

Prince Alcouz and the Magician

Clark Ashton Smith

Alcouz Khan was the only son of Yakoob Ullah, Sultan of Balkh. Unruly and vicious by nature, he was anything but improved by the luxury and power of his position. He grew up overbearing, cruel, and dissolute, and with mature years his faults and vices only became more pronounced. He was exactly the opposite of his father, who was a wise and just ruler and had endeared himself to the people.

The prince spent his time in reprehensible sports and dissipation and kept evil companions. His father often remonstrated with him, but without effect. He sighed when he thought of the day not far distant, for he was growing old, when Alcouz would come to the throne. The prince's succession, indeed, was universally dreaded, for well the people knew what manner of Sultan the cruel, dissipated youth would make.

There came to Balkh from Hindustan a noted magician, by name Amaroo. He soon became famous for his skill in foretelling the future. His patrons were many and of all stations in life, for the desire to tear aside the veil of the future is universal.

Alcouz, actuated by the common impulse, visited him. The magician, a small man with fiery, gleaming eyes, who wore flowing robes, arose from the couch whereon he had been sitting wrapped in meditation, and salaamed low.

"I have come to thee," said Alcouz, "that thou mayest read for me the hidden and inscrutable decrees of fate."

"In so far as lies my ability, I will serve thee," replied the Hindu. He motioned his visitor to be seated and proceeded with his preparations. He spoke a few words in a tongue Alcouz could not understand and the room became darkened except for the dim, flickering light of a brazier of burning coals. Into this Amaroo cast various perfumed woods, which he had at hand. A thick black smoke arose, and standing in it, his figure half-hidden and seemingly grown taller and more impressive, he recited incantations in the strange and unknown tongue.

The room lightened and seemed to widen out indefinitely, with it the black vapor. Alcouz could no longer see the walls and the room seemed some vast cavern shut in at a distance by darkness. The smoke formed itself into curling, fantastic shapes which took on rapidly the semblance of human beings. At the same time the walls of the darkness contracted till they limited a space as large as the Sultan's throne room. More smoke arose from the brazier and grew to long rows of pillars and to a dais and a throne. A shadowy figure sat upon the throne before which the other figures assembled and knelt. They rapidly became clearer and more distinct, and Alcouz recognized them.

The place was the royal throne room, and the seated figure was himself. The others were officers of the court and his personal friends. A crown was placed on Alcouz's head and his courtiers knelt down in homage. The scene was maintained awhile and then the shapes re-dissolved into black vapor.

Amaroo stood at the prince's side. "What thou hast beheld will in time come to pass," he said. "Now thou shalt look upon another event."

Again he stood in the whirling smoke and chanted incantations, and again the vapor grew to pillars and a throne occupied by the solitary figure of Alcouz. He was sitting with unseeing eyes, absorbed in meditation. Anon a slave and seemed to speak to him, then withdrew.

Then came a figure which Alcouz recognized as that of Amaroo, the Hindu magician. He knelt before the throne and seemed to present some petition. The seated shape was apparently about to reply, when the Hindu, springing suddenly to his feet, drew a long knife from his bosom and stabbed him.

Almost at the same instant, Alcouz, who was watching horror-stricken, gave a wild cry and fell dead, stabbed to the heart by the magician, who had crept up behind him unobserved.

Notes

[from THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY STORIES: 4, ed. Lin Carter; DAW Books, 1978; by permission of Lin Carter for the Estate of the author.]

"Smith, on the other hand, was more excited by the ARABIAN NIGHTS and imitations such as Beckford's astonishing novel VATHEK, than by the Norse myths; as he ably demonstrates in the tale which follows.

"Only recently discovered in manuscript and published by Roy Squires, this brief fable is considered one of the very earliest experiments in fiction to have survived. Squires is of the opinion that it was written around 1910-12, about the same time as his first tales. It may indeed be his very first fantasy -- who knows? Anyway, in its brevity and extreme, almost poetic, precision of phrase, it seems to demonstrate that Smith was feeling his way from verse to prose narrative.

"A minor work, obviously. But even the minor work of a major fantasist is of interest." -- L.C.