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Cavalier Treatment: A Quest for a King

CAVALIER TREATMENT

BY LEE SPETH

A QUEST FOR A KING

Among the few works of science fiction that ever lodged themselves in my heart are the Mars books of John Keir Cross - *The Angry Planet* and *The Red Journey Back*. I read them (and re-read them, and re-read them) as a sprig, and along the way a bit of poetry from the second book crept into my mind and stuck there. As the heroes tractor across the Martian desert, one of the characters quotes dreamily, from "the old play of *Hassan*":

We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go
Always a little further: it may be
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow
Across that angry or that glimmering sea.
White on a throne or guarded in a cave
There lives a prophet who can understand
Why men were born: but surely we are brave,
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

Nearly fifteen years after I first read that, while turning over handfuls of books on a donation sorting table, I found *Hassan*. Spurred by a surprisingly insistant memory, I promptly made it my own and set about learning more concerning these pilgrims and their golden journey.

The author was James Elroy Flecker (of whom I knew nothing); the play is an Oriental confection, operatically conceived, executed with spirit, romantic in a heart-rending, youthful fashion and salted with a grim and disillusioning portrait of fabled Haroun al-Rashid. Not a masterpiece perhaps, but for me at least a lucky and satisfying find:

Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.

James Elroy *Flecker* - the name suddenly connected. I recalled that among the books of Charles Williams, our Charles Williams, was a biography entitled *Flecker of Dean Close*. The same? No, as it turned out, but almost. CW's subject was in fact my author's father, W. H. Flecker, a well-regarded Anglican clergyman and schoolmaster.

The true scent to be followed was in *The Reader's Encyclopedia* under "Flecker, James Elroy". It gave his dates (a brief transit), listed *Hassan* and a Don Juan play (eventually read by me and not recommended), some volumes of poetry, "and one novel, *The King of Alsander*."

To a collector of fantasy novels a title like *The King of Alsander* can only sound reveille.

It would not be true to say that *The King of Alsander* haunted me, called to me as El Dorado called to the conquistadores. It is true that for a few months it was very much on my mind whenever I prowled old book stores and thrift shops. I finally found it listed, prosaically enough, in the Central Card File at the L.A. Public Library.

But it wasn't on the shelves. And a stack search failed to produce it. But still I didn't despair of learned where *Alsander* is and why its king was considered

remarkable. I was persistent ("King of *Alsander*?" the librarian asked, as if I had been pressuring her in an alien tongue). It eventuated that their only copy of Flecker's only novel had long slept at a storage warehouse far from the main library building. But the thing could be retrieved.

About two weeks later I came trotting down the library steps in a frenzied book-collector's joy, clutching the shabby purplish-brown publicly owned copy of *The King of Alsander*, the only copy, so far as I knew, in the city of Los Angeles. The preface is dated 1913, the American edition was published in '26; the library copy had not been checked out since the 40's.

I read the book. I read passages to friends. I read passages to myself before it had to go back to its warders. I had resolved to love it and I did.

For those who have not read this novel, and I assume that you are legion, *The King of Alsander* is not precisely a fantasy, but more a cheerful romance in the mode known as Graustarkian. *Alsander* is somewhere in Europe, but the directions for getting there may be summed up as "over the hills and far away". Fantasy wreathes the story in the mysterious declamatory figure of the old man who launches the young Englishman's quest and dominates the epilogue, and in the indication that the hero's bloodline is not exclusively mortal.

There is romance, political intrigue, the consumedly affectionate Peronella and the more elevated lady whom the Englishman finds at last as he ascends his foreordained throne. All this is told in buoyant, mannered, but evocative style, the effect of which was to send me scurrying to my archaic typewriter to send off a pleading letter to Mr. Lin Carter, begging that *The King of Alsander* be revived in the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series. I never got an answer, and perhaps the suggestion was unworthy. In any case, I rest selfishly content, for nowadays I have my own copy, found after a couple of years' search, a bright orange Knopf volume that is far classier than that Municipal Warehouse Octavo, the only other copy I know of in the greater Los Angeles area.

Anyone else who might be inclined to search out this novel should be warned that Flecker's friend and admirer J. C. Squire found it disappointing. But I was entertained and enlivened by the tale and can render no simple judgment on a novel that ends like this:

"John saw the old man fling off his white mantle: an instant after it was in flames. Then he thought he saw him rise naked among the flames and run toward the sea with a silver disc shining on his breast: and he began to swim out along the track of the moon. Then he saw the great full moon burst into a shower of stars and fall into the sea, and a white woman rose, huge and glorious, from the waves, with a horned helmet on her brow and spread over the sky like light till she filled the world. Then the treble octave was sounded all through the universe, and he fell senseless.

"He awoke hours later, but saw nothing save a wet sea rolling in the dawn."