SOLILOQUIES IN THE BATH

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Temporary Financial Embarrassment

There is no moral to the following story, and if the reader should discover one I wash my hands of it.

Yesterday afternoon the ex-soldier with the head wound came up to my table at the café and stood modestly waiting, without saying anything. He comes every afternoon, and I give him tuppence each time, for he is one of my regulars who, in the course of the years, have become part of my life.

Now, you may sometimes fall into arrears with your gas bill, or even with your rates, but to tell a beggar to come another time, to explain to him that you are hard up yourself at the moment—no, that is out of the question.

So, when the ex-soldier with the head wound appeared, I automatically reached into my pocket. Dash it all ! Not a copper anywhere. And my note-case. . . . Must have left it at home. The situation was getting painful. The ex-soldier with the head wound stood and waited. His bearing was modest, but his expression betrayed no sympathy or understanding. I gave him a covert look. His eyes twitched a little, and for a moment it

seemed as if he were going to take pity on me, but then his look hardened, as though to say, " I'm very sorry, I know this is embarrassing to you, my friend, but in these hard times I can't afford, with the best will in the world, to make you a present of that miserable tuppence, or even to give you a respite. I'm very sorry indeed, but my creditors are hard, too. I don't get anything for nothing, either, do I ? "

I blushed under his gaze and got up.

" Wait a moment," I said.

I looked round in the café, hoping to discover a friend. Ah, there was the bank manager. I advanced towards him unthinkingly, but before I reached him I changed my mind. He was reading a paper—no, it wouldn't do, it would be ridiculous, I'd have to tell him a joke in order to make my request for a loan of tuppence plausible, and I did not feel like telling jokes just then, nor was I in the mood to explain to him that I had left my note-case at home. No, it wouldn't do.

The proprietor. . . . No, I couldn't borrow money from him. I have it ! The headwaiter ! . . . No, no good. He was at the table of those inquisitive people who always stared across at me, and it would not do to give them an insight into my private affairs.

" Good afternoon, sir ! " . . . .

I wheeled round. It was the one-legged beggar, my dear, cheery, bohemian friend. He looked at me with a charming, friendly smile. Then I had a brainwave.

" You're just in time, my friend," I said. " I'm in need of tuppence."

" Certainly, sir," he said, " here you are, sir."

The ex-soldier with the head wound was still standing at my table, waiting darkly, relentlessly, and I was immensely relieved to be in a position to satisfy him. Of course, temporary financial embarrassments are not very serious matters if you have well-to-do friends.

The Thermometer

" Civilization ! " said Robert scornfully. " How far does it go ? "

This was Robert's way of introducing a story. Pouncing on a word or a phrase in the general conversation, he used it as his text for a little philosophical dissertation, which he then illustrated with a yarn of doubtful origin and still more doubtful entertainment value. Having had a good many drinks, he had already treated us to several yarns of this type, so, hoping to avert a sixth, one of us tried to turn the conversation.

" Have you fellows heard that Leopold's getting married ? " he remarked.

" Getting married ! " barked Robert. " Ridiculous ! . . . Civilization ! . . . How far does it go ? "

We resigned ourselves to our fate, and Robert began his sixth story.

" Imagine the background. The Russian Front in the third year of the War. Galicia. Winter. Freezing cold. Night. The Lieutenant returns from an inspection tour dead tired. He gulps down

some hot tea from a thermos flask, but it's all he can do to keep his eyes open. Another minute and he'll be asleep. He's seized with terror—what's going to happen if it should get still colder? The wind's shrieking through the trench, and his fur-lined coat's no protection. The thermometer registers twenty degrees of frost—twenty degrees C. If the temperature falls another five degrees and he's asleep, he'll be sure to freeze to death. But sleep he must. He remembers his batman, a Croatian peasant lad, a primitive fellow, a creature from the Stone Age, a true barbarian. But how is he to explain things to this animal? In the end he said to the lad: "Listen, Milos, listen carefully. Do you see this tube here? And do you see this silver ribbon inside? Well, the silver ribbon is the devil. He wants to kill me, so I've locked him into the tube. But there's a tiny hole here—you can't see it, but it's there. If the devil gets as far as this"—and the Lieutenant indicated twenty-five degrees below zero—"he can get through the hole, and then he'll kill me. Now, I'm going to lie down. You watch the tube, and when the devil reaches this place, you must wake me up at once."

"Well," continued Robert, "the lad took the thermometer with superstitious fear. The Lieutenant fell asleep. The lad began to pray, and his

teeth chattered as he did so. The 'devil' sank lower and lower. Then, suddenly, he leapt half a degree higher. The lad thought the 'devil' was frightened of his voice, so he raised the thermometer close to his lips and went on fervently praying to all the saints to save his master. The mercury column rose higher and higher. The lad, in the innocence of his heart, was happy in the belief that he had conquered the devil. He did not know, and he was never to learn, that the thermometer, warmed by his breath, could not show the critical degree. And, of course, he was too surprised for words when, in the morning, he could not shake his master awake. The Lieutenant lay dead, frozen in thirty degrees of frost."

There was silence for a moment. Then:

"An improbable story," remarked someone timidly.

"Improbable?" cried Robert. "Improbable? . . . Well, of course, the Lieutenant may have lied to me."

The Poet

(*A Legend*).

The poet settled down comfortably at a table in the café, drew a cup in front of him, put a lump of sugar into the cup, and began to weep. He wept slowly, evenly, first from his right eye, then from the left, carefully catching the tears in the cup. When the cup was full the poet wiped his eyes with a serviette, and after stirring up the liquid he began to sip it with evident enjoyment.

A tall, gaunt gentleman sitting at the next table watched the poet attentively. Suddenly he rose and went up to him.

"My name's John Devil," he said briefly.

"Satan?" asked the poet curiously.

"Maybe I'm related to him," said the gaunt gentleman coldly, "but that's nothing to do with you. I'm a business man and I came to Budapest on business. What are you doing here?"

"Can't you see? I'm having my tea. Or rather my dinner."

"And is all that genuine?"

The poet shrugged his shoulders. John Devil raised the cup, smelt it, dipped a finger into the cup and licked his finger. He gave a nod and glanced at his watch.

"I'm leaving for Manchester in half an hour, and in any case I dislike protracted negotiations, so I'll make you my offer in a few words. You'll supply me with two or three pints of this liquid per month at the rate of a hundred pounds per pint. The money'll be remitted to you by my Manchester counting house, monthly, in advance. You'll receive the first remittance at the end of this month, and I'll expect your first delivery not later than the fifteenth of next month. Good-bye."

John Devil vanished, and the poet rubbed his eyes.

"Nonsense," he said nervously.

However, on the first of the following month he received two hundred pounds. He was overjoyed, and in his first excitement he bought himself some new clothes, rented a nice little flat, ordered a ton of coal, and began to *live*. A week later his conscience began to trouble him. It was time he made a delivery to the excellent John Devil; the time-limit was approaching.

That evening he returned early from the club he had joined. He ordered his servant to make a

good fire, then he consumed a rich dinner, put on his new silk pyjamas and set to work. Sitting down at his desk he drew a fine porcelain cup in front of him and waited for the tears to flow. After five minutes he became disquieted and he began to squeeze his eyes.

"What's the matter?" he mumbled. But no tears came. "Well, well, well," said the poet irritably. "Hurry up!"

The poet bowed his head and began to wail:

"I'm a poor, unhappy wretch . . . no father, no mother . . . down and out . . . derelict. . . ."

It was all in vain. The tears simply refused to flow. The poet was terrified. If it went on like this he would be unable to send anything at all to John Devil, and then it would be all over with the easy life. He began to squeeze and knead his eyes in wild despair, breathing heavily as he did so.

"This won't do," he said at last. "I can't cheat my eyes. They can see I'm not a poor wretch, not down and out. I must think of something else." And after a brief pause he began to wail again: "Oh, poor, unhappy humanity . . . Oh, my poor, poor fellow creatures. . . . How much you have to suffer. . . ."

He waited anxiously, and he realised with growing terror that his eyes were getting drier and drier,

and that the corners of his mouth were curling upwards, no matter how hard he tried to press them downwards.

"My poor, miserable fellow creatures. . . ."

It was no use. His brow was covered with cold sweat as he felt his mouth distending wider and wider; in another minute he would split his sides with laughter.

So it was all finished. He must give up this life of ease so soon after he had first tasted its joys.

He hesitated a moment, then a defiant gleam sprang to his eyes. He rose to his feet, walked to the washstand, and pouring some water into a saucepan he heated it slightly over a spirit lamp. He mixed the lukewarm water in the cup with a little salt and a few grammes of wood ash. He filled a bottle with this mixture, and stoppered and sealed the bottle.

He posted the bottle to Manchester and waited for the reply with bated breath. By the fifteenth of the month he posted a total of three pints.

On the first day of the following month he received the money without comment. The poet heaved a sigh of relief. He immediately engaged a secretary, equipped a laboratory, and set to work. Two months later he demanded a higher price from John Devil on the plea that the price of raw materials