### A Matter of Principle

Isaac Asimov

George stared somberly into his glass, which contained my drink (in the sense that I would surely be paying for it) and said, “It is only a matter of principle that makes me a poor man today.”

He then fetched a huge sigh up from the region of his umbili­cus and said, “In mentioning ‘principle’ I must, of course, apolo­gize for using a term of which you are not cognizant, except perhaps as the title of an official at the grade school from which you nearly graduated. As a matter of fact, I am myself a man of principle.

“Really?” I said. “I presume you have been granted this char­acter trait by Azazel only two minutes ago, for you had never exhibited it, to anyone's knowledge, before then.”

George looked at me in an aggrieved manner. Azazel is the two-centimeter demon who possesses stunning magical powers — and only George is able to conjure him up at will. He said, “I cannot imagine where you have heard of Azazel.”

“It's a complete mystery to me too,” I said agreeably, “or would be if it weren't your sole subject of conversation these days.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” said George. “I never mention him.”

Gottlieb Jones [said George] was a man of principle too. You might think that an utter impossibility, considering that his occu­pation was that of an advertising copywriter, but he rose supe­rior to his vile calling with an ardor it was most attractive to watch.

Many times he would say to me, over a friendly hamburger and dish of French fries, “George, words cannot describe the horror of the job I have, or the despair that fills me at the thought that I must find persuasive ways of selling products that every instinct tells me human beings are better off without. Only yesterday, I had to help sell a new variety of insect repellent which, by test, has mosquitoes emitting supersonic screams of delight as they flock to it from miles around. ‘Don't be mosquito bait,’ my slogan reads. ‘Use Skeeter-Hate.’

“Skeeter-Hate?” I repeated, shuddering strongly.

Gottlieb covered his eyes with one hand. I'm sure he would have used both, had he not been shoveling French fries into his mouth with the other. “I live witu this shame, George, and sooner or later I must leave the job. It violates my principles of business ethics *and* my writing ideals, and I am a man of princi­ple.”

I said courteously, “It does bring you fifty thousand a year, Gottlieb, and you do have a young and beautiful wife plus an infant child to support.”

“Money” said Gottlieb violently, “is dross! It is the worthless bribe for which a man sells his soul. I repudiate it, George; I cast it from me with scorn; I will have nothing to do with it.”

“But Gottlieb, surely you are doing no such thing. You accept your salary, do you not?” I will admit that for an uncomfortable moment I thought of a penniless Gottlieb and the number of lunches his virtue would make it impossible for him to buy the two of us.

“Well, yes, I do. My dear wife, Marilyn, has a disconcerting way of introducing her household allowance into conversations of an otherwise purely intellectual sort, to say nothing of her idle references to various purchases she foolishly makes at clothing stores and appliance shops. This does have a constraining influ­ence on my plans of action. As for young Gottlieb Junior, who is now nearly six months old, he is not quite ready to understand the utter unimportance of money — though I will do him the justice of admitting that he has never yet actually asked me for any.”

He signed, and I sighed with him. I had frequently heard of the uncooperative nature of wives and children where finances are concerned, and it is, of course, the chief reason I have re­mained uncommitted in this respect through a long lifetime, during which my ineffable charm has caused me to be pursued ardently by a variety of beautiful women.

Gottlieb Jones unwittingly interrupted several pleasant remi­niscences in which I was harmlessly indulging myself by saying, “Do you know my secret dream, George?”

And for a moment he had so lubricious a gleam in his eyes that I started in mild alarm, thinking he had somehow read my mind.

He added, however, “It is my dream to be a novelist, to write trenchant exposes of the quivering depths of the human soul, to hold up before a humanity that is at once shuddering and de­lighted the glorious complexities of the human condition, to write my name in large indelible letters across the face of classic literature, and to march down the generations in the glorious company of men and women such as Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Ellison.”

We had finished our meal, and I waited tensely for the check, judging to a nicety the moment when I would allow my atten­tion to be distracted. The waiter, weighing the matter with the keen perception inseparable from his profession, handed it to Gottlieb.

I relaxed and said, “Consider, my dear Gottlieb, the appalling consequences that might follow. I have read but recently, in a newspaper of the highest reliability which a gentleman near me happened to be holding, that there are thirty-five thousand pub­lished novelists in the United States; that of these but seven hundred make a living of their craft, and that fifty — only fifty, my friend — are rich. In comparison with this, your present sal­ary —”

“Bah,” said Gottlieb. “It is a matter of little moment to me whether I make money or not, just so I gain immortality and bestow a priceless gift of insight and understanding to all future generations. I could easily bear the discomfort of having Marilyn take a job as waitress or bus driver, or some other undemanding position. I am quite certain she would, or should, consider it a privilege to work by day and care for Gottlieb Junior by night so that my artistry might have full play. Only ...” He paused.

“Only?” I said encouragingly.

“Well, I don't know why it is, George,” he said, a rather petulant note entering his voice, “but there is a trifle that stands in the way. I don't seem to be able quite to do it. My brain teems with ideas of tremendous moment. Scenes, scraps of dialogue, situations of extraordinary vitality tumble through my mind constantly. It is only the very unimportant matter of actually placing it all into appropriate words that seems to elude me. It must be a minor problem, for every incompetent scrivener, such as that friend of yours with the peculiar name, seems to be at no loss for a way of turning out books by the hundred, and yet I cannot quite grasp the trick.”

(He surely must have meant you, my dear fellow, since the phrase “incompetent scrivener” seems so apt. I would have de­fended you, of course, but I felt that that would be a losing proposition.)

“Surely,” I said, “you can't have tried hard enough.”

“Have I not? I have hundreds of sheets of paper, each contain­ing the first paragraph of a marvelous novel — the first paragraph and no more. Hundreds of different first paragraphs for hun­dreds of different novels. It is the second paragraph that, in every case, is the stumbling block.”

A brilliant idea struck me, but I was not surprised. My mind welters constantly in brilliant ideas.

“Gottlieb,” I said, “I can solve this problem for you. I can make you a novelist. I can make you rich.”

He looked at me with an unlovely gleam of skepticism. “*You* can?” he said, with a most unflattering emphasis on the pro­noun.

We had risen and left the restaurant. I noted that Gottlieb had forgotten to leave a tip, but felt it to be scarcely politic for me to mention the fact as he might have then made the appalling sug­gestion that I take care of it.

“My friend,” I said. “I have the secret of the second para­graph, and therefore can make you rich and famous.”

“Hah! What is the secret?”

I said delicately (and here we come to the brilliant idea that had struck me), “Gottlieb, a laborer is worthy of his hire.”

Gottlieb laughed shortly. “My confidence in you is such, George, that I have no fear in stating that if you can make me a rich and famous novelist, you can have half my earnings — after business expenses are deducted, of course.”

I said, even more delicately, “I know you to be a man of principle, Gottlieb, so that your bare word will hold you to an agreement as though you were bound with hoops of the finest-alloy steel, but just for a laugh — ha, ha — would you be willing to put that statement into written form and have it signed and — just to make the laugh even heartier — ha, ha — notarized? We can each have a copy.”

That little transaction took up only half an hour of time, since it involved only a notary public who was also a typist and a friend of mine.

I put my copy of the precious paper carefully into my wallet and said, “I cannot give you the secret immediately, but as soon as I have arranged matters I will let you know. You can then try to write a novel and you will find that you will have no trouble with the second paragraph — or the two thousand and second. Of course, you will not owe me anything until the first advance — a very large one, I'll be bound — comes in.”

“You'd better believe it,” said Gottlieb nastily.

I went through the ritual that called up Azazel that very eve­ning. He is only two centimeters tall, and is a personage of no account on his own world. That is the only reason he is willing to help me out in various trivial ways. It makes him feel impor­tant.

Of course, I can never persuade him to do anything that will serve, in some direct fashion, to make me rich. The little crea­ture insists that this would be an unacceptable commercializa­tion of his art. Nor does he seem convinced by my assurance that anything he will do for me will be used in an utterly selfless way for the good of the world. When I said that, he made a queer sound, the significance of which I did not understand, and which he said he had learned from a native of the Bronx.

It was for that reason that I did not explain the nature of my agreement with Gottlieb Jones. It would not be Azazel who would be making me rich. It would be Gottlieb who would be doing so after Azazel had made *him* rich — but I despaired of making Azazel understand the nice distinction involved.

Azazel was, as usual, irritated by having been called up. His tiny head was decorated with what looked like minute fronds of seaweed and it appeared from his somewhat incoherent account that he had been in the midst of an academic ceremony in which some honor or other was being conferred upon him. Being of no real account on his own world, as I said earlier, he had the tendency to attach far too much importance to such an event, and was bitter in his comments.

I shrugged it off. “You can, after all,” I said, “take care of my trifling request and then return to the exact moment at which you left. No one will even know you were gone.”

He grumbled a little but had to admit that I was right, so that the air in his immediate vicinity ceased crackling with miniature lightning.

“What do you want, then?” he demanded.

I explained.

Azazel said, “His profession is that of the communication of ideas, is that it? The translation of ideas into words, as in the case of your friend with the peculiar name?”

“That is it, but he wishes to do it with increased efficiency, and to please those he deals with so that he achieves much ac­claim —and wealth, too, but he wants that only as tangible evi­dence of the acclaim, for he despises money in itself.”

“I understand. We have wordsmiths on our world, too, and one ana all “alue only the acclaim and would not accept the smallest unit of currency were it not that they must have it as tangible evidence of the acclaim.”

I laughed indulgently. “A foible of the profession. You and I are fortunate to be above such things.”

“Well,” said Azazel. “I can't be here for the rest of the year, can I, or I'll have trouble pinpointing the precise time of my return. Is this friend of yours within mental reach?”

We had trouble finding him, even though I pointed out the location of his advertising firm on a map and gave my usual eloquent and accurate description of the man, but I don't want to bore you with irrelevant detail.

Gottlieb was eventually found, and after a brief study Azazel said, “A peculiar mind of the type universal among your un­pleasant species. Gummy, yet fragile. I see the wordsmith circuit and it is knotted and bumpy, which makes it no surprise that he is having trouble. I can remove the obstructing bit but that could endanger the stability of his mind. I think not, if I am skillful enough, but there is always the chance of accident. Do you sup­pose he would be willing to take the risk?”

“Oh, undoubtedly!” I said. “He is intent on fame and on serv­ing the world with his art. He wouldn't hesitate to take the risk at all.”

“Yes, but you are a devoted friend of his, I gather. He may be blinded by his ambition and his desire to do good, but you may see more clearly. *Are you* willing to have him take the chance?”

“My only aim,” I said, “is to bring him happiness. Go ahead, and hack away as carefully as you can, and if things go wrong — well, it will have been in a good cause.” (And it was, of course, some very harsh words that I knew he had never learned at his mother's knee — unless she was a very unusual mother. So here I am, out of a job.”

He looked up at me with a hostile scowl. “I suppose you'll tell me this is your doing.”

I said, “Of course it is. You did what you subconsciously knew was right. You deliberately had yourself fired so you could spend all your time at your true *art* Gottlieb, my friend, go home now. Write your novel and make sure you get no less than one hun­dred thousand dollars' advance. Since there will be no business expenses to speak of, except a few pennies for paper, you will not have to deduct anything and can keep fifty thousand.”

He said, “You're crazy.”

“I am confident,” I said, “and to prove it, I will pay for the lunch.”

“You *are* crazy,” he said, in an awed kind of voice, and actu­ally left me to pay the bill, though he must have known that my offer was merely a rhetorical device.

I phoned him the next night. Ordinarily, I would have waited longer. I would not have wanted to rush him. Still, I now had a financial investment in him. Lunch had cost me eleven dollars, to say nothing of a quarter tip, and I was naturally restless. You can understand that.

“Gottlieb,” I said, “how is the novel going?” “Fine,” he said absently. “No problem. I knocked off twenty pages, and very good stuff, too.”

Yet he sounded casual, as though it was something else on his mind. I said, “Why aren't you jumping for joy?”

“Over the novel? Don't be silly. Feinberg, Saltzberg and Ro­senberg called.”

“Your advertising — Your ex-advertising firm?” “Yes. Not all of them, of course; just Mr. Feinberg himself. He wants me back.”

“I trust, Gottlieb, you told him exactly how far up—” But Gottlieb interrupted me. “Apparently,” he said, “the air­freshener account went wild over my copy. They wanted to use it and they wanted to commission a whole group of ads, for TV as well as for the printed media, and they wanted only the writer of that first ad to organize the campaign. They said that what I had done had been bold and hard-hitting and that it perfectly suited the decade of the eighties. They said they wanted to pro­duce advertising that was unprecedentedly forceful and for that they needed me. Naturally, I said I would consider it.”

“That's a mistake, Gottlieb.”

“I ought to be able to hit them for a raise, a substantial one. I have not forgotten the cruel things Feinberg said when he kicked me out — some in Yiddish.”

“Money is dross, Gottlieb.”

“Of course, George, but I want to see how *much* dross is involved.”

I wasn't very worried. I knew how the task of writing adver­tising copy grated on Gottlieb's sensitive soul, and I knew how attractive would be the ease with which he could write a novel. It was only necessary to wait and (to coin a phrase) let nature take its course.

But then the air-freshener ads came out and they made an instant hit with the public. “Quench the Stench” became a by­word with the youth of America and each use was, willy-nilly, a plug for the product.

I imagine that you yourself remember that fad — but of course you do, for I understand rejection slips containing the phrase became *de rigueur* among the periodicals for which you try to write, and you must have experienced it many times.

Other ads of the sort came out and were just as successful.

And suddenly I understood. Azazel had arranged to give Gottlieb the mind-set that made it possible for him to please the public with his writing, but, being small and of no account, he had been unable to fine-tune the mind in order to make the gift applicable to novels only. It might well be that Azazel did not even know what a novel was.

Well, did it matter?

I can't say that Gottlieb was exactly pleased when he came home and found me at his doorstep, but he was not so entirely lost to shame as to refuse to invite me in. In fact, it was with some satisfaction that I realized he could not fail to invite me to dinner, though he sought (deliberately, I think) to destroy that pleasure by having me hold Gottlieb Junior for a lengthy period of time. It was a fearful experience.

Afterward, when we were alone in his dining room, I said, “And how much dross are you making, Gottlieb?”

He looked at me reproachfully. “Don't call it dross, George. It's disrespectful. Fifty thousand a year, I admit, is dross, but a hundred thousand a year, plus some very satisfactory perks, is financial status.

“What's more, I will soon establish my own firm and become a multimillionaire, at which level money becomes virtue — or power, which is the same thing, of course. With my power, for instance, I will be able to drive Feinberg out of business. That will teach him to address me in terms that no gentleman should use to another. Do you happen to know what ‘shmendrick’ means, by the way, George?

I couldn't help him there. I am conversant with a number of languages, but Urdu is not one of them. I said, “Then you have grown rich.”

“And plan to grow far richer.”

“In that case, Gottlieb, may I point out that this happened only after I agreed to make you rich, at which time you, in turn, promised to give me half your earnings?”

Gottlieb's eyebrows drew together in a frown. “Did you? Did I?”

“Why, yes. I admit it is the sort of thing that is very easy to forget, but fortunately it was all placed in writing — in return for services rendered — signed — notarized, all that sort of thing. And I happen to have a photocopy of the agreement with me.”

“Ah. May I see it, then?”

“Certainly, but may I stress that it is merely a photocopy, so that if you should accidentally happen to tear it into little pieces in your eagerness to examine it closely, I will still have the origi­nal in my possession”

“A wise move, George, but do not fear. If all is as you say, not one jot nor tittle — not even a penny — will be withheld from you. I am a man of principle and I honor all agreements to the let­ter.”

I gave him the photocopy and he studied it carefully. “Ah yes,” he said, “I do remember. Of course. There's only one little point —”

“What?” I asked.

“Well, here on this paper it refers to my earnings as a novelist. I am not a novelist, George.”

“You intended to be, and you can be one any time you sit down at the typewriter.”

“But I no longer intend to be, George, and I do not expect to sit down at the typewriter.”

“But great novels will mean immortal fame. What can your idiotic slogans bring you?”

“Lots and lots of money, George, plus a huge firm which I will own, and which will employ many miserable copywriters whose very lives I will hold in the hollow of my hand. Did Tolstoy ever have that? Does del Rey?”

I couldn't believe it. “And after what I have done for you, you will refuse to give me one red cent, simply because of a single word in our solemn agreement?”

“Have you ever tried your own hand at writing, George? Be­cause I couldn't have put the situation into words more clearly and succinctly myself. My principles hold me to the letter of the agreement, and I am a man of principle.”

From that position he would not budge, and I realized it would do no good to bring up the matter of the eleven dollars I had spent for our last lunch together.

To say nothing of the quarter tip.

George rose and left, and did so in such a state of histrionic despair that I couldn't bring myself to suggest that he first pay his half of the drinks. I called for the bill and noted that it came to twenty-two dollars.

I admired George's careful arithmetic in paying himself back and felt constrained to leave a half-dollar tip.