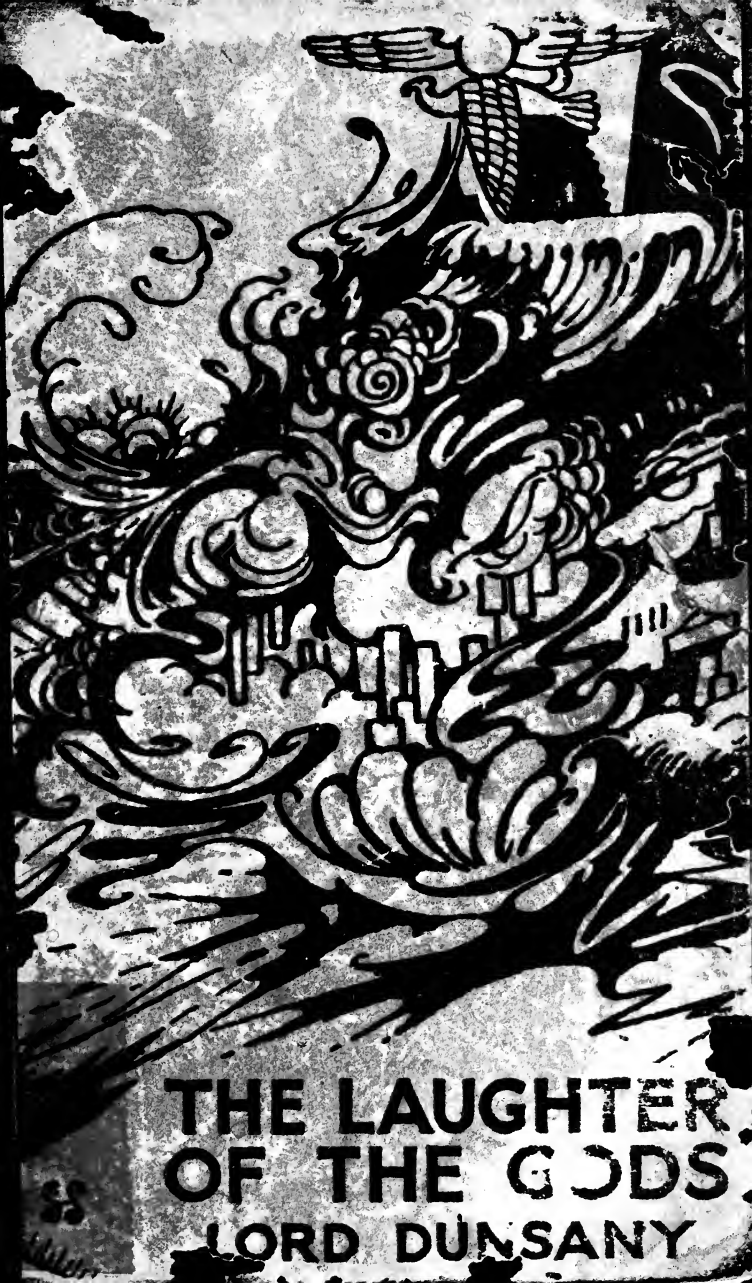

THE LAUGHTER OF THE GODS

LORD DUNSANY

The Laughter of the Gods

BY

LORD DUNSANY

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NOW MISS
JUDY
VANSEL

THE LAUGHTER OF THE GODS

Dramatis Personæ

KING KARNOS

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS (*a prophet*)

ICHTHARION

LUDIBRAS

HARPAGAS

FIRST SENTRY

SECOND SENTRY

ONE OF THE CAMEL GUARD

AN EXECUTIONER

THE QUEEN

THARMIA (*wife of Ichtharion*)

AROLIND (*wife of Ludibras*)

CAROLYX (*wife of Harpagas*)

ATTENDANTS

THE LAUGHTER OF THE GODS.

A Tragedy in Three Acts.

Act I.

Time: *About the time of the decadence in Babylon.*

Scene: *The jungle city of Thek in the reign of King Karnos.*

Tharmia

You know that my lineage is almost divine.

Arolind

My father's sword was so terrible that he had to hide it with a cloak.

Tharmia

He probably did that because there were no jewels in the scabbard.

Arolind

There were emeralds in it that outstared the sea.

. . . . . .

THARMIA

Now I must leave you here and go down among the shops for I have not changed my hair since we came to Thek.

ICHTHARION

Have you not brought that from Barbul-el-Sharnak ?

THARMIA

It was not necessary. The King would not take his court where they could not obtain necessities.

AROLIND

May I go with your Sincerity ?

THARMIA

Indeed, princely lady, I shall be glad of your company.

AROLIND

(*To* LUDIBRAS) I wish to see the other palaces in Thek. (*To* THARMIA) Then we can go beyond the walls to see what princes live in the neighbourhood.

THARMIA

It will be delightful.

(*Exeunt* THARMIA *and* AROLIND.)

ICHTHARION

Well, we are here in Thek.

LUDIBRAS

How lucky we are that the King has come to Thek. I feared he would never come.

ICHTHARION

It is a most fair city.

LUDIBRAS

When he still tarried year after year in monstrous Barbul-el-Sharnak, I feared that I would see the sun rise never more in the windy glorious country. I feared we should live always in Barbul-el-Sharnak and be buried among houses.

ICHTHARION

It is mountainous with houses: there are no flowers there. I wonder how the winds come into it.

LUDIBRAS

Ah. Do you know that it is I that brought him here at last. I gave him orchids day by day that came from a far country. At last he noticed them. "These are good flowers," said he. "They come from Thek," I said. "Thek is

purple with them. It seems purple far out on the sand to the camel men." Then . . .

ICHTHARION

No, it was not you that brought him. He saw a butterfly once in Barbul-el-Sharnak. There had not been one there for seven years. It was lucky for us that it lived : I used to send for hundreds, but they all died but that one when they came to Barbul-el-Sharnak. The King saw it.

LUDIBRAS

It was since then that he noticed my purple orchids.

ICHTHARION

Something changed in his mind when he saw the butterfly. He became quite different. He would not have noticed a flower but for that.

LUDIBRAS

He came to Thek in order to see the orchids.

ICHTHARION

Come, come. We are here. Nothing else matters.

LUDIBRAS

Yes, we are here. How beautiful are the orchids.

ICHTHARION

What a beautiful thing the air is in the morning. I stand up very early and breathe it from my casement: not in order to nourish my body, you understand, but because it is the wild, sweet air of Thek.

LUDIBRAS

Yes, it is wonderful rising up in the morning. It seems all fresh from the fields.

ICHTHARION

It took us three days to ride out of Barbul-el-Sharnak. Do you remember how men stared at our camels? No one had gone away from the city for years.

LUDIBRAS

I think it is not easy to leave so great a city. It seems to grow thicker around you, and you forget the fields.

ICHTHARION (*looking off*)

The jungle is like a sea lying there below us. The orchids that blaze on it

are like Tyrian ships, all rich with purple of that wonderful fish : they have even dyed their sails with it.

LUDIBRAS

They are not like ships because they do not move. They are like . . . They are like no tangible thing in all the world. They are like faint, beautiful songs of an unseen singer ; they are like temptation to some unknown sin. They make me think of the tigers that slip through the gloom below them.

(*Enter* HARPAGAS *and* A NOBLE OF THE COURT, *with spears and leather belts.*)

ICHTHARION

Why, where are you going ?

HARPAGAS

We are going hunting.

ICHTHARION

Hunting ! How beautiful !

HARPAGAS

A little street goes down from the palace door : the other end of it touches the very jungle.

LUDIBRAS

O, heavenly city of Thek.

ICHTHARION

Have you ever before gone hunting?

HARPAGAS

No: I have dreamed of it. In Barbul-el-Sharnak I nearly forgot my dream.

ICHTHARION

Man was not made for cities. I did not know this once.

LUDIBRAS

I will come with you.

ICHTHARION

I will come with you, too. We will go down by the little street, and there will be the jungle. I will fetch a spear as we go.

LUDIBRAS

What shall we hunt in the jungle?

HARPAGAS

They say there are kroot and abbax: and tigers, some say, have been heard of.

NOBLE

We must never go back to Barbul-el-Sharnak again.

ICHTHARION

You may rely on us.

LUDIBRAS

We shall keep the King in Thek.

(*Exeunt, leaving two* SENTRIES *standing beside the throne.*)

1ST SENTRY

They are all very glad to be in Thek. I, too, am glad.

2ND SENTRY

It is a very little city. Two hundred of these cities would not build Barbul-el-Sharnak.

1ST SENTRY

No. But it is a finer palace, and Barbul-el-Sharnak is the centre of the world: men have drawn together there.

2ND SENTRY

I did not know there was a palace like this outside Barbul-el-Sharnak.

1ST SENTRY

It was built in the days of the forefathers. They built palaces in those days.

2ND SENTRY

They must be in the jungle by now. It is quite close. How glad they were to go.

1ST SENTRY

Yes, they were glad. Men do not hunt for tigers in Barbul-el-Sharnak.

(*Enter* THARMIA *and* AROLIND *weeping*.)

THARMIA O, it is terrible.

AROLIND O! O! O!

1ST SENTRY (*to* 2ND SENTRY)
Something has happened.

(*Enter* CAROLYX.)

CAROLYX

What is it, princely ladies?
(*To* SENTRIES.)
Go. Go away.
(*Exeunt* SENTRIES.)
What has happened?

THARMIA

O. We went down a little street.

CAROLYX

Yes. Yes.

AROLIND

The main street of the city.

(*Both weep quietly.*)

CAROLYX

Yes? Yes? Yes?

THARMIA

It ends in the jungle.

CAROLYX

You went into the jungle! There must be tigers there.

THARMIA

No.

AROLIND

No.

CAROLYX

What did you do?

THARMIA

We came back.

CAROLYX (*in a voice of anguish*)

What did you see in the street?

THARMIA

Nothing.

AROLIND

Nothing.

CAROLYX

Nothing ?

THARMIA

There are no shops.

AROLIND

We cannot buy new hair.

THARMIA

We cannot buy (*sobs*) gold-dust to put upon our hair.

AROLIND

There are no (*sobs*) neighbouring princes.

(CAROLYX *bursts bitterly into tears and continues to weep.*)

THARMIA

Barbul-el-Sharnak, Barbul-el-Sharnak. O why did the King leave Barbul-el-Sharnak ?

AROLIND

Barbul-el-Sharnak. Its streets were all of agate.

THARMIA

And there were shops where one bought beautiful hair.

CAROLYX

The King must go at once.

THARMIA (*calmer now*)

He shall go to-morrow. My husband shall speak to him.

AROLIND

Perhaps my husband might have more influence.

THARMIA *and* AROLIND

My husband brought him here.

THARMIA

What!

AROLIND

Nothing. What did you say?

THARMIA

I said nothing. I thought you spoke.

CAROLYX

It may be better for my husband to persuade the King, for he was ever opposed to coming to Thek.

THARMIA (*to* AROLIND)

He could have but little influence with his Majesty since the King *has* come to Thek.

AROLIND

No. It will be better for our husbands to arrange it.

CAROLYX

I have myself some influence with the Queen.

THARMIA

It is of no use. Her nerves are all a-quiver. She weeps if you speak with her. If you argue a matter with her she cries aloud and maidens must come and fan her and put scent on her hands.

AROLIND

She never leaves her chamber and the King would not listen to her.

THARMIA

Hark, they are coming back. They are singing a hunting song. . . . Why, they have killed a beast. All four of the men are bringing it in on two branches.

AROLIND (*bored*)

What kind of a beast is it ?

THARMIA

I do not know. It seems to have barbed horns.

CAROLYX

We must go and meet them.

(*The song is loud and joyous.*)

(*Exeunt by the way that the* SENTRIES *went.*)

(*Enter* SENTRIES.)

1ST SENTRY

Whatever it is it has passed away again, for they were smiling.

2ND SENTRY

They feared that their husbands were lost and now they return in safety.

1ST SENTRY

You do not know, for you do not understand women.

2ND SENTRY

I understand them quite as well as you.

1ST SENTRY

That is what I say. You do not understand women. I do not understand them.

2ND SENTRY

. . . . . Oh. (*A pause.*)

1ST SENTRY

We shall never leave Thek now.

2ND SENTRY

Why shall we never leave it ?

1ST SENTRY

Did you not hear how glad they were when they sang the hunting song? They say a wild dog does not turn from the trail, they will go on hunting now.

2ND SENTRY

But will the King stay here?

1ST SENTRY

He only does what Ichtharion and Ludibras persuade him. He does not listen to the Queen.

2ND SENTRY

The Queen is mad.

1ST SENTRY

She is not mad but she has a curious sickness. She is always frightened though there is nothing to fear.

2ND SENTRY

That would be a dreadful sickness, one would fear that the roof might fall on one from above or the earth break in pieces beneath. I would rather be mad than to fear things like that.

1ST SENTRY (*looking straight before him*)
Hush.

(*Enter* KING *and* RETINUE. *He sits on the throne. Enter from other side* ICHTHARION, LUDIBRAS *and* HARPAGAS, *each with his wife beside him, hand in hand. Each couple bows before the* KING, *still hand in hand then they seat themselves. The* KING *nods once to each couple.*)

KING (*to* THARMIA)
Well, your sincerity, I trust that you are glad to have come to Thek ?

THARMIA
Very glad, your Majesty.

KING (*to* AROLIND)
This is pleasanter, is it not, than Barbul-el-Sharnak ?

AROLIND
Far pleasanter, your Majesty.

KING
And you, princely lady Carolyx, find all that you need in Thek ?

CAROLYX
More than all, your Majesty.

KING (*to* HARPAGAS)

Then we can stay here long, can we not ?

HARPAGAS

There are reasons of State why that were dangerous.

KING

Reasons of State ? Why should we not stay here ?

HARPAGAS

Your Majesty, there is a legend in the world, that he who is greatest in the city of Barbul-el-Sharnak is the greatest in the world.

KING

I had not heard that legend.

HARPAGAS

Your Majesty, little legends do not hive in the sacred ears of kings ; nevertheless they hum among lesser men from generation unto generation.

KING

I will not go for a legend to Barbul-el-Sharnak.

HARPAGAS

Your Majesty, it is very dangerous . . . .

KING (*to* LADIES)

We discuss things of State, which little interest your Sincerities.

THARMIA (*rising*)

Your Majesty, we are ignorant of these things. (*Exeunt.*)

KING (*to* ICHTHARION *and* LUDIBRAS)

We will rest from things of State for a while, shall we not? We will be happy, (shall we not?) in this ancient, beautiful palace.

LUDIBRAS

If your Majesty commands, we must obey.

KING

But is not Thek most beautiful? Are not the jungle orchids a wonder and a glory?

LUDIBRAS

They have been thought so, your Majesty; they were pretty in Barbul-el-Sharnak where they were rare.

KING

But when the sun comes over them in the morning, when the dew is on them

still: are they not glorious then? Indeed they are very glorious.

LUDIBRAS

I think they would be glorious if they were blue, and if there were fewer of them.

KING

I do not think so. But you, Ichtharion, you think the city beautiful?

ICHTHARION

Yes, your Majesty.

KING

Ah. I am glad you love it. It is to me adorable.

ICHTHARION

I do not love it, your Majesty. I hate it very much. I know it is beautiful because your Majesty has said so.

LUDIBRAS

This city is dangerously unhealthy, your Majesty.

HARPAGAS

It is dangerous to be absent from Barbul-el-Sharnak.

ICHTHARION

We implore your Majesty to return to the centre of the world.

KING

I will not go again to Barbul-el-Sharnak.

(*Exeunt* KING *with* ATTENDANTS. ICHTHARION, LUDIBRAS *and* HARPAGAS *remain.*)

(*Enter* AROLIND *and* CAROLYX; *each goes up to her husband, very affectionate.*)

AROLIND

And you talked to the King?

LUDIBRAS

Yes.

AROLIND

You told him he must go back to Barbul-el-Sharnak at once?

LUDIBRAS

Well, I——

AROLIND

When does he start?

LUDIBRAS

He did not say he will start.

AROLIND

What ?

CAROLYX

We are not going ?

(AROLIND *and* CAROLYX *weep and step away from their husbands.*)

LUDIBRAS

But we spoke to the King.

AROLIND

O, we must stay and die here.

LUDIBRAS

But we did what we could.

AROLIND

O, I shall be buried in Thek.

LUDIBRAS

I can do no more.

AROLIND

My clothes are torn, my hair is old. I am in rags.

LUDIBRAS

I am sure you are beautifully dressed.

AROLIND (*full height*)

Beautifully dressed! Of course I am beautifully dressed! But who is there to see me? I am alone in the jungle, and here I shall be buried.

LUDIBRAS

But——

AROLIND

Oh, will you not leave me alone. Is nothing sacred to you? Not even my grief?

(*Exeunt* AROLIND *and* CAROLYX.)

HARPAGAS (*to* LUDIBRAS)

What are we to do?

LUDIBRAS

All women are alike.

ICHTHARION

I do not allow my wife to speak to me like that.

(*Exeunt* HARPAGAS *and* LUDIBRAS.)

I hope Tharmia will not also weep; it is very distressing to see a woman in tears.

(*Enter* THARMIA.)

Do not be unhappy, do not be at all unhappy. But I have been unable to persuade the King to return to Barbul-el-Sharnak. You will be happy here after a little while.

THARMIA (*breaks into loud laughter*) *You* are the King's adviser. Ha-ha-ha! *You* are the Grand High Vizier of the Court. Ha-ha-ha. *You* are the warden of the golden wand. Ha-ha-ha. O go and throw biscuits to the King's dog.

ICHTHARION

What!

THARMIA

Throw little ginger biscuits to the King's dog. Perhaps he will obey you. Perhaps you will have some influence with the King's dog if you feed him with little biscuits. You——

(*Laughs and Exit.* ICHTHARION *sits with his miserable head in his hands.*)

(*Re-enter* LUDIBRAS *and* HARPAGAS.)

LUDIBRAS

Has her Sincerity the princely Lady Tharmia been speaking with you?

ICHTHARION

She spoke a few words.

(LUDIBRAS *and* HARPAGAS *sigh.*)

We must leave Thek. We must depart from Thek.

LUDIBRAS

What, without the King?

HARPAGAS

No.

ICHTHARION

No. They would say in Barbul-el-Sharnak "These were once at the Court," and men that we have flogged would spit in our faces.

LUDIBRAS

Who can command a King?

HARPAGAS

Only the gods.

LUDIBRAS

The gods? There are no gods now. We have been civilised over three thousand years. The gods that nursed our infancy are dead, or gone to nurse younger nations.

ICHTHARION

I refuse to listen to——. O, the sentries are gone. No, the gods are no use to us, they were driven away by the decadence.

HARPAGAS

We are not in the decadence here. Barbul-el-Sharnak is in a different age. The city of Thek is scarcely civilized.

ICHTHARION

But everybody lives in Barbul-el-Sharnak.

HARPAGAS

The gods——

LUDIBRAS

The old prophet is coming.

HARPAGAS

He believes as much in the gods as you or I do.

LUDIBRAS

Yes, but we must not speak as though we knew that.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS (*a prophet*) *walks across the stage.*

ICHTHARION, LUDIBRAS, HARPAGAS
(*rising*)

The gods are good.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

They are benignant. (*Exit.*)

ICHTHARION

Listen! Let him prophesy to the King. Let him bid the King go hence lest they smite the city.

LUDIBRAS

Can we make him do it?

ICHTHARION

I think we can make him do it

HARPAGAS

The King is more highly civilised even than we are. He will not care for the gods.

ICHTHARION

He cannot ignore them; the gods crowned his forefather, and if there are no gods who made him King?

LUDIBRAS

Why that is true. He must obey a prophecy.

ICHTHARION

If the King disobeys the gods the people will tear him asunder, whether the gods created the people or the people created the gods.

(HARPAGAS *slips out after the* PROPHET.)

LUDIBRAS

If the King discovers this we shall be painfully tortured.

ICHTHARION

How can the King discover it ?

LUDIBRAS

He knows that there are no gods.

ICHTHARION

No man knows that of a certainty.

LUDIBRAS

But if there are——!

(*Enter* PROPHET *with* HARPAGAS. ICHTHARION *quickly sends* LUDIBRAS *and* HARPAGAS *away.*)

ICHTHARION

There is a delicate matter concerning the King.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Then I can help you little for I only serve the gods.

ICHTHARION

It also concerns the gods.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Ah. Then I hearken.

ICHTHARION

This city is for the King, whose body is fragile, a very unhealthy city. Moreover, there is no work here that a King can profitably do. Also it is dangerous for Barbul-el-Sharnak to be long without a King, lest——

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Does this concern the gods?

ICHTHARION

In this respect it does concern the gods—that if the gods knew this they would warn the King by inspiring you to make a prophecy. As they do not know this——

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

The gods know all things.

ICHTHARION

The gods do not know things that are not true. This is not strictly true——

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

It is written and hath been said that the gods cannot lie.

ICHTHARION

The gods of course cannot lie, but a prophet may sometimes utter a prophecy that is a good prophecy and helpful to men, thereby pleasing the gods, although the prophecy is not a true one.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

The gods speak through my mouth; my breath is my own breath, I am human and mortal. But my voice is from the gods and the gods cannilote.

cannot lie.

ICHTHARION

Is it wise in an age when the gods have lost their power to anger powerful men for the sake of the gods?

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

It *is* wise.

ICHTHARION

We are three men and you are alone with us. Will the gods save you if we want to put you to death and slip away with your body into the jungle?

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

If you should do this thing the gods have willed it. If they have not willed it you cannot.

ICHTHARION

We do not wish to do it. Nevertheless you will make this prophecy—you will go before the King and you will say that the gods have spoken, and that within three days' time, for the sake of vengeance upon some unknown man who is in this city, they will overthrow all Thek unless every man is departed.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

I will not do it, for the gods cannot lie.

ICHTHARION

Has it not been the custom since unremembered time for a prophet to have two wives?

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Most certainly. It is indeed the law. (ICHTHARION *holds up three fingers.*) What!

ICHTHARION

Three.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Do not betray me. It was long ago.

ICHTHARION

You will be allowed to serve the gods no more if men know this. The gods will not protect you in this matter, for you have offended also against the gods.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

It is worse that the gods should lie. Do not betray me.

ICHTHARION

I go to tell the others what I know.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

I will make the false prophecy.

ICHTHARION

Ah. You have chosen wisely.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

When the gods punish me who make them lie, they will know what punishment to give to you.

ICHTHARION

The gods will not punish us. It is long ago that the gods used to punish men.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

The gods will punish us.

ACT II

Same scene.
Same day.

KING KARNOS (*pointing off* L.)

Look at them now, are they not beautiful. They catch the last rays of the lingering sun. Can you say that the orchids are not beautiful now?

ICHTHARION

Your Majesty, we were wrong, they are most beautiful. They tower up from the jungle to take the sun. They are like the diadem of some jubilant king.

KING KARNOS

Ah. Now you have come to love the beauty of Thek.

ICHTHARION

Yes, yes, your Majesty, I see it now. I would live in this city always.

KING KARNOS

Yes, we will live here always. There is no city lovelier than Thek. Am I not right?

LUDIBRAS

Your Majesty is right, no city is like it.

KING KARNOS

Ah. I am always right.

THARMIA

How beautiful is Thek.

AROLIND

Yes, it is like a god.

(*Three notes are stricken on a sonorous gong.*)

WHISPERS (*on*)

There has been a prophecy. There has been a prophecy.

KING KARNOS

Ah! There has been a prophecy. Bring in the prophet. (*Exit* ATTENDANT.)

(*Enter mournfully with dejected head and walking very slowly* VOICE-OF-THE-GODS.)

KING KARNOS

You have made a prophecy.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

I have made a prophecy.

KING KARNOS

I would hear that prophecy. (*A pause.*)

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Your Majesty, the gods in three days' time——

KING KARNOS

Stop! Is it not usual to begin with certain words? (*A pause.*)

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

It is written and hath been said . . . that the gods cannot lie.

KING KARNOS

That is right.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

That the gods cannot lie.

KING KARNOS

Yes. Yes.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

In three days' time the gods will destroy this city for vengeance upon some man, unless all men desert it.

KING KARNOS

The gods will destroy Thek!

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Yes.

KING KARNOS

When will this happen?

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

It must be in three days' time.

KING KARNOS

How will it happen

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Why. It will happen.

KING KARNOS

How?

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Why . . . there will be a sound . . .

as the riving of wood . . . a sound as of thunder coming up from the ground. A cleft will run like a mouse across the floor. There will be a red light, and then no light at all, and in the darkness Thek shall tumble in.

(*The* KING *sits in deep thought. Exit* PROPHET *slowly, he begins to weep, then casts his cloak over his face. He stretches out his arms to grope his way and is led away by the hand. The* KING *sits thinking.*)

THARMIA

Save us, your Majesty.

AROLIND

Save us.

ICHTHARION

We must fly, your Majesty.

LUDIBRAS

We must escape swiftly.

(*The* KING *sits still in silence. He lifts a stick on his right to beat a little silver bell; but puts it down again. At last he lifts it up and strikes the bell. An* ATTENDANT *enters.*)

KING KARNOS

Bring back that prophet. (ATTENDANT *bows and exit.*)

(*The* KING *looks thoughtful. The rest have a frightened look. Re-enter* PROPHET.)

KING KARNOS

When the gods prophesy rain in the season of rain, or the death of an old man, we believe them. But when the gods prophesy something incredible and ridiculous, such as happens not nowadays, and hath not been heard of since the fall of Bleth, then our credulity is overtaxed. It is possible that a man should lie, it is not possible that the gods should destroy a city nowadays.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

O King, have mercy.

KING KARNOS

What, would you be sent safe away while your king is destroyed by the gods ?

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

No, no, your Majesty. I would stay in the city, your Majesty. But if the gods do not destroy the city, if the gods have misled me.

KING KARNOS

If the gods have misled you they have chosen your doom. Why ask for mercy from me?

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

If the gods have misled me and punish me no further, I ask mercy from you, O King.

KING KARNOS

If the gods have misled you, let the gods protect you from my executioner.

1ST SENTRY (*laughs aside to* 2ND SENTRY.)

Very witty.

2ND SENTRY

Yes, yes. (*laughs too.*)

KING KARNOS

If the doom fall not at sunset why then the executioner——

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

Your Majesty!

KING KARNOS

No more! No doubt the gods will destroy the city at sunset.

(*The* SENTRIES *titter. The* PROPHET *is led away.*)

ICHTHARION

Your Majesty! Is it safe to kill a prophet, even for any guilt? Will not the people——

KING KARNOS

Not while he is a prophet; but if he has prophesied falsely his death is due to the gods. The people once even burned a prophet themselves because he had taken three wives.

ICHTHARION (*aside to* LUDIBRAS)

It is most unfortunate, but what can we do.

LUDIBRAS (*aside to* ICHTHARION)

He will not be killed if he betray us instead.

ICHTHARION (*aside*)

Why . . . that is true.

(ALL *are whispering.*)

KING KARNOS

What do you whisper?

THARMIA

Your Majesty, we fear that the gods will destroy us all and . . .

KING KARNOS

You do not fear it?

(*Dead silence. A plaintive lament off. Enter the* QUEEN. *Her face is pale as paper.*)

QUEEN (*loq.*)

O your Majesty. Your Majesty. I have heard the lutanist. I have heard the lutanist.

KING KARNOS

She means the lute that is heard by those about to die.

QUEEN

I have heard Gog-Owza, the lutanist, playing his lute. And I shall die, O I shall die.

KING KARNOS

No. No. No. You have not heard Gog-Owza. Send for her maidens, send for the Queen's maidens.

QUEEN

I have heard Gog-Owza playing, and I shall die.

KING KARNOS

Hark. Why I hear it too. That is not Gog-Owza, it is only a man with a lute; I hear it too.

QUEEN

O the King hears it too. The King will die. The great King will die. My child will be desolate for the King will die. Mourn, people of the jungle. Mourn citizens of Thek. And thou, O Barbul-el-Sharnak, O metropolitan city, mourn thou in the midst of the nations, for the great King will die.

KING KARNOS

No. No. No. (*To oldest present*) Listen you. Do you not hear it?

THE OLDEST

Yes, your Majesty.

KING KARNOS

You see it is a real lute. That is no spirit playing.

QUEEN

O but he is old, in a few days he will die. It is Gog-Owza, and the King will die.

KING KARNOS

No, no; it is only a man. Look out of the window there. (*To any* YOUNG MAN.)

THE YOUNG MAN

It is dark, your Majesty, and I cannot see.

QUEEN

It is the spirit Gog-Owza.

THE YOUNG MAN

I can hear the music clearly.

KING KARNOS

He is young.

QUEEN

The young are always in danger, they go about among swords. He will die too, and the great King, and I. In a few days we will be buried.

KING KARNOS

Let us all listen; we cannot all die in a few days' time.

THARMIA

I hear it clearly.

QUEEN

Women are blossoms in the hand of Death. They are often close to Death. She will die too.

ALL

I hear it. I hear it. And I. And I. And I. It is only a man with a lute.

QUEEN (*pacified*)

I should like to see him, then I should know for certain.

(*She looks out of the casement.*)

No, it is too dark.

KING KARNOS

We will call the man if you wish it.

QUEEN

Yes, I shall be easy then, and then I shall sleep.

(KING *instructs* ATTENDANTS *to enquire without.* QUEEN *at window still.*)

KING KARNOS

It is some man down by the river playing his lute. I am told that sometimes a man will play all night.

THARMIA (*aside*)

That's their amusement here.

AROLIND (*aside*)

Well really it's almost all the music we get.

THARMIA (*aside*)

It really is.

AROLIND (*aside*)

O how I cry for the Golden Hall of Song in Barbul-el-Sharnak. I think it would almost hold the city of Thek.

(*Re-enter* ATTENDANT.)

ATTENDANT

It is only a common lute, your Majesty. All hear it except one man.

KING KARNOS

All except one did you say. Ah thank you.

(*To* QUEEN *at window*)

It is only a common lute.

QUEEN

One man did not hear it. Who was he? Where is he? Why didn't he?

ATTENDANT

He was riding back again to Barbul-el-Sharnak. He was just starting. He said he did not hear it.

QUEEN

O, send for him here.

ATTENDANT.

He is gone, your Majesty.

QUEEN

Overtake him quick. Overtake him.

(*Exit* ATTENDANT.)

THARMIA (*aside to* AROLIND)

I wish that I were going to Barbul-el-Sharnak.

AROLIND

O to be back again at the centre of the world!

THARMIA

Were we not talking of the golden hall?

AROLIND

Ah, yes. How lovely it was! How beautiful it was when the King was there and strange musicians came from the heathen lands with huge plumes in their hair, and played on instruments that we did not know.

THARMIA

The Queen was better then. The music eased her.

AROLIND

This lute player is making her quite mad.

THARMIA

Well. Well. No wonder. He has a mournful sound. Listen!

AROLIND

Do not let us listen. It makes me feel cold.

THARMIA

He cannot play like Nagra or dear Trehannion. It is because we have heard Trehannion that we do not like to listen.

AROLIND

I do not like to listen because I feel cold.

THARMIA

We feel cold because the Queen has opened the casement.

KING KARNOS (*To* ATTENDANT)

Find the man that is playing the lute and give him this and let him cease to play upon his lute.

(*Exit* ATTENDANT.)

ICHTHARION

Hark! He is playing still.

KING KARNOS

Yes, we all hear him: it is only a man.

(*To another or same* ATTENDANT)
Let him stop his playing.

ATTENDANT.
Yes, your Majesty. (*Exit.*)

(*Enter an* ATTENDANT *with another.*)

ATTENDANT.
This is the man that does not hear the lute.

KING KARNOS
Ah. You are deaf, are you not?

MAN
No, your Majesty.

KING KARNOS
You hear me clearly?

MAN
Yes, your Majesty.

KING KARNOS
Listen! . . . Now you hear the lute?

MAN
No, your Majesty.

KING KARNOS
Who sent you to Barbul-el-Sharnak?

MAN

The captain of the camel-guard sent me, your Majesty.

KING KARNOS

Then go, and never return. You are deaf and also a fool. (*To himself*) The Queen will not sleep. (*To* ANOTHER) Bring music, bring music quickly. (*Muttering*) The Queen will not sleep.

(*The man bows low and departs. He says farewell to a* SENTRY. *The* QUEEN *leans from the casement muttering. Music heard off.*)

QUEEN

Ah, that is earthly music, but of that other tune I have a fear.

KING KARNOS

We have all heard it. Comfort yourself. Calm yourself.

QUEEN

One man does not hear it.

KING KARNOS

But he has gone away. We all hear it now.

QUEEN

I wish that I could see him.

KING KARNOS

A man is a small thing, and the night is very large, and full of wonders. You may well not see him.

QUEEN

I should like to see him. Why cannot I see him ?

KING KARNOS

I have sent the camel guard to search for him and to stop him playing his lute.

(*To* ICHTHARION)

Do not let the Queen know about this prophecy. She would think . . . I do not know what she would think.

ICHTHARION

No, your Majesty.

KING KARNOS

The Queen has a very special fear of the gods.

ICHTHARION

Yes, your Majesty.

QUEEN

You speak of me ?

KING KARNOS

O no. We speak of the gods.
(*The earthly music ceases.*)

QUEEN

O do not speak of the gods. The gods are very terrible, all the dooms that shall ever be come forth from the gods. In misty windings of the wandering hills they forge the future even as on an anvil. The future frightens me.

KING KARNOS

Call the Queen's maidens. Send quickly for her maidens. Do not let the future frighten you.

QUEEN

Men laugh at the gods, they often laugh at the gods. I am sure that the gods laugh too. It is dreadful to think of the laughter of the gods. O the lute! the lute! How clearly I hear the lute. But you all hear it? Do you not? You swear that you all hear it?

KING KARNOS

Yes, yes. We all hear the lute. It is only a man playing.

QUEEN

I wish I could see him. Then I should know that he was only a man and not Gog-Owza, most terrible of the gods. I should be able to sleep then.

KING KARNOS (*soothingly*)

Yes, yes.

(*Enter* ATTENDANT.)

Here comes the man that I have sent to find him. You have found the lute player? Tell the Queen that you have found the lute player.

ATTENDANT

The camel guard have sought, your Majesty, and cannot find any man that is playing a lute.

CURTAIN.

ACT III.

Three days elapse.

THARMIA

We have done too much. We have done too much. Our husbands will be put to death. The prophet will betray them and they will be put to death.

AROLIND

O what shall we do?

THARMIA

It would have been better for us to be clothed with rags, than to bring our husbands to death by what we have done.

AROLIND

We have done too much and we have angered a king, and (who knows!) we may have angered even the gods.

THARMIA

Even the gods! We are become like Helen. When my mother was a child she saw her once. She says she was the quietest and gentlest of creatures and only wished to be loved, and yet because of her there was a war for four or five years at Troy, and the city was burned which had remarkable towers; and some of the gods of the Greeks took her side, my mother says, and some she says were against her, and they quarrelled upon Olympus where they live, and all because of Helen.

AROLIND

O don't, don't. It frightens me. I only want to be prettily dressed and see my husband happy.

THARMIA

Have you seen the prophet?

AROLIND

Oh yes, I have seen him. He walks about the palace. He is free but he cannot escape.

THARMIA

What does he look like? Has he a frightened look?

AROLIND

He mutters as he walks. Sometimes he weeps: and then he puts his cloak over his face.

THARMIA

I fear that he will betray them.

AROLIND

I do not trust a prophet. He is the go-between of gods and men. They are so far apart. How can he be true to both?

THARMIA

This prophet is false to the gods. It

is a hateful thing for a prophet to prophesy falsely.

(PROPHET *walks across hanging his head and muttering.*)

PROPHET

The gods have spoken a lie. The gods have spoken a lie. Can all their vengeance ever atone for this?

THARMIA

He spoke of vengeance.

AROLIND

O he will betray them.

(*They weep. Enter* QUEEN.)

QUEEN

Why do you weep? Ah you are going to die. You heard the death-lute. You do well to weep.

THARMIA

No, your Majesty. It is the man that has played for the last three days. We all heard him.

QUEEN

Three days. Yes, yes, it is three days. Gog-Owza plays no longer than three days. Gog-Owza grows weary then. He

has given his message and he will go away.

THARMIA

We have all heard him your Majesty except the deaf young man that went back to Barbul-el-Sharnak. We hear him now.

QUEEN

Yes! But nobody has seen him yet. My maidens have searched for him but they have not found him.

THARMIA

Your Majesty, my husband heard him, and Ludibras; and while they live we know there is nothing to fear. If the King grew angry with them—because of any idle story that some jealous man might tell—some criminal wishing to postpone his punishment—if the King were to grow angry with them they would open their veins, they would never survive his anger. Then we should all of us say, "Perhaps it was Gog-Owza that Ichtharion and Ludibras heard."

QUEEN

The King will never grow angry with Ichtharion or Ludibras.

THARMIA

Your Majesty would not sleep if the King grew angry with them.

QUEEN

Oh No. I should not sleep, it would be terrible.

THARMIA

Your Majesty would be wakeful all night long and cry.

QUEEN

Oh yes. I should not sleep, I should cry all night. (*Exit.*)

AROLIND

She has no influence with the King.

THARMIA

No. But he hates to hear her cry all night.

(*Enter* ICHTHARION.)

I am sure that the prophet will betray you. But we have spoken to the Queen. We have told her it would be dreadful if the King were angry with you, and she thinks she will cry all night if he is angry.

ICHTHARION

Poor frightened brain. How strong are little fancies. She should be a beautiful Queen. But she goes about white and crying, in fear of the gods. The gods, that are no more than shadows in the moonlight. Man's fear rises weird and large in all this mystery and makes a shadow of himself upon the ground and Man jumps and says "the gods." Why, they are less than shadows, we have seen shadows, we have not seen the gods.

THARMIA

O do not speak like that. There used to be gods. They overthrew Bleth dreadfully. And if they still live on in the dark of the hills, why, they might hear your words.

ICHTHARION

Why! you grow frightened too. Do not be frightened. We will go and speak with the prophet, while you follow the Queen; be much with her, and do not let her forget that she will cry if the King should be angry with us.

AROLIND

I am almost afraid when I am with the Queen ; I do not like to be with her.

THARMIA

She could not hurt us, she is afraid of all things.

AROLIND

She makes me have huge fears of prodigious things.

(*Exeunt* THARMIA *and* AROLIND.)

(*Enter* LUDIBRAS.)

LUDIBRAS

The prophet is coming this way.

ICHTHARION

Sit down. We must speak with him. He will betray us.

LUDIBRAS

Why should the prophet betray us ?

ICHTHARION

Because the guilt of the false prophecy is not his guilt, it is ours ; and the King may spare him if he tells him that. Again, he mutters of vengeance as he walks ; many have told me.

LUDIBRAS

The King will not spare him even if he betrays us. It was he that spoke the false prophecy to the King.

ICHTHARION

The King does not in his heart believe in the gods. It is for cheating him that the prophet is to die. But if he knows we had planned it——

LUDIBRAS

What can we say to the prophet?

ICHTHARION

Why we can say nothing. But we can learn what he will do from what he says to us.

LUDIBRAS

Here he is. We must remember everything that he says.

ICHTHARION

Watch his eyes.

(*Enter the* PROPHET, *his eyes concealed by his cloak.*)

ICHTHARION *and* LUDIBRAS

The gods are good.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

They are benignant.

ICHTHARION

I am much to blame; I am very much to blame.

LUDIBRAS

We trust the King will relent.

ICHTHARION

He often relents at sunset: he looks out over the orchids in the evening. They are very beautiful then, and if he is angry his anger passes away just when the cool breeze comes at the set of sun.

LUDIBRAS

He is sure to relent at sunset.

ICHTHARION

Do not be angry. I am indeed to blame. Do not be angry.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

I do not wish the King to relent at sunset.

ICHTHARION

Do not be unhappy.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

I say to you that I have betrayed the gods.

ICHTHARION

Listen to me. Do not be so unhappy. There are no gods. Everybody knows that there are no gods. The King knows it.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

You have heard their prophet lie, and believe that the gods are dead?

LUDIBRAS

There are indeed no gods. It is well known.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

There are gods, and they have a vengeance even for you. Listen! and I will tell you what it shall be. Aye and for you also . . . Listen! . . . No, no, they are silent in the gloom of the hills. They have not spoken to me since I lied.

ICHTHARION

You are right, the gods will punish us. It is natural that they should not speak just now; but they will certainly punish us. It is not therefore necessary

for any man to avenge himself upon us, even though there were any cause.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

It is not necessary.

ICHTHARION

Indeed it might even further anger the gods if a man should be before them to punish us.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

The gods are very swift; no man outruns them.

LUDIBRAS

A man would be rash to attempt to.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

The sun is falling low. I will leave you now, for I have ever loved the sun at evening. I go to watch it drop through the gilded clouds, and make a wonder of familiar things. After the sunset night, and after an evil deed the vengeance of the gods. (*Exit* R.)

LUDIBRAS (*with contemptuous wonder*)

He really believes in the gods.

ICHTHARION

He is as mad as the Queen. We must

humour his madness if we ever see him more. I think that all will be well.

(*An* EXECUTIONER *steals after the* PROPHET; *he is dressed in crimson satin down to the knees. He wears a leather belt and carries the axe of his trade.*)

LUDIBRAS

His voice was angry as he went away. I fear he may yet betray us.

ICHTHARION

It is not likely. He thinks that the gods will punish us.

LUDIBRAS

How long will he think so? The Queen's fancies change thrice an hour.

ICHTHARION

The executioner keeps very close to him now. He comes closer every hour. There is not much time for him to change his fancies.

LUDIBRAS

He has the will to betray us if that fancy leaves him.

ICHTHARION

The executioner is very eager for him.

He invented a new stroke lately, but he has not had a man since we came to Thek.

LUDIBRAS

I do not like an eager executioner—the King sees him and it makes him think . . .

ICHTHARION

Look how low the sun is, he has no time to betray us, the King is not yet here.

LUDIBRAS

He is coming.

ICHTHARION

But the prophet is not here.

LUDIBRAS

No, he is not yet come.

(*Enter the* KING.)

KING KARNOS

The Queen's maidens have persuaded her that there is nothing to fear. They are quite excellent; they shall dance before me. The Queen will sleep; they are quite excellent. Ah, Ichtharion. Come to me, Ichtharion.

LUDIBRAS

Why does the King send for you?

KING KARNOS

You were wrong, Ichtharion.

ICHTHARION

Your Majesty!

(LUDIBRAS *watches.*)

KING KARNOS

You were wrong to think that Thek is not very lovely.

ICHTHARION

Yes, I was wrong, and I am much to blame.

KING KARNOS

Yes, it is very beautiful at evening. I will watch the sun go down over the orchids. I will never see Barbul-el-Sharnak any more. I will sit and watch the sun go down on the orchids, till it is gone and all their colours fade.

ICHTHARION

It is very beautiful now. How still it is. I have never seen so still a sunset before.

KING KARNOS

It is like a picture done by a dying painter, full of a beautiful colour. Even if all these orchids died to-night yet their beauty is an indestructible memory.

LUDIBRAS (*aside to* ICHTHARION)

The prophet is coming this way.

ICHTHARION

Your Majesty, the prophet walks about the palace, and the executioner is close behind him! If the Queen saw him and the executioner would it not trouble her? Were it not better that he be killed at once? Shall I whistle now to the executioner?

KING KARNOS

Not now. I said at sunset.

ICHTHARION

Your Majesty, it is merciful to kill a man before the set of sun. For it is natural in a man to love the sun. But to see it set and to know that it will not come again is even a second death. It would be merciful to kill him now.

KING KARNOS

I have said—at sunset. It were unjust to kill him before his prophecy is proven false.

ICHTHARION

But, your Majesty, we know that it is false. He also knows it.

KING KARNOS

He shall die at sunset.

LUDIBRAS

Your Majesty, the prophet will pray for life if he is not killed now. It would be a pity to grant it.

KING KARNOS

Is not a King's word death? I have said he shall die at sunset.

(*Enter* PROPHET. *The* EXECUTIONER *creeps along close behind him.*)

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

O the gods are about to have lied. The gods will have lied. I have prophesied falsely and the gods will have lied. My death cannot atone for it, nor the punishment of others.

(ICHTHARION *and* LUDIBRAS *start.*)

ICHTHARION

He will betray us yet.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

O why did you let your voice come through my lips? O why did you allow your voice to lie? For centuries it has been said from city to city "The gods cannot lie." The nomads have known it out upon the plains. The mountaineers have known it near the dawn. That is all over now. O King, let me die at once. For I have prophesied falsely and at sunset the gods will lie.

KING KARNOS

It is not sunset yet. No doubt you have spoken truly.

(*Enter* QUEEN.)

How well the Queen looks. Her maidens are quite excellent.

LUDIBRAS (*to* ICHTHARION)

There is something a little dreadful in seeing the Queen so calm. She is like a windless sunset in the winter before a hurricane comes and the snow swirls up before it over the world.

ICHTHARION

I do not like calm sunsets ; they make me think that something is going to happen. Yes, the Queen is very quiet, she will sleep to-night.

QUEEN

I am not frightened any longer. All the wild fancies of my brain have left it. I have often troubled you with little fears. Now they are all at rest and I am afraid no longer.

KING KARNOS

That is good; I am very glad. You will sleep to-night.

QUEEN

Sleep ? Why—yes I shall sleep. O yes we shall all sleep.

KING KARNOS

Your maidens have told you that there is nothing to fear.

QUEEN

Nothing to fear ? No, no more little fears to trouble me.

KING KARNOS

They have told you there is nothing at all to fear. Indeed there is nothing.

QUEEN

No more little fears. There is one great fear.

KING KARNOS

A great fear! Why, what is it?

QUEEN

I must not say. For you have often soothed me when I was frightened, and it were not well for me to trouble you at the last.

KING KARNOS

What is your fear? Shall I send again for your maidens.

QUEEN

No, it is not my fear. It is all men's fear if they knew.

KING KARNOS (*glancing round*)

Ah, you have seen my man in red. I will send him away. I will——

QUEEN

No, no. My fear is not earthly. I am not afraid of little things any more.

KING KARNOS

Why, what is it then?

QUEEN

I do not quite know. But you know how I have ever feared the gods. The gods are going to do some dreadful thing.

KING KARNOS

Believe me; the gods do nothing nowadays.

QUEEN

You have indeed been very good to me. It seems a little while since the camels came to Argun-Zeerith by the iris marshes, the camels with the gold-hung palanquin, and the bells above their heads, high up in air, the silver bridal bells. It seems a very little while ago. I did not know how swift the end would come.

KING KARNOS

What end? To whom is the end coming?

QUEEN

Do not be troubled. We should not let Fate trouble us. The World and its daily cares, ah! they are frightful; but

Fate, I smile at Fate. Fate cannot hurt us if we smile at it.

KING KARNOS

What end do you say is coming ?

QUEEN

I do not know. Something that has been shall soon be no more.

KING KARNOS

No, no. Look upon Thek. It is built of rock and our palace is all of marble. Time has not scratched it with six centuries. Six tearing centuries with all their claws. We are throned on gold and founded upon marble. Death will some day find me indeed, but I am young. Sire after sire of mine has died in Barbul-el-Sharnak or in Thek, but has left our dynasty laughing sheer in the face of Time from over these age-old walls.

QUEEN

Say farewell to me now, lest something happen.

KING KARNOS

No, no, we will not say unhappy things.

EXECUTIONER

The sun has set.

KING KARNOS

Not yet. The jungle hides it. It is not yet set. Look at the beautiful light upon the orchids. For how long they have flashed their purple on the gleaming walls of Thek. For how long they will flash there on our immortal palace, immortal in marble and immortal in song. Ah ; how the colour changes.

(*To the* EXECUTIONER)

The sun is set. Take him away.

(*To the* QUEEN)

It is *he* whose end you foresaw.

(*The* EXECUTIONER *grips the* PROPHET *by the arm.*)

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

The gods have lied !

KING KARNOS

The jungle is sinking ! It has fallen into the earth !

(*The* QUEEN *smiles a little, holding his hand.*)

The city is falling in ! The houses are rolling towards us !

(*Thunder off.*)

ICHTHARION

They are coming up like a wave and a darkness is coming with them.

(*Loud and prolonged thunder. Flashes of red light and then total darkness. A little light comes back, showing recumbent figures, shattered pillars and rocks of white marble.*)

(*The* PROPHET'S *back is broken, but he raises the fore part of his body for a moment.*)

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS (*triumphantly*)

They have not lied!

ICHTHARION

O, I am killed.

(*Laughter heard off.*)

Someone is laughing. Laughing even in Thek! Why the whole city is shattered.

(*The laughter grows demoniac.*)

What is that dreadful sound?

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS

It is the laughter of the gods that cannot lie, going back to their hills.

(*He dies.*)

CURTAIN.