

The Pardon and The Punishment



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THE GREAT MAN sat on the desolate beach, his swollen leg propped up toward the sullen sky. The Recording Angel appeared before him, bathed in golden light, scroll in hand.

The Great Man looked up and sighed. "You have come at last to judge me?"

The Angel shook his head. "I have merely come to record your punishment. You have already been judged by your fellow man."

The Great Man brightened. "Yes, a full and complete pardon," he said. "I have it here somewhere . . ."

"You have been pardoned by just one of your fellow men," said the Angel. "I fear the rest either hate or pity you."

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THE GREAT MAN'S head seemed to retreat into his shoulders. He glanced sideways at the Angel. "They always hated me. All my life they hated me. There was no one I could trust."

"You were too suspicious," said the Angel.

"But I never cared," said the Great Man, the perspiration breaking out on his upper lip. "I didn't want their love. I wanted their respect. And I earned it."

"I suppose you did," said the Angel.

"No one overcame more adversities in his struggle to the top than I," said the Great Man. His fist clenched. "Everyone was against me. But I showed them. And when I reached the top, I opened new avenues of peace after a generation of distrust. I single-handedly plucked mankind back from the brink of self-destruction."

"A marvelous achievement," agreed the Angel.

"Yet I wanted the respect not only of my fellow man," said the Great Man, "but of history, of generations yet unborn." His eyes grew dreamy. "I was the greatest man on earth, you know."

"Yes, you soared to the stars and plummeted like a meteor," said the Angel. "You have all the qualities of a tragic hero."

The Great Man sat straighter. "Yes, yes, a tragic hero. Will they tell stories, write plays and sing of me in years to come?"

"It depends on the ending," said the Angel. "A tragic hero requires a gloriously tragic ending."

"I could, like Marc Antony, throw myself on my sword," said the Great Man thoughtfully.

"Today, you would only be thought a psychopath."

"Perhaps someone will murder me, like Caesar," said the Great Man hopefully.

"You are too isolated, too heavily guarded."

"It's too bad they don't behead people or burn them at the stake any more," said the Great Man. "The least they can do is chain me in a dungeon to suffer the privations . . ."

"You have been pardoned," said the Angel. "Perhaps that was the cruellest act of all."

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WHAT WILL they do with me then?" said the Great Man.

"Nothing," said the Angel. "They will try to forget you. They will hope you will vanish. They will wait for the ending."

"But what is the ending?" cried the Great Man desperately.

The Angel again shook his head. "There is no possible ending," he said.

"No ending? But then what is my punishment?"

"That," said the Angel, making an entry on his scroll, "is your punishment."