## But Not the Herald

Roger Zelazny

*In my earlier collection—The* Last Defender of Camelot—*mentioned, in introducing “Comes Now the Power,” that on a particularly bleak day I wrote three stories, one after the other, to occupy my mind: this one, that one and “Divine Madness” I also said there that I had included “Divine Madness” and this one in* The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth, and Other Stories, *an even earlier collection. I later received a number of communications from faithful readers—the very first from Jim Burk, of Wichita (Hi, Jim)—saying that “But Not the Herald” was* not *included in* The Doors—*oh, hell—in the earlier one. I checked. It had been a long while. They were right. All those years I’d been living in a fool’s paradise, convinced that my little story was out there in the world doing its bit to clean up the environment and so forth. I suppose that a story written to keep one’s mind of of nasty realities is yet another variation on the game the creative impulse plays...*

As the old man came down from the mountain, carrying the box, walking along the trail that led to the sea, he stopped, to lean upon his staff, to watch the group of men who were busy burning their neighbor’s home.

“Tell me, man,” he asked one of them, “why do you burn your neighbor’s home, which, I now note from the barking and the screaming, still contains your neighbor, as well as his dog, wife, and children?”

“Why should we not burn it?” asked the man. “He is a foreigner from across the desert, and he looks different from the rest of us. This also applies to his dog, who looks different from our dogs and barks with a foreign accent, and his wife, who is prettier than our wives and speaks with a foreign accent, and his children, who are cleverer than ours, and speak like their parents.”

“I see,” said the old man, and he continued on his way.

At the crossroads, he came upon a crippled beggar whose crutches had been thrown high into a tree. He struck upon the tree with his staff and the crutches fell to the ground. He restored them to the beggar.

“Tell me how your crutches came to be in the treetop, brother,” he said. “The boys threw them there,” said the beggar, adjusting himself and holding out his hand for alms.

“Why did they do that?”

“They were bored. They tired their parents with asking, 'What should I do now?' until finally one or another of the parents suggested they go make sport of the beggar at the crossroads.”

“Such games be somewhat unkind,” said the old man.

“True,” said the beggar, “but fortunately some of the older boys found them a girl and they are off in the field enjoying her now. You can hear her cries if you listen carefully. They are somewhat weak at the moment, of course. Would I were young and whole again, that I might join in the sport!”

“I see,” said the old man, and he turned to go.

“Alms! Alms! Have you no alms in that box you bear? Have you nothing to bestow upon a poor, lame beggar?”

“You may have my blessing,” said the old man, “but this box contains no alms.”

“A fig for thy blessing, old goat! One cannot eat a blessing! Give me money or food!”

“Alas, I have none to give.”

“Then my curses be upon your head! May all manner of misfortune come down on you!”

The old man continued on his way to the sea, coming after a time upon two men who were digging a grave for a third who lay dead.

“It is a holy office to bury the dead,” he remarked.

“Aye,” said one of the men, “especially if you have slain him yourself and are hiding the evidence.”

“You have slain that man? Whatever for?”

“Next to nothing, curse the luck! Why should a man fight as he did over the smallest of coins? His purse was near empty.”

“From his garments, I should judge he was a poor man.”

“Aye, and now he has naught more to trouble him.”

“What have you in that box, old man?” asked the second.

“Nothing of any use. I go to cast it in the sea.”

“Let’s have a look.”

“You may not.”

“We’ll be judge of that.”

“This box is not to be opened.”

They approached him. “Give it to us.”

“No.”

The second one struck the old man in the head with a stone; the first snatched the box away from him. “There! Now let us see what it is that is so useless.”

“I warn you,” said the old man, rising from the ground, “if you open that box you do a terrible thing which may never be undone.”

“We’ll be judge of that.”

They cut at the cords that bound the lid.

“If you will wait but a moment,” said the old man, “I will tell you of that box.”

They hesitated. “Very well, tell us.”

“It was the box of Pandora. She who opened it unleashed upon the world all of the terrible woes which afflict it.”

“Ha! A likely tale!”

“It is said by the gods, who charged me cast it into the sea, that the final curse waiting within the box is worse than all the other ills together.”

“H”

They undid the cord and threw back the lid.

A golden radiance sped forth. It rose into the air like a fountain, and from within it a winged creature cried out, in a voice infinitely delicate and pathetic, “Free! After all these ages, to be free at last!”

The men fell upon their faces. “Who are you, oh lovely creature,” they asked, “you who move us to such strange feelings?”

“I am called Hope,” said the creature. “I go to travel in all the dark places of the Earth, where I will inspire men with the feeling that things may yet be better than they are.”

And with that it rose into the air and dashed off in search of the dark places of the Earth.

When the two murderers turned again to the old man, he was changed: For now his beard was gone, and he stood before them a powerful youth. Two serpents were coiled about his staff.

“Even the gods could not prevent it,” he said. “You have brought this ill upon yourselves, by your own doing. Remember that, when bright Hope turns to dust in your hands.”

“Nay,” said they, “for another traveler approaches now, and he wears a mighty purse upon him. We shall retire on this day’s takings.”

“Fools!” said the youth, and he turned on winged heels and vanished up the path, greeting Hercules as he passed him by.