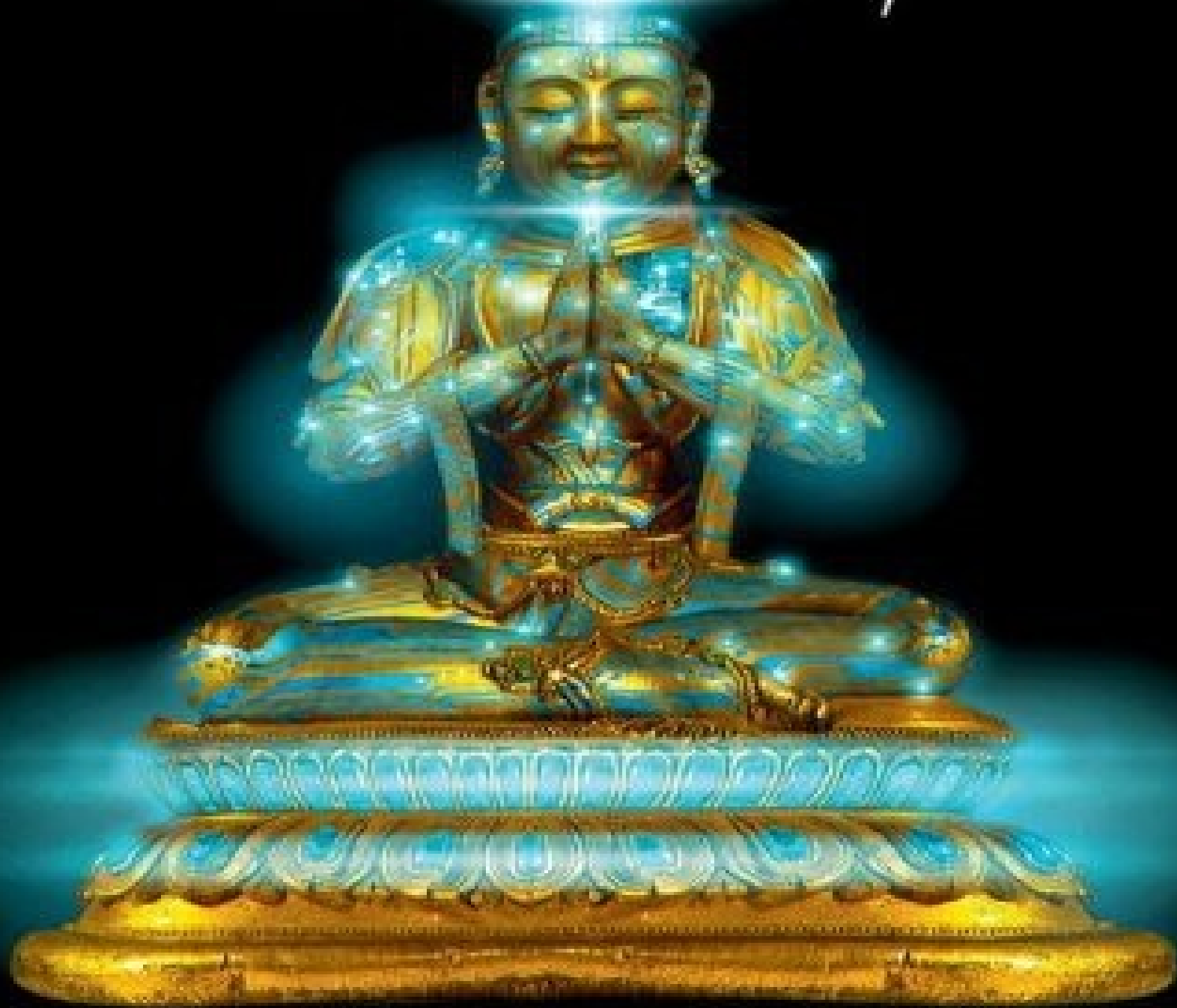


THE LEGENDARY SF CLASSIC

LORD OF LIGHT



ROGER ZELAZNY

"TRICKY AND BRILLIANT AND HEARTFELT AND DANGEROUS."

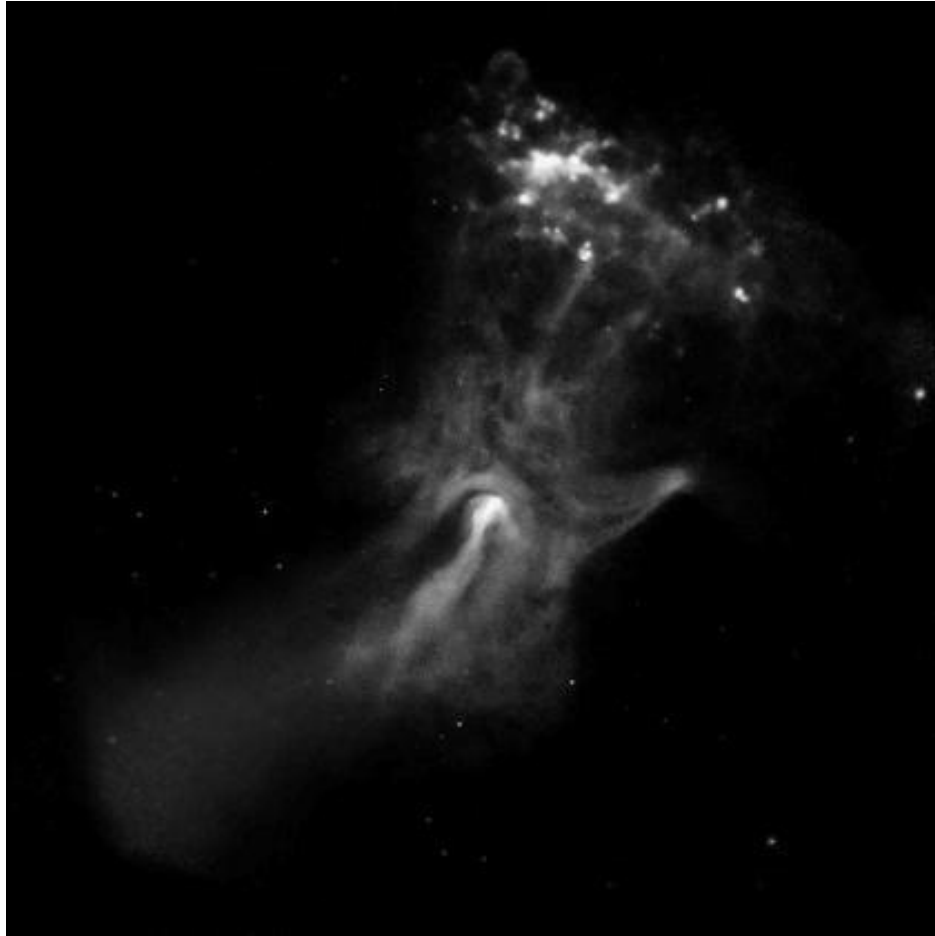
—NEIL GAIMAN

Lord of Light

By

Roger Zelazny





"A thing happens once that has never happened before. Seeing it, a man looks upon reality. He cannot tell others what he has seen."

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-I-

It is said that fifty-three years after his liberation he returned from the Golden Cloud, to take up once again the gauntlet of Heaven, to oppose the Order of Life and the gods who ordained it so. His followers had prayed for his return, though their prayers were sin. Prayer should not trouble one who has gone on to Nirvana, no matter what the circumstances of his going. The wearers of the saffron robe prayed, however, that He of the Sword, Manjusri, should come again among them, The Boddhisatva is said to have heard...

*He whose desires have been throttled,
who is independent of root,
whose pasture is emptiness –
signless and free –
his path is as unknowable
as that of birds across the heavens.
Dhammapada (93)*

His followers called him Mahasamatman and said he was a god. He preferred to drop the Maha- and the -atman, however, and called himself Sam. He never claimed to be a god. But then, he never claimed not to be a god. Circumstances being what they were, neither admission could be of any benefit. Silence, though, could.

Therefore, there was mystery about him.

It was in the season of the rains...

It was well into the time of the great wetness...

It was in the days of the rains that their prayers went up, not from the fingering of knotted prayer cords or the spinning of prayer wheels, but from the great pray-machine in the monastery of Ratri, goddess of the Night

The high-frequency prayers were directed upward through the atmosphere and out beyond it, passing into that golden cloud called the Bridge of the Gods, which circles the entire world, is seen as a bronze rainbow at night and is the place where the red sun becomes orange at midday.

Some of the monks doubted the orthodoxy of this prayer technique, but the machine had been built and was operated by Yama-Dharma, fallen, of the Celestial City; and, it was told, he had ages ago built the mighty thunder chariot of Lord Shiva: that engine that fled across the heavens belching gouts of fire in its wake.

Despite his tall form, Yama was still deemed mightiest of the artificers, though it was not doubted that the Gods of the City would have him to die the real death were they to learn of the pray-machine. For that matter, though, it was not doubted that they would have him to die the real death without the excuse of the pray-machine, also, were he to come into their custody. How he would settle this matter with the Lords of Karma was his own affair, though none doubted that when the time came he would find a way. He was half as old as the Celestial City itself, and not more than ten of the gods remembered the founding of that abode. He was known to be wiser even than the Lord Kubera in the ways of the Universal Fire. But these were his lesser Attributes. He was best known for another thing, though few men spoke of it. Tall, but not overly so; big, but not heavy; his movements, slow and fluent. He wore red and spoke little.

He tended the pray-machine, and the giant metal lotus he had set atop the monastery roof turned and turned in its sockets.

A light rain was falling upon the building, the lotus and the jungle at the foot of the mountains. For six days he had offered many kilowatts of prayer, but the static kept him from being heard On High. Under his breath, he called upon the more notable of the current fertility deities, invoking them in terms of their most prominent Attributes.

A rumble of thunder answered his petition, and the small ape who assisted him chuckled. "Your prayers and your curses come to the same. Lord Yama," commented the ape. "That is to say, nothing."

"It has taken you seventeen incarnations to arrive at this truth?" said Yama. "I can see then why you are still doing time as an ape."

"Not so," said the ape, whose name was Tak. "My fall, while less spectacular than your own, nevertheless involved elements of personal malice on the part of _"

"Enough!" said Yama, turning his back to him.

Tak realized then that he might have touched upon a sore spot. In an attempt to find another subject for conversation, he crossed to the window, leapt onto its wide sill and stared upward.

"There is a break in the cloud cover, to the west," he said.

Yama approached, followed the direction of his gaze, frowned, and nodded.

"Aye," he said. "Stay where you are and advise me."

He moved to a bank of controls.

Overhead, the lotus halted in its turning, then faced the patch of bare sky.

"Very good," he said. "We're getting something."

His hand moved across a separate control panel, throwing a series of switches and adjusting two dials.

Below them, in the cavernous cellars of the monastery, the signal was received and other preparations were begun: the host was made ready.

"The clouds are coming together again!" cried Tak.

"No matter, now," said the other. "We've hooked our fish. Out of Nirvana and into the lotus, he comes."

There was more thunder, and the rain came down with a sound like hail upon the lotus. Snakes of blue lightning coiled, hissing, about the mountaintops.

Yama sealed a final circuit.

"How do you think he will take to wearing the flesh again?" asked Tak.

"Go peel bananas with your feet!"

Tak chose to consider this a dismissal and departed the chamber, leaving Yama to close down the machinery. He made his way along a corridor and down a wide flight of stairs. He reached the landing, and as he stood there he heard the sound of voices and the shuffling of sandals coming in his direction from out a side hall.

Without hesitating, he climbed the wall, using a series of carved panthers and an opposing row of elephants as handholds. Mounting a rafter, he drew back into a well of shadow and waited, unmoving.

Two dark-robed monks entered through the archway.

"So why can she not clear the sky for them?" said the first.

The second, an older, more heavily built man, shrugged. "I am no sage that I can answer such questions. That she is anxious is obvious, or she should never have granted them this sanctuary, nor Yama this usage. But who can mark the limits of night?"

"Or the moods of a woman," said the first. "I have heard that even the priests did not know of her coming."

"That may be. Whatever the case, it would seem a good omen."

"So it would seem."

They passed through another archway, and Tak listened to the sounds of their going until there was only silence.

Still, he did not leave his perch.

The "she" referred to by the monks could only be the goddess Ratri herself, worshiped by the order that had given sanctuary to the followers of Great-Souled Sam, the Enlightened One. Now, Ratri, too, was to be numbered among those fallen from the Celestial City and wearing the skin of a mortal. She had every reason to be bitter over the whole affair; and Tak realized the chance she was taking in granting sanctuary, let alone being physically present during this undertaking. It could jeopardize any possibility of her future reinstatement if word of it got out and reached the proper ears. Tak recalled her as the dark-haired beauty with silver eyes, passing in her moon chariot of ebony and chromium, drawn by stallions black and white, tended by her guard, also black and white, passing up the Avenue of Heaven, rivaling even Sarasvati in her glory. His heart leapt within his hairy breast. He had to see her again. One night, long ago, in happier times and better form, he had danced with her, on a balcony under the stars. It had been for only a few moments. But he remembered; and it is a difficult thing to be an ape and to have such memories.

He climbed down from the rafter.

There was a tower, a high tower rising from the northeast corner of the monastery. Within that tower was a chamber. It was said to contain the indwelling presence of the goddess. It was cleaned daily, the linens changed, fresh incense burnt and a votive offering laid just within the door. That door was normally kept locked.

There were, of course, windows. The question as to whether a man could have entered by means of any of these windows must remain academic. Tak proved that an ape could.

Mounting the monastery roof, he proceeded to scale the tower, moving from brick to slippery brick, from projection to irregularity, the heavens growling doglike above him, until finally he clung to the wall just below the outer sill. A

steady rain fell upon him. He heard a bird singing within. He saw the edge of a wet, blue scarf hanging over the sill.

He caught hold of the ledge and raised himself until he could peer inside.

Her back was to him. She wore a dark blue sari, and she was seated on a small bench at the opposite end of the room.

He clambered onto the sill and cleared his throat.

She turned quickly. She wore a veil, so that her features were indistinguishable. She regarded him through it, then rose and crossed the chamber.

He was dismayed. Her figure, once lithe, was wide about the waist; her walk, once the swaying of boughs, was a waddle; her complexion was too dark; even through the veil the lines of her nose and jaw were too pronounced.

He bowed his head. "And so you have drawn near to us, who at your coming have come home," he sang, "as birds to their nest upon the tree."

She stood, still as her statue in the main hall below.

"Guard us from the she-wolf and the wolf, and guard us from the thief, oh Night, and so be good for us to pass."

She reached out slowly and laid her hand upon his head.

"You have my blessing, little one," she said, after a time. "Unfortunately, that is all I can give. I cannot offer protection or render beauty, who lack these luxuries myself. What is your name?"

"Tak," he told her.

She touched her brow. "I once knew a Tak," she said, "in a bygone day, a distant place..."

"I am that Tak, madam."

She seated herself upon the sill. After a time, he realized that she was weeping, within her veil.

"Don't cry, goddess. Tak is here. Remember Tak, of the Archives? Of the Bright Spear? He stands yet ready to do thy bidding."

"Tak..." she said. "Oh, Tak! You, too? I did not know, I never heard..."

"Another turning of the wheel, madam, and who knows? Things may yet be better than even once they were."

Her shoulders shook. He reached out, drew back his hand.

She turned and took it.

After an age, she spoke: "Not by the normal course of events shall we be restored or matters settled, Tak of the Bright Spear. We must beat our own path."

"What mean you?" he inquired; then, "Sam?"

She nodded.

"He is the one. He is our hope against Heaven, dear Tak. If he can be recalled,

we have a chance to live again."

"This is why you have taken this chance, why you yourself sit within the jaws of the tiger?"

"Why else? When there is no real hope we must mint our own. If the coin be counterfeit it still may be passed."

"Counterfeit? You do not believe he was the Buddha?"

She laughed, briefly. "Sam was the greatest charlatan in the memory of god or man. He was also the worthiest opponent Trimurti ever faced. Don't look so shocked at my saying it. Archivist! You know that he stole the fabric of his doctrine, path and attainment, the whole robe, from prehistorical forbidden sources. It was a weapon, nothing more. His greatest strength was his insincerity. If we could have him back..."

"Lady, saint or charlatan, he is returned."

"Do not jest with me, Tak."

"Goddess and Lady, I just left the Lord Yama shutting down the pray-machine, frowning his frown of success."

"The venture was against such mighty odds... Lord Agni once said that no such thing could ever be done."

Tak stood.

"Goddess Ratri," he said, "who, be he god or man, or anything between, knows more of such matters than Yama?"

"I have no answer for that question, Tak, because there is none. But how can you say of a certainty that he has netted us our fish?"

"Because he is Yama."

"Then take my arm, Tak. Escort me again, as once you did. Let us view the sleeping Boddhisatva."

He led her out the door, down the stairs, and into the chambers below.

Light, born not of torches but of the generators of Yama, filled the cavern. The bed, set upon a platform, was closed about on three sides by screens. Most of the machinery was also masked by screens and hangings. The saffron-robed monks who were in attendance moved silently about the great chamber. Yama, master artificer, stood at the bedside.

As they approached, several of the well-disciplined, imperturbable monks uttered brief exclamations. Tak then turned to the woman at his side and drew back a pace, his breath catching in his throat.

She was no longer the dumpy little matron with whom he had spoken. Once again did he stand at the side of Night Immortal, of whom it has been written, "The goddess has filled wide space, to its depths and its heights. Her radiance drives out the dark."