

# On the Dry Land

Lord Dunsany

Over the marshes hung the gorgeous night with all his wandering bands of nomad stars, and his whole host of still ones blinked and watched.

Over the safe dry land to eastward, grey and cold, the first clear pallor of dawn was coming up above the heads of the immortal gods.

Then, as they neared at last the safety of the dry land, Love looked at the man whom he had led for so long through the marshes, and saw that his hair was white, for it was shining in the pallor of the dawn.

Then they stepped together on to the land, and the old man sat down weary on the grass, for they had wandered in the marshes for many years; and the light of the grey dawn widened above the heads of the gods.

And Love said to the old man, 'I will leave you now.'

And the old man made no answer, but wept softly.

Then Love was grieved in his little careless heart, and he said: 'You must not be sorry that I go, nor yet regret me, nor care for me at all.'

'I am a very foolish child, and was never kind to you, nor friendly. I never cared for your great thoughts, or for what was good in you, but perplexed you by leading you up and down the perilous marshes. And I was so heartless that, had you perished where I led you, it would have been nought to me, and I only stayed with you because you were good to play with.'

'And I am cruel and altogether worthless and not such a one as any should be sorry for when I go, or one to be regretted, or even cared for at all.'

And still the old man spoke not, but wept softly; and Love grieved bitterly in his kindly heart.

And Love said: 'Because I am so small my strength has been concealed from you, and the evil that I have done. But my strength is great, and I have used it unjustly. Often I pushed you from the causeway through the marshes, and cared not if you drowned. Often I mocked you, and caused others to mock you. And often I led you among those that hated me, and laughed when they revenged themselves upon you.'

‘So weep not, for there is no kindness in my heart, but only murder and foolishness, and I am no companion for one so wise as you, but am so frivolous and silly that I laughed at your noble dreams and hindered all your deeds. See now, you have found me out, and now you will send me away, and here you will live at ease, and, undisturbed, have noble dreams of the immortal gods.

‘See now, here is dawn and safety, and *there* is darkness and peril.’

Still the old man wept softly.

Then Love said: ‘Is it thus with you?’ and his voice was grave now and quiet. ‘Are you so troubled? Old friend of so many years, there is grief in my heart for you. Old friend of perilous ventures, I must leave you now. But I will send my brother soon to you—my little brother Death. And he will come up out of the marshes to you, and will not forsake you, but will be true to you as I have not been true.’

And dawn grew brighter over the immortal gods, and the old man smiled through his tears, which glistened wondrously in the increasing light. But Love went down to the night and to the marshes, looking backward over his shoulder as he went, and smiling beautifully about his eyes. And in the marshes whereunto he went, in the midst of the gorgeous night, and under the wandering bands of nomad stars, rose shouts of laughter and the sounds of the dance.

And after a while, with his face towards the morning, Death out of the marshes came up tall and beautiful, and with a faint smile shadowy on his lips, and lifted in his arms the lonely man, being gentle with him, and, murmuring with his low deep voice an ancient song, carried him to the morning to the gods.

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