No Visitors

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When the man in the bed woke up, it was early in the afternoon. He had learned, some weeks before, that it was a good thing, when you woke up, to hold yourself perfectly still for moment, until you were wide awake. In that way you wouldn't make an unexpected movement and the pain, if any, wouldn't jump at you. It was the jumping at you that mattered—if you merely lay still and let it seep into you, you could stand it quite nobly and heroically, even if no one else were around. But this afternoon there was nothing—just a little whisper, a little reminiscence—nothing real. Just enough to make you conscious that there had been a great deal of it, once. It was wonderful.

"Boy!" said John Blagden to himself. "You're going to get well. Do you know it? You're going to be O.K."

He sat up a little higher in bed and listened to the sounds of Floor 7. The radio was on as usual, next door, at "No Visitors," muted and throbbing—the old guy across the hall was getting a different program. "Now, Lucy Lee, don't you worry—we'll get them cows back for you." It was a little loud, but John Blagden didn't mind. The old guy was just a mild heart case—let him amuse himself. When you'd had a McWhirter, with adhesions, you could afford to be generous to people like that.

As he often did, when he waked up, he had a sense of the whole big mechanism of the hospital, cut off from the rest of the world, yet self-sufficient, like a boat or a train. That was a hang-over from the dreams after the operation. But it made an amount of sense. There was a routine, with fixed stops, and you saw a great deal of people you would probably never see again. Sometimes you didn't even see them—just knew them as you knew his neighbor, No Visitors, from a card stuck in a door and a radio heard through the wall. Nevertheless, he had been able to build up a pretty good picture of his neighbor. She was small and faded and whiny, and she put on a bright pink bed jacket before the doctor came. She didn't like Orson Welles, but she just loved Nelson Eddy and, though she complained about the food, she didn't want to die. He wondered if she had any children—there was probably a toothy, successful son somewhere. The grandchildren weren't brought to see her, because she'd cry at them. But the son sent flowers on Monday, and she talked to the nurses about him. Yes, that would be it. Afterwards, when it was over, the marcelled daughter-in-law would talk about mother's illness to her friends, with a proprietary pride. "Ed had everything possible done—you know how generous Ed is!" No, he couldn't really like No Visitors. But it must be tough, being No Visitors, day after day.

He could do with a cigarette. When he stretched his arm for it, the shadow of pain increased by a fraction, but that had no significance. He lit the cigarette cautiously and inhaled. For the first

time, it tasted right, not like hay and ether. He drew the smoke all the way inside him—inside his body that had been sick and was getting well.

“Have a nice nap?” said the nurse, coming in. “That’s a good boy.”

She smiled, professionally, and put cold fingers on his wrist, glancing at her watch. Some of their hands were warm and some were cold, but they were all nice girls, except for the one night nurse who had said she had no orders to give him the hypo, that time. He didn’t even know what she looked like, but he had hated her for a long while. Now, it seemed silly to have hated her—indeed, silly to have hated anybody, *I’m Tiny Tim, himself and in person*, he thought. *But I don’t mind.*

“How is it outside?” he said.

“It’s cold,” said the nurse, “but I like it cold. I’m from Vermont. A lot of the girls don’t like it, but I do. Don’t you want the bed up—you’ll want to read your book, I guess.”

She went to work, smoothly and efficiently, fixing the pillows, cranking the bed with the little crank, while he thought about her being from Vermont. As she bent to lift him, her black hair was neat under her cap and her body touched him, impersonally. It was funny, being taken care of by somebody you knew as well and yet as little as you knew a nurse. Must be funny for them too.

“All righty?” she said, smiling.

“All righty,” he said. “Oh, look, would you just get me that board? I might do a little work.”

“Did doctor say——” said the nurse.

“Oh, it’s O.K. with Doctor Dennis.” said John Blagden. “I’ve talked to him. Anyhow, I’ve got to start making some money or you’ll throw me out for nonpayment of dues.”

“I guess we’re not worrying,” said the nurse. “A famous author and everything.” She shook her head. “You men,” she said. “Always wanting to get back to your business. There’s a very nice gall bladder in 735 and he keeps in touch with his office three times a day. But it’s not so good for him—he’s the fussy kind. Always fussing. I’d pull out his phone if I were Doctor De Lacey. Lucky I’m not, I guess.”

“Am I the fussy kind?” said John Blagden, unable to help himself.

“No, you’re a model patient. Only I’m not saying what model,” said the nurse. It was, obviously, a routine jest.

John Blagden laughed obediently.

“That’s what I always tell them,” said the nurse, with satisfaction. “They’re all model patients —only I’m not saying what model. It makes them see the humorous side of it.”

“I can see it would,” said John Blagden. He drew a breath. “Doctor Dennis didn’t come in, did he?” he said, in a slightly altered voice. “I mean, while I was taking my nap.”

The nurse shook her head. “No, doctor hasn’t been on the floor since I came on,” she said. “But he’ll be in.”

“He was going to look at my pictures,” said John Blagden. “He and Doctor Seaver. So I was just wondering.”

“Now, don’t you worry about your pictures,” said the nurse. “Any time Doctor Seaver operates, things are going to be all right.” She spoke almost reprovingly. “Of course, they have to take the pictures afterwards,” she said. “Just to check.”

“All the same, he must lose some patients,” said John Blagden, drawing on his cigarette. “I mean anyone must.”

“Well, there was that poor old man—such a sweet old man,” said the nurse. “But that was before you came in. Gee, that was a shame, though—I felt awfully sorry for his family. Such nice people. They were so appreciative, too—they knew Doctor Seaver had done everything he could.”

“What was the matter?” said John Blagden.

“Complications,” said the nurse, with a veil on her face. “But you don’t have to worry. It wasn’t a bit like yours.” She looked at her watch. “Gee, I’ve got to hurry,” she said. “I’m late now with my pulses. But if you want anything you know what to do.”

“You bet,” said John Blagden. He stubbed out the cigarette and lay back. It was fine to lie back, to carry on a normal conversation. It was fine to be able to talk about a nice old man who’d had complications and not have it worry you. In fact, everything was fine. He’d better call Rosalie and tell her so.

He lifted the phone, gave the number.

“Is Mrs. Blagden there? . . . Oh, hello, Edna. . . . Yes, this is Mr. Blagden. . . . Yes, I’m much better, thanks. . . . All right, I’ll hold on.”

He waited, tasting the moment, while little footsteps went away inside the phone and something crackled. Then there was the warm, known voice.

"Hello, honey. . . . Oh, perfectly fine. I had a nap. Pete's coming in later to tell me about the pictures. And look, honey, don't try to come up this evening. It looks darn cold. . . . No, honestly, don't. Charlie may come in, and if he doesn't I'll just lie around and work. I think I've got a new slant on the chapter. How are the kids?"

He listened, talked and laughed. The warm, known voice told him the small familiar things—about Susan's being in the play and Bill's arithmetic. They were good to hear. He could see them all, living in the apartment without him, as if he were looking into a doll's house. They looked pleasant, a pleasant family. They had a dog and goldfish, a servant and food on plates and lamps that turned off and on. The doll called Father wasn't there, right now, but that would get fixed, in time.

He'd never much thought of their being a family before—never stood off from them to look. It seemed, in a sense, ridiculous that he, John Blagden, should have a family. As if he were pretending. And yet, they were there. They'd made something, he and Rosalie, something that wasn't just getting married and renting an apartment. They had done so, almost without thinking, and yet it was going to go on.

"☐ 'By, honey," he said. "Take care of yourself." He heard the warm voice, "☐ 'By, darling." *Yes, we've done it pretty well*, he thought. *Poor kid—this has been tough on her. She was scared, that night. I could see her being scared and not showing it. Well, we'll make it up, somehow. You're a lucky stiff, Blagden. You don't know how lucky you are. You might have had a wife like Jo Pritchett and children with web feet.*

He put back the phone and stared at the sheets of yellow paper on the board. It seemed a geologic age since he had last written words on yellow paper, but that, too, was going to be all right. He could see, now, that the last two chapters of the novel were bad—he must have been sick when he wrote them. But he had a new slant now, and could push ahead. He drew a few squiggles, a house with smoke coming out of the chimney and a bird with spotted wings. That was necessary, for some reason. Then he crumpled that piece of paper, threw it on the floor and began to write.

An hour later he put the pencil down. About five hundred words, maybe. Not much, but a start. And it came all right—it had left him tired, but it came. It was going to be a good book—maybe better than that. At forty-three, you ought to be able to write a good book, if you were ever going to. The old boys had. He saw deliciously and for a large, childish instant the long reviews, all saying the same thing. It didn't matter, it meant nothing; you wrote for a

different reason—but, when it came, it was like honey on the tongue. He had had it just once before, for *The Years Are Bold*, eight years ago, and he was still known as the author of *The Years Are Bold*. But the new one was going to change that. He had the stuff to change it, now.

There was nothing like a blank sheet of yellow paper and a pencil in the hand—neither love nor health nor youth. There was nothing comparable. He supposed Pete Dennis got an equal kick out of medicine, but he did not see how Pete could.

Now the shadow of pain had strengthened, but you could expect that, still, in the afternoon. You didn't get over a serious operation in a day or a week. Only now the docs knew what to do. *I suppose, fifty years ago I'd be dead*, he thought solemnly. It was good to be able to think of that quickly and without fear. He took out the thing in the secret part of his mind and looked at it. Yes, he had been afraid to die. Even talking offhandedly with Pete and in spite of the pain, it had come for a moment like a wave, the blind primal terror. He'd held on to Rosalie's hand. And then they'd given him the shot and you had to be a gentleman. But the terror had been there.

There was a knock at the door. "Mr. Fentriss to see you, Mr. Blagden." Then Charlie, a trifle hushed, as all visitors were, and not knowing quite what to do with the flowers. He was glad to see old Charlie, with his crisp, waxed moustache and his good suit.

"Well," he said. "You horse thief. Thanks a lot. They look swell."

"You look swell yourself," said Charlie. "I think you're faking." He sat down on the edge of a chair, as visitors did.

"Oh, I'm fine," said John Blagden. "It was just a little McWhirter."

"A little what?" said Charlie.

"It's what they call it," said John Blagden, "when they cut a lot of you out and sew it together again. They found some adhesions, too," he said, with pride.

"And you were three hours on the table and the doctors said it was a miracle," said Charlie. He grinned. "I know," he said. "What I do for ten per cent! I bet I've had more long-distance operations than any man in New York. Well, I'm glad it's over. We were kind of worried." His eyes brightened. "Done any work?"

"No, Simon Legree. But I'm going to."

"That's good," said Charlie. His waxed moustache bristled like a friendly cat's. "A couple of

things came up," he said. "I haven't bothered you about them, but I just thought we'd run through them. TDS wants to do a version of *The Flowers That Bloom* on their workshop hour. They'll only pay a hundred—it's sustaining—but the hour's been getting attention, so I said all right." He paused. "Hank Lieber wants another Ma Hudgins story."

"I won't," said John Blagden. "I'm sick of Ma. And I want to get ahead with the novel."

"All right," said Charlie. "But they'll go up two hundred and fifty, and I had to ask you." His voice was sad.

"Tell them I'll think about it," said John Blagden. "In other words, tell them to hell with it, in a nice way."

"All right," said Charlie. "But I just thought, coming up here—well, suppose Ma Hudgins had an operation. You ought to have the background cold by now."

"Body snatcher!" said John Blagden, with affection. "Tell them I'll think about it."

"All right," said Charlie, "but just remember, if you do, it establishes the new price. Now——"

He went on; John Blagden listened and answered. It was good to talk about work, to hear that this was a hit and that wasn't doing so well—to get back into the familiar, smoky world of shop-talk and publishers' gossip and contracts and prices. At the end, Charlie rapidly told three funny stories, picked up his neat hat and neat overcoat and left, with an unexpected "When you're over this, you'll feel a lot better, fella. I did, after my bust."

"I never knew you had a bust," said John Blagden.

"That was when you were in England," said Charlie. "They had to give me two transfusions. But I've taken a lot better care of myself ever since. Well, I'll call Rosalie and tell her you're just a big bluff."

He left, and John Blagden thought about Ma Hudgins. Charlie was right, as Charlie generally was. *Ma Hudgins Goes to the Hospital* was a definite story, worth a definite price. He was sick of writing Ma Hudgins stories, but he could begin to feel the plot form in his mind. Well, plenty of time.

The orderly came in.

"Afternoon, Mr. Blagden."

“Afternoon, Jim.” He rolled over, gingerly. He didn’t ask what his temperature was—only new patients did that and he was an old inhabitant. When the orderly had gone, however, he wondered. There might be a little temperature—just a little. The bed felt scratchier and less comfortable than it had an hour ago. But, even if there were a little temperature, it didn’t matter. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the room was dark and there was a presence at the door. “Hello,” he said, with a thick tongue.

“Hello, Jack,” said Pete Dennis. “Did I wake you up?”

“Nope,” said John Blagden. “I wasn’t really sleeping. Come in, Pete, and switch on the light.”

Pete came in, as always, diffidently. He had dull red hair and a pleasant, ugly face. His white coat was a little rumpled, but it suited him. He sat down in a chair, looking big for it.

“Well,” he said, “what kind of day has it been?”

“Oh, fine,” said John Blagden. “I even did a little work.”

“On the novel?”

“Yes.”

“That’s fine. Lord!” said Pete Dennis, “I don’t see how you do it. When I even have to write a report, I sweat.”

“It’s a gift,” said John Blagden, smiling. “Just naked genius.” He leered at his friend. “I’m going to do a Ma Hudgins about a hospital. The hero will be a man in white.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” said Pete Dennis, with patient despair.

“Charlie suggested it,” said John Blagden. “It won’t be very bad. You’ll be a clean-eyed young idealist, but you won’t have to discover the secret of cancer or anything.”

“Thanks,” said Pete Dennis. His voice sounded friendly but absent, and a small cold wave went over John Blagden’s skin.

“Well,” he said, very casually, “did you look at the pictures?”

“Yes,” said Pete Dennis, “I went over them with Seaver.” He paused. “We went over the last

tests, too," he said. "It's nothing to worry about, Jack. But, talking it over, we decided we might have to go in again."

"You decided what?" said John Blagden, in a voice of complete incredulity. He could feel the pain jump at him now.

"I told you I was keeping my fingers crossed," said Pete Dennis. "Sure, I'd rather it had happened the other way. But, every now and then you get a different situation—well, I told you about that."

There was a small silence in the room.

"A doctor!" said John Blagden, breathing deeply. "A doctor! I wouldn't trust you to poison a dog!"

"Go ahead, if it helps," said Pete Dennis. His head was heavy and averted—the dull red hair shone under the bright light. The big body looked tired and worn. *It's what he always does*, thought John Blagden—*my God, it's my having to cheer him up when he was an intern! It's what makes him a good doctor, I guess.*

"Sorry, Pete," he said. "I didn't mean that at all."

"That's all right," said Pete Dennis, hurting himself. "You've got every sort of right. And I told Seaver I'm not going into it bullheaded. I want to have Abbott take a look at you."

"I—don't—need—a—consultation," said John Blagden slowly. "If you and Seaver——"

"I want to have Abbott look at you," said Pete Dennis inexorably. "He's about the best man in the country. He'll be in tonight—it just happens he's down here for a meeting and I got him on the phone. You needn't worry about the bills," he said quickly. "Abbott's very decent. It's just that we'd feel a little surer."

"Oh, I won't worry," said John Blagden. "I won't worry at all." He laughed sharply.

"Listen, Jack!" said Pete Dennis firmly. "In the first place, if Abbott doesn't think so, we won't do it. In the second place, even if he does, we're not shooting in the dark. It's a perfectly well-known operation. If you want to know about it technically——"

His slow, reassuring voice continued. John Blagden listened, not listening.

"All right," he said, at the end. "You're the doctor."

“You’ll like Abbott,” said Pete Dennis earnestly. “Don’t get put off if he talks to you about eighteenth-century chamber music. He knows his stuff.”

“Okay,” said John Blagden. “And, by the way, when will you cut?”

“Depends on Abbott,” said Pete Dennis, his face still heavy and averted. “But don’t worry. We won’t rush you.”

“That’s a good idea,” said John Blagden. He began to talk quickly. “Look here, Pete,” he said, “you know I believe everything you’ve said. But you’ve got to give me a little time, that’s all. I mean, it’s only sensible to take precautions. Well, for instance, I haven’t made a will since Bill was born. And that throws things out in New York State. I can get Jimmy Williams up tomorrow and fix it.”

“We-el,” said Pete Dennis, “if it makes you feel any better——”

“Of course it does,” said John Blagden. “I mean it’s a sensible precaution. I’d do it if I were having my appendix out. I ought to have done it before.” He breathed deeply. “How much chance is there, Pete?” he said. “I’ve known you long enough—you ought to be honest.”

Pete Dennis made a sharp gesture. “Listen, Jack,” he said, “there’s a chance in every operation. There’s a chance in having a tooth out. But——”

“Thanks,” said John Blagden. “That’s what I wanted to know.”

“Don’t be a fool,” said Pete Dennis.

“I’m not,” said John Blagden. “After all, I’ve been through it before. When’s Abbott coming?”

“Oh, ten—ten-thirty—as soon as he’s through with his meeting,” said Pete Dennis in a relieved voice. He smiled his pleasant, ugly smile. “I’ll be with him,” he said. “He may show up in a tuck, but he’ll know his business. And then, when he’s through, we can really talk over the whole works.” He rose. “Frances sent her best,” he said. “She’d have been in to see you before, but she’s had a cold. And, Jack, this is just a little setback. You’ve got to think of it that way. I won’t have you thinking anything else.”

“Check,” said John Blagden. He watched the big shoulders swing out of the door. Old Pete. He’d first run into Pete twenty years ago. They’d drunk beer at Jerry’s place, with a man who was dead and a man who had come to nothing and “Hooks” Wilson, the prof, who had had the scandal, later. And now Pete was a first-class doctor, and he was a well-known writer. But a doctor had it over a writer—he got nearer to the bone. If Pete said the

operation was going to be all right, it was going to be all right.

His tray came in and he ate, keeping something at bay. When the tray was gone and he had joked with the nurse, it came back, not to be denied, the trained, automatic knowledge. A writer's business was seeing and hearing—to note the tone and the inflection and mark them down on the wax record of the brain. And, that being so, he had seen and he had heard. Pete was awfully good at his stuff, but he knew when Pete was worried about a case. He lay still, taking it, while two radios played.

It was not the fault of the doctors that the hospital had thin walls—they would have liked it otherwise, but an architect had designed the hospital. It was not the fault of the doctors that his body had to have another operation. It was nobody's fault. It just happened, and there it was, like a splinter of ice.

It had happened to Mr. Sherwood, down the line; it was happening, slowly, next door, at No Visitors. Mr. Sherwood had taken two days to die, quite noisily. There were times when everybody could hear him, even with the door shut. He had called for his mother, like somebody dying in a second-rate novel; he had carefully and loudly explained the interminable details of a business transaction in which he seemed to have been cheated by two brothers named Purvis. You could write a better death scene in your sleep—it was badly constructed and banal—but, at the end, Mr. Sherwood had died; at the end, No Visitors would die. So that was that.

It would be a good idea to read, at this point, but he didn't feel like reading. If he hadn't been lazy this summer, he'd be two-thirds through his novel. If he hadn't had to do Ma Hudgins, it might be finished and in proof. Just as well. You couldn't die with a really good book unfinished, in spite of the people who had.

He switched on his radio—the station didn't matter. Out of humming and crackles, there came suddenly and authoritatively the bright, loving voice that was peace and solace to all mankind: "And next week, at the very same hour, we hope you all will be guests again at another of Aunt Mandy's Supper Parties, bringing you the glint and the glamour of old plantation days. Until then—and with thanks to you, Kay Kibbey and your Jugtown Jugblowers—and special thanks to you, Doris Delavan, for the haunting freshness you lend to the great songs of Stephen Foster—Aunt Mandy and Plantation Pork Products say to you-all, 'Good night! Keep a-smilin'!'□ "

The voice dwelt upon the last words, tenderly, richly, sorry to go. A gong struck. "It is now 8:30 P.M. by Hawkeye—*H-A-W-K-E-Y-E*— The timepiece of a nation," said another voice, with omen. John Blagden switched off the radio.

Yes, he thought. *It's eight-thirty p.m. The kids will be going to bed.* He discovered that his

hands were damp. That had better stop. But it wouldn't help to turn on the radio again.

He saw, with the sharp eyes of fever, the bright, pleasant, lighted doll house—the life he and Rosalie had made. It wasn't so much to ask—just to keep that. But it wasn't a question of asking or denying.

He found himself thinking back, trying to find some logic in the pattern. There were all the priceless, worthless memories, from the look of the little silver cologne bottle on mother's bureau to kissing a yellow-haired girl named Rosalie Marsh in a taxi on 56th Street, without premeditation and for keeps. The memories included landscapes and furniture and people, they included poverty and Charlie Fentriss and the faces of two children and your name on the cover of a book. Together, they made up a life, and nobody else could ever know them all. There must be a logic and a pattern. But, instead, there were only gaps and flashes, like country seen at night from the window of a train.

A comfortable train enough, and you went along with it, with your pasteboard slip in your hatband. Until suddenly there was the destination—the stop called No Visitors. He could see it—a bare, wintry platform. Beyond it there was night and snow and the elemental cold. He could see a small John Blagden, getting down from the train to the platform and standing there, minute, lonely and afraid.

There was a knock at the door and John Blagden sweated. But it was only the black-haired intern who liked to be sociable. "Well, Mr. Blagden," he said, "getting along all right?"

"Oh, fine," said John Blagden. He braced himself. "How did you like the show?" he said.

"I laughed my fool head off. He certainly knows his stuff, doesn't he?"

"George Crandall?" said John Blagden. "Yes, he's about as skillful as they come. And, of course, Jimmy Trevor gives a beautiful performance."

"Do you know him?" said the intern, interestedly. "What's he like?"

"Oh, I've seen him around. Nice fellow—very pleasant and modest. He married Betty Dunn—she's a peach. We've had them at the house."

It sounded gay and exciting, saying it. The intern looked impressed, which was as it should be. Go into your dance, John Blagden—tell some fascinating anecdotes about the world of letters. It's a nice youngster and it still thinks writers and artists are something special. If you asked it what dying was like, it would be very professional and no help at all.

"I remember when Betty was playing in 'Thar She Blows,'□ " said John Blagden. His hands

were wet, under the bedclothes, but he told the anecdote with crispness and point. The intern laughed appreciatively. John Blagden wished that the intern would die or be called on the phone or anything that would get him out of the room, so a man could have peace. But none of these things ever happened and he knew they would not.

When the intern had left, John Blagden looked at his watch. About nine—almost nine. And Abbott might come at ten. Just about an hour. The train was going faster—he could feel it sway on the grades. Pretty soon, too soon, John Blagden would have to get down and stand on that bare, wintry platform. So what was there to do about it? . . . Call Rosalie? . . . No.

A phrase, unbidden, flashed into his mind: "To prepare the soul for the great day." But if you didn't believe in things like that you didn't; no use faking. They didn't, most of the people he knew, though they went to church now and then, and were open-minded.

It's time for it, boy—for the consolations of philosophy, if any. You've been an artist and a modern and a free spirit. Well, you get what you pay for. Let's see what you've got. There's a novel and a half, five short stories, and a one-act play. "Among minor figures of the period"—yes. And I could have tried harder to get Tom Whitter into Chi Sigma, but I didn't. But that's washed up—I can't change it. I can't change being mean to Rosalie, that time. And a man should be judged by his work. We'll call it three short stories—we'll compromise for that. Dear God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul. Dear God, if there is a God, let somebody be reading my three short stories, sometime—somebody who isn't a Ph.D. with a thesis. And don't let poor Nelly starve. But that was Charles II and he didn't carry insurance. The insurance would take care of that end of it. At least, for a while, and better not think after that.

So it was all modern and scientific and well-arranged. You could die very nearly as privately in a modern hospital as you could in the Grand Central Station, and with much better care. And there would be the nice, kind drugs at the end—Pete Dennis would see to that. It all became part of a ceremony and, though you were the central figure, your lines didn't matter. No matter how badly you played the part, the notices would be favorable, on the whole.

His grandfather, the revivalist, had died shouting and praying in the black-walnut room at Englemere. He'd seen that and hated every minute of it, even as a child. It was phony, from first to last, with the family arranged in rows and Aunt Ellen leading the hymn. It was completely phony—it had had a fierce strength, which was gone. You could not summon back that strength, and yet there was nothing to replace it.

He was thinking very logically and clearly about the whole question. Yet, he must have dozed, for, suddenly, Pete Dennis was there in the room and there was a good deal more pain. The white-moustached, pink-faced little man with Pete Dennis had on a white coat as

well, but you could see his stiff collar and black tie.

“Doctor Abbott?” said John Blagden. “It’s awfully good of you to do this.”

After the examination, John Blagden lay flat on his back. In the wall, the muted radio that belonged to No Visitors throbbed meaninglessly. He felt a sudden kinship with the sound. They’d be talking him over, outside, but he didn’t much care what they said. You didn’t, when it was decided. The porter was getting his bag now, and taking it to the end of the car.

“Save my soul, if I have a soul”—but it wasn’t as simple as that. There remained the problem, and the question. For an instant, it seemed to him that he saw through the wall—saw into the next room, with its photographs on the dresser, and the small, faded woman in the bed jacket, playing her radio against the encompassing dark. It was a small soul, but so was his; so were all souls, faced with the fact. There was a community, somehow; it didn’t really matter who you were.

Why, it’s easy to do, thought John Blagden, with sudden surprise. *They make a great fuss about it, but it’s easy to do. It doesn’t take a religion, or even a technique. All it takes is being mortal.*

He let go and had the pain come in. It was very considerable, but something remained untouched. That also would go, no doubt, with the drugs and the rest, but, while one had it, one had it. Having lived, it did not matter if you fumbled the last lines of the part.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” said John Blagden, quoting. It did not matter now, if the words were true or not. They had been greatly said, though they were said for the living.

“Glad to meet you, No Visitors,” said John Blagden. “Both members of the same club.”

Then Pete came in, with his fine, poised smile, and the verdict written all over him.

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