

THE CONQUEST OF FAIRYLAND

from Twilight Stories



There reigned a king in the land of Persia, mighty and great was he grown,
On the necks of the kings of the conquered earth he builded up his throne.

There sate a king on the throne of Persia; and he was grown so proud
That all the life of the world was less to him than a passing cloud.

He reigned in glory: joy and sorrow lying between his hands.
If he sighed a nation shook, his smile ripened the harvest of lands.

He was the saddest man beneath the everlasting sky,
For all his glories had left him old, and the proudest king must die.

He who was even as God to all the nations of men,
Must die as the merest peasant dies, and turn into earth again.

And his life with the fear of death was bitter and sick and accursed,
As brackish water to drink of which is to be forever athirst.



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The hateful years rolled on and on, but once it chanced at noon
The drowsy court was thrilled to gladness, it echoed so sweet a tune.

Low as the lapping of tile sea, as the song of the lark is clear,
Wild as the moaning of pine branches; the king was fain to hear.

"What is the song, and who is the singer?" he said; "before the throne
Let him come, for the songs of the world are mine, and all but this are known."

Seven mighty kings went out the minstrel man to find:
And all they found was a dead cyprus souging in the wind.

And slower still, and sadder still the heavy winters rolled,
And the burning summers waned away, and the king grew very old;

Dull, worn, feeble, bent; and once he thought, "to die
Were rest, at least." And as he thought the music wandered by.

Into the presence of the king, singing, the singer came,
And his face was like the spring in flower, his eyes were clear as flame.

"What is the song you play, and what the theme your praises sing?
It is sweet; I knew not I owned a thing so sweet," said the weary king.

"I sing my country," said the singer, "a land that is sweeter than song."
"Which of my kingdoms is your country? Thither would I along."

"Great, O king, is thy power, and the earth a footstool for thy feet;
But my country is free, and my own country, and oh, my country is sweet!"

As he heard the eyes of the king grew young and alive with fire
"Lo, is there left on the earth a thing to strive for, a thing to desire?"

"Where is thy country? tell me, O singer, speak thine innermost heart!
Leave thy music! speak plainly! Speak-forget thine art!"

The eyes of the singer shone as he sang, and his voice rang wild and free
As the elemental wind or the uncontrollable sobs of the sea.

"O my distant home!" he sighed; "Oh, alas! away and afar
I watch thee now as a lost sailor watches a shining star.



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"Oh, that a wind would take me there! that a bird would set me down
Where the golden streets shine red at sunset in my father's town!

"For only in dreams I see the faces of the women there,
And fain would I hear them singing once, braiding their ropes of hair.

"Oh, I am thirsty, and long to drink of the river of Life, and I
Am fain to find my own country, where no man shall die."

Out of the light of the throne the king looked down: as in the spring
The green leaves burst from their dusky buds, so was hope in the eyes of the king.

"Lo," he said, "I will make thee great; I will make thee mighty in sway
Even as I; but the name of thy country speak, and the place and the way."

"Oh, the way to my country is ever north till you pass the mouth of hell,
Past the limbo of dreams and the desolate land where shadows dwell.

"And when you have reached the fount of wonder, you ford the waters wan
To the land of elves and the land of fairies, enchanted Masinderan."

The singer ceased; and the lyre in his hand snapped, as a cord, in twain;
And neither lyre nor singer was seen in the kingdom of Persia again.

And all the nobles gazed astounded; no man spoke a word
Till the old king said: "Call out my armies; bring me hither a sword!"

As a little torrent swollen by snows is turned to a terrible stream,
So the gathering voices of all his countries cried to the king in his dream.

Crying, "For thee, O our king, for thee we had freely and willingly died,
Warriors, martyrs, what thou wilt; not that our lives betide

"The worth of a thought to the king, but rather because thy rod
Is over our heads as over thine Is the changeless will of God.

"Rather for this we beseech thee, O master, for thine own sake refrain
From the blasphemous madness of pride, from the fever of impious gain."

"You seek my death," the king thundered; "you cry, forbear to save
The life of a king too old to frolic; let him sleep in the grave.



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“But I will live for all your treason; and, by my own right hand!
I will set out this day with you to conquer Fairyland.”

Then all the nations paled aghast, for the battle to begin
Was a war with God, and a war with death, and they knew the thing was sin.

Sick at heart they gathered together, but none denounced the wrong,
For the will of God was unseen, unsaid, and the will of the king was strong.

So the air grew bright with spears, and the earth shook under the tread
Of the mighty horses harnessed for battle; the standards flaunted red.

And the wind was loud with the blare of trumpets, and every house was void
Of the strength and stay of the house, and the peace of the land destroyed.

And the growing corn was trodden under the weight of armed feet,
And every woman in Persia cursed the sound of a song too sweet,

Cursed the insensate longing for life in the heart of a sick old man;
But the king of Persia with all his armies marched on Masinderan.

Many a day they marched in the sun till their silver armour was lead
To sink their bodies into the grave, and many a man fell dead.

And they passed the mouth of hell, and the shadowy country gray,
Where the air is mist and the people mist and the rain more real than they.

And they came to the fount of wonder, and forded the waters wan,
And the king of Persia and all his armies marched on Masinderan.

And they turned the rivers to blood, and the fields to a ravaged camp,
And they neared the golden faery town, that burned in the dusk as a lamp.

And they stood and shouted for joy to see it stand so nigh,
Given into their hands for spoil; and their hearts beat proud and high.

And the armies longed for the morrow, to conquer the shining town,
For there was no death in the land, neither any to strike them down.

The hosts were many in numbers, mighty, and skilled in the strife,
And they lusted for gold and conquest as the old king lusted for life.



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And, gazing on the golden place, night took them unaware,
And black and windy grew the skies, and black the eddying air

So long the night and black the night that fell upon their eyes,
They quaked with fear, those mighty hosts; the sun would never rise.

Darkness and deafening sounds confused the black, tempestuous air,
And no man saw his neighbor's face, nor heard his neighbor's prayer.

And wild with terror the raging armies fell on each other in fight,
The ground was strewn with wounded men, mad in the horrible night

Mad with eternal pain, with darkness and stabbing blows
Rained on all sides from invisible hands till the ground was red as a rose.

And, though he was longing for rest, none ventured to pause from the strife,
Lest haply another wound be his to poison his hateful life

And the king entreated death; and for peace the armies prayed;
But the gifts of God are everlasting, his word is not gainsaid;

Gold and battle are given the hosts, their boon is turned to a ban,
And the curse of the king is to reign forever in conquered Masinderan.

