

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

By Lord Dunsany

Table of Contents

<u>Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories</u>	1
<u>By Lord Dunsany</u>	1
<u>Idle Days on the Yann</u>	1
<u>A Shop in Go-by Street</u>	9

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

By Lord Dunsany

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- [Idle Days on the Yann](#)
 - [A Shop in Go-by Street](#)
-

Idle Days on the Yann

So I came down through the wood to the bank of Yann and found, as had been prophesied, the ship Bird of the River about to loose her cable.

The captain sat cross-legged upon the white deck with his scimitar lying beside him in its jewelled scabbard, and the sailors toiled to spread the nimble sails to bring the ship into the central stream of Yann, and all the while sang ancient soothing songs. And the wind of the evening descending cool from the snowfields of some mountainous abode of distant gods came suddenly, like glad tidings to an anxious city, into the wing-like sails.

And so we came into the central stream, whereat the sailors lowered the greater sails. But I had gone to bow before the captain, and to inquire concerning the miracles, and appearances among men, of the most holy gods of whatever land he had come from. And the captain answered that he came from fair Belzoond, and worshipped gods that were the least and humblest, who seldom sent the famine or the thunder, and were easily appeased with little battles. And I told how I came from Ireland, which is of Europe, whereat the captain and all the sailors laughed, for they said, "There are no such places in all the land of dreams." When they had ceased to mock me, I explained that my fancy mostly dwelt in the desert of Cuppar-Nombo, about a beautiful city called Golthoth the Damned, which was sentinelled all round by wolves and their shadows, and had been utterly desolate for years and years, because of a curse which the gods once spoke in anger and could never since recall. And sometimes my dreams took me as far as Pungar Vees, the red walled city where the fountains are, which trades with the Isles and Thul. When I said this they complimented me upon the abode of my fancy, saying that, though they had never seen these cities, such places might well be imagined. For the rest of that evening I bargained with the captain over the sum that I should pay him for my fare if God and the tide of Yann should bring us safely as far as the cliffs by the sea, which are named Bar-Wul-Yann, the Gate of Yann.

And now the sun had set, and all the colours of the world and heaven had held a festival with him, and slipped one by one away before the imminent approach of night. The parrots had all flown home to the jungle on either bank, the monkeys in rows in safety on high branches of the trees were silent and asleep, the fireflies in the deeps of the forest were going up and down, and the great stars came gleaming out to look on the face of Yann. Then the sailors lighted lanterns and hung them round the ship, and the light flashed out on a sudden and dazzled Yann, and the ducks that fed along his marshy banks all suddenly arose, and made wide circles in the upper air, and saw the distant reaches of the Yann and the white mist that softly cloaked the jungle, before they returned again into their marshes.

And then the sailors knelt on the decks and prayed, not all together, but five or six at a time. Side by side there kneeled down together five or six, for there only prayed at the same time men of different faiths, so that no god

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

should hear two men praying to him at once. As soon as any one had finished his prayer, another of the same faith would take his place. Thus knelt the row of five or six with bended heads under the fluttering sail, while the central stream of the River Yann took them on towards the sea, and their prayers rose up from among the lanterns and went towards the stars. And behind them in the after end of the ship the helmsman prayed aloud the helmsman's prayer, which is prayed by all who follow his trade upon the River Yann, of whatever faith they be. And the captain prayed to his little lesser gods, to the gods that bless Belzoond.

And I too felt that I would pray. Yet I liked not to pray to a jealous God there where the frail affectionate gods whom the heathen love were being humbly invoked; so I bethought me, instead, of Sheol Nugganoth, whom the men of the jungle have long since deserted, who is now unworshipped and alone; and to him I prayed.

And upon us praying the night came suddenly down, as it comes upon all men who pray at evening and upon all men who do not; yet our prayers comforted our own souls when we thought of the Great Night to come.

And so Yann bore us magnificently onwards, for he was elate with molten snow that the Poltiades had brought him from the Hills of Hap, and the Marn and Migris were swollen full with floods; and he bore us in his might past Kyph and Pir, and we saw the lights of Goolunza.

Soon we all slept except the helmsman, who kept the ship in the midstream of Yann.

When the sun rose the helmsman ceased to sing, for by song he cheered himself in the lonely night. When the song ceased we suddenly all awoke, and another took the helm, and the helmsman slept.

We knew that soon we should come to Mandaroon. We made a meal, and Mandaroon appeared. Then the captain commanded, and the sailors loosed again the greater sails, and the ship turned and left the stream of Yann and came into a harbour beneath the ruddy walls of Mandaroon. Then while the sailors went and gathered fruits I came alone to the gate of Mandaroon. A few huts were outside it, in which lived the guard. A sentinel with a long white beard was standing in the gate, armed with a rusty pike. He wore large spectacles, which were covered with dust. Through the gate I saw the city. A deathly stillness was over all of it. The ways seemed untrodden, and moss was thick on doorsteps; in the market-place huddled figures lay asleep. A scent of incense and burned poppies, and there was a hum of the echoes of distant bells. I said to the sentinel in the tongue of the region of Yann, "Why are they all asleep in this still city?"

He answered: "None may ask questions in this gate for fear they wake the people of the city. For when the people of this city wake the gods will die. And when the gods die men may dream no more." And I began to ask him what gods that city worshipped, but he lifted his pike because none might ask questions there. So I left him and went back to the Bird of the River.

Certainly Mandaroon was beautiful with her white pinnacles peering over her ruddy walls and the green of her copper roofs.

When I came back again to the Bird of the River, I found the sailors were returned to the ship. Soon we weighed anchor, and sailed out again, and so came once more to the middle of the river. And now the sun was moving towards his heights, and there had reached us on the River Yann the song of those countless myriads of choirs that attend him in his progress round the world. For the little creatures that have many legs had spread their gauze wings easily on the air, as a man rests his elbows on a balcony and gave jubilant, ceremonial praises to the sun, or else they moved together on the air in wavering dances intricate and swift, or turned aside to avoid the onrush of some drop of water that a breeze had shaken from a jungle orchid, chilling the air and driving it before it, as it fell whirring in its rush to the earth; but all the while they sang triumphantly. "For the day is for us," they said, "whether our great and sacred father the Sun shall bring up more life like us from the marshes, or whether all the world shall end to-night." And there sang all those whose notes are known to human ears, as well as those whose

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

far more numerous notes have never been heard by man.

To these a rainy day had been as an era of war that should desolate continents during all the lifetime of a man.

And there came out also from the dark and steaming jungle to behold and rejoice in the Sun the huge and lazy butterflies. And they danced, but danced idly, on the ways of the air, as some haughty queen of distant conquered lands might in her poverty and exile dance, in some encampment of the gipsies, for the mere bread to live by, but beyond that would never abate her pride to dance for a fragment more.

And the butterflies sung of strange and painted things, of purple orchids and of lost pink cities and the monstrous colours of the jungle's decay. And they, too, were among those whose voices are not discernible by human ears. And as they floated above the river, going from forest to forest, their splendour was matched by the inimical beauty of the birds who darted out to pursue them. Or sometimes they settled on the white and wax-like blooms of the plant that creeps and clammers about the trees of the forest; and their purple wings flashed out on the great blossoms as, when the caravans go from Nurl to Thace, the gleaming silks flash out upon the snow, where the crafty merchants spread them one by one to astonish the mountaineers of the Hills of Noor.

But upon men and beasts the sun sent a drowsiness. The river monsters along the river's marge lay dormant in the slime. The sailors pitched a pavilion, with golden tassels, for the captain upon the deck, and then went, all but the helmsman, under a sail that they had hung as an awning between two masts. Then they told tales to one another, each of his own city or of the miracles of his god, until all were fallen asleep. The captain offered me the shade of his pavilion with the gold tassels, and there we talked for a while, he telling me that he was taking merchandise to Perdónaris, and that he would take back to fair Belzoond things appertaining to the affairs of the sea. Then, as I watched through the pavilion's opening the brilliant birds and butterflies that crossed and recrossed over the river, I fell asleep, and dreamed that I was a monarch entering his capital underneath arches of flags, and all the musicians of the world were there, playing melodiously their instruments; but no one cheered.

In the afternoon, as the day grew cooler again, I awoke and found the captain buckling on his scimitar, which he had taken off him while he rested.

And now we were approaching the wide court of Astahahn, which opens upon the river. Strange boats of antique were chained there to the steps. As we neared it we saw the open marble court, on three sides of which stood the city fronting on colonnades. And in the court and along the colonnades the people of that city walked with solemnity and care according to the rites of ancient ceremony. All in that city was of ancient device; the carving on the houses, which, when age had broken it remained unrepaired, was of the remotest times, and everywhere were represented in stone beasts that have long since passed away from Earth—the dragon, the griffin, and the hippogriffin, and the different species of gargoyle. Nothing was to be found, whether material or custom, that was new in Astahahn. Now they took no notice at all of us as we went by, but continued their processions and ceremonies in the ancient city, and the sailors, knowing their custom, took no notice of them. But I called, as we came near, to one who stood beside the water's edge, asking him what men did in Astahahn and what their merchandise was, and with whom they traded. He said, "Here we have fettered and manacled Time, who would otherwise slay the gods."

I asked him what gods they worshipped in that city, and he said, "All those gods whom Time has not yet slain." Then he turned from me and would say no more, but busied himself in behaving in accordance with ancient custom. And so, according to the will of Yann, we drifted onwards and left Astahahn, and we found in greater quantities such birds as prey on fishes. And they were very wonderful in their plumage, and they came not out of the jungle, but flew, with their long necks stretched out before them, and their legs lying on the wind behind straight up the river over the mid-stream.

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

And now the evening began to gather in. A thick white mist had appeared over the river, and was softly rising higher. It clutched at the trees with long impalpable arms, it rose higher and higher, chilling the air; and white shapes moved away into the jungle as though the ghosts of shipwrecked mariners were searching stealthily in the darkness for the spirits of evil that long ago had wrecked them on the Yann.

As the sun sank behind the field of orchids that grew on the matted summit of the jungle, the river monsters came wallowing out of the slime in which they had reclined during the heat of the day, and the great beasts of the jungle came down to drink. The butterflies a while since were gone to rest. In little narrow tributaries that we passed night seemed already to have fallen, though the sun which had disappeared from us had not yet set.

And now the birds of the jungle came flying home far over us, with the sunlight glistening pink upon their breasts, and lowered their pinions as soon as they saw the Yann, and dropped into the trees. And the widgeon began to go up the river in great companies, all whistling, and then would suddenly wheel and all go down again. And there shot by us the small and arrow-like teal; and we heard the manifold cries of flocks of geese, which the sailors told me had recently come in from crossing over the Lispsian ranges; every year they come by the same way, close by the peak of Mluna, leaving it to the left, and the mountain eagles know the way they come and—men say—the very hour, and every year they expect them by the same way as soon as the snows have fallen upon the Northern Plains. But soon it grew so dark that we saw these birds no more, and only heard the whirring of their wings, and of countless others besides, until they all settled down along the banks of the river, and it was the hour when the birds of the night went forth. Then the sailors lit the lanterns for the night, and huge moths appeared, flapping about the ship, and at moments their gorgeous colours would be revealed by the lanterns, then they would pass into the night again, where all was black. And again the sailors prayed, and thereafter we supped and slept, and the helmsman took our lives into his care.

When I awoke I found that we had indeed come to Perdóndaris, that famous city. For there it stood upon the left of us, a city fair and notable, and all the more pleasant for our eyes to see after the jungle that was so long with us. And we were anchored by the marketplace, and the captain's merchandise was all displayed, and a merchant of Perdondaris stood looking at it. And the captain had his scimitar in his hand, and was beating with it in anger upon the deck, and the splinters were flying up from the white planks; for the merchant had offered him a price for his merchandise that the captain declared to be an insult to himself and his country's gods, whom he now said to be great and terrible gods, whose curses were to be dreaded. But the merchant waved his hands, which were of great fatness, showing his pink palms, and swore that of himself he thought not at all, but only of the poor folk in the huts beyond the city to whom he wished to sell the merchandise for as low a price as possible, leaving no remuneration for himself. For the merchandise was mostly the thick toomarund that in the winter keep the wind from the floor, and tollub which the people smole in pipes. Therefore the merchant said if he offered a piffek more the poor folk must go without their toomarunds when the winter came, and without their tollub in the evenings, or else he and his aged father must starve together. Thereat the captain lifted his scimitar to his own throat, saying that he was now a ruined man, and that nothing remained to him but death. And while he was carefully lifting he beard with his left hand, the merchant eyed the merchandise again, and said that rather than see so worthy a captain die, a man for whom he had conceived an especial love when first he saw the manner in which he handled his ship, he and his aged father should starve together and therefore he offered fifteen piffeks more.

When he said this the captain prostrated himself and prayed to his gods that they might yet sweeten this merchant's bitter heart—to his little lesser gods, to the gods that bless Belzoond.

At last the merchant offered yet five piffeks more. Then the captain wept, for he said that he was deserted of his gods; and the merchant also wept, for he said that he was thinking of his aged father, and of how soon he would starve, and he hid his weeping face with both his hands, and eyed the tollub again between his fingers. And so the bargain was concluded, and the merchant took the toomarund and tollub, paying for them out of a great clinking purse. And these were packed up into bales again, and three of the merchant's slaves carried them upon their

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

heads into the city. And all the while the sailors had sat silent, cross-legged in a crescent upon the deck, eagerly watching the bargain, and now a murmur of satisfaction arose among them, and they began to compare it among themselves with other bargains that they had known. And I found out from them that there are seven merchants in Perdóndaris, and that they had all come to the captain one by one before the bargaining began, and each had warned him privately against the others. And to all the merchants the captain had offered the wine of his own country, that they make in fair Belzoond, but could in no wise persuade them to it. But now that the bargain was over, and the sailors were seated at the first meal of the day, the captain appeared among them with a cask of that wine, and we broached it with care and all made merry together. And the captain was glad in his heart because he knew that he had much honour in the eyes of his men because of the bargain that he had made. So the sailors drank the wine of their native land, and soon their thoughts were back in fair Belzoond and the little neighbouring cities of Durl and Duz.

But for me the captain poured into a little glass some heavy yellow wine from a small jar which he kept apart among his sacred things. Thick and sweet it was, even like honey, yet there was in its heart a mighty, ardent fire which had authority over souls of men. It was made, the captain told me, with great subtlety by the secret craft of a family of six who lived in a hut on the mountains of Hiam Min. Once in these mountains, he said, he followed the spoor of a bear, and he came suddenly on a man of that family who had hunted the same bear, and he was at the end of a narrow way with precipice all about him, and his spear was sticking in the bear, and the wound not fatal, and he had no other weapon. And the bear was walking towards the man, very slowly because his wound irked him—yet he was now very close. And what the captain did he would not say, but every year as soon as the snows are hard, and travelling is easy on the Hian Min, that man comes down to the market in the plains, and always leaves for the captain in the gate of fair Belzoond a vessel of that priceless secret wine.

And as I sipped the wine and the captain talked, I remembered me of stalwart noble things that I had long since resolutely planned, and my soul seemed to grow mightier within me and to dominate the whole tide of the Yann. It may be that I then slept. Or, if I did not, I do not now minutely recollect every detail of that morning's occupations. Towards evening, I awoke and wishing to see Perdóndaris before we left in the morning, and being unable to wake the captain, I went ashore alone. Certainly Perdóndaris was a powerful city; it was encompassed by a wall of great strength and altitude, having in it hollow ways for troops to walk in, and battlements along it all the way, and fifteen strong towers on it in every mile, and copper plaques low down where men could read them, telling in all the languages of those parts of the Earth—one language on each plaque—the tale of how an army once attacked Perdóndaris and what befell that army. Then I entered Perdóndaris and found all the people dancing, clad in brilliant silks, and playing on the tam-bang as they danced. For a fearful thunderstorm had terrified them while I slept, and the fires of death, they said, had danced over Perdóndaris, and now the thunder had gone leaping away large and black and hideous, they said, over the distant hills, and had turned round snarling at them, showing his gleaming teeth, and had stamped, as he went, upon the hilltops until they rang as though they had been bronze. And often and again they stopped in their merry dances and prayed to the God they knew not, saying, "O, God that we know not, we thank Thee for sending the thunder back to his hills." And I went on and came to the market-place, and lying there upon the marble pavement I saw the merchant fast asleep and breathing heavily, with his face and the palms of his hands towards the sky, and slaves were fanning him to keep away the flies. And from the market-place I came to a silver temple and then to a palace of onyx, and there were many wonders in Perdóndaris, and I would have stayed and seen them all, but as I came to the outer wall of the city I suddenly saw in it a huge ivory gate. For a while I paused and admired it, then I came nearer and perceived the dreadful truth. The gate was carved out of one solid piece!

I fled at once through the gateway and down to the ship, and even as I ran I thought that I heard far off on the hills behind me the tramp of the fearful beast by whom that mass of ivory was shed, who was perhaps even then looking for his other tusk. When I was on the ship again I felt safer, and I said nothing to the sailors of what I had seen.

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

And now the captain was gradually awakening. Now night was rolling up from the East and North, and only the pinnacles of the towers of Perdóndaris still took the fallen sunlight. Then I went to the captain and told him quietly of the thing I had seen. And he questioned me at once about the gate, in a low voice, that the sailors might not know; and I told him how the weight of the thing was such that it could not have been brought from afar, and the captain knew that it had not been there a year ago. We agreed that such a beast could never have been killed by any assault of man, and that the gate must have been a fallen tusk, and one fallen near and recently. Therefore he decided that it were better to flee at once; so he commanded, and the sailors went to the sails, and others raised the anchor to the deck, and just as the highest pinnacle of marble lost the last rays of the sun we left Perdóndaris, that famous city. And night came down and cloaked Perdóndaris and hid it from our eyes, which as things have happened will never see it again; for I have heard since that something swift and wonderful has suddenly wrecked Perdóndaris in a day—towers, and walls, and people.

And the night deepened over the River Yann, a night all white with stars. And with the night there arose the helmsman's song. As soon as he had prayed he began to sing to cheer himself all through the lonely night. But first he prayed, praying the helmsman's prayer. And this is what I remember of it, rendered into English with a very feeble equivalent of the rhythm that seemed so resonant in those tropic nights.

To whatever god may hear.

Wherever there be sailors whether of river or sea: whether their way be dark or whether through storm: whether their perils be of beast or of rock: or from enemy lurking on land or pursuing on sea: wherever the tiller is cold or the helmsman stiff: wherever sailors sleep or helmsman watch: guard, guide, and return us to the old land, that has known us: to the far homes that we know.

To all the gods that are.

To whatever god may hear.

So he prayed, and there was silence. And the sailors laid them down to rest for the night. The silence deepened, and was only broken by the ripples of Yann that lightly touched our prow. Sometimes some monster of the river coughed.

Silence and ripples, ripples and silence again.

And then his loneliness came upon the helmsman, and he began to sing. And he sang the market songs of Durl and Duz, and the old dragon-legends of Belzoond.

Many a song he sang, telling to spacious and exotic Yann the little tales and trifles of his city of Durl. And the songs welled up over the black jungle and came into the clear cold air above, and the great bands of stars that looked on Yann began to know the affairs of Durl and Duz, and of the shepherds that dwelt in the fields between, and the flocks that they had, and the loves that they had loved, and all the little things that they hoped to do. And as I lay wrapped up in skins and blankets listening to those songs, and watching the fantastic shapes of the great trees like to black giants stalking through the night, I suddenly fell asleep.

When I awoke great mists were trailing away from the Yann. And the flow of the river was tumbling now tumultuously, and little waves appeared; for Yann had scented from afar the ancient crags of Glorm, and knew that their ravines lay cool before him wherein he should meet the merry wild Irillion rejoicing from fields of snow. So he shook off from him the torpid sleep that had come upon him in the hot and scented jungle, and forgot its orchids and its butterflies, and swept on turbulent, expectant, strong; and soon the snowy peaks of the Hills of Glorm came glittering into view. And now the sailors were waking up from sleep. Soon we all ate, and then the

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

helmsman laid him down to sleep while a comrade took his place, and they all spread over him their choicest furs.

And in a while we heard the sound that the Irillion made as she came down dancing from the fields of snow.

And then we saw the ravine in the Hills of Glorm lying precipitous and smooth before us, into which we were carried by the leaps of Yann. And now we left the steamy jungle and breathed the mountain air; the sailors stood up and took deep breaths of it, and thought of their own far-off Acroctian hills on which were Durl and Duz—below them in the plains stands fair Belzoond.

A great shadow brooded between the cliffs of Glorm, but the crags were shining above us like gnarled moons, and almost lit the gloom. Louder and louder came the Irillion's song, and the sound of her dancing down from the fields of snow. And soon we saw her white and full of mists, and wreathed with rainbows delicate and small that she had plucked up near the mountain's summit from some celestial garden of the Sun. Then she went away seawards with the huge grey Yann and the ravine widened, and opened upon the world, and our rocking ship came through to the light of day.

And all that morning and all the afternoon we passed through the marshes of Pondooverly; and Yann widened there, and flowed solemnly and slowly, and the captain bade the sailors beat on bells to overcome the dreariness of the marshes.

At last the Irusian Mountains came in sight, nursing the villages of Pen-Kai and Blut, and the wandering streets of Mlo, where priests propitiate the avalanche with wine and maize. Then the night came down over the plains of Tlun, and we saw the lights of Cappadarnia. We heard the Pathnites beating upon drums as we passed Imaut and Golzunda, then all but the helmsman slept. And villages scattered along the banks of the Yann heard all that night in the helmsman's unknown tongue the little songs of cities that they know not.

I awoke before dawn with a feeling that I was unhappy before I remembered why. Then I recalled that by the evening of the approaching day, according to all foreseen probabilities, we should come to Bar-Wul-Yann, and I should part from the captain and his sailors. And I had liked the man because he had given me of his yellow wine that was set apart among his sacred things, and many a story he had told me about his fair Belzoond between the Acrotian hills and the Hian Min. And I had liked the ways that his sailors had, and the prayers that they prayed at evening side by side, grudging not one another their alien gods. And I had a liking too for the tender way in which they often spoke of Durl and Duz, for it is good that men should love their native cities and the little hills that hold those cities up.

And I had come to know who would meet them when they returned to their homes, and where they thought the meetings would take place, some in a valley of the Acrotian hills where the road comes up from Yann, others in the gateway of one or another of the three cities, and others by the fireside in the home. And I thought of the danger that had menaced us all alike outside Perdóndaris, a danger that, as things have happened, was very real.

And I thought too of the helmsman's cheery song in the cold and lonely night, and how he had held our lives in his careful hands. And as I thought of this the helmsman ceased to sing, and I looked up and saw a pale light had appeared in the sky, and the lonely night had passed; and the dawn widened, and the sailors awoke.

And soon we saw the tide of the Sea himself advancing resolute between Yann's borders, and Yann sprang lithely at him and they struggled a while; then Yann and all that was his were pushed back northwards, so that the sailors had to hoist the sails, and the wind being favourable, we still held onwards.

And we passed Góndara and Narl and Hoz. And we saw memorable, holy Golnuz, and heard the pilgrims praying.

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

When we awoke after the midday rest we were coming near to Nen, the last of the cities in the River Yann. And the jungle was all about us once again, and about Nen; but the great Mloon ranges stood up over all things, and watched the city from beyond the jungle.

Here we anchored, and the captain and I went up into the city and found that the Wanderers had come into Nen.

And the Wanderers were a weird, dark, tribe, that once in every seven years came down from the peaks of Mloon, having crossed by a pass that is known to them from some fantastic land that lies beyond. And the people of Nen were all outside their houses, and all stood wondering at their own streets. For the men and women of the Wanderers had crowded all the ways, and every one was doing some strange thing. Some danced astounding dances that they had learned from the desert wind, rapidly curving and swirling till the eye could follow no longer. Others played upon instruments beautiful wailing tunes that were full of horror, which souls had taught them lost by night in the desert, that strange far desert from which the Wanderers came.

None of their instruments were such as were known in Nen nor in any part of the region of the Yann; even the horns out of which some were made were of beasts that none had seen along the river, for they were barbed at the tips. And they sang, in the language of none, songs that seemed to be akin to the mysteries of night and to the unreasoned fear that haunts dark places.

Bitterly all the dogs of Nen distrusted them. And the Wanderers told one another fearful tales, for though no one in Nen knew ought of their language, yet they could see the fear on the listeners' faces, and as the tale wound on, the whites of their eyes showed vividly in terror as the eyes of some little beast whom the hawk has seized. Then the teller of the tale would smile and stop, and another would tell his story, and the teller of the first tale's lips would chatter with fear. And if some deadly snake chanced to appear the Wanderers would greet him like a brother, and the snake would seem to give his greetings to them before he passed on again. Once that most fierce and lethal of tropic snakes, the giant lythra, came out of the jungle and all down the street, the central street of Nen, and none of the Wanderers moved away from him, but they all played sonorously on drums, as though he had been a person of much honour; and the snake moved through the midst of them and smote none.

Even the Wanderers' children could do strange things, for if any one of them met with a child of Nen the two would stare at each other in silence with large grave eyes; then the Wanderers' child would slowly draw from his turban a live fish or snake. And the children of Nen could do nothing of that kind at all.

Much I should have wished to stay and hear the hymn with which they greet the night, that is answered by the wolves on the heights of Mloon, but it was now time to raise the anchor again that the captain might return from Bar-Wul-Yann upon the landward tide. So we went on board and continued down the Yann. And the captain and I spoke little, for we were thinking of our parting, which should be for long, and we watched instead the splendour of the westerning sun. For the sun was a ruddy gold, but a faint mist cloaked the jungle, lying low, and into it poured the smoke of the little jungle cities, and the smoke of them met together in the mist and joined into one haze, which became purple, and was lit by the sun, as the thoughts of men become hallowed by some great and sacred thing. Sometimes one column from a lonely house would rise up higher than the cities' smoke, and gleam by itself in the sun.

And now as the sun's last rays were nearly level, we saw the sight that I had come to see, for from two mountains that stood on either shore two cliffs of pink marble came out into the river, all glowing in the light of the low sun, and they were quite smooth and of mountainous altitude, and they nearly met, and Yann went tumbling between them and found the sea.

And this was Bar-Wul-Yann, the Gate of Yann, and in the distance through that barrier's gap I saw the azure indescribable sea, where little fishing-boats went gleaming by.

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

And the sunset and the brief twilight came, and the exultation of the glory of Bar–Wul–Yann was gone, yet still the pink cliffs glowed, the fairest marvel that the eye beheld—and this in a land of wonders. And soon the twilight gave place to the coming out of stars, and the colours of Bar–Wul–Yann went dwindling away. And the sight of those cliffs was to me as some chord of music that a master's hand had launched from the violin, and which carries to Heaven of Faäry the tremulous spirits of men.

And now by the shore they anchored and went no farther, for they were sailors of the river and not of the sea, and knew the Yann but not the tides beyond.

And the time was come when the captain and I must part, he to go back again to his fair Belzoond in sight of the distant peaks of the Hian Min, and I to find my way by strange means back to those hazy fields that all poets know, wherein stand small mysterious cottages through whose windows, looking westwards, you may see the fields of men, and looking eastwards see glittering elfin mountains, tipped with snow, going range on range into the region of Myth, and beyond it into the kingdom of Fantasy, which pertain to the Lands of Dream. Long we should meet no more, for my fancy is weakening as the years slip by, and I go ever more seldom into the Lands of Dream. Then we clasped hands, uncouthly on his part, for it is not the method of greeting in his country, and he commended my soul to the care of his own gods, to his little lesser gods, the humble ones, to the gods that bless Belzoond.

A Shop in Go–by Street

I said I must go back to Yann again to see if Bird of the River still plies up and down and whether her bearded captain commands her still or whether he sits in the gate of fair Belzoond drinking at evening the marvellous yellow wine that the mountaineer brings down from the Hian Min. And I wanted to see the sailors again who came from Durl and Duz and to hear from their lips what befell Perdóndaris when its doom came up without warning from the hills and fell on that famous city. And I wanted to hear the sailors pray at night each one to his god, and to feel the wind of the evening coolly arise when the sun went flaming away from that exotic river. For I thought never again to see the tide of Yann, but when I gave up politics not long ago the wings of my fancy strengthened, though they had erstwhile drooped, and I had hopes of coming behind the East once more where Yann like a proud white war–horse goes through the Lands of Dream.

Yet had I forgotten the way to those little cottages on the edge of the fields we know whose upper windows, though dim with antique cobwebs, look out on the fields we know not and are the starting–point of all adventure in all the Lands of Dream.

I therefore made enquiries. And so I came to be directed to the shop of a dreamer who lives not far from the Embankment in the City. Among so many streets as there are in the city it is little wonder that there is one that has never been seen before: it is named Go–by Street and runs out of the Strand if you look very closely. Now when you enter this man's shop you do not go straight to the point but you ask him to sell you something, and if it is anything with which he can supply you he hands it to you and wishes you good–morning. It is his way. And many have been deceived by asking for some unlikely thing, such as the oyster–shell from which was taken one of those single pearls that made the gates of Heaven in Revelations, and finding that the old man had it in stock.

He was comatose when I went into his shop, his heavy lids almost covered his little eyes; he sat, and his mouth was open. I said "I want some of Abama and Pharpah, rivers of Damascus." "How much?" he said. "Two and a half yards of each, to be delivered at my flat." "That is very tiresome," he muttered, "very tiresome. We do not stock it in that quantity." "Then I will take all you have," I said.

He rose laboriously and looked among some bottles. I saw one labelled "Nilos, river of Aegyptos" and others Holy Ganges, Phlegethon, Jordan; I was almost afraid he had it, when I heard him mutter again, "This is very

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

tiresome," and presently he said, "We are out of it." "Then," I said, "I wish you to tell me the way to those little cottages in whose upper chambers poets look out upon the fields we know not, for I wish to go into the Lands of Dream and to sail once more upon mighty, sea-like Yann."

At that he moved heavily and slowly in way-worn carpet slippers, panting as he went, to the back part of his shop, and I went with him. This was a dingy lumber-room full of idols: the near end was dingy and dark but at the far end was a blue caerulean glow in which stars seemed to be shining and the heads of the idols glowed. "This," said the fat old man in carpet slippers, "is the heaven of the gods who sleep." I asked him what gods slept and he mentioned names that I had never heard as well as names that I knew. "All those," he said, "that are not worshipped now are asleep."

"Then does Time not kill the gods?" I said to him and he answered, "No. But for three or four thousand years a god is worshipped and for three of four he sleeps. Only Time is wakeful always."

"But they that teach us of new gods," I said to him, "are they not new?"

"They hear the old ones stirring in their sleep being about to wake, because the dawn is breaking and the priests crow. These are the happy prophets: unhappy are they that hear some old god speak while he sleeps being still deep in slumber, and prophesy and prophesy and no dawn comes, they are those that men stone saying, 'Prophesy where this stone shall hit you, and this.'"

"Then shall Time never slay the gods," I said. And he answered, "They shall die by the bedside of the last man. Then Time shall go mad in his solitude and shall not know his hours from his centuries of years and they shall clamour round him crying for recognition and he shall lay his stricken hands on their heads and stare at them blindly and say. 'My children, I do not know you one from another,' and at these words of Time empty worlds shall reel."

And for some time then I was silent, for my imagination went out into those far years and looked back at me and mocked me because I was the creature of a day.

Suddenly I was aware by the old man's heavy breathing that he had gone to sleep. It was not an ordinary shop: I feared lest one of his gods should wake and call for him: I feared many things, it was so dark, and one or two of those idols were something more than grotesque. I shook the old man hard by one of his arms.

"Tell me the way to the cottages." I said, "on the edge of the fields we know."

"I don't think we can do that," he said.

"Then supply me," I said, "with the goods."

That brought him to his senses. He said, "you go out by the back door and turn to the right," and he opened a little, old, dark door in the wall through which I went, and he wheezed and shut the door. The back of the shop was of incredible age. I saw in antique characters upon a mouldering board: "Licensed to sell weasels and jade earrings." The sun was setting now and shone on little golden spires that gleamed along the roof which had long ago been thatched and with a wonderful straw. I saw that the whole of Go-by Street had the same strange appearance when looked at from behind. The pavement was the same as the pavement of which I was weary and of which so many thousand miles lay the other side of those houses, but the street was of most pure untrampled grass with such marvellous flowers in it that they lured downward from great heights the flocks of butterflies as they travelled by, going I know not whence. The other side of the street there was pavement again but no houses of any kind, and what there was in place of them I did not stop to see, for I turned to my right and walked along the back of Go-by Street till I came to the open fields and the gardens of the cottages that I sought. Huge flowers went up out of

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

these gardens like slow rockets and burst into purple blooms and stood there huge and radiant on six-foot stalks and softly sang strange songs. Others came up beside them and bloomed and began singing too. A very old witch came out of her cottage by the back door and into the garden in which I stood.

"What are these wonderful flowers?" I said to her.

"Hush! Hush!" she said, "I am putting the poets to bed. These flowers are their dreams."

And in a lower voice I said: "What wonderful song are they singing?" and she said, "Be still and listen."

And I listened and found they were singing of my own childhood and of things that happened there so far away that I had quite forgotten them till I heard the wonderful song.

"Why is the song so faint?" I said to her.

"Dead voices," she said, "Dead voices," and turned back again to her cottage saying: "Dead voices" still, but softly for fear that she should wake the poets. "They sleep so badly while they live," she said.

I stole on tiptoe upstairs to the little roof from whose windows, looking one way, we see the fields we know and, looking another, those hilly lands that I sought—almost I feared not to find them. I looked at once towards the mountains of faëry; the afterglow of the sunset flamed on them, their avalanches flashed on their violet slopes coming down tremendous from emerald peaks of ice; and there was the old gap in the blue-gray hills above the precipice of amethyst whence one sees the Lands of Dream.

All was still in the room where the poets slept when I came quietly down. The old witch sat by a table with a lamp, knitting a splendid cloak of gold and green for a king that had been dead a thousand years.

"Is it any use," I said, "to the king that is dead that you sit and knit him a cloak of gold and green?"

"Who knows?" she said.

"What a silly question to ask," said her old black cat who lay curled by the fluttering fire.

Already when I arrived some colour began to show in the amethyst precipice below the gap although it was not yet morning. I heard a rattling and sometimes caught a flash from those golden dragons far away below me that are the triumph of the goldsmiths of Sirdoo and were given life by the ritual incantations of the conjurer Amargrarn. On the edge of the opposite cliff, too near I thought for safety, I saw the ivory palace of Singanee that mighty elephant-hunter; small lights appeared in windows, the slaves were awake, and beginning with heavy eyelids the work of the day.

And now a ray of sunlight topped the world. Others than I must describe how it swept from the amethyst cliff the shadow of the black one that opposed it, how that one shaft of sunlight pierced the amethyst for leagues, and how the rejoicing colour leaped up to welcome the light and shot back a purple glow on the walls of the palace of ivory while down in that incredible ravine the golden dragons still played in the darkness.

At this moment a female slave came out by a door of the palace and tossed a basketfull of sapphires over the edge. And when day was manifest on those marvelous heights and the flare of the amethyst precipice filled the abyss, then the elephant-hunter arose in his ivory palace and took his terrific spear and going out by a landward door went forth to avenge Perdóndaris.

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

I turned then and looked upon the Lands of Dream, and the thin white mist that never rolls quite away was shifting in the morning. Rising like isles above it I saw the Hills of Hap and the city of copper, old, deserted Bethmoora, and Utnar Véhi and Kyph and Mandaroon and the wandering leagues of Yann. Rather I guessed than saw the Hian Min whose imperturbable and aged heads scarce recognize for more than clustered mounds the round Acrotian hills, that are heaped about their feet and that shelter, as I remembered, Durl and Duz. But most clearly I discerned that ancient wood through which one going down to the bank of Yann whenever the moon is old may come on Bird of the River anchored there, waiting three days for travellers, as has been prophesied of her. And as it was now that season I hurried down from the gap in the blue-gray hills by an elfin path that was coeval with fable, and came by means of it to the edge of the wood. Black though the darkness was in that ancient wood the beasts that moved in it were blacker still. It is very seldom that any dreamer travelling in Lands of Dream is ever seized by these beasts, and yet I ran; for if a man's spirit is seized in the Lands of Dream his body may survive if for many years and well know the beasts that mouthed him far away and the look in their little eyes and the smell of their breath; that is why the recreation field at Hanwell is so dreadfully trodden into restless paths.

And so I came at last to the sea-like flood of proud, tremendous Yann, with whom there tumbled streams from incredible lands— with these he went by singing. Singing he carried drift-wood and whole trees, fallen in far-away, unvisited forests, and swept them mightily by; but no sign was there either out in the river or in the olden anchorage near by of the ship I came to see.

And I built myself a hut and roofed it over with the huge abundant leaves of a marvellous weed and ate the meat that grows on the targar-tree and waited there three days. And all day long the river tumbled by and all night long the tolulu-bird sang on and the huge fireflies had no other care than to pour past in torrents of dancing sparks, and nothing rippled the surface of Yann by day and nothing disturbed the tolulu-bird by night. I know not what I feared for the ship I sought and its friendly captain who came from fair Belzoond and its cheery sailors out of Durl and Duz; all day long I looked for it on the river and listened for it by night until the dancing fireflies danced me to sleep. Three times only in those three nights the tolulu-bird was scared and stopped his song, and each time I awoke with a start and found no ship and saw that he was only scared by the dawn. Those indescribable dawns upon the Yann came up like flames in some land over the hills where a magician burns by secret means enormous amethysts in a copper pot. I used to watch them in wonder while no bird sang—till all of a sudden the sun came up over a hill and every bird but one began to sing, and the tolulu-bird slept fast, till out of an opening eye he saw the stars.

I would have waited there for many days, but on the third day I had gone in my loneliness to see the very spot where first I met Bird of the River at her anchorage with her bearded captain sitting on the deck. And as I looked at the black mud of the harbour and pictured in my mind that band of sailors whom I had not seen for two years, I saw an old hulk peeping from the mud. The lapse of centuries seemed partly to have rotted and partly to have buried in the mud all but the prow of the boat and on the prow I faintly saw a name. I read it slowly—it was Bird of the River. And then I knew that, while in Ireland and London two years had barely passed over my head, ages had gone over the region of Yann and wrecked and rotted that once familiar ship, and buried years ago the bones of the youngest of my friends, who so often sang to me of Durl and Duz of told the dragon-legends of Belzoond. For beyond the world we know there roars a hurricane of centuries whose echo only troubles—though sorely—our fields; while elsewhere there is calm.

I stayed a moment by that battered hulk and said a prayer for whatever may be immortal of those who were wont to sail it down the Yann, and I prayed for them to the gods to whom they loved to pray, to the little lesser gods that bless Belzoond. Then leaving the hut that I built to those ravenous years I turned my back to the Yann and entering the forest at evening just as its orchids were opening their petals to perfume the night came out of it in the morning, and passed that day along the amehyst gulf by the gap in the blue-gray mountains. I wondered if Singanee, that mighty elephant-hunter, had returned again with his spear to his lofty ivory palace or if his doom had been with that of Perdóndaris. I saw a merchant at a small back door selling new sapphires as I passed the

Idle Days on the Yann and Other Stories

palace, then I went on and came as twilight fell to those small cottages where the elfin mountains are in sight of the fields we know. And I went to the old witch that I had seen before and she sat in her parlour with a red shawl round her shoulders still knitting the golden cloak, and faintly through one of her windows the elfin mountains shone and I saw again through another the fields we know.

"Tell me something," I said, "of this strange land?"

"How much do you know?" she said. "Do you know that dreams are illusion?"

"Of course I do," I said, "Every one knows that."

"Oh no they don't," she said, "the mad don't know it?"

"That is true," I said.

"And do you know," she said, "that Life is illusion?"

"Of course it is not," I said, "Life is real, Life is earnest..."

At that both the witch and her cat (who had not moved from her old place by the hearth) burst into laughter. I stayed some time, for there was much that I wished to ask, but when I saw that the laughter would not stop I turned and went away.