

Conversation Pieces
Volume 5

The Traveling Tide

Short Fiction

by

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*The tide of time flow'd back with me
The forward-flowing tide of time
—Tennyson*

This book is for Harold, who, upon being asked for ideas for an epigraph, thought for two seconds, and from the depths of his prodigious memory produced two lines of verse that says it all.

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Alexander's Feats

This is the untold story of Alexander, the Great Man of Science. You may have heard of Alexander the Great, Man of Conquest. But man of genius and invention? Conqueror of space and time? A man who found the secret of eternal youth and gave it to his wife?

The genius of Alexander worked by trial and error, through observation and experiment. He found the trick of it and left it to others after him to flesh out details of the theory.

Some knowledge is hidden still.



*How Alexander gave his beloved wife
Roxanne
the secret of eternal youth, though he never
could tell what it was that he did.*

One day Alexander, propped on a single, regal elbow, looked closely at his wife who slept beside him.

“How sorry I am for you!” he whispered into her soft pink ear.

Roxanne tilted her fair head so she could hear more clearly.

“All women have a problem.”

Roxanne knew it. *Men!* Still she pretended to sleep.

Alexander sighed. “Women grow old.”

Roxanne took heed. Would Alexander take another wife?

Alexander paused. “Of course, men, too, grow old. Not me. I am the son of a god and hence immortal.”

Roxanne was on her guard. She would keep watch on Alexander. He was about to stray. Again.



It was winter, the time when armies rested and recovered their strength for the summer of conquering ahead. Winter was the season that civilized nations devote to archery and the care of animals. Winter was the time Alexander took for his experiments.

Roxanne was at her wits end. “Not tonight,” she said firmly, eyeing the latest herbal draught that was placed before her.

“Why my dear wife, Roxanne, do you not wish to stay young forever?”

“I do, my King.”

“Why then, drink this potion of eternal youth.”

“My belly aches. It will not be good for me, to take it at this time of month.”

“This draught is from herbs that grow in the valleys of Mir Samir. The lamas praise them as herbs of rare virtue and power.”

"If I drink, I shall grow a beard. And then I shall lose your love."

"Come now!"

"I am quite convinced of it. The lamas have beards so long they tie them in knots and toss them over their shoulders."

"But they are men already! A beard means nothing in those circumstances."

"How do you know for sure?"

"It's called an experiment," said Alexander. "I shall not know for certain until after the event."

"Then it will be too late, for you shall have a bearded, ageless wife." Roxanne burst into tears.

"I know it is that time of the month," Alexander soothed. "I shall drink the potion myself, and you shall see it cannot hurt you."

Alexander drank the potion, but his act neither confirmed nor denied Roxanne's worst fears. For he was already a man with a beard, and immortal besides.

But Roxanne's words gave him food for thought. The men of the mountains, the lamas, possess many strange powers. They claim to be able to hover above the earth, not touching it. They sit naked in snow, and the heat of their bodies melts ice.

And what of the Syrian bear? It sleeps the winter away and emerges refreshed in the spring. It lives a long life, that bear.

Alexander sent his men to find a bear and kill it.

Roxanne looked at the new potion Alexander had prepared for her. "Are you suggesting, my lord, that if I drink this I shall sleep all winter?"

“Like the bear, you will reawaken in the fine first flurry of your youth!”

“If I slept all winter, you would take a second wife! And I would be rejected!”

“What if I did take a second wife?” he replied. “She would sleep all summer, and you two need never meet.”

There was no end to Roxanne’s objections.

And when she heard what was in his latest potion! “Entrails of bear?” she screeched.

Once more Alexander muttered dark things and drank the concoction himself. He roistered for three days and nights without ceasing, and his stools turned a luminous green.

The herbalist was banished to the mountains.

When Alexander recovered his temper he realized that something strange had happened. He had come back to his senses after three days without knowing time had passed. Something had worked, in some way, in that potion.

Alexander kept up his search for the secret of youth. “There is this country,” he told Roxanne. “It is the country which lies just beyond this place. I am told that the women who live there die at the beginning of winter. They are buried, and in spring their coffins are opened. They step out, young and beautiful again!”

Roxanne refused to think about it. Indeed, Alexander could see that the experiment had its dangers. He would not perform it on himself. And the ethics of the situation would not allow him to test it on his wife.

One night, on the first day of winter, Roxanne disappeared. That night she slept by his side. The next morning when he woke, she was gone. Alexander

searched for her everywhere. He grieved for her, believing her slain by his enemies.

Six months later she ran screaming from the cave of the Syrian bear. She came back with no recollection of the passing of time and with her youth restored to her.

Alexander was off on his campaigning, but news of her return soon reached him. He sent for her, rejoicing in his heart.

All Roxanne could say was that she fell asleep in one place and awoke in another, her head on the warm fur of a Syrian cub.

"Bears!" said Alexander, "I always knew they had something to do with it!"

Roxanne vowed never to have anything to do with a bear for the rest of her life.

Alexander promised to stop his experiments. "One test is enough to establish the point. I put some herbs into your drink. They must have done the trick."

"You never said!" Roxanne liked what she saw each morning in the mirror. Secretly, though, she doubted it had been Alexander's doing. Her father Darius the King had gone to war believing himself to be an agent of Light against the powers of Darkness.

"See the world before your eyes," Darius told the infant Roxanne. "You are a small part of the great war of the cosmos waged at the level of the Truth and the Lie. The battle will go on for ever and ever, at all levels of the cosmos, each side seeking to ensnare and conquer the other."

Darius, being a King, saw himself in the grip of wild cosmic forces far greater than himself. Roxanne, being

a woman, knew the forces of men were the forces she must reckon with.

“And besides,” Roxanne told Alexander, “it was not quite the way my father said. It seemed to me that for that winter, I passed for one short night from the kingdom of light into the kingdom of darkness. But it was not an evil, just a different place. Time passed more swiftly there.”

“It must have been the entrails of the bear,” said Alexander.

Roxanne knew better than to contradict him.



How Alexander invented the bathyscape and descended to the bottom of the Caspian Sea and founded a new Alexandria among the fish.

It was an invention that took all his ingenuity. He dreamed of a machine and tried to make it with stout timbers and proud beams of oak. But the caulking did not hold. The wooden sphere plunged into the sea and sank, as planned. But the trickle of water through the caulking soon turned into a gush, and Alexander had to make a swift and far from elegant escape.

Roxanne arrived swiftly at the scene to soothe his fevered brow, but her loving care was not enough.

Alexander sat on a cliff and brooded. He took to drinking red wine in large amounts. What if the king-

dom of the sea should be beyond his reach? It was unthinkable that he should accept this first defeat if he was to conquer all. He sent to Egypt for sweet-smelling powder to anoint his body.

Roxanne feared the worst. Soon Alexander would blame her for his defeat. His moods took on new urgency for her. How could she endure his frustration for all eternity?

Roxanne consulted a soothsayer but learned nothing. The soothsayer spoke in cryptic riddles, as was his custom, especially when asked questions by a Queen about a King.

Alexander called for more goatskins of good red wine. He took to sitting on his rocky crag and drinking. The vapors of the wine rose up around him.

One day a fierce storm whipped up. Lightning flashed to earth. Alexander took no notice, lost as he was to the world in the oblivion of drink. Roxanne sent a warrior to bring him back to safety. But as the warrior ran to do his task, a bolt of lightning fell from the sky.

A sphere of light surrounded Alexander, and he woke and looked around him in amazement.

Roxanne watched in horror as the light gathered Alexander to itself, then gently rolled him down the hill and into the waters of the Caspian Sea. Drunk though he was, Alexander could still see this was an opportunity he must seize. "I am immortal," he later told the story, "and what goes down must rise." He smiled as the waters closed over his sea-craft and thanked his father Jupiter for his divine intervention.

With the sphere of light enclosing him, he sank into the depths. Yet he was neither burned nor drowned.

He bent space with light and created a craft to take him on his travels. He sank into the sea on a golden throne of light.

“Look!” his men cried when he returned. “See how he tames the light! See how he harnesses the storm!”

Alexander said: “The light shone forth from my chariot into the darkness. I saw ruined cities and tall columns of stone. I saw lions that once had stood on the sides of the throne of Nebuchadnezzar, now sunk into the depths. The fish came to pay me homage. I conquered the depths of the sea. Now I must move on.”

Confronted with a puzzle of nature, Alexander summoned his philosopher, Aristotle. “I see my travels under the sea as a sign of my divinity. Surely these are not the forces of nature at work, but the workings of a god?”

“Just how many goatskins of wine did you drink?” asked Aristotle.

“Five only.”

“You may be right,” said Aristotle. “But in my experience it is best to look first for the causes of things in the forces of nature before bringing in the gods.”

“What would you say?”

“A sphere of fire formed about you,” he said. “Perhaps it was a fire that forms in the mines deep in the earth, a fire that glows but is cool to the touch. It rises sometimes to the surface. It fell upon you, and you chose to roll with it into the water. You accepted it as a chariot your father Jupiter had created for you.”

“If fire rises to its natural place high in the heavens, how was it that I sank?”

“With you at its center, it grew heavy and sank into the sea.

“How come I rose again?”

“Ah, there you have me.”

“My father, Jupiter, caused that to happen.”

“I grant that, but I would suggest that he chose to work through the forces of nature, as even gods must sometimes do.”

“What next?”

“After your fall, you rose again, expelled back to the realm of air, your natural place.”

“I swear to you, I saw the heavens part, and Jupiter looked down on me.”

Aristotle conceded defeat. Alexander traveled beneath the water, but it was left to others later to establish the true causes of that effect.



They said of Alexander that after he conquered Persia, he became soft, in the Persian manner, and by this they meant he was seduced by their soft and luxurious way of living, enamored of strong wines, soft silks, sweet music, silk pantaloons. They said that he ordered all who approached him to bow low and grovel in the dirt. He sent camels to Egypt, they said, for expensive oils for massage and for his favorite powder for use in wrestling.

Another story might be told, of Alexander the man who believed divine power favored him, who, through knowledge of his supernatural origin, came to appreciate all the more the natural beauties of this earth. He was a King who judged it his responsibility to partake

of all the pleasures of this world in order to know it more surely, treasure it more dearly. Only then could he move on to explore new kingdoms in the stars.

Of Roxanne, his wife, not so many stories have been told, which is the point of this present chronicle. Behind every great Emperor and every great inventor, there lies the springs of genius, genius that may be original, but that often lies in the actions and ideas of an unacknowledged other.

It is to Roxanne that true credit must be given for Alexander's last, most marvelous invention. For it was Roxanne who discovered the secret of interstellar travel and gave it to her man.



How Roxanne discovered the secret of interstellar travel and bestowed it on her lord, the Emperor Alexander.

“Is this the great Sea at the Edge of the World?” asked Alexander, when he reached the China Sea. His arrival caused consternation among the local inhabitants. His great army was hungry and needed to be fed.

The great scholar Hsuan-Tsang gestured towards the glittering sea. “It is a great sea, and it is the edge of the world,” he agreed. “Need you know more?”

“Then I have conquered to the ends of the earth!” Alexander was first exultant, then his brow creased

with sorrow. "But there is nothing left to conquer! I have come to the end of it all."

Hsuan-Tsang was the wisest of men. His face was as round as the evening moon, his cheeks as rosy as the evening mists. Alexander's bronzed face was scarred, his eyes imperious and aggressive.

"The problem is one of geometry," Alexander explained, drawing a circle on the sand.

Roxanne listened intently.

"You see this circle? Now I expand my conquests." Alexander drew a larger circle round the smaller. "You see the problem?"

Roxanne saw the void space that lay beyond the boundary. Hsuan-Tsang frowned.

"It is a question of ever-expanding boundaries to my empire. It is a question of the ever-increasing difficulty in keeping those ever-increasing boundaries secure. That is why I see things the way I do. I propose a simple solution. I dream of having no borders, no boundaries to my conquest. Security lies here, geometry lies there. Uniting the two, that is the trick of it. I see a borderless kingdom, with the whole world now one great Alexandria. The whole world, under my rule, under my eternal rule."

"Only the one world?" murmured the great Chinese sage.

Roxanne looked at him sharply.

Alexander was puzzled. "You tell me I have come to the end of the world."

"This is the Great Sea, and it is the Edge of the World," Hsuan-Tsang agreed. "But look at the stars,

and see what other worlds there are for you to conquer! An infinity of worlds—and all for you!”

Alexander wept. How could he conquer all those other worlds that twinkled so brightly at night in the heavens?

“There is a problem with this particular world, with this particular sea. The world is round, and there is no edge to it, as you imagine. If you set sail on this sea, you will return one way or the other: you will travel across the water and sooner or later you will come back to the country from which you began your travels.”

Alexander grunted at the wildness of this notion. Who would set out on his travels only to arrive at the place he had left? Step up to the stars, though, to go on in eternal conquest: that was a better idea.

“There is a beginning, and a middle, but where there seems to be an end, there then is only another beginning,” the wisest of men remarked.

Alexander brightened at the thought.

Roxanne grew gloomy. She looked up at the stars and knew she wanted, above all else, to stay warm and comfortable at home. She questioned her man. “What if I were to tell you I do not want to come with you?”

Alexander was generous. “I do not ask that of you. I ask only that you stay faithful until my return.”

Roxanne looked at the stars and at the sheer number of them. “It will take a long time,” she said, calculating.

“It is in my nature,” said Alexander. “I cannot do otherwise.”

“Then it is my duty to help you.”

Roxanne took Hsuan-Tsang aside and spoke quietly to him. “What has wings and can fly through the air?”

“An eagle?”

“What has wings and can fly through the air with a man on its back?”

“I confess, I do not know.”

“What if the eagle had the body of a lion and the strength of ten oxen and wings which could bear half an army aloft?”

Hsuan-Tsang responded with a problem of his own. “I dreamed last night of a lotus that was made from the hardest stone and dwelt in the depths of the sea. A fierce storm blew up and cast the lotus at my feet. Each time I tried to grasp it, the lotus retreated from me.”

Roxanne smiled. “I know what you want to know. Find me a griffin and I shall tell you. If a griffin were to bear Alexander aloft, who knows where he might come down? Go to Bactria in my father's lands, and tell them Roxanne sent you.” Griffins have secrets that only Roxanne knew.

Summer gave way to winter and thence to spring. The time of retreat to archery and the care of animals had passed. Alexander yearned to travel on.

“The time has come,” said Hsuan-Tsang. “Come with me, and I shall show you the way.” Roxanne's heart leapt. This was the moment she had been waiting for.

They walked towards the shore, where warriors were lined up in formation. Each man held a long thread that reached up into the sky, so high that the kites flying above, if kites they were, seemed mere specks in the sky. At a signal the soldiers pulled in their threads. There, spiraling, tumbling, swooping down the sky came a crowd of

the most elegant griffins. Down they swooped through the air to sit at the feet of their new master.

The griffins were half lion, half eagle. Their heads and wings were those of the eagle, burnished with gold. Their bodies were covered in soft long golden fur. The light of the stars flashed from their black eyes. Their ears stood in sharp points. Deep red jewels glowed on their studded collars and their golden reins.

“Take these griffins as tribute to you, my lord, from the Emperor of China to the Emperor of the rest of the world!”

Alexander was delighted. He had come to the end of this world, but there would be other worlds to conquer.

Roxanne marveled at the sight. “I knew these griffins in my father’s country. Fine animals all; they deserve better than this terrible fate, to rise only while chained to this earth. Take these griffins and fly, for they will take you where you want to go.”

Alexander looked doubtful.

“I shall show you.” Roxanne called for a griffin to be saddled and brought to her. Then from round her neck she took a silver purse. The griffin stiffened with excitement. The chain was severed and she rode towards the sky. The griffin looked back over its shoulder at Roxanne and at the silver purse she wore around her neck. Then its eyes filled with the light of the stars and the tears of the wanderer who finds, at last, the true path home. Roxanne smiled, and leaned forward to stroke the animal’s soft ears. She opened the purse. The griffin pricked its ears in the air; its nostrils quivered; its neck grew strong and straight. Then, in full

sight of Alexander and his army, Roxanne and her beast both disappeared.

Alexander cursed himself for his stupidity. How could he let Roxanne fall into such danger? Once more he mourned his lost wife.

But not for long. Soon there was another commotion, and Roxanne reappeared in the skies. She rode her proud griffin back upon the sands. "Look," she cried, as she flung down before Alexander a branch of a glittering gold, "See what I have brought you! Here is the secret of travel to the stars!"

"What happened, Roxanne?"

"Griffins will bear you aloft and take you where you want to go."

That last night there was much feasting and laughter, and sorrow and anticipation of the pangs of parting.

Later, Alexander asked Roxanne, "Tell me, how do you know these things?"

"See how the griffin sniffs the air, drinking in smell. What is the sense of smell but the act of perceiving small particles borne from one place to another upon the ethereal wind? There is a strong power of attraction of the bird for this herb, as strong as the earth for the stone that lies upon it, as strong as the water for the earth that lies beneath it, as strong as the air for the water that lies beneath it in its turn, and as strong as the fire for the air that lies underneath. Such is the power of attraction that like will fly to like in the twinkling of an eye. You will cross to the stars and continue on your way. It is all perfectly logical."

"Why then, you are a true philosopher. I shall part from Aristotle and take you with me!"

Roxanne shook her head.

Alexander turned to Hsuan-Tsang. “Will you come with me to the stars?”

“No. I have entered this troubled whirl of death and birth here, upon this earth. It is this world to which I belong and to which I must return—life after death, death after life.”

“I have the gift of eternal life,” Alexander replied. “Eternity—indeed, infinity—is no problem to me. If there is one life and that one life is eternal, then the precept of reincarnation is irrelevant.” Alexander stroked the griffin’s soft flank. Its beak swiveled round. Its sharp eyes followed his movement. Then it let out a deep soft purr, like a cat. “In Bactria, they told me that griffins guard the treasures of the Kings. In all my time in Bactria I never saw them. But now, I have come to the end of the world, and here they await me.”

“Be vigilant, my griffins,” commanded Alexander. “Take me to the stars!” The griffins chirruped. They hauled Alexander and his men aloft.

Swiftly they rose through the sphere of air to where the fifth essence of matter, the *quinta-essentia*, grows in power and influence. The griffins grew wild with joy. It is from the *quinta-essentia* that fabulous beings take their power of life and chief source of motion, the divine fuel that powers them to the remote reaches of the heavens, without benefit of crossing the distance in between. Arrival is in a moment of time.

Alexander ascended and found new worlds to conquer.



A long time ago Alexander defeated the Persian King Darius and wed his daughter Roxanne. The two Kings had gone to war, each believing in his heart that he served the truth. But truth to tell, they were but minor players in the cosmic battle between the forces of the Truth and the Lie. Both held themselves on the side of Truth and thus helped to serve the Lie.

Wars of domination and conquest exist at all levels of creation. At the human level, all is muddle and confusion.

Hsuan-Tsang dispatched the conqueror Alexander from his shores without the necessity for fighting. Then he turned to Roxanne and said, "I brought your griffins. Now you must tell me what you know about my dream."

"All dreams signify something," said Roxanne. "Nothing is in vain. You dreamed of a lotus. His dream was of the stars."

Roxanne showed Hsuan-Tsang the path back through all the dominions Alexander had conquered. Neither were interested in taking great treasure, nor was it their intention to conquer all the world. They knew that to win these things in this life was to lose them in the next.

But with that notion Alexander would never have agreed, and so it was best that they had parted from him.