Song of the Blue Baboon

Roger Zelazny

There were only three things to which he might look forward now. Possibly four. He would not be certain of the fourth until he found it, or it found him.

He stood beside a marble bench in a garden filled with flowers. There was no sun in sight, but a diffuse brightness like morning or evening filled the place, and a breeze that was cool moved the leaves and the branches.

He seated himself on the bench and regarded the colors of the flowers, their fragrances strong in his nostrils. As he sat there, a final touch of remorseful oblivion dropped from his consciousness, was gone.

Then, somewhere far behind him, it began, a single note, rising and rising in pitch, until it approximated the scream of a freight train passing in the distance. Abruptly, his hands began to shake, and he jammed them into his pockets and balled them into fists.

Then it died. The song of the blue baboon was finished.

The garden came alive with the sounds of insects and birds.

He turned when he heard the footfall, and she was standing there on the flagstone walk, her pale blue blouse open at the throat, her black slacks cuffed high above white sandals. Her caramel hair still touched her shoulders, and she smiled as she touched his.

“Kenneth.”

He rose to his feet, and she was in his arms.

“Sandra!” he said, and drew her down on the bench beside him.

They sat there a long, silent time, his arm about her shoulders. Then, “It was strange,” he said.

“Strange that you became a hero? Many things were forgiven on the Day of Liberation, to those who fought.”

“No,” he said. “Strange that you came back to me. I never thought I’d see you again.”

He plucked a white camellia and wove it into her hair.

“You couldn’t really have been a traitor, or you wouldn’t have fought on that day, the day we liberated Earth,” she said, and she stroked his cheek as she said it.

He smiled. “I was weak,” he said, “but never a traitor. They were wrong about me, all along.”

“I know. Everyone knows now. It’s all right. Forget it.”

But he could not. The rats at the back of his mind began to gnaw upon the corpse of a memory. What? What was it?

He sprang to his feet and stared down into her dark eyes through the wet curtains that covered them now.

“You’re not telling me the whole truth. Something’s wrong. What is it?”

She shook her head slowly and rose to her feet. He moved away, then turned his back on her.

“Three things… What are the other two?” he asked.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he heard her say.

“Then I have to find out.”

There was silence. He waited a time, then turned around.

She was gone.

\* \* \*

He moved along the walk until he came to a path, winding downward to his right through a stand of broad-leafed trees. He heard a sound of splashing water, from that direction. He followed it.

The man beside the stream had his back to him, but he recognized him from a gesture: a quick flick of his thumb toward his head, to moisten it; and then the hand was lowered to seal the cigarette paper he held. A flare of light, and a moment later smoke swirled back over his shoulder.

He turned, and they regarded one another.

“Roscoe…” he said.

The man lowered his cigarette, stroked his black beard, spat abruptly. He wore khakis under a dirty field jacket; a pistol hung at his side.

“Pig!” he said, raising his cigarette like an accusing finger.

“What’s wrong, Roscoe?”

“What’s right, animal?”

“I don’t…”

“You betrayed us during the invasion! You sold out your tower to those blue⁠—baboons!⁠—from another world! It might have stood! We might have won! But because you betrayed us, they enslaved the human race!”

“No!” he said. “I didn’t!”

“You gave them information! You were well paid for it!”

Then he remembered his tower group in the sea, so large a destroyer looked like a toy beside it. He remembered the swelling green of the Atlantic, far below his station. He had sat there at his post as such a vessel passed. He was one of the three workers at UN Automated Defense Station 7. The other two were dead by then or wishing that they were, for first one fool and then the other had been taken away by the blue-furred Kheean, who had seemed to come out of nowhere the previous evening without even disturbing the radar. Baboon-like they raged through the station, sometimes moving on all fours, their song of triumph a single, mounting shriek that rose and blared like a diesel’s whistle. He imagined they occupied the station completely. Two of them guarded the cell in which he remained. He remembered, he remembered…

“I let them pay me to destroy suspicion,” he said. “There’s a difference between useful and useless information. Everything I told them was useless.”

“You rationalize, traitor, for you could not have known what would have been useful to them. Then you let them pamper you, for six years, as a factory supervisor.”

“I was working with the underground the full time, you know that, getting ready for the Day.”

“I think maybe you worked both sides, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“You’re going to die.”

“You are going to kill me?”

“I’ve already killed you.”

“I don’t follow you…”

Roscoe laughed, then stopped abruptly at the sound of Sandra’s voice:

“…And it means nothing that he fought bravely on the Day of Liberation?” she asked, stepping into sight along the trail.

Roscoe blew smoke and looked away.

\* \* \*

“So you summon your good angel to defend you,” he said finally. “What sort of tale is it that she tells? You were a coward on the day we rose up. You ran!”

“That’s not so!”

“Then why is it that I myself had to shoot you, for desertion under fire⁠—all the bullets in the back?”

Kenneth clasped his forehead, rubbed it.

“It’s not true. I was shot by the enemy.”

“You were killed by me, and she knows it! You know it!”

“I⁠—I’m not dead…”

“At this very moment they are probably typing up your death certificate, and your vital organs are on their way out, for transplant into some real human being. You know it! They gave you the drug that kills the pain, makes the final seconds seem like hours. Gives you illusions too, to pass the time. You are talking only to yourself. There can be no lying here! Admit it, you are a traitor and a coward!”

“No!”

“You twist everything,” said Sandra. “You are fear and natural human guilt. He was a hero of the revolution.”

“We lost the revolution. We have lost the entire Earth, because of the likes of him! You are wishful thinking. You are the final coverup.”

“We did not lose! We won, because of men like him! You know it!”

And Kenneth stood straight. At first unsure, then smiling. He said, “Now I understand. All men fear the final instant of their lives, and they wish to judge themselves and be judged, be found not wanting⁠—?”

“They wish to rationalize and cloak with illusion,” said Roscoe, “as you have done. But they know in the end, as you will know.”

There came the sound of a trumpet from across the stream, then the sounds of other instruments. Somewhere, a brass band was playing march music.

Kenneth pointed in the direction of the music.

“Three things. Subconsciously, I knew there’d be time for perhaps three important things. Let me be judged by whatever approaches!”

They crossed the stream, moving from stone to stone, wading through shallows. They mounted the hill these faced and looked down upon the broad highway that passed before it. There were buildings along its way, some of them in ruin, all of them fenced by throngs of cheering people. The pageant moved into sight. It was the armies of the Liberation passing in review. None wore real uniforms and all looked dirty and tired, but they stood erect and marched in stride, soon to be decked with flowers and bits of colored paper. As one, they began singing, and their voices mingled, though each seemed to be singing a different song. The national anthems of all the people, of the Earth blended together into the Song of Man that poured forth from their throats, rose above the cheering.

“There is your answer, Roscoe!” he cried out. “I was right! We’ll go to them!”

The bearded man moved down the hill to join the passing troupe. Kenneth took a step, then turned and held out his hand.

Sandra had vanished.

A white something fluttered at his feet, and he bent forward to pick it up. He saw that it was the camellia he had woven into her hair, and even as he raised the flower, its center turned a dark, darkening color that spread like a rising, single stain over all⁠—

A Word from Zelazny

Zelazny wrote this “to go behind a cover for If or Galaxy. I had twisted, bent, folded and spindled and mutilated things to fit the cover scene. I sort of looked upon the cover as the scaffolding that was holding up the building. Due to a complex mix-up, the story did not get paired with the cover. Unfortunate. All the king’s horses, and all the king’s guys in armor…etcetera.” Zelazny considered this story his “most miserable failure” because it appeared without the cover art.[[1]](#footnote-1)⁠

However, one critic cited Ernest Hemingway’s influence in this story⁠—the theme of a man finding honor in death and a lean, dispassionate style[[2]](#footnote-2).⁠

A Word from Frederik Pohl

“I forgot to tell you, in regard to your cover story, ‘A Song of the Blue Baboon,’ that I finally did it. I assigned the same cover to two writers for stories, and both of them came in and both of them were fine.

“So if you notice that your story appears in another magazine without the cover, it is because I made a boo-boo. From my point of view, it is a plus⁠—I wanted more stories from you anyhow!⁠—but I apologize for putting you to work, since it turned out to be a hard one for you to do.”⁠[[3]](#footnote-3)

Notes

This story echoes Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” A prisoner escapes hanging and returns home after the rope breaks; however, his escape and journey are illusory, imagined in his last few seconds of life. In Zelazny’s story, the protagonist imagines conversations while dying; the stain on the flower comes from his fatal wound.

1. Phantasmicom #10, November 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Prehensile #4, June 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Letter from Galaxy editor Frederik Pohl to Roger Zelazny dated May 13, 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)