Sardalifië

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In my younger years I sailed upon the rivers of the midlands, for then there were many towns upon its banks and a modest fortune to be had as a porter of goods and men. In the daytime its channels were crowded with vessels of many curious shapes, the banners of unknown lands, and far did rise the shouts of men in tongues strange and fair. But at twilight that bustling country fell still; then, I became a merchant of fables, a haggler of tale.

There was a man from some land afar, and this I knew because his speech was somewhat irregular and bore an accent very queer. But he was a quiet yet fine teller—not the finest, no, but very well—and I a listener to his taste, that for many an evening in those idle days did we sail with no end in mind but the fullness of our souls, and from gloaming unto morning, the oars dipped to the tune of tales beyond the sea.

Often did he tell of fair Sardalië, which I have never forgotten; hear now. It was the city of his youth; that is a very long time ago, my boy. And it commanded unmatched beauty. For in a day, one could behold the passing of a year that saw no winter on its terraces, tinted with the golden mist of dawn like the meadows of lilies on rolling knolls. Upon its white walls could one catch colors of a multitude, the dappled rays of a youthful grove stretching across the eves, and the sparkling of their brows were as the twinkling tips of bedewed leaves. At noon the sun was height and warmth, and glid and sang the birds at each corner and bend, and the fresh plumes of spring filled the broad streets and drifted through open doors to settle upon the sills. Then the people mingled upon its white cobbles and hailed each other with merriment, or gathered about the rooms and on the terraces with fair food and

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fairer cheer. For in that place were many artisans of the mind, gifted writers, and poets, and musicians. And the folk from all the surrounding country came through its open gates to share in their delight. When the day did wane at last, even then did ne'er beauty desert that city but scatter about its streets the blushes of autumn, for so interwove the heat of twilight with its mosaics of copper and gold. Then was there yet deeper comfort through fellowship that lacked for none, and good drink and hale hearth. Then the hush of the night, solitude without loneliness.

So was that city the great pride of its lands, and, in time, the great envy of many.

In those days, the Kings of the city announced each year after the last snows a major feast to herald the return of springtime. All from her farmsteads and the neighbouring countries and yet unknown lands were welcomed, and for seven nights and seven days all the streets burgeoned with life with the reception of a terrific multitude of peoples, and there abounded much leisure and refreshment during the day, and feasting and music, and chanting of thanks and peace, and joyous chatter deep into the evening. It was custom to eat after dusk of the winter crop, a large melon of amber hue. Only in the Sardalinaë earth would its plant take root, even through the frost, and swell to a bulb as many as three hands wide and radiant. And even as the snows layered heavily upon the fields, one looking from the hills saw of Sardalië a beacon set upon a sea illuminated.

The teller would recall that prized fruit, and long had he gone hither and thither to rediscover it, a strange, ineffable sweetness, a succulence, the rosiness of daybreak, yet the tart of wintertide lingers. But there is none which may contend as its equal.

In time I thought that I should like to see this fair land for myself, so amply had his own devotion to that place animated anew a yearning in my own mind, even from a vision like a splintered shaft and waning. Oh I can do it no justice, my boy, none at all. For how can you now exalt the glory which I cannot grasp even for myself? Therefore, on one autumn's night after the teller had finished another tale, I at last inquired of him, that he might make known to me the roads that lead to Sardalië, that I might see it for myself. And he opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out, and he stared at me, and I saw the flares of first light flickering in his eyes. The sun was rising in the east. Then he turned away, and I asked no more of it.

But many days thereafter, he spoke quietly of the first festival of his full youth. One whom they figured a sage came into the city on the sixth night, the height of revelry, alone as some did fare. And in the early morning he requested audience with the King. But the stewards thought his countenance grim, and in that time of festivity answered that he must await the following day, for then the King would be disposed to hear his news or his counsel or whatever he may desire to speak. Until then, he was welcome to join in celebration, and they did him well, even to offer a room in the palace quarters, for they perceived him to be a man of deep wisdom.

But he went out of the inner courtyards and began to foretell in the streets of a impending doom. In each square he told of the same, a terrible destruction upon Sardalië: a blight over its country, a shattering of its light, and the march of its enemies upon its ruins. Indeed, he declared, such happenings were imminent.

To those who heard came confusion and unrest, a seizing fear to some, and incredulity to others. The servants of the King and the stewards came and bade him return, but when the sage continued to prophesy to them as though they had not spoken, they seized and conducted him to the palace. Behind the doors of the highest chamber where the throne and its house take counsel, they bade this man speak that which he would speak, for commanded the King, "Thou who wouldst not abide til the morning, speak that which thou wilt, and I as King will hear thy words in earnest, and my house besides. But thou shalt no more disquiet my people."

And the sage spoke, gazing not at the stewards nor the King but past them. "Hear thy judgment, whose delivery has been given to me. When on the final day the fire of the earth is eaten, and the spirit of the land lay dry, and all the country is swathed in night, shall the end come to thy beloved city. No sign will be found, but will the wolves come upon the fold as devouring flames erupt from a spark. So will the first buds of spring perish as the last. Then shall the vile crawl in thy homes and the foul soles of thy enemies trample thy ways. For as radiant as fair Sardalië is now known, so shall the shadow of its reign be not less but indeed far surpass it, unto the end of the ages."

The countenance of the King grew grim, and upon the hearts of the stewards came at once a ghastly fear, for he spoke with a clutching authority. They began to mutter restlessly amongst one another about this strange divination,

and they bade him tell more of the time and condition of these events. But the prophet spoke none more, and departed from the city as he had come. The King and his stewards remained, and they took hidden counsel in that high chamber.

Yet the festivities passed with little more incident, and all the people returned to their own lands, sated and easy, for few remembered the riotous callings of the madman, and those who did dismissed them as such. And Sardalië flourished for many ages. In time, indeed, the King passed, and his stewards followed in due course. In his place was raised another upon that hill of prophesy. Yet in a while, too, the memory of those words left the minds of men and settled amongst the letters and lists of the dusty inner rooms. In those years, the springtime feast continued annually.

Then he did not continue, but a shadow came into his gaze and to his lips a silence. I dared not urge him on. But after a long time, he went on. We had slipped under a canopy of reaching willows. He muttered under his breath some word, a chant or a lament, in his own idiom. I strained to listen.

There fell on the land a pitiless winter, that even the folk of that bountiful city should endure a binding cold, and hunger, and malady. For the harvest had been neither poor nor plenty, but the chill seeped into all the stores and much was rotted by its grasp. Many perished, young and old. Stiff was the frigid grip that even the rivers of the foothills halted in ice, and the whole place became a sheet of white. No one traveled in that season. And the King, young in those days, died with no heir. Therefore the stewards took up their place at the council and elected from amongst themselves a Steward to whom the keys of the city would be entrusted until another should be born of a sister or a cousin of the house. The Steward declared a time of weeping in the New Year. In the deathly cold, all took to mourning by the hearths, for indeed was there much mourning at hand.

But in the days following the last snows, the winds fled upward, and the valleys warmed. The Steward declared that the fair city should doubtless recover and the annual feast be held in short time. Indeed, terrific bulbs lined the snow-melted farmlands, the most prodigious yet seen. When the burials were complete, they set about in liveliness to the harvest and other preparations. Again after a long while, cheer came to the city.

Yet on that morning the sky would not lighten, but the pale glow of the overcast morning waned and crept off below the horizon. The clouds grew

riotous, rolling billows. The land was shrouded but for the fire of the sun; it blazed yet, a splintered crystal behind a curtain of black. And all around ceased in their doings in the fields and the streets and upon the balconies but stared in dismay. Then it was devoured.

Then the clap of a blast sounded for many miles, for the keep was laid to waste, and the hill of Sardalië torn asunder. The swords of the city marshalled to its foot to confront their enemy who by some way or another had infiltrated into the bowels of the palace—yet may no man by his own hands so rend the earth.

Therewith came suddenly the tremors of crashing hooves by the multitude, for the armies of her enemies were upon the fields of fair Sardalië. From their copses of concealment they thundered upon the unharvested fruits, and the din of a terrible shattering rang beneath the cries of anticipation and the fury of the hosts. And the banners of many colours encroached upon the hill. Bewildered were they to encounter one other on the champaign; the whole terrain was cast into battle, stranger upon stranger, even friend upon friend—outsiders under a tarnishing light. Then the clamors of warfare turned indistinct, swallowed by a dreadful gurgling; whence came the shouts of fury rose now beastly howls, and warriors shrieked as banshees, and the peals of steel broke to a cacophony of chattering, and ruptures, and the quench and the smoke of the souls of men.

We reached then the fens, and the teller bade me to moor by the trees. Then he rose and went, and thereafter I haggled no more.