

THE LAST GENERATION

A Story of the Future

James Elroy Flecker

Sample



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The Last Generation
A Story of the Future
by James Elroy Flecker

First published 1908

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*El hombre es el rey de la creación; vive (he lives) en la tierra y cree
(he believes) en el cielo*

DE ARTEAGA, *Spanish Grammar*

To
FRANK SAVERY
who taught, encouraged, and revealed

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Elroy Flecker, born in London in November 1884, was a British diplomat, poet, playwright and novelist, best known today for his poetry, and for his verse drama *Hassan: The Story of Hassan of Baghdad and How he Came to Make the Golden Journey to Samarkand* (published and performed posthumously) — not to be confused with his poem *The Golden Journey To Samarkand*, nor with a collection of his poems (published 1913) with the same title — see below.

From 1902 to 1906 Flecker studied in Oxford, and from 1908 to 1910 in Cambridge, learning modern oriental languages in preparation for his consular career; in 1907 he published his first collection of poems. During his studies he came in contact with members of the Aesthetic Movement, John Addington Symonds among them. Flecker also became a close friend of the classical archaeologist and art historian John Beazley, a friendship in which may be found hints of homosexuality; Flecker's religiously very strict parents held Beazley responsible for their son's turn towards agnosticism. In 1908 Flecker passed the consular service examination, and from 1910 on he was posted in the Eastern Mediterranean. On a ship to Athens he met his future wife, Greek poet Helle Skiadaressi, whom he married in 1911. That year, stationed in Beirut, he also struck up a friendship with "Lawrence of Arabia" T. E. Lawrence.

In 1910 Flecker was diagnosed with tuberculosis, an illness that increasingly took its toll; the last 18 months of his life, writing poetry and working on *Hassan* until the end, he spent at various sanatoriums in Switzerland, where he died in January 1915.

The following verses, often quoted, are from the *Hassan* play:

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 lies a prophet who can understand
Why men were born: but surely we are brave,
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

Here is the poem *The Golden Journey To Samarkand*, here taken from Harold Monro, *Poetry and Drama*, 1913 (slightly different from the version published in *The Collected Poems of James Elroy Flecker*, 1916).

I

We who with songs beguile your pilgrimage
And swear that beauty lives though lilies die;
We poets of the proud old lineage
Who sing to find your hearts, we know not why,

What shall we tell you? Tales marvellous tales
Of ships and stars and isles where good men rest,
Where nevermore the rose of sunset pales,
And winds and shadows fall toward the West:

And there the world's first huge, white-bearded kings
In dim glades sleeping murmur in their sleep,
And all the ivy rustles where it clings,
Cutting its pathway slow and red and deep.

II

And how beguile you? Death has no repose
Warmer and deeper than that orient sand
Which hides the beauty and bright faith of those
Who made the Golden Journey to Samarcand.

And now they wait and whiten peaceably,
Those conquerors, those poets, those so fair:
They know time comes not only you and I
But the whole world shall whiten, here or there

When those long caravans that cross the plain
With dauntless feet and sound of silver bells
Put forth no more for glory or for gain,
Draw no more solace from the palm-girt wells.

When the great markets by the sea shut fast
All that calm Sunday that goes on and on:
When even lovers find their peace at last,
And Earth is but a star that once had shone.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This edition follows the original *New Age Press* (London) edition of 1908, with only minimal orthographic changes: the æ (or Æ) ligature in *Æolus*, *Cæsar*, *mediæval*, *pæan* and *æsthetes* has been resolved to ae (or Ae), and the hyphen has been removed from *to-day*.

The footnote in chapter 4 is mine.

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INTRODUCTION

I had been awake for I know not how many hours that summer dawn while the sun came over the hills and coloured the beautiful roses in my mother's garden. As I lay drowsily gazing through the window, I thought I had never known a morning so sultry, and yet so pleasant. Outside not a leaf stirred; yet the air was fresh, and the madrigal notes of the birds came to me with a peculiar intensity and clearness. I listened intently to the curious sound of trilling, which drew nearer and nearer, until it seemed to merge into a whirring noise that filled the room and crowded at my ears. At first I could see nothing, and lay in deadly fear of the unknown; but soon I thought I saw rims and sparks of spectral fire floating through the pane. Then I heard some one say, "I am the Wind." But the voice was so like that of an old friend whom one sees again after many years that my terror departed, and I asked simply why the Wind had come.

"I have come to you," he replied, "because you are the first man I have discovered who is after my own heart. You whom others call dreamy and capricious, volatile and headstrong, you whom some accuse of weakness, others of unscrupulous abuse of power, you I know to be a true son of Aeolus, a fit inhabitant for those caves of boisterous song."

"Are you the North Wind or the East Wind?" said I. "Or do you blow from the Atlantic? Yet if those be your feathers that shine upon the pane like yellow and purple threads, and if it be through your influence that the garden is so hot today, I should say you were the lazy South Wind, blowing from the countries that I love."

“I blow from no quarter of the Earth,” replied the voice. “I am not in the compass. I am a little unknown Wind, and I cross not Space but Time. If you will come with me I will take you not over countries but over centuries, not directly, but waywardly, and you may travel where you will. You shall see Napoleon, Caesar, Pericles, if you command. You may be anywhere in the world at any period. I will show you some of my friends, the poets ...”

“And may I drink red wine with Praxiteles, or with Catullus beside his lake?”

“Certainly, if you know enough Latin and Greek, and can pronounce them intelligently.”

“And may I live with Thais or Rhodope, or some wild Assyrian queen?”

“Unless they are otherwise employed, certainly.”

“Ah, Wind of Time,” I continued with a sigh, “we men of this age are rotten with booklore, and with a yearning for the past. And wherever I asked to go among those ancient days, I should soon get dissatisfied, and weary your bright wings. I will be no pillar of salt, a sterile portent in a sterile desert. Carry me forward, Wind of Time. What is there going to be?”

The Wind put his hand over my eyes.

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