

The Coming of the Sea

By Lord Dunsany

Once there was no sea, and the gods went walking over the green plains of earth.

Upon an evening of the forgotten years the gods were seated on the hills, and all the little rivers of the world lay coiled at Their feet asleep, when Slid, the new god, striding through the stars, came suddenly upon earth lying in a corner of space. And behind Slid there marched a million waves, all following Slid and tramping up the twilight; and Slid touched Earth in one of her great green valleys that divide the south, and here he encamped for the night with all his waves about him. But to the gods as They sat upon Their hilltops a new cry came crying over the green spaces that lay below the hills, and the gods said:

“This is neither the cry of life nor yet the whisper of death. What is this new cry that the gods have never commanded, yet which comes to the ears of the gods?”

And the gods together shouting made the cry of the south calling the south wind to them. And again the gods shouted all together making the cry of the north, calling the north wind to Them; and thus They gathered to Them all Their winds and sent these four down into the low plains to find what thing it was that called with the new cry, and to drive it away from the gods.

Then all the winds harnessed up their clouds and drave forth till they came to the great green valley that divides the south in twain, and there found Slid with all his waves about him. Then for a space Slid and the four winds struggled with one another till the strength of the winds was gone, and they limped back to the gods, their masters, and said:

“We have met this new thing that has come upon the earth and have striven against its armies, but could not drive them forth; and the new thing is beautiful but very angry, and is creeping towards the gods.”

But Slid advanced and led his armies up the valley, and inch by inch and mile by mile he conquered the lands of the gods. Then from Their hills the gods sent down a great array of cliffs against hard, red rocks, and bade them march against Slid. And the cliffs marched down till they came and stood before Slid and leaned their heads forward and frowned and stood staunch to guard the lands of the gods against the might of the sea, shutting Slid off from the world. Then Slid sent some of his smaller waves to search out what stood against him, and the cliffs shattered them. But Slid went back and gathered together a hoard of his greatest waves and hurled them against the cliffs, and the cliffs shattered them. And again Slid called up out of his deep a mighty array of waves and sent them roaring against the guardians of the gods, and the red rocks frowned and smote them. And once again Slid gathered his greater waves and hurled them against the cliffs; and when the waves were scattered like those before them the feet of the cliffs were no longer standing firm, and their faces were scarred and battered. Then into every cleft that stood in the rocks Slid sent his hugest wave and others followed behind it, and Slid himself seized hold of huge rocks with his claws and tore them down and stamped them under his feet. And when the tumult was over the sea had won, and over the broken remnants of those red cliffs the armies of Slid marched on and up the long green valley.

Then the gods heard Slid exulting far away and singing songs of triumph over Their battered cliffs, and ever the tramp of his armies sounded nearer and nearer in the listening ears of the gods.

Then the gods called to Their downlands to save Their world from Slid, and the downlands gathered themselves and marched away, a great white line of gleaming cliffs, and halted before Slid. Then Slid advanced no more and lulled his legions, and while his waves were low he softly crooned a song such as once long ago had troubled the stars and brought down tears out of the twilight.

Sternly the white cliffs stood on guard to save the world of the gods, but the song that once had troubled the stars went moaning on awaking pent desires, till full at the feet of the gods the melody fell. Then the blue rivers that lay curled asleep opened their gleaming eyes, uncurled themselves and shook their rushes, and, making a stir among the hills, crept down to find the sea. And passing across the world they came at last to where the white cliffs stood, and, coming behind them, split them here and there and went through their broken ranks to Slid at last. And the gods were angry with Their traitorous streams.

Then Slid ceased from singing the song that lures the world, and gathered up his legions, and the rivers lifted up their heads with the waves, and all went marching on to assail the cliffs of the gods. And wherever the rivers had broken the ranks of the cliffs, Slid's armies went surging in and broke them up into islands and shattered the islands away. And the gods on Their hill-tops heard once more the voice of Slid exulting over Their cliffs.

Already more than half the world lay subject to Slid, and still his armies advanced; and the people of Slid, the fishes and the long eels, went in and out of arbours that once were dear to the gods. Then the gods feared for Their dominion, and to the innermost sacred recesses of the mountains, to the very heart of the hills, the gods trooped off together and there found Tintaggon, a mountain of black marble, staring far over the earth, and spake thus to him with the voices of the gods:

“O eldest born of our mountains, when first we devised the earth we made thee, and thereafter fashioned fields and hollows, valleys and other hills, to lie about thy feet. And now, Tintaggon, thine ancient lords, the gods, are facing a new thing which overthrows the old. Go therefore, thou, Tintaggon, and stand up against Slid, that the gods be still the gods and the earth still green.”

And hearing the voices of his sires, the elder gods, Tintaggon strode down through the evening, leaving a wake of twilight broad behind him as he strode: and going across the green earth came down to Ambrady at the valley's edge, and there met the foremost of Slid's fierce armies conquering the world.

And against him Slid hurled the force of a whole bay, which lashed itself high over Tintaggon's knees and streamed around his flanks and then fell and was lost. Tintaggon still stood firm for the honour and dominion of his lords, the elder gods. Then Slid went to Tintaggon and said: “Let us now make a truce. Stand thou back from Ambrady and let me pass through thy ranks that mine armies may now pass up the valley which opens on the world, that the green earth that dreams around the feet of older gods shall know the new god Slid. Then shall mine armies strive with thee no more, and thou and I shall be the equal lords of the whole earth when all the world is singing the chaunt of Slid, and thy head alone shall be lifted above mine armies when rival hills are dead. And I will deck thee with all the robes of the sea, and all the plunder that I have taken in rare cities shall be piled before thy feet. Tintaggon, I have conquered all the stars, my song swells through all the space besides, I come victorious from Mahn and Khanagat on the furthest edge of the worlds, and thou and I are to be equal lords when the old gods are gone and the green earth knoweth Slid. Behold me gleaming azure and fair with a thousand

smiles, and swayed by a thousand moods.” And Tintaggon answered: “I am staunch and black and have one mood, and this—to defend my masters and their green earth.”

Then Slid went backward growling and summoned together the waves of a whole sea and sent them singing full in Tintaggon’s face. Then from Tintaggon’s marble front the sea fell backwards crying on to a broken shore, and ripple by ripple straggled back to Slid saying: “Tintaggon stands.”

Far out beyond the battered shore that lay at Tintaggon’s feet Slid rested long and sent the nautilus to drift up and down before Tintaggon’s eyes, and he and his armies sat singing idle songs of dreamy islands far away to the south, and of the still stars whence they had stolen forth, of twilight evenings and of long ago. Still Tintaggon stood with his feet planted fair upon the valley’s edge defending the gods and Their green earth against the sea.

And all the while that Slid sang his songs and played with the nautilus that sailed up and down he gathered his oceans together. One morning as Slid sang of old outrageous wars and of most enchanting peace and of dreamy islands and the south wind and the sun, he suddenly launched five oceans out of the deep all to attack Tintaggon. And the five oceans sprang upon Tintaggon and passed above his head. One by one the grip of the oceans loosened, one by one they fell back into the deep and still Tintaggon stood, and on that morning the might of all five oceans lay dead at Tintaggon’s feet.

That which Slid had conquered he still held, and there is now no longer a great green valley in the south, but all that Tintaggon had guarded against Slid he gave back to the gods. Very calm the sea lies now about Tintaggon’s feet, where he stands all black amid crumbled cliffs of white, with red rocks piled about his feet. And often the sea retreats far out along the shore, and often wave by wave comes marching in with the sound of the tramping of armies, that all may still remember the great fight that surged about Tintaggon once, when he guarded the gods and the green earth against Slid.

Sometimes in their dreams the war-scarred warriors of Slid still lift their heads and cry their battle cry; then do dark clouds gather about Tintaggon’s swarthy brow and he stands out menacing, seen afar by ships, where once he conquered Slid. And the gods know well that while Tintaggon stands They and Their world are safe; and whether Slid shall one day smite Tintaggon is hidden among the secrets of the sea.