He That Moves

Roger Zelazny

stop

wait till the gate opens

turn left

turn right

proceed to the next intersection

turn left

bear to the right

turn right

He walked along the thoroughfare, his way empty of everything save for the echoes of his footsteps, the buildings turned to black, himself.

The signs were there only for his benefit. He moved past them, following their instructions:

mount this stair

enter here

He moved through the enormous building, breathing heavily. The stairway without had been far too large for one of his kind to negotiate with ease.

As he entered, he felt something like release⁠—from the pressure of all the eyes, or whatever they called them, that had been fixed upon him from invisible positions of security. He cursed, then chuckled.

Absolutely alone now, he continued to follow the signs. They led him into a gigantic room, indicated his destination.

He pursued them through the carnage, across the black floors, past the stage, still set, until he stood above the remains that lay beneath the sign that said here, with an arrow pointing downward.

Then he saw what remained, and he unfolded the thing that he bore and began filling it with that which had died.

\* \* \*

She stirred. She sucked in the night air, sighed, opened her eyes. She lay upon a hillside, and the net of the sky hung heavy above her with its bright catch of stars. She wore an asphodel in her long, dark hair. When she felt strong enough, she sprang to her feet, prepared to flee.

“Please wait,” said a voice, and she turned, waiting, for it was human.

“Yes?” she finally said, in the same strange language in which she had been addressed.

“I aroused you and I mean you no harm. Don’t flee⁠—please.”

The figure of a small man moved into view, features indistinct.

She waited until he drew near.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Eric, Eric Weiss,” he said. “I helped you to escape.”

“Escape?”

“⁠—From the place where they had you confined,” he finished.

“You speak their language…”

“So do you. We all do.”

“All? I don’t understand. They told me I was going to sleep. Why did you arouse me?”

“I was lonely. I have friends, but I was lonely nevertheless. Yours seemed a lovely and sympathetic face.”

“I understand. Can you tell me what is happening, and why?”

“Perhaps,” he said. “I’ll try.”

\* \* \*

As he drew the shroud up over the shoulders of the dead man, François continued to glance about the enormous room. The place was filled with corpses, but the one he tended was the only human body among them. He did not let his gaze dwell long upon the shapes of the others. There had been as much violence on the floor as upon the stage that he viewed.

Shuddering, he hurried. But he whistled while he worked.

\* \* \*

They walked along the crest of the hill, and she looked down upon the field of people, caught like ants in amber, standing within their towers, there in the starlight.

“What is your name?” he asked her.

“Sappho,” she said.

“Did you write poetry?”

“Sometimes.”

“And live on an isle called Lesbos?”

“Yes.”

“I had no idea,” he said, “though I suspected that everyone down there was once noted for something. If it will please you to know it, portions of your poetry survived for thousands of years. You are a legend. Would you care for a drink of water?”

“Yes, please.”

“Here. I’ve some fresh fruit also. I gathered it in a grove farther to the north.”

“Thank you.”

“I believe that some sort of end is in sight,” he said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I was awakened once, from out of my tower of jelly, and asked to do a job for our⁠—owners. Something in the jelly⁠—DNA, I believe, is what a friend called it⁠—gives us a common tongue which they understand. They had, before awakening me, come into possession of an entire world which was locked to them.”

“Locked?”

“Yes, it was an artificial planet which served as an enormous vault. They could not enter it, with all their machines and scientists, so they aroused me to open it for them. I did it with a small file, some wax and a length of copper wire. Then they returned me to this place, my usefulness being a thing of the past. Only I resolved to escape, and I did. Were you ever so used by them?”

“Yes. They aroused me and they spoke to me, saying: ‘Sappho, we need you to seduce a matriarchy with your song’⁠—and I did this thing, for I thought they were gods. Are they not?”

“No,” said Weiss, “not at all. In my day I was considered a great seeker after things beyond mortality, and I know that they are not gods. They are a race of creatures possessed of an interstellar culture far exceeding anything mankind ever developed. They inherited us and they used us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Another race collected us. Recently the others lost a war to this one, who found us here and decided to use us to exploit their winnings. I feel that there is much concerning the sciences of the older race which they do not understand.”

“Why do we permit them to do as they would with us?”

“Madam, the human race is extinct.”

“How can that be? We are here. I do not understand…”

“Nor do I, fully. I am told, though, that it killed itself off in a great atomic holocaust. I only just recently learned what ‘atomic’ means, and I appreciate the fact that this is probably what happened.”

“I’m sorry. You’re going too fast for me.”

“We’re dead, that’s what I’m trying to say. Every creature that lived on the planet Earth is dead, save for the samples. From among these, we have been revived.”

He gestured at the others, encased in the jellies that nourished and sustained them.

“Do you know that if you were to die again, this night, and if ages from now someone were to find a bone here upon this hilltop and stick it into one of those towers, it would reconstruct you⁠—molecule by molecule, cell by cell⁠—so that you could one day be awakened, possessed of everything you now possess, arranged in precisely the fashion you are now arranged, and including the last thought that flickered through your mind before you died? They have the power to regenerate a creature from any fragment. I had to repick the flower you wear in your hair, for a full-grown plant hovered above your head when I freed you. Portions of our corpses were obtained; we were rebuilt in this fashion.”

“I remember,” she said, “my passing. I wept and I cried out. It was strange to reawaken aboard one of their vessels. So they preserved the dead and they make them to live again…”

“They didn’t. It was the race they destroyed that preserved us. I doubt that this one even understands the process involved. Possibly that first race thought we might be worth studying sometime, but never got around to it. That’s only a guess. They rifled our graves and they preserved in their towers of jelly those whom they thought represented certain worthwhile qualities of the race. Apparently, they had been watching us for thousands of years.”

“And they thought me worth preserving?”

“The fact that you’re here is answer to that. I think they made a good choice.”

“I find it unbelievable,” she said, “despite my experience on the world of the mothers. I was never that popular.”

He shrugged.

“I was. But I never thought that anyone would care to save me in this fashion.”

The night was cool, silent about them.

\* \* \*

François bore the remains down the gigantic stair and back along the thoroughfare in the direction from which he had come. Even the robots did not come to aid him. The entire thing was in his hands, upon his head. They all stayed out of his way, and they watched as he left the city turned to black.

In the distance, he saw the ship.

\* \* \*

The stars shone less brightly as dawn began in the east.

“After they had fought and won their war,” Weiss told her, “they discovered us. They weren’t sure what sort of spoils we were, but they’d come into possession of some kind of record of this place, so they knew what we could do. We had been neatly filed and tabulated. They knew our talents, our abilities. So they began awakening us and asking us to do things for them⁠—quite politely, I must add.”

“What were you,” she asked, “that you unlocked a world?”

She saw the whiteness of his smile within the morning shadows.

“Eric Weiss,” he said. “I can escape from anything anybody can put me into, including a mound of living gelatin. At your service, lovely lady.” And he bowed. “They knew I could unlock a world for them, but they made the mistake of thinking they could reconfine me afterwards.”

“Why do you think that the end is in sight? You said that earlier.”

“I feel that some catastrophe may soon occur, that is true,” he told her. “I can return you to your sleep, if you wish. I had thought…”

“No,” she said, “I wish to remain awake. Tell me the rest of the story.”

“All right. They recently sent for one of our kind to go to their home world for purposes of staging a special entertainment for their rulers. I managed to speak with him for some time, from where I had hidden myself near their vessel. I learned what they wanted of him, and I made him aware of many of the things I had learned concerning this race. He based his decision upon what I told him⁠—though I tried to dissuade him. You see, beyond that high ridge to the north there is a small colony of those I have freed, of which our owners so far know nothing. Thus have I gained the counsel of many, as well as information from those few who had been awakened and employed. Now another man has been sent for. Machiavelli, who analyzed the situation, thinks that we may be doomed.”

“Why?”

“Well,” said Weiss, “if the political situation is truly what he guessed it to be, and the man with whom I spoke is now dead, as I fear he must be…”

\* \* \*

François entered the ship and called out the words he had been told to say. The hatches closed behind him, and the vessel rose into the air. He locked his burden in one of the cabins.

There was a great silence about him.

He sat and watched stars through the viewport for the entire journey.

He realized that there was no real need to have locked the cabin.

\* \* \*

“You see, the first race⁠—the one that did the thing⁠—is dead,” said Weiss, “and now they have done it. If what Machiavelli thinks might happen happens, then they will probably destroy such a menace as the remaining sample⁠—ourselves.”

“What’s that?” She pointed.

He looked up. The great, wedgeshaped vessel cruised silently above the valley, its many fins slicing the brightening air as it descended, drew nearer.

“That,” he said, “is the ship bearing the last man to depart here. Its design is the same. He should be returning with the remains of the player. I am convinced that he can tell us our fate, if he is not in restraint or dead himself.”

\* \* \*

François stepped down from the vessel, which closed itself behind him and rose immediately into the air. He placed the corpse upon the ground and watched the ship climb at a great speed. Suddenly, it was replaced by an orange-gold fireball, and after a time there came a sound as of thunder.

In the distance, he saw two figures advancing toward him. He waited for them to approach.

“What is the verdict?” Weiss called out.

“We live,” he replied. “They told me of their fears and asked for pardon before I did this thing. It would seem that it was indeed as had been rumored there and guessed here. In order to gain his position, their last head of state slew his gens-brother and married his wives. The son of the slain Lord suspected this, but had no evidence. He slew his stepfather, however, after witnessing his reactions to the play. The entire court perished in the uprising that followed.”

“Then why⁠—?”

“It is difficult to conceive of a race sufficiently advanced to conquer an interstellar empire, yet as gullible as this. But they based their conclusion on a sort of logic. Each of us who has been aroused has demonstrated a great ability along some line. They now consider these divine attributes. The first race had disturbed him and died. Their ruler disturbed him also, and carnage was wrought within his court, and he perished. They are now convinced that we are the gods of the old race, and they fear our wrath. They quarantined the palace until one of us could be gotten to remove the body. Now they would have no more to do with us. As you witnessed, they even destroyed the ship that was involved in the act.

“If I gave a damn about life or death, I might even fear the curse myself,” said François, hefting the body and bearing it toward the valley of the mounds, whistling as he went.

After a time, Sappho touched Weiss’ arm. He smiled at her and stared into her dark eyes.

“What are those little trays before each mound?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been able to figure that out.”

“They are like,” she said, “the offering trays my people laid before the gods, in the old days of Earth.”

“You mean⁠—?”

“I believe that we were indeed the gods of the first race. For some reason, they worshipped the greatest among men and preserved them here in eternal slumber. I know that man behind you⁠—the one with the necklace and the war-tattoo. He is Agamemnon.”

Ahead of them, François removed the shroud and began the task of placing the broken body back into its mound of preservative. They moved to join him.

“A race that sought its gods from among another race?”

“It is no more foolish than to seek them anywhere else, is it?”

They watched François at his task.

“That poor man,” she said. “The one who saved us.” And there were tears in her eyes as she spoke.

“If that first race thought he was a god, they took a hell of a chance when they moved him,” said François.

“Perhaps,” said Weiss, “they thought that moving him to honor him would absolve them of the curse he had promised.”

“And the conquerors did not believe in the gods of those whom they had vanquished⁠—until now,” said François. “We’re free. This world is ours. They’ll never bother us again. I⁠—Damn!”

Weiss rushed to his side, but it was too late. He had slipped upon a portion of the gelatinous substance, and his temple had struck against the only rock in sight. He lay very still.

They raised him and placed him within another mound.

“I don’t believe it’s what it seems,” said Weiss. “It was only coincidence. It had to be.”

“At least he’ll recover, won’t he?”

“Yes, I should think so. We will all recover from death or injury, for so long as this jelly lasts⁠—which should be long enough to get the human race back on its feet again.”

“What are those words on the piece of stone he struck? Are they of your language?”

“Yes,” and he read, silently:

good friend for iesvs sake forbeare,

to digg the dvst enclosed heare!

blest be ye man yt spares these stones,

and curst be he yt moves my bones.

“It says that he would resent being disturbed,” he told her.

“His face is so kind,” she said. “Who was he?”

“Nobody really knows for sure,” he said.

Sappho removed an ancient flower from her hair and placed it at the feet of the broken man in the capsule.

Eric Weiss turned away from her strange, sad eyes, prisoner once more in the barless cage of himself.

A Word from Zelazny

This was another story written to match a cover painting[[1]](#footnote-1).

Notes

The mythical, immortal Asphodel grows on the Elysian fields; the real one is in the lily family, bearing long, slender leaves and a daffodil-like flower on a spike. Eric Weiss (occasionally Erich or Ehrich) was born Weisz Erik in Hungary, but his name was Anglicized when he emigrated to the US. He was better known as the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini. Sappho was an ancient Greek poetess who was born on the island of Lesbos around 610 BC. Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli was an Italian political philosopher, musician, poet, and romantic comedic playwright; he is considered the father of modern political philosophy and political science. However, he is also noted for favoring unscrupulous acts to achieve goals, which explains the term Machiavellian. OK

“In order to gain his position, their last head of state slew his gens-brother and married his wives. The son of the slain Lord suspected this, but had no evidence. He slew his stepfather, however, after witnessing his reactions to the play. The entire court perished in the uprising that followed.” This is the plot of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The ruling race has just seen Hamlet, and the mass carnage that followed mimicked the play, with everyone in the alien court dead. The first race had disturbed him and died. Their ruler disturbed him also, and carnage was wrought within his court, and he perished… the prior race and the present race died as a consequence of disturbing the unnamed “him”⁠—the person whose body François is carrying. The aliens want to be rid of the body in order to be rid of his curse.

Agamemnon was commander in chief of the Greek expedition against Troy. On his return home, wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus murdered him. His son Orestes and daughter Electra avenged his murder. The stories of Agamemnon and Hamlet have similarities.

The tombstone inscription is William Shakespeare’s. Thus Shakespeare’s curse has afflicted the race of aliens that reincarnated him (and other humans) against his will on this faraway world.

It is possible that François is meant to be Sir Francis Bacon, who many believe wrote some or all of Shakespeare’s works. This would mean that Shakespeare exacts revenge upon Bacon at the end. Or François may be Saint-François d’Assise⁠—St. Francis of Assisi⁠—who, like Hamlet, has been depicted contemplating life and death while holding a human skull.

1. Roger Zelazny, Jane M. Lindskold, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)