The Outward Sign

Roger Zelazny

There once was a calligrapher in Agra who inscribed the word of the Prophet for no eyes but those of Allah, Himself. Every day, stopping only to face the west and perform his holy duties, he spent the hours of light on his balcony, forming the sacred script of the Koran.

Knowing little of the devices of the world he withdrew to this balcony, “To the greater honor and glory of Allah,” and centered his being on the production of filigreed scroll-work and lettering. He toiled not for the coin of man and his children ran ragged through the streets, fed by the few pennies his faithful wife received for washing the clothes of the merchants. But Allah finally smiled upon his servant, and Azrael, the angel of death, called for the soul of his wealthy uncle Babulla.

Soon the calligrapher was the wealthiest man in his village. But still he sat, cross-legged on his mat of straw, tracing the words of Mahomet unto the gold-bordered field of his scroll. “When I die,” he said unto his wife, “this is to be placed on the pyre by my side. And let not any eyes⁠—least of all thy unworthy own⁠—look upon its words, for it is meant for none but He That Is and, bismillah, so shall it be!”

But his wealth, as the juice of the sugar plant summons the winged minions of torment, brought to his house those local unworthies who abound this sinful world: Hafiz, the Arab, Isadore of the tribe of Abraham, and Larry, the drunken Christian.

The way now is short; he was lured from his balcony and fell among these vilest of men. From them he came to know the evils Eblis sets before the faithful: Isadore taught him the joys of pig-flesh, Larry the glories of the grape, and Hafiz of the foul plant hashish that brings the seven ages of man to pass in the shade of one afternoon.

Brushing the rubies of wine from his whitened beard, he came to know the warmth of the belly at the time he once was wont to pay his reverence to Mecca. The muezzins called their summons, but he chewed his pig-meat and chuckled. He smoked with Hafiz and knew himself to be like unto Allah.

But every night in the circle of light from a shining lantern-face he scribed with care the words of God as he had always done.

And as he grew older and descended further into the pit of the world he came to disbelieve in the blessed Garden of Joys that Allah has promised the faithful; the angels ceased to cross the moonbeams in his cloth-hung room of the high bed, and his garden of joys was the cellar of wine.

Even unto the last evening of his life he wrote to the glory of the God he no longer held with, and still he meant that no man should see these writings. He squinted his bird-like eyes and creased his narrow forehead into wrinkle-making grimaces not unlike those lines he labored to produce.

And the day of the flame his good wife placed the scroll by his side, lamenting loudly as they were reduced to ashes and gnarled ropes of smoke. Larry and Isadore moved in search of a new patron, and all was as it had been until Hafiz, the dreamer, dreamed a question:

“Damned of holy,” he dreamed, “for whom does one perform when his audience departs and cannot be replaced?” but he only dreamed it for a little while and it became obscured by the sweet smoke, then all came to be as it had been.

Notes

After high school Zelazny largely abandoned writing except for poetry. Poetry was his primary interest as a writer. This is the sole known story that he wrote during the time he attended Western Reserve University, and it appeared in the university magazine Skyline. This fable displays a style similar to Lord of Light, even though it was written ten years earlier.

Agra is a city in northern India, the site of the Taj Mahal. In Islam, the Prophet is Mohammed and Allah is the Supreme Being or God. The Koran is the Islamic sacred book, believed to be the word of God, dictated to Mohamet (Mohammed) by the archangel Gabriel and written down in Arabic. Filigree consists of fine gold or silver wire that is worked into a delicate, ornamental tracery. In Jewish and Islamic mythology, Azrael is the angel who severs the soul from the body at death. Bismillah is an invocation meaning “In the name of Allah!” Eblis is the fallen angel of Islam, chief of djinns, and demon of despair. Hashish is a purified resin created from cannabis which is then smoked, chewed or drunk as an intoxicant or stimulant. The seven ages of man refers to Shakespeare’s monologue “All the World’s a Stage” in the play As You Like It. The seven ages include infancy, childhood, lover (adolescent), soldier (young adult), justice (adult), old age, and dementia/death. Mecca is a city in western Saudi Arabia, birthplace of Mohammed; Muslims consider it the holiest city of Islam. Muezzins are the men who call Muslims to prayer.