

The Spectre of Doom

By Bram Stoker

Far away there is a place known as the Country Under the Sunset. Time there goes on much as it does here. Once it had been a beautiful land and there had been love and reverence towards the King, but this was no more. No longer was there perfect peace.

The people of the Country Under the Sunset had become more selfish and more greedy, and had tried to grasp all they could for themselves. There were some very rich and there were many very poor.

Most of the beautiful gardens in the land were laid to waste. Houses had grown up close around the King's palace; and in some of these dwelt many persons who could only afford to pay for part of a house.

All the beautiful country was sadly changed, and changed was the life of the dwellers in it.

The spirits that guarded the land were very, very sad. Their great white shadowy wings drooped as they stood at their posts at the portals of the land. They hid their faces, and their eyes were dim with continuous weeping, so that they heeded not if any evil thing went by them. They tried to make the people think of their evil-doing; but they could not leave their posts, and the people heard their moaning in the night season, and said, 'Listen to the sighing of the breeze; how sweet it is!'

So it is ever with us also, that when we hear the wind sighing and moaning and sobbing round our houses in the lonely nights, we do not think that our angels may be sorrowing for our misdeeds, but only that there is a storm coming. The angels wept evermore, and they felt the sorrow of dumbness—for though they could speak, those they spoke to would not hear.

Whilst the people laughed at the idea of giants, there was one old old man who shook his head, and made answer to them, when he heard them, and said: 'Death has many children, and there are giants in the marshes still. You may not see them, perhaps—but they are there, and the only bulwark of safety is in a land of patient, faithful hearts.'

The name of this good old man was Knoal, and he lived in a house built of great blocks of stone, in the middle of a wild place far from the city.

In the city there were many great old houses, storey upon storey high; and in these houses lived much poor people. The higher you went up the great steep stairs the poorer were the people that lived there, so that in the garrets were some so poor, that when the morning came they did not know whether they should have any thing to eat the whole long day. This was very, very sad, and gentle children would have wept if they had seen their pain.

In one of these garrets there lived all alone a little maiden called Zaya. She was an orphan, for her father had died many years before, and her poor mother, who had toiled long and wearily for her dear little daughter—her only child—had died also not long since.

Poor little Zaya had wept so bitterly when she saw her dear mother lying dead, and she had been so sad and sorry for a long time, that she quite forgot that she had no means of living. However, the poor people who lived in the house had given her part of their own food, so that she did not starve.

Then after a while she had tried to work for herself and earn her own living. Her mother had taught her to make flowers out of paper; so she made a lot of flowers, and when she had a full basket she took them into the street and sold them. She made flowers of many kinds, roses and

lilies, and violets, and snowdrops, and primroses, and mignonette, and many beautiful sweet flowers that only grow in the Country Under the Sunset. Some of them she could make without any pattern, but others she could not, so when she wanted a pattern she took her basket of paper and scissors, and paste, and brushes, and all the things she used, and went into the garden which a kind lady owned, where there grew many beautiful flowers. There she sat down and worked away, looking at the flowers she wanted.

Sometimes she was very sad, and her tears fell thick and fast as she thought of her dear dead mother. Often she seemed to feel that her mother was looking down at her, and to see her tender smile in the sunshine on the water; then her heart was glad, and she sang so sweetly that the birds came around her and stopped their own singing to listen to her.

She and the birds grew great friends, and sometimes when she had sung a song they would all cry out together, as they sat round her in a ring, in a few notes that seemed to say quite plainly: 'Sing to us again. Sing to us again.'

So she would sing again. Then she would ask them to sing, and they would sing till there was quite a concert. After a while the birds knew her so well that they would come into her room, and they even built their nests there, and they followed her wherever she went. The people used to say: 'Look at the girl with the birds; she must be half a bird herself, for see how the birds know and love her.'

From so many people coming to say things like this, some silly people actually believed that she was partly a bird, and they shook their heads when wise people laughed at them, and said: 'Indeed she must be; listen to her singing; her voice is sweeter even than the birds.'

So a nickname was applied to her, and naughty boys called it after her in the street, and the nickname was 'Big Bird'. But Zaya did not mind the name; and although often naughty boys said it to her, meaning to cause her pain, she did not dislike it, but the contrary, for she so gloried in the love and trust of her little sweet-voiced pets that she wished to be thought like them.

Indeed it would be well for some naughty little boys and girls if they were as good and harmless as the little birds that work all day long for their helpless baby birds, building nests and bringing food, and sitting so patiently hatching their little speckled eggs.

One evening Zaya sat alone in her garret very sad and lonely. It was a lovely summer's evening, and she sat in the window looking out over the city. She could see over the many streets towards the great cathedral whose spire towered aloft into the sky higher by far even than the great tower of the King's palace. There was hardly a breath of wind, and the smoke went up straight from the chimneys, getting fainter and fainter till it was lost altogether.

Zaya was very sad. For the first time for many days her birds were all away from her at once, and she did not know where they had gone. It seemed to her as if they had deserted her, and she was so lonely, poor little maid, that she wept bitter tears. She was thinking of the story which long ago her dead mother had told her, how Prince Zaphir had slain the giant, and she wondered what the Prince was like, and thought how happy the people must have been when Zaphir and Bluebell were King and Queen. Then she wondered if there were any hungry children in those good days, and if, indeed, as the people said, there were no more giants. So she thought and thought, as she went on with her work before the open window.

Presently she looked up from her work and gazed across the city. There she saw a terrible thing—something so terrible that she gave a low cry of fear and wonder, and leaned out of the window, shading her eyes with her hand to see more clearly.

In the sky beyond the city she saw a vast shadowy form with its arms raised. It was shrouded in a great misty robe that covered it, fading away into air so that she could only see the face and the grim, spectral hands.

The form was so mighty that the city below it seemed like a child's toy. It was still far off the city.

The little maid's heart seemed to stand still with fear as she thought to herself, 'The giants, then, are not dead. This is another of them.'

Quickly she ran down the high stairs and out into the street. There she saw some people, and cried to them, 'Look! look! the giant, the giant!' and pointed towards the form which she still saw moving slowly onwards to the city.

The people looked up, but they could not see anything, and they laughed and said, 'The child is mad.'

Then poor little Zaya was more than ever frightened, and ran down the street crying out still, 'Look! look! the giant, the giant!' But no one heeded her, and all said, 'The child is mad,' and they went on their own ways.

Then the naughty boys came around her and cried out, 'Big Bird has lost her mates. She sees a bigger bird in the sky, and she wants it.' And they made rhymes about her, and sang them as they danced round.

Zaya ran away from them; and she hurried right through the city, and out into the country beyond it, for she still saw the great form before her in the air.

As she went on, and got nearer and nearer to the giant, it grew a little darker. She could see only the clouds; but still there was visible the form of a giant hanging dimly in the air.

A cold mist closed around her as the giant appeared to come onwards towards her. Then she thought of all the poor people in the city, and she hoped that the giant would spare them, and she knelt down before him and lifted up her hands appealingly, and cried aloud: 'Oh, great giant! spare them, spare them!'

But the giant moved onwards still as though he never heard. She cried aloud all the more, 'Oh, great giant! spare them, spare them!' And she bowed down her head and wept, and the giant still, though very slowly, moved onwards towards the city.

There was an old man not far off standing at the door of a small house built of great stones, but the little maid saw him not. His face wore a look of fear and wonder, and when he saw the child kneel and raise her hands, he drew nigh and listened to her voice. When he heard her say, 'Oh, great giant!' he murmured to himself, 'It is then even as I feared. There are more giants, and truly this is another.' He looked upwards, but he saw nothing, and he murmured again, 'I see not, yet this child can see; and yet I feared, for something told me that there was danger. Truly knowledge is blinder than innocence.'

The little maid, still not knowing there was any human being near her, cried out again, with a great cry of anguish: 'Oh, do not, do not, great giant, do them harm. If someone must suffer, let it be me. Take me. I am willing to die, but spare them. Spare them, great giant; and do with me even as thou wilt.' But the giant heeded not.

And Knoal—for he was the old man—felt his eyes fill with tears, and he said to himself, 'Oh, noble child, how brave she is, she would sacrifice herself!' And, coming closer to her, he put his hand upon her head.

Zaya, who was again bowing her head, started and looking round when she felt the touch. However, when she saw that it was Knoal, she was comforted, for she knew how wise and good

he was, and felt that if any person could help her, he could. So she clung to him, and hid her face in his breast; and he stroked her hair and comforted her. But still he could see nothing.

The cold mist swept by, and when Zaya looked up, she saw that the giant had passed by, and was moving onwards to the city.

‘Come with me, my child,’ said the old man; and the two arose, and went into the dwelling built of great stones.

When Zaya entered, she started, for lo! the inside was as a tomb. The old man felt her shudder, for he still held her close to him, and he said: ‘Weep not, little one, and fear not. This place reminds me and all who enter it, that to the tomb we must all come at the last. Fear it not, for it has grown to be a cheerful home to me.’

Then the little maid was comforted, and began to examine all around her more closely. She saw all sorts of curious instruments, and many strange and many common herbs and simples hung to dry in bunches on the walls. The old man watched her in silence till her fear was gone, and then he said: ‘My child, saw you the features of the giant as he passed?’

She answered, ‘Yes.’

‘Can you describe his face and form to me?’ he asked again.

Whereupon she began to tell him all that she had seen. How the giant was so great that all the sky seemed filled. How the great arms were outspread, veiled in his robe, till far away the shroud was lost in air. How the face was as that of a strong man, pitiless, yet without malice; and that the eyes were blind.

The old man shuddered as he heard, for he knew that the giant was a very terrible one; and his heart wept for the doomed city where so many would perish in the midst of their sin.

They determined to go forth and warn again the doomed people; and making no delay, the old man and the little maid hurried towards the city.

As they left the small house, Zaya saw the giant before them, moving still towards the city. They hurried on; and when they had passed through the cold mist, Zaya looked back, and saw the giant behind them.

Presently they came to the city.

It was a strange sight to see that old man and that little maid flying to tell the people of the terrible plague that was coming upon them. The old man’s long white beard and hair and the child’s golden locks were swept behind them in the wind, so quick they came. The faces of both were white as death. Behind them, seen only to the eyes of the pure-hearted little maid when she looked back, came ever onwards at slow pace the spectral giant that hung a dark shadow in the evening air.

But those in the city never saw the giant; and when the old man and the little maid warned them, still they heeded not, but scoffed and jeered at them, and said, ‘Tush! there are no giants now;’ and they went on their way, laughing and jeering.

Then the old man came and stood on a raised place amongst them, on the lowest step of the great fountain with the little maid by his side, and he spake thus: ‘Oh, people, dwellers in this land, be warned in time. This pure-hearted child, round whose sweet innocence even the little birds that fear men and women gather in peace, has this night seen in the sky the form of a giant that advances ever onwards menacingly to our city. Believe, oh, believe; and be warned, whilst ye may. To myself even as to you the sky is a blank; and yet see that I believe. For listen to me: all unknowing that another giant had invaded our land, I sat pensive in my dwelling; and, without cause or motive, there came into my heart a sudden fear for the safety of our city. I arose and looked north and south and east and west, and on high and below, but never a sign of danger

could I see. So I said to myself, "Mine eyes are dim with a hundred years of watching and waiting, and so I cannot see." And yet, oh people, dwellers in this land, though that century has dimmed mine outer eyes, still it has quickened mine inner eyes—the eyes of my soul. Again I went forth, and lo! this little maid knelt and implored a giant, unseen by me, to spare the city; but he heard her not, or, if he heard, answered her not, and she fell prone. So hither was come to warn you. Yonder, says the maid, he passes onwards to the city. Oh, be warned! be warned in time.'

Still the people heeded not; but they scoffed and jeered the more, and said, 'Lo, the maid and the old man both are mad;' and they passed onwards to their homes—to dancing and feasting as before.

Then the naughty boys came and mocked them, and said that Zaya had lost her birds, and had gone mad; and they made songs, and sang them as they danced round.

Zaya was so sorely grieved for the poor people that she heeded not the cruel boys. Seeing that she did not heed them, some of them got still more rude and wicked; they went a little way off, and threw things at her, and mocked her all the more.

Then, sad of heart, the old man arose, and took the little maid by the hand, and brought her away into the wilderness; and lodged her with him in the house built with great stones. That night Zaya slept with the sweet smell of the drying herbs all around her; and the old man held her hand that she might have no fear.

In the morning Zaya arose betimes, and awoke the old man, who had fallen asleep in his chair.

She went to the doorway and looked out, and then a thrill of gladness came upon her heart; for outside the door, as though waiting to see her, sat all her little birds, and many many more. When the birds saw the little maid they sang a few loud joyous notes, and flew about foolishly for very joy—some of them fluttering their wings and looking so funny that she could not help laughing a little.

When Knoal and Zaya had eaten their frugal breakfast and given some to their little feathered friends, they set out with sorrowful hearts to visit the city, and to try once more to warn the people. The birds flew around them as they went, and to cheer them sang as joyously as they could, although their little hearts were heavy.

As they walked they saw before them the great shadowy giant; and he had now advanced to the very confines of the city.

Once again they warned the people, and great crowds came around them, but only mocked them more than ever; and naughty boys threw stones and sticks at the little birds and killed some of them. Poor Zaya wept bitterly, and Knoal's heart was very sad. After a time, when they had moved from the fountain, Zaya looked up and started with joyous surprise, for the great shadowy giant was nowhere to be seen. She cried out in joy, and the people laughed, and said, 'Cunning child! she sees that we will not believe her, and she pretends that the giant has gone.'

They surrounded her, jeering, and some of them said, 'Let us put her under the fountain and duck her, as a lesson to liars who would frighten us.' Then they approached her with menaces. She clung close to Knoal, who had looked terribly grave when she had said she did not see the giant any longer, and who was now as if in a dream, thinking. But at her touch he seemed to wake up; and he spoke sternly to the people, and rebuked them. But they cried out on him also, and said that as he had aided Zaya in her lie he should be ducked also, and they advanced closer to lay hands on them both.

The hand of one who was a ringleader was already outstretched, when he gave a low cry, and pressed his hand to his side; and, whilst the others turned to look at him in wonder, he cried out

in great pain, and screamed horribly. Even whilst the people looked, his face grew blacker and blacker, and he fell down before them, and writhed a while in pain, and then died.

All the people screamed out in terror, and ran away, crying aloud, 'The giant! the giant! he is indeed amongst us!'

They feared all the more that they could not see him.

But before they could leave the market-place, in the centre of which was the fountain, many fell dead, and there their corpses lay.

There in the centre knelt the old man and the little maid, praying; and the birds sat perched around the fountain, mute and still, and there was no sound heard save the cries of the people far off. Then their wailing sounded louder and louder, for the giant—Plague—was amongst and around them, and there was no escaping, for it was now too late to fly.

Alas! in the Country Under the Sunset there was much weeping that day; and when the night came there was little sleep, for there was fear in some hearts and pain in others. None were still except the dead, who lay stark about the city, so still and lifeless that even the cold light of the moon and the shadows of the drifting clouds moving over them could not make them seem as though they lived.

And for many a long day there was pain and grief and death in the Country Under the Sunset.

Knoal and Zaya did all they could to help the poor people, but it was hard indeed to aid them, for the unseen giant was amongst them, wandering through the city to and fro, so that none could tell where next he would lay his ice-cold hand.

Some people fled away out of the city; but it was little use, for go how they would and fly never so fast they were still within the grasp of the unseen giant. Ever and anon he turned their warm hearts to ice with his breath and his touch, and they fell dead.

Some, like those within the city, were spared, and of these some perished of hunger, and the rest crept sadly back to the city and lived or died amongst their friends. And it was all, oh! so sad, for there was nothing but grief and fear and weeping from morn till night.

Now, see how Zaya's little bird friends helped her in her need.

They seemed to see the coming of the giant when no one—not even the little maid herself—could see anything, and they managed to tell her when there was danger just as well as though they could talk.

At first Knoal and she went home every evening to the house built of great stones to sleep, and came again to the city in the morning, and stayed with the poor sick people, comforting them and feeding them, and giving them medicine which Knoal, from his great wisdom, knew would do them good. Thus they saved many precious human lives, and those who were rescued were very thankful, and henceforth ever after lived holier and more unselfish lives.

After a few days, however, they found that the poor sick people needed help even more at night than in the day, and so they came and lived in the city altogether, helping the stricken folk day and night.

At the earliest dawn Zaya would go forth to breathe the morning air; and there, just waked from sleep, would be her feathered friends waiting for her. They sang glad songs of joy, and came and perched on her shoulders and her head, and kissed her. Then, if she went to go towards any place where, during the night, the plague had laid his deadly hand, they would flutter before her, and try to impede her, and scream out in their own tongue, 'Go back! go back!'

They pecked of her bread and drank of her cup before she touched them; and when there was danger—for the cold hand of the giant was placed everywhere—they would cry, 'No, no!' and she would not touch the food, or let anyone else do so. Often it happened that, even whilst it

pecked at the bread or drank of the cup, a poor little bird would fall down and flutter its wings and die; but all they that died, did so with a chirp of joy, looking at their little mistress, for whom they had gladly perished. Whenever the little birds found that the bread and the cup were pure and free from danger, they would look up at Zaya jauntily, and flap their wings and try to crow, and seemed so saucy that the poor sad little maiden would smile.

There was one old bird that always took a second, and often a great many pecks at the bread when it was good, so that he got quite a hearty meal; and sometimes he would go on feeding till Zaya would shake her finger at him and say, 'Greedy!' and he would hop away as if he had done nothing.

There was one other dear little bird—a robin, with a breast as red as the sunset—that loved Zaya more than one can think. When he tried the food and found that it was safe to eat, he would take a little tiny piece in his bill, and fly up and put it in her mouth.

Every little bird that drank from Zaya's cup and found it good raised its head to say grace; and ever since then the little birds do the same, and they never forget to say their grace—as some thankless children do.

Thus Knoal and Zaya lived, although many around them died, and the giant still remained in the city. So many people died that one began to wonder that so many were left; for it was only when the town began to get thinned that people thought of the vast numbers that had lived in it.

Poor little Zaya had got so pale and thin that she looked like a shadow, and Knoal's form was bent more with the sufferings of a few weeks than it had been by his century of age. But although the two were weary and worn, they still kept on their good work of aiding the sick.

Many of the little birds were dead.

One morning the old man was very weak—so weak that he could hardly stand. Zaya got frightened about him, and said, 'Are you ill, father?' for she always called him father now.

He answered her in a voice alas! hoarse and low, but very, very tender: 'My child, I fear the end is coming: take me home, that there I may die.'

At his words Zaya gave a low cry and fell on her knees beside him, and buried her head in his bosom and wept bitterly, whilst she hugged him close. But she had little time for weeping, for the old man struggled up to his feet, and, seeing that he wanted aid, she dried her tears and helped him.

The old man took his staff, and with Zaya helping to support him, got as far as the fountain in the midst of the market-place; and there, on the lowest step, he sank down as though exhausted. Zaya felt him grow cold as ice, and she knew that the chilly hand of the giant had been laid upon him.

Then, without knowing why, she looked up to where she had last seen the giant as Knoal and she had stood beside the fountain. And lo! as she looked, holding Knoal's hand, she saw the shadowy form of the terrible giant who had been so long invisible growing more and more clearly out of the clouds.

His face was stern as ever, and his eyes were still blind.

Zaya cried to the giant, still holding Knoal tightly by the hand: 'Not him, not him! Oh, mighty giant! not him! not him!' and she bowed down her head and wept.

There was such anguish in her heart that to the blind eyes of the shadowy giant came tears that fell like dew on the forehead of the old man. Knoal spake to Zaya: 'Grieve not, my child. I am glad that you see the giant again, for I have hope that he will leave our city free from woe. I am the last victim, and I gladly die.'

Then Zaya knelt to the giant, and said: 'Spare him! oh! spare him and take me! but spare him! spare him!'

The old man raised himself upon his elbow as he lay, and spake to her: 'Grieve not, little one, and repine not. Sooth I know that you would gladly give your life for mine. But we must give for the good of others that which is dearer to us than our lives. Bless you, my little one, and be good. Farewell! farewell!'

As he spake the last word he grew cold as death, and his spirit passed away.

Zaya knelt down and prayed; and when she looked up she saw the shadowy giant moving away.

The giant turned as he passed on, and Zaya saw that his blind eyes looked towards her as though he were trying to see. He raised the great shadowy arms, draped still in his shroud of mist, as though blessing her; and she thought that the wind that came by her moaning bore the echo of the words: 'Innocence and devotion save the land.'

Presently she saw far off the great shadowy giant Plague moving away to the border of the land, and passing between the guardian spirits out through the portal into the deserts beyond—for ever.