

The Fall of Babbulkund

Lord Dunsany

I said: 'I will arise now and see Babbulkund, City of Marvel. She is of one age with the earth; the stars are her sisters. Pharaohs of the old time coming conquering from Araby first saw her, a solitary mountain in the desert, and cut the mountain into towers and terraces. They destroyed one of the hills of God, but they made Babbulkund. She is carven, not built; her palaces are one with her terraces, there is neither join nor cleft. Hers is the beauty of the youth of the world. She deemeth herself to be the middle of Earth, and hath four gates facing outward to the Nations. There sits outside her eastern gate a colossal god of stone. His face flushes with the lights of dawn. When the morning sunlight warms his lips they part a little, and he giveth utterance to the words "Oon Oom," and the language is long since dead in which he speaks, and all his worshippers are gathered to their tombs, so that none knoweth what the words portend that he uttereth at dawn. Some say that he greets the sun as one god greets another in the language thereof, and others say that he proclaims the day, and others that he uttereth warning. And at every gate is a marvel not credible until beholden.'

And I gathered three friends and said to them: 'We are what we have seen and known. Let us journey now and behold Babbulkund, that our minds may be beautified with it and our spirits made holier.'

So we took ship and travelled over the lifting sea, and remembered not things done in the towns we knew, but laid away the thoughts of them like soiled linen and put them by, and dreamed of Babbulkund.

But when we came to the land of which Babbulkund is the abiding glory, we hired a caravan of camels and Arab guides, and passed southwards in the afternoon on the three days' journey through the desert that should bring us to the white walls of Babbulkund. And the heat of the sun shone upon us out of the bright grey sky, and the heat of the desert beat up at us from below.

About sunset we halted and tethered our horses, while the Arabs unloaded the provisions from the camels and prepared a fire out of the dry scrub, for at sunset the heat of the desert departs from it suddenly, like a bird. Then we saw a traveller approaching us on a camel coming from the south. When he was come near we said to him:

'Come and encamp among us, for in the desert all men are brothers, and we will give thee meat to eat and wine, or, if thou art bound by thy faith, we will give thee some other drink that is not accursed by the prophet.'

The traveller seated himself beside us on the sand, and crossed his legs and answered:

‘Hearken, and I will tell you of Babbulkund, City of Marvel. Babbulkund stands just below the meeting of the rivers, where Oonrana, River of Myth, flows into the Waters of Fable, even the old stream Plegáthanees. These, together, enter her northern gate rejoicing. Of old they flowed in the dark through the Hill that Nehemoth, the first of Pharaohs, carved into the City of Marvel. Sterile and desolate they float far through the desert, each in the appointed cleft, with life upon neither bank, but give birth in Babbulkund to the sacred purple garden whereof all nations sing. Thither all the bees come on a pilgrimage at evening by a secret way of the air. Once, from his twilit kingdom, which he rules equally with the sun, the moon saw and loved Babbulkund, clad with her purple garden; and the moon wooed Babbulkund, and she sent him weeping away, for she is more beautiful than all her sisters the stars. Her sisters come to her at night into her maiden chamber. Even the gods speak sometimes of Babbulkund, clad with her purple garden. Listen, for I perceive by your eyes that ye have not seen Babbulkund; there is a restlessness in them and an unappeased wonder. Listen. In the garden whereof I spoke there is a lake that hath no twin or fellow in the world; there is no companion for it among all the lakes. The shores of it are of glass, and the bottom of it. In it are great fish having golden and scarlet scales, and they swim to and fro. Here it is the wont of the eighty-second Nehemoth (who rules in the city today) to come, after the dusk has fallen, and sit by the lake alone, and at this hour eight hundred slaves go down by steps through caverns into vaults beneath the lake. Four hundred of them carrying purple lights march one behind the other, from east to west, and four hundred carrying green lights march one behind the other, from west to east. The two lines cross and re-cross each other in and out as the slaves go round and round, and the fearful fish flash up and down and to and fro.’

But upon that traveller speaking night descended, solemn and cold, and we wrapped ourselves in our blankets and lay down upon the sand in the sight of the astral sisters of Babbulkund. And all that night the desert said many things, softly and in a whisper, but I knew not what he said. Only the sand knew and arose and was troubled and lay down again, and the wind knew. Then, as the hours of the night went by, these two discovered the foot-tracks wherewith we had disturbed the holy desert, and they troubled over them and covered them up; and then the wind lay down and the sand rested. Then the wind arose again and the sand danced. This they did many times. And all the while the desert whispered what I shall not know.

Then I slept awhile and awoke just before sunrise, very cold. Suddenly the sun leapt up and flamed upon our faces; we all threw off our blankets and stood up. Then we took food, and afterwards started southwards, and in the heat of the day rested, and afterwards pushed on again. And all the while the desert remained the same, like a dream that will not cease to trouble a tired sleeper.

And often travellers passed us in the desert, coming from the City of Marvel, and there was a light and a glory in their eyes from having seen Babbulkund.

That evening, at sunset, another traveller neared us, and we hailed him, saying:

‘Wilt thou eat and drink with us, seeing that all men are brothers in the desert?’

And he descended from his camel and sat by us and said:

‘When morning shines on the colossus Neb and Neb speaks, at once the musicians of King Nehemoth in Babbulkund awake.

‘At first their fingers wander over their golden harps, or they stroke idly their violins. Clearer and clearer the note of each instrument ascends like larks arising from the dew, till suddenly they all blend together and a new melody is born. Thus, every morning, the musicians of King Nehemoth make a new marvel in the City of Marvel; for these are no common musicians, but masters of melody, raided by conquest long since, and carried away in ships from the Isles of Song. And, at the sound of the music, Nehemoth awakes in the eastern chamber of his palace, which is carved in the form of a great crescent, four miles long, on the northern side of the city. Full in the windows of its eastern chamber the sun rises, and full in the windows of its western chamber the sun sets.

‘When Nehemoth awakes he summons slaves who bring a palanquin with bells, which the King enters, having lightly robed. Then the slaves run and bear him to the onyx Chamber of the Bath, with the sound of small bells ringing as they run. And when Nehemoth emerges thence, bathed and anointed, the slaves run on with their ringing palanquin and bear him to the Orient Chamber of Banquets, where the King takes the first meal of the day. Thence, through the great white corridor whose windows all face sunwards, Nehemoth, in his palanquin, passes on to the Audience Chamber of Embassies from the North, which is all decked with Northern wares.

‘All about it are ornaments of amber from the North and carven chalices of the dark brown Northern crystal, and on its floors lie furs from Baltic shores.

‘In adjoining chambers are stored the wonted food of the hardy Northern men, and the strong wine of the North, pale but terrible. Therein the King receives barbarian princes from the frigid lands. Thence the slaves bear him swiftly to the Audience Chamber of Embassies from the East, where the walls are of turquoise, studded with the rubies of Ceylon, where the gods are the gods of the East, where all the hangings have been devised in the gorgeous heart of Ind, and where all the carvings have been wrought with the cunning of the isles. Here, if a caravan hath chanced to have come in from Ind or from Cathay, it is the King’s wont to converse awhile with Moguls or Mandarins, for from the East come the arts and

knowledge of the world, and the converse of their people is polite. Thus Nehemoth passes on through the other Audience Chambers and receives, perhaps, some Sheikhs of the Arab folk who have crossed the great desert from the West, or receives an embassy sent to do him homage from the shy jungle people to the South. And all the while the slaves with the ringing palanquin run westwards, following the sun, and ever the sun shines straight into the chamber where Nehemoth sits, and all the while the music from one or other of his bands of musicians comes tinkling to his ears. But when the middle of the day draws near, the slaves run to the cool groves that lie along the verandahs on the northern side of the palace, forsaking the sun, and as the heat overcomes the genius of the musicians, one by one their hands fall from their instruments, till at last all melody ceases. At this moment Nehemoth falls asleep, and the slaves put the palanquin down and lie down beside it. At this hour the city becomes quite still, and the palace of Nehemoth and the tombs of the Pharaohs of old face to the sunlight, all alike in silence. Even the jewellers in the market-place, selling gems to princes, cease from their bargaining and cease to sing; for in Babbulkund the vendor of rubies sings the song of the ruby, and the vendor of sapphires sings the song of the sapphire, and each stone hath its song, so that a man, by his song, proclaims and makes known his wares.

‘But all these sounds cease at the meridian hour, the jewellers in the market-place lie down in what shadow they can find, and the princes go back to the cool places in their palaces, and a great hush in the gleaming air hangs over Babbulkund. But in the cool of the late afternoon, one of the King’s musicians will awake from dreaming of his home and will pass his fingers, perhaps, over the strings of his harp and, with the music, some memory may arise of the wind in the glens of the mountains that stand in the Isles of Song. Then the musician will wrench great cries out of the soul of his harp for the sake of the old memory, and his fellows will awake and all make a song of home, woven of sayings told in the harbour when the ships came in, and of tales in the cottages about the people of old time. One by one the other bands of musicians will take up the song, and Babbulkund, City of Marvel, will throb with this marvel anew. Just now Nehemoth awakes, the slaves leap to their feet and bear the palanquin to the outer side of the great crescent palace between the south and the west, to behold the sun again. The palanquin, with its ringing bells, goes round once more; the voices of the jewellers sing again, in the market-place, the song of the emerald, the song of the sapphire; men talk on the housetops, beggars wail in the streets, the musicians bend to their work, all the sounds blend together into one murmur, the voice of Babbulkund speaking at evening. Lower and lower sinks the sun, till Nehemoth, following it, comes with his panting slaves to the great purple garden of which surely thine own country has its songs, from wherever thou art come.

‘There he alights from his palanquin and goes up to a throne of ivory set in the garden’s midst, facing full westwards, and sits there alone, long regarding the sunlight until it is quite gone. At this hour trouble comes into the face of Nehemoth. Men have heard him muttering at the time of sunset: “Even I too, even I too.” Thus do King Nehemoth and the sun make

their glorious ambits about Babbulkund.

‘A little later, when the stars come out to envy the beauty of the City of Marvel, the King walks to another part of the garden and sits in an alcove of opal all alone by the marge of the sacred lake. This is the lake whose shores and floors are of glass, which is lit from beneath by slaves with purple lights and with green lights intermingling, and is one of the seven wonders of Babbulkund. Three of the wonders are in the city’s midst and four are at her gates. There is the lake, of which I tell thee, and the purple garden of which I have told thee and which is a wonder even to the stars, and there is Ong Zwarba, of which I shall tell thee also. And the wonders at the gates are these. At the eastern gate Neb. And at the northern gate the wonder of the river and the arches, for the River of Myth, which becomes one with the Waters of Fable in the desert outside the city, floats under a gate of pure gold, rejoicing, and under many arches fantastically carved that are one with either bank. The marvel at the western gate is the marvel of Annolith and the dog Voth. Annolith sits outside the western gate facing towards the city. He is higher than any of the towers or palaces, for his head was carved from the summit of the old hill; he hath two eyes of sapphire wherewith he regards Babbulkund, and the wonder of the eyes is that they are today in the same sockets wherein they glowed when first the world began, only the marble that covered them has been carved away and the light of day let in and the sight of the envious stars. Larger than a lion is the dog Voth beside him; every hair is carved upon the back of Voth, his war hackles are erected and his teeth are bared. All the Nehemoths have worshipped the god Annolith, but all their people pray to the dog Voth, for the law of the land is that none but a Nehemoth may worship the god Annolith. The marvel at the southern gate is the marvel of the jungle, for he comes with all his wild untravelled sea of darkness and trees and tigers and sunward-aspiring orchids right through a marble gate in the city wall and enters the city, and there widens and holds a space in its midst of many miles across. Moreover, he is older than the City of Marvel, for he dwelt long since in one of the valleys of the mountain which Nehemoth, first of Pharaohs, carved into Babbulkund.

‘Now the opal alcove in which the King sits at evening by the lake stands at the edge of the jungle, and the climbing orchids of the jungle have long since crept from their homes through clefts of the opal alcove, lured by the lights of the lake, and now bloom there exultingly. Near to this alcove are the hareems of Nehemoth.

‘The King hath four hareems—one for the stalwart women from the mountains to the north, one for the dark and furtive jungle women, one for the desert women that have wandering souls and pine in Babbulkund, and one for the princesses of his own kith, whose brown cheeks blush with the blood of ancient Pharaohs and who exult with Babbulkund in her surpassing beauty, and who know nought of the desert or the jungle or the bleak hills to the north. Quite unadorned and clad in simple garments go all the kith of Nehemoth, for they know well that he grows weary of pomp. Unadorned all save one, the Princess Linderith, who weareth Ong Zwarba and the three lesser gems of the sea. Such a stone is Ong Zwarba

that there are none like it even in the turban of Nehemoth nor in all the sanctuaries of the sea. The same god that made Linderith made long ago Ong Zwarba; she and Ong Zwarba shine together with one light, and beside this marvellous stone gleam the three lesser ones of the sea.

‘Now when the King sitteth in his opal alcove by the sacred lake with the orchids blooming around him all sounds are become still. The sound of the tramping of the weary slaves as they go round and round never comes to the surface. Long since the musicians sleep, and their hands have fallen dumb upon their instruments, and the voices in the city have died away. Perhaps a sigh of one of the desert women has become half a song, or on a hot night in summer one of the women of the hills sings softly a song of snow; all night long in the midst of the purple garden sings one nightingale; all else is still; the stars that look on Babbulkund arise and set, the cold unhappy moon drifts lonely through them, the night wears on; at last the dark figure of Nehemoth, eighty-second of his line, rises and moves stealthily away.’

The traveller ceased to speak. For a long time the clear stars, sisters of Babbulkund, had shone upon him speaking, the desert wind had arisen and whispered to the sand, and the sand had long gone secretly to and fro; none of us had moved, none of us had fallen asleep, not so much from wonder at his tale as from the thought that we ourselves in two days’ time should see that wondrous city. Then we wrapped our blankets around us and lay down with our feet towards the embers of our fire and instantly were asleep, and in our dreams we multiplied the fame of the City of Marvel.

The sun arose and flamed upon our faces, and all the desert glinted with its light. Then we stood up and prepared the morning meal, and, when we had eaten, the traveller departed. And we commended his soul to the god of the land whereto he went, of the land of his home to the northward, and he commended our souls to the God of the people of the land wherefrom we had come. Then a traveller overtook us going on foot; he wore a brown cloak that was all in rags and he seemed to have been walking all night, and he walked hurriedly but appeared weary, so we offered him food and drink, of which he partook thankfully. When we asked him where he was going, he answered ‘Babbulkund.’ Then we offered him a camel upon which to ride, for we said, ‘We also go to Babbulkund.’ But he answered strangely:

‘Nay, pass on before me, for it is a sore thing never to have seen Babbulkund, having lived while yet she stood. Pass on before me and behold her, and then flee away at once, returning northwards.’

Then, though we understood him not, we left him, for he was insistent, and passed on our journey southwards through the desert, and we came before the middle of the day to an oasis of palm trees standing by a well and there we gave water to the haughty camels and

replenished our water-bottles and soothed our eyes with the sight of green things and tarried for many hours in the shade. Some of the men slept, but of those that remained awake each man sang softly the songs of his own country, telling of Babbulkund. When the afternoon was far spent we travelled a little way southwards, and went on through the cool evening until the sun fell low and we encamped, and as we sat in our encampment the man in rags overtook us, having travelled all the day, and we gave him food and drink again, and in the twilight he spoke, saying:

‘I am the servant of the Lord the God of my people, and I go to do his work on Babbulkund. She is the most beautiful city in the world; there hath been none like her, even the stars of God go envious of her beauty. She is all white, yet with streaks of pink that pass through her streets and houses like flames in the white mind of a sculptor, like desire in Paradise. She hath been carved of old out of a holy hill, no slaves wrought the City of Marvel, but artists toiling at the work they loved. They took no pattern from the houses of men, but each man wrought what his inner eye had seen and carved in marble the visions of his dream. All over the roof of one of the palace chambers winged lions flit like bats, the size of every one is the size of the lions of God, and the wings are larger than any wing created; they are one above the other more than a man can number, they are all carved out of one block of marble, the chamber itself is hollowed from it, and it is borne aloft upon the carved branches of a grove of clustered tree-ferns wrought by the hand of some jungle mason that loved the tall fern well. Over the River of Myth, which is one with the Waters of Fable, go bridges, fashioned like the wisteria tree and like the drooping laburnum, and a hundred others of wonderful devices, the desire of the souls of masons a long while dead. Oh! very beautiful is white Babbulkund, very beautiful she is, but proud; and the Lord the God of my people hath seen her in her pride, and looking towards her hath seen the prayers of Nehemoth going up to the abomination Annoloth and all the people following after Voth. She is very beautiful, Babbulkund; alas that I may not bless her. I could live always on one of her inner terraces looking on the mysterious jungle in her midst and the heavenward faces of the orchids that, clambering from the darkness, behold the sun. I could love Babbulkund with a great love, yet am I the servant of the Lord the God of my people, and the King hath sinned unto the abomination Annoloth, and the people lust exceedingly for Voth. Alas for thee, Babbulkund, alas that I may not even now turn back, for tomorrow I must prophesy against thee and cry out against thee, Babbulkund. But ye travellers that have entreated me hospitably, rise and pass on with your camels, for I can tarry no longer, and I go to do the work on Babbulkund of the Lord the God of my people. Go now and see the beauty of Babbulkund before I cry out against her, and then flee swiftly northwards.’

A smouldering fragment fell in upon our camp fire and sent a strange light into the eyes of the man in rags. He rose at once, and his tattered cloak swirled up with him like a great wing; he said no more, but turned round from us instantly southwards, and strode away into the darkness towards Babbulkund. Then a hush fell upon our encampment, and the smell of the tobacco of those lands arose. When the last flame died down in our camp fire I

fell asleep, but my rest was troubled by shifting dreams of doom.

Morning came, and our guides told us that we should come to the city ere nightfall. Again we passed southwards through the changeless desert; sometimes we met travellers coming from Babbulkund, with the beauty of its marvels still fresh in their eyes.

When we encamped near the middle of the day we saw a great number of people on foot coming towards us running, from the southwards. These we hailed when they were come near, saying, 'What of Babbulkund?'

They answered: 'We are not of the race of the people of Babbulkund, but were captured in youth and taken away from the hills that are to the northward. Now we have all seen in visions of the stillness the Lord the God of our people calling to us from His hills, and therefore we all flee northwards. But in Babbulkund King Nehemoth hath been troubled in the nights by unkingly dreams of doom, and none may interpret what the dreams portend. Now this is the dream that King Nehemoth dreamed on the first night of his dreaming. He saw move through the stillness a bird all black, and beneath the beatings of his wings Babbulkund gloomed and darkened; and after him flew a bird all white, beneath the beatings of whose wings Babbulkund gleamed and shone; and there flew by four more birds alternately black and white. And, as the black ones passed Babbulkund darkened, and when the white ones appeared her streets and houses shone. But after the sixth bird there came no more, and Babbulkund vanished from her place, and there was only the empty desert where she had stood, and the rivers Oonrana and Plegáthanees mourning alone. Next morning all the prophets of the King gathered before their abominations and questioned them of the dream, and the abominations spake not. But when the second night stepped down from the halls of God, dowered with many stars, King Nehemoth dreamed again; and in this dream King Nehemoth saw four birds only, black and white alternately as before. And Babbulkund darkened again as the black ones passed, and shone when the white came by; only after the four birds came no more, and Babbulkund vanished from her place, leaving only the forgetful desert and the mourning rivers.

'Still the abominations spake not, and none could interpret the dream. And when the third night came forth from the divine halls of her home dowered like her sisters, again King Nehemoth dreamed. And he saw a bird all black go by again, beneath whom Babbulkund darkened, and then a white bird and Babbulkund shone; and after them came no more, and Babbulkund passed away. And the golden day appeared, dispelling dreams, and still the abominations were silent, and the King's prophets answered not to portend the omen of the dream. One prophet only spake before the King, saying: "The sable birds, O King, are the nights, and the white birds are the days. . ." This thing the King had feared, and he arose and smote the prophet with his sword, whose soul went crying away and had to do no more with nights and days.

‘It was last night that the King dreamed his third dream, and this morning we fled away from Babbulkund. A great heat lies over it, and the orchids of the jungle droop their heads. All night long the women in the hareem of the North have wailed horribly for their hills. A fear hath fallen upon the city, and a boding. Twice hath Nehemoth gone to worship Annolith, and all the people have prostrated themselves before Voth. Thrice the horologers have looked into the great crystal globe wherein are foretold all happenings to be, and thrice the globe was blank. Yea, though they went a fourth time yet was no vision revealed; and the people’s voice is hushed in Babbulkund.’

Soon the travellers arose and pushed on northwards again, leaving us wondering. Through the heat of the day we rested as well as we might, but the air was motionless and sultry and the camels ill at ease. The Arabs said that it boded a desert storm, and that a great wind would arise full of sand. So we arose in the afternoon, and travelled swiftly, hoping to come to shelter before the storm. And the air burned in the stillness between the baked desert and the glaring sky.

Suddenly a wind arose out of the South, blowing from Babbulkund, and the sand lifted and went by in great shapes, all whispering. And the wind blew violently, and wailed as it blew, and hundreds of sandy shapes went towering by, and there were little cries among them and the sounds of a passing away. Soon the wind sank quite suddenly, and its cries died, and the panic ceased among the driven sands. And when the storm departed the air was cool, and the terrible sultriness and the boding were passed away, and the camels had ease among them. And the Arabs said that the storm which was to be had been, as was willed of old by God.

The sun set and the gloaming came, and we neared the junction of Oonrana and Plegáthanees, but in the darkness discerned not Babbulkund. We pushed on hurriedly to reach the city ere nightfall, and came to the junction of the River of Myth where he meets with the Waters of Fable, and still saw not Babbulkund. All round us lay the sand and rocks of the unchanging desert, save to the southwards where the jungle stood with its orchids facing skywards. Then we perceived that we had arrived too late, and that her doom had come to Babbulkund; and by the river in the empty desert on the sand the man in rags was seated, with his face hidden in his hands, weeping bitterly.

Thus passed away in the hour of her iniquities before Annolith, in the two thousand and thirty-second year of her being, in the six thousand and fiftieth year of the building of the World, Babbulkund, City of Marvel, sometime called by those that hated her City of the Dog, but hourly mourned in Araby and Ind and wide through jungle and desert; leaving no memorial in stone to show that she had been, but remembered with an abiding love, in spite of the anger of God, by all that knew her beauty, whereof still they sing.

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