

When the Gods Slept

By Lord Dunsany

All the gods were sitting in Pegana, and Their slave, Time, lay idle at Pegana's gate with nothing to destroy, when They thought of worlds, worlds large and round and gleaming, and little silver moons. Then (who knoweth when?), as the gods raised Their hands making the sign of the gods, the thoughts of the gods became worlds and silver moons. And the worlds swam by Pegana's gate to take their places in the sky, to ride at anchor for ever, each where the gods had bidden. And because they were round and big and gleamed all over the sky, the gods laughed and shouted and all clapped Their hands. Then upon earth the gods played out the game of the gods, the game of life and death, and on the other worlds They did a secret thing, playing a game that is hidden.

At last They mocked no more at life and laughed at death no more, and cried aloud in Pegana: "Will no new thing be? Must those four march for ever round the world till our eyes are wearied with the treading of the feet of the Seasons that will not cease, while Night and Day and Life and Death drearily rise and fall?"

And as a child stares at the bare walls of a narrow hut, so the gods looked all listlessly upon the worlds, saying:

"Will no new thing be?"

And in Their weariness the gods said: "Ah! to be young again. Ah! to be fresh once more from the brain of MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI."

And They turned away Their eyes in weariness from all the gleaming worlds and laid Them down upon Pegana's floor, for They said:

"It may be that the worlds shall pass and we would fain forget them."

Then the gods slept. Then did the comet break loose from his moorings and the eclipse roamed about the sky, and down on the earth did Death's three children—Famine, Pestilence, and Drought—come out to feed. The eyes of the Famine were green, and the eyes of the Drought were red, but the Pestilence was blind and smote about all round him with his claws among the cities.

But as the gods slept, there came from beyond the Rim, out of the dark and unknown, three Yozis, spirits of ill, that sailed up the river of Silence in galleons with silver sails. Far away they had seen Yum and Gothum, the stars that stand sentinel over Pegana's gate, blinking and falling asleep, and as they neared Pegana they found a hush wherein the gods slept heavily. Ya, Ha, and Snyrg were these three Yozis, the lords of evil, madness, and of spite. When they crept from their galleons and stole over Pegana's silent threshold it boded ill for the gods. There in Pegana lay the gods asleep, and in a corner lay the Power of the gods alone upon the floor, a thing wrought of black rock and four words graven upon it, whereof I might not give thee any clue, if even I should find it—four words of which none knoweth. Some say they tell of the opening of a flower towards dawn, and others say they concern earthquakes among hills, and others that they tell of the death of fishes, and others that the words be these: Power, Knowledge, Forgetting, and another word that not the gods themselves may ever guess. These words the Yozis read, and sped away in dread lest the gods should wake, and going aboard their galleons, bade the rowers haste. Thus the Yozis became gods, having the power of gods, and they sailed away to the earth, and came to a mountainous island in the sea. There they sat upon the rocks, sitting as the gods sit,

with their right hands uplifted, and having the power of gods, only none came to worship. Thither came no ships nigh them, nor ever at evening came the prayers of men, nor smell of incense, nor screams from the sacrifice. Then said the Yozis:

“Of what avails it that we be gods if no one worship us nor give us sacrifice?”

And Ya, Ha, and Snyrg set sail in their silver galleons, and went looming down the sea to come to the shores of men. And first they came to an island where were fisher folk; and the folk of the island, running down to the shore cried out to them:

“Who be ye?”

And the Yozis answered:

“We be three gods, and we would have your worship.”

But the fisher folk answered:

“Here we worship Rahm, the Thunder, and have no worship nor sacrifice for other gods.”

Then the Yozis snarled with anger and sailed away, and sailed till they came to another shore, sandy and low and forsaken. And at last they found an old man upon the shore, and they cried out to him:

“Old man upon the shore! We be three gods that it were well to worship, gods of great power and apt in the granting of prayer.”

The old man answered:

“We worship Pegana’s gods, who have a fondness for our incense and the sound of our sacrifice when it squeals upon the altar.”

Then answered Snyrg:

“Asleep are Pegana’s gods, nor will They wake for the humming of thy prayers which lie in the dust upon Pegana’s floor, and over Them Sniracte, the spider of the worlds, hath woven a web of mist. And the squealing of the sacrifice maketh no music in ears that are closed in sleep.”

The old man answered, standing upon the shore:

“Though all the gods of old shall answer our prayers no longer, yet still to the gods of old shall all men pray here in Syrinais.”

But the Yozis turned their ships about and angrily sailed away, all cursing Syrinais and Syrinais’s gods, but most especially the old man that stood upon the shore.

Still the three Yozis lusted for the worship of men, and came, on the third night of their sailing, to a city’s lights; and nearing the shore they found it a city of song wherein all folks rejoiced. Then sat each Yozi on his galleon’s prow, and leered with his eyes upon the city, so that the music stopped and the dancing ceased, and all looked out to sea at the strange shapes of the Yozis beneath their silver sails. Then Snyrg demanded their worship, promising increase of joys, and swearing by the light of his eyes that he would send little flames to leap over the grass, to pursue the enemies of that city and to chase them about the world.

But the people answered that in that city men worshipped Agrodaun, the mountain standing alone, and might not worship other gods even though they came in galleons with silver sails, sailing from over the sea. But Snyrg answered:

“Certainly Agrodaun is only a mountain, and in no manner a god.”

But the priests of Agrodaun sang answer from the shore:

“If the sacrifice of men make not Agrodaun a god, nor blood still young on his rocks, nor the little fluttering prayers of ten thousand hearts, nor two thousands years of worship and all the hopes of the people and the whole strength of our race, then are there no gods and ye be common sailors, sailing from over the sea.”

Then said the Yozis:

“Hath Agrodaun answered prayer?” And the people heard the words that the Yozis said.

Then went the priests of Agrodaun away from the shore and up the steep streets of the city, the people following, and over the moor beyond it to the foot of Agrodaun, and then said:

“Agrodaun, if thou art not our god, go back and herd with yonder common hills, and put a cap of snow upon thy head and crouch far off as they do beneath the sky; but if we have given thee divinity in two thousand years, if our hopes are all about thee like a cloak, then stand and look upon thy worshippers from over our city for ever.” And the smoke that ascended from his feet stood still and there fell a hush over great Agrodaun; and the priests went back to the sea and said to the three Yozis:

“New gods shall have our worship when Agrodaun grows weary of being our god, or when in some night-time he shall stride away, leaving us nought to gaze at that is higher than our city.”

And the Yozis sailed away and cursed towards Agrodaun, but could not hurt him, for he was but a mountain.

And the Yozis sailed along the coast till they came to a river running to the sea, and they sailed up the river till they came to a people at work, who furrowed the soil and sowed, and strove against the forest. Then the Yozis called to the people as they worked in the fields:

“Give us your worship and ye shall have many joys.”

But the people answered:

“We may not worship you.”

Then answered Snyrg:

“Ye also, have ye a god?”

And the people answered:

“We worship the years to come, and we set the world in order for their coming, as one layeth raiment on the road before the advent of a King. And when those years shall come, they shall accept the worship of a race they knew not, and their people shall make their sacrifice to the years that follow them, who, in their turn, shall minister to the END.”

Then answered Snyrg:

“Gods that shall recompense you not. Rather give us your prayers and have our pleasures, the pleasures that we shall give you, and when your gods shall come, let them be wroth—they cannot punish you.”

But the people continued to sacrifice their labour to their gods, the years to come, making the world a place for gods to dwell in, and the Yozis cursed those gods and sailed away. And Ya, the Lord of malice, swore that when those years should come, they should see whether it were well for them to have snatched away the worship from three Yozis.

And still the Yozis sailed, for they said:

“It were better to be birds and have no air to fly in, than to be gods having neither prayers nor worship.”

But where sky met with ocean, the Yozis saw land again, and thither sailed; and there the Yozis saw men in strange old garments performing ancient rites in a land of many temples. And the Yozis called to the men as they performed their ancient rites and said:

“We be three gods well versed in the needs of men, to worship whom were to obtain instant joy.”

But the men said:

“We have already gods.”

And Snyrg replied:

“Ye, too?”

The men answered:

“For we worship the things that have been and all the years that were. Divinely have they helped us, therefore we give them worship that is their due.”

And the Yozis answered the people:

“We be gods of the present and return good things for worship.”

But the people answered, saying from the shore:

“Our gods have given us already the good things, and we return Them the worship that is Their due.”

And the Yozis set their faces to landward, and cursed all things that had been and all the years that were, and sailed in their galleons away.

A rocky shore in an inhuman land stood up against the sea. Thither the Yozis came and found no man, but out of the dark from inland towards evening came a herd of great baboons and chattered greatly when they saw the ships.

Then spake Snyrg to them:

“Have ye, too, a god?”

And the baboons spat.

Then said the Yozis:

“We be seductive gods, having a particular remembrance for little prayers.”

But the baboons leered fiercely at the Yozis and would have none of them for gods.

One said that prayers hindered the eating of nuts. But Snyrg leaned forward and whispered, and the baboons went down upon their knees and clasped their hands as men clasp, and chattered prayer and said to one another that these were the gods of old, and gave the Yozis their worship—for Snyrg had whispered in their ears that, if they would worship the Yozis, he would make them men. And the baboons arose from worshipping, smoother about the face and a little shorter in the arms, and went away and hid their bodies in clothing, and afterwards galloped away from the rocky shore and went and herded with men. And men could not discern what they were, for their bodies were bodies of men, though their souls were still the souls of beasts and their worship went to the Yozis, spirits of ill.

And the lords of malice, hatred and madness sailed back to their island in the sea and sat upon the shore as gods sit, with right hand uplifted; and at evening foul prayers from the baboons gathered about them and infested the rocks.

But in Pegana the gods awoke with a start.