

Under the Sunset

by

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Far, far away, there is a beautiful Country which no human eye has ever seen in waking hours. Under the Sunset it lies, where the distant horizon bounds the day, and where the clouds, splendid with light and colour, give a promise of the glory and beauty which encompass it.

Sometimes it is given to us to see it in dreams.

Now and again come, softly, Angels who fan with their great white wings the aching brows, and place cool hands upon the sleeping eyes. Then soars away the spirit of the sleeper. Up from the dimness and murkiness of the night season it springs. Away through the purple clouds it sails. It hies through the vast expanse of light and air. Through the deep blue of heaven's vault it flies; and sweeping over the far-off horizon, rests in the fair Land Under the Sunset.

This Country is like our own Country in many ways. It has men and women, kings and queens, rich and poor; it has houses, and trees, and fields, and birds, and flowers. There is

day there and night also; and heat and cold, and sickness and health. The hearts of men and women, and boys and girls, beat as they do here. There are the same sorrows and the same joys; and the same hopes and the same fears.

If a child from that Country was beside a child here you could not tell the difference between them, save that the clothes alone are different. They talk the same language as we do ourselves. They do not know that they are different from us; and we do not know that we are different from them. When they come to us in their dreams we do not know they are strangers; and when we go to their Country in our dreams we seem to be at home. Perhaps this is because good people's homes are in their hearts; and wheresoever they may be they have peace.

The Country Under the Sunset was for long ages a wondrous and pleasant Land. Nothing there was which was not beautiful and sweet and pleasant. It was only when sin came that things there began to lose their perfect beauty. Even now it is a wondrous and pleasant land.

As the sun is strong there, by the sides of every road are planted great trees which spread out their thick branches. So the travellers have shelter as they pass. The milestones are fountains of sweet cold water, so clear and bright that when the wayfarer comes to one he sits down on the carved stone seat beside it and gives a sigh of relief, for he knows that there is rest.

When it is sunset here, it is the middle of the day there. The clouds gather and shade the Land from the great heat. Then for a little while everything goes to sleep.

This sweet, peaceful hour is called the Rest Time.

When it comes the birds stop their singling, and lie close under the wide eaves of the houses, or in the branches of the trees where they join the stems. The fishes stop darting about in the water, and lie close under the stones, with their fins and tails as still as if they were dead. The sheep and the cattle lie under the trees. The men and women get into hammocks slung between trees or under the verandahs of their houses. Then, when the sun has ceased to glare so fiercely and the clouds have melted away, the living things all wake up.

The only living things that are not asleep in the Rest Time are the dogs. They lie quite quiet, only half asleep, with one eye open and one ear cocked; keeping watch all the time. Then if any stranger comes during the hour of Rest, the dogs rise up and look at him, softly, without barking, lest they should disturb anyone. They know if the new comer is harmless; and if it be so they lie down again, and the stranger lies down too till the Rest Time is over.

But if the dogs think that the stranger is come to do any harm, they bark loudly and growl. The cows begin to low and the sheep to bleat, and the birds to chirp and sing their loudest notes, but without any music in them; and even the fishes begin to dart about and

splash the water. The men awake and jump out of their hammocks, and seize their weapons. Then it is an evil time for the intruder. Straightway he is brought into the Court and tried, and if found guilty sentenced, and either put into prison or banished.

Then the men go back to their hammocks, and all living things retire again till the Rest Time is over.

It is the same in the night as in the Rest Time, if an intruder comes to do harm. In the night only the dogs are awake, and the sick people and their nurses.

No one can leave the Country Under the Sunset except in one direction. Those who go there in dreams, or who come in dreams to our world, come and go they know not how; but if an inhabitant tries to leave it, he cannot except by one way. If he tries any other way he goes on and on, turning without knowing it, till he comes to the one place where only he can depart.

This place is called the Portal, and there the Angels keep guard.

Exactly in the middle of the Country is the palace of the King, and the roads stretch away from it on every side. When the King stands on the top of the tower, which rises to a great height from the middle of his palace, he can look along the roads, which are all quite straight.

They seem to become narrower and narrower as they get further, till at last they are lost altogether in the mere distance.

Round the King's palace are gathered the houses of the great nobles, each being close in proportion to the rank of its owner. Outside these again come the houses of the lesser nobles; and then those of all the other people, getting smaller and smaller as they get further.

Every house, big and little, stands in the middle of a garden, which has a fountain and a stream of water in it, and big trees, and beds of beautiful flowers.

Farther off, away towards the Portal, the country gets wilder and wilder. Beyond this there are dense forests and great mountains full of deep caverns, as dark as night. Here wild animals and all cruel things have their home.

Then come bogs and fens and deep shaky morasses, and thick jungles. Then all becomes so wild that the road gets lost altogether.

In the wild places beyond this no man knows what dwells. Some say that the Giants who still exist, live there, and that all poisonous plants there grow. They say that there is a wicked wind there that brings out the seeds of all evil things and scatters them over the earth. Some there are who say that the same wicked wind brings out also the Diseases and Plagues that there exist. Others say that Famine lives there in the marshes, and that he

stalks out when men are wicked - so wicked that the Spirits who guard the land are weeping so bitterly that they do not see him pass.

It is whispered that Death has his kingdom in the Solitudes beyond the marshes, and lives in a castle so awful to look at that no one has ever seen it and lived to tell what it is like. Also it is told that all the evil things that live in the marshes are the disobedient Children of Death who have left their home and cannot find their way back again.

But no man knows where the Castle of King Death is. All men and women, boys and girls, and even little wee children should so live that when they have to enter the Castle and see the grim King, they may not fear to behold his face.

For long, Death and his Children stayed without the Portal and all within was joy.

But there came a time when all was changed. The hearts of men grew cold and hard with pride in their prosperity, and they heeded not the lessons which they had been taught. Then when within there was coldness and indifference and disdain, the Angels on guard saw in the terrors that stood without, the means of punishment and the lesson which could do good.

The good lessons came - as good things very often do - after pain and trial, and they taught much. The story of their coming has a lesson for the wise.

At the Portal two Angels for ever kept watch and guard. These angels were so great and so watchful, and were always so steadfast in their guardianship, that there was only one name for them both. Either or both of them would, if spoken to, have been called by the whole name. One of them knew as much as the other did about anything which could have anything known about it. This was not so strange, for they both knew everything. Their name was Fid-Def.

Fid-Def stood on guard at the Portal. Beside them was a Child-Angel, fairer than the light of the sun. The outline of its beautiful form was so soft that it ever seemed to be melting into the air; it seemed a holy living light.

It did not stand as the other Angels did, but floated up and down and all around. Sometimes it was but a tiny speck, and then it would suddenly, without seeming to be making any change, be bigger than the great Guardian Spirits that were the same for ever.

Fid-Def loved the Child-Angel, and as it rose now and again, they spread their great white wings, and it would sometimes stand on them. Its own beautiful soft wings would gently fan their faces as they turned to speak.

But the Child-Angel never went over the threshold. It looked out into the wilderness beyond; but it never put even the tip of its wing over the Portal.

It was asking questions of Fid-Def, and seemed to want to know what was without, and how all there differed from all within.

The questions and the answers of the Angels were not like our questions and answers, for no speech was needed. The moment a thought occurred of wanting to know anything, the question was asked and the answer given. But still the question was given by the Child-Angel and answered by Fid-Def; and if we knew the no-language that the Angels were not-speaking we would have heard thus. Fid-Def was talking to Fid-Def:

"Is not Chiaro beautiful?"

"He is very beautiful. He will be a new power in the Land."

Here Chiaro, who was standing with one foot on the plume of Fid-Def's wing, said:

"Tell me, Fid-Def, what are those dreadful-looking Beings beyond the Portal?"

Fid-Def answered:

"They are Children of King Death. That dreadfulest one of all, enwrapt in gloom, is Skooro, an Evil Spirit."

"How horrible they look!"

"Very horrible, dear Chiaro; and these Children of Death want to pass through the Portal and enter the Land."

Chiaro, at the terrible news, soared up aloft, and got so big that the whole of the Country Under the Sunset was made bright. Soon, however, he grew smaller and smaller till he was only a speck, like the coloured ray seen in a dark room when the sun comes in through a chink. He asked of the Angels of the Portal:

"Tell me, Fid-Def, why do the Children of Death want to get in?"

"Because, dear Child, they are wicked, and wish to corrupt the hearts of the dwellers in the Land."

"But tell me, Fid-Def, can they get in? Surely, if the All-Father says, No! they must stay ever without the Land."

After a pause came the answer of the Angels of the Portal:

"The All-Father is wiser than even the Angels can conceive. He overthroweth the wicked with their own devices, and he trappeth the hunter in his own snare. The Children of Death when they enter - as they are about to do - shall do much good in the Land,

which they wish to harm. For lo! the hearts of the people are corrupt. They have forgotten the lessons which they have been taught. They do not know how thankful they should be for their happy lot, for of sorrow they wot not. Some pain or grief or sadness must be to them, that so they may see the error of their ways."

As they spoke, the Angels wept in sorrow for the misdeeds of the people and the pain they must endure.

The Child-Angel answered in awe:

"Then this most horrible Being, too, is to enter the Land. Woe! woe!"

"Dear Child," said the Guardian Spirits, as the Child-Angel crept into their bosoms, "on you devolves a great duty. The Children of Death are about to enter. To you has been entrusted the watching of this dread Being, Skooro. Wheresoever he goeth, there must you be also; and so naught of harm can happen - save only what is intended and allowed."

The Child-Angel, awed by the greatness of the trust, resolved that his duty should be well done. Fid-Def went on:

"You must know, dear Child, that without darkness is no fear of the unseen; and not even the darkness of night can fright if there be light within the soul. To the good and pure there is no fear either of the evil things of the earth or of the Powers that are unseen. To you is trusted to guard the pure and true. Skooro will encompass them with his gloom; but to you is given to steal into their hearts and by your own glorious light to make the gloom of the Child of Death unseen and unknown."

"But from evil-doers - from the wicked, and the ungrateful, and the unforgiving, and the impure, and the untrue you will keep afar off; and so when they look for you to comfort them - as they must ever - they will not see you. They will see only the gloom which your far-off light will make seem darker still, for the shadow will be in their very souls."

"But oh, Child, our Father is kind beyond belief. He orders that should any that are evil repent, you will on the instant fly to them, and comfort them, and help them, and cheer them, and drive the shadow afar off. Should they only pretend to repent, meaning to be again wicked when the danger is past; or should they only act from fear, then will you hide your brightness so that the gloom may grow darker still over them. Now, dear Chiaro, become unseen. The time approaches when the Child of Death is to be allowed to enter the Land. He will try to steal in, and we shall let him, for we must work unseen and unknown, that we may do our duty."

Then the Child-Angel faded slowly away, so that no eye - not even the eye of Fid-Def - could see him; and the Guardian Spirits stood as ever beside the Portal.

The Rest Time came; and all was quiet in the Land.

When the Children of Death afar off in the marshes saw that nothing was stirring, save that the Angels stood as ever on guard, they determined to make another effort to gain entrance to the Land.

Accordingly they resolved themselves into many parts. Each part took a different form, but all together they moved on towards the Portal. Thus the Children of Death drew a-nigh the threshold of the Land.

On the wings of a passing bird they came; on a cloud that drifted slowly in the sky; in the snakes that crawled on the earth - in the worms, and mice, and moles that crept under it; in the fishes that swam and the insects that flew. By earth and water and air they came.

So without let or hindrance; and in many ways, the Children of Death entered the country Under the Sunset; and from that hour all in that fair Land was changed.

Not all at once did the Children of Death make themselves known. One by one the bolder spirits amongst them, stalking with fell footsteps through the Land, filled all hearts with terror as they came.

However, each and all of them left a lesson for good in the hearts of the dwellers in the Land.