



The Troubadour
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About Lowndes:

Robert Augustine Ward "Doc" Lowndes (September 4, 1916 - July 14, 1998) was an American science fiction author, editor and fan. He was best known as the editor of Future Science Fiction, Science Fiction, and Science Fiction Quarterly. In 1991 he received the First Fandom Hall of Fame award.

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There was something odd about the guest attraction, Mr. Fayliss, and something odder still about his songs.

So far as parties go, Jocelyn's were no duller than any others. I went to this one mainly to listen to Paul Kutrov and Frank Alva bait each other, which is usually more entertaining than most double features. Kutrov adheres to the "onward and upward" school of linear progress, while Alva is more or less of a Spenglerian. More when he goes along by himself; less when you try to pin him down to it. And since the subject of tonight's revelations would be the pre-Mohammed Arabian Culture, I'd find Alva inclined toward my side of the debate, which is strictly morphological and without any pious theories of "progress".

I'd completely forgotten that Jocelyn had mentioned something about having a special attraction: a "Mr. Fayliss", who, she insisted, was a troubadour. I didn't comment, not wanting to spend a day with Jocelyn on the phone, exploring the Provence.

The night wasn't too warm for August, and there were occasional gusts of air seeping through the layers of tobacco smoke that hovered over the assemblage. As usual, it was a heterogeneous crowd, which rapidly formed numerous islands of discourse. The trade winds carried salient gems of intelligence throughout the entire archipelago at times, and Jocelyn walked upon the water, scurrying from one body to another, sopping up the overflow of "culture". She visited our atoll, where Kutrov's passionate exposition had already raised the mean temperature some degrees, but didn't stay long. Such debates didn't suggest any course of social or political action, and couldn't be trued in to any of her causes.

My attention was wandering from the Kutrov-Alva variations, for Bill had only been speaking for ten minutes, and could not be expected to arrive at any point whatsoever for at least another fifteen. From the east of us came apocalyptic figures of nuclear physics; from the west, I heard the strains of Mondrian interwoven with Picasso; south of us, a post mortem on the latest "betrayal" of this or that aspiration of "the people", and to the north, we heard the mysteries of atonality. It was while I was looking around, and letting these things roll over me, that I saw the stranger enter. Jocelyn immediately bounced up from a couch, leaving the crucial problem of atmosphere-poisoning via fission and/or fusion bombs suspended, and made effusive noises.

This, then, was the "troubadour"—Mr. Fayliss. The Main Attraction was decidedly prepossessing. Tall, peculiarly graceful both in

appearance and manner, dressed with an immaculateness that seemed excessive in this post-Bohemian circle. There was a decided musical quality to his speech, as he made polite comments upon being introduced to each of us, and an exactness in sentence-structure, word-choices and enunciation that bespoke the foreigner. Jocelyn took him around with the air of conducting a quick tour through a museum, then settled him momentarily with the music group, now in darkest Schoenberg, only partially illuminated by "Wozzek". I watched Fayliss long enough to solidify an impression that he was at ease here—but not merely in this particular discussion. It was a case of his being simply at ease, period.

Kutrov was watching him, too, and I saw now that there would be a most-likely permanent digression. Too bad—I'd had a feeling that when he came to his point, it would have been a strong one. "Hungarian, do you suppose?" he asked.

Alva examined the evidence. Fayliss had high cheekbones, longish eyes, with large pupils. He was lean, without giving an impression of thinness. He had not taken off his gloves, and I wondered if he would come forth with a monocle; if he had, it would not have seemed an affectation.

"I wouldn't say Slavic," Alva said. He started off on ethnology, and we toured the Near East again. I jumped into the break when Kutrov was swallowing beer and Alva lighting a cigaret to observe that Fayliss reminded me of some Egyptian portraits—although I couldn't set the period. "If those eyes of his don't shine in the dark," I added, "they ought to."

A brief pause for appreciation, then Jocelyn was calling for all men's attention. She managed to get it in reasonably short order, took a deep breath, then dived into announcing that our "special guest, Mr. Fayliss" was going to deliver a song-cycle.

Fayliss arose, bowed slightly, then nodded to Mark Loring, who brought forth his oboe. "These songs were not conceived or composed in the form I am presenting them," he said. "But I believe that the arrangement I use is an effective one.

"I call this, 'Song of the Last Men'." He nodded again to Loring, and the performance began. His voice was affecting, and his artistry unmistakable. And there were overtones in his voice that gave an added eeriness to the weird music itself.

The songs told of the feelings, the memories, and despair of a nearly-extinct people—one which had achieved a great culture and a world-wide civilization. The singer knows that the civilization has been destroyed; that the people created by this culture and civilization are gone, the few survivors being pitiful fellaheen, unable to rebuild or bring forth a culture of their own. There is despair at the loss of the comforts the civilization they knew brought them, sorrow at their inability to share in its greatness—even in memory; and a resigned certainty that they are the last of the race—they will soon be gone, and no others shall arise after them.

There was silence when Fayliss finished, then discreet but firm applause, as if the audience felt that giving full reign to their approval would make an impious racket. Fayliss seemed to sense this feeling, and smiled as he bowed.

"These are not songs of your people, are they?" asked Jocelyn.

Fayliss shook his head. "Oh no—they are far removed from us. I am merely an explorer of past cultures and civilizations, and I enjoy adapting such masterpieces of the past as I can find. This arrangement was made for you; I shall make a different one for my own people, so that the sonic values of the music and the words agree with each other."

Kutrov blinked, then asked him—"Well, can you tell us something more about the people who created this cycle? It has a familiar ring to it, yet I cannot tie it in with any past culture I have heard of."

Jocelyn cut in with the regretful announcement that Mr. Fayliss had another appointment, and called for a note of thanks to him for coming. More applause—this time unrestrained. Fayliss smiled again and swept his eyes around us, as if filled with some amusing secret. Then he said to Kutrov, "You would find them quite understandable."

I wandered over to the window, in search of air, and noted that someone had indiscreetly left a comfortable chair vacant. I was near the door, so that I could hear Jocelyn say to Fayliss: "It was—very moving. Why, I could almost feel that you were singing about us."

Fayliss smiled again. "That is as it should be."

"Of course," chimed in Loring, who'd come up to ask Fayliss if he could have a copy of the score, "that's the test of expert performance."

The lights were dimmed again by the fog of tobacco smoke, and I could see the street quite clearly by moonlight. I decided I would watch Fayliss, and see if his eyes did glow in the dark. I saw him go down the

sidewalk, with that graceful stride of his, his hands in his pockets. But I couldn't see his eyes at all.

Then a gust of wind tugged his hat, and, for an instant I thought he'd have to go scrambling after it. But, quick as a rapier thrust, a tail darted out from beneath his dress coat, caught the hat, and set it back upon his head.

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