### More Things in Heaven and Earth

Isaac Asimov

George had been unusually quiet during dinner and had not even bothered to stop me when I took the trouble to tell him a few of the many bons mots I had committed in the course of the last few days. A light sneer at my best mot was all I got out of him.

Then, over dessert (hot blueberry pie à la mode) he heaved a sigh from the bottom of his abdomen, giving me a not entirely welcome reprise of the shrimps scampi he had eaten earlier in the meal.

“What is it, George?” I asked. “Something seems to be on your mind.”

“You amaze me,” said George, “by showing this unwonted sensitivity. Usually you are far too wrapped up in your own miserable writing chores to note another's sufferings.”

“Yes, but as long as I've noted it,” I said, “let's not waste the effort it has cost me.”

“I was merely thinking of an old friend of mine. Poor fellow. Vissarion Johnson, his name was. I suppose you never heard of him.”

“As it happens,” I said, “I never did.”

“Well, such is fame, although I suppose it is no disgrace to remain unknown to a person of your limited vision. As it hap­pens, Vissarion was a great economist.”

“Surely you jest,” I said. “How did you become acquainted with an economist? It sounds like an unusual degree of slum­ming even for you.”

“Slumming? Vissarion Johnson was a man of great learning.”

“I don't doubt that for a moment,” I said. “It's the integrity of the entire profession I wonder about. There is the story about President Reagan who had grown worried about the federal bud­get and, in trying to work it out, said to a physicist, 'What is two and two?' The physicist replied at once, Tour, Mr. President.\*

“Reagan considered this a moment, making use of his fingers, and found himself dissatisfied. He therefore asked a statistician, 'What is two and two?' The statistician replied, after some thought, 'The latest poll among fourth-graders, Mr. President, reveals a set of answers that averages fairly close to four.'

“But it was the budget that was under question, so Reagan felt he should carry the question to the top. He asked an economist, therefore, 'What is two and two?' The economist pulled down the shades, looked quickly from side to side, then whispered, 'What would you like the answer to be, Mr. President?'”

George did not by word or facial expression indicate any amusement at this. He said, “You clearly know nothing at all about economics, old fellow.”

“Neither do economists, George,” I said.

“So let me tell you the sad tale of my good friend the econo­mist Vissarion Johnson. It happened some years ago.”

Vissarion Johnson, as I told you [said George], was an econo­mist who was at or near the top of his profession. He had studied at Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he had learned how to write equations of the most abstruse kind, without as much as a tremble of the chalk.

Upon graduation, he entered into practice at once and, thanks to the funds made available to him by a number of clients, learned a great deal about the importance of chance vicissitudes on the daily drift of the stock market. Such was his skill that a few of his clients scarcely lost anything at all.

On a number of occasions he was daring enough to predict that on the morrow the stock market would go either up or down depen­ding on whether the atmosphere was favorable or unfavorable, respectively, and in each case the market did ex­actly as he had predicted.

Naturally, triumphs such as these made him famous as the Jackal of Wall Street and his advice was sought after by many of the most famous practitioners of the art of making a fast buck.

But he had his eyes fixed on something greater than the stock market, something greater than business machinations, some­thing greater even than the ability to foretell the future. What he wanted was nothing less than the rank of Chief Economist of the United States, or as this functionary is more familiarly known, “economic adviser to the President.”

You, with your limited interests, can scarcely be expected to know the extremely delicate position of Chief Economist. The President of the United States must make the decisions that de­termine governmental regulations of trade and of business. He must control the money supply and the banks. He must suggest or veto measures that will affect agriculture, commerce, and in­dustry. He must decide the divisions of the tax dollar, determin­ing how much of it goes for the military, and whether anything is accidentally left over for anything else. And in all these things he turns, first and foremost, to the Chief Economist for advice.

And when the President turns to him, the Chief Economist must be able to decide instantly and exactly what it is the Presi­dent wants to hear, and must give it to him together with the necessary meaningless catchphrases which the President can then, in turn, present to the American public. When you told me the tale of the President, the physicist, the statistician, and the economist, old fellow, I thought for a moment that you under­stood the delicate nature of the economist's task, but your en­tirely inappropriate cackle of laughter afterward showed me plainly that you had missed the point altogether.

By the time Vissarion was forty, he had achieved all the quali­fications needed for any post, however high. It was widely bruited through the halls of the Institute of Governmental Eco­nomics that Vissarion Johnson had not once in the last seven years told anyone anything he or she did not want to hear. What's more, he had been voted into the small circle of the CDR by acclamation.

You, in your inexperience of anything beyond your typewriter, have probably never heard of the CDR, which is the acronym for the Club of Diminishing Returns. In fact, very few people have. Even many among the lower ranks of economists do not know of it. It is the small and exclusive band of economists who have thoroughly mastered the intricate realm of thaumaturgical economics — or as one politician once called it, in his quaintly rustic way, “voodoo economics.”

It was well known that no one outside the CDR could make his mark in the federal government but that anyone inside it might. Thus, when the chairman of the CDR died rather unex­pectedly and a committee of the organization met with Vissarion to offer him the post, Vissarion's heart bounded. As chairman he would certainly be appointed Chief Economist at the next avail­able opportunity, and he would be at the very fount and source of power, moving the President's own hand in exactly the direc­tion in which the President wanted it to go.

One point, however, worried Vissarion, and left him in a terri­ble quandary. He felt he needed the help of someone with a level head and a keen intelligence and he turned to me at once, as anyone in that situation naturally would.

“George,” he said, “to become the chairman of the CDR ful­fills my greatest hopes and my wildest dreams. It is the open gateway to a glorious future of economic sycophancy, in which I may even outstrip that second purveyor of confirmation of all presidential guesses — the chief scientist of the United States.”

“You mean the scientific adviser to the President.”

“If you want to be informal, yes. It needs only for me to become chairman of the CDR and, within two years, I shall certainly be Chief Economist. Except —”

“Except?” I said.

Vissarion seemed to take a firm grip on himself. “I must go back to the beginning. The Club of Diminishing Returns was founded sixty-two years ago, and the name was chosen because the Law of Diminishing Returns is the one economic law that all economists, how­ever well trained, have heard of. Its first presi­dent, a much beloved figure who predicted in November 1929 that the stock market was due for a serious down­turn, was re-elected year after year and remained president for thirty-two, years, dying at the patriarchal age of ninety-six.”

“Very commendable of him,” I said. “So many people give up far too soon when it only takes grit and determination to hang on till ninety-six or even beyond.”

“Our second chairman did almost as well, holding the post for sixteen years. He was the only one who did not become Chief Economist He deserved it and was appointed to the post by Thomas E. Dewey, the day before election day, but somehow — Our third chairman died after holding the post for eight years, and our fourth died after being chairman for four years. Our late chairman, who just died last month, was the fifth in line, and he held the post for two years. Do you see something peculiar about all this, George?”

“Peculiar? Did they all die natural deaths?” “Of course.”

“Well, considering the post they held, that *is* peculiar.”

“Nonsense,” said Vissarion with some asperity. “I call your attention to the lengths of time in office for successive chairmen: thirty-two, sixteen, eight, four and two.”

I thought for a while. “The numbers seem to grow smaller.” “They don't just grow smaller. Each is exactly half of the previous number. — Believe me, I had it checked by a physicist.”

“You know, I think you're right. Has anyone else seen this?”

“Certainly,” said Vissarion. “I have shown these figures to my fellow clubmen and they all claim that it is not statistically sig­nificant unless the President issues an executive proclamation stating that it is. But don't you see the significance of this? If I accept the post as chairman, I will die after one year. That is certain. And if I do, it will be extremely difficult for the Presi­dent to appoint me to the post of Chief Economist thereafter.”

I said, “Yes, Vissarion, you are in a dilemma. I have known many governmental functionaries who showed no signs of life behind the forehead, but not one who showed no signs of life *at all.* Give me a day to think of this, will you, Vissarion?”

We made arrangements to meet the next day; same time, same place. It was an excellent restaurant, after all, and, unlike you, old man, Vissarion did not begrudge me a crust of bread.

— All right, then, he didn't begrudge me shrimp scampi, ei­ther.

It was obviously a case for Azazel and I felt thoroughly justi­fied in putting my small two-centimeter demon to work at this, with his otherworldly powers.

After all, not only was Vissarion a kindly man with a good taste in restaurants, but I honestly felt he could do our nation great service in confirming the President's notions against the objections of people with better judgment. After all, who had elected *them?*

Not that Azazel was glad to be called up. He no sooner saw me than he threw down the contents of his little hands. They were too small for me to make out very clearly but they seemed to be little pasteboard rectangles of curious design.

“There!” he said, his tiny face contorted and turning a rich yellow with rage. His small tail lashed wildly and the miniature horns on his forehead fairly vibrated in the grip of his strong emotion.

“Do you realize, you vile huge mass of inferiority,” he shrilled, “that I finally held in my hand a zotchil; and not only a zotchil, but a zotchil with cumin high and pair of reils to boot. They were all bidding me up and I couldn't lose. I would have cleaned up every half-bletchke on the table.”

I said severely, “I don't know what you're talking about, but it does sound as though you have been gambling. Is that a re­fined and civilized thing to do? What would your poor mother say if she knew you were spending your time gambling with a group of bums?”

Azazel seemed taken aback. Then he mumbled, “You are right. My mothers would be broken-hearted. All three of them. Especially my poor middle mother, who sacrificed so much for me.” And he broke into soprano howls that were quite dreadful to hear.

“There, there,” I said soothingly. I ached to stick my fingers in my ears, but that would have offended him. “You can make it all well by helping a worthy being of this world.”

I told him the story of Vissarion Johnson.

“Hmm,” said Azazel.

“What does that mean?” I asked anxiously.

“It means ‘hmm,’ ” snapped Azazel. 展hat else do you think it could possibly mean?

“Yes, but don't you think that all this is merely coincidence and that Vissarion ought to disregard it?”

“Possibly — were it not that all this can't be coincidence and that Vissarion dare not disregard it. It has to be the working-out of a law of nature.”

“How can it be a law of nature?”

“Do you think you know all the laws of nature?”

“Well, no!”

“Of course not. Our great poet, Cheefpreest, wrote a delicate couplet on that once, which I will, with my own great poetic acumen, translate into your barbarous language.”

Azazel cleared his throat, thought a moment, then said:

“*All nature is but art, unknown to thee;*

“*All chance, direction, which thou canst not see.*”

I asked suspiciously, “What does that mean?” “It means that a law of nature is involved, and we must figure out what it is and how it might be taken advantage of to modify events to our liking. That's what it means. Do you think a great poet of my people would lie?”

“Well, can you do anything about it?1\*

“Possibly. There are a great many laws of nature, you know.”

“Are there?”

“Oh, yes. There's quite a cute little law of nature — devilishly attractive equation when put into Weinbaumian tensors—that governs the heat of soup in relation to the hurry you are in to finish it. It's possible, if this odd diminution of duration of Chairmanly term is governed by the law I think it is governed by, that I can so alter the nature of your friend's being as to ensure him against damage from anything on Earth. He won't be immune to the processes of physiological decay, of course. The workings of what I have in mind won't make him immortal, but it will at least make certain he won't die of infection or of acci­dent, which I imagine he would find satisfactory.”

“Entirely so. But when will this come to pass?”

“I'm not completely sure. I'm rather busy these days with a young female of my species who seems uncannily smitten with me, poor soul.” He yawned, his small, forked tongue curling into a helix and straightening again. “I seem to be short on sleep, but in two or three days it should be done.”

“Yes, but how can I tell when and if all is well?”

“That's easy,” said Azazel. “Just wait a few days and then shove your friend under a speeding truck. If he gets up un­harmed, the modifications I have introduced will be working. — And now if you don't mind, I just want to play out this one hand and then I will think of my poor mid-mother and leave the game. With my winnings, of course.”

Don't think I didn't have plenty of trouble persuading Vissa-rion that he was perfectly safe.

“Nothing on Earth can harm me?” he kept saying. “How do you know nothing on Earth can harm me?”

“I know. See here, Vissarion, I don't question your specialized knowledge. When you tell me that interest rates are going to fall, I don't quibble and ask you how you know.”

“Well, that's all very well, but if I say interest rates are going to fall and then they proceed to rise — and they don't do that more than half the time — merely your feelings are hurt. If, how­ever, I act on the assumption that nothing on Earth can hurt me, and then something on Earth hurts me, I am a lot more than hurt. I am *hurt”*

There's no arguing with logic, but I kept arguing anyway. I persuaded him at least to attempt no flat refusal of the post but to try to delay them for a few days.

“They'll never accept a delay,” he said, but out of nowhere it turned out that that very day was the anniversary of Black Fri­day and the CDR went into the usual three-day period of mourning and prayers for the dead. The delay therefore came automatically and that alone rather shook Vissarion into think­ing that perhaps he did lead a charmed life.

Then, at the end of the mourning period, when he ventured into public again, I was crossing a busy street with him and — I don't really remember how it happened — I suddenly bent to tie a shoelace and somehow I lost my balance and fell against him, and *he* lost his balance and fell into the line of traffic and sud­denly there was a devil of a shrieking of brakes and skidding of tires and three cars were totaled.

Vissarion didn't come out of it entirely untouched. His hair was rather mussed, his eyeglasses were slightly askew, and there was a spot of oil on the right knee of his trousers.

He disregarded that, however. He said in awe as he gazed at the carnage, “They never touched me. My goodness, they never touched me.”

And the very next day he was caught in the rain without rubbers, umbrella, or raincoat — a nasty, cold rain — and did not catch cold on the spot. He called up, without even bothering to towel his hair, and accepted the post as chairman.

He had a very nice tenure, I must say. He quintupled his fees at once without any of this nonsense of achieving a better batting average as his prognostications were concerned. After all, a cli­ent can't expect to have everything. If he gets unparalleled prestige in the professional man he consults, can he reasonably de­mand better advice *also?*

Furthermore, he enjoyed life. No colds. Nothing communica­ble at all. He crossed streets with impunity, disregarding the lights when he was in a hurry, and yet only rarely caused acci­dents to others. He had no hesitation about entering the park at night, and once when a street hooligan placed a knife to his chest and suggested a transfer of funds, Vissarion simply kicked the young financier in the groin and walked on. The hooligan in question was so preoccupied with the kick that he entirely ne­glected to renew his application.

It was on the anniversary of his succession to the chairman­ship when I met him at the parkside. He was on his way to the testimonial luncheon for the occasion. It was a beautiful Indian summer day and, as we took our seats on the park bench, side by side, we felt completely happy and at ease.

“George,” he said, “I have had a happy year.”

“I'm delighted.” I said.

“My reputation is higher than that of any economist who ever lived. Only last month, when I warned that Amalgamated Suds would have to merge with Consolidated Soap and they were forced to consolidate with Merged Soap, everyone marveled at how close I came.”

“I remember,” I said.

“And now, I want you to be the first to know —”

“Yes, Vissarion?”

“The President has asked me to be Chief Economist of the United States, and I have reached the pinnacle of ail my dreams and desires. See here.”

He held out to me an impressive envelope with “White House” embossed in the upper left. I opened it and, as I did so, I heard a strange sort of *zing-g-g,* as though a bullet had buzzed its way past my ear, and I caught a strange flash of light in the corner of my eye.

Vissarion was sprawled sideways on the bench, a splotch of blood on his shirt front, clearly dead. Some passersby stopped in astonishment; others screamed or gasped and hurried on.

“Call a doctor!” I called out. “Call the police!”

They came eventually, and the verdict was that he had been shot, right through the heart, by a gun of uncertain caliber, fired by some psychopathic sniper. They never caught the sniper, or even found the bullet. Fortunately there were witnesses willing to testify that I had been holding a letter in my hand at the time and was clearly innocent of any evil deed, or I might have had an uncomfortable time of it.

Poor Vissarion! He had been chairman for exactly one year, as he himself had feared he would be, and yet it was not Azazel's fault. Azazel had said that Vissarion would not be killed by anything on Earth, but as Hamlet wisely said, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than there are in earth alone.”

Before the doctors and police arrived, I had noted the small hole in the wood of that part of the bench that had been behind Vissarion. With my penknife, I picked out the small dark object embedded in it. It was still warm. Months later, I had it quietly looked at at the museum and I was right. It was a meteorite.

In short, then, Vissarion had been killed by nothing on Earth. He was the first person in history known to have been killed by a meteorite. I kept it absolutely quiet, of course, for Vissarion was a very private man and would have hated to achieve notoriety in this way. It would have drowned out all his great works of eco­nomics and I couldn't allow that.

But on every anniversary of his elevation and of his death — like today — I sit and think: Poor Vissarion! Poor Vissarion!

George mopped at his eyes with his handkerchief and I said, “And what happened to the next person to succeed to the chair­manship? He must have held office for a half year, and then the next one for three months, and then the next—”

George said, “There is no need to flaunt your knowledge of higher mathematics at me, old fellow. I'm not one of your poor suffering readers. None of that ever happened. The irony of it is that the club altered the law of nature on its own.”

“Oh? And how did they do that?”

“It struck them that the name of the club, the CDR, the Club of Diminishing Returns, was an ill-omened named that con­trolled the length of tenure of the chairman. They simply in­verted the initials, therefore, and changed CDR to CRD.”

“And what does CRD stand for?”

“The Club of Random Distribution, of course,” said George, “and the next chairman has now been in office for ten years and is still going strong.”

And as the waiter returned with my change, George caught it in his handkerchief, put both handkerchief and bills into his breast pocket with a flourish, got up and, with a debonair wave of his hand, walked off.