

The Golden Doom

BY EDWARD JOHN DUNSANY

PERSONS

THE KING
CHAMBERLAIN
CHIEF PROPHET
GIRL
BOY
FIRST PROPHET
SECOND PROPHET
FIRST SENTRY
SECOND SENTRY
STRANGER
ATTENDANTS

Scene: Outside the King's great door in Zericon.

Time: Some while before the fall of Babylon.

THE GOLDEN DOOM

Two Sentries pace to and fro, then halt, one on each side of the great door.

FIRST SENTRY

The day is deadly sultry.

SECOND SENTRY

I would that I were swimming down the Gyshon, on the cool side,
under the fruit trees.

FIRST SENTRY

It is like to thunder or the fall of a dynasty.

SECOND SENTRY

It will grow cool by night-fall. Where is the King?

FIRST SENTRY

He rows in his golden barge with ambassadors or whispers with captains concerning future wars. The stars spare him!

SECOND SENTRY

Why do you say "the stars spare him"?

FIRST SENTRY

Because if a doom from the stars fall suddenly on a king it swallows up his people and all things round about him, and his palace falls and the walls of his city and citadel, and the apes come in from the woods and the large beasts from the desert, so that you would not say that a king had been there at all.

SECOND SENTRY

But why should a doom from the stars fall on the King?

FIRST SENTRY

Because he seldom placates them.

SECOND SENTRY

Ah! I have heard that said of him.

FIRST SENTRY

Who are the stars that a man should scorn them? Should they that rule the thunder, the plague and the earthquake withhold these things save for much prayer? Always ambassadors are with the King, and his

commanders, come in from distant lands, prefects of cities and makers of the laws, but never the priests of the stars.

SECOND SENTRY

Hark! Was that thunder?

FIRST SENTRY

Believe me, the stars are angry.

[Enter a Stranger. He wanders toward the King's door, gazing about him.]

SENTRIES *(lifting their spears at him)*

Go back! Go back!

STRANGER

Why?

FIRST SENTRY

It is death to touch the King's door.

STRANGER

I am a stranger from Thessaly.

FIRST SENTRY

It is death even for a stranger.

STRANGER

Your door is strangely sacred.

FIRST SENTRY

It is death to touch it.

[The Stranger wanders off.]

[Enter two children hand in hand.]

BOY *(to the Sentry)*

I want to see the King to pray for a hoop.

[The Sentry smiles.]

BOY *(pushes the door; to girl)*

I cannot open it. *(To the Sentry)* Will it do as well if I pray to the King's door?

SENTRY

Yes, quite as well. *(Turns to talk to the other Sentry)* Is there anyone in sight?

SECOND SENTRY *(shading his eyes)*

Nothing but a dog, and he far out on the plain.

FIRST SENTRY

Then we can talk awhile and eat bash.

BOY

King's door, I want a little hoop.

[The Sentries take a little bash between finger and thumb from pouches and put that wholly forgotten drug to their lips.]

GIRL *(pointing)*

My father is a taller soldier than that.

BOY

My father can write. He taught me.

GIRL

Ho! Writing frightens nobody. My father is a soldier.

BOY

I have a lump of gold. I found it in the stream that runs down to Gyshon.

GIRL

I have a poem. I found it in my own head.

BOY

Is it a long poem?

GIRL

No. But it would have been only there were no more rhymes for sky.

BOY

What is your poem?

GIRL

I saw a purple bird Go up against the sky And it went up and up And round about did fly.

BOY

I saw it die.

GIRL

That doesn't scan.

BOY

Oh, that doesn't matter.

GIRL

Do you like my poem?

BOY

Birds aren't purple.

GIRL

My bird was.

BOY

Oh!

GIRL

Oh, you don't like my poem!

BOY

Yes, I do.

GIRL

No, you don't; you think it horrid.

BOY

No. I don't.

GIRL

Yes, you do. Why didn't you say you liked it? It is the only poem I ever made.

BOY

I do like it. I do like it.

GIRL

You don't, you don't!

BOY

Don't be angry. I'll write it on the door for you.

GIRL

You'll write it?

BOY

Yes, I can write it. My father taught me. I'll write it with my lump of gold. It makes a yellow mark on the iron door.

GIRL

Oh, do write it! I would like to see it written like real poetry.

[The Boy begins to write. The Girl watches.]

FIRST SENTRY

You see, we'll be fighting again soon.

SECOND SENTRY

Only a little war. We never have more than a little war with the hill-folk.

FIRST SENTRY

When a man goes to fight, the curtains of the gods wax thicker than ever before between his eyes and the future; he may go to a great or to a little war.

SECOND SENTRY

There can only be a little war with the hill-folk.

FIRST SENTRY

Yet sometimes the gods laugh.

SECOND SENTRY

At whom?

FIRST SENTRY

At kings.

SECOND SENTRY

Why have you grown uneasy about this war in the hills?

FIRST SENTRY

Because the King is powerful beyond any of his fathers, and has more fighting men, more horses, and wealth that could have ransomed his father and his grandfather and dowered their queens and daughters; and every year his miners bring him more from the opal-mines and from the turquoise-quarries. He has grown very mighty.

SECOND SENTRY

Then he will the more easily crush the hill-folk in a little war.

FIRST SENTRY

When kings grow very mighty the stars grow very jealous.

BOY

I've written your poem.

GIRL

Oh, have you really?

BOY

Yes, I'll read it to you. (*He reads*)

I saw a purple bird Go up against the sky And it went up and up And
round about did fly. I saw it die.

GIRL

It doesn't scan.

BOY

That doesn't matter.

*[Enter furtively a Spy, who crosses stage and goes out. The Sentries
cease to talk.]*

GIRL

That man frightens me.

BOY

He is only one of the King's spies.

GIRL

But I don't like the King's spies. They frighten me.

BOY

Come on, then, we'll run away.

SENTRY (*noticing the children again*)

Go away, go away! The King is coming, he will eat you.

[The Boy throws a stone at the Sentry and runs out. Enter another Spy, who crosses the stage. Enter third Spy, who notices the door. He examines it and utters an owl-like whistle. No. 2 comes back. They do not speak. Both whistle. No. 3 comes. All examine the door. Enter the King and his Chamberlain. The King wears a purple robe. The Sentries smartly transfer their spears to their left hands and return their right arms to their right sides. They then lower their spears until their points are within an inch of the ground, at the same time raising their right hands above their heads. They stand for some moments thus. Then they lower their right arms to their right sides, at the same time raising their spears. In the next motion they take their spears into their right hands and lower the butts to the floor, where they were before, the spears slanting forward a little. Both Sentries must move together precisely.]

FIRST SPY (*runs forward to the King and kneels, abasing his forehead to the floor*)

Something has written on the iron door.

CHAMBERLAIN

On the iron door!

KING

Some fool has done it. Who has been here since yesterday?

FIRST SENTRY (*shifts his hand a little higher on his spear, brings the spear to his side and closes his heels all in one motion; he then takes one pace backward with his right foot; then he kneels on his right knee; when he has done this he speaks, but not before*)

Nobody, Majesty, but a stranger from Thessaly.

KING

Did he touch the iron door?

FIRST SENTRY

No, Majesty; he tried to, but we drove him away.

KING

How near did he come?

FIRST SENTRY

Nearly to our spears, Majesty.

KING

What was his motive in seeking to touch the iron door?

FIRST SENTRY

I do not know, Majesty.

KING

Which way did he go?

FIRST SENTRY (*pointing left*)

That way, Majesty, an hour ago.

[The King whispers with one of his Spies, who stoops and examines the ground and steals away. The Sentry rises.]

KING (*to his two remaining Spies*)

What does this writing say?

A SPY

We cannot read, Majesty.

KING

A good spy should know everything.

SECOND SPY

We watch, Majesty, and we search out, Majesty. We read shadows, and we read footprints, and whispers in secret places. But we do not read writing.

KING (*to the Chamberlain*)

See what it is.

CHAMBERLAIN (*goes up and reads*)

It is treason, Majesty.

KING

Read it.

CHAMBERLAIN

I saw a purple bird Go up against the sky, And it went up and up And round about did fly. I saw it die.

FIRST SENTRY (*aside*)

The stars have spoken.

KING (*to the Sentry*)

Has anyone been here but the stranger from Thessaly?

SENTRY (*kneeling as before*)

Nobody, Majesty.

KING

You saw nothing?

FIRST SENTRY

Nothing but a dog far out upon the plain and the children of the guard at play.

KING (*to the Second Sentry*)

And you?

SECOND SENTRY (*kneeling*)

Nothing, Majesty.

CHAMBERLAIN

That is strange.

KING

It is some secret warning.

CHAMBERLAIN

It is treason.

KING

It is from the stars.

CHAMBERLAIN

No, no, Majesty. Not from the stars, not from the stars. Some man has done it. Yet the thing should be interpreted. Shall I send for the prophets of the stars?

[The King beckons to his Spies. They run up to him.]

KING

Find me some prophet of the stars. (*Exeunt Spies*) I fear that we may go no more, my chamberlain, along the winding ways of unequalled Zericon, nor play dahoori with the golden balls. I have thought more of my people than of the stars and more of Zericon than of windy Heaven.

CHAMBERLAIN

Believe me, Majesty, some idle man has written it and passed by. Your spies shall find him, and then his name will be soon forgotten.

KING

Yes, yes. Perhaps you are right, though the sentries saw no one. No doubt some beggar did it.

CHAMBERLAIN

Yes, Majesty, some beggar has surely done it. But look, here come two prophets of the stars. They shall tell us that this is idle.

[Enter two Prophets and a Boy attending them. All bow deeply to the King. The two Spies steal in again and stand at back.]

KING

Some beggar has written a rhyme on the iron gate, and as the ways of rhyme are known to you I desired you, rather as poets than as prophets, to say whether there was any meaning in it.

CHAMBERLAIN

'Tis but an idle rhyme.

FIRST PROPHET (*bows again and goes up to door. He glances at the writing*)

Come hither, servant of those that serve the stars.

[*Attendant approaches.*

FIRST PROPHET

Bring hither our golden cloaks, for this may be a matter for rejoicing; and bring our green cloaks also, for this may tell of young new beautiful things with which the stars will one day gladden the King; and bring our black cloaks also, for it may be a doom. (*Exit the Boy; the Prophet goes up to the door and reads solemnly*) The stars have spoken.

[*Reënter Attendant with cloaks.*

KING

I tell you that some beggar has written this.

FIRST PROPHET

It is written in pure gold. (*He dons the black cloak over body and head*)

KING

What do the stars mean? What warning is it?

FIRST PROPHET

I cannot say.

KING (*to Second Prophet*)

Come you then and tell us what the warning is.

SECOND PROPHET (*goes up to the door and reads*)

The stars have spoken. (*He cloaks himself in black*)

KING

What is it? What does it mean?

SECOND PROPHET

We do not know, but it is from the stars.

CHAMBERLAIN

It is a harmless thing; there is no harm in it, Majesty. Why should not birds die?

KING

Why have the prophets covered themselves in black?

CHAMBERLAIN

They are a secret people and look for inner meanings. There is no harm in it.

KING

They have covered themselves in black.

CHAMBERLAIN

They have not spoken of any evil thing. They have not spoken of it.

KING

If the people see the prophets covered in black they will say that the stars are against me and believe that my luck has turned.

CHAMBERLAIN

The people must not know.

KING

Some prophet must interpret to us the doom. Let the chief prophet of the stars be sent for.

CHAMBERLAIN (*going toward left exit*)

Summon the chief prophet of the stars that look on Zericon.

VOICES OFF

The chief prophet of the stars. The chief prophet of the stars.

CHAMBERLAIN

I have summoned the chief prophet, Majesty.

KING

If he interpret this aright I will put a necklace of turquoises round his neck with opals from the mines.

CHAMBERLAIN

He will not fail. He is a very cunning interpreter.

KING

What if he covers himself with a huge black cloak and does not speak and goes muttering away, slowly with bended head, till our fear spreads to the sentries and they cry aloud?

CHAMBERLAIN

This is no doom from the stars, but some idle scribe hath written it in his insolence upon the iron door, wasting his hoard of gold.

KING

Not for myself I have a fear of doom, not for myself; but I inherited a rocky land, windy and ill-nurtured, and nursed it to prosperity by years of peace and spread its boundaries by years of war. I have brought up harvests out of barren acres and given good laws unto naughty towns, and my people are happy, and lo, the stars are angry!

CHAMBERLAIN

It is not the stars, it is not the stars, Majesty, for the prophets of the stars have not interpreted it. Indeed, it was only some reveller wasting his gold.

[Meanwhile enter Chief Prophet of the stars that look on Zericon.]

KING

Chief Prophet of the Stars that look on Zericon, I would have you interpret the rhyme upon yonder door.

CHIEF PROPHET *(goes up to the door and reads)*

It is from the stars.

KING

Interpret it and you shall have great turquoises round your neck, with opals from the mines in the frozen mountains.

CHIEF PROPHET *(cloaks himself like the others in a great black cloak)*

Who should wear purple in the land but a King, or who go up against the sky but he who has troubled the stars by neglecting their ancient worship? Such a one has gone up and up increasing power and wealth, such a one has soared above the crowns of those that went before him, such a one the stars have doomed, the undying ones, the illustrious.

[A pause.]

KING

Who wrote it?

CHIEF PROPHET

It is pure gold. Some god has written it.

CHAMBERLAIN

Some god?

CHIEF PROPHET

Some god whose home is among the undying stars.

FIRST SENTRY (*aside to the Second Sentry*)

Last night I saw a star go flaming earthward.

KING

Is this a warning or is it a doom?

CHIEF PROPHET

The stars have spoken.

KING

It is, then, a doom?

CHIEF PROPHET

They speak not in jest.

KING

I have been a great King--Let it be said of me "The stars overthrew him, and they sent a god for his doom." For I have not met my equal among kings that man should overthrow me; and I have not oppressed my people that man should rise up against me.

CHIEF PROPHET

It is better to give worship to the stars than to do good to man. It is better to be humble before the gods than proud in the face of your enemy though he do evil.

KING

Let the stars hearken yet and I will sacrifice a child to them--I will sacrifice a girl child to the twinkling stars and a male child to the stars that blink not, the stars of the steadfast eyes. *(To his Spies)* Let a boy and girl be brought for sacrifice. *(Exit a Spy to the right looking at footprints)* Will you accept this sacrifice to the god that the stars have sent? They say that the gods love children.

CHIEF PROPHET

I may refuse no sacrifice to the stars nor to the gods whom they send. *(To the other Prophets)* Make ready the sacrificial knives.

[The Prophets draw knives and sharpen them.]

KING

Is it fitting that the sacrifice take place by the iron door where the god from the stars has trod, or must it be in the temple?

CHIEF PROPHET

Let it be offered by the iron door. *(To the other Prophets)* Fetch hither the altar stone.

[The owl-like whistle is heard off right. The Third Spy runs crouching toward it. Exit.]

KING

Will this sacrifice avail to avert the doom?

CHIEF PROPHET

Who knows?

KING

I fear that even yet the doom will fall.

CHIEF PROPHET

It were wise to sacrifice some greater thing.

KING

What more can a man offer?

CHIEF PROPHET

His pride.

KING

What pride?

CHIEF PROPHET

Your pride that went up against the sky and troubled the stars.

KING

How shall I sacrifice my pride to the stars?

CHIEF PROPHET

It is upon your pride that the doom will fall, and will take away your crown and will take away your kingdom.

KING

I will sacrifice my crown and reign uncrowned amongst you, so only I save my kingdom.

CHIEF PROPHET

If you sacrifice your crown which is your pride, and if the stars accept it, perhaps the god that they sent may avert the doom and you may still reign in your kingdom though humbled and uncrowned.

KING

Shall I burn my crown with spices and with incense or cast it into the sea?

CHIEF PROPHET

Let it be laid here by the iron door where the god came who wrote the golden doom. When he comes again by night to shrivel up the city or to pour an enemy in through the iron door, he will see your cast-off pride and perhaps accept it and take it away to the neglected stars.

KING (*to the Chamberlain*)

Go after my spies and say that I make no sacrifice. (*Exit the Chamberlain to the right; the King takes off his crown*) Good-bye, my brittle glory; kings have sought you; the stars have envied you. (*The stage grows darker*)

CHIEF PROPHET

Even now the sun has set who denies the stars, and the day is departed wherein no gods walk abroad. It is near the hour when spirits roam the earth and all things that go unseen, and the faces of the abiding stars will be soon revealed to the fields. Lay your crown there and let us come away.

KING (*lays his crown before the iron door; then to the Sentries*)

Go! And let no man come near the door all night.

THE SENTRIES (*kneeling*)

Yes, Majesty.

[*They remain kneeling until after the King has gone. King and the Chief Prophet walk away.*]

CHIEF PROPHET

It was your pride. Let it be forgotten. May the stars accept it. (*Exeunt left*)

[*The Sentries rise.*]

FIRST SENTRY

The stars have envied him!

SECOND SENTRY

It is an ancient crown. He wore it well.

FIRST SENTRY

May the stars accept it.

SECOND SENTRY

If they do not accept it what doom will overtake him?

FIRST SENTRY

It will suddenly be as though there were never any city of Zericon nor two sentries like you and me standing before the door.

SECOND SENTRY

Why! How do you know?

FIRST SENTRY

That is ever the way of the gods.

SECOND SENTRY

But it is unjust.

FIRST SENTRY

How should the gods know that?

SECOND SENTRY

Will it happen to-night?

FIRST SENTRY

Come! we must march away. (*Exeunt right*)

[The stage grows increasingly darker. Reënter the Chamberlain from the right. He walks across the Stage and goes out to the left. Reënter Spies from the right. They cross the stage, which is now nearly dark.]

BOY (*enters from the right, dressed in white, his hands out a little, crying*)

King's door, King's door, I want my little hoop. (*He goes up to the King's door. When he sees the King's crown there, he utters a satisfied*) O-oh! (*He takes it up, puts it on the ground, and, beating it before him with the sceptre, goes out by the way that he entered*)

[The great door opens; there is light within; a furtive Spy slips out and sees that the crown is gone. Another Spy slips out. Their crouching heads come close together.]

FIRST SPY (*hoarse whisper*)

The gods have come!

[They run back through the door and the door is closed. It opens again and the King and the Chamberlain come through.]

KING

The stars are satisfied.

CURTAIN