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Cavalier Treatment: Curses and Caravans

CAVALIER TREATMENT

CURSES AND CARAVANS

LEE SPETH

In Roger Lancelyn Green's *From the World's End* (bound up in the Ballantine *Double Phoenix*), the hero speaks fondly of:

"... the great romances: the Argonauts, or the Volsungs - or something more recent, *The Sundering Flood*, or *Lilith*, *Aylwin* or *Perelandra*..."

When Mr. Green, the friend, travelling companion and co-biographer of C. S. Lewis speaks, we hearken. At any rate I hearkened when I first read this passage. *Lilith*, of course, is a George MacDonald fantasy and I cannot say that it's a favorite of mine, though my friend Gary Myers, a connoisseur in such matters, considers it the greatest vampire story ever written. *The Sundering Flood* is one of William Morris's grave and other-worldly romances and *Perelandra* needs no explanation to this audience.

So what the devil is *Aylwin*?

My reference books at home did not know. A reference librarian whom I consulted did not know. So I left her and went down to the British Museum Catalogue of Books and there found that *Aylwin* was written in the 1890's by someone called Theodore Watts-Dunton. When I returned to the reference librarian, she also had made discovery and was waving aloft a slip of paper with the name of Watts-Dunton, "the friend of Swinburne."

May you and I and all of us find such a friend in such an hour. The story of that friendship has been recounted by Mollie Panter-Downs in her entertaining study *At The Pines: Swinburne and Watts-Dunton in Putney* (Gambit, Inc., 1971). There we learn how Watts, a Victorian critic and acquaintance of practically everybody spilling ink in England, sought out Swinburne when the poet was broken with bohemianism and hours from death in a proverbial garret. He bore Swinburne to a manor, The Pines, at Putney, supervised his recovery and oversaw the life of that creative but askew gentleman for the next thirty years.

To many of Swinburne's admirers this charity amounted to betrayal. The correct romantic finale would have been death, preferably while delirious, in candlelit, cobwebby squalor, not this regulated progress through middle age in the suburbs, with Watts-Dunton holding the checkbook and measuring the wine. Photos of Watts-Dunton could not have reassured the romantic. He looks every inch the stodgy Victorian *pater familias*, portly, high-collared, with the mandatory Victorian *pater familias* full moustache. He looks the fit warden for an aging Dionysian. He does not look like the author of *Aylwin*.

For yes, I found *Aylwin*. It alone of the four "recent" books extolled by Green through his hero has not been reprinted lately in Amer-

ican paperback. It must be sought on the fiction shelves of old book stores, among titles that were popular sellers before the Archduke died in Serbia and the old days passed into war. I found my copy in Hollywood. It cost two dollars; the prospective buyer will be glad to know that the market is not prohibitive.

Aylwin is less a fantasy than a melodrama. It is, I think, too much a period piece to generate popularity today, but too singular a production to entirely dismiss once one has read it. Contemporaries were enthusiastic, sales galloped. Oscar Wilde thought *Aylwin*, "a capital book to give one's parents at Christmas," which may or may not be praise, but there is no mistaking the enthusiasm, however semicoherent, of Swinburne's mother who wrote Watts, "... its originality unflagging interestingness and though fearfully exciting the tone throughout is so entirely free from anything one could not quite like that I think it really a wonderful book."

Destiny is master in this novel, no inscrutable destiny, but one that the gypsy reads in the clouds. Curses are effectual and the moody dead can blight innocent lives. Our hero, Henry Aylwin, is rather insipid, likewise his Welsh-born True Love, Winifred Wynne, artless Victorian victim-heroine from the enchanted slopes of Snowden. Henry's steely mother is a notch better, but the person one recalls most vividly is Sinfi Lovell, the gypsy girl, a staunch nomad of exotic beauty. Her speech is written in something of a hillbilly dialect - we rather expect her to smoke a pipe, though she doesn't. But artists seek her as a model and Henry Aylwin will at last genuflect to her wisdom. Sinfi enters into Exchange of the Charles Williams sort; she sacrifices her love, she engineers the happy climax and exits, desolated, into the Welsh wilds and whatever heart we can bring to this somewhat contrived novel goes with her.

The painter D'Arcy (a minor but crucial character) is said to be modelled on Dante Gabriel Rossetti. I never met the gentleman and cannot vouch for the likeness, but if so it's a kindly portrait. D'Arcy conveys no hint of the Rossetti, who, according to Miss Panter-Downs, became obsessed with a belief that the birds were being trained by his enemies to sing insults at him. (Watts-Dunton offered what comfort he could and Rossetti paid him the supreme compliment of dying in his arms.) Most of the other people in *Aylwin* are forgettable.

Aylwin is a romance to be read, if it is read at all, for atmosphere - for the Gothic conventions of curses, madness and the Moonlight Cross of the Gnostics, for the evocation of the wilds about Snowden, and for the plunge into the vagrant, gaudy, arrogant world of the gypsies.

I'm not sure that I'll ever re-read *Aylwin*, but I'll hang on to my copy just in case. Watts-Dunton wrote another gypsy tale, *The Coming of Love: Rhona Boswell's Story*. If I were to run across it - well, it would depend on the price.