

Checks and Balances

By George Wilhite

I

John knew this was going to be the roughest part of the program. The first of the twelve steps had gone rather smoothly. Admitting there was a God was easy enough. He had done that years ago in Catholic School to fit in and avoid bruised knuckles: whether it was true or not never mattered much to him anyway. Coming to believe that only this God, whoever He was exactly, was the only source through which he could regain his sanity? Sure—why not? People had let him down often enough, and he had returned the favor many times over.

Then, he moved from the basic beliefs of those first few steps to the tougher ones—the steps that dealt with “the others.” There were so many others he had injured along the way. The Trail of Tears, as he called it, the journey backwards from his last drink, was long, messy, and filled with deceit, pain and indifference, all in the name of the blessed bottle. With too many others to count, and certainly many more he would never remember through his alcohol-clouded memory, he made a list of the ones he did remember, ordering them from the least offended

to the ones at the bottom so injured they were probably sorry he was sober. Those at the bottom of the list probably wanted him strung up by his balls forever in Hell. And he did not blame them at all.

Predictably, the others at the top of the list provided easy reconciliation, practice runs for the real deal. "Oh, I knew it was the alcohol talking, John. Of course I forgive you. Glad you've come around. Good luck." Hugs and tears, the first of both he experienced outside of the meetings, made him feel like there was some hope for this Step Number Eight. Then he would remind himself of his current position on the list.

Now, finally working the bottom of the list, hugs and tears had turned to curses, slammed doors and desperation. Fine, he deserved all this, but it was getting old fast. Of all the steps he had worked through, this one had him craving booze the most, especially after every encounter with Helen.

Helen's name was unconditionally at the bottom of the list, but she was also an exception. Naturally, one's wife is often the prime target for all the bullshit you shovel out when you're a drunk, but it wasn't that cut and dry with old Helen. No. Not one bit. Helen played many roles in the House of Addiction, but she quit playing The Co-Dependant quite early on. Making amends would be a lot easier if she had always been The Victim. The

problem was she swiftly moved on and took over the role of The Judge.

Helen the Judge had nothing to do with his decision to get sober. She had not offered one infinitesimal speck of support. The Judge had screamed, thrown any object in her vicinity worthy of taking flight at him, told him how truly worthless and miserable he was and that he might as well drink himself to death and get it over with. Yet she still made the bottom of the list because a lot of what she said was true.

Helen was relishing her moment now, a chance to, as she put it: "make his life a living Hell." She rehashed all the old arguments and laughed at his attempts to make amends, told him he might as well "get over this temporary guru shit and go back to the only thing you do well—drink." No breaks whatsoever with Helen.

He was only a block away from Helen's house (technically it was still their house) and he was itching for a drink. Helen was certainly a bitch, self-proclaimed and proud of it, and confronting her today may not have been the healthiest course of action open to him. But Step Eight was not ambiguous: "make direct amends whenever possible, except when to do so would injure you or others." Helen no longer threw things or beat him. It had been all words so far so he pressed on. But Good Lord he wanted a drink. "Shit," he thought. "Why do we drunks always say

we want a drink? I want a whole fucking bottle! Helen makes me want to drink a whole damn case!"

Storming down the street where he used to live, anger and despair came in waves, and both desired a drink to be sated.

II

The roguish imp currently named Charlie was eavesdropping on John's mind. This was just the ticket for him. Lately, he had been slipping in his powers and the Master was getting angry. He was not going to be allowed to roam the earth much longer at this rate, and certainly would never climb the ranks.

Charlie had been at Helen's house with John before and thought about getting involved, but thus far John remained willful enough to keep the game a struggle, and Charlie preferred easy prey. Today John's will seemed perhaps diminished just enough that maybe . . .

. . . and in that instant John's thoughts betrayed him, offering Charlie his final cue: "what I wouldn't give to make this all go away."

That was all Charlie needed to hear. The game commenced.

"Do you really mean that?" John heard the voice clearly enough but, looking around, saw nobody there.

"Great," he said aloud, assuming he was alone. "Now I'm going crazy."

"Oh, I am here." The voice came again, a male voice, deep enough to be that of an adult, but it also carried an innocent, child-like timbre. "Did you mean what you said?"

"What are you talking about?" Then, angry that he was giving into this madness, he called out: "Who are you? Where are you?"

"Open your eyes, John."

"They are open, jackass. And how do you know my name? Is this some kind of joke? Do you know Helen?"

"I know who she is, same as I know who you are. Stop thinking so literally. You are seeing but not perceiving. Open your eyes and look straight ahead."

John looked forward and concentrated. Initially nothing happened, then, a gradual change occurred, a thin black mist formed before him, out of synch with the hot summer day. Slowly, the mist dissipated and a human form appeared, first barely perceptible, like a specter, and then it finally took corporeal form. It seemed to be a human male, but there were anomalies in his appearance. He stood about three feet tall but had no dwarfish features, rather he just seemed like a half-scale model of a person. He smiled broadly as he appeared and this accented

his other peculiar feature—though he seemed to be an adult his face was like that of an infant.

“Who are you?”

Charlie sighed deeply. “You humans always ask the difficult questions. I have had many names.” He moved closer as he prattled on. “And all my real names are so difficult for you to pronounce. So unless you want to become involved in a trivial and I am sure boring linguistics lesson, allow me to use my current earthly name of choice, Charlie.”

“O-kaay,” answered John, not quite sure what to make of this stranger. “So the next question is . . .”

“Yes. I am real. Not a figment of your imagination. Always been here, just not often seen. Roam the earth, largely invisible to most, but real nonetheless. Does any of this matter?”

“So you can read my mind. Congratulations. Hope you enjoy it in there more than I do.”

“Sarcasm. Love it. A human trait I wish I could master. So much to do, so little time.” As Charlie rambled on, John watched him pace annoyingly about with tremendous energy and zeal. “Ah, I drift again. Moving on. John, the last thought you had before I appeared.” Then Charlie became immediately still and looked directly into John’s eyes with sudden intensity and said, slowly and deliberately: “ Did-you--mean it?”

"That I want to make this all go away. If that was it, of course."

"You said: 'what I wouldn't give to make this all go away.' By that, do I deduce you would give anything?"

"Oh, so that's the deal. You're some sort of genie?"

Charlie laughed so hard he snorted, and a little puff of smoke came out of his nostrils. He covered his mouth. "Sorry. I told you. I am not a fictional character. Genies. Three wishes. Ridiculous." He scratched his head suddenly and John noticed for the first time the little two little nubs on his head. "Yeah, they're horns. Or will be someday. What I am is not important. I can help you, if you are willing to give up certain things."

"You can make this pain go away. Now. No tricks. No twelve steps. That's what you're telling me."

Charlie looked into his eyes again. The child-man's eyes were alluring, as though he knew some form of hypnotism. They were a curious maroon color and had no pupils, further evidence that he was some kind of unearthly creature. As he gazed into John's eyes he said: "I can make the whole situation go away—as though it never happened. You will never have taken a drop of alcohol in your life. You never hurt anyone, and therefore have nothing to confess. None of it ever happened."

John listened intently as Charlie spoke these words slowly, in a whisper, as though delivering some arcane litany. Certainly

this was a compelling temptation. He blinked and the trance was broken, but its affect held. "You are serious?"

Charlie's silence answered that question.

"And, of course I am serious," John stated.

"You must know," Charlie said. He again commenced his nervous pacing, this time circling John and no longer making eye contact. "There are consequences to this sort of thing. I am not in charge. There are--how shall we put it? Checks and balances. You will never have been a drunk. Other things will change also. You may have different friends. You will probably not be as rich as you are now."

"Stop. Listen, Charlie. I may have managed pretty well for myself, but now the money is all I have. And the jobs that I took to get that money, all that stress, that's what started my drinking in the first place. I have no friends now. No real friends. I don't care about any checks and balances. Let's deal."

Charlie looked John directly in the eyes again, his impish face filled with glee.

III

Helen Jamison woke from her alcoholic stupor. Peeling back her eyelids she saw it was 10:20 PM. Shit! Another night wasted by this stupid television with that worthless husband. It's too

late now to go out and have any fun. I need to be at work all the earlier now that this slob of a husband is out of work—again! She belched loudly and tasted bile raising from her stomach, void of food and full of way too much gin.

“Hey John, you worthless piece of shit!” she bellowed in her favorite Joan Crawford voice. “I thought you were making me some fucking dinner! You gotta do something worthwhile around her you lazy bastard!”

John sat at the dining room table, as he had for over two hours, staring at the meal he made grow cold and inedible, another thing for her Majesty to rave about. What would she destroy this time? She was so proud of that job of hers, but lately he wondered if they broke even with all the things she shattered in her nightly tantrums.

He had simply sat there for hours while Helen slept, snoring and farting away. How he dreamt of the day she would drink so much that she would choke on her own vomit and end it all. She was a bigger bitch as a drunk than she had ever been sober and he wondered why he never mustered enough courage to leave. But he knew the answer. He was the ultimate co-dependant, for when he thought to himself “this is all my fault” he knew in his case it was the truth. That was part of the deal with Charlie. Nobody else would know things had ever been any

different. Only he would remember the previous version of his life.

"Answer me, you son of a bitch!" came the cry of the banshee from the next room. It was moving around in there, destroying everything in its path as it approached.

"Here we go again," he said softly. He always spoke softly now. "Damn you to Hell Charlie, wherever you are."

IV

"Damn me to Hell," said Charlie. "That's a good one!" The imp laughed, snorted and breathed a little fire.

The imp some knew as Charlie, that demon also known by many other names, looked out upon his latest project and proclaimed it was good. His head itched and he scratched it furiously, but he did not mind the pain. His horns would go through a nice growth spurt over this. A few more good ones like this and he would finally be a full-fledged member of the elite. He knew exactly which aging demon, headed for retirement, he wanted to replace. He chose to become Despair.

He was certainly on his way. This one had been clean. All the checks and balances were in place. Despair was alive and well in the Jamison household.