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VLADIMIR PIŠTALO

THE TALE
OF
ALEXANDER

A novel

*Translation from Serbian into English:
Christina Pribichevich Zoric*



I

The story of Alexander the Great begins at the moment when the god Ammon, disguised as a snake, impregnated Olympias, the wife of King Philip of Macedon. That is when dreamtime started. First Philip dreamed that he had impressed onto the wax stomach of his wife his own seal with the engraved image of a lion. Then Olympias dreamed that her womb had been illumed by a bolt of lightning. Aligned in celestial order, the planets awaited the birth of the curse of Asia. The very day that Alexander came into this world, flames engulfed the distant temple of Artemis of Ephesus.

The boy who one day would be called the most glorious of men, slept with "The Iliad" under his pillow. He tried to irradiate his body of mud with gymnastics. His dignity was a bodily secret. His sweat smelled of pine resin and his eyes were gray, like the goddess Athena's. Noticing that Alexander played the lyre too well for a prince, King Philip said:

"I don't understand why you are not ashamed to be devoting yourself to such a thing so seriously."

Philip ruled over the Phrygian sides, Macedonian lands and Hellenic islands with an iron fist. He neighed through his horse teeth and jumped around the palace like a bewitched goblin. His courtiers listened to his boasting with heads bowed. Philip had been whinnying menacingly at Persia through his horsey teeth ever since the Macedonian phalanx had become the most terrifying in the world. The relentlessness of his bared teeth had already broken the Thracians, the Illyrians, and the joint resistance of Athens and Thebes. He had established the Pan-Hellenic League.

Enwrapped by a tame snake, the neglected Queen Olympias yawned herself to oblivion. Her breasts swelled until they were bigger than her shaven head. Olympias overindulged in the orphic rites. She inhaled the smoke of the burning laurel and trembled, jealous of Philip's young wife Cleopatra, who was always ready for sweet debauchery. Olympias lips, partial to food and drink as much as to passionate kissing, touched Alexander's ear and whispered:

“Kill Philip!

Meanwhile, the king was slapping his equine thighs and humiliating Olympias with the tireless lechery of an old man. When drunk, the king would let any sycophant sit on his back and ride him, while he screamed around the palace. But the sycophant had to be careful, because when sober Philip was happiest when he could humiliate someone. He gave no thought to what he was saying; words spewed out of his nose one minute and fell back in the next.

“Words are the squid ink of passion,” Philip whinnied. “Words are the garbage used to deceive. I know only too well that every paid sophist can malign and extol me with equal eloquence.

Despite his disrespect for words, the victorious Philip spared the city of the philosopher Aristotle. And in so doing he brought the famous philosopher, bent-nosed from the wind, to the unworldly world – the Macedonian capital of Pella. Aristotle's mouth soon began to light up in his new home. The new teacher carefully explained to prince Alexander the movement of the circle of constellations, the twelve celestial beasts, the lunar hours and the changing seasons. The philosopher continued to teach Alexander until the boy came to hate him and to love philosophy and medicine.

It often pained Alexander to remember that he had been created out of nothing. His lip cracking like a pomegranate, he said to Aristotle:

“Most of all I hate that saying of Cleobulus’s: “Moderation is best!” I dread the shape my fate will take. I am a drawn bow and worry whether my arrow will soar into the clouds or drop at my feet. I often go out riding on my own. Akin to a golden statue, I spread out over the coastal rocks until the sun warms my hair. Then I lie on the water. I listen to the crepitant depths of the sea and think of harmony and glory.

Though he loved philosophy, Alexander did not neglect the martial arts and his love of taming horses. When in his company, women would start to fix their hair. The boy, who was only just coming of age, rubbed his shoulder against his cheek and asked his father:

“What is better, love or hate?”

“Love is boring. Hate is interesting!” the king neighed. “Evil propels life forward with the crack of a whip. I am the kind of person who cannot find happiness without an enemy. What about your life, what is it like?”

Alexander felt important. The sun welled out of his eyes. He said the same thing that was whispered in the city squares:

“My life is like the moon. Full one minute and empty the next.”

Philip’s answer was to give him a ring composed of four magnetically attached parts, saying:

“Each part symbolizes a quarter moon. When you look at it you will know how you are. The ring will light up and reflect where you are in your life. But there is one condition,” yelled Philip. “You must get rid of the thoughts entrapping you. They are not yours anyway. Just as a boat is carried not by itself but by gusts of wind. First the body arrives on earth and then it waits for the soul

to arrive. Conquer your soul in battle, vacillator! Have the courage to pull your soul down from the heavens!”

King Philip’s words were a verdict on his son and on himself. Alexander staggered away from his father, convinced that love was paler than hate. Thereafter he began extolling Heraclitus’s idea that all Ephesians should hang themselves and leave governing to the children. It was then that Philip’s penchant for causing offense came home to roost. One night, a night besmirched with white flowers, an offended Pausanias stabbed him with a sword. Many wondered whether the murderer’s hand had been guided by the will of the mother and son. Even after placing a death mask on Philip’s head, Olympias licked her peppery lips and continued to tremble with jealousy.

II

While Philip the father was real, Alexander the son was not. The truth was that until the one stepped down from the throne, the other could not call himself king. As soon as Philip died, neighboring barbarian tribes started to snarl. Meanwhile, allies pulled on their cunning smiles. Alexander, the successor, waved his ring and led his troops to the site of the Oracle of Delphi, overlooking a sea of olive trees. There he closed his eyes and prayed to the living, attentive powers of the world. When he opened his eyes, the oracle was standing before him, with a senile smile. She answered, unasked:

“Within your bosom, you feel an itch that you cannot scratch. Your power is coming! Your fate will become a boat with taut sails. You must find the courage to endure it, and not to be frightened of yourself when you become strong.”

Upon hearing these words, Alexander raised his hand from his heart up to the sky and sobbed:

“Come! Arrive out of nowhere! Fill my body!”

He had barely uttered the words when he began to tremble. His thighs, the tongue in his mouth and all the digits of his body were enthralled.

“Come!”, Alexander said again, and his soul burst into him so forcefully that foam spewed out of his mouth. The world, until then porous, became pregnant. Imagine the apple! Imagine a woman’s stomach! While the troops cheered the king in Delphi, the spirit supported all the bodies from within. The scent of lavender filled Alexander’s nostrils. His horse Bucephalus reared up un-

derneath him, its face, ugly for a man but handsome for a horse, recalled that of Philip of Macedon. The wind swirled across the fields, disturbing Delphi's sea of olive trees until it drove itself into the ground. Alexander lifted his ring and his cavalry followed the subterranean wind. Its sabers rattling, the infantry set off in the shadow of the Macedonians' seven-meter-long spears, known as *sarissas*.

In their first clash, the Macedonians crushed the troops of the Triballi king Syrmus. When they came out onto the banks of the Danube, the river islands radiated noble aureoles into the twilight. They watched the Gauls catch a whale-sized catfish and cut it up on one of the Danubian islands. Alexander formed an alliance with them and they supplied him with meat.

Upon his return to Greece, he stormed Thebes, in the peppered wind, set it aflame and sold the Thebans as slaves. As Thebes burned, he looked at his ring. The first quarter moon was aglow.

As soon as he came home, Alexander cocooned himself in his thoughts, while his court waited to see what he would be like when he came out. A whole month of spring passed by while they waited and the sweet scent of acacia gave way to the fragrance of linden. Meanwhile, Orpheus's statue in Libetra was sweating profusely. Alexander felt that the world and his reinvigorated soul were one. The unsafe had become safe, and the uncertain – inevitable.

Finally, Alexander staggered out of the palace. The gray, cloudy day gave way to the blazing sun. The scent of lavender filled his nose. Through Alexander's mind, the Fates had decided:

“Go to Persia!”

As morning knocked at Hellada's windows, swallows roused the sleeping men to go off to war. Only the Spartans scornfully declined the invitation, baring their shark-teeth. Columns of soldiers started pouring in from the villages, ghostly white in the early dawn. Towns of smooth stone dispatched wing-footed young men

as their contribution to the pan-Hellenic campaign. A warm breeze crept under the soldiers' robes and caressed their necks. The sea was cuddling against the shores. The wind carried the quivering reflection of the sunlight across the pine trees. The horses were disturbed by their own shadows. The sea was blue, the seaweeds agitated, the shallow bays shone bright. The Hellenic soldiers left their world, blessed by the wings of the seagulls.

They left at the very moment that pheasants all over Hellada had eaten their fill of snakes. The hedgehogs, those small, despised creatures, fled, their quills full of fruit. Their hearts, devoid of evil, meant well. Even they felt triumph in their little lives. The young Macedonian king riding at the head of his army bent down from his tall saddle and murmured:

“I'm glad I am Alexander and not a hedgehog.”

The subterranean wind and scent of lavender led the Hellenes toward Persia. Olympians chose the god Pan as an appropriate escort for this pan-Hellenic campaign. Pan had already helped the Athenians once, at Thermopylae, when he blew inexplicable fear into the souls of the Persian soldiers. Like King Alexander, Pan liked to play the lyre. He knew about prophecies and medicine and liked to surprise travellers in faraway places. Pan also knew how to submit nature to his invisible influences. He could either fill mortals with panic or illuminate them with joy. This he did now. Harmony shone from the treetops, from the blue sky, from the earth. The pine forests bowed to Alexander's army as it passed by.

And the moon? The Macedonians did not take their troops out in the month of Daesius. Alexander violated this old tradition. He miscalculated, thinking that the laws did not apply to faraway Persia. And therefore in the month of Daesius he would be doomed to die. Let us wait. For now, the Macedonian army, exhausted by the march, fell onto the River Granicus.