The Salvation of Faust

Roger Zelazny

The cursed bells of Orgytime are ringing. My words begin to stir upon the page. Blinking clear, I see that the paper is moist. A strange taste to the wine, a tainted perfume in the hangings, and Helen snoring gently...

I rise. I cross to the window and look outside.

The animals are enjoying themselves.

They look like me. They walk and talk like me. But they are animals. Animal post coitum triste est is not always the case. They are happy.

Sporting about the great pole, and unashamed upon the village green, indeed they are happy animals. Repeatedly so.

The bells!

I should give anything I possess to join them there!

But they disgust me.

...Helen?

No. No solace today. For, verily, I am triste.

The wine. Their wine is tapped so early in the morning! Blessed drunkenness inundates the countryside. My wine is tainted, however.

I am damned.

“My god, my god—why hast thou forsaken me?”

“Faustus?”

“Helen?”

“Come to me.”

I kiss her with the tenderness of the strange feeling I have known these past months.

“Why?”

“Why what, my dear?”

“Why must you treat me as you do?”

“I have no word for the feeling.”

The tears of Helen upon the counterpane, drops of misery upon my hands.

“Why are you not like the others?”

I stare across the room. Each peal of the Orgy bell rattles upon the walls of flesh, the bars of bone.

“I traded something very precious, my dear, for all that I possess.”

“What?”

“I have no word for it.”

I return to the balcony and throw a handful of gold coins to the beggars who crouch by the gate, torn between their desire for alms and the lecherous cries of their sagging flesh. Let both be answered.

Let them be gone!

My eyes fall upon the dagger, the ceremonial dagger I had used in the rituals. If only I had the strength, the will...

But something, I do not understand what, cries out within me, “Do not! It is a—”

—I have no word for the concept.

“Wagner!”

A sudden resolution. A pathetic entreaty.

An attempt...

“You called, master?”

“Yes, Wagner. Set up the north room. Today I shall conjure.”

His freckled face drops. A sniff emerges from his snubnose.

“Hurry. Set things up. Then you may join them on the green.”

He brightens. He bows. He never bowed before, but I have changed, and people fear me now.

“Helen, my dearest, I go to put on my robes. Perhaps I shall be a different man when I return.”

She breathes heavily, she squirms upon the bed. “Oh, do! Please!”

Her animal passions both attract and repel me now. Oh damnation! That I had never tampered with things forbidden! For mere wealth, knowledge, power...This!

Down my long halls, and through the glittering vistas of crystal, of marble. Of painted canvas. The thousand statues of my palace are crying.

“Hold! Save us, Faustus! Do not go back! We will grow ugly...”

“I am sorry, beauty,” I answer, “but you are not enough. I must fight to recover what once was mine.”

I pass on, and something is sobbing behind me.

The north room wears black, and the Circle is drawn. The candles whip the shadows with lashes of light. The walls are carousel, Wagner’s eyes, and pleading.

“Well set. Go thy ways, Wagner. Enjoy the day, thy youth...”

My voice breaks, but he is already gone.

The black robes disgust me also. It is repugnant to traffic thus—why, I do not know.

“Gather, darkness!”

The heaviness is upon me. Contact already—rapport soon.

“Great hornéd one, I summon thee, from the depths...”

Each candle is bonfire.

Light without illumination.

Darkness visible...

“By all the great names, I charge thee, appear before me...”

He is here, and my limbs are leaden.

Two eyes flickering, unblinking, from a pillar of absolute darkness.

“Faustus, you have called.”

“Yes, great hornéd one, Lord of the Festival, I have summoned thee, upon this, thy day.”

“What do you wish?”

“An end to the bargain.”

“Why?”

“I wish to be like the others once more. I am sorry I made the pact. Take back everything you have given me! Make me like the poorest beggar at my gate, but return me to what I was!”

“Faustus. Faustus. Faustus. Three times do I speak thy name in pity. It is no longer as I will, or as thou willest, but as it is willed.”

My head swimming, my knees buckling, I step forward and break the Circle.

“Then consume me. I no longer wish to live.”

The pillar sways.

“I cannot, Faustus. Thy destiny is thy own.”

“Why? What have I done that makes me so special, that sets me so apart?”

“You have accepted a soul in return for your lust to live, to know.”

“What is a soul?”

“I do not know. But it was a part of the pact, and there are conditions upon this world which I must observe. You are eternally, irrevocably saved.”

“Is there nothing I can do?”

“Nothing.”

Heavier and heavier the robes.

“Then begone, great one. You were a good god, but I have been twisted inside. I must seek me another now, for strange things trouble me.”

“Good-bye, gentle Faustus—most unhappy of men.”

The emptied walls spin carousel. Around and around.

The great green sun grinds on. Forever, and ever.

The cursed bells of Orgytime are ringing!

And I in the center, alone.

Notes

This is the first of many tales in which Zelazny explored the tale of Faust. In this story’s alternate universe, Faust is safe but bored and sad, as opposed to damned but happy in the original.

Faust conjured Helen of Troy to be his paramour, and in one version of the tale, he begat a child with her. “Animal post coitum triste est” means that an animal is sad or wistful after the joy of sex, and this quote has been attributed both to Aristotle and Galen. Triste means melancholy or depressed. My god, my god—why hast thou forsaken me? are words spoken in anguish by Jesus on the Cross.