

Forever and Forever

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ORDINARILY, Glen Murray admitted he was something of a marathon sleeper - claimed a world's championship or two, in fact. "When I turn in at night," he often bragged to his friends at the club, "I pull up the covers, flash out the bed light, bury my left ear in the pillow - "

"Always the left ear?" his friends would inquire in mock skepticism.

"Always the left ear," he would reply emphatically. "And the next thing I know, the alarm clock is doing its little solo, and I lean out of bed and choke it between my powerful thumb and forefinger. In other words, I'll challenge any three sleepers to outsleep me at any time, any place, anyhow."

"Any time?" again queried his friends.

"Well, any time except - two or three times a year. Then something goes screwy, and I lose the combination that opens the good old gates of sleep."

Except.

"Perhaps the Sand Men's Local number thirteen has had a walk-out."

"Maybe. Perhaps old man Morpheus was taking a night off himself. Whatever is wrong, I go to bed feeling tired enough to sleep around the clock. I perform the full routine, including digging in with the good old left ear, and then, for some unknown reason, the goddess of sleep gives me a frosty eye. In fact, she must be out on a private date of her own, for all my most adroit wooing doesn't get a nod from her, much less forty winks. I roll and toss"

"We know," his friends agreed, unsympathetically. "We all go through it."

"Of course," was Murray's impatient retort. "Most people do. The point I am making is that with me it is altogether out of the ordinary."

One of Those Nights.

"Clearly," Murray muttered, as he flashed on the bed light and looked at the alarm clock near his bed "this is going to be one of the out-of-the-ordinary nights.":

The quietly ticking clock indicated three-thirty, its hands forming an accusing right triangle, the legs of which slowly and rheumatically dragged themselves apart.

Murray glared at the clock indignantly. He had been in bed a good hour and a half and the magic formula for sleep simply escaped him. He had counted sheep and included a few black ones, until he felt he could never again look a lamb chop in the face. He had counted up to a thousand, counted in the approved rhythmic monotony and he felt fresh enough to start another thousand, and make fair headway toward a possible million.

Yet there was every reason why he should be dead tired. In the shaded light of his bed lamp he looked about the disordered room - his dress clothes folded neatly on a chair, his soiled dress skirt a white splotch on the rug near his dresser, gloves and a stick across another chair, and, on the table, near the lamp - .

Her Husband.

He reached out and picked up the gardenia, which lay within easy grasp of his fingers. Ah! Perhaps that was why he had not been able to sleep, though you'd think a lot of tossing might precede that important decision, not follow it. For she was usually like a wave of peace to his soul, a fragrant garden in which he walked, drinking in the sedative that is beauty.

Though neither had put it into words, both knew that he had made his decision that very night.

"I saw Phil in the Plaza grill this noon," he said, though he was sure that would not interest her.

"His divorce was not likely to keep him long in mourning. I'm sure he was much more relieved even than I was, and that's saying a lot."

"He looked well."

"Doesn't he always?"

Decisions.

Murray agreed that he did. In fact, Phil looked, if anything, too charming and attractive. Phyllis caught his thought, a flattering trick she had, and put it into words.

"Yes," she said, "Phil always looked so well that I knew I couldn't trust him. He looked well to too many women. I preferred a man who would rather look well to me alone. Anyway, our names" (she threw the whole matter off with her delightful laughter), "Phil and Phyllis, were too awful. We sounded like a small-time dancing act. It was just as well that we parted before our relations became something for the police to settle."

But Murray knew, as she talked, that he was settling something vastly important to him. He had been sure he loved her when she was still Phil Seward's wife. He knew he loved her now. The divorce was six months old, and the slight gossip that eddied up around it had settled down. He had gone to her, first, out of a blend of love and pity and admiration for her gameness under what was, to say the least, an annoying publicity.

A Choice.

He had gone out with her because she fascinated him as no other woman in his experience had ever done. And his mounting love was now a thing which he recognised as past his control. In fact, he had known it for weeks. He admitted it to himself tonight (again he looked at the clock); last night, of course, he meant. It was now glasses in a toast to midnight, and, later, when, at her apartment, he kissed her good-night.

Why he had not, there and then, asked her to marry him made him feel a bit curious. He thought he had been held back by any number of reasons. First of all, he felt that she deserved something better than a "Will you?" muttered in a hushed voice, under a dim light, outside the elevator of her apartment house. She might, he felt, contrast it sharply with what must have been Phil Seward's

polished, almost poetic, proposal. You only had to know Phil slightly to be sure his proposal would have been a masterpiece.

Why Not?

Besides (he confessed it now as the hands of the clock showed a quarter to four), there was something else. A religious scruple, confound the fool thing! One would think that, after six years away from the Church, marriage with a divorced woman one was lucky enough to love would be just another hurdle to take in one's stride. But it wasn't quite.

"Oh, well - "

He flicked off the light once more, and with a firm gesture tucked his left ear again into the pillow.

"To-morrow's Friday, and the first," he groaned. "All the piled-up work of the end of the week and the first of the month! It's likely I'll not see Phyllis in any case until Saturday evening.

"And, if I don't get sleep - one, two, three, four, five, six, seven..."

He counted a hundred, a second hundred, a fifth and sixth hundred.

It Can't Go On.

Then, once more, sheep, like figures in a slow-motion picture, hurdled the fence with a floating, unreal grace, and then, as if the projector had suddenly broken, seemed to pause in mid-air, floating, like fleecy, if decidedly substantial, clouds.

He cursed softly. "Here, here!" he muttered. "This can't go on forever."

The beat of his measured counting suddenly, and without his noticing it, transferred itself to that lovely word of vowels and mutes and liquids that had concluded his last exclamation.

"Forever, forever, forever," he began to chant in the back of his brain, his lips slightly smiling at the silly things one does and says under the influence of a sleepless dawn.

"Forever and forever," he thought, sharply conscious that he was not one millimeter closer to sleep. "Forever and forever."

Wasn't that the name of a play? Surely, at least, one syrupy song had been called that. It was something for the crooners to drool over. Beautiful word, though! Beautiful phrase! The very essence of a lover's oath! He smiled into the dawn.

"I shall love you, Phyllis, forever and forever."

A Promise.

A large promise. Probably Phil had assured her of just that, and his forever has proved to be a matter of months.

"Let's see," he mused. "If we start to measure my 'forever and forever,' why, I'm thirty-six. She is at least thirty-two. First love lasts, I suppose, somewhere between two years and five. Then, if you are lucky, congenial companionship succeeds. That lasts until... death cuts into the heart of forever, snaps it into clipped little syllables..."

Wide awake in the dark, his brain suddenly snapped back to a long forgotten memory.

"And, then" (his brain continued to form words not of his own choosing), "and then forever and forever really begins."

Fleeting Forever.

He flung himself restlessly on his right side.

"Sounds like a phrase out of a high school retreat," he muttered, and set himself determinedly to sleep, thereby banishing beyond recall whatever of slumber had hovered by his bedside.

"Forever and forever," his brain went on clicking, without his volition, "but not with Phyllis. I'll promise her that, and, sweet sophisticate that she is, she will accept my promise as if it meant what it said. But we'll both know - know the fickleness and fleetingness of our passion, know the transitory companionship that is love, know the sagging of companionship into boredom, know the inevitability of its end in death, and, then - forever and forever and forever."

The Problem.

Now he was fully aroused. His naturally keen mind, a mind that had trained itself to crack open a problem and pull out each last rich fragment of nut-meat it contained, doggedly and almost avidly seized this word. With knitted eyebrows, he proceeded to break the word open. "Forever." A queer word. Could a man fathom it? He was a lawyer. Even as a young and aggressive prosecutor, he had sent criminals up for life. He knew what life imprisonment could mean, going on hopelessly, "from now on," and if you were friendless and not lucky enough to be valuable to some gang, without prospects of a reprieve. That was forever.

No. He shook his head, repudiating the explanation. Some day a merciful figure that slipped past turnkeys and wardens, defying the high walls and endlessly barred doors of the prison, would open the lifer's cell. That was not forever. Death ended life imprisonment.

Until Release.

He remembered, for the first time in five years or more, the old lawyer with whom he had first been associated. He remembered noting with pity the twisting of his hands through arthritis and the slow knotting of his whole body into a tortured skein of agony. When last he had called to see the old fellow before his death, he had touched his hand in friendship, and the lawyer on the bed wailed in an anguish that was hardly human.

They had later rested him, he heard, on an air cushion, and the breath of wind across him played on those tortured nerves like the harsh hands of some vandal mercilessly grabbing at a harp.

"No cure," said the physician, who walked with him into the corridor on the occasion of his last visit. "He is going to suffer this forever."

Again Murray shook his head. No, that was not forever. The pain that knotted his nerves into hard centres of agony would some day grasp his throat for a last throttling that might be singularly merciful, and all would be over.

Murray smiled grimly as he saw how the word "forever" cracked wide the narrow limits of a deadly disease, and went searching out for limitless time and space.

Far, Far Back.

Now, thoroughly aroused at the fascination of the simple word which had been, first, the rhythmic measure of his sleeplessness, and the poetic promise of his love, his active reasoning joined hands with his imagination to slip far out into time.

In quick retrospect he saw the universe evolving from gas and stardust, from molten masses of whirling fire, to sun and planets and earth in mighty solar systems, till gas grew cool and crusts formed, and vegetation in watery depths were nibbled by fish that rose to the surface, took clumsily to wing, and in time bore their offspring in some lush, incredible jungle, where, later, skyscrapers towered above man at his work and play.

Yet, somewhere, sometime, by whatever first impulse you will, all this had to begin. It had not always been. It was not something that had always existed. Though the measure of its slow unfolding was not a measure of minutes, but of uncounted ages; Murray's mind could still go back to chaos and a beginning. Even that was not forever.

And Forward.

So he pushed ahead. America would fall as Babylon and Egypt and the ancient cities of Nineveh and Troy and Carthage had fallen. Slowly, but inevitably, the sun itself would cool. He could imagine the earth dwellers of some distant day shivering to their deaths between fields of ice. The resistless unwinding of the world's cycle would go on, until, like some ancient clock, suns ceased to whirl, the wheels that were the earths and planets and moons would grow rusty, weary, and halt in their revolution, moons would fall heavily through space, and chaos reign once more.

It might be after more years than he could write in zeros on the sides of the Rockies, but when it came, and after it came, the end of all this familiar universe, the winding, up of this world that shelters man, that would still not be forever.

An Old Comparison.

Somewhere out of his memory Murray recalled a comparison. Who had used it? By an effort of his memory he associated it with a serious face, white, atop a black cassock. But the name of the man was gone, as most things connected with his outgrown faith were gone. This problem of forever, he recalled rather hurriedly, was not one of faith. It was the problem of a man, too tired to sleep, who let his brain course down a tricky problem, the finding of whose answer might leave him free to sleep.

Ah, yes, the comparison!

"Suppose" (he could almost hear the priest's words) "a ball of solid steel, vast as the earth, hanging in space by some chain that fastened it to a ring of Saturn. Suppose, each thousand years, a humming bird brushes with his wings against the ball.

He returns, this little fluff of vibrant feather, each millennium, until the ball of steel, once vast as the earth, is worn down to a tiny fragment of steel that, with a last sweep of his wing, he flings out into chaos. Suppose, with each succeeding thousand years, the humming bird brushes the chain, link by link, until, from earth up to Saturn, each burnished link has been blown in dust far into space.

How long before that humming bird, weary from his task, would finally see the earth-large ball, the steel chain that hung from Saturn, reduced to the fine grey dust to which his recurring wing had brushed it? How long? And still, that is not forever."

Beyond Count.

He smiled into the darkness with wide-open eyes, knowing that the problem, defying any figures known to mathematics, still eluded the boundaries of his imagination. He had still not reached forever. It was absurd. It was intriguing. It was a problem too big for human solution.

Yet, when next he met Phyllis, he would swear to love her forever and forever, and promise himself with her a life endlessly blissful.

Wasted Sleep.

The gaunt, slightly rheumatic minute hand of his clock pointed warningly toward the hour. Four o'clock. And he must be up at seven to face a piled desk that waited for him at his office.

Silly to let his sleep be stolen by the very word he had used as a rhythm to induce his sleep. Silly to become engrossed with a word as impersonal as infinity, as unrelated to himself as...

Almost like the stroke of a small mallet against his forehead, he felt an idea strike him sharply. It struck him with real impact, like a physical blow. Impersonal? Unrelated? Was it, this strange haunting word? The idea brought him bolt upright in bed. He reached out again for the light and then pulled back his hand almost convulsively.

If immortality, that dream of all philosophers, that promise of all faiths and creeds, that recurrent craving of all men and women, of all nations and ages, were true...

The Real "He."

If he, as his forgotten (no, not forgotten, but long sloughed off, buried, hidden) religion taught - if he was half-corrupting flesh and half-enduring spirit...

If, when his body dropped to dust, as, cynically, he recalled it must and would; if then the real he of will and reasoning and personality went on forever...

He shuddered.

A curious blend of imagination and reasoning forced him to see himself suddenly imprisoned in that word "forever." It was as if he saw the consonants as so many bars, the vowels as small prison portholes, and himself caught in the dungeon of a word. He felt about him bars he could not shake nor bend nor split, portholes through which all torturing squeezing failed to force his imprisoned soul.

He was, as he saw it, caught in that prison-house of forever.

Caught.

Now, looking forward, he saw a hideous, terrifying, nightmarish possibility: The world crashing into chaos, the stars falling headlong back into a sea of gas, the towering cities of earth melting, as the universe is poured back into the seething cauldron of primaeval fire - and yet he, he the man, he Glen Murray, still living, still existing, still imprisoned in that cell-house made up of the consonants and vowels of the word "forever."...

He saw the humming bird, with the triumphant final flick of his wing, brushing into dust the last steel atom, to which, through incredible ages, he had slowly worn the steel ball and its links, and then fluttering back from Saturn's outer ring down in fulfilment of a final destiny. Yet he, Glen

Murray, still somewhere, living, knowing, groping, captured in that terrifying prison that was forever!

Laughter.

In the darkness he laughed aloud. Strange how the small hours and sleeplessness league together to make a man's nerves wince at strange sounds, tremble as a shadow moves across a drawn blind, and scamper about in the frightened recesses of memory at the sleepy repetition of a word like "forever."

It was humiliating.

One felt so sure in cool disbelief, leaning firmly on the massive pillars of one's doubt, and then felt hot rushes of ancient faith that set knees to trembling and memory to pulling out hobgoblins that danced before one's eyes!

Why (he laughed), even the figures of speech were, in the early dawn, a twisted fantasy of shadowy pillars and hot breaths and hobgoblins and the ghosts of a creed deader than Banquo. When once he was married to Phyllis...

Her Answer.

The phantom of her laughter seemed to float reassuringly to him across the darkness, that faintly ironic laughter with which she warded off life. Life, she pretended gaily, was such a joke. It was a jest that one was wise to play on others before others got a chance to play it on oneself. A bad or unsuccessful first marriage, he had sometimes suspected, twists laughter into mockery, as it twists love into cynical acceptance of passion. But Phyllis had survived because she had continued to laugh cleanly.

Phyllis would certainly be ashamed of him if she could see him now. (The clock had drawn its hands together again at twenty minutes past four, almost like the hands of an amateur diver poised for the plunge.) She would laugh at him for lying long after four in the morning cracking his head over the ridiculous problem, "How long is forever?"

She would answer that with a smile.

"As long as we love each other," he could almost hear her say. "That long will be our forever. Beyond that, who cares?"

While Love Endures.

Of course! Who cared? They'd love each other passionately for a year or so, find each other excellent comrades for half a decade, drift on the tides of their personal selfishness, down individual ways, but still good friends, tolerant and kindly, maturing and growing old among their devoted associates and the sweet amenities of life. That would go on for twenty years, thirty, forty...

While the humming bird beat his wings against a steel ball and wore down a chain, and made no dent, no slight impression on forever.

Suppose (oh, confound that word "suppose"), suppose that immortality had something to it. After all, all men had believed in it. All faiths guaranteed it. Much apparently sound philosophy claimed to prove it.

The Certainty of Doubt.

Murray shook his head as if to throw off the doubt of his doubt.

"No, it's too late for all that to be disorganising my mind and my life now. My doubts are too certain. I have no need to question them. When I die, I die dead, end my story at the finis called the grave. That has all been clear to me. Why, now, do I find myself flirting with the preposterous idea called 'forever'?"

Knife-sharp, his mind, whetted to almost a clairvoyant keenness, cut and stabbed into the future. He laid the years with Phyllis end to end and eyed with alarming contempt their pitiful fewness. Then he seemed to stand looking at himself, as if he were outside of himself and could see himself, Glen Murray, held captive in that fantastic prison called "forever."

"Still I Am."

"The mountains crumble; I still am. The world is dust; I still exist. The universe clatters to chaos; I live on. Uncounted, uncountable eras drift, cloudlike, across the vastness of space; I have not ceased to be.

Immortal... deathless... forever. Suppose all this were true. Suppose - a gambler's risk - that all this were my destiny. Measuring this against the decade of my probable happiness with Phyllis...

"Happiness?"

Sudden Sweat.

In the darkness he felt sudden sweat on his forehead. He hardly knew why his hands were hot, or that he licked his lips furtively with his tongue. He was afraid, afraid as a man might be who, in the darkness, faces his coming disgrace, sees his crime, hidden until now, discovered and blazoned to the world, and watches the doors of the prison opening to swallow what remains of his life.

No. That was not what caused the sweat, the trembling he could not control. Here was no question of what remains of life, of a dozen years, or two score or a hundred. It was the horrible supposition that there might be a life eternal, a life which continued after death, a life that went on - .

Forever.

Suppose...

Gambler's Choice.

Who was the gambler now? The man who staked infinity, the endless reach of ages, forever, against the hours in Phyllis' arms, years spent in walking, talking, eating, sleeping at her side? What pitiful odds he, the gambler, was taking for his risk! If, by some terrible fact, these brief years ahead were really the time when one prepared for forever, if, while one lived here and now, one determined whether the forever should be in a prison cell, the cell of one's endless, but solitary, confinement, where no turnkey, Death, entered to unbolt the door and say, "The grave is your open way to freedom," where no final clutch of agony caught the gasping windpipe and stilled the agony of arthritis-twisted limbs; or whether...

Ah, there was a second whether - whether forever was to be the high sheltering walls of one's eternal garden of delight...

He flung the idea away as he had long since relegated to the same oblivion of fairyland the heavens and hells of whatever age or race.

Can All Be Wrong?

Yet, even as he flung the idea aside, he realised that he was flinging, not his own idea, but the idea of a thousand races and uncounted years and untold generations, who clung with all their strength of mind and will to a forever that would be blissful or miserable, depending on the way in which they had spent the present now. And he could hear their voices clearly answer his contempt of immortality with a calm, "Can all mankind be wrong?"

He was one against the world, he and his generation, persuading themselves of what even they found difficult to believe, that the moment of passion was beyond price, that doubt and disbelief were the highest certainties, that the great gambler was he who grasped a certain second and let go his chance to win a priceless eternity.

To Stake All.

No. That was absurd. Memory of many seconds of passion told him with nausea that they could not be priceless, as they surely had not been painless. How could doubt, the rejecter of the truth, be certainty itself?

And the gambler was the man who risked the coin in hand for the future coins he might win by staking the present. He was choosing Phyllis and tearing up his gambler's chance that, supposing there was a forever, he should, by staking his hours and days of passion and companionship, win...

Almost he felt as if he had been given a gambler's hunch, the hunch to play his coin, the prospects of an immediate happiness, in order to win forever and forever. If he played his coin upon Phyllis (he drew back from the crudeness of the phrase; then plunged his mind relentlessly into it), if he played his coin upon Phyllis and lost, and there was a forever, a forever in which he would sit, imprisoned, with no releasing gaoler; sick, with no merciful death; a failure, with no chance to retrieve lost fortunes - forever sick of himself, sick of his failure, tormented as failures are tormented, and knowing that not next year, nor after a million years, nor after a hundred billion, nor after the sun's fire had cooled to a cold ash, and the last planet was sifted in fine dust vaguely through barren space, would it end for him or for his memory and his bitterness.

The hands of the clock, in a miniature yawn, were stretched wide. It was a quarter to five.

Glen Murray pushed back the covers that seemed to burn him, drive his feet into bedroom slippers, flung himself across the room, pulled out a sheet of paper, wrote briefly, sealed the envelope and jammed a stamp haphazardly on the corner.

At Dawn.

The priest in the down-town church was vesting for Mass in the shabby little sacristy, but he stopped when a well-dressed man entered.

"Certainly," he replied to a question. "Kneel down right here."

The man talked rapidly, and with a clear knowledge of how he came and why. He ended his confession with a new sin. At least, he evidently thought it was a sin, and it was surely new to the priest.

"And I accuse myself of being a gambler who preferred what he thought was a small, sure thing to what he fancied was a magnificent, overwhelming, astounding risk."

"That," said the priest, puzzled, "was surely no sin."

"It was to me," the stranger replied.

So the priest shifted to more familiar grounds.

"Why did you come back?" he asked.

"Because," said the man, "of forever."

"I beg your pardon."

The priest was now completely puzzled.

But the penitent offered no explanation. So the priest pushed on.

For Forever.

"Can you break with the woman?"

The man laughed. And there was irony in his voice.

"Father, I feel sure that I am simply the first of a waiting line where she is concerned."

Again the priest, who was a simple soul, decided it was better to let it rest.

"Do you promise," he asked in routine fashion, "to the best of your ability, to avoid sin and live a good life?"

"That," replied the man, still talking part plain fact and part queer muddle - "that I can and do promise forever and for forever."
