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JAMES BRANCH CABELL

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By Bob Canary

"Now this Cabbel did many of doughty deeds
and sang most well of loue and fortun
and the deeds of manley men . . ."–SONG OF LADE NARSHERK

As they tell it in Richmond, it began one afternoon as Cabell was strolling alone through a wood near his home. He seemed much like the other young men of Richmond, possessing a surpassing reverence for his ancestors, the young ladies of his acquaintance, and for words of every kind, being remarkable only in the form of his worship of the last. For as his contemporaries bowed down before round-bellied words like "progress" and "socio-economic" and "forward-looking", so he laid his gift of irony before the dim-lit altars of almost forgotten words– "chivalry", and "honor", and all manner of words little used of late.

Strolling, Cabell suddenly found himself face to face with a stranger, half-boy, half-man, fair of face and slender of body, whose unfamiliar features seemed to bear some strange resemblance to his own. Horridville (for that was the stranger's name) smiled good-naturedly and a little wearily. "Come with me, James Branch Cabell, and I will show you all manner of things, the like of which you have never seen."

"Well," said Cabell, after a respectable pause, "it seems like a generous offer and one I am little-minded to refuse."

So it was that Cabell followed the stranger whose name was Horridville through the forest to a sudden clearing. In the midst of the clearing rose an exceeding high mountain, which Cabell, who had roamed these woods with other companions, could not recall having seen before. A little mist played around its peak, and at its base stood a white stallion with gold trappings.

"No doubt," said Horridville, "you will tire of stock situations such as this, but we must abide by tradition. Three times must I bring you to this mountain, and three times shall you have a choice to make."

"I am ready to choose, strange lad," said Cabell, although he was a trifle uncertain as to the nature of the choice offered him.

Horridville gave breath to a sigh. "Well, then let us be on with it. This stallion, whom some call Kalki, is yours to ride where you will. Your first choice, then, will be where you wish to ride. There is no sense to it, but the Fates, being women and unpredictable, have so ordained, and it must be so."

"My gratitude . . ." Cabell began, but Horridville went on almost immediately.

"There are two paths that you may take. The first is to the right . . ." He paused and waved his hand in that direction. Cabell saw that he had failed to notice a road to his right. It was paved with asphalt and littered with garbage cans; tumble-bugs crept along its side; and where it crawled into the horizon he could make out the black towers of smoke stacks.

"This is not the road I propose to travel," Cabell said firmly. It is the sort taken only by those dreadful Realists who have no aesthetic sense."

"Very well, then," said Horridville. "There is the road to the left." Cabell looked to the left and saw there a dirt path he had not noticed before. Animated animals chattered in human tongues along the wood-shaded path; he would even have sworn he could espy in the distance an armored knight, riding toward some distant turret on a distant tower.

Horridville spoke quietly in his ear. "This is the road of dreams," he said. "All things come true on it if you wish hard enough, for here is absolute beauty and juistice and love and goodness. All the ideals that men have sought lie along this road, waiting to be plucked and held to the breast as a suckling rose or the wild flowers that grow by its side."

"I certainly admire all these things," replied Cabell with regret. "but I cannot quite believe in them. No dream is quite so good in its telling, and no beauty remains absolute to its spouse. Most men live on dreams, but I fear that I could not be quite comfortable doing so. In short, I fear that the air of that path and that strange country might make me over-Disney, it being too rarefied for my poor earthy temperament."

"We seem to have reached an impasse," said Horridville, scratching his ear.

"Not at all," said Cabell, and he mounted that white stallion whom some call Kalki. "I will make my own path, according to my own liking. For I am a Branch and a Cabell and cannot forget it, and so must I go my own way according to my own thinking." With that he lifted the golden reins, and the silver steed bore him off through the underbrush.

"You had better beware, lest your horse fall and break that bone which connects his head with his trunk," Horridville called after him, but Cabell was out of hearing by the time Horridville had worked the sentence around in his mind to his liking. He sighed once more and shook his head. "It does not greatly matter," he told himself. "I shall assuredly see him once more in twenty years time."

James Branch Cabell rode off in a direction much his own and created a country that was largely his own and called it Pointsell. It was a strange country and much to his liking. All that happened there seemed a model of chivalry and of honor, yet men behaved there much as they do any place, which is very badly indeed, and some women behaved a great deal worse. They developed many weapons—swords and lances and spears—and all of these were double-edged and particularly potent. They had good need of these weapons, for they had many enemies; those to the right said that it was a flowerly land of false ideals, and those to the left said that it was an obscene land of phallic symbols, and both sides attacked it vigorously.

When twenty of our years had passed, Horridville came to Pointsell to speak once more with Cabell. They put the golden trappings on the white stallion, which had stood for twenty of our years in an unchanging stable, and Horridville directed Cabell to the exceeding high mountain. This time they did not rest at its base, but rode to its mist-shrouded top. There they descended from their mount and mingled with a large group of other horsemen. Cabell was secretly glad that there were others there, for cold, fast winds buffeted the mountain-top, and at one side it seemed to end in a sheer drop.

Horridville set about introducing Cabell to some of the assembled horsemen. One of these was a bearded man with red fire in his eyes. "I will tell you what the world is," he said. "It is a gyring spiral through the four-and-twenty phases of the moon though confidentially I only half-believe that myself. It is the trembling of thighs of a human woman beneath the lustful beak of a divine swan. Once I thought it could all be wrapt up in a rose and a virgin, and I

was wrong; now I am sure, and I can put it in the mouths of a mad whore and a beggar. The Japanese knew what it was; read the Noh plays."

He was followed by a thin man with glasses and a shabby hat. "What do you think the world is?" Cabell asked him politely.

Woo—said the man. First it is warm then it gets cold—and a very good time it was; no, not me, I will not . . . So warm, now cold. Waah! Cleritas, integritas, veritas, I say. Aquinas, you know. Cursed Jesuit. Look at that epiphany!

Cabell repeated his question.

Shame—came the reply—Potato here. Soap here. Boylan there. Shame. Don't think. Think of Keyes, crossed keys—do you get it, Telemachus, my son. Crossed keys, like what is home without Plumtree's? Incomplete. Reached the first plateau: come back next week. That woman over there—bet she wears frilly underwear. Like Molly this morning. Coming to practice. Blazes and Boiling over the kidney. Shame. Shame. Shame.

"I can tell," said Cabell righteously, "that you are one of those dreadful Realists without aesthetic sense, no sense of larger values.

He turned away and did not hear the man answer him—river-run, rockridded satyrist, shanning fartyarald, by Hearse Costel Environs ruins an navalid agument, All-living Power, internal yea with priests and pears, panarchy and anarchy and mehitabel. Men fail-fall prehistoric tumblescence of finny answertors to Gallypuppy questionearwigs. Guilting man and riverrun woman, Tree-, stone, and daughter, I sold them all, all internal yea-seers.

There were many other riders there. There was a pinched little man with a red sign on his back painted with a white zero and blinkers on his eyes marked with the sign of the cross, and there was a thin, sickly-looking man who stood apart from the group, his eyes closed in memory. There was a naked man with a feathered serpent wound about his neck; he was giving chase to one of the few women on the mountain-top, a snobbish lady with a tailored suit, who seemed to be wearing an imitation of the shabby hat of the incoherent gentleman Cabell had just spoken to. Around the American flag, which had been planted there by some New England marines earlier, was a large group engaged in some sort of a brawl. They were being urged on by a portly gentleman, who seemed to be of German descent, and who was most certainly drunk. Cabell looked on him with affection, for he offered Cabell a beer, and Cabell was thirsty. One of the group around the flag cried out "we must be He-men!;" another cried out "We shall achieve high art through

idiots and allegories;" and a third gave a long speech, which Cabell could not quite catch, but which seemed to be largely composed of snatches of Shakespere and Whitman, considerably elaborated on.

Cabell started to look for his guide, stumbled over two young French authors engaged in unnatural practices, and hurried over to the white stallion. Horridville joined him there a minute later.

"These people are insane," Cabell said quickly. "And this hill-top is uncomfortable; it is even dangerous." He cast an apprehensive glance at the sharp drop from the edge of the mountain-top. "Then, too," he added, "though I am not one to criticize any man's friends, I feel yours act a trifle eccentric. I would like to make my choice and leave."

"You have already made it," said Horridville without regret. "Shall we ride back to Pointsell?"

"I think not," said Cabell. "I have lived in Pointsell for twenty years as men reckon time, and I know it rather well. There is many a tale I may yet tell of it when the winter fires grow cold, but I don't think I care to live there much longer. To tell the truth, I am a little bit sick of Pointsell."

Thus it came about that Cabell rode this time at the base of the mountain along a different path than he had followed before, though it was quite close to his previous path and he rode on the same silver steed. "I'll see you in twenty-some years," Horridville called after him.

Cabell turned in his seat to reply. "Pray make it forty," he called back, "for another visit such as this would turn me into one of those dreadful Realists who have no aesthetic sense."

Horridville agreed, and so Cabell wandered in the forest for forty of our years, stopping first here and then there, never knowing where he was going or why, and having all manner of adventures, some of which would be too long to tell here and others of which pose yet other problems for the faithful transcriber of old legends. Suffice it to say that he was, by most standards, some eighty years of age when Horridville came for him for the third time and led him to where he had tethered the white stallion whom some call Kalki and directed him to the exceeding high mountain and on up to the top of the mountain. All this Horridville did without a word, and by this did Cabell know what choice it was he had to make on the mountain-top.

"First of all," he said, "I am positive that this is a real choice before me, not pre-determined by god or man." He looked at Horridville, but Horridville remained silent. "Just now," he went on, "I am

pretty much in neglect, having been once well-known for a multitude of wrong reasons." He glanced at Horridville again, but the boy did not reply.

He stirred uneasily in the saddle. "I am a Branch," he told Horridville, "and a Cabell; I hardly care to meet the most dreadful of those dreadful Realists who have no sense of humor."

His cheeks were somewhat red from the cold wind that blows on that hill-top, and he shivered slightly as he sat on the white stallion with the golden trappings. "Somehow in my wanderings," he said, "I've outlasted two wives. That's quite a record." He looked at Horridville as if he expected a smile; if he did, he was disappointed. "I think I've done well enough with life; I'd do it over again anytime—but now . . ."

There was a long silence until Cabell spoke again at last. "I've made my choice already," he said, "haven't I?" Horridville nodded and waved his hand to him in parting. For the great white stallion, whom some called Kalki, bore its sleeping rider off through the air. No one knows where they rode or flew—not even Horridville, who is always left on the hilltop, standing and waving good-bye.