Youth Eternal

Roger Zelazny

The street was narrow and the light from the still-rising sun rode on golden roads past the buildings and fell broken into spider-web-like filigree on the pavement. Unconscious of these patterns at his feet and, indeed, unconscious of everything save his own deep thoughts, the old man moved rapidly down the center of the thoroughfare.

The vehicle turned the corner and as it thundered toward him, the warning screams of its four occupants, two boys and two girls, rose from its open top.

Yet for another moment he did not notice.

When the shouts finally struck some chord of response in his white-fringed beard, he looked up, eyes wide, mouth suddenly open. For all of three seconds he remained in this position before his sluggish reflexes responded to the danger. By then it was nearly upon him.

The pair of hands that suddenly fastened themselves to his arm and shoulder were tanned and muscular. They violently pulled him to the right.

He was in a shaded doorway struggling to catch his breath and keep his balance. The vehicle surged past, splashing up a cold little shower from a nearby puddle along with a chilly gust of air.

Then it rounded the next corner and was gone.

Shakily the old man leaned against the wall and felt the hands release his arm. He breathed deeply, then unconsciously began wiping at the water spatters on his face and clothes.

“Th-thank you,” he muttered to his rescuer, “I didn’t even see it coming. These streets⁠—they’re so narrow⁠—there’s hardly any room for the pedestrian. I was meditating⁠—going to the library. Thanks.”

“Certainly,” breathed the other between clenched teeth. “These kids nowadays shouldn’t be allowed on the roads.” He put his hand back on the old man’s shoulder, comfortingly. “Do you feel all right? I didn’t hurt your arm when I pulled you that way, did I?”

The old man bent his arm and straightened it.

“No, no damage.” For the first time he looked at the man who had saved him. “But it was quite a terrible feeling to look up and see something terrible bearing down like that, Sergeant,” he noticed the other’s uniform.

“I’ll walk with you to the library,” the sergeant offered. “I’m going in that direction myself.”

They left the doorway, took a few steps down the street. The old man stopped and shuddered.

“I don’t blame you for feeling weak,” the sergeant said. “You’d be amazed at the number of reports we get every week. This generation seems to be going to the dogs. Reckless driving, theft, wild parties, street fighting... I don’t know what it will finally lead to.”

“Well, children are inclined to be a little wild when they’re growing up,” the old man began as they resumed walking. “I have heard a few stories...”

“What you hear isn’t even half of it,” said the sergeant. “A large number of them come from the better homes⁠—rich businessmen and important officials. In such cases things are often smoothed over and the kids get off without a lick of punishment.” He paused, as if to let his words sink in, then added, “I think a heavy leather strap would provide a better answer.”

“I have heard predictions that the human race is headed toward a new social low,” observed the old man as they turned into a larger thoroughfare. “If they’re as bad as all that, I shudder to think what will become of the world when they’re full grown.”

“If they live that long,” said the sergeant. “Really though, that makes you wonder how much longer the human race has left when kids are allowed to run around doing anything they fancy, with no respect for anybody or anything. What men they’ll make!”

Their footsteps sounded dully on the wet pavement as they neared the library. The old man turned to his new friend.

“I wish to thank you again... What is your name?” he inquired.

The sergeant smiled and chose to appear noble.

“Just think of me as representing the hand of the Law,” he stated.

“Well, I thank the hand that was extended to me,” the old man replied, “and a good morning to you.” He extended his hand.

“Good morning,” said the other as they clasped hands, one tanned and powerful, the other pale and delicate.

“And mark my words,” the sergeant offered in parting, “unless some radical step is taken, the youth of today will bring the world to chaos in a few years.”

The sergeant turned on his heel and headed toward the distant dark mouth of another narrow street. And the old man moved up the walk and past the obelisk that marked the great library of Alexandria.

Notes

This is the last surviving manuscript written during Zelazny’s high school days.