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Judgment of Mr. Pembroke

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Judgment of Mr. Pembroke

Robert Browne Wallace

Scene: The place of judgment for the hereafter. The place is entirely empty except for three angels sitting at a simple table and a Chinese coolie standing before it. The three angels, whose names are Solon, Hasau, and Lemas, have just put their heads together and seem to have arrived at a decision. Solon, who is the ringleader, announces in a firm but mellifluous voice, "A79-b314Z". Immediately a lively little man with white whiskers bobs in. He is dragging a reluctant, middle-aged man in a business suit, who is clutching an armful of flowers. The little old man leaves his captive standing with a dazed, asinine look on his face and goes up to the coolie.

PETER: Man, oh man, Chinee, you're a lucky one. It's not many folks as gets placed so well. A79-b314Z! They sure did all right by you.

SOLON: Silence, Peter! We are not interested in your remarks. See to it in the future that you are more respectful. You will remember we are under no obligation to keep you in your position. You may now proceed with your duties.

PETER (*Only slightly subdued*): Yes, sir. All right, Chinee, through the pearly gates you go. A79-b314Z.

He makes an electric pass with his fingers, and the Chinaman disappears, his voice remaining in the air to say:

I am humbly grateful for whatever desert, however infinitesimal, I have been accorded.

There is a gentle whirring noise as of smoothly running machinery, ended abruptly by a click. Everyone listens in silence until the click is heard. Then Solon motions Peter to bring up the confused gentleman in the business suit.

PETER: This here is Mr. Pembroke. I found him wandering around down in the lower pastures picking posies. I asked him why he didn't follow the signs pointing to the place of judgment. He said he'd rather pick posies and wasn't going to pay me any mind, so I just brought him anyhow.

SOLON: How do you do, Mr. Pembroke?

MR. P.: Say, what's the meaning of all this, I'd like to know? I was just minding my own business. What right does he have to drag me in here like this? (*Pointing to Peter, who is on the point of going out again*).

PETER: What right? Just listen to that drivell! You'd think he was of the opinion it'd be all the same if he gathered posies for the next thousand years.

SOLON (*Not unsympathetically*): That's enough, Peter; you may go now.

PETER: Yes, sir. (*Exit.*)

SOLON: Now, Mr. Pembroke, it is time that you realize you are at last in the hall of judgment. Incidentally, before we go farther, please consider the weightiness of the moment and discard those flowers.

Mr. Pembroke shamefacedly drops the flowers, and they melt away as they touch the floor.

SOLON: I don't know why it is, but you Americans, especially, almost always come here with a whole armful of flowers which you picked in spite of all the signs expressly directing you to present yourselves for judgment without delay. But whether you think you are ready to be judged or not, and according to the merit or demerit resulting from your life on earth, you will be placed on the infinite continuum of heaven and hell, and—

MR. P.: Wait a minute. What is that last —?

SOLON: The infinite continuum? Possibly you have been led to believe that heaven and hell are quite distinct and unconnected?

MR. P.: Of course, any one knows they're as different as black and white.

SOLON: Ah, yes, have you ever known two extremes to be anything but unlike? Yet always they melt together somewhere in between. When does white cease to be white as it becomes more grey? One has to set up arbitrary boundaries to decide, but we must never forget that everything is merely a part of the One, all apparently distinct parts owing their separateness entirely to degree. Thus the theoretical extremes of heaven and hell are connected by a continuum, and you will

be placed where you deserve on that continuum. Just as a matter of curiosity, where do you think you deserve to be placed?

MR. P.: Why—why, in heaven, of course. What do you think I've been living a good Christian life for?

HASAU: Aha, fear of the hereafter.

MR. P.: Well, fear or not, I guess I did what was right.

SOLON: We shall see about that. Now, Mr. Pembroke, what—

MR. P. (*Becoming indignant*): Say, what is this? Where's St. Peter, I'd like to know? He's the one to say whether I get in heaven or not.

LEMAS: I am afraid we shall have to disillusion you. He was the foolish little gentleman with the whiskers that brought you here. He does his job abominably, but he has been in the service so long we just hate to discharge him.

MR. P. (*Impatiently*): All right, all right. Fire away with your judgment. I have a clear conscience.

LEMAS: Excellent, Mr. Pembroke, excellent, but let us examine facts to see if you deserve to have a clear conscience.

MR. P.: Deserve it! I don't like to boast, but there's not many people that have wanted in their hearts to lead as good a life as I have.

HASAU: We only raise the question because of experience in the past. For instance, we had a South Seas missionary in here the other day who claimed to have a clear conscience. In questioning him we found that he had disrupted the gentle community life of an island of Polynesians by forcing upon the natives his European religion, clothes, and diet in the mistaken belief that it was for the good of their souls. We interviewed him on the same day as a patriarch of a so-called heathen tribe of a neighboring island, and he was horrified when he learned we were placing him farther from heaven than the unconverted heathen.

MR. P.: Now wait a minute. I don't know as I care to go where there are any heathens. Just what sort of a place is heaven if you let pagans in?

SOLON: My dear man, you shall have no choice as to where you shall be sent. As for your traditional concepts of heaven and

hell, you may as well cast them out now. For those who can visualize the abstract only by symbols it is convenient to think of hell as a place of holocaustic fire and devilish tortures, and of heaven as a pleasant town with streets of gold and villagers communing with one another in sublime happiness.

MR. P.: Well, what are heaven and hell like, then, if they aren't like that?

SOLON: In the first place there is nothing material in either. No gold, no fire, no whips or stings, no pleasant sounds or ticklings.

MR. P.: Why, if that was true, there wouldn't be any difference between heaven and hell.

SOLON: Wouldn't there? Only consider this. You will be all alone for eternity with nothing but your mind, and your mind stopped growing the moment you died.

MR. P.: That still doesn't say what heaven and hell are like.

SOLON: It is impossible to explain farther. If you had never had experience with water, I should not be able to tell you how it feels to get your finger wet.

MR. P.: I don't think I know what you're talking about. All I know is I've been a good Christian.

LEMAS: Mr. Pembroke, supposing you tell us in just what ways you feel you were a good Christian.

MR. P.: Well, I went to church every Sunday. I followed the ten commandments. I did whatever my church told me to do. I gave a great deal of money to charity. I —

HASAU: All very commendable in intention, no doubt, but we must go deeper. Now take this matter of giving to the poor— I understand by that that you reached a position of considerable wealth?

MR. P.: Of course; there's nothing wrong with that, is there? How could I give to the poor if I didn't have something to give them? Besides, it is only human nature to want to succeed.

HASAU: It is human nature to desire a place for one's ego in society. No one wants to fail.

MR. P.: Sure, that's what I was just saying. I just didn't want to be a failure.

HASAU: Naturally not, but if you had your eyes open at all down

on earth, Mr. Pembroke, you must have noticed that there was a limited amount of gold to be had, and nothing in the way of a clever man's taking a lion's share, except perhaps a fear of the hereafter. Honestly now, did you feel it was Christian to take more than your share?

MR. P.: Why not? If I hadn't taken it, some one else would. A person has to look out for himself in the business world. The idea is to make all the money you can, and if you're a Christian to give what you don't need back to charity.

LEMAS: Ah, do I understand you to say that Christianity doesn't apply to business?

MR. P.: That's right. The two just don't mix. You've got to run a business in order to live—unless you go on relief—and you've got to be able to live before you can be a Christian.

LEMAS: Yes, undoubtedly there are a few physical needs to be satisfied in order to continue life, but really did you find that your limousine, your country estate, your summers in Europe, enabled you to become a better Christian?

MR. P.: Well, a person can't be a Christian day in, day out. He has to enjoy himself some time. Anyhow, I did what my church told me was all right.

HASAU: Ah, now we are getting somewhere. Your church told you, I suppose, that it is more blessed to give than to receive?

MR. P.: Of course; that's Christianity.

HASAU: And did you understand by that that the more one gives, the more blessed one becomes?

MR. P.: Certainly.

HASAU: Even if all you give away is water and pebbles?

MR. P.: Oh, of course not. You have to give things a person needs.

HASAU: But suppose the person needs water or pebbles for some reason or other and you have oceans of water and acres of pebbles for which you have no need?

MR. P.: Well, then I'd be blessed if I gave him these things.

HASAU: Even if he used the water to drown his child and the pebbles to stone his wife to death?

MR. P.: It wouldn't be *my* business what he did with my gifts.

HASAU: My dear man, we do not judge so much on intentions as on results of intentions in action. And our records show that

your best of all intentions often resulted in unpremeditated distress for others.

MR. P.: Why, when did that ever happen?

HASAU: Many times. For instance, last week you gave ten dollars to a beggar along the street. When you left him he used the money you gave him to get drunk, causing considerable discomfort to both himself and his family. Were you being a Christian?

MR. P.: Well, I couldn't play him a nurse-maid, could I?

LEMAS: Mr. Pembroke, the true Christian not only has good intentions, but in his wisdom is capable of resolving them into actions and consequences which are also good. But your selfish and unthinking creed, which you call Christianity, has resulted in bad nearly as often as good. There is surely little merit in such Christianity.

MR. P.: I suppose the next thing you'll say is that the ten commandments are wrong.

HASAU: Mr. Pembroke, none of the church-given precepts is wrong.

MR. P.: Why, you just got through saying it's wrong to give.

HASAU: Not at all. I merely argued the necessity of allowing wisdom to guide giving. Christianity or its equivalent by any other name is dynamic. One cannot become a Christian simply by following a book full of rules.

MR. P.: If not, how's a person to know what to do?

HASAU: He must know that more important than any rule or commandment is the active consideration of others and sufficient consideration for himself that he will best be able to serve others.

MR. P.: Oh, that's too vague to be practical.

HASAU: Yes, it does seem vague, and for that reason rules were framed to guide your actions. But it is impossible to frame a set of rules which under no condition may be broken. Even the ten commandments are merely convenient rules-of-thumb, not to be broken without weighty consideration of consequences.

MR. P.: Why, that's blasphemy!

HASAU: On the surface it does sound that way, but let us consider more than the surface. I recall a prudish young lady

we interviewed not long ago who thought it a sin to lie, believing in the absolute truth of the ten commandments. Shortly before she came before us she had refused to tell a lie which, if told, would have saved the lives of many of her countrymen and saved countless others from distress. Her utter selfishness in thinking that the purity of her soul was worth more than the well-being of society earned her one of the lowest places on the hell end of the continuum that we have yet offered a person of so-called good intentions.

MR. P.: What does that have to do with me? I don't think you appreciate how good I am compared to most people. Some people I used to know made a lot of money and kept it all to themselves; a lot of my friends didn't even believe in immortality; plenty of them went to the movies on Sunday or even worked.

SOLON: Mr. Pembroke, we are not interested in you compared to most people, but in you as compared with what you should have been. And thanks to the revealing transparency of your words in this interview we have achieved our aim.

MR. P.: This interview? It isn't over, is it? I've scarcely begun to tell you about myself yet.

SOLON: You have told us everything we need to know. If you will pardon us now, my colleagues and I will decide where to plot you on the continuum.

Solon, Hasau, and Lemas, as before, put their heads together a moment and quickly arrive at a decision.

SOLON: K432-160aL.

PETER (*Bobbing in with a bleary-eyed charwoman in tow, who looks blankly around the hall, bucket and mop in hand, while Peter confronts Mr. Pembroke*): Heh! I knew you weren't headed for any good when I first saw you picking posies as if you were the only person in the world. You've made your bed, now you can lie in it. K432-160aL.

He makes an electric pass and Mr. Pembroke disappears, his voice remaining in the air to say:

Hey, wait a minute. I don't think you realize I'm a good Christian.

Everyone listens in silence to the gently whirring machinery which terminates in a decisive click.