

# Reaping Time

## A. Bertram Chandler

It was already dark when they came to the city. The sky, save for a low bar of sullen crimson overhanging the low hills to the westward, was overcast. The road along which they had come glimmered pallidly, stretched behind them broad and straight to the very edge of the featureless grey plain. Before them, solidly ugly valves of dull metal between two squat black towers, was the gate.

‘Are you sure there is no mistake?’ asked the woman.

She looked up at the forbidding portal, at the black, harshly utilitarian architecture beyond. Few lights, and those dim and furtive, broke the monotony of straight perpendicular lines, of geometrical masses upheaved darkly against darkness. And there was no sound from the city, no joyful clamour of bells, no music of plucked strings and singing voices. There was, perhaps, the merest tremor of the air, a vibration felt rather than heard, a distant throbbing as of some great and well-tended machine.

‘Are you sure there is no mistake?’ she said.

‘No,’ replied the man confidently. ‘This - ’ and he flung out an possessive hand - ‘is better, perhaps, than we were led to believe. It has no tinsel prettiness. It has . . . dignity.’

‘Yes,’ agreed the woman. ‘There is dignity.’

And with the words the harsh, strong lines of her face and bony added strength, and harshness, as did those of the man. They were, husband and wife, worthy citizens of the place to which they were come. Worthier far than many they had known who had let some softness, some weakness, bar them forever from even so much as setting foot upon the road.

Slowly, silently, the gates swung open. Deliberately, not looking back, man stepped forward - his woman, as was proper, a pace or so to the rear. Behind them the gates shut. There was something irrevocable about their closing. There was the merest suggestion of an unmusical clang.

To their right, as they entered, was a door, open, in the dexter tower. Light streamed from it, was reflected brightly from the black, polished pavement. There was movement inside the gatehouse, a shadow that shifted across the source of illumination. Then all was still again, and the bright light in the tower glared unwinking through the open doorway.

Confidently, his heels ringing on the polished pavement, the man walked towards the only sign of life that they had so far seen. No less confidently his woman followed. They hesitated on the threshold of the gatehouse — but this was due to physical rather than to psychological reasons. The harsh brilliance of the unshaded lamp was cruel to eyes long inured to semi-darkness. But it was not long before they were able to see, albeit dimly at first, the desk behind which sat the Gatekeeper. And then they saw the Gatekeeper. himself, in his drab, monkish habit, and the Book before him, and the text, lurid orange on black, on the wall behind him, Its sentiments, harshly uncompromising, did much to dispel the mistrust the hooded robe had inspired in the man and woman. It was the woman who repeated the words, unctuously - *As a man sows, so shall he surely reap...*

‘Yes,’ agreed the Gatekeeper. ‘Surely...’

It was not the words so much as the tone in which they were spoken the faintly mocking voice and the eyes, brightly sardonic, peering out from beneath the cowl - that caused the mistrust to return. And there was, although both the pilgrims stared ill-manneredly, no sign of a beard.

‘He must be off duty,’ whispered the woman. ‘His relief maybe...’

‘It could be. If we’re to believe all we’re told they’ve had some rather queer types here...’

The Gatekeeper ignored them. With practiced hands he flipped over the pages of the Book. He asked, in a dry official voice- ‘John and Sara Goode?’

‘That is correct.’

‘Let me see . . . Your qualifications for entry?’

‘They are in your records.’

‘True...’ The slim hands still turned the heavy, thick pages, but more slowly now. They paused, hovered over the open book. Then - ‘Your temperance work?’

‘My wife and myself were indefatigable labourers in that corner of the Lord’s vineyard. It was largely due to our efforts that our town exercised the right of local option...’

‘And that certain of your fellow citizens poisoned themselves with what is known, I believe, as rotgut?’

‘We would not know. That is a matter for their consciences. It...’

An upraised hand cut him short. The eyes under the cowl twinkled shrewdly. The voice, grimly humorous, quoted – ‘And wine that maketh glad the heart of man...’

‘Strong drink is a mocker,’ came the ready reply.

‘He is testing us,’ whispered the woman.

‘And wasn’t there a wedding feast, once, where the water was turned into wine?’

‘The wine in those days-’ the answer came glibly - was no more than unfermented fruit juices.’

‘H’m. There’s something here about Sunday cinemas. I trust that in your campaign against this form of entertainment you were concerned chiefly about the low artistic quality of the films?’

‘That was no concern of ours. It was breaking the Sabbath, and that we could not tolerate.’

‘I see. But what of the young people, soldiers and airmen and their girls, forced to walk the streets when they could have passed a pleasant hour or so in the warmth; being driven by sheer boredom into experimental and often disastrous loves when the safety valve of celluloid amours was denied them?’

‘There were always the churches,’ the woman put in primly.

‘True,’ sighed the Gatekeeper. ‘There are always the churches.....’

Another page turned slowly under his slim, strong, hand. Then, and his voice was no longer humorous - ‘There was a girl - young, silly, parentless, a servant in your household. There was a young airman - lonely, far from home. There was one of the Sabbaths that you strove to bring to your community - no cheap plush comfort of the cinema, no warm, friendly hotel lounge - only a long walk over the moors, the two young people alone together, and the sweeping searchlights and the mattering gunfire to the north reminding the young man of the fate that would be his. He would have married her, I think - but he fell in flames over Berlin.

‘That girl - she needed an older woman then, someone on whom she could lean in her trouble. You turned her out. Do you know what happened to her?’

The woman replied.

‘We neither know nor care. She was the Scarlet Woman. She had no place in a Christian household.’

‘There was One who said,’ remarked the Gatekeeper quietly, ‘Let he who is without sin cast the first stone...’

‘And we are without sin!’ cried the woman, pride lending what was almost beauty to her severe features. ‘We have neither lied, stolen, nor committed adultery. We have honoured the name of the Lord and kept it holy, We have kept the Sabbath.’

‘Then you may enter into the Master’s presence.’

The Gatekeeper rose, his feet clicking curiously on the polished floor. His cowl fell back, and for the first time they saw his horns...

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