

PARABLES
of the



MANSION

By
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By

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1.

The DIRTY MAN

he MAN LOOKED TANNED, BUT NOT from the sun. On closer inspection it was clear that the dirt had worked its way into his very skin and become a part of him. The owner of the mansion, however, opened his door and let him into the foyer, gleaming with green-veined marble.

“Jes—! Oh, sorry.” The brown cheeks turned terra-cotta. “Look at that!” He gazed in admiration at the staircase that opened like a fan in front of him, leading up to a sunny landing draped in velvets and brocade. “Just like I’ve always dreamed of! What I wouldn’t give to live in a place like this!”

“Well, some say it takes a bit of getting used to,” replied the owner; “but those who stay seem to like it.”

“If you could’ve seen the things *I*’ve had to get used to!” said the dirty man. “This’d be heaven!”

“Do you *really* think you’d enjoy living here?” asked the owner.

“I suppose it costs. Just my luck.”

“Well, yes, it does, unfortunately.”

“I knew there was a hitch. Do I look as if I had any money?”

“Oh, it doesn’t cost *money*. But it costs.”

“You mean I actually could live here if I wanted to?”

“I’ve had the sign out for years now,” said the owner. “You must have seen it.”

“You mean the thing out front. Well, actually, I never paid much attention to it. I never really believed it, in fact; I just knocked for the hell of it. You mean it’s really true?”

“Oh yes, it’s true.”

“Then you just try me!” he exclaimed, and looked as if he were about to run up the staircase, when, as he lifted his foot, he paused. “Is this floor hot?” he asked.

“No, actually,” replied the owner, “but your feet, you know, are dirty, and the floor interacts with the dirt to clean them off. Look at your shoes.” They were glistening. “The effect has begun to work its way inside.”

“It’s uncomfortable as hell!” exclaimed the dirty man. “Don’t you have carpets?”

“Of course, but they’re the same. Dirty people—excuse me for saying it—but dirty people can’t live here. I told you it takes some getting used to.”

“Why can’t they? That’s just prejudice. Discrimination.”

“I don’t mean they can’t come in and start living here. It’s just that the house is made in such a way that they can’t live here and stay dirty; there isn’t any dirt here.”

“Why not? Dirt’s natural. Everybody’s dirty.”

“That may be, temporarily at least,” answered the owner. “But you see, the dirt covers a person so that you can’t see what he really is—and it blocks his pores so he can’t really feel

and clogs his ears and eyes so that he can't hear and see clearly, and so on. A dirty person isn't really himself; and so we think it's dishonest for a person to stay dirty."

"Oh yeah? Well, where I come from, they say a man's not honest *unless* he's a little dirty. Man was made from dirt, after all."

"That's true; and I know what they say," said the owner with a touch of irony.

"The muddy man, standing now on one foot, now on the other, looked round and said, "Where would I stay, anyway, if I decided to live here? I mean, would I have a room of my own?"

"Oh yes," was the reply. "This house, you know is actually my father's house; but I happen to know its layout very well, and I can assure you that there are very many rooms in it, and in fact, there's one already assigned to you, to see if you find it satisfactory."

The dirty man looked up with the look of those who have been taken advantage of before and don't want it to happen again. "Suppose I don't. Don't I get to pick my own?"

"Oh, I wouldn't be concerned about that," answered his host. "The selection is actually up to you. What I meant about having the room assigned is that you've already chosen it, before you came into this territory. We built it to the specifications you laid down."

"No! Really? How did you do that?"

"Oh, we have our ways. Didn't you hear about it? You must have."

"You mean that story that there was always some spy watching everything I did, like Santa Claus or something? I

stopped believing in that when I found out there wasn't a Santa Claus."

"Well, whatever you believe or don't believe, we do have a room," returned the owner. "And I venture to predict that you'll find it familiar when you see it; and after a while, if you choose to stay, you'll be quite comfortable in it. That's the whole purpose of this mansion.

"Can I show it to you?" he went on. "It's at the head of the stairs."

As the muddy man, led by the host, started up the magnificent staircase, his hand touched the golden bannister. "Ow!" he cried. The palm of his hand was gleaming white. "I thought I'd burned my goddam hand off!"

"No, it's just clean now."

"Oh *I* get it now!" exclaimed the man. "*I* get it now! You can't take a man for what he is! You've got to change him around to *your* idea of what he *ought* to be before you'll let him live here. And when you get through, his own mother wouldn't recognize him!"

"I told you it costs to stay here," replied the owner calmly. "That's what it costs."

"So you're saying I've got to become somebody else just to live here. I've got to give up what I am."

"That's what it amounts to, I'm afraid," said the host. "Let me say, however, that I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. You'll recognize yourself when it's all over—and it doesn't take so very long, as you can see. Look at your legs already." They were absolutely pristine up to the knees by this time.

"*Oh*, no! *Oh*, no!" said the man. "You sound just like everybody else! What do you people have against somebody just being his natural self?"

“Nothing at all,” was the answer. “It’s just that it’s not possible to live in this house and be your natural self. The house wasn’t built that way.”

“Well, it’s a stupid way to build a house, if you ask me,” he said, “if nobody can live in it but artificial freaks.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call them artificial, exactly,” answered the owner, “just made over. We think of it as an improvement on what was there before, not a replacement. In fact, the people themselves seem to feel the same way, once they become accustomed to it. That was what I meant when I said that you’d recognize yourself.”

“Well sure they feel comfortable, once their brains are washed the way you’re trying to wash my hands and feet. The poor fools don’t have minds of their own any more.”

“They don’t *just* have minds of their own, that’s true. But that’s the price of living here.”

“It sounds to me like too high a price to pay. Anybody’d be a fool to pay it.”

“One man’s foolishness is another man’s wisdom.”

“And one man’s proverbs are another man’s crap!” retorted the dirty man. “At least I know who I am, and I’m damned if I’ll give *that* up!”

“It’s your choice, of course,” said the owner. No one is going to try to force you.

The dirty man went back down the few steps he ascended and looked around the foyer at the statuary and the plants in the oriel windows. “What a shame!” he said. “It’d be the kind of thing you dream about in other circumstances.”

“Don’t let this conversation mislead you. You’re still perfectly welcome to stay if you want.”

“Oh, I’m not blaming *you*. You can live in whatever kind of house you want. He reached out his clean hand and shook the hand of his host. “No hard feelings, but even the gutter’s a better place than this. At least there you can be yourself—but I suppose you wouldn’t understand that; and it’s not my place to try to convince you. Live and let live.”

“We try to.”

“Well, it’s been real,” said the man as he opened the door to go out.

“It has indeed,” said the owner.

11.

The Respectable Gentleman



HE SECOND MAN TO COME IN WAS clean and well-dressed and seemed more at home in the mansion than the first one. He greeted the owner warmly, and said, "I noticed that you had rooms to let. I happen to have had to change my residence suddenly, and I was wondering if you had anything available."

"Oh, yes," replied the owner, "there are still quite a number of places. I think we might be able to find something suitable for you, if you decide to stay."

The well-dressed man looked back over his shoulder. "I notice that the one before me left."

"Yes."

"You must get many applications from his sort."

"As a matter of fact," answered the owner, "we do get rather a large number."

"It's your sign, you know," said the man. "It just encourages them to try. You'd think they'd know; but then, that's the way they are. If you put the price on the sign, it would help."

"But I did. Quite clearly."

“Oh, you mean that bit of philosophy on the bottom? But no one pays any attention to that.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say that,” answered the owner. “Many who stay do—in fact, all who stay seem to. And even those who don’t, or who have never seen the sign, appear to understand it when it’s explained to them as they come in.”

“That may be,” returned the clean man, “but your advertising leaves something to be desired, at the very least. It’s too complicated just for a sign, if you really mean what it says there, because so few people read the fine print.”

“You’re right,” said the owner. “Most have to have things clarified when they arrive; almost everyone is muddled up in one way or another. We’ve tried to be as clear as we could, but somehow we seem to keep being misunderstood.”

“Perhaps when I get settled in, you might consider taking me as a consultant. I could word things so that you wouldn’t have the annoyance of trying to get rid of all the unsuitable people who try to find rooms. The house, by the way, is really magnificent.”

“Thank you.”

“Though, from what I’d heard, not less than I expected, you understand.”

“I understand perfectly. But actually, it’s no annoyance having people apply. Anyone’s welcome to come in and talk about it; and we let them decide for themselves if they’d be comfortable here. It usually only takes a few minutes for them to make up their minds.”

“That’s what I mean. Aren’t there a lot of people who are deluded? I mean, there must be people who get so dazzled by this entryway that they stay on even though in the long run they couldn’t possibly fit in.”

“Actually, we’ve never had anyone leave, once he’s finally settled in his room. Everyone seems quite comfortable, and manages somehow to get along rather well with everyone else.”

“That’s amazing!” said the well-dressed man. “And I thought this was an exclusive club.”

“Oh, it is,” replied the owner. “Very exclusive. But we find that it tends to be self-selecting.”

“Ah! I see. You have your ways, you mean. I won’t pursue the subject by asking embarrassing questions.”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand. There’s nothing devious about it. We just show people the conditions here, and they decide whether they find them congenial; and it seems to happen that if they accept them, they manage to get along with the other inhabitants.”

“Really?” said the man skeptically. “Well, we’ll see. Your entrance hall leaves nothing to be desired, at least. Could you show me my room, and then we can discuss the price.”

“Very well,” said the owner. “This way please.” And he led him up the stairs and along a corridor to the right. “I wouldn’t want to deceive you,” he added. “It *is* possible that you might not find it satisfactory; but it’s all we have available for you at the moment.”

“I think I can be the best judge of that,” replied the neat man. The owner opened a door in the middle of the corridor, and showed him in.

“I see what you mean,” said the man. “It’s much too cramped. The furniture is all out of proportion.”

“I was afraid you might feel that way,” the owner responded. “But, you see, it was made to your specifications, and we didn’t feel we could change it.”

“My specifications!” cried the well-dressed man. “I never saw this place before! My ideas are much more expansive than that—you should know that. You were supposed to know everything.”

“Actually, that is what accounts for the furniture. We anticipated that there might be a difficulty when you saw the two together; but again, we didn’t feel we ought to change your order.”

“But I’d *never* order something like this!” he said as he ran his hand along the back of the huge sofa that took up the whole right wall. “It’s much too cheap and gaudy.”

“On the contrary, it’s extremely expensive.”

“I wasn’t talking about money; money means nothing to me. I was referring to taste.”

“I know,” said the owner. “One man’s riches is another man’s poverty. But come now: don’t you find the pieces rather familiar? Really?”

The man was about to sputter in indignation at his host, who happened to walk in front of an ornate curio cabinet, filled with mementoes from resorts all over the world; the kind sold in bazaars everywhere. On seeing it, the man stopped with his mouth open, and then said, “You mean you think that *I*—? Well, obviously there’s a misunderstanding here. I think you’d better show me a different room.”

“Well, we can’t do that, really.”

“Oh, come now! I could make it worth your while.”

“No, no; that’s not the problem. We can show you other rooms, if you like. But no one has ever found any other room to be more satisfactory than the one he ordered himself.”

“Well, this one is *not* the one I ordered, whatever you might think. Let me see a few.”

“Very well,” said the owner, and took him down the corridor and opened another door. “This one does not have an occupant at the moment.”

“Where’s the furniture? There’s just this deck chair.”

“Unfortunately, this is all that comes with this room.”

“You’re joking! Show me something else.” Another door was opened. “Well, the room’s all right, but that view is simply terrible. I could never live here.”

“I’m sorry to say that all the other ones I can show you have the same restricted view.”

“Very well, let’s go back to the first one.” They proceeded back down the corridor and entered the original room. “I suppose I can put up with this temporarily until we have a talk and get all this straightened out. But there’s one thing I absolutely must know first: Who will be my neighbors?”

“Well, as to that, you see,” said the owner, “we build, as we said, each of these rooms to the inhabitant’s specifications. But that means that we have to fit the rooms into the building in such a way that the dimensions are compatible. You understand, don’t you? Everything *in* a room is personal, but what rooms are next to yours is not at a person’s disposal.”

“You’re beating around the bush. Who are these people?”

“Well on your left—they’re very nice people on both sides, actually, as you’ll find once you come to know them—but on the left you have a family of a retired coal miner, and on the right there’s a single man who couldn’t find any work except as a garbage collector after he was let out of prison. But he’s very learned, as it happens, even though he’s almost entirely self-educated. Quite a philosopher, in fact.”

“No doubt. I’m sure they’re both very nice people in their own way. But you know me. I’ve always been extremely

selective in the company I keep. Again, I thought I had sent up my request for habitation with the specification that I be in the vicinity of my friends.”

“Yes, well,” answered the owner, “the problem with that was that there are none of them living here.”

“What! I happen to know that quite a few of them left for this country long ago!”

“That’s true, of course; but it seems we weren’t really able to satisfy them. They all appeared to have, if you’ll forgive me, contradictory specifications—and we *can’t* make a room be two opposite things at once, I’m sorry to say. That’s why this room is so narrow and cramped; it was the only way we could get your specifications to come out into something possible.”

“But this is just too much!” said the well-dressed man. “The room is bad enough in itself, but if I can’t even live near someone I can talk to intelligently, I don’t see how I could take up permanent residence here. No one with the least shred of self-respect would live under conditions like this.”

“Well, you see, that’s the point, in a sense. You asked about the price of the room.”

“What’s the price got to do with it?”

“The price of a room is every last shred of self-respect. The room, in the last analysis, is a gift, not what you deserve. There is no favoritism here.”

There was a pause. Finally, the man said, “I see. Well, I’ll have to find another hotel, I suppose. Could you be so good as to tell me where my friends have gone?”

“I don’t really know. We lose track of people when they leave here—though they’re welcome back, of course, if they change their minds.” He shook his head a bit sadly and added, “No one ever has.”

“Well, that doesn’t really matter, as long as I can find a place to stay. I’ll find them with time. Where is there another hotel in this country?”

“As far as I know, there is only this one; and I believe I would have heard. Perhaps there is something; but you can’t see anything from here; it’s too dark out there.”

“Are you telling me that there is no place at all in this country except this one mansion? And that there is no room for me in this mansion except this one room?”

“I’m afraid that’s the way it is. We can make changes in the rooms right until the time someone arrives on our shores; but once that is done, the masons and carpenters leave and won’t put up with any more remodeling. It looks very much as if you won’t actually find a place to stay if you don’t stay here.”

“Well, that remains to be seen,” said the man. My friends must have gone *somewhere*; they’d never be contented with just wandering around forever.”

“No,” said the owner to his back as he stalked toward entrance, “I wouldn’t say they’re *contented*. But one of them walked by last week, and when I invited him in, he gave me the impression that he was less discontented with his condition outside than he would have been if he’d stayed here. Don’t forget, though, if you should ever want to return, the room is waiting for you.”

“*That* room!” exclaimed the man over his shoulder. “Don’t keep yourself up late waiting; my mind is definitely made up.”

“Well, it’s your choice,” said the owner.

III.

The Rich Man

he THIRD MAN WOULD NOT COME in much farther than a few steps beyond the door, and kept turning and glancing back through it. “Do you have rooms?” he asked, somewhat hesitantly.

“Yes, we do,” said the owner. “Come in.”

“I need a room,” said the man, “but I was wondering if you could send someone to help me with my trunk. It’s right outside the door.”

“I’ll give you a hand with it,” answered the owner and went out on the steps. Each man took one end of an enormous trunk, and struggled to get it into the foyer—but it would not go through the door. They turned it this way and that, but each of its dimensions was too great to fit through the narrow doorway.

“I’m afraid it’s no use,” said the owner finally. “The door is just too small for it.”

“Well, isn’t there a service entrance or something that I could use?”

“Unfortunately not,” was the answer. “This is the only door we have.”

“But that’s ridiculous!” exclaimed the man. “An entrance as narrow as a needle’s eye into an enormous mansion like this?”

“It does seem a little odd, doesn’t it?” replied the owner. “But that was the way it was originally built.”

“Well, if I were you, I’d have seen another architect for a second opinion.”

“Perhaps we should have. But what’s done is done.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do? Couldn’t we get it in through a window somewhere?”

“I’m afraid not. All the windows that face outside are narrower than the door is. The ones that look inward on the courtyard are larger, and there are a number of quite wide doors opening on the interior garden. If we were already inside, there would be no problem; it’s just a bit difficult *getting* in in the first place.”

“Suppose I called a contractor to come and make an opening in the wall—or maybe it would be enough to take the door off the hinges. The trunk almost fits, after all.”

“I don’t see how I could allow that,” returned the owner reluctantly. “I’d like to oblige; we always do all we can to help people come in. But my Father, who had the house built, is still alive, and he left strict instructions about the way he wanted the house constructed and maintained. I couldn’t go against his wishes in something like this.”

“Oh, I thought *you* were the owner,” said the man. “At least, that’s what I was always told.”

“Well, I am; but jointly with my Father. It would be impossible for me to countermand his orders.”

“Then could you get him down here, so the three of us could talk?”

“I’m afraid he only shows himself to people once they’ve settled down inside. He named me his representative in everything, however; so as far as that is concerned, my father and I are one and the same.”

“But then what am I supposed to do?”

“Well, I wouldn’t really worry about the trunk. In the first place, all the rooms are furnished to your specifications anyway. I think you’ll find that you won’t need most of what you have in it.”

“But you don’t understand. It isn’t that there’s anything particularly valuable in there—at least anything that anyone else would find valuable. It’s just that everything there represents a part of my life, and so I’m very attached to it.”

“I can see that,” said the owner. “Well, perhaps you could leave the trunk out here, and bring in the things one at a time.” He added, “That is, if you still think you want any of them after you’ve seen your room.”

“But if I leave it out here, what’s to stop anyone in the crowd I saw headed this way from walking off with something while I’m there inside with you? There are some pretty—unsavory—looking types among them.”

“I thought you said that no one else would find any of it valuable.”

“Well, I was speaking figuratively. I meant that no one else would find these things *as* valuable as I do; but some of them are worth quite a lot, actually.”

“Oh.”

“I have an idea. Could you send someone to guard the trunk while I was away from it?”

“Yes, I believe we could manage that,” said the owner. “We try to do everything we can to help.”

The man looked at him. Did that answer come a little too quickly? Was he just a bit overeager to “guard” the trunk to see to it that no one *else* took anything while the two were inside? Could you really trust this person? The man had heard some say that he was fond of taking things from people.

“Come,” said the owner. “Let me show you to your room, and then we can come back and you can begin taking your things in.”

“I don’t know,” said the man. “I mean, even if you send someone to guard it, here it is right out in the open with people milling all around. Are you *sure* nobody will be able to take anything?”

“In the few minutes we’ll be inside? I think it’s highly improbable.”

“But you admit it *could* happen.”

“Well, our guard is only a single person. I would say it would be as safe with him here as it is with you.”

“Well, but he’s just a hired hand. I mean, he wouldn’t have the interest in it that I have, so he might not defend it as strongly.”

“I have every reason to believe he’s trustworthy,” was the reply. “But of course, you’ll just have to take my word for it.”

“So as far as I’m concerned, it’s quite possible that when I come back, it’ll be gone.”

“Well,” answered the owner, “I don’t see that there’s anything I can say now that can make you absolutely sure that nothing will happen to the trunk or anything in it—not if you

don't trust what I say. I can assure you that even if something is lost from it, we will replace it at no charge."

"At least let me empty the trunk and leave the contents inside the door. Then I'd feel more comfortable, because at least the things wouldn't be out here to tempt everybody."

"No, sir, I'm afraid we can't do that. We have a rule that says that nothing that belongs to you is to be left inside until you have seen your room first and approved it; and that means that you will have to leave your possessions behind for at least a few moments. The price for your room, in fact, is the risk you take that when you return, some of the objects in the trunk might be missing. But let me assure you once again that it is really no price at all, because in fact you have nothing to lose and everything to gain if you settle in my father's house."

"I know I know," said the man in anguish. "That's what I keep hearing from everyone. But how can I be *sure*? I told you that everything in that trunk has become a part of me. If I leave it even for a few minutes, it's the same as leaving something of myself behind."

"Would it help if I said that if you leave yourself behind out here, you will find it inside?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Come in and see."

The man took a step toward the door, then looked back at the trunk, turned once again to the door and took another step, and then walked resolutely up to the threshold, where he paused and looked back. The owner was already inside, beckoning him to follow. "Wait," he said.

He took a step back outside. "No, I can't."

"I could help you, if you'd like."

He looked back at the owner, and then his eyes fell to the ground. “No, I just can’t. I’ve made up my mind. I mean, if I give all this up for just a few minutes, this is the same as giving up my whole life, and then who will I be inside there? Without all this?”

“Well, as to that,” said the owner, “once you are inside, you’ll recognize yourself, and as I say recover what it was that you thought you were preserving by what is in that trunk. You aren’t actually in there, you know.”

“But that’s the only self I know!”

“I realize that. Then isn’t it time to find out what you really are?”

“No, it’s too much. Too much of a risk; I can’t afford to lose everything. Besides, what for? I don’t want any more than what’s in there anyway. Why live in a palace and not have what I’ve worked so hard for all my life?”

“I think I ought to tell you,” said the owner, “that there’s no shelter in this land except in this house. If you don’t come in here, you’ll have to stay outside.”

“I could live in the trunk,” he answered. “I could empty it out on the ground and then tip it upside down and open the lid and use it as a prop. And then when I left for food, I could close the lid and lock it—no, I’d set it up somewhere near a store so it wouldn’t be out of my sight for a minute; and then come right back and crawl in. That’s what I could do.”

“Don’t you think it would be a little cramped and dark in there?” asked the owner. “The room you have waiting for you is much more spacious and airy.”

“But this would be mine; the one I built all by myself. What have I been working for all my life except for this trunk and what’s in it? No, I’m sorry; but now that I’ve considered

the matter, I couldn't be happy in a room you gave me, even if I could take in some of my possessions. I *made* these, and I made myself; I can't imagine how I could even have considered your offer. I should never have knocked in the first place."

"Well, we certainly don't want to force anyone," said the owner. "If you find living in that trunk preferable to residence in this mansion, that is, of course, up to you. But if you change your mind after trying it for a while, you may be assured that your room will be waiting for you."

"I don't really think you need to bother," said the man, as he grasped the handle of the trunk and began dragging it painfully away after him.

IV.

The Obedient Woman

 I would like to speak to the owner, if you please."

The owner bowed.

"Well?" said the woman, after a pause.

"What is it Madame wishes to say?"

"Oh, are *you* the owner? You look like a doorman."

"I am."

"Well, I want the master of the house. I was told I'd be able to speak to him. He has a room ready for me, and I want to ask him about it."

"Yes. Well, as a matter of fact, there are two rooms ready for you," replied the owner. "You'll have to make a choice which one you prefer. They're different prices, of course."

"Then take me to the owner, so that I can discuss it."

"I'm afraid that you'll have to talk to me. My Father has put everything into my hands, and speaking to me is the same as speaking to him. I'm sorry, but you'll have to take my word

for it that for practical purposes, I am the owner of this establishment.”

The woman protested for several more minutes, but the owner’s calm replies were always the same, and so she finally said, “Very well, I guess you’ll have to do for now. But later I’ll be wanting to talk to that father of yours to see if he can make better arrangements for greeting people. I *did* think that here, of all places, appearances wouldn’t be deceptive.”

“It’s been my experience,” replied the host, “that at least expectations are apt to be very deceptive.”

“Well then, if in spite of appearances you are the owner, then you know I’ve been negotiating for a room for a very long time—since as long as I found out about the mansion.”

“Yes, we’ve been aware of that.”

“We? You made a bit of a slip there, didn’t you? —But since I apparently have to talk to you, then I’d like you to look at this: I’ve been saving up for this moment for years and years, and I’ve made up this list that I’m sure you’ll be interested in.” She pulled out a sheaf of computer printout and handed it over to be examined.

The owner looked it over briefly, and said, “It doesn’t seem quite to match our own list; but we can let that pass for now. It’s the price of one of the rooms, in any case, whichever list is accurate.”

“Well, I’m sure mine is; I’ve been very careful about it.”

“I can see that. You seem to have taken care to document everything you’ve done and put a value on it.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. I was just remarking. It’s the values, actually, that don’t exactly jibe with ours.”

“Well I can justify absolutely everything that’s there. Show me one thing you don’t agree with.”

“It really doesn’t make any difference, Madam,” said the owner. “Whichever of us is right, this wouldn’t change the nature of the room you ordered.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the specifications of the room are not determined by price. We build the room to your specifications, whatever price you have paid for it.”

“That doesn’t seem fair to me,” she said. “I mean, if you work harder for something, you ought to get something better.”

“But if you get exactly what you asked for, no matter what you ask, why should you get more than that just because you’ve worked harder?”

“Because a person should get what she deserves!”

“Oh, as to that,” said the owner, “you may set your mind at ease. In one sense, you get exactly what you deserve—at a minimum. Occasionally more.”

“That’s another thing. If one person gets more than he deserves and the other person doesn’t, how fair is that?”

“There is a point of view, of course,” he said, “from which it isn’t fair. But that’s the way it is.”

“I don’t see why it has to be that way.”

“It doesn’t *have* to be. I just said that that’s the way it *is*.”

The woman looked as if she were going to continue arguing, but then suddenly said, “Well, we can discuss all this after you show me the rooms I’ve ordered.”

“Right this way, then, Madame,” said the owner with a bow, and led her downstairs and down a rather dark corridor. He opened the door to a room and stepped back for her to precede him inside. “This is the room you paid for,” he said.

“*This* tiny place? Why there’s hardly any light in it at all!” She went over to the window. “—And no view to speak of. What are those buildings over there?”

“The stables, Madame.”

“That’s an insult!”

“I’m sorry, Madame, but you wanted to see the room you paid for.”

“This is an outrage!” she sputtered. “Now I really *must* see the real owner! He can’t have prepared this for me, after all I’ve done! Why, I did every single thing he asked!”

“That’s true. You did everything that was demanded of you.”

“Well then, I should get what I deserve!”

“Yes, you should.”

“Then show it to me!”

“I’m afraid, Madame, that this is what it is. You see, you did exactly what was asked, but no more than that—”

“But I was never *asked* to do more!”

“That’s true. No one is ever asked to do more than one is asked. But it is possible to do it, nevertheless.”

“But that’s not fair! If you expect people to do more than you ask of them, you should tell them that!”

“I agree, it’s not fair,” said the owner. “But it’s also true that we don’t *expect* people to do more than they’re asked to do. It’s simply that we recognize that it’s possible, and take that into account. On the other hand, we don’t, of course, deny rooms to those who do only what was asked of them.”

“But anyway,” said the woman, “I did do more than I was asked. Let me see that list.” The owner handed it over, and she ran her finger down several pages. “Look here,” she said. “One

act of charity. I took a young poor girl in to live with me, and gave her board and room. I didn't have to do that."

The owner looked over at where her finger pointed. "Oh yes, that. Well, for one thing, you do know that we asked for some acts of charity."

"But you didn't ask for that one. And I have others."

"Yes, we're aware of that. But let's look at that act. You agreed with the girl that she'd share the housework in exchange for the room, wasn't that it?"

"Well of course; that's only fair."

"Exactly. And fairness is justice, isn't it? Our view of charity is that it goes beyond justice."

"But it did!" she said. "Look at what she was getting: she had no place to live, and all she had to do was a little of the housework—not even all of it, just a little. If she'd rented a room, she would have had to pay for it *and* do all her own cleaning and cooking."

"That's true," said the owner, "from her point of view. But from yours, you were relieved of half of the housework in exchange for the slight inconvenience of having someone else living with you—and it wasn't all that inconvenient, was it? Because the preceding week, you'd put in an advertisement for a companion, which you would have had to pay for. You were better off with here living there than you were before."

"But she got more out of it than I did! A *lot* more! You men don't understand anything. I may have had a 'companion,' as you put it, but with two living in the same house, there's twice as much cleaning and cooking to be done."

"Well, not quite twice as much. Was there?"

She hesitated. "Well maybe not exactly twice, but almost. But that's beside the point. I would have done it even if she

couldn't have done any housework; it was for her sake as much as mine that we made the agreement. She shouldn't get the idea that you can have something for nothing."

"Why not?"

"Why not! *You* of all people asking me that! Now I'm sure you can't be the owner. Not the one I've been speaking to all these years."

"Yes, you've spoken *to* me a great deal," he said.

"You needn't get all huffy about it," she retorted. "Why do you keep imputing motives to me? What was wrong with what I did?"

"Nothing at all; it was a good act. I was simply pointing out that in point of fact, it was an act of justice, not charity; you did all we expected you to do in that act."

"But I *could* have done more. Is that it?"

"You could have, you know."

"Oh, I could have, I suppose! I *could* have let everyone walk all over me. God knows they tried, but *I* never complained. But I happen to believe in standing up for my rights now and then. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Only that it's possible not to."

"Well, I don't understand that. It's degrading to human dignity if you let people treat you like dirt."

"That's true."

"Well, then?"

"Well, it's possible out of a sense of the human dignity of others not to be concerned with one's own dignity."

"I don't see that. Human dignity is human dignity. Why should my dignity take a back seat to anyone else's?"

“There’s no reason. But by the same token, why are you so important that your dignity should take precedence over someone else’s?”

“I don’t see how you can say that I—a creature created by God—should do damage to myself for the sake of something else.”

“I’m not saying that you should do *harm* to yourself for any reason; only that you don’t have to stand on your dignity.”

“It’s the same thing!”

“It’s not, you know. How does someone else’s advancement lessen you?”

“Because it makes us unequal! I’m not inferior to anyone! Why should I pretend I am?”

“Well, as to that, either your getting precedence over someone else makes you superior to that other person, in which case you’re not equal—or it doesn’t really make any difference to the reality of either of you, in which case, his advancement doesn’t make you unequal.”

“This is ridiculous! I’m not here to solve metaphysical riddles; I’m looking for a room—but not this one. You said I could have a different one. I’d like to see that, if you please.”

“I’m happy to oblige, Madame,” said the owner. “Please follow me.” He led her upstairs and down another, spacious corridor, to a room with an ornate oak-paneled door, which he opened for the woman.

“Well, now! *This* is what I was expecting. Why didn’t you show it to me first?”

“Do you like it?” said the owner, obviously pleased. “We showed you the other one first, because you seemed to want the one you paid for.”

The woman walked in, laid her purse upon the mahogany end table, and patted the down-filled cushions of the sofa, which was covered in silk brocade. She went to the window, pulling aside the chiffon curtains, to look out at the view of the lake in the foreground with snow-capped mountains in the distance.

After examining everything carefully, her expression indicated that, somewhat to her disappointment, there was nothing for her to find fault with. Finally, she turned back to the owner. "I'll take it," she said.

"There is a condition on it, however," said the owner.

"Oh, there is! I fail to see—well, never mind. We can discuss that after I've moved in. What is the condition?"

"The price for this room is that you receive it as a gift, and not as something that you paid for."

The woman looked at the owner for almost a full minute. Then she looked around the room again, and turned back to the owner. "Well, in the first place, I know that your records are wrong, and *this* is the room I worked so hard for and had my heart set on."

"It's yours if you want it, Madame."

"—But in the second place," the woman went on as if the owner had not spoken, "I have never accepted a dime of charity in my life, and I'm too old to begin at my age. Now let's stop all this nonsense, and take me to the real owner, and let me straighten up this mess. I don't know why all this has to happen to *me*. I only try to get what's fair."

"You can have what's fair, Madame, if that's what you want. But it's the other room, I assure you. There's been no mistake; and I really am the owner."

“Well, I won’t stand for it! I won’t take this room as a gift and say that I didn’t deserve it! And the other room is simply out of the question. I’m going to complain to the management!”

“You’d only be complaining to me, Madame. I’m sorry, but there’s no one else.”

The woman turned out of the room, and suddenly the door of the mansion appeared before her. She opened it, and with her hand still on the knob, said, “You haven’t heard the last of this. I’ll be back.”

“I certainly hope you will be, Madame.”

V.

The MATERIALIST

S THE WOMAN left, she almost knocked over a man who was walking, stooped over, up the steps to the portico of the building. She stepped back in horror and gave him a wide berth—which made sense, since he was dressed in tatters and covered with filth of every description and could be smelled from ten feet away. He had a huge pack on his back, from which some of the odor clearly emanated, since it was half slit open, almost spilling its contents of elegant clothes, half-eaten roasts, and gaudy trinkets: superb taste mixed with the most execrable trash.

He managed to cower away from her and watch her stalk down the stairs. Uncertain, he turned back himself.

“Were you looking for something?” asked the owner.

The man stopped and looked over his pack at the owner. “Well, I—Never mind.”

“I thought you were about to come in,” said the owner.

“No, it’s just that for a moment . . . But never mind.”

“We do have rooms, you know.”

“That’s what the sign said. I noticed it as I was passing by, and I thought . . .”

“You thought you might come up and see if it was true.”

“I’m sorry.”

“But it *is* true.”

The man looked down the gloomy road at the woman’s back, and said, “Yeah, well . . .”

“Do you have somewhere else to stay?”

“Me? No. But don’t worry about it; I’ve never really stayed anywhere all my life. There never seemed to be a place for me. But I made out all right. There’s no reason it should be different in this country.”

“What’s the matter? Did the woman frighten you?”

“Well, I mean, if she couldn’t even get in, then—look, don’t make me say it. I didn’t think you’d notice me; I just wanted to watch what happened. So I’ll be going now.” And he turned away and started back down the steps.

“Just a moment, please!” said the owner. “We have all sorts of rooms. And as to the woman, it wasn’t that we refused to let her in, it was that for some reason she didn’t think the room we had to offer was good enough for her. But wouldn’t you at least like to look around inside a little? You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to; you don’t have to do anything but look.”

The man stopped. Then he made as if to go on down the steps.

“How can it hurt,” said the owner, “now that you’ve spoken to me? Wasn’t that your problem, really? Well, you’ve done it.”

The man turned back, but did not come any closer.

“Weren’t you afraid I was going to shout at you and drive you away? With a whip or something?”

“Well, no, I guess. . . . Not really. But—I don’t know.”

“But you felt you didn’t deserve to come in here.”

“I mean—Look at me.”

“I have been. Look: if I have no problem inviting you inside, why should you? It’s my house, after all.”

“But why should the likes of you care about somebody like me? I mean, if you knew what I’ve done!”

“As a matter of fact, I do know what you’ve done, and you know I know; otherwise, why would you be refusing to come in here with me?”

“You sound like you don’t care what I did.”

“I don’t.”

“But everything I heard about you said just the opposite.”

“Well,” said the owner, “put it this way: it really doesn’t make any difference to *me* what you’ve done. Before you did it, I warned you not to, not because of me, but because of what you were about to do to yourself. And wasn’t I right? Look at you.”

The man looked down at his torn, dirty clothes. “All right, I messed up; I admit it. But what can I do about it now? This is what I did to myself, and I have to live with it.”

“Do you like being that way?”

“Of course not! Why are you torturing me like this?”

“Listen to me. Listen. I can help you get yourself cleaned up, if you want. I won’t do it if you don’t want me to. But that’s not even the point. The point is that I’m not angry with you and I’m not going to punish you, and I’m not going to keep you out of my house if you want to come in. I have a room ready for you, if you want to look at it. If you don’t want

to, that's one thing. But if you'd like to see it, then don't think that the condition you're in makes any difference."

The man thought for a while, and then said, "Well, what the hell. Why not?" He began to follow the owner inside, but was stopped by his bag, which wouldn't fit through the door.

"I think you'd better leave that outside for the moment," said the owner. "You can come back for it later."

The man stopped at the threshold, and said, "Well, I don't know. I'd hate to lose it. I mean, all I have is in there."

"It's not likely to get stolen. It's possible, of course."

The man hesitated.

"I don't want to pressure you," said the owner. "But the arrangement here is that even if you lose something on your journey, we see to it that it's replaced with a replica or something of even greater value to you."

"You can't mean that. I mean, this isn't the way the world works."

"No, that's true. But it's the way things work here."

"How do I know you're not lying to me?"

"You have to take my word for it, that's all. But why would I lie to you? Think. What do *I* have to gain from *you* or anything you have?"

"That's right. *You're* certainly getting no bargain. That's why I can't really believe it. There's got to be a catch somewhere."

"Try me."

"—Oh, what the hell! Who'd want what's in here anyway—except me? But still, I got so used to the bag being here on my shoulder. But it's only for a few minutes. You're *sure* I can come back and take out the stuff I want? And bring it in?"

“If you decide that you like the room and want to stay. If you don’t, the bag will almost certainly be out here waiting for you.”

The man began to slide the bag from his shoulder. “It’s stuck!” he cried.

“Would you like me to help you?”

“No, that’s all right.” The man made a few more efforts, without success, and finally said. “Well, it doesn’t really make any difference, I guess. I should have known from the beginning I couldn’t get in.”

“Now don’t be like that,” said the owner. “Let me give you a hand.”

“No!” shouted the man. “Don’t touch it!” The owner backed off. “Wait!” he said. He struggled a bit more. “Oh, go ahead!” he cried in despair. The owner put his hand on the bag and tore it off his back. He screamed in agony; the bag had rotted so thoroughly onto his shoulder that removing it had torn a huge chunk off his skin.

“God, that hurt!” said the man. He reached up to rub his shoulder and thought better of it.

“Yes, but it’s over now. You’ll be surprised at how fast it will heal, now that you’re here. Think of it. When you come back for it, you’ll actually be able to get at what’s inside.”

“You know, you’re right. I never even looked in it for years and years; I couldn’t have, could I? I just kept throwing stuff in, I was so afraid to let go of it. I don’t even remember half of what’s there any more. Let me take a look just for a second.” And he stooped down about to rummage about inside the bag.

“I think,” said the owner, with a gentle hand on his uninjured shoulder, “it would be better if you came inside first.

It shouldn't take long at all, and then you can come back and, if you like, I can help you sort things out."

"You really think I should?"

"I really think you should. Do you want that thing back on your shoulder again?"

"No," said the man, with an expression on his face that meant "yes." "No, I guess not. But you're not saying that I *can't* have it in case things don't work out in there, right?"

"No, if you decide you don't want the room, then you can take it back again and go wherever you want."

"Well, all right." He began to follow the owner through the door. "My shoulder hurts like hell—and so does my back, now."

"It's just that you've started to stand up straighter now that you don't have all that weight on your back." replied the owner. "Don't worry; you'll get used to it. Doesn't your shoulder feel less painful already?"

"—I guess it does, now that you mention it." The man stood on the shining marble inside the entrance, awestruck at the magnificence of the foyer and the staircase. "I can't believe it—Ow!" he said, lifting up his foot.

"I'm sorry; I should have warned you about the floors. They're cleaning off your feet. But don't be concerned; this will be over soon too."

"This is too much!" cried the man. "First you rip my stuff right off my back, and now you clean my feet off! I *knew* I didn't belong here!"

"Be a little patient," said the owner. "Think of the pain in your back and your shoulder. Don't you feel better in spite of it? Without that enormous weight you were carrying?"

The man considered for a few moments, standing now on one foot and now on the other. "I guess so. Yeah, I do."

"Then give this a chance too."

"Why should I? I mean, you're trying to make me over completely, aren't you?"

"Well, were you satisfied the way you were? You didn't look satisfied."

"Look, you've got to make allowances. I mean, I'm not complaining or anything—who am *I* to complain? But it's all so new!"

"I know. We make everything new here. But I think I ought to advise you to be a little careful what you touch for a while. The faster the cleaning process works, the more painful it is. But of course, you can suit yourself."

"If I stay."

"*If* you stay. But why shouldn't you? You're already inside, and no one has eaten you."

"Except the floor."

The owner laughed. "That's true, of course. But it's only eaten the dirt, really, and your feet are almost clean already."

"You're right. Hey, will you look at that! I'd forgotten what color I really was! And you know something? It's a lot easier to walk now than it's been for a long time. I feel as if my feet have been massaged."

"They have been."

"It seems it's okay when it's over. But you're not very gentle about it, are you?"

"No, when we massage in here, we often have to use sandpaper. But it works."

The man looked up at the owner. "You know something?" he said. "I think I like you."

“I had a feeling you would.”

“You’re not what I was expecting at all. You’re easy to talk to, for one thing, even by somebody like me.”

“Why should I find it hard to talk to you? If you’re willing to take me as I am, I’m willing to take you as you are. What does it matter where you’ve been and what you’ve seen? You’re here, and that’s enough.”

“But you ripped off my bag and started cleaning me up.”

“So? Dirt and what was in that bag was just something you were hiding behind, wasn’t it? You just said that you yourself forgot what color you really were.”

“Like I say, I’m not complaining, really.”

“Any time you dislike what’s happening to you, you’re free to go; it’s perfectly all right with me if you don’t like it here and leave; it’s completely up to you. We have never yet put someone out of this house because *me* thought he wouldn’t fit in; it’s always been that *he* found it unsatisfactory for one reason or another and thought that he’d be happier—or perhaps I should say, less unhappy—outside somewhere. The only real condition for staying here is that everyone who remains has to be willing to accept himself for what he really is, just as I accept him; and all that usually means is that he has to give up some silly ideas about himself.”

“That’s all?”

“Well, that, and to like me—or at least, be willing to put up with me and my ways. I’m pretty likeable, actually, and we can get to be friends gradually, if that’s the way the person wants it.”

“But I thought you had to do all kinds of things to get here, and I never did any of them. I always did just the opposite.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but I don’t understand it. I can’t believe it.”

“You don’t have to believe anything any more. But let me explain a little. Most people have to do all the things you never did, and avoid all the things you never avoided, to be in a condition to accept themselves for what they really are, and even to begin to like me at all for my own sake and not just for what I can do for them.

“I a way, you’re lucky, you know. You did all the wrong things, and yet you never made a virtue of them, just because you did so many of them and saw how unsatisfying they all were. And you *didn’t* want to accept yourself as that kind of person, which meant that you really *wanted* to be what you really are; but just weren’t able to be. And I’ll tell you a secret. No one is.

“But, you see, I can make anyone able. I just won’t force them to be willing.”

“I guess I am lucky,” said the man. “I had the best of both worlds.”

“Really? Do you really think that the things you hated yourself for doing even while you were doing them were the best way to enjoy yourself? Even before you came over here?”

“Well, there’s that, of course.”

“You never gave yourself a chance to find out if the other things were fun to do. You just took people’s word for it that they were boring and painful—when in fact if you’d have tried them, you’d have discovered they were a lot more fun than what you called ‘really living.’”

The man was silent for a few minutes. “Yeah, I guess. Now that I look back on it, I *did* make pretty much a wreck of my whole life, didn’t I?”

“Pretty much. Not that it matters. And I don’t want to deceive you; the room you’ve built for yourself is very small, and you might not like it. Here it is, in fact.” They had been walking down several corridors as they talked, and had reached a very plain door, which the owner opened. It was indeed a tiny room, sparsely furnished, but neat and clean, with a very small window in the door (closed) that led to the garden beyond.

“Yeah, you’re right,” said the man. “A little less, and it wouldn’t be a room at all. But on the other hand, it’s kind of cozy, when you come to think of it. It sort of fits.”

“You’ll have to leave that curtain drawn over the window for a while, because the light is so bright out there that it might blind you while your eyes are in the process of healing. And you won’t have full run of the palace at the beginning, more or less for the same reason. But afterwards, of course, you can visit any other room you choose, and even stay with the other person for as long as you wish—I would say overnight, but there is no night here—or spend your time in the garden. This, however, will always be your room; and once you have gone back to your bag and chosen the things you want to keep from it, perhaps to hang on the walls, and so on, or put on shelves we can furnish, then the room will never change. But there’s the garden.”

“No, no, don’t worry about it. This room is just fine. Better than I deserve—a lot better. Besides, like I said, it fits; it feels like home already.”

“I rather thought it would. It’s not this size because we think this is the size you should have; it’s this size because this is the one you wanted.”

The man looked around the room contentedly. “It’ll be nice just to have a rest for a while,” he remarked.

“Well then, let’s go back out to your bag,” said the owner.

“That’s right; I almost forgot about that. I’m not sure I want anything in it now.”

“Well, we’d better go out and see. We wouldn’t want to throw anything out that you’d be missing later. I’ll help you pick out the things you want to bring in here, and then I’ll leave you for a while, and be there in the garden when you get well.”

“That’ll be nice,” said the man. “I can hardly wait.”

“It won’t be long,” said the owner. “Like everything else here, it’s all up to you.”

VI.

The BLIND WOMAN

HEN THE OWNER AND THE MAN had finished picking over his possessions, and taking back the rather remarkably few things that he said he would like to keep, the owner returned to clear away the rest of the contents of the bag. As he was bent over sweeping some of the detritus into a dustpan, a woman walked right into him.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she exclaimed, looking straight in front of her. My cane didn’t touch anything, and I thought . . .” She reached down, still looking straight before her, and put her hand on the owner’s back. “Did I knock you over? Are you hurt?”

“No, not at all,” said the owner. “I was only stooped over, and I suppose I had inadvertently dodged your cane. May I help you?”

“Well, I was looking for the mansion. I was told that I should speak to the owner.”

“As a matter of fact,” he answered, “you are only two steps away from the entrance, and I happen to be the one you were to speak to. Are you looking for a room?”

“Don’t you know? I thought you would know.”

“Well, I do, actually. It was just a formality. Here, let me take your hand.”

“I can manage by myself, thank you,” she said. “I always have. I’ve had to.”

“Whatever you please,” said the owner. The woman, waving her cane before her, walked up to the steps and was about to ascend; but the step was higher than she had anticipated, and she stumbled and nearly fell to her knees.

“Don’t you have an access ramp to this building?” she asked indignantly.

“No, actually, we don’t. We—”

“But you should! You have to! It’s against the law not to!”

“That law doesn’t apply in this country, Madame,” said the owner. We—”

“I thought in *this* place of all places, you wouldn’t put obstacles in people’s way! How are people in wheel chairs supposed to get up these steps?” She felt the height of the steps carefully with her cane.

“We carry them up, generally, though some find that when they come this far, they don’t need the wheel chair any more. And no one inside uses one. So we thought it an unnecessary expense to make a ramp that actually would almost never be used.”

“But then you’re depriving the ones who don’t want to be carried of their independence—not to mention people like me, who can’t see the stairs and are apt to trip over them.”

“I did offer to take your hand, you know.”

“But that’s what I mean! You degrade me into someone who needs another person’s help just to do the simplest thing like climbing stairs, when I’m perfectly capable of doing things for myself if I’m given the chance.”

“Well, if you want to know the truth,” returned the owner. “absolutely no one can get up those stairs without my help—and the help of quite a few other people, if it comes to that.”

“Are you trying to tell me,” she said, “that everyone has to have his hand held and be guided along just as if he were a child—or blind? I don’t believe it.”

“More or less. Of course, some people need more help than others.”

“Well *that’s* what I resent. Even if nobody’s completely independent, I don’t see why I can’t be *as* independent as everyone else is. Why do I have to be singled out for special pity and condescension?”

“Well, because you’re blind, for one thing.”

“Why should that put me in a special class that’s looked down on?”

“No one is looking down on you.”

“Oh no? You’re just like everyone else. ‘May I help you, Madame?’ Which translates into, ‘May I show you how much more capable I am than you are, Madame?’ I’m sick of it! I thought when I got here, all of *that*, at least, was going to stop. I wouldn’t even demand to be able to see. But why can’t I be treated just like everyone else?”

“Because you’re not like everyone else.”

“But I am! All human beings are equal.”

“Well, they’re not, you know.”

“How dare you!”

“For instance, other people can see. You can’t. So you can’t be treated as if you could.”

“Oh yes I can! All I need is to be given a chance!”

“You mean, for instance, if we built access ramps with railings, you could walk up to the door just as easily as a sighted person.”

“Exactly.”

“But then if we have to tear out part of these steps and put in a ramp just for you to use, how is this treating you like everyone else?”

“You don’t understand! Because then I could get up to the door without anyone helping me!”

“You mean so that you could *pretend* you were getting to the door without any special help; but really, the special help only came beforehand, with the building of the ramp. But you see, Madame, we don’t pretend here. If you need help, you need help—and we are happy to give it to you.”

“Then why didn’t you have a ramp constructed? If you call that ‘help,’ that’s the kind of help I need—and the *only* kind of help I need.”

“Well, you see, it’s our policy to help anyone reach any goal he sets for himself; we will defer to his goals, and, for instance, build his room to his specifications. But we reserve the right to help the person in our way, and not necessarily his. What difference does it make if he reaches the goal he was aiming at in any case?”

“It makes all the difference in the world! A person has a right to have control over *her* own life!”

“One does? What ever gave you that idea?”

“Well, it— But it’s obvious! It just stands to reason! Why live if you can’t be in control of your life?”

“Perhaps we misunderstand each other. Everyone has control over what his life will ultimately turn out to be—in other words, what his room here will be like. But no one has control over everything that happens to him while he is on the way here.”

“Well they ought to,” she said. “You’re just playing with them when you ‘help them in your own way,’ the way you say you do.”

“That may be, Madame,” he answered. “But that is the way things are.”

“You don’t need to tell *me* that!” she retorted. “I didn’t ask to be born blind, you know.”

“That’s true. Of course, you didn’t ask to be born, either.”

“Why was *I* singled out? What did I do to deserve being born blind?”

“Nothing at all. You were ‘singled out’ as you put it, because everyone is singled out. We give each person certain gifts at the beginning, and other gifts along the way; some we give more to, and some less. No two people have ever had the same gifts. In that sense, no two human beings are exactly equal; if they were, they would be the same person.”

“Well, I don’t understand it; but I know one thing. It’s not fair.”

“No, you’re right. It’s not.”

“And you’re not ashamed of this?”

“Ashamed? Because I give someone more than he deserves, and I give another a great deal more than he deserves?”

“Well, it seems to me that you give *some* people a lot less than they deserve!”

“Really?”

“Take me, for instance. I didn’t deserve to be born blind.”

“You mean that, even though you had no right to be born in the first place, you somehow had a right to be born sighted?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean! Ninety-nine percent of the people in the world are born sighted. I was born less ‘gifted,’ if you want to call it that, than ninety-nine percent of the people.”

“Yes, that’s true. And so?”

“So why was I singled out to be discriminated against? That’s the question I’ve asked all my life, and I expect an answer! I demand an answer!”

“You really do want an answer? That is, you don’t simply want an excuse to complain?”

“—I wish there were someone else here to talk to who had some minimal degree of understanding of people who aren’t like himself! You don’t know what it’s like to go through the things I’ve been through. I’ve had to struggle and struggle my whole life long.”

“Yes, you have. And now the time of struggle is over. Now you can take possession of the room we built to your specifications.”

“But other people haven’t had to struggle as much as I have for their rooms! Is mine going to be any better than theirs?”

“Than some, because you were more ambitious than some people who weren’t constantly faced with obstacles. But there are others who, frankly, have more expensive and elaborate

rooms than you have, because they set their sights higher—but not because they worked harder. How hard you work, in the last analysis, has nothing to do with what your room looks like, because in the last analysis, it too is a gift. The only difference is that this particular gift depends on what the person asks for out of life.”

“I don’t understand it.”

“As I said, I can give you some kind of an explanation, if you want. I am not sure it will satisfy you, however.”

“Well, if you think you can explain it, go ahead.”

“You remember I said to you that if two human beings received exactly the same gifts—the same talents, the same circumstances, and so on—then they wouldn’t be two different human beings, but one and the same person. Even identical twins, you know, are not *exactly* the same in every respect—because if they were, then they’d have to be in the same place at the same time, for instance, and then how could there be two of them in any sense?”

“That’s all just metaphysics! What difference does it make?”

“You said you wanted an explanation, Madame. It turns out that the explanation involves metaphysics. I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is. Shall I go on?”

“Oh, go ahead.”

“At any rate, if you grant that if there is going to be a plurality of human beings, each has to have different gifts, it necessarily follows that some will have more gifts than others. Some will necessarily lack the gifts that others have.

“And that means, as I said, that no two human beings are equal. But if they are all endowed with different gifts, and there

are many people, then obviously, there will have to be some with a great deal fewer than the ones who have most.”

“That’s what I mean. It’s not fair.”

“You are right, and I agree with you that it is not fair, if by ‘fair’ you mean that each person should have the same gifts that everyone else has. But what I was trying to show is that on that condition, there could only be one human being.”

“Then there shouldn’t be any human beings in the first place!”

“There is that alternative, of course. But if you make the assumption—which happens to be true—that something is greater than nothing, it follows that the least gifted human being is greater than nothing at all, and so if he exists, whatever his total of gifts, it is greater than if he did not exist. And it was our opinion that, since the least gifted human being is nonetheless gifted, it was worth while that human beings exist.”

“But I keep telling you! It’s not *fair!*”

“That is, of course, the price one pays for having many human beings. But you see, if you don’t compare yourself with other human beings, and just consider the gifts you *have*, you find that you are gifted indeed. And most people who do this think that it is better to be alive and have these gifts than never to have lived. Some don’t, of course.”

“Well I happen to think they’re right. I don’t see any reason why I have to have fewer gifts than the next person.”

“There is no particular reason for that, of course.”

“And in practice, this means that some people have an easy life, and others have to suffer. That’s discrimination if I ever saw it.”

“Oh, yes, we discriminate.”

“Well, I’ve fought against discrimination my whole life long!”

“I know.”

“Well, then.”

“I can tell you a secret, if you’d like; though I don’t think it will solve your particular problem.”

“All I can say is I’m not satisfied with your self-justification yet. But if that secret of yours has anything to do with it, I’m willing to give you that chance. Go ahead.”

“Well, as I say, in the last analysis, what happens to you before you get to this country doesn’t matter, because the room you have is just exactly the room you choose, and really has nothing to do with the gifts you were given at the start. It’s just that we had to start all of you off somehow so that you could choose what you wanted out of life.

“But the secret is this. You mentioned suffering a few minutes ago. We built not only this mansion, you know, to the specifications of each of you, but we built the whole country you came from, also to your—how shall I say it—collective specifications. We consulted the original inhabitant about the kind of world he wished to live in, only putting certain conditions upon it because of what we knew about the underpinnings of the construction.

“But it turned out that he refused to accept the minor limitations his reality imposed upon himself and chose a world with good *and evil*. And the result was that, in deference to his wishes, we built a universe which included suffering in it.”

“So we have to suffer because of *his* choice. That’s even more unfair!”

“Yes, I suppose, but as I said, in the last analysis it doesn’t really make any difference, because we moved the mansion over

here, instead of where we would have built it in the other world; and so we kept this land from the infection that our original consultant had brought upon his universe. But there is more.”

“Well, I might as well hear you out to the end. But you were right when you said I wouldn’t be satisfied.”

“Our plans were that I myself would go into the other world, to reconstruct it into the condition it would have been in if the original consultant had not given us such a—let me say it—pitifully inadequate plan.

“But we never want to impose our ideas on other people, because we want them to choose their own destiny. And so, I was to let the people know what this new kingdom was to be like, and the condition now was that they were to accept me to be its king. Our hope, you see, was that the experience of the results of the original consultant’s specifications would lead people to prefer the world that could have existed: one without death, without disease, without blindness, without, in short, suffering.

“Unfortunately, as you know, the people I chose as the spokesmen for all humanity would not accept me as their king, nor would the representative of the rest of humanity, who we saw to it was to be in control of them so that he could exercise a veto over their decisions if he chose.

“They killed me, in short, which means that the only way any human being can arrive at this mansion is to share my death, so that he can share a room in my home.”

“You’re punishing everyone for what some Jews and Romans did thousands of years ago.”

“If you want to look at it that way. But the mansion is here waiting for anyone who wants to come in, of course. And

if I may say so, it is rather more generously appointed than it would have been had it been built over there. I suppose you could call that a kind of compensation. I call it another gift.”

“So for some reason,” said the blind woman, “I was appointed to suffer because you weren’t accepted as the King of Judea. How just is that? I certainly didn’t volunteer.”

“Well, I didn’t think I would satisfy you. But really it doesn’t matter now. Would you like me to show you to your room?”

“It most certainly *does* matter now! I won’t go in there until all this is straightened out! I want to know why you treated me as shabbily as I was treated!”

“You will see, you know, once you settle into your room; and your sight will never be taken away from you forever. We’ve been keeping it for you.”

“But why couldn’t I have had it from the very beginning, like everyone else? That’s what I want to know!”

“Would it help if I told you that if you *hadn’t* been born blind, you would in fact have had considerably more to suffer, most of which you would have brought on yourself? You would not even have approached this door.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“Madame, you forget who you are talking to.”

“But even so, it makes no difference. All you’re saying is that I was singled out for suffering from the very beginning, because, according to you, *you* resent what some other people did to you once. It’s just that I was subjected to *less* suffering than I might otherwise have been. Thank you very much.”

“Well, whatever happened in the past, and whatever the reason for it, what’s done is done, and from now on, the only

thing that will happen is just exactly what you want to happen. Let me show you to your room.”

“Not until I get an apology!”

“You want me to apologize for giving you life? For giving you a brilliant mind? For making you attractive? Healthy all your life? For the parents who loved you so deeply?”

“For making me blind!”

“That is, for *not* giving you sight. I did not give you much strength either, and you are shorter than most women. Should I apologize for those deficiencies?”

“I don’t care about all that.”

“Why must I apologize for not giving you some gifts, and need not apologize for not giving you others?”

“Why are you *torturing* me like this? You know what I mean!”

“Indeed I do, Madame; but I don’t think *you* do. If you don’t come in and occupy your room, you will never see—physically. But if you don’t open the eyes of your mind, you will not come in. I am trying to help your mental blindness.”

“Well, I’ve always been able to think for myself, thank God—”

“You’re welcome.”

“Don’t be snide. And I don’t happen to think that I’m spiritually blind.”

“I know. I was hoping I could show you. But not even that matters. Whatever you think, only come in. We can discuss all this after you’re settled and comfortable.”

“You don’t understand, do you? How could I live in the same house with you when you’ve done all you’ve done to me? I’d be willing, perhaps, if you at least had the decency to give

me even a *hint* that you were the least bit sorry for it; but when you try to make a virtue out of forcing me into a life of pain and struggle, it's—how could *anyone* live in your house under those conditions? I'd rather not live anywhere!"

"Unfortunately, that's the alternative. You realize that, don't you?"

"I don't care. It would be more torture for me to be in there constantly reminded at every second of who it was who treated me so shabbily for so long! At least if I'm outside, I'm on my own. I've been able to manage for myself so far, and, since it's obvious I'll get no help from you, I can keep managing."

"I did offer to help, you remember."

"I spit on your kind of help!" She turned and, waving her cane angrily before her, walked swiftly away into the darkness that was as dark without as within.

VII.

The HATER

KIPPING TO AVOID BEING HIT WITH the cane, a man, looking sheepish, approached the owner, who was gazing off toward the retreating figure with a pensive expression, and said, “Excuse me. They told me that I should come here and speak to the doorman and take my chances. Is that all right?”

“You are looking for a room?”

“Well, no I wasn’t actually. That is, I am, I guess. I mean, I wasn’t really planning to come here quite this early, you know what I’m saying? and I didn’t quite have time to, like, look into the matter. I mean I did, of course, but I kept putting it off, somehow, you know what I’m saying? and anyway, before I did more than just start with the brochures and things, I found myself on the plane over here, and so I, like, don’t know my way around and—hell, I don’t even know if this is the right place!”

“But you would like a room.”

“But that’s the point, you know what I’m saying? I didn’t really have time to, like, book one, and so I don’t even know if there’s anything available, or what it’d be like, or anything, let alone the price, you understand what I mean? And from the looks out front here, I don’t think I’ve, like, saved up enough to be able to afford it. I’m practically broke, in fact, if you want to know the truth.”

“We certainly want to know the truth. I think we might be able to find something. We’ll see.”

“Um—can I, like, ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“. . . Well, I don’t mean to be disrespectful or anything, you know what I’m saying? and when it comes to that it’s none of my business, but it kind of, like, bothered me, and I’d just like to know—if it’s all right with you. I mean, if you don’t want to tell me, that’s all right, because like I said it’s really none of my business, but—Why did you turn that poor woman away?”

“You mean the blind woman?”

“Right. See, if you don’t mind my saying so, it doesn’t sound like the kind of thing I heard goes on over here, and it sort of, like, made me wonder whether I wound up in the wrong place, you know what I’m saying? and if I did, if there’s any way I could, like, get up to the place I thought I was going to—or at least *hoped* I was going to, you know what I’m saying?”

“Actually,” said the owner, “there isn’t more than one place on this side of the ocean you crossed. It’s what the people call one place or the other depending on how you take it.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Well let me explain by answering the question you had about the woman. I offered her a room, and tried to get her to come and look at it—”

“*Look* at it?”

“Well yes, actually. Literally as well as figuratively. It was a beautiful room too, one of our best; and I’m sure she would have been just delighted with it if she’d come in and actually seen it. But she told me that she couldn’t bear to be in the same house with me after all I’d done to her, and that she’d rather spend her time walking about in the darkness.”

“Well did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Did you, like, do to her what she thought you did?”

“Yes I did, actually.”

“Well then.”

“But it’s not quite so simple.” said the owner. “You see, I consider that what I did was actually a benefit for her, and I’m convinced that if she had only come inside, she would have seen it that way too. I only did it, in fact, because I knew that when she finally got into her room, she wouldn’t have wanted me to have done anything else. But there was no way I could persuade her to consider the possibility. So she decided she didn’t want to come in.”

“So you didn’t turn her away, then. I mean, I always heard that it was the very devil to—sorry, I didn’t mean that—that it was hard as hell to—sorry, I seem to have, like, got into a habit of speaking, but you know what I mean, that you’d be, like, standing there with a flaming sword or something, yelling at people in a voice loud enough to be heard all over the universe, and telling everybody all the horrible things a man did and so on, and then, like, banishing just about everyone into some pit

somewhere where they'd be dancing around in fire and sulfur, you know what I'm saying? From what I heard, practically nobody ever made it in, and if you did, it was because you, like, beat yourself over the back and wore hairshirts and things and, like, had your hell before you ever got here. But that's not the way it is, you say?"

"Not really. We never turn anyone away. The ones who don't come in turn themselves away, because the house doesn't live up to their expectations."

"Not live up to their expectations! *This* place? What, is it, a dump inside?"

"No, it's just that some people have very high standards."

"I'll say they must! I mean, if this doesn't live up to their standards, then not even heaven itself—Oh."

"Precisely."

"That's really weird. I mean, it, like, boggles the mind!"

"The pit of fire and sulfur is inside their mind, you see; it's the high standards they've set for the way they ought to be treated. If we forced them to come in and live in the room they'd made for themselves, they'd be in even worse torment, because they can't bear to think that reality isn't what they'd like it to be."

"Well, what do you know! I can't get over it! I mean, how could anybody expect *more*? Than *this*? Hell, I never even thought that I'd get this far, and I'd, like, be happy just sleeping on the steps here!"

"I don't actually think you would, you know."

"Well, not if there's actually a room for me in there. I can't believe it! I mean, if you knew how up until just yesterday I spent running away from this place, I mean trying to forget that this country even existed, and just, like, laughing off any

notion that there was this mansion in it—and especially that business of fire and sulfur. I mean, you can't, like, go around worrying about that all the time, can you? At least—well, you know what I'm saying?"

"I think I do. Yes, it took quite a while for what *we* were saying to get through to you, didn't it?"

"What you were saying?"

"The things you say you couldn't go around worrying about."

"Oh, that. You mean you were, like, sending messages to me all the time, or something?"

"We tried everything we could think of; but you were just too busy—forgive my saying it—hating other people."

"Yeah, well that's what occurred to me yesterday. I mean, when I had that pain in my chest the first time, it just, like, kind of came to me. I said to myself, 'What are you doing, you craphead?'—excuse the language, I keep forgetting where I am, but I said, 'What are you doing? What good does it do you if Harry or Sandra gets the shaft? I mean, so they get screwed, how does that help *you* at all, even if they'd screw you—sorry, I gotta clean up my mouth, don't I?—but you know what I'm saying, they'd—I don't know how to say it another way—if they got the chance. Like, I mean, it's bad enough the way it is for all of us, so why should I, like, pretend that it's easier for me if I make it worse for others, you know what I'm saying? And for what? Let 'em live their lives, what the hell—I mean what difference does it make?"

"That's why you're here, you know."

"Well, to tell the truth, when I felt that pain in my chest, I kind of had what you might call a glimmer of hope that it, like, might work if it wasn't too late, you know what I'm

saying? But it probably was, if you know what I mean, but what the hell, whether it worked or not it was the truth anyway, and even if it didn't work, there was just no percentage, like, in making life miserable for people around me. God knows I worked hard enough at that most of my life!"

"Yes, I do."

"What? Oh. Right. I can't believe I'm actually talking to you yet. I mean, I still really can't believe you're actually real. I mean, I'm *not* dreaming, am I?"

"No, you're dead."

"Christ!"

"Yes?"

"Sorry. I'm sorry. But I mean, when you say it like that! I mean, how can you, like, *deal* with it?"

"Oh, you'll get used to it soon enough."

"And there's actually a room for me in there!"

"Well, I don't want to get your expectations up too high; it's a pretty small one, and it hasn't got much of a view. But there's a room, yes."

"I don't believe it!"

"You don't have to. I can show it to you."

"I mean, I believe you, but I can't believe it, you know what I'm saying? Just for that few minutes yesterday!"

"That, and a couple of other things. Not many, I'll admit. But you didn't seem to want anything to do with anything in this direction. But why don't I show you to your room?"

As they went inside, the young man remarked about the heat in the floor, which the owner explained to him. He did not seem overly concerned about it, however, because he was so intrigued with the luxury he found inside. He kept exclaiming, "And this is going to be *my* house! I can't believe it!"

Finally, down a rather long and darkish corridor with a great many doors, they came to a room that was anything but prepossessing in comparison with the rest of the mansion. The owner opened the door, and they went inside.

“But it’s real nice!” said the young man. “I mean, I was expecting something down in the basement looking out over the garbage cans or something, and here I’ve even got French doors that look like they go out into a garden.”

“Yes, they do, in fact. I’m afraid that for now, you shouldn’t try to draw the curtain or the light out there will be too much for you. But I suspect that you’ll find enough to occupy yourself with in here meanwhile.”

“What’s this map on the wall here?”

“That’s one of the things I thought you’d be interested in. It’s your life.”

“It looks like one of those road maps you get in the auto clubs. It’s even got a route highlighted.”

“That’s the road you actually took. The roads that branch off it show what would have happened to you if you had chosen a different path, or if something different had happened to you.”

“Oh yeah. Right here near the beginning, for instance, is where I got scarlet fever and nearly died. Let’s see . . . Man! It looks like if I hadn’t got it, I’d have gone down here and caught AIDS when I was eighteen.” He looked at the owner. “Would I really?”

“Well, there are, as you can see, other possibilities down that path. But first of all, we knew that that was what in fact would have happened, and secondly most of the other possibilities would have involved something worse not only for you but for the people you came in contact with.”

“You had it, like, all figured out to the last detail? I mean, not only what *did* happen, but what *would have* happened if it didn’t?”

“That’s right.”

“And you drove me down this particular path—”

“Now wait, that’s not really true. We knew which turning you’d take, and we *helped* you make the decision; but it was always yours. What we did, you see, was rearrange the map based on the decisions we knew you’d take, so that you’d ultimately wind up here and have a chance to pick your room. But as you can see from the blind woman, whether you actually take the room depends on you. We’ll help, but what the decision is going to be is always up to you.”

“I don’t understand it.”

“Fortunately, you don’t have to. But notice how many times you turned away from what would have given you a magnificent apartment here.”

The young man looked in some chagrin at the map. “Man! I was pretty damn stupid, wasn’t I?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“But I made it! I can’t believe it! But say—one of the things I, like, wondered this morning when they took me into the emergency room, and I knew I was going to die. Why then? I mean, I’m a young guy, and young guys don’t get heart attacks.”

“Look at the map.”

The route highlighted ended in the middle of the map, but roads still branched off into the unreal future. He began following some of them. “So if I hadn’t had the heart pain yesterday, then I wouldn’t have realized what I was doing to

myself and the other people and turned away from it; and so if I went down this way—Jesus!”

“Yes?”

“Oh. Sorry. Man! *That* way’s no good. What about this one? . . . Chri—I mean, that’s even worse!”

“Actually,” said the owner, “we saw that you had boxed yourself into a position where every path into the future led to complete disaster. So we decided that, all things considered, it was better to cut your life on earth short.”

“This is, like fascinating, you know what I’m saying? I can see why every single thing happened to me. It was all to get me here, wasn’t it?”

“Well, it wasn’t *all* to get you here. All that time you were shaping who it was you’d be when you got here. For instance, if you’d taken this road down here that you considered at one time, you would have become a world-famous biologist who discovered a cure for AIDS.”

The man thought for a minute and said, “Does somebody else discover it?”

“That particular one? No. No, I’m afraid that particular item of biological knowledge will never get into human consciousness.”

“I blew it, then, didn’t I?”

“From the point of view of this information, I think you could say you did. But it’s your life. However, don’t worry about it; we manage to arrange things for other people just as we arranged your map depending on what you actually chose.”

“So you *do* have it all figured out. I mean, there were so many things that happened that just plain didn’t make sense at the time—and I mean to *nobody*—that you just, like, take it for granted that things don’t make sense, and what the hell, you’ve

got a life to live, you know what I'm saying? and all the time it *does* make sense. But I guess you have to get over here before you can see it."

"Generally. Some people spot it before they get here."

"What are all these pictures of other rooms hanging on the wall?"

"Those are the rooms prepared for people your life has touched."

"Yeah? For real? Whose is this big one, for instance, with that real neat balcony looking over—what is it, a lake?"

"That one belongs to Sandra."

"Sandra? You mean Sandra Phillips? *That* Sandra?"

"Yes, that one."

"But . . . But I *hated* her! I mean, you wouldn't *believe* what I did to her! And that's nothing compared to what I *wanted* to do! If I could've gotten away with it, I'd have killed her!"

"That's true. And if you look back at the map, you'll find that if you had lived five more years, and if she had stayed in Chicago, you would have."

The young man traced the route with his finger, "And I didn't get away with it, did I? I mean I wouldn't have. Here's me in prison. Man! And look at what happens in there! Thank God I missed that!"

"You're welcome."

"What? Oh, that's right, isn't it? I mean, please don't think I'm not grateful or nothing, but, like, all this is so new to me."

"I understand."

"I mean, thanks a lot. An awful lot."

"As I said, you're perfectly welcome."

“You know, I feel funny, like I should be kneeling down and kissing the floor in front of you or something, and here you are, like, just a guy, you know what I’m saying?”

“We try to be friends with the people who live here. If you can put up with me and my ways, I can put up with you and yours.”

“I can’t believe it! . . . And so that’s Sandra’s room. You know, that’s really neat; it’s such a nice room—looks real comfortable. I’m glad she’s got something like that to look forward to, instead of what I did to her.”

“Yes, well do you see that balcony and that view?” asked the owner.

“Yeah, it’s really beautiful. Maybe the best thing about the room.”

“That’s what you gave her.”

“Me?” his mouth dropped in astonishment.

“Your hatred. You see, we don’t allow anything but good over here; and we happen to know that this is what would please her more than anything else; she has always longed for a room with a view over a lake and a balcony to sit on so that she can contemplate it. But she couldn’t have got it simply by her own efforts, and so we let your hatred build it for her.”

“—I can’t believe it! That’s incredible! It almost makes it worth while hating her! —I mean, I don’t mean that the way it sounds, but—you know what I’m saying?”

“Well, we do the best we can with what we have. But I should tell you that what she has is nothing in comparison to what she would have had if you had loved her.”

“Oh. . . . So I blew it again, right?”

“Not that it matters. What is is what it is. You seem to be interested in what could have been if things weren’t the way

they are; and we don't see any reason for not satisfying that curiosity. But in the last analysis, your life here is what you wanted your life to be, and that goes for anyone else who gets here."

"Is Sandra going to be here soon?"

"That's not for me to tell you," said the owner. "You'll find out for yourself when the time comes."

"I mean, will I meet her? I mean, I don't know what I could say, you know what I'm saying?"

"Well, if she decides to stay here, then you can be sure she won't take anything you'd say in a wrong sense. You'll find when you talk to people here that you know *exactly* what they're saying."

"You mean she might not stay?"

"That is totally up to her," answered the owner.

"But—but if she didn't, that'd be, like, really rotten."

"Look at it this way: if she decides not to stay, then it's because she'd feel happier somewhere else. You wouldn't want her to be less happy than she wanted to be, would you?"

". . . I guess not."

"All the people in this country, whether they are in this house or not, have everything they are willing to receive. But no more."

"But look at me. *I* got more. *A lot* more."

"You have a great deal more than you deserve, that's true. But not more than you are willing to accept—provided, of course, you decide to stay."

"Provided! I mean, how could I not?"

"I am happy to hear that; and so, if I may say so, is everyone else living here. And so let me leave you to explore

your room until the curtain is drawn back for you and you can see the garden. I'll meet you out there afterwards."

VIII.

The Victim



Oh, what a lovely little room!” exclaimed the woman—hardly more than a girl, really. “It’s even nicer than I’d hoped it would be!”

“We do try to please,” said the owner. “I had a feeling you’d like it.”

“And I do want to thank you for booking such an early flight for me to come here. I had visions of just waiting and waiting for the plane, and I didn’t know if I could stand it.”

“Well, we’d had reports, you see, that if you had stayed much longer, you would have taken steps to travel here on your own, and if you did, then this room wouldn’t have been available—and there was a good chance that there might be nothing you’d like at all. And even if you didn’t, if we’d

delayed your flight, the only thing we'd have been able to offer you were rooms that were considerably more cramped and not at all as well decorated. So we decided to strike while the iron was hot, so to speak."

"Oh, don't apologize. I can't see why people are so anxious to postpone their travel until the last possible second. I know some who had even a worse time than I had, and yet they keep calling up to get extensions on their stay over there."

"Generally that's because they don't think that this country exists, you know."

"I've never been able to understand that. What possible sense could there be in waiting for a plane if it wasn't going to take you anywhere?"

"Ah, but you see, many of them don't realize that what they're actually in is an airport."

"But that's silly. All they have to do is look out the window."

"You would think so, wouldn't you? But many of them don't."

"Well, it's not for lack of windows, certainly."

"No, we tried to put them throughout the building."

"You know what really bothered me over there? The fact that nobody every wanted to talk about what was really important, like what was outside and where the planes were all going, and what we were doing in that waiting room in the first place. If I'd bring up the subject, they'd all shush me because I was interrupting the football game on the monitor, or they were busy shopping for the right kind of dress for the party. Even the color of their nail polish was more important than anything *I* wanted to talk about."

“I know. But of course, you might say that they thought that they were making the best of their time there. Many of them want to sample everything in the airport before their flight is called, and they run around from shop to shop and lounge to lounge because they’re never sure when their flight is supposed to leave. We thought of installing timetables, but reconsidered when we realized that too many people would simply do nothing until the last minute, and even then, instead of getting ready for the journey, they’d just be in a frantic rush to see all they’d missed.”

“That’s what I mean. You’d think they didn’t care. Believe me, I tried to make them see what they were doing, but they didn’t want to listen, and they’d just call me a nut.”

“They did that to me, too, you know, when I was over there.”

“I know. Isn’t it discouraging?”

“Well no, not really,” answered the owner.

“How can you *say* that? *You* of all people!”

“Well in the first place, many of them do seem to settle in rather well over here, and find their rooms quite comfortable—though from an absolute standpoint, so to speak, they aren’t overly blessed with furnishings. But if they’re happy in them, and would only be uncomfortable in something more elaborate, who are we to impose our standards on them?”

“What do you mean? I thought that that was the whole point of your going over there in the first place.”

“Oh, no, you misunderstood. Many do. No, all I was trying to do, given that they didn’t want me to build this mansion over there, was to let them know the house was here and show them the kinds of things that would make them dissatisfied with *any* room in it. But *their* standards prevail. If

they don't want a room, after having been informed of it—and after seeing it, if they'd like, when they get here—then we respect their wishes, and our blessings go with them even as they wander around in the darkness outside.”

“But how could anyone not want a room, especially once he's seen it?”

“You'd be surprised. You see, most of the rooms turn out to have furnishings that people are a little surprised to find there—even though they'd ordered them themselves while they were in the other country. The trouble, you see, is that what they ordered and what they *thought* they were ordering don't always agree, though we try to make the catalogue as clear as possible. And when they get here and find out what it actually is, then some of them don't feel comfortable with it.”

“But isn't it something *you*'ve given them? And how could anyone be dissatisfied with that?”

“Well, because, as I said, their standards are the ones they judge things by. Many of them ask to change their order once they see it in the room; but once you're over here, it's too late. Even if you could change it, nothing else would satisfy you any better. Because your standards are set by that time, you see.”

“Well, I suppose I can see your point, but when you're back there, what you've just said amounts in practice to what I was saying. And I *tried* to tell them. They'd go into the bar and drink, for instance, and I'd tell them that I didn't want to go, because I didn't want to do that kind of thing to myself, and I didn't try to preach at them, really, but they took my refusal as some kind of self-righteous sneering at them; and they just wanted to have nothing to do with me. It was hard.”

“Yes, it was, wasn't it? They didn't want to accept you for what you were.”

“That was just it! I used to try to go to parties with them, but I couldn’t bring myself to get drunk and do drugs and all the things they thought were fun, and they’d ask me why I didn’t just try it to see what it was like, and what was I supposed to say? And when I did say that I didn’t want to do that kind of thing to myself, they acted as if I was stuck up. But what was I supposed to do?”

“Well, you were certainly *supposed* not to do harm to yourself.”

“And that’s what they were doing to *themselves*, and I cared about them. I mean, I’m a very caring person. People come to me when they’re in trouble, and I listen to them, and I can sometimes help them, because they know I *care*. But these people wouldn’t even *let* me help them. And I’m a sensitive person. It really bothers me when people hate me even though I’m just trying to help them. I mean, I know it shouldn’t, but I can’t help it; it just does.”

“They wanted you to just let them alone.”

“That’s right. That’s what they said. But they were *ruining* their lives and the lives of their parents and the other people who loved them. And what should I have done? Just stand by and let them make a wreck of themselves?”

“Did they know they were doing this?”

“They certainly *should* have. I told them and told them. And they did, actually. Sometimes they’d come back at me and say, ‘Will you shut up? It’s my life, and if I want to ruin it, that’s my privilege.’”

“It is, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is their life, and if they want to wreck it, that’s the privilege we give them.”

“But how *can* you? That’s what I always wondered. How can you just sit over here, knowing what they’re doing, and able to keep them from doing it, and go ahead and let them do it?”

“Well, of course, we try to see to it that they’re informed about what they’re doing and what effect it’s going to have.”

“But they don’t *listen!*”

“That’s true, many of them don’t. We have to shock some of them into actually hearing what we are saying, and some of them only listen for a very short time. We tend often to issue their boarding call at that moment, because we can foresee that, like you, if we delayed, then the moment would be lost and they’d never accept their room. That’s what we’re really interested in; whether they have a chance to accept their room once they get here, not in what they get up to over there in the waiting room.”

“I don’t understand that. Don’t you *care* what happens over there?”

“That depends on what you mean by ‘care,’ I suppose. We care enough about people to respect their freedom. If they know what they are doing and decide to do it, then we think it’s not respectful of us to interfere.”

“Even for their own good?”

“You see, we happen to think that their good is that they be free to make of their lives what they want. It sometimes involves what most people would call a miserable life; but if they find they would be *more* miserable doing what most people would be happy doing, why should we make them more miserable for their own good?”

“I don’t see that at all. I don’t think you understand what life is really like over there.”

“You forget that I was over there myself.”

“Yes, but you didn’t *really* share what our life is like. You couldn’t. These people *can’t* really know what’s good for them or they’d never choose the things they choose. And if *you* won’t tell them, *somebody’s* got to.”

“Well, as I say, we do see to it that the information is available to them.”

“That’s what I mean. You just lay it out there for them to look at, but you don’t *make* them see it. How can you say that they’re well informed under those conditions? For instance, you said that many of them don’t think believe that this country exists. Well, why don’t you *show* them?”

“We’ve certainly told them about it.”

“Yes, but if you showed them, they couldn’t deny it.”

“Oh, come now,” said the owner. “When I was over there among you, I showed them all sorts of things, and they wouldn’t believe their own eyes; they said it was all a trick. Besides, our research indicates that the kind of information we give allows for people when they get here to be surprised, so to speak, into accepting their room, while if we showed it to them when they were over there, many more of them would reject it as a fraud intended to keep them out of the shops and so on in the airport.”

“Well I personally think that somebody who really cares about another person has a duty to do everything in his power to see to it that the other person doesn’t wreck his life. If not for his sake, then for the sake of the others that he drags down with him. I’ve seen it happen too often!”

“Well, we seem to have something of a disagreement here that we can perhaps iron out later in our conversations after

you have settled in. Do you like the room? Do you think you want to stay?"

"Oh yes! I love it, in fact. That little balcony is the cutest thing; I always wanted a balcony I could sit on and look out at the scenery. But what's that tent around it?"

"Oh, that's just temporary. It turns out that the garden beyond is too bright to get used to all at once; it will be removed soon after you take up residence."

"What's the view like? I'm almost afraid to ask."

"Well, there's a small lake down below with a pergola beside it, and mountains off in the distance. That sort of thing."

"Oh, I was hoping that was what it was! I'm sure it's going to be just perfect!"

"We try our best, Sandra. Now is there anything else about the room that you'd like to ask about?"

You can take all the time you need."

She walked about the room, examining the furniture, looking over the books on the shelf, and making little squeals of delight as she recognized what was familiar. But she stopped, puzzled, at a picture on the wall. "What is this picture of another room?" she asked.

"That's another person's room."

"But why is it here? Do I know her?"

"It's a man, actually, and yes, you do know him. It's Frank's room."

"Oh. . . . Is he *here*?"

"Didn't you know? He arrived shortly before you did."

"But I—I never expected to find him *here*. I mean, he *hated* me. I thought you knew that."

"Yes, we did."

“But it wasn’t just ordinary hatred. He actually *raped* me once. It was in his living room, one time when I had come over to make a friendly visit, and we got to talking, and—” tears began streaming down her face—“and I was just trying to help him, and he—and he—said, ‘I can’t take any more of this!’ and he grabbed me and pushed me down on the floor, and—and raped me, and said, ‘So you think I’m rotten do you? I’ll show you how rotten I can be! You’ve pestered me and pestered me, and this is what I think of it and of you and all you stand for!’ And all I ever tried to do was *help* him, and he did this horrible thing to me! How could you not know that? You’re supposed to know everything. It was the most terrible thing that ever happened in my whole life!”

“Yes, Sandra,” said the owner quietly, “we were aware of the whole thing.”

“And he’s *here*? You’ve *rewarded* him for it? How *could* you?”

“No, we haven’t rewarded him. Nothing here is a reward; it’s all a gift.”

“And look at the room he’s got! Look at those French doors and the scenery outside them! It must be one of the best rooms in the house!”

“Oh, no. Far from it, actually. But that set of French doors and the scenery was a special gift from someone else, not simply from us.”

“From someone else? Who?”

“You’ll have to brace yourself for this. It was from you, actually.”

“From *me*? Why would I give *him* a gift like that? He should be *punished*, not rewarded! Don’t you realize what he did to me? He ruined my whole life! I could never forget it!”

“I know, and, to be perfectly truthful, it was your hatred for him that built that addition onto his room.”

“My *hatred!* I never hated him. I forgave him!”

“Yes, that’s what you kept telling everyone—and yourself too. But you wanted him punished, you remember; you lived for the thought of seeing him punished, and it hurt and galled you that he seemed to be getting away with what he had done, because no one believed you.”

“I know! It was so unfair! There I was suffering, and no one would believe me! I felt so bad I could hardly mention it, and when I told someone, she just looked at me and said, ‘I know you broke up with him, Sandra, but don’t try to make yourself a martyr now.’ A *martyr!* As if I were just making it up! And it really happened! It really *happened!*”

“Yes, it really happened.”

“And it was *horrible!* You have no idea how horrible it was!” She looked over at the owner, as if a revelation had dawned on her. “Not even *you* care, do you?” she said bitterly. “You go giving him that beautiful room, in spite of everything, and you have the nerve to tell me that *I* am responsible for the best part of it! What kind of monster *are* you, anyway? And to top it all off, you say that it’s my *hatred* that did it, and I’ve never hated anyone in my whole life!”

“I’m sorry if you take it that way. But that’s what the facts are. You see, what we call hatred is wishing harm to another person, and being miserable because he is happy. Wanting him punished, if you like.”

“Why shouldn’t I want him punished after what he did to me? It’s only simple justice!”

“We don’t work on simple justice here. But of course, what his hatred did for you is here in your room, just as yours is there in his.”

“But then . . . I think I know what you’re going to say. What about this patio? Is that just your gift to me? Or is it . . . ?”

“Yes, Frank built you that patio with his hatred.”

“Oh *no!* Oh *no!* I can’t *stand* it! The thing I thought was going to be my joy and pleasure! And *now* look what you’ve done to it!”

“Sandra, it’s still what it was a minute ago.”

“Still what it was! Do you think I could set foot on it now, knowing who’s responsible for it? I’d die a thousand deaths before I’d give him the satisfaction!”

“Sandra, listen to me! Listen! He’s very happy now to know that what he thought ruined your life actually had no other effect than to make it that much more beautiful. He’s so grateful that he wasn’t able to do you any damage, Sandra. He loves you. It took him a long time, but he loves you.”

“Oh, he does, does he? Is that what he says?”

“No, he hasn’t said it explicitly, but that’s what the truth is. You should have seen his face when I told him about the patio.”

“How do *you* know? How do you know he wasn’t lying? He could con anybody.”

“Sandra, look at me. I know.”

“Well even if he does, I don’t see how that changes things. He still ruined my life over there. I could never act normally around men again. How do you expect me to sit on this patio and look out over the landscape and be able to forget why I’m there? I could forgive him for what he did, but how do you

expect me to forget it? *Nothing* he could do could ever make up for it! Nothing! Nothing *anyone* could do!”

“Sandra, please! Listen!”

“No! I won’t! You’re just like everyone else! And I thought it would be different here; I thought I could at last find *someone* who shared my values! But no! You’re just as bad as the rest of them. You go along with evil and don’t try to stop it, and you even *reward* it, and you do *this* to someone who’s never done anything in her whole life but try to *help* people and to do the right thing! There’s *nobody* who shares my values! I’m totally alone!”

“There are those who love you, Sandra, and want you to be happy. You’re not alone unless you isolate yourself. Please don’t do that.”

“Happy? *Here?* You’ve made it impossible for me ever to be happy here! *You* don’t love me any more than anyone else does! You’re just saying that to keep me here so you can torture me by holding that horrible moment before my eyes all the time. And all I was trying to do was help you do your work, and you punish me with the most cruel of all punishments for it! You *hate* me. Everyone hates me! You’re just as evil as all the rest of them! I can’t stand it! I can’t stand it! I hate you all! Every last one of you!”

—And she rushed out into the darkness, sobbing and screaming.

IX.

The Bishop

AS THE GIRL'S DISTRAUGHT FIGURE disappeared in the distance, a portly man just past middle age, wearing a Roman collar and a large ring, approached the steps. He turned and looked back at the girl, then up the two steps to the owner, and said, "Have you turned her away?"

"Not exactly," was the answer. "She seems to have turned herself away."

"But aren't you going to call her back?"

"I already have," said the owner. "She doesn't appear to be interested."

"But you have to *make* her interested, don't you realize that? You've taken the wrong approach. Do you want her wandering around out there in the cold and dark forever?"

"If that is what she herself prefers, well yes."

"But that's ridiculous! How could she prefer it?"

“Some seem to. Perhaps after a time ... But so far, no one who has turned away has come back.”

“That’s just the point. They probably can’t find their way back here, once you send them away—especially if you make no effort to go after them!”

“For your information, they can, if they choose. None have chosen, that’s all.”

“Well no wonder, if what they’re coming back to is some rigid taskmaster who’s more interested in seeing to it that his commands are carried out than in the people he’s supposed to love so much! I know you better than that.”

“You do, do you?”

“Of course I do. It’s just that you give the wrong impression. People get lost in the dogma, and forget that there’s a pastoral dimension to everything too.”

“In other words, you don’t think I make a very good shepherd.”

The Bishop laughed. “Well, I’d be the last to say that, wouldn’t I?”

“Oh, I don’t suppose you’ll be the last,” returned the owner.

“I mean, it’s obvious to me,” said the Bishop, “that that poor girl’s situation is only temporary, and all based on a misunderstanding, and everything is going to be all right in the end.”

“You’re right that it’s based on a misunderstanding. And whether it’s will be all right in the end depends on what you mean by ‘all right.’ She will have what she prefers, whatever that is.”

“You see? I know you. I can’t believe there’s not a room ready for her right now, and that you’ll be welcoming her back

the way the father welcomed the prodigal son in the story you told.”

“You’re right that the room is there, and I am ready to welcome her back when and if she comes. I am not angry with her.”

“I told you so. But if you’d been just a little more gentle and flexible, you could have avoided all this unpleasantness. —Of course,” he added, catching a look from the owner, “I’m not really accusing you of inflexibility either; it’s probably due to the way she was taught about you, and she probably has to unlearn a good deal.”

“She has to change her attitude toward me, at least,” said the owner.

“For instance, she probably heard the interpretation of that story in terms of the two sons, the prodigal and the older brother, and was told to compare herself to one of them. But the way I preach it, I concentrate on the father. I think of the older son as representing the conservative wing of Christianity, who can’t understand what the modern world is coming to; and the younger son is the liberal wing, who think that this Christianity stuff the conservatives talk about is just too confining.

“But the father is there, you’ll notice, right in the middle of the road, welcoming in the prodigal, and welcoming in the older son when he complains about the treatment the prodigal is getting.”

“The father is the moderate, in other words.”

“Right. He’s in the middle, where the truth is, and so he can see both sides.”

“Really. Then why didn’t he go looking for the prodigal?”

“Oh, he would have; except the prodigal came home. They always do. Remember, the woman looked through the whole house to find the lost coin, and the shepherd left the ninety-nine sheep and went after the stray.”

“Let’s extend the story a little bit. Suppose he goes looking for the son and finds him feeding the pigs. He asks him to come home and the son refuses. What does he do?”

“I imagine he’d reason with him.”

“And after that, do you think he’d say, ‘Here’s another thousand, son. You can’t think straight if you’re breaking your back feeding these pigs. Take this and consider your life.’”

“I suppose he might.”

“I thought you would. And what would the son do with the extra thousand?”

“Well, take it and find himself a decent place to live and reconsider his life based on how kind his father is.”

“He wouldn’t just spend it on prostitutes and then go back to the father for another ‘loan’ when it was gone?”

“Well, he might, of course. There’s always that risk.”

“In other words, the father would risk subsidizing the prodigal son’s lifestyle, because he’s in the middle of the road, and neither a conservative nor a liberal.”

“Well, that sounds a little crude as you put it. It implies that the father approves of what the son is doing. He loves the son.”

“And loving the son involves subsidizing his life of sin.”

“Well ... sin.”

“What would you call it?”

“Well, if you want a term, I’d call it an unhealthy lifestyle. I’d even go so far as to say that it was self-destructive behavior. But sin ... you see, sin has this connotation of an angry God

who's going to send you into fire and brimstone if you violate his orders."

"Or perhaps let you wander in the darkness."

"Exactly. And you're not like that. The father welcomed the son back. And notice, he didn't ask for any 'atonement' or 'reparation' for what he'd done; he just killed the fatted calf because he'd come back."

"But in the story, he did wait until the son came back, and in fact welcomed him only after the son had completely changed his attitude."

"Well of course, but that's not the point of the story. The point of the story is that he welcomed him and didn't make him pay for his 'sin,' if that's what you want to call it; and that the older son's attitude was the one he condemned."

"Well now, he didn't condemn the older son."

"You're right, he didn't; I stand corrected. But that just reinforces the point I'm trying to make. He welcomed both of them, liberal and conservative."

"But the one you call the 'liberal,' only after he's returned to what is presumably 'conservatism.'"

"But that isn't the message. That story, after all, comes right after the one of the shepherd going after the lost sheep. You can't say that the *sheep* had to undergo a change of heart before the shepherd would take it back."

"It would be a little difficult to be realistic, wouldn't it, and talk about repentant sheep?"

"But the fact is that the story *doesn't* require the repentance of the sheep. And the shepherd goes looking for it, and doesn't wait until it's trying to find its way back."

"So the repentance of the prodigal is only secondary, in your mind. It wasn't added to the sheep story precisely to

correct the impression that repentance might not really make a difference.”

“Well, repentance makes a *difference*, of course, but it’s more nuanced than you’re making it out to be. You see, the prodigal was really doing himself damage without realizing it when he was engaging in his dissolute lifestyle. His repentance brought him in line with the truth, and in *that* sense it made a difference. But it wasn’t that he was sorry he was disobeying an angry father, or was afraid of what his father would do to him if he caught him.”

“He expected his father to treat him as one of his slaves, not a son any longer,” said the owner.

“Well yes,” answered the Bishop, “but you and I know that his father wasn’t going to do that; and if he’d thought about it enough, he would have realized that too.”

“You think his father would not have left him there feeding the pigs, supposing he hadn’t come to his senses.”

“I don’t think his father would have left him there forever, no. And neither do you. Admit it.”

“What would you have? Would the father go to see him and pick him up on his shoulders like a lost sheep and carry him back, kicking and screaming, to his family?”

“Of course not. He’d go to him and find some way of persuading him to realize what he was doing to himself and return on his own two feet. That father is a very, very clever father.”

“And children are never perverse enough to withstand his blandishments.”

“You have a way of putting things, don’t you. Why would he have children who were only going to ruin their lives eternally? It doesn’t make sense.”

“It makes sense if he has enough respect for them not to try to manipulate them into doing something they don’t want to do.”

“Ah, well there you’re avoiding nuances again. What do you mean, they ‘don’t want to do’ it? Nobody wants his own destruction; they want to be happy; so the prodigal really wants to live in the family, and is just deluded about what he really wants. So the father’s ‘blandishments,’ as you call them aren’t ‘manipulation,’ they’re simply the revelation to the ‘sinner’ of what the truth is about his situation. And anyway, what are threats about hellfire except manipulation?”

“What about a description of the way things really are?”

“Oh, come now. You’re not going to tell me that there’s really a pit of fire and sulfur that sinners dance around in with devils prodding them with pitchforks!”

“No more than that heaven is one eternal literal banquet. But does that mean that the psychological equivalent doesn’t really exist?”

“I’m sorry, but I just don’t buy all that; it’s all rhetoric. The God I believe in is a compassionate God, and would never tolerate leaving his beloved children in eternal torment, whether it’s physical or psychological.”

“And if they prefer eternal torment to a life in Abraham’s bosom? If they’d find it more torture to endure what most of us would call happiness than to pursue their own chosen lifestyle?”

“You mean, no matter what pain that lifestyle causes them?”

“Yes.”

“That’s absurd. Why would they do it?”

“Oh, there are many reasons. Because they hate me for making them blind, for instance. Or for forgiving someone they themselves can’t forgive.”

“They don’t hate you. Not really.”

“They certainly make a good show of it.”

“No, you don’t understand. They’re just upset by the situation they’re in. This is what I was talking about. If you show yourself as kind and gentle and compassionate—as you really are, in other words—then they’d get over their temper tantrum and embrace you. They always have with me when I’ve shown you this way.”

“Yes, they have. I’ve seen it. Unfortunately, when you show me this way, what you’re saying, in effect, is that I’m going to make reality conform to what they want it to be, rather than forcing them to accept it as it is.”

“Well now, you’re talking in terms of black and white again. Anyway, you *can’t* ‘force’ people to accept anything they don’t want to accept.”

“Which was just my point. If they will not accept it, they will not accept it; it’s their choice.”

“No, no, no, you keep misunderstanding me. What I meant was that you can’t *force* people to accept things; but you can *explain* things to them in such a way that they realize that it wasn’t the rigid black-or-white, sin-or-virtue situation that they thought it was.”

“Suppose it *is* black-or-white.”

“Oh, come now. Nothing is ever black or white.”

“Nothing? Ever? Even ‘Nothing is ever black or white?’”

“Good heavens! Who would ever believe that *you*, of all people, would start spouting sophisms!”

“I was just pointing one out.”

“You know what I mean! Reality isn’t some fixed lump of rock that is rigid and immovable forever and ever. Reality can be modified; think of how we’ve progressed over all the centuries in reshaping our world—just as you yourself intended. And reality has, as you so well know, an infinite number of facets; you can’t just focus on one or two to the exclusion of all the others.”

“So you’re telling me that if I run into a recalcitrant servant who, instead of listening to me, proceeds to tell me how to manage my universe, I should find some new facet of reality which will mollify him, and then I can win him back to me.”

“Well isn’t that the loving and compassionate thing to do? He’s lost without you. You have to *listen* as well as talk, or there’s no dialogue.”

“And after all, dialogue and presumably consensus is what we’re really after.”

“There, you see? I told you I knew you. It’s just a matter of emphasis.”

“The emphasis being that instead of just asserting my will for my creatures, I should listen to them and modify it so that we can come to a consensus.”

“Of course. *You* know that. I didn’t need to tell you that.”

“You apparently thought you did.”

“You seem to think I don’t realize who I’m talking to.”

“What you’ve been saying is open to that interpretation, to say the least.”

“Well, but you see, I know you. After all, I’ve been talking to you for a good fifty years and more.”

“Yes, that’s very true, isn’t it? You’ve been talking to me for years and years and years. But now that we’ve reached

consensus on this, perhaps we should postpone further dialogue for the moment. You'd like to see your room, I presume."

"Well yes, I would, if it isn't too much trouble."

"First, before we go in, do you know the name of the door in front of you?"

"The name? It's a beautiful door, of course. Carved oak, isn't it? But does it have a name?"

"Indeed it does. Its name is 'reality.'"

"Ah, I see," said the Bishop. "Very clever. You mean, I'm now facing reality."

"Exactly. You always were quick and capable of catching subtle nuances. The reason I'm telling you, however, is that most people find reality something of a shock. We have been having this conversation, actually, not simply to pass the time, but to prepare you for the experience. I make it explicit now to be sure that you are forewarned."

"Oh, I think I'll be able to handle it. Lead on."

The owner opened the door and passed through, with the Bishop following. As they entered the foyer, the owner grew larger and larger, until he was at least three times as tall as he had been outside; the Bishop's eye was now at the level of his kneecap.

As he stepped over the threshold, the Bishop shrank back a bit, but then took a deep breath and trotted, feeling ridiculous, after the enormous figure who was preceding him down a l o n g c o r r i d o r .

The Bishop wanted to protest the speed, but had no breath to spare. A single stride of the giant was a dozen of his, and no concession seemed to be being made for the sudden difference in size.

Unfortunately, the mansion was quite large and they seemed to be going into one of the farthest wings. “This is the area I have reserved for my chosen slaves,” came the booming voice from above. “Your room is down this corridor.”

There were many very ornate doors, worthy of kings rather than slaves, on either side of the passageway; but there were others that looked as if they opened into very definite servants’ quarters. It was in front of one of these that the owner stooped, about to turn the handle.

The Bishop stopped, gasping, looking up into the enormous face of the owner. “Sl—slaves?” he managed finally to say. “I thought you called us ‘friends.’”

“Indeed I did,” said the owner. “I preceded it, however, with ‘You call me “master” and “teacher,” and you are right, because that is what I am.’ I choose to call you ‘friends’ and to make you children; but that is my choice, just as you yourself were my choice, not I yours. I had a mission for you to perform.”

The Bishop had found his breath by that time. “I know that. I tried my best to fulfill it. It was to love others.”

“As I loved you. Did I make life easy and comfortable for my people?”

“I know that you wanted to.”

“Do you. The time for all of this is gone. Do you want to see the room?”

The Bishop looked up at the owner, surprised at his tone, and then meekly answered, “Yes, please.”

The owner opened the door, ducked under the lintel, and both entered. “But—but this is a—a tomb!” said the Bishop. It certainly looked like one, or like a dungeon. The walls were huge blocks of rough stone, and instead of windows at eye-

level and below, there were niches which held caskets of various sizes and degrees of ornateness.

Fearful of what they held, the Bishop went over to one and gingerly lifted its lid—and discovered that inside it was just what one would have expected: a collection of bones and rotting flesh. In speechless horror, he looked up at the owner.

“These,” was the deafening reply, “are the remains of the people your stupid ‘compassion’ affected. Some will in fact occupy their rooms in spite of you; but the hearts of many were hardened against reality by your sophistical attempts to pretend that I did not really mean what I was saying.”

“I don’t know what to say,” said the Bishop. “I’m shocked! Shocked! You *can’t* be the bloodthirsty God the hellfire preachers rant about. This must be some kind of joke.”

“The joke is what you made of my attempt to explain to my people what they actually were, and that they could not make reality over into something else simply by declaring it to be what it was not. I sent you to deliver my message to people so that they could be saved—and you spent your life arguing not with unbelievers, but with me, because it did not suit your puny idea of what I and my reality ought to be. You succeeded not only in deluding yourself, but in seducing my beloved into sin, and not only into sin, but into sin in my name!

“Fortunately for them and you, neither of you fully realized what you were doing. Many of them will be saved through their sincere adherence to the errors into which you led them, since they thought they were following the authentic shepherd. You are capable of being saved because you were too stupid yourself to be aware of the implications of your rebellion—so stupid that you were able to convince yourself that it was service to me and not Satan.”

“Satan?” said the Bishop in a small voice.

“You were warned that he masks himself as an angel of light; but his object is to convince mankind that it has control over reality, and can remake it simply by a technological manipulation that allows it to appear the opposite of what it is. You, for instance, championed sex-change operations for those dissatisfied with what you call their ‘gender’—as if an operation could actually change their genetic structure and the body that it built. You debased the difference between the sexes by reducing it to one of external organs and hormones.”

“But the only important thing about gender—”

“We will have no more of that! I have heard all your arguments. Instead of looking at the reality of what you were doing, you protested against me and my authentic representatives as being too harsh and not taking human reality into account, by which you meant human desires. Reality, as you now see, is not measured in by the strength of desire.”

“But I can’t believe—”

“Beware when you say that! You have hidden behind ‘but I can’t believe’ as if it were an innocuous phrase. You can believe. Whether you believe or not depends on whether you *choose* to believe. I gave you much, not the least of which was a brilliant mind, which you have squandered on ‘I can’t believe,’ finding all kinds of reasons why it is plausible not to believe. Now is the moment of truth. Do you believe or not?”

“I believe. I believe in a God of forgiveness and mercy.”

“Your task in the next few days is going to be to discover whether you believe in the God who is letting you have the heaven you have constructed for yourself, which is this room, because this room is the result of your use of the commission I gave to you to be my emissary to my people. Instead of

flinging you out into the darkness, I permit you to remain here, and to study the contents of those caskets. As you understand what each of them contains, they will disappear, and a window will open in this room onto the landscape in which the people whom your penance will save will find their happiness. Eventually, when you have made atonment for all the damage you have done to them, you yourself will be able to leave the room and wander outside, and eventually even furnish the room itself to your liking. That is my mercy toward you.”

“Do I understand you? You’re sentencing me to prison?” squeaked the Bishop.

“For your misuse of my gifts. You were ordained presbyter: an elder, and elders are supposed to be wise with tradition, not sophomores full of their own cleverness, looking for innovations. You were then ordained as my emissary, whose function was to preserve my truth intact and transmit it through the ages, not to distort it according to the ‘wisdom’ of the spirit of the age. Your mind was to be my mind, not to remake my mind unto your own image and likeness, whatever your ‘compassion’ for my people.”

“Then why did you create me with a mind,” said the Bishop, flushing, “if you don’t want me to have a mind of my own?”

“When you chose to be my emissary, you freely gave up the ‘mind of your own.’ My thoughts are not your thoughts, and for us to be one, your thoughts must be transformed into mine, not the other way round.”

“This has to be a nightmare! I can’t believe it’s happening! It’s the very opposite of everything I’ve stood for and struggled for!”

“Exactly. It is time to face reality; you can no longer evade it.”

“But—”

“It is also no longer time for objections. These are the facts. You will be locked in here for a few days because that is the only way you will be able to circumvent your considerable powers of evasion. After that, you may leave and wander in the darkness, where you will wail and gnash your teeth, and I will declare that I never knew you; or you will begin the slow process of undoing the harm you have perpetrated in your foolishness.”

“You can’t do this to me! You *can’t!*”

“You have done it to yourself. It is not your blindness which will condemn you; it will be your persistence in saying that you can see. The only way you will open your eyes is if you are locked in here; and therefore, in spite of your protests, it will be done to you. The choice afterward is yours.

“But—”

“Farewell.”

X.

The Suicide

hen he opened the door, the owner saw at the foot of the steps a man kneeling, bent over with his head upon his knees and his arms grasping his head, sobbing as if his heart would break.

“I can’t stand it! I can’t stand it!” he kept crying, between bursts of inarticulate wailing.

The owner went down the steps and sat down beside him.

Eventually, he became aware of another presence and glanced up; but this only threw him into another paroxysm of grief. The owner sat without speaking.

“Well go ahead!” screamed the man—who looked quite young, but possibly because of a serious program of weight lifting. “Get it over with! It can’t be any worse than I’ve had to go through all these years! I can’t stand it! I can’t stand it!” He stared defiantly at the owner, the tears soaking his whole face, making his rebellious expression more ridiculous than tragic.

“You are still alive,” said the owner.

“Oh, you noticed!” he shrieked. “God curse the moment I was born! —But you won’t, will you? You’re going to preach to me about how great a gift this ‘life’ you gave me is! Well, I don’t want your gift! Fuck your gift! But you won’t let me give it back to you, will you? I have to keep living and living and living! I can’t stand it! I can’t stand it!”

“I could annihilate you, you know,” said the owner gently. “But think. How would that give you satisfaction? There would be nothing to be satisfied.”

“Oh, shut up! I don’t give one sweet shit whether there’s anything to be satisfied or not! I want out! I don’t want to live! —And now there’s nothing I can do about it! And you won’t annihilate me, because it’s against your law!”

A thought struck him, and he suddenly looked up into the owner’s face. “Would you? If I really wanted it?”

“No. You are right, because I created you immortal, and I don’t contradict myself. And I certainly wouldn’t do it before you had a chance to see your room.”

The man turned over from his kneeling position and sat on the lowest step, his forearms on his knees and his hands dangling limply in space, his head bowed over his chest. He was silent for a long time, except for an occasional sobbing gasp as his breath came back to him.

“Well,” he said at last, “I took my chance, and why should it have turned out any different from anything else I’ve tried? —Oh God! Forever and ever and ever!” He closed his eyes and buried his head in his hands and wept again, but now with the more silent agony of exhaustion.

“You failed in everything,” said the owner.

The man, who one could now see was probably well into middle age, turned angrily on the owner. “*You* know that! Or at least you’re supposed to! Not one thing I ever tried worked!”

“Well that’s not true, you know. But it is true that the things you really cared about failed.”

“What, are you going to hold up all my little ‘successes’ that don’t amount to a hill of beans and tell me, ‘See how wonderful life is? You built a model plane when you were twelve! You were the only one to solve a math problem in your junior year in high school! A girl actually cared about you once for a couple of hours!’”

“A wife still cares about you.”

“She doesn’t care about *me*! She cares about her idea of me! She’s the greatest failure of my life, if anything. God knows I tried, but I couldn’t satisfy her. —Of course, how could I, being what I am? What should I have expected? I should never have asked her to marry me.

“—There it is. I knew it wouldn’t work—or I should have, so I can’t blame anybody but myself. But I was just stupid enough to think that it was barely possible that with her help, I could change. Ha. What right did I have to subject her to all she went through?”

“It was her choice too.”

“Yes, but she was much more self-deluded than I was—she still is, for that matter. Of course, maybe now her eyes have been opened a little. She’s free anyway. If only I were! How is she?”

“Well, she resents bitterly what you just did to her by killing yourself. She hasn’t got over that yet.”

“And she’s probably feeling guilty that she should have found a way to stop me, that she didn’t really believe I’d do it after all these years of saying I would.”

“That too.”

“So I failed again. Story of my life. You know, once I called the suicide prevention hotline, and got talking to a poor lady, who was trying to get me to promise not to do it. ‘Why should I?’ I said. She said, ‘You hurt those you care about so deeply. I care. I don’t want you to destroy yourself.’ ‘Look, lady,’ I said. ‘I’m going to kill myself because my life is so horrible that I’d rather face the prospect of hell than go on’—I actually said that—‘and you want me to reconsider because you might be disappointed if I do it. You don’t even know me! Why should how you feel make any difference to me?’

“Well, she went on and on and in the course of it mentioned that crap about how people use threats of suicide to control others. That really pisses me off! It’s true I was playing with her, and that I’d called in the first place to find out what these pricks think they can actually do besides make themselves feel good that they at least tried.

“But I threatened to kill myself because I couldn’t stand life, not so I could get something from my wife or whatever. As far as I’m concerned, she can be whatever she wants to be, and if I can help, I’ll do it.”

“You did want to open her eyes as to how blind she was about you, though.”

“I won’t deny it. But I knew it wouldn’t work. And frankly, I didn’t care, when push came to shove. She is what she is, just like I am what I am, however much she wanted me to be somebody else. I just wanted out. But no psychologist can believe that; you’ve got to be nuts if you want to end it all.

Why, if life is positive hell? Why, if there's no hope that the things that make life worth living are out of reach? Hanging there in front of you as if you could actually get them, when you know you can't—and when you do get a taste of them, you know you've got to spit it out!

“I finally hung up on her. That was five years ago. I didn't bother calling this time.”

“That was when James Levine sent back your opera.”

“Right. —Say, you do know everything, don't you? I mean, this is all real, what they always said. I never believed it.”

“It's real. And you didn't quite disbelieve it either, did you? You half meant what you said when you told that woman you were ready to face the prospect of hell.”

“I guess maybe I did—at least, I was afraid it just might be true! And it is! Oh, God!”

“Well, part of what you believed isn't. You don't see me standing over you with a lightning bolt in my hand ready to zap you.”

“What difference does it make? You can't give me a worse hell than my whole life has been up to now anyway. Take that rejection. The damn thing got that far! All the way up to Levine himself! And he actually read it! I saw some notes he made in the margin. —But when all was said and done, it 'didn't fit the needs of the Metropolitan Opera at this time. We hope you will find success placing it elsewhere.' Just like all the rest of the 'elsewheres.' I said to myself, 'Why do you bother? Why do you work your ass off? Nobody's actually going to *hear* any of this crap!'”

“He told you he liked it; he thought it was well-written and had some outstanding parts.”

“Big deal. I didn’t write it for somebody to tell me it was well-written. You write music so it’ll be *heard*, for God’s sake! What the hell do I care what his opinion of it was? I had something I wanted to tell him, and you have to hear it for it to mean anything. —But you wouldn’t understand that. For you, music is just music.”

“You forget who you’re talking to. I know exactly what you were trying to say with that opera; and that it was true. I could hear it as well as you. Better.”

“I suppose I ought to take that as some consolation. But I don’t. I wasn’t talking to you; I was talking to people, telling them something they needed to hear. But they just weren’t interested. ‘It’s too melodic,’ they told me. Right! And it actually dares to use major triads! In the twentieth century! Why the hell should music or anything else be a celebration of a garbage dump? Levine liked what I *did* with the melody and the major triads, because it hasn’t been done before; what he couldn’t take was that he saw that it actually sounded pleasant! Beauty for some reason nowadays is supposed to set your teeth on edge! —Oh, it’s okay if it comes from the 1800’s; because we can look down on how ‘undeveloped’ everyone was. We love to listen to Tchaikowsky, but at the same time we sneer at him for being superficial and not daring enough. But look at that 5/4 movement in—what symphony was it? I forget at the moment, but you know what I mean. If you get over your contempt for what sounds nice, there’s all kinds of stuff there to sink your teeth into. —But you don’t want to hear all this.”

“You and Tschaikowsky have a lot in common, actually.”

“A lot more now, I suppose, now that I killed myself. Except the way I hear it, he had to because he was caught ‘in a compromising situation with a man,’ and would have gone to

prison in disgrace. At least nowadays *that's* not something you have to worry about. Not prison, anyway."

"It's interesting, considering who you are, that all your music is about hope and rationality, and how life makes sense and happiness is possible."

"Yeah, I used to think about that a lot. But when I tried to write stuff about futility and absurdity, it all came out just stupid imitations of Berg and Webern and that bunch, and it wouldn't work. Not for me, anyway. *They* apparently believed it. I just lived it."

"Why was that, do you suppose?"

"I don't know. I've never been able to figure it out." He looked at the owner. "Do *you* know?"

"Of course. Music was the area of your life where you were least capable of being dishonest."

The man thought about this for a few moments. "What does that mean?" he asked.

"Don't you see? Your music wouldn't let you say that life is fundamentally absurd and that success is impossible. No matter what actually happened in your life, you knew that it couldn't be that way and that somehow it all made sense—that it can't make sense that nothing makes sense. And since you couldn't lie in your music, your music makes sense."

The man gave a little, almost silent laugh through closed lips, which came out as a faint snort through his nose. "Which shows how stupid I was."

"Does it?"

"Doesn't it?"

"You're here, aren't you? Not nothing, and not in some flaming pit. And I'm talking to you, trying to get you to face reality, not denouncing you."

“What do you mean, ‘face reality’?”

“You know perfectly well that the reason you jumped out of that window was not that you wanted to be nothing, but that the circumstances of your life contradicted so blatantly what you knew life had to be like that it was just too much for you.”

The man just sat, silent.

The owner remarked, “I heard you say ‘God forgive me!’ on the way down.”

“Hell, I didn’t even really believe you existed.”

“It was just to be on the safe side.”

“Something like that, I guess.”

“Like your music. You knew. You had trouble facing reality—the reality you knew. It’s time to face it.”

“Ha! I’ve been facing it all my life! Look at me!”

“No you haven’t. You’ve been facing the considerable difficulties I put in front of you—because you asked me to—as if they were the reality, instead of the underlying truth you couldn’t deny in your music—and ultimately in your conduct, if you look at it realistically.”

“Oh, I *asked* you for all this? One thing I never asked. I never asked to be gay!”

“Did you want to be a great composer, whose works would be heard and understood for generations after you? Did you want to be able to find the truth in music, or just write stuff that people would buy?”

“What has that got to do with being homosexual?”

“It turns out that in your case, your homosexuality and the struggle you had your whole life long against the pretense that because it felt good it was the right thing to do was the least painful way to get you able to see through the sophistries

and general subjectivism music is plagued with like everything else in your time. There were others, but believe me, you'd have been here a lot earlier if I'd given them to you—without that opera and all the symphonies and all the rest of it.”

“So I was right. All the gay people I ever met kept telling me that it was my nature, but I still couldn't get over the fact that the asshole is not a sexual organ, and cum isn't milk. And obviously, when you're sucking somebody, what's nice about it—aside from the fact that he likes it—is that it's some kind of an imitation of suckling your mother. But I saw all that, and I didn't really want *that*. What *was* it I wanted so desperately with these guys?”

“Oh, the answer to that is easy. Acceptance.”

The man sat, looking at his hands. “I suppose you're right. You know, I told Paula that I had these homosexual tendencies—she had a right to know, after all—and that's what I thought they were at the time, and she always thought that eventually I'd get rid of them—that they weren't the 'real me.' Well, it turned out that they were. So part of it was that at least gay people wouldn't have a problem accepting me for what I really was.

“But the trouble was that I was gay, but I didn't want to actually have sex. I just wanted—something or other. Somebody to hug me, I guess, and tell me it was all right. But even if somebody had, we'd have gone to bed together, I suppose. But of course, nobody ever just wanted to be my friend, at least not a friend who'd just hold hands and maybe kiss me and that would be as far as it went. None of the straight people I knew could ever accept that I was gay, and none of the gay people could ever accept the fact that what I wanted wasn't really sexual intercourse. Especially when that's what it always led

to—and in spite of myself, it was beautiful. I’ve never understood it.”

“There are a lot of beautiful things that aren’t right. A lot of your friends have found the beauty of crack and heroin.”

“Thank God I was able to keep away from that!”

“You’re welcome. That, as it happens, is another side-effect of your homosexuality, that threw you completely back on yourself. It enabled you to look at the facts, not just believe what other people said or what you wanted to believe.”

“Which is why, I suppose, I kept writing even though I couldn’t see any way it’d get published. I *hate* being rejected! I *hate* it!”

“And yet you kept producing things that people rejected, because you knew they were good.”

“I hoped they were. But who was I to say that I was right and everyone else was wrong?”

“You know that that’s not the right question to ask. Who are you? Nobody. It’s what facts do you see—what evidence you have. Even in music. You can understand that.”

“That’s what kept me going. I didn’t think anybody else understood it but me. You know, if you don’t mind my saying so, it’s really nice that *you* understand it.”

“So you were right after all.”

“Much good it did.”

“Oh, listen. There’s something else that you’re not facing. You read the life of Mozart and Bach and all kinds of other musicians. Did anybody understand them until after they died?”

“That’s true. I used to imagine the people coming into the Thomaskirche on Good Friday, saying to themselves, ‘That organist probably has another four-hour oratorio we have to sit

through!’ And there’s poor Bach, with his little choir half of whom probably couldn’t even carry a tune, and his organ and a pick-up orchestra, doing his best with this magnificent music that didn’t sound anything like what he knew it should sound like, with all the congregation grumbling about having to listen to this stuff!

“You know, I had a reading of a string quartet I wrote once. What a shock! It wasn’t anything like what I thought it’d be. They suggested a whole bunch of changes, and I made them and gave it back. But they never played it.”

“You ruined it with the changes. You were right the first time.”

“I kind of half believed that. I kept the first version, because I couldn’t believe it actually sounded that bad. And the second one turned out to be not what I wanted to say anyway.”

“They weren’t playing what you wrote. How could they, reading it at sight like that.”

“Well, that’s what I hoped, at least.”

The owner rose to his feet. “Well,” he said. “Do you think you’d like to see your room now?”

“You mean I have one?”

“Oh yes. In one sense, no thanks to you. You’ll have to accept the fact that the reason it’s there—or at least, the reason you’ll actually enter this door to take a look at it is because of the prayers of your wife.”

“Paula? But she’s an atheist!”

“She was. But your suicide shocked her into seeing a priest. And he told her that he believed that, since God is eternal and there’s no time with him, her prayers for you after

you died could give you a moment to ask forgiveness that you wouldn't have had if she hadn't prayed. He was right."

"But how can the future change the past? The past is already done."

"The future can't change what the past actually was. What is is what it is. But it can change what the past *would have been* if the future event hadn't happened. How else would prophesy make sense? David's psalm didn't cause me to be crucified; it was my crucifixion that caused David to write the psalm he wrote."

"I don't understand it."

"You don't have to. It's true, though. But it's not all that difficult, if you put your mind to it. You know that you can't change what the future actually *will* be, because it will be what it will be. But you can change what it *would* be if you had made a different choice. That's what choices do; they change what the future *would* be. Well, the same applies to the past."

"It still doesn't make sense. But who cares? If you say so, then so be it."

As they talked, they proceeded down a corridor with marble walls and floors, with doorways framed with Corinthian columns. "This is the artists' wing," said the owner. "At least, most of the people here are artists, though there are some others. We have a fairly complex way of classifying things that you wouldn't be interested in."

He stopped in front of a very ornate door. "This?" said the composer.

"Well, you did say you struggled a lot. That makes your room that much more intricate. You'll see the pattern as time goes on."

"I don't know what to say."

“It makes sense, don’t you think? That the temporary setbacks you had would turn out to be eternal benefits?”

“Well, yes, I suppose. —I mean, of course, when you think about it. It’d have to be that way if the world actually did make sense.”

“Let’s go in, shall we?”

It was a lovely room—not perfect, but lovely, with a window overlooking the mountain off in the distance. But the main feature was on the left wall: an enormous three-dimensional television set, running.

“That’s *King Lear!*” cried the composer.

“It’s the performance in La Scala on November 21, 2347,” replied the owner. That’s the best of them, I thought, although the production in 2170 at the Metropolitan comes really close—except that the interpretation is a bit different from what you had in mind when you wrote it. It’s a valid one, though; there was more in it than you realized when you composed it.”

The composer’s eyes were riveted on the set, even though he could not see through the tears of joy that now streamed down his face. The singers came to a climax, and he cried “Yes!” and hit his fist into his hand. “Damn, that’s good! I knew it!”

The first-act curtain went down to thunderous applause. “See?” said, looking over at the owner. “They like it! It *is* good!”

“Of course it is. You knew that all along. Now everybody does.”

The composer rushed over to the owner, and impulsively hugged him. The owner put his arms around him and held him.

XI.

The Scientist

S THE OWNER REACHED THE door again, a rather elderly man came up the steps, carrying a cane, which he tapped on each step.

“It *seems* solid enough,” he said to himself. “But then, I suppose it would. I wonder how I could get a test of it. But I suppose I can’t, in my condition.”

“May I help you?” asked the owner.

“Interesting. It even seems to talk. I wonder if it’ll answer me. Let’s see, what’ll I ask it? . . . Well, why not? Do you really exist?”

“Oh, yes,” was the answer.

“So I can actually carry on a conversation.” He turned to the owner. “This is a fascinating experience for me. I’ve had dreams, but nothing this vivid before. Of course, I’m terribly sick, and it must be because of the stress.”

“Actually, you’re not sick any more, you know.”

“Are you my projection of the surgeon? You don’t look like him.”

“No, he’s still in the other country, and will be there for quite a while yet.”

“Then you must be the result of the stories I heard when I was a child. I suppose that’s what *would* happen, now that I think of it. They’d always been associated with death, and now that I’m at death’s door, the old associations come back. It just goes to show that we don’t really forget anything, doesn’t it?”

“You’re right, you don’t. But you’re not at death’s door, you know.”

The man chuckled. “Oh, I doubt if I’m going to recover. No, this will be one ‘near death experience’ that won’t get into any book, because I’ll never be able to tell about it.”

“Tell me: Why are you so convinced that you haven’t actually died?”

“Well, I *can’t* have can I? I’m still conscious. You know. ‘*Nox est una perpetua dormienda.*’ That’s Catullus.”

“Yes, I know Catullus. He has a room in there, and you can meet him later, if you’d like. But he’s not asleep, let alone perpetually, because in fact there’s no night here. No one sleeps here at all; they all find life too interesting.”

“And I suppose no one ever gets tired.”

“As a matter of fact, no.”

“Well, if you’re going to live forever, I guess that’s what it’d have to be like. But the only problem is that it violates the laws of physics.”

“And so?”

“And so I’m dreaming. It’s an interesting dream though, I’ll admit. I wonder how long it’ll last.”

“That’s a question that doesn’t have an answer. There isn’t any long time or short time in this country, because there isn’t

any time at all. It's like asking what the color green sounds like."

"There you are again. Time is *the* fundamental constant of physics. —Well, actually, so are mass and length. But you understand what I mean. —Of course you have to understand, don't you, because you're a projection of my own brain."

"I'm not, you know."

"I have to admit you don't *seem* to be. In fact, what I'm experiencing now is far more vivid and realistic even than most of my waking experiences up to this point. That's what's interesting about all this. You saw me tapping at the steps, and they sounded just as if they were real marble. I'll bet they feel like it too."

"Try it."

The man bent down and ran his hand along the smooth surface of the stairway. "I thought as much. It has to be the extreme stress my body is under."

"Or that you've died."

"But I told you, I haven't lost consciousness yet. It's not an alternative worth considering."

"Why not? There are a lot of people who have considered it, even over in your country, and have come to the conclusion that life doesn't end with death. Even physicists."

"Well of course, because there are people who can't bear the thought of ceasing to exist. For my own part, I have no problem with that. Life's good enough in its own way, I suppose, but there's not a great deal to it, in the last analysis. And if I can't get over this cancer—and there's no reason to believe I can—then I'd just as soon end everything rather than string out a painful existence for a few more years. After all, we

go to sleep every night, and as far as we know, you might say, we go out of existence. So what's there to be terrified of?"

"How about
the thought of—something—after death,
the undiscovered country from whose bourne
no traveler returns'—

as long as you're quoting."

He laughed. "All I can say is it doesn't puzzle *my* will. And of course, if what I see here is what it's like—which I don't for a minute admit—then even then there's nothing to be afraid of, is there?"

"Well, it's true that no one is going to do anything *to* you—except yourself, of course. There's that."

"Well, I've always taken care of myself. There's no reason I'd change at this late date. So I'm not worried. But actually, this is all silly, you know. I don't *need* to pretend that I'm immortal; I'm quite satisfied with having lived as long as I have."

"I know. That's one reason we called you. Not the only one—or the main one, for that matter."

"You're not going to stop trying to convince me that I'm not dreaming, are you? I'm interested to see how you'd do it."

"It does seem rather difficult, now that you mention it."

"Of course it does. You're not dealing with a gullible fool here; I've devoted my whole life to science—to observation of what I can see and touch and measure, and to drawing the necessary conclusions based on that observation."

"And so you'll now deny the evidence of your sight and touch because of some dogma you have that says you can't actually be seeing and touching anything."

"Clever, aren't you?"

“What’s the matter? Why *don’t* you trust the evidence of your senses?”

“Well, you see, I happen to know that I’m very sick, and undergoing a serious operation. I also know that under extreme conditions, hallucinations are possible. I never held that we should *always* trust the evidence of our senses. For instance, my sense of sight and touch tell me that this marble—assuming, of course, that it’s real marble—is continuous and solid; but I happen to know that it’s mostly space. But, you see, that’s a conclusion that’s *based* on the evidence of the senses and measurement.”

“And how do you know you could trust the evidence of the senses that these conclusions are based on?”

“It’s obvious. Don’t be silly.”

“And somehow it’s not obvious that you’re actually looking at me. What’s the difference?”

“Listen. If I could see you at a time when I was in good health, and didn’t have any reason to believe that I might be seeing things like this based on my body’s instinctive aversion to death, then you might be able to make out a case. I’d be willing to let you try, even under those conditions—though frankly, people have been trying and failing to make a case for this nonsense for centuries, and I can’t see, based on your performance so far, that you’d be able to do any better.”

“But how do you *know* that all past attempts have been failures, Sir?” said the owner. “Our research indicates that you never bothered to look at *any* case that was made for my existence.”

“Well of course not. Why should I? I have better things to do with my time. I was engaged in serious research, after all.

I didn't investigate the case people allegedly were making for astrology or witchcraft or ghosts either."

"So you just took the word of those who held to the same dogmas you hold to when they said that any argument for my existence had no merit."

"Just a minute, now. You've mentioned the word 'dogma' twice here in connection with science; and this time I'm not going to let you get away with it. I subscribe to no dogma. Anything I hold is subject to being tested."

"Oh yes? How do you test the notion that everything that exists is measurable?"

"Really! You ought to be able to do better than that. If there's anything that's been tested thoroughly, it's that one."

"Indeed? When no one has ever been able to measure human consciousness?"

"Nonsense! Human consciousness has been measured. It's nothing but neural impulses."

"It is? Then how is it that the nerves can be active and there is no consciousness below what you scientists call the 'threshold of perception'—and how is it that entirely different kinds of consciousness, like seeing and hearing, are exactly the same kind of energy—and how is it that when the threshold of perception is reached, the neural output is completely unaffected, even if consciousness suddenly appears. I thought energy was neither created nor destroyed."

"Look, I suppose I have to get through this period somehow, but couldn't we stop arguing about it? We'd have to set up experiments to find the answer to those questions, and we're certainly not in a position to do that here. But I might as well tell you that I don't have the slightest qualm that the experiments would do anything but confirm that conscious-

ness, like anything else, is simply a form of energy, and is measurable like everything else.”

“All right. You were the one who challenged me to go on with this, remember; and I’ll stop with just this remark: You claim that no one has been able to prove that I exist, and presumably because of this *lack* of what you call evidence, you explain away what certainly seems to you to be evidence that I do in fact exist. On the other hand, no one so far has ever succeeded in measuring consciousness; and yet you don’t take *this* lack of evidence as a reason for believing that consciousness is not measurable. Do you see now why I used the word ‘dogma’?”

“Have it your way, then; I’m not going to argue with you.”

“Very well. Shall I show you to your room now?”

“Oh, is that what’s supposed to happen? Lead on, then. That would certainly be a better way to while away the time than getting involved in silly discussions.”

The two walked down a long, dark, corridor, which had doors spaced farther and farther apart. Finally, the owner reached a very ornate door on the left, inserted his key, and opened it, letting the man pass in before him.

“Well!” exclaimed the man. “This is really magnificent! Considering that I’ve always held everything you stood for in contempt, I would hardly have expected anything as sumptuous as this.”

“Well, you see, we try to make allowances for sincere ignorance. It was our opinion that if you hadn’t been brain-washed, if I may say so, by your upbringing, you would have followed me gladly; and we take that sort of thing as the equivalent of actually accepting me. We, you see, are will-

ing—you might even say eager—to accept others for what they are, as long as they take us for what we are.”

“But you’re not going to bribe me even now, you realize,” was his answer, “no matter how luxurious you make this room I’m supposed to have. I can’t give up the facts for a fiction, no matter how pleasant it might be.”

“You’ll notice we’re not asking you to. The room is yours if you accept it—the suite actually; that door leads into a study, and there is even a small laboratory through that other door to the left, where you can continue the research you are so interested in.”

“You know, it’s odd,” said the man. “You’d think I’d be having nightmares now, considering what’s happening to me; and yet I don’t think I’ve ever had a more enjoyable dream. It’s not every day you win an argument with God, after all!” He laughed.

“If you think you’ve won. But we can let that pass also. The only really important question is whether you find your room satisfactory, and one you’d be willing to stay in.”

“As to that, of course, if I *had* to stay forever, I think I could manage quite well—except for one thing.”

“What is that?”

“There are no windows in it.”

“That’s true. You see, we build the rooms to the person’s specifications, and yours didn’t include windows.”

“I don’t understand. How will I look out and see other people? —Come to think of it, there weren’t any doors within hundreds of feet of this one. Why am I so isolated?”

“We thought that was what you preferred”

“What *I* preferred! You mustn’t know very much about me after all, then. You know, that’s interesting; this is the first

slip you've made—the first thing I wouldn't have been able to predict from all the legends about this place.”

“Why do you think we don't know much about you?”

“Why, because if there's anything I enjoy, it's being with people. Whenever I wasn't in the lab, you'd find me at a friend's house, enjoying his company.”

“Precisely. Enjoying his company. You found other people entertaining.”

“Well, what's wrong with that?”

“Nothing at all. It's just that you always thought of others in terms of their entertainment value to you or some other use they had to make your life more fulfilling or pleasant. It never entered your mind to be interested in anyone else for his own sake.”

“Aha! I understand now. The ‘altruism’ foolishness. All right, you're predictable again. Why should I consider someone else ‘for his own sake’? After all, *I*’m the source of my actions; so what reason is there for making anyone else the goal of my acts?—even if I could.”

“Oh, you *can*. People do, you know.”

“They *say* they do; but they're just self-deluded hypocrites who get their own satisfaction in sacrificing themselves for others. The only difference between them and me is that I'm honest about my relations to other people. I say that I enjoy them, because they amuse me or are useful to me. I don't pretend that my enjoyment of them is an abandonment of myself.”

“Yes, we know that. In fact, it's your fierce honesty that has brought you this far. You are honest with yourself in your self-centeredness in many ways. You will not pursue some pleasure if it means violating some other aspect of yourself; and

you recognize that a part of yourself in a sense is your social self—and so you have never done any actual *harm* to anyone else, or extorted unwilling service to yourself from anyone else. You have fulfilled the law, in fact.”

“Well, I suppose I should be grateful that the law I set for myself would be the one you regard as your law.”

“There’s nothing surprising in that. You found that law in your own nature; and I made that nature, with its law. The trick, of course, as you say, is in being honest with yourself and not pretending that you aren’t what you are.”

“Well, I think I’ve managed rather well in that respect,” said the man.

“You have done a remarkable job, considering how difficult it is,” answered the owner. “That is why the room is as ornately decorated as it is. It is just that you overlooked one detail.”

“You mean the altruism aspect.”

“Precisely. You see, even though you have fulfilled your *objective* reality and have not tried to pretend that you could substitute your idea of what you would like to be for what you really are, you did not notice that, *objectively* speaking, you are no more worthy of fulfillment than any other human being. What makes you superior to other humans that you should be the exclusive goal of your own or of anyone’s acts? Nothing but the accident of your being the source of the acts.”

“And isn’t that enough?”

“No, because who it is who fulfills a person does not have any bearing on whether the person is worthy of being fulfilled. And you are objectively no more worthy of being fulfilled than anyone else.”

“We’re getting into conundrums again.”

“Bear with me a minute more, and then I’ll explain why I am telling you this. No one is asking you to sacrifice yourself or do harm to yourself for someone else’s sake. But just as you have used others for your own fulfillment without doing them any harm, so no harm is done to you if you exert yourself in helping someone else find fulfillment. Objectively, this is as laudable an act as the other.

“Now this is why I am telling you this: You see that there are no windows in this room. No one on this side of the ocean can be used for the fulfillment of anyone else; each person is complete in himself, as he has made himself by his choices in the other country. And what that means is that the only contact you have with anyone else over here is if, before you get here, you have been interested in that person for his own sake, and not for what you can get out of him. *Then* you have a window to see into his life, but only then.

“You are a sincere and honest person, but misguided in this respect because of a view that you thought reasonable; and we wanted to make sure that you didn’t inadvertently bring upon yourself an eternity of isolation. This was the only way we could find to do it.”

The owner’s face now became stern, and his tone hardened. “I am not going to indulge you further with argument. I have stopped playing games. I am in fact real, this is no flight of fancy; it is the eternity that faces you. But I am not going to accept you into this country at this time; I am sending you back, and when you wake up shortly, you will remember this as a near-death experience.

“Your problem then will be to decide whether what you are now experiencing was a hallucination brought on by stress, or whether it was what I am telling you it is: a warning of what

is going to happen to you if you continue as you have been living. You have been warned. When I see you back again, you will no longer have the excuse that you were ignorant. Your refusal to accept it will be the result of a deliberate choice.”

The man stood silent in open-mouthed shock, and as the owner finished, he began to fade away. Voices seemed to echo in the room, as from far off, *“Wait! I think I saw his eyelids flutter! I think he’s reviving! We haven’t lost him after all!”*

XII.

The Saint

h, LOIS!" EXCLAIMED THE OWNER.
"I've been waiting for you!"

The old woman ran up the steps like a teenager, with her arms outstretched, then paused with a shocked look on her face, and fell to her knees. "Master!" she cried. "I'm so glad finally to be here!" She reached out impulsively and embraced his legs. Laughing, he raised her up.

"You don't have to hold on; I'm not going anywhere. Ever again. You remind me of Mary Magdalene." He held her at arms length and looked into her eyes. She tried to avert her gaze, but found herself fascinated by his look, and finally returned it, blushing with embarrassment. "What are you afraid of?" he laughed. "Don't you know me?"

"I don't—I don't know what to say," she faltered, her eyes still captives of his. "I know that face so well! I never saw it before, and it's completely different from what I thought it would be, but now that I see it, I've known it all my life. . . . You know, I always wondered what this moment would be

like, when I met you face to face for the first time. And it isn't the first time, is it?"

"Far from it," he said. "We've been together for years and years."

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she put her arms around the owner and sobbed against his breast, "I was so afraid! I was af—afraid I'd never make it! I'd even be—begun to wonder whether there even *was* such a place, and wheth—whether you really existed at all! And I—and you were there all the time, weren't you? And—what am I *doing*?" she suddenly cried, aghast, pushing herself away from him; but he held her and with his hand kept her head upon his chest.

"What are you doing? Just exactly what you should be doing. I'm your husband, Lois; you know that. My home has been in you for a long time now, and you've found your home in me, which is why you know me." He held her head and looked again with amusement at her face, streaming with tears. "—And there's no need any longer to beware of any impulse you have; every one now is exactly what it ought to be."

She put her hands over his and said, "I thought there was supposed to be no weeping here, and look at me!" she laughed. "My heart is going to break with joy!"

"It is a bit overwhelming at the beginning, isn't it?" he answered. "But don't worry; it will all be familiar before you know it."

"I'm not sure I want it to be. —And to think it will never end! That 'and they lived happily ever after' isn't just for fairy stories! I can't believe it!"

"You don't have to any more."

She put her head on his chest again. "You know what bothered me most back there? That all this—what you

promised—was too good to be true. I mean, it all made sense, and what else did? But I couldn't help thinking, 'Are things really that neat? Does everything really work out for the best? Open your eyes. It *can't* be true; it has to be just a legend and a myth to make weak souls able to face life. Reality isn't that way.'"

"But it is, of course. Why shouldn't it be? It's the weak souls, actually, who give in to the temptation of believing that, because they want something to be a certain way, this proves the opposite. There are different kinds of wishful thinking."

"But it's so easy to do that, because so many awful things happen—and we *do* so many awful things to each other! When I think of what I've done to some people, I can't bear it! I don't see how I can live with the thought! I mean, I didn't so much mind suffering myself; it's the suffering I've caused others I can't stand."

"But Lois, don't you know even yet? You have never done anything to anyone except exactly what they needed to reach their own happiness. How can you think I'd let you—or anyone else—actually harm someone I love?"

She backed away a little and looked up at him. Emboldened by his expression, she said, "Well, you have a funny notion of what helps people, then."

"You know why that is?"

"Why?"

"Because you people rejected me. It meant I was to save all of you by using the sentence you handed down and by dying on the cross. But the punishment of mankind for that rejection is that instead of removing suffering from your life on earth, your rescue must now come through sharing the cross—because it's the cross that saves you."

“You mean that if we’d accepted you as our king, none of us would have had to suffer?”

“Or die. Or be able to harm anyone, even temporarily. I tried to tell you while I was with you—and I showed you in every way I could. But nobody took me literally. I simply couldn’t convince people that to accept me meant not to die or have disease or suffer. I failed.”

“*We* failed.”

“Well, that’s true too, of course. But you didn’t know what you were doing, really, and so it was a redeemable failure. But what it resulted in is that everyone is saved through failure. The cross is not so much suffering as failure, and because of your rejection of me, success comes only in failing.”

“How strange. But I guess it makes sense. I always hoped it was something like that, actually, because I’ve never really done anything right. It used to bother me so much! It isn’t even that I tried my hardest and didn’t succeed; I didn’t even try very hard, most of the time.”

“That’s true; but you can see that it doesn’t matter, does it?”

“I know. Here I am! I can’t believe it! And even there, after a while I got resigned to it, and told you, remember, that I *wanted*, more or less, to do the right thing; and I asked you to take that and see what you could do with it.”

“I remember.”

“And do you remember when it occurred to me? I was meditating on the stations of the cross, on the one where you fell the third time, and the thought came to me, ‘He didn’t do a very good job carrying the cross, did he?’ And then I realized that you weren’t even *carrying* it. Simon was. You couldn’t

carry your own cross! So how could I be expected to carry mine?”

He smiled. “It took a while to get through to you with that. You used to be so concerned, and feel so guilty, over things that made no difference. No one can carry his cross by himself; and to reveal that, even I had help, and still fell.”

“So I didn’t need to worry, really, did I? In spite of the mess I made of things.”

“It doesn’t really matter what you *do* on your way here, but what you try to do and what you want to do. That’s what builds your room; I take care of everything else.”

She thought for a moment. “—But can I know *how* the damage I did to other people actually helped them? I mean, I love them all so much, and—well, it’d ease my mind if I knew how they were. Especially if they realize now that I didn’t really want to hurt them.”

“Oh, yes. You’ll meet all the others who are already here out in the garden; and they’ll tell you all you want to know about their lives. You don’t want to be hearing it retail from me.”

“And there’s so many others I wanted to be able to do something for and—in a way, I was sorry you called me this early, even though I almost couldn’t bear not to be here, because I didn’t get done half of what I wanted to. Am I making sense?”

“Dear Lois, you’ve barely *begun* your work. Single mothers will be looking for your help for thousands of years.”

“Oh, I hoped so so much! They need so much help!”

“Your concern for them doesn’t stop with the ones you had direct contact with. You’ll see. When you get to your

room, you'll find an album full of all the lives who have been enriched because you chose to care about them."

"People I don't even know!"

"You will. And they'll know you. They'll be asking for your help; you'll see. And since you and I are the same, you will be able to help them because I will be helping them in you."

"How wonderful! When can I start?"

He smiled. "You've already started; and you've already finished, and the work will continue forever. There's no time here."

"You see? It's too good to be true!"

"No, Lois. It's too good *not* to be true. This is my world, remember. And I made everything good. But before I show you your room, there's someone who said she'd like to meet you right away; and I've never been able to refuse her anything."

They entered the door, and on the other side, with her arms outstretched, was a woman, clothed with the sun, with a crown of twelve stars on her head. She reached out and took both of Lois's hands in her own and said, "It's so wonderful to see you here, Lois! We have so much to talk about."

"My Lady—" she began.

"Mary," returned the other. "I am no one any more than you are. Why should we be formal, when we've spoken together so often already? We've been practically a team, after all, haven't we?"

"Well," faltered Lois, "I did ask if you'd speak to your Son for me quite a bit."

"It does my heart good to have somebody remember that I actually care," said the lady. "Of course,"—looking at the

owner—“*he* does everything, but he likes to have cooperation, doesn’t he?”

“The more the merrier,” said the owner. “And you know perfectly well, Madame, that the desire to cooperate with me comes from me, because I am in you and you are in me—just like me and my Father.”

“Of course, child,” she said. “Whoever would say anything different? What are we? But that’s neither here nor there. When you get settled in your room, Lois, I’d like it if you’d come into the salon over there where I live. There have been a couple of requests that I’d like your help on.”

“Really? —I don’t know what to say. I’d be ever so happy to do what I can. But—”

“And you’ll be amazed what you can do, now that you’re here. But don’t let me keep you now. You’ll be wanting to see your room.”

“Thank you, my Lady.”

“Mary. Just Mary. And don’t thank *me*. Thank *him*.”

“Oh I do, —Mary. I thank him so much!”

“Well,” said the owner. “But I want to see your face when you see your room. So come this way.”

The woman waved and Lois, looking back at her, made her way up the stairs to a room just off the balcony. The owner put a key in the paneled door.

“This?” she said. “But I don’t—what’s that noise?”

“You’ll see,” he said as he flung the door open, and a small black and white border collie dashed out and leaped into Lois’s arms. He kept licking her chin as she leaned her face back away from him and squirming so violently she could hardly hold him. “Frodo!” she cried. “Frodo doggie! I missed you so much!”

“The rule,” said the owner, “is that we were to wait for things like this until all the rooms are claimed and we move the mansion back to the other country after we’ve finished remodeling over there. But as a special favor to you, and because you loved him so much, we thought we might bend the regulations a bit.”

“This *is* heaven!” she exclaimed, and then looked into the dog’s eyes. Suddenly, she found herself looking back at a blurred image of her own face, and filled with an ecstasy of pleasure so great that she could not keep any part of her body still. She turned her head toward the owner, and things became normal again. “That was what *he* was feeling, wasn’t it?” she asked. “I always wanted to know what was going on in that little head!” The owner nodded.

The dog gave a particularly violent squirm, and she put him down. Immediately he dashed into the room and through the French doors out onto the wrought-iron balcony, and flew down the stairs into the garden beyond, ran at top speed around a blue spruce in the center, back up the stairs, jumped up against her, and began the circuit again.

“He’ll dig up all the flowers!” she cried, running out onto the balcony after him.

“Don’t worry,” said the owner, following her out into the Spring-fresh air, full of the scent of tulips and roses. “He couldn’t even if he tried; and he won’t try.”

“I could never break him of that. As soon as our back was turned, he’d go right into the garden and flop down right on top of the flowers. It was the soft ground, I suppose.”

“Well, we have our little ways here.”

She looked out over the landscape. “How absolutely lovely!” she cried.

“Well, we have quite a few expert gardeners who come here, you know; and as soon as they get here, they’re itching to get out and tend to the grounds.”

She looked over at him. “So it’s not just you. We make this place too.”

“Of course. No one is idle here; no one wants to be, especially since you can’t get tired any more. We didn’t make a place where you sit back and have things happen to you; our place is a place where you *do* all you ever wanted to do.” He added, with a smile, “And succeed, for a change.”

The dog, by this time, had worked off the frenzy of his delight. He trotted up the stairs and into the room, where he flopped down on the small oval Oriental rug in the center, and let out a sigh of absolute contentment. Lois and the owner, arm in arm, followed him inside. She looked around at the enormous room, with its ornate fireplace and mantle of carved ebony, on which ticked an ormolu clock.

“But this is *much* too much!” she exclaimed. “I don’t need all this! I’d be afraid even to sit in these chairs.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said the owner, running his hand along the silk brocade of the back of the sofa. “After all, most of this furniture was what you yourself picked out.”

“I did? But I never really even paid attention to things like this! You know that. I was poor as poor, and perfectly content to be poor, as long as I could get my work done.”

“Exactly. And that’s what built all these riches—because you, of all people, can appreciate them for what they are. Go ahead. Sit down.”

Gingerly, she sank into the soft chair beside the fireplace. The owner said, “You don’t have to worry about appearing proud; relax. It’s yours because it fits you. Everything fits

everyone. It's as hypocritical to pretend you're less than what you are as to pretend you're more than what you are."

"I suppose," she said dubiously.

"Everyone finds that living here tends to need a bit of getting used to. It's never quite what anyone expects, even though it's what they've been preparing for all their life. But it *is* comfortable, isn't it?"

"It's certainly *comfortable*," she said, her hand caressing the satin of the chair's arm. "But you're right; I'll have to get used to it. Like you. It's strange to have my Master sitting over there just as a friend."

"Much more than a friend, my darling."

"That's what I mean. It's right, but—but it's so strange." The dog came over and lay at her feet, with his chin on her left shoe. She reached down and patted him.

"You'll settle in, never fear. Look how soon Frodo has."

She looked down at him again and got a dog's eye view of the room, suffused with a feeling of peaceful contentment. She stood up, "But you mustn't let me keep you," she said. "You must have a million things to do."

"I have all the time with you you want," he said. "There are no distractions here, and no duties; we all do everything we want, and never have to leave one thing for another. But you haven't really looked around the room yet."

She walked about. "I know; I was so overwhelmed. I still can't believe it! And look at all the vases of flowers you've put around for me; it's as if the garden invaded the inside!"

"Well actually, I didn't put those there. They're gifts and mementoes from your friends. There's a tag on each one."

She picked up one of the tags. “With the deepest love. Welcome. Julie.’ Julie! I haven’t thought of her for years! Is she here?”

“Oh yes, she’s been here quite some time. She was overjoyed to hear that you were coming today; but when she put the vase on the table, she seemed to think that the room wasn’t quite adequate.”

“That’s Julie, all right. Nothing is ever too good for the people she takes a shine to.”

“And nothing used to be quite bad enough for the people she didn’t,” added the owner, voicing the thought that came unbidden into Lois’s mind. “I’m happy to say that she’s moderated that attitude a good deal. She told me to be sure to tell you to drop into her room as soon as you’d got everything straightened out here.”

“I can’t wait to hear how she’s been,” she said, moving about the room, looking at the vases and reading their tags. “But they all want to see me right away! How nice of them! And such lovely bouquets! —Who’s that?” she asked, stopping in front of what looked like an ornately framed portrait. “Do I know her? Such a beautiful young woman!”

“That, Madame,” said the owner, “is a mirror.”