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LORD DUNSANY'S PLAYS*

By PADRAIC COLUM

THE publication last year of the episodes missing from *Vathek* must have sent many to Beckford's unique romance. Those who took it must have been glad of the reminder, for there are few stories as good as *Vathek*. Only half the length of one of our short novels, it is filled with such abounding invention that we feel when we have finished it we have read not one but a hundred stories. *Vathek* may not be like an Arabian tale, but it is very like a European one. A moral inconsequence that is more startling than the occasional moral inversions in Western story-telling goes through it. "Thus," says the historian, "thus the Caliph Vathek, who, for the sake of empty pomp and forbidden power, had sullied himself with a thousand crimes, became a prey to grief without end and remorse without mitigation; whilst the humble and despised Gulchenrouz passed whole ages in undisturbed tranquility, and the pure happiness of childhood." We leave a venturesome caliph in torment and a soulless minion in beatitude.

Not the most daring of stage-producers would arrange *Vathek* either as a ballet or a wordless play, although it presents itself in vivid, fantastic, sensual and sinister scenes. But one wonders why none of the illustrators have attempted to interpret the story in colour. What opportunities it offers to imaginative designs! Vathek, on his tower of eleven thousand stairs, regards the oracles of the stars—the hideous Indian presents the sabres with their inexplicable inscriptions—Carathis, in the chamber of the mummies, opens her cabinet of rarities "oil of the most venomous serpents, rhinoceros' horns, "woods of subtile and penetrating odour"—the Caliph's cavalcade starts from the great square that is variegated with stately tulips—Carathis, mounted on the camel Alboufiki, hurries on with her two negresses, the hideous Nerkes and the unrelenting Cafour. They stand before the sarcophagus of white marble and summon the ghouls from the tombs. Then there are the scenes in the Hall of Eblis. The Prince of Darkness is upon his throne and elders with streaming beards and afrits in complete armour surround him—the Pre-Adamite Kings are recumbent on their beds of incorruptable cedar—then Vathek and Nouronihar, stricken with their doom, join the multitude that drifts through the boundless halls, each with a hand laid upon their burning heart. Why should an illustrator

*Five Plays by Lord Dunsany. London: Grant Richards. 3s. 6d.

with imagination go on making designs for the Rubaiyat when Beckford's story is still unlimned?

There is an East of the Kings as well as an East of the Caliphs, and an East of the Gods as well as an East of the Prophet and the Genii. Lord Dunsany is the historiographer of these lands. His work begins in mythology, and he tells us first about the gods. They are remote upon Pegana, but below them are the thousand Home Gods—Roon, the God of Going, whose incense is the smoke of the camp fire to the South, whose temples stand beyond the farthest hills; Kilooloogung, the Lord of Arising Smoke; Jabim, who sits behind the house to lament the things that are broken and cast away; Triboogie, the Lord of Dusk, whose children are the shadows; Pitsu, who strokes the cat; Hobith, who calms the dog; Habinabah, who is Lord of Glowing Embers; old Gribaun, who sits in the heart of the fire and turns the wood to ash. "And when it is dark, all in the hour of Triboogie," says the chapter that tells of the Thousand Home Gods, "Hish creepeth from the forest, the Lord of Silence, whose children are the bats, that have broken the command of their father, but in a voice that is ever so low. Hish husheth the mouse and all the whispers in the night: he maketh all noises still. Only the cricket rebelleth. But Hish hath sent against him such a spell that after he hath cried a thousand times his voice may be heard no more, but becometh part of the silence."

After he had written *The Gods of Pegana*, Lord Dunsany discovered a figure that was more significant than any of the Gods—the figure of Time. "Suddenly the swart figure of Time stood up before the Gods, with both hands dripping with blood and a red sword dangling idly from his fingers." Time had overthrown Sardathrion, the City they had built for their solace, and when the oldest of the Gods questioned him. "Time looked him in the face and edged towards him fingering with his dripping fingers the hilt of his nimble sword." Over and over again he tells about the cities that were wonderful before Time prevailed against them—Sardathrion, with its onyx lions looming limb by limb from the dusk: Babbulkund, that was called by those who loved her "The City of Marvel," and by those who hated her "The City of the Dog," where, over the roofs of her palace chambers, "winged lions flit like bats, the size of every one is the size of the lions of God, and the wings are larger than any wing created." Bethmoora, where window after window pours into the dusk "its lion-frightening light." Those fair and unbelieving cities with the heathen kings who rule over them were found in the Bible, and the language in which they are written of never shames themes that have so grand a source.

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One might read Lord Dunsany's characteristic work and believe that he had read no book since the Prophets filled his mind. Sometimes it has the form of Biblical poetry, as in this meditation upon the Sphinx at Gizeh, on whose face the paint still remains :

I saw the other day the Sphinx's painted face.
She had painted her face in order to ogle Time.
And he has spared no other painted face in all the world
but hers.
Delilah was younger than she, but Delilah is dust.
Time hath loved nothing but this worthless painted face.
I do not care that she is ugly, nor that she has painted her
face, so that she only lure his secret from Time.
Time dallies like a fool at her feet when he should be smiting
cities.
Time never wearies of her silly smile.
There are Temples all about her that he has forgotten to
spoil.
I saw an old man go by and Time never touched him.
Time that has carried away the seven gates of Thebes
She has tried to bind him with ropes of eternal sand, she had
hoped to oppress him with the Pyramids.
He lies there in the sun with his foolish hair all spread about
her paws.
If she ever learns his secret we will put out his eyes, so that
he shall find no more our beautiful things.
We shall shut him up in the Pyramid of Cheops, in the great
chamber where the sarcophagus is.
Thence we will lead him out when we give our feasts. He
shall ripen our corn for us and do menial work.
We will kiss thy painted face, O Sphinx, if thou wilt betray
to us Time.
And yet I fear that in his ultimate anguish he may take hold
blindly of the world and the moon and slowly pull down
upon him the House of Man.

The people in Lord Dunsany's plays are like the people in his stories—as simple as his gods. It is not they but the things that happen to them that are extraordinary. In *King Argimenes and the Unknown Warrior* (printed in the *Irish Review* and produced in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin), an enslaved King finds a sword, and by its aid makes himself King again; and in *The Gods of the*

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Mountain (printed in the *Irish Review* and produced in the Haymarket in 1911) certain beggars impersonate the gods and sit in state receiving the gifts and homage of the people until the gods tramp down from their seats on the Mountain and turn the imposters into stone. The theatre of to-day has need of the qualities Lord Dunsany can bring into it—the glamour that comes from an unusual imagination moving through strange places, and a rich and rhythmical speech. His soliloquys and his dialogue have the dignity of blank verse—"O warrior spirit," cries Argimenes:

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 the sacrifice every year of a hundred goodly oxen. And I will build in Ithara a temple to thy memory wherein all that enter in shall remember thee, so shalt thou be honoured and envied among the dead, for the dead are very jealous of remembrance. Aye, though thou wert a robber that took man's lives unrighteously, yet shall rare spices smoulder in thy temple and little maidens sing and new-plucked flowers deck the solemn aisles; and priests shall go about it ringing bells that thy soul shall find repose. O but it has a good blade this old green sword; thou wouldst not like to see it miss its mark (if the dead see at all, as wise men teach), thou wouldst not like to see it go thirsting into the air; so huge a sword should find 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.

His tales should be told in the orthodox Eastern fashion, story within story, but at present they are scattered through four or five books. If he ever puts them together in such a way, the narrative called *Idle Days on the Yann* would provide a frame-work. What stories could be told upon so wonderful a voyage:

And so we came into the central stream, whereat the sailors lowered the greater sails. But I had gone to bow before the captain, and to inquire concerning the miracles, and appear-

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ances among men, of the most holy gods of whatever land he had come from. And the captain answered that he came from fair Belzoond, and worshipped gods that were the least and humblest, who seldom sent the famine or the thunder, and were easily appeased with little battles. And I told him how I came from Ireland, which is of Europe, whereat the captain and all the sailors laughed, for they said "There is no such place in the land of dreams." When they had ceased to mock me, I explained that my fancy mostly dwelt in the desert of Cuppar-Nombo, about a beautiful blue city called Golthoth the Damned, which was sentinelled all round by wolves and their shadows, and had been utterly desolate for years and years, because of a curse which the gods once spoke in anger and could never since recall. And sometimes my dreams took me as far as Pungar Vees, the red-walled city where the fountains are, which trades with the Isles and Thul.

. . . At last the Irusian mountains came in sight, nursing the villages of Pen-Kai and Blut, and the wandering streets of Mlo, where priests propitiate the avalanche with wine and maize. Then night came down over the plains of Tlun, and we saw the lights of Cappadarnia. We heard the Pathnites beating upon drums as we passed Imaut and Golzunda, then all but the helmsman slept. And villages scattered along the banks of the Yann heard all night in the helmsman's unknown tongue the little songs of cities that they knew not.

He has the mind of a myth-maker, and when he imagines an elemental force or a thing that has been created by multitudes of men—a city or a ship—he sees a visible presence beside it. The Whirlpool and the Earthquake have vast and proper shapes. The Whirlpool is Nooz Wana, the Whelmer of Ships. "Standing firm upon Ocean's floor, with my knees a little bent, I take the waters of the Straits in both my hands and whirl them round my head . . . then I draw the waters of the Straits towards me and downwards nearer and nearer to my terrible feet." The overwhelmed ships have their personality also—"Just before I drag them to the floor of the Ocean and stamp them asunder with my wrecking feet, ships utter their ultimate cry . . . and in the ultimate cry of ships are the songs that sailors sung and their hopes and all their loves, and the song of the wind amongst the masts and timbers when they stood in the forest long ago, and the whisper of the rain that made them grow, and the soul of the tall pine tree and the oak." His well-loved cities have each their soul, and a man knew that the city

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of Andelsprutz had gone mad and had fled away. This man saw on the mountain near him "the huge and misty outline of the soul of Andelsprutz sitting decked with her ghostly cathedrals, speaking to herself, with her eyes fixed before her in a mad stare, telling of ancient wars." The souls of a great concourse of cities came to comfort the soul of Andelsprutz—"I saw there Babylon and Persepolis, and the bearded face of bull-like Nineveh, and Athens mourning her immortal gods."

Lord Dunsany's most characteristic work is in the volume of selections edited by Mr. Yeats and published by the Cuala Press.