Prince of the Powers of This World

Roger Zelazny

“God’s balls!” said the first gravedigger, driving his spade into the earth, the better to lean upon it, to watch the bloody glow of the dying sun. “We’ll be at this all night!”

“God damned ground’s harder nor a stone,” said the second. “Just like the old bastard to die midwinter and us to have the buryin’ of ’im.”

The third paused to blow upon his hands.

“Sooner the damned better he’s underground. Out of sight, out of mind,” he observed. “ ’Twas good watchin’ his church burn. By the Old One’s split feet! We could use some of that warm now, sure!”

The others chuckled.

“Aye!”

“True!”

They watched the sun slip away, the shadows rush to fill its place.

“Hark! What star is that, on high?” asked the first, pointing.

The others looked in the direction of his gesture.

“He’s a right bright ruddy bastard,” said the second. “But he ain’t big-balled Mars. I don’t know... Never seen his like afore.”

“Son of a bitch seems to be movin’,” said the third, “off to the north.”

“Aye,” said the first.

“What’s this?” asked the second. “Music? D’you hear it?”

“Music? Yer daft,” said the third. “Y’d too much ale a’ Mistress Doll’s.”

“Yer bloody deaf ! Get the shit outen yer ears and give a listen!”

“He’s right,” said the first. “It seems to be comin’ up outen the ground.” With that, he pushed upon his spade with his foot and removed a clod of earth. He leaned then. “Pay heed,” he said after a moment. “ ’Tis down there.”

The others bent forward, listening.

“By Holy Joe’s holy horns!” said the second. “ ’Tis pipes and some stringy thing and a drum, risin’ like a fart outen the bowels of the earth⁠—”

“Lads,” said the third, dropping his spade and climbing out of the hole, “I’ve a mind not to be about when that wind breaks.”

The others quickly retreated, also.

As they drew back from the half-dug grave the music came louder and the earth began to vibrate beneath their feet. Then, a dozen paces from their work, they were cast to the ground by a spasm that rippled through it like a wave through water. They shaded their eyes against the sudden illumination of flames which burst from the grave.

“Lords of the year! We’re undone!” cried the first. “Behold what elevates from the Pit!”

Like a statue carved from old night, the horned, bat-winged figure rose amid the flames to tower above them. Its great yellow eyes moved from side to side, then fixed upon them where they lay quivering. The music throbbed and skirled about it as it raised a leg to place a hoof the size of a bread loaf upon the grave’s edge. Suddenly, its voice sounded, flute-like, above the tune from the earth:

“Rejoice, you miserable motherfuckers, for tonight is the night of your lord’s birth!”

“Glad to hear that,” said the first.

“I’m rejoicin’ a’ready,” said the second.

“Me, too,” said the third, eyes darting toward the cover of a nearby thicket.

“This night he is born to a former virgin tupped screamin’ by the Lord of Darkness in the convent where she dwelled,” the dark creature went on. “Cast out by the nuns, refused shelter by the fearful country folk, she wandered, halfmad, till this night when she gives birth in a cave occasionally used for the quartering of animals. Her son is the Messiah of Hell, and I, Asmodeus, proclaim his reign to you! Now get your asses over to the cave and pay him homage!”

The music had risen as he spoke, retreated now as he concluded.

“Aye, Lord Asmodeus,” said the first. “But⁠—uh⁠—where shall we find this cave with the babe in it?”

Asmodeus raised his right hand, pointing a talon on high.

“Follow the damned star,” he said, “ ’Tis really a demon in a fiery chariot. He’ll halt it above the cave so there can be no mistake.”

“Yes, sir!” said the second.

“We’re on our way!” said the third.

Asmodeus leapt from the grave and began to dance. The earth shook again, and from somewhere a chorus of childlike voices accompanied him as he sang:

What child is this that is brought to birth

With eyes like coals a-blazing?

This, this is the Prince of Earth.

Who’ll take it to its ending.

When the first gravedigger looked back he saw that the other two were not far behind him.

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Coming at length to a cave from which a faint glow emerged, the gravediggers halted, then advanced slowly, to peer within.

They beheld a mother and child, reclining on a bed of straw, huddled amid pigs, rats, ravens, and a pair of strange furry creatures.

“What are the two big’uns?” whispered the second gravedigger.

“Jackals,” said the first. “I saw their like one time in a book at the castle. The lord was readin’ on the eve of a hunt, and he’d a mind to show us pictures of animals from other lands. Don’t know what these two might be doin’ here, though.”

“P’raps they’re someone’s pets as got free.”

“P’raps.”

The third gravedigger cleared his throat.

“We’d best be payin’ our respects,” he said. “Wouldn’t want to have Asmodeus mad at us.”

“You’re right,” said the first.

Simultaneously then, all three of them cleared their throats.

The woman, almost a child herself, turned her head in their direction.

“Who’s there?” she asked.

“Just⁠—just some gravediggers,” said the first, entering. “We were told to follow a star and we’d find this place. We came to pay our respects⁠—to your child.” The others followed him into the cave. The jackals raised their heads and regarded the men with yellow, unblinking eyes. It was difficult to tell where the light⁠—a pale red glow⁠—came from. Perhaps from the child himself. Silently, the mother began to weep.

“Well, here he is,” she finally said, indicating the small black figure at her side. “He’s sleeping just now.”

The men dropped to their knees.

“ ’Tis good you’d a warm furry robe to wrap him ’im in,” said the second.

She laughed, though her tears continued to flow.

“ ’Tis not a robe. ’Tis his own hairy hide,” she said.

“Oh,” said the third. “Seein’ as you’re not so fortunate, let me give you my cloak.”

“I can’t take your cloak. It’s cold out there.”

“I’ve another at home. Take it,” he said. “Even with your animal friends you’ll be needin’ it.”

He extended it, let it fall upon her.

“I hope he brings you some kind of joy,” said the second.

She bit her lip.

“Who knows? He might take more after me than after his da. ’Tis possible, you know.”

“Of course,” said the first, turning away. “I wish you good fortune and that the young ’un will love you and honor you and care for you.”

“Why should I?” came a tiny voice.

He looked back, and the child’s strange eyes (he could never recall their color) were open and fixed upon him.

“He has been able to speak since the moment of his birth,” the mother stated.

“Why should I?” the child repeated.

“Because she loves you and tends to you and has suffered for you and will suffer for you,” the first replied.

The child turned his gaze upward.

“Mother, is this true?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

“I do not want you to suffer,” he said.

“There is little you can do about it,” she told him.

“We shall see,” he stated.

“I guess we’d best be going now,” said the first gravedigger.

She nodded.

“Thank you for the cloak,” she said to the third.

“Bide a moment,” said the child. “Who told you to follow the star to this place?”

“A demon named Asmodeus,” said the second. “He came up out of the ground and so bade us.”

“And why did you do as he told you?”

“Why, we feared him, sir,” said the first.

“I see. Thank you. Good night to you.”

The gravediggers backed out of the cave, were gone into the night.

“Those men,” the child said then, “do not love me or tend to me as you do. They came because they feared that they would suffer if they did not obey my Uncle. Is that not correct?”

“Yes,” his mother said. “That is correct.”

“Then which is stronger, love or fear?”

“I do not know,” she said. “But the one did not give me his cloak out of fear, and he will suffer from the cold because of it.”

“Does that mean that he loves you?”

“It is a kind of love to tend to another when you do not have to. But it is more a friendly thing than a lovely thing. With fear, you do things because you must or you will be hurt.”

“I see,” said the furry child, snuggling against her. “The man is a friend.”

Later, as they dozed, three more figures approached the cave and begged permission to enter. They were three kings who had traveled far and over the sea out of the East and the South, bearing gifts of opium, strychnine, and silver, each of which gave power over people by different means. They desired that their kingdoms be spared when the days of the conflagration arrived⁠—and that, as future allies, they might benefit from the destruction of their neighbors who resisted.

“I begin to understand,” the child said after they had left. “They do not love me, they fear me.”

“That is right,” she said.

“They are not even friends.”

“No, they are not.”

At midnight a great rush of fire occurred beyond the cave mouth, filling the entire enclosure with baleful brilliance. The mother gasped and shielded her eyes, but the child stared into the flames, where a dark, brooding, masculine form took shape. With a laugh, the figure strode forward, to regard them. Then he stooped, snatched the gravedigger’s cloak away from the woman and cast it back over his shoulder, where it burst into flames. Then he threw an ermine robe atop her and the child.

“You!” she gasped.

“Yes,” he replied. “My son and my mare deserve the best of garments.” Reaching behind him, he produced a stack of shirts, skirts, and swaddling clothes which he laid nearby. “And good meats, fresh fruits, bread, vegetables, herbs, wine.” He placed a massive basket upon the floor. Then he leaned to examine the opium, the strychnine, the thirty pieces of silver. “Ah, the kings have been by to plead for their pathetic realms,” he said. “Well, do with them as you would, when your time comes.”

“I shall,” said the child.

“Do you know who you are, boy?” the dark one asked.

“I am her son, and yours.”

“That is right, and you can summon a legion of demons to do your bidding simply by naming them. If you think about it, you will see that you know all of their names.”

“It seems that I do.”

“Do you know what it is that I want of you?”

“Something involving blood and fire and destruction, I believe. Someone may have referred to it as the final conflagration.”

“That is close enough. The details will become clearer to you as you grow older. And you can always call upon me for a consultation if you are in doubt.”

“Thank you.”

“The means will be a young man who would be king. You will meet him one day, make him your slave, help him to his kingship, see him unite this realm, then have him cross the Channel to kick down the remaining holdings of the Roman Empire, take it for his own, and forge it into a new power under his command. Then you will be in position to execute the next phase of my plan⁠—”

“Father, what will his name be, this young king?”

“I cannot see that deeply into things that are yet to be. There is always a cloud about major events.”

“Will this man love me, or will he fear me?”

“Neither, if you use your powers properly. Think upon the lessons of your gifts. The silver teaches that people will betray others, and that everything has a price. The strychnine teaches that those who are too troublesome can be eliminated. The opium teaches that people may be placed in thrall, may be led as you choose, by a dulling of their senses and a laying on of glamour. That may be the easiest route with your king. You will know what is best when the time comes.”

“I understand you,” said the child. “How am I to know this man?”

“A fair question, my son. Behold!” With that, the dark one turned to his rear. When he turned back, he held a blade in his hand. He brandished it on high and it took fire with a roaring sound. Then, with a single step, he crossed the cave and plunged the weapon into a stone. “There,” he answered. “He will be the only man capable of drawing that sword from that stone.”

“I see,” said the child. “Yes, I, too, see these things that are yet to be, through a cloud, dimly. I understand how I may use it.”

“Very well, lad. If you need anything, call upon my minions. They will obey you as they would me.”

“I shall, father.”

The dark one turned, retreated into the flames beyond the cave mouth, and was gone. Moments later, the flames died.

The child yawned and snuggled against his mother once again. “Tell me, son,” she asked. “Can you really see the future, like your father?”

“Better,” he replied, yawning again. “Arthur shall be my friend.”

Notes

The anthology Christmas Forever featured stories connected to the holiday. Zelazny’s contribution features his typical humor, some uncharacteristic swear words, and the mix of several legends and myths.

The baby is the sorcerer Merlin, who has foreseen young Arthur, the future king, pulling the sword from the stone. Here Zelazny borrowed from “Merlin,” poet Robert de Boron’s version of the Arthurian legend. In de Boron’s account, a devil (or Satan himself) begets Merlin on a virgin to be the Antichrist. The expectant mother thwarts the plot when she informs her confessor, Blaise. They baptize the boy at birth and free him from Satan’s power. God supplements Merlin’s uncanny knowledge of past and present, giving the boy the gift of prophecy.

Tupped means had sexual intercourse with. Asmodeus, one of Hell’s four Princes, has battled King Arthur in comic books. Making Asmodeus Merlin’s uncle may imply that Merlin’s father was the Devil himself.