might (had he the philosophy) make reply: "I have kept alive their spirit of wonder, and wonder in man is holy." Lord Dunsany speaking for himself would say with Blake "Imagination is the man." He would, I think, go on to declare that the one thing worth doing for mankind is to make their imaginations more and more exalted. One can hardly detect a social idea in his work. There is one there, however. It is one of unrelenting hostility to everything that impoverishes man's imagination—to mean cities, to commercial interests, to a culture that arises out of material organization. He dwells forever upon things that arouse the imagination—upon swords and cities, upon temples and palaces, upon slaves in their revolt and kings in their unhappiness. He has the mind of a myth-maker, and he can give ships and cities and whirlpools vast and proper shapes.



It is easy to find his literary origins—they are the Bible, Homer and Herodotus. He made the Bible his book of wonder when he was young, being induced to do this by a censorship his mother had set up—she was adverse, as he tells us, to his reading newspapers and current periodicals. From the Bible he has got his rhythmic, exalted prose. He took from it too the themes that he has so often repeated—fair and unbelieving cities with their prophets and their heathen kings. Homer he loves and often repeats, and the accounts of early civilizations that Herodotus gives delights him. I do not think he reads much modern literature, and I am certain that he reads none of the philosophic, sociological and economic works that fill the bookshops to-day. He would not judge a book by its cover, but he would, I am sure, judge it by its title. I have seen him become enraptured by titles of two books that were being reviewed at the time. One was “The High Deeds of Finn,” and the other “The History of the East Roman Empire from the Accession of Irene to the Fall of Basil the Third” (I am not sure I have got the Byzantine sovereigns in right). He has a prodigal imagination. I have watched him sketch a scenario for a play, write a little story, and invent a dozen incidents for tales, in the course of a morning, all the time talking imaginatively. He thinks best, I imagine, in the open air while he is shooting or hunting around his Castle. And he exercises a very gracious hospitality in that twelfth century castle of his in the County Meath, and he would travel a long way a-foot, I know, to find a good talker that he could bring into the circle. It is a long time now since an ancient historian in Ireland wrote into “The Annals of the Four Masters,” “There be two great robber barons on the road to Drogheda, Dunsany and Fingall; and if you save yourself from the hands of Fingall, you will assuredly fall into the hands of Dunsany.”

PADRAIC COLUM.

NEW YORK, August, 1917.

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# A DREAMER'S TALES

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## POLTARNEES, BEHOLDER OF OCEAN

**T**OLDEES, Mondath, Arizim, these are the Inner Lands, the lands whose sentinels upon their borders do not behold the sea. Beyond them to the east there lies a desert, for ever untroubled by man: all yellow it is, and spotted with shadows of stones, and Death is in it, like a leopard lying in the sun. To the south they are bounded by magic, to the west by a mountain, and to the north by the voice and anger of the Polar wind. Like a great wall is the mountain to the west. It comes up out of the distance and goes down into the distance again, and it is named Poltarnees, Beholder of Ocean. To the northward red rocks, smooth and bare of soil, and without any speck of moss or herbage, slope up to the very lips of the Polar wind, and there is nothing else there but the noise of his anger. Very peaceful are the Inner Lands, and very fair are their cities, and there is no war among them, but quiet and ease. And they have no enemy but age, for thirst and fever lie sunning themselves out in the mid-desert, and never prowl into the Inner Lands. And the ghouls and ghosts, whose highway is the night, are kept in the south by the boundary of magic. And very small are all their pleasant cities, and all men are known to one another

therein, and bless one another by name as they meet in the streets. And they have a broad, green way in every city that comes in out of some vale or wood or downland, and wanders in and out about the city between the houses and across the streets; and the people walk along it never at all, but every year at her appointed time Spring walks along it from the flowery lands, causing the anemone to bloom on the green way and all the early joys of hidden woods, or deep, secluded vales, or triumphant downlands, whose heads lift up so proudly, far up aloof from cities.

Sometimes waggoners or shepherds walk along this way, they that have come into the city from over cloudy ridges, and the townsmen hinder them not, for there is a tread that troubleth the grass and a tread that troubleth it not, and each man in his own heart knoweth which tread he hath. And in the sunlit spaces of the weald and in the wold's dark places, afar from the music of cities and from the dance of the cities afar, they make there the music of the country places and dance the country dance. Amiable, near and friendly appears to these men the sun, and he is genial to them and tends their younger vines, so they are kind to the little woodland things and any rumour of the fairies or old legend. And when the light of some little distant city makes a slight flush upon the edge of the sky, and the happy golden windows of the homesteads stare gleaming into the dark, then the old and holy figure of Romance, cloaked even to the face, comes down out of hilly woodlands and bids dark shadows to rise and dance, and sends the forest creatures forth to prowl, and lights in a moment in her bower of grass the little glow-worm's lamp, and brings a hush down over the grey lands, and out of it rises faintly on far-off hills the voice of a lute. There are not in the world lands more prosperous and happy than Toldees, Mondath, Arizim.

From these three little kingdoms that are named the Inner Lands the young men stole constantly away. One by one they went, and no one knew why they went save that



they had a longing to behold the Sea. Of this longing they spoke little, but a young man would become silent for a few days, and then, one morning very early, he would slip away and slowly climb Poltarnees's difficult slope, and having attained the top pass over and never return. A few stayed behind in the Inner Lands and became old men, but none that had ever climbed Poltarnees from the very earliest times had ever come back again. Many had gone up Poltarnees sworn to return. Once a king sent all his courtiers, one by one, to report the mystery to him, and then went himself; none ever returned.

Now, it was the wont of the folk of the Inner Lands to worship rumours and legends of the Sea, and all that their prophets discovered of the Sea was writ in a sacred book, and with deep devotion on days of festival or mourning read in the temples by the priests. Now, all their temples lay open to the west, resting upon pillars, that the breeze from the Sea might enter them, and they lay open on pillars to the east that the breezes of the Sea might not be hindered but pass onward wherever the Sea list. And this is the legend that they had of the Sea, whom none in the Inner Lands had ever beholden. They say that the Sea is a river heading towards Hercules, and they say that he touches against the edge of the world, and that Poltarnees looks upon him. They say that all the worlds of heaven go bobbing on this river and are swept down with the stream, and that Infinity is thick and furry with forests through which the river in his course sweeps on with all the worlds of heaven. Among the colossal trunks of those dark trees, the smallest fronds of whose branches are many nights, there walk the gods. And whenever its thirst, glowing in space like a great sun, comes upon the beast, the tiger of the gods creeps down to the river to drink. And the tiger of the gods drinks his fill loudly, whelming worlds the while, and the level of the river sinks between its banks ere the beast's thirst is quenched and ceases to glow like a sun. And many worlds thereby are heaped up

dry and stranded, and the gods walk not among them evermore, because they are hard to their feet. These are the worlds that have no destiny, whose people know no god. And the river sweeps onwards ever. And the name of the river is Oriathon, but men call it Ocean. This is the Lower Faith of the Inner Lands. And there is a Higher Faith which is not told to all. According to the Higher Faith of the Inner Lands the river Oriathon sweeps on through the forests of Infinity and all at once falls roaring over an Edge, whence Time has long ago recalled his hours to fight in his war with the gods; and falls unlit by the flash of nights and days, with his flood unmeasured by miles, into the deeps of nothing.

Now as the centuries went by and the one way by which a man could climb Poltarnees became worn with feet, more and more men surmounted it, not to return. And still they knew not in the Inner Lands upon what mystery Poltarnees looked. For on a still day and windless, while men walked happily about their beautiful streets or tended flocks in the country, suddenly the west wind would bestir himself and come in from the Sea. And he would come cloaked and grey and mournful and carry to someone the hungry cry of the Sea calling out for bones of men. And he that heard it would move restlessly for some hours, and at last would rise suddenly, irresistibly up, setting his face to Poltarnees, and would say, as is the custom of those lands when men part briefly, "Till a man's heart remembereth," which means "Farewell for a while;" but those that loved him, seeing his eyes on Poltarnees, would answer sadly, "Till the gods forget," which means "Farewell."

Now the King of Arizim had a daughter who played with the wild wood flowers, and with the fountains in her father's court, and with the little blue heaven-birds that came to her doorway in the winter to shelter from the snow. And she was more beautiful than the wild wood flowers, or than all the fountains in her father's court, or than the blue heaven-birds



in their full winter plumage when they shelter from the snow. The old wise kings of Mondath and of Toldees saw her once as she went lightly down the little paths of her garden, and, turning their gaze into the mists of thought, pondered the destiny of their Inner Lands. And they watched her closely by the stately flowers, and standing alone in the sunlight, and passing and repassing the strutting purple birds that the king's fowlers had brought from Asagéhon. When she was of the age of fifteen years the King of Mondath called a council of kings. And there met with him the kings of Toldees and Arizim. And the King of Mondath in his Council said:

"The call of the unappeased and hungry Sea (and at the word 'Sea' the three kings bowed their heads) lures every year out of our happy kingdoms more and more of our men, and still we know not the mystery of the Sea, and no devised oath has brought one man back. Now thy daughter, Arizim, is lovelier than the sunlight, and lovelier than those stately flowers of thine that stand so tall in her garden, and hath more grace and beauty than those strange birds that the venturous fowlers bring in creaking waggons out of Asagéhon, whose feathers are alternate purple and white. Now, he that shall love thy daughter, Hilnaric, whoever he shall be, is the man to climb Poltarnees and return, as none hath ever before, and tell us upon what Poltarnees looks; for it may be that thy daughter is more beautiful than the Sea."

Then from his Seat of Council arose the King of Arizim. He said: "I fear that thou hast spoken blasphemy against the Sea, and I have a dread that ill will come of it. Indeed I had not thought she was so fair. It is such a short while ago that she was quite a small child with her hair still unkempt and not yet attired in the manner of princesses, and she would go up into the wild woods unattended and come back with her robes unseemly and all torn, and would not take reproof with humble spirit, but made grimaces even in my marble court all set about with fountains."