PROPHECY

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It was in the days of the great wars when tyrants and despots were conquering the world and all peoples were ground into the earth. And it happened that signs and portents of disaster began to be apparent in all places. There were storms upon the sun and great spots, and on the earth explosions and eruptions of mountains and risings of the sea in great waves and many storms on sea and on land. And at that time prophets began to arise, Jews and Gentiles, old men and young, and women. And they all began to prophesy the end of the world, crying, "Vengeance will be visited on the oppressor and the iniquity of the world." And all this time the confusion of the elements increased, and everywhere there were great earthquakes and tall buildings were fallen and whole cities broken and destroyed.

And in those days there lived an old woman, alone and high on a mountain. The storms and the earthquakes troubled her not, for she and her thick-walled stone hut had weathered many of them. And the wars and the troubles of the world had no effect upon her, for she knew not of them. She lived high on the side of the mountain and for her there was no world save the mountain and her small farm on its side.

She hoed her little fields, turned her goats out to graze in the grass, and every day her only care was for the rain or the sun to nourish her crops, and she saw no man from month's rise to month's end. As the fall drew on, she housed her grain and stored the vegetables in her cellar and knew not that through the world men cried, "God has deserted us," and that great battles raged in the world and men died and lay in their gore till they fell apart and became part of the soil and their empty skulls grinned up at the sardonic face of the moon.

Through the long winter, the old woman sat by her fire and had no knowledge that the prophets screamed, "There is no God now. Our doom is approaching on us!" or that cities were burning and women and children shrieking in pain as the flames licked over them with grasping, raking fingers, or that below her the roads were jammed with the homeless, dragging on and ever on to nowhere. Old women, gaunt men with rag-tied feet and tiny children, whimpering with the cold.

The earthquakes had ceased. For that the old woman was glad, for she told herself that when the rains came, even her stout cottage might be loosed and sent in ruins down the mountain side. But all through the winter the skies were heavy-browed and grey, and all the days were dusk. But there was no snow and no rain, and the old woman worried, for the soil needed to store its moisture against the summer's baking sun.

The year changed and the new year came, and the months passed, each day grey and windless; and March came and went, and April, and still there was no rain and the greyness of the clouds still hung over the earth and no wind blew them. So she waited for May, since there were no April rains, and she went out to break the soil with her hoe, but it was hard as if frozen, and dry. She laid the seed in and covered it with the chunks of dry soil and waited, but no sprouts appeared. And no leaves appeared on the trees and the grass stayed winter-dry and brown, and the grain for the goats grew low in the bins and the vegetable-shelves bare in her
cellar. And over everything the greyness clung, and the air was heavy and still and odors hung where they rose and drifted slowly off like smoke in an airless hall. And the oppression weighed on the old woman and grew, and she became afraid.

So she gathered her potatoes and apples together, baked a last loaf of bread, and tied them in a cloth and set off down the mountain. She walked stolidly through the forests, leafless and bare in July, and came to the village where she had been born and where she'd not set foot for twenty years, and she walked stiff-backed down its main street. And nowhere was there sign of life. The houses were empty and soulless, and the quiet of the place was dead and the air hung heavy and stifling on the roof-tops as though the clouds themselves settled there. And the old woman stood before the empty church and was afraid.

But she gripped her stick and set off again down the mountain. For three days she walked in the forest and for three more over wide fields in the valley. And all the farms that she passed were empty, and in places there were animals dead in the fields and the putrid odor of carrion lay pressed to the earth by the grey oppression of the clouds.

And on the fifth day she met a crowd of men and women, and their faces were grey and still as the skies, and they said nothing. But she followed behind them, and came to the city. And far off were the sounds of the city audible, and the old woman was glad because of its noise and life.

But inside the city the streets were like tunnels, dark and airless and thick with the smell of men and of garbage. And everywhere the faces of the people were grey and frightened and no children played in the streets, and no one laughed.

The old woman wandered up and down the streets, bewildered and alien, and she saw great crowds praying before the churches, crying "Forgive us and save us, O God," and the wine shops were filled with those who drank and sang with frightened eyes. And often she heard men crying, "God has deserted us! There is no God! The hour of doom approaches!" And some old men with beards and wild hair passed her shrieking and beating their backs with whips till they were soft and covered with blood, and they yelled, "Doom, doom, doom," as they went.

As night fell and the darkness that was little deeper than the greyness of the day, the people lit lights and burned fires on the street corner. And the old woman set on a doorstep and watched the fire, a thing familiar and comforting to her, and she was weary and hungry and confused. And she sat on the doorstep and leaned against the wall, and the leaping flames blurred and faded before her eyes, and the last thing she heard was the mad-men's cries of "Doom, doom, doom."