

Why The Gods Play With Laughing Sam's Dice

by

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Orcu stood with Andiron upon the edge of the great mountain. They gazed out over the Peaceful Valley, hidden beneath the rising vapours of the predawn mist. Andiron looked up at the sound of the cuckoo.

“Four of the morning,” she said, “Time for sunrise.”

“I suppose so,” said Orcu. “Give me my bag. I shall have to go now.”

Seizing the trunk at his feet, Orcu leapt into the air and flew down to the eastern horizon. The track of the sun lay across the sky, east to west. Orcu drew on a pair of welder’s goggles and opened the lid of the trunk. He inserted his hand.

“Come on boy. Out you come. Time to shine and rise. There boy, easy boy. Easy, easy, easy.” Carefully he drew out the golden disk of the sun. “Onto the hook; there you go. Another day, another dollar.” He hooked the sun onto the track. It wriggled and he put up a hand to steady it on the hook.

“Ffff...oiled!!!!!!” He shrieked in pain. “This thing burned my finger.” He put his hand into his mouth and cursed in fourteen languages.

“That does it!” He sat down morosely, sucking the injured digit. “I am absolutely NOT going to continue putting up this ridiculous sun each morning for another day more.”

“Orcu! Orcu!” The voice of Andiron came from the top of the mountain. “You will be late with the sun. The ceremony of the morning begins already in the Peaceful Valley.”

“Let them wait for it,” growled Orcu. “They can do without light today.”

“Oh no, my Lord Orcu. What of your ancient covenant with Bartan, first father of the tribes of the Valley? You promised, each day you would bring light to their children. Can you forget your word to your faithful servant and leave his offspring to die?”

“Jesus Christ! That was ten thousand years ago! I have come to the end of my patience. No more will I rise each morning to singe my fingers. No more will I listen to the drums of the morning ceremonies in the valley. I’m going to sleep in!”

“But, Oh My Lord, wouldst Thou forget Thy word? Wouldst Thou be foresworn unto Thy friend Bartan the wise?”

“Not a Damn!” said Orcu. “They can have their Sun every morning. I am a God, after all. It is just that I am not prepared to do it my bloody self, day after every day, any more! Hear Me! Hear Me! Hear Me!

“Be it known that I, Orcu, Prince of the heavens, son of Bog and Mabog, ruler of the air, conqueror of Sagan the Devourer, command this day...” He glanced at his Rolex DateJust. “The twenty third of the month of Bashan in the ten thousand three hundred and seventieth year of our age of peace...” Pause for breath. “That from this moment onward for eternity (or until I make alternative provisions) the Sun shall rise of itself in the appointed hour for the dawning of each day, shall run its course in the track of the heavens and, of itself, shall rest in the night.

“I Orcu have spoken! Let the world hear and obey!”

The sun, which had been hovering on the track, hopeful of a speedy return to its night-time peace gave a ferocious scowl, pulled a tongue at Orcu and, glowering fiercely, made its way up over the horizon.

“Orcu! Orcu!” Andiron called, impatient, from the hilltop. “Have you finished with that sun yet? It is the time to lift the veil of the morning mist from the valley. I go now, to bless the milking of the herds and you had best hurry or we shall have an epidemic of common colds among the milkmaids.”

Orcu got to his feet, kicking the empty trunk irritably so that it spun out into the sky with a trail of light visible next to the sunrise for several astronomical units. The commotion in the valley was audible from horizon to horizon as the priests began to beat their drums, and chant praises.

“Oh Orcu, Lord of Light.

Oh Orcu Great deliverer.

Orcu of power, husband of Andiron, conqueror of Sagan.

Great is Thy power for the new sign Thou givest us.

Great is Thy name for the glory of Thy days!

Ten thousand are Thy years!
Merciful is Thine hand!”

Once, the songs of the priests had given Orcu some satisfaction but, frankly, he had heard them all before. He stamped to the mouth of the valley and began to fan the breeze up through the lowlands.

An hour later, the sun well up, the mist lifted, Andiron and Orcu sat down to breakfast.

“I don’t like that business with the sun this morning one bit,” she began. “You’ll have to look out or you’ll find yourself staying in bed all day like your brother, Loco. Since he automated that world he just mopes around. He does nothing all year and he doesn’t even turn out for the harvest festival anymore.”

“Can’t say I blame him. Why in the name of reason would anyone who hadn’t made some sort of stupid agreement - among other things, an agreement with a mortal who has been dead more than ten thousand years - be working three hundred and sixty five days a year at our age?” He took a bite of toast. “It’s enough to make you sick. Just because I get carried away one day; see some idiot - Bartan the Wise - that’s a laugh - see some idiot about to be eaten by Sagan the Devourer, fight a few battles, just for fun, get drunk together and make a promise. OK for him. Twenty years on and he croaks. So long and good night.

“Where does that leave me, I ask you? Here I am, millennia on, working like a pig protecting his descendants. It’s no fun anymore. And those descendants! At least Bartan was good for a laugh. Drink all night, kill a few pigs in the morning, a bit of rape and pillage, and boy, could that guy put together a party! But these bloody descendants. They’re as boring as... boring as...” he paused, lost for comparison. “Rain for the planting; Dry for the harvest; Snow for the skiing and showers for the Spring. What do they think it’s like, dishing out weather on schedule year in, year out?”

“And boring songs! The last time they came out with a new one was a hundred and fifty years ago. And since they invented the calendar it’s getting even worse.

“Once upon a time you could rely on their forgetting the fertilities in the spring – every fifty years or so – and we could take a holiday in the summer. Now, with all this technology, they hit every ceremony on the button. What a pain! I can tell you, I am thinking of putting in a totally automated system like

Loco's.

“He was saying the other day, he hasn't even had to look at his lot in more than a hundred years.”

“But what does he do about the prayers and special requests? What about the clinics on Saturday mornings and the infertility problems and the sick children? Who blesses his trading expeditions?”

“That's the most interesting thing of all. Nobody does. Imagine someone comes in asking for a miracle. In the old days he used to be like us. He'd be down there listening. He'd pull the guy's card. Check on the credit status: sacrifices all made, tithes up to date, good moral standing, not cheating on the wife, adequate faith level and wham bam, Loco would see him right.

“Then one day he overslept. Forgot to go down to the constituency surgery and what happened? Half a dozen requests for healings, a couple of dodgy business proposals, some weddings and what not - you know, the typical weeks business. Anyway, he was quite nervous about it all, but no need to worry.

“A few more than half the ailing recovered. The rest died. Business ventures more or less up to par, a few friends lost where they failed, but no more than if he'd taken sides as usual. Anyway, short long story, nobody noticed. There he'd been, working his fingers to a frazzle, and to what purpose? Net impact: zero.”

“Well, if that's the way you feel,” said Andiron, “Why haven't you given up long ago? I've always rather fancied a bungalow down by the sea.”

“No,” said Orcu, “what would we do with ourselves? Remember before we came here, that villa down on the Aegean? All those orgies? I don't, know. There was a time when I used to be amused by the idea of transmutation into a bull and a spot of sport with the mortals. But that sort of thing doesn't really turn me on any more. When you've fecundated a couple of hundred herds of cows what do you do for an encore? No, I can't think of anything more interesting to do than what we do here. Anyway, duty calls.”

He picked up his whip, jammed his hat on his head and set off.

He collected the rain sheep in the meadows over the sea, whipping them over towards the valley with flashes and cracks of his mighty whip. The same whip he had once used so memorably to vanquish Sagan. He drove them over

the pass where Sagan's hoof had cloven the mountains as he fled the valley so long ago. It seemed just yesterday. Orcu could not help making an unfavourable comparison between the exciting days of his fighting youth and the life of a god trapped in the ceremonial calendar of a tribe of pastoralists and cultivators by a foolish oath.

He thought of the battles with Sagan. What would have become of Sagan? Being the bad guy, he would certainly not be bored out of his brain with ministering to a bunch of farmers.

Just as he whipped the cloudy rain sheep to make them release their showers on time for the two PM rain ceremonial, the voice of his divine wife came booming over from the mountain.

"Orcu! Orcu!" She was quite excited, "Orcu, guess who's here. Come home and see."

"Hang on," he shouted back. "I'll just put the last squeeze on these clouds and let them be off."

Orcu flew up to the top of the mountain, shielded still from mortal eye by the dispersing flock of rain sheep.

"Come inside, come inside." said Andiron. "Look who's back. It's Sagan the Devourer."

"Aha!" exclaimed Orcu "At last! Sagan! A worthy challenge to the whip of Orcu! Come out and let us settle old scores. You shall never molest the children of Bartan while I, Orcu am sworn to defend them."

Sagan came out of the house. He held a glass of beer in his hand.

"Forget about it," he said. "I've no energy to mess about with your tedious mortals. I'm just passing through on my way south and I stopped in for a drink and to say hello."

"What?" Orcu was disappointed. "You mean you're not even going to fight?"

"Oh no." Sagan replied. "I have spent the last ten thousand years fighting, devouring cities, valleys, tribes, peoples, herds, flocks. I'm sick of it. And look at my weight. I used to keep it down. Every couple of hundred years I'd sort myself out with a new body - you know, virile, iron hard, erupting flames or whatever, but I can't be bothered any more. They don't call me Sagan

the Devourer these days, they call me Sagan the Fat.

“Come, sit down and tell me how goes your life. How fortunate you must be, my friend. I have plumbed the depths. You remember me, years ago. All out to take what I needed from the world. I ravened and ravened, devoured, to slake my thirst for satisfaction. All, I took; thinking always to appease my cravings with the next morsel. Well I can tell you it is all a farce.

“Take what you will, it is all the same. In the end you come to know, the beast you devour today is no more and no less than the one you ate yesterday. It is no better. It is no worse. You labour, fight, take. Anything he wants, a God may have. But when he has had it? What next? You, Orcu, with your beautiful Andiron, your structured, useful life, you surely have the better part.”

“No! No!” Orcu shook his head. “I cannot think of anything worse than the life we lead. Except for any other type of life. The only thing that keeps us here is we have nowhere else we would rather be. But enough of our troubles. Tell us, where are you bound, Sagan? What takes you past our door if you no longer have interests in the valleys?”

“Actually,” said Sagan, “I was going out to a show down at Olympus. Produced by a Goddess called Eris. Very short - ten years, no interval. Starts next week on the coast of Asia Minor, it’s called The Trojan War.”

“A war? No, we’ve seen too many of those already.” said Andiron. “You know, time was when the sight of a few humans ripping each other’s heads off was a novelty, but it’s on all the time now. Every time you look round you see nothing but violence and sex. No subtlety, just chip chop, in out, and it’s blood and guts all over the place.”

“No. This one’s different. Those Greeks have seen everything. You know how hard they are to please.” Sagan replied. “The script writer’s an up and coming young mortal called Homer. He’s put in some of everything: sex, religion, adultery, betrayal, treachery. The female lead is called Helen. Really beautiful I gather; body that would launch a navy, or something. Anyway, there’s has been nothing like this before. A completely fresh way to massacre people. All sorts of new techniques: metonymy, synecdoche, irony, onomatopoeia, oxymoron. The works.”

“I hear what you’re saying.” Andiron smiled. “All for the sake of art. But honestly, it’s all gratuitous violence. Orcu and I went up to see that war in Norway. We walked out half way. Tedious and disgusting. No real plot to speak

of. Just boring rape and pillage.”

“Yes, that’s the point. These don’t die in vain. There’s a moral to it and a really good story: a kidnapping, the motivation of the betrayed husband, some subterfuge with a donkey at the end, I heard. I believe that they’ve even got an advance on a sequel about some bloke getting lost on his way home. After all the effort to set it up, we really should support them, not just wait for imported shows.”

“Well I don’t know. If Orcu is interested, I suppose I’m game. We’ve nothing better planned for this decade. But I warn you, I haven’t a thing to wear.” She looked at Orcu questioningly.

“OK, Andiron, it sounds like something I’d want to see, so let’s get you a new outfit. Sagan, old friend, if you can get seats for us, I’ll just set up this valley on automatic, we’ll tag along and maybe go out for a meal after the show.”
