

Deal with the Devil - First Draft

Sit a spell, if you so desire, and I will tell you my tale. Though you likely won't believe the words I now speak when I have finished, within my heart there is a glowing fire that desires to bear a truth. I am sick; I believe I am, finally, dying. Or at least, I hope, for my time as come and gone, and yet I am still here, in a perpetual life that I cannot escape; I now understand the desperation of the man who I succeeded in this role. I sometimes wonder what happened after I took this post, suffice it to say that I will likely see him again when my time... if, I should say, my time comes. And though I do wish for this life to end, I do not look upon the day with great enthusiasm for I will have to answer for what I have done, and though I have done nothing out of line in consideration of my unique position in this world, I have corrupted countless men and women and children to evil will, and I, as everyone must, will answer for these actions, for they were, ultimately, precipitated by a decision I alone made. And though I did not make that decision with a completeness of knowledge of the consequences, I did make it with consciousness and consideration. And for this, I fear I will be severely punished.

No... I have not hurt a body. Least of one who did not deserve that hurt. At least not directly, and though the doings of others are not entirely my fault, I maintain the darkness of the world so that people like yourself can choose what is right for them. I did not encourage anyone to perform any acts for good or evil. I did not even offer the option, I simply ensured there was one for them to take. And I did not enjoy this task, but it is necessary.

No, the only person directly affected by my actions are myself. And, of course, Mr. Lantas, though he and I are, in some ways of speaking, the same, though I am not fully aware of the rules that guide our relationship. But I do not care about myself, nor Mr. Lantas, and I have no worry of judgement for what it is I have done to myself. Despite there being many penalties for what we inflict upon others, there are no statutes, no punishment, that can amount to the horrors and atrocities we force upon ourselves.

Let it be said: May even the desolate most graces of God fall upon me. May my Father in His kingdom forgive me, for I have sinned. I made a deal with the Devil. And that deal lasts forever, as long as you breathe.

Yes, I know. How low of an opinion can you hold of me? I dare not guess, and such judgement should, I think and ask, be reserved until the end of my tale, for though I have dealt with what many consider to be the enemy, it is not so simple as that. Can you tell me what is? Exactly. Nothing is simple, some things are simply less complex.

It was many years ago I met a man on the train. He called himself Mr. Lantas, and he was very kind. We chatted for some time on our ride, for it was several hours long. I was on a business trip, and he said he was returning from vacation to see his sister. I now believe this to be a lie, though I am not entirely certain, but at the time I could see nothing wrong with his explanation of our chance encounter. He was several years older than I, and wore a very expensive black suit. He had a thin mustache and looked to have not shaven his cheeks or chin in the past couple of days.

Three weeks later I was left without work due to a drastic change in the economy. I had the money to live comfortably there for perhaps a year before finding another job. Some weeks after that, I again by chance met Mr. Lantas while out for coffee in the mid-morning. He immediately recognized me and loudly and encouragingly requested to join me at my small table, where I sat by myself. I accepted, glad for such a friendly encounter of good company.

“How have you been, my friend?” He asked, his arms open wide. He had shaven, though retained his thin moustache and had a light goatee that was immaculately shaped.

Not exactly keen on telling one who, though I did like, my current financial state, I responded positively, “I am well, thank you. And yourself?”

“I have been wonderful!” He declared loudly. Moments after a waitress walked by and he hailed her to our table, requesting a menu which was promptly brought forth.

For several minutes he looked it over, though seemed slightly unclear as to what various items were, despite them being quite commonplace. For instance, he asked me what exactly fricassee chicken was before ordering it with excitement. Though I found this somewhat odd, his entire demeanor was queer and I assumed him to be from an awkwardly secluded type, perhaps from a rich family (judging by his clothes, at least, he was quite wealthy) that rarely ate out.

We sat, for some time, in the diner, discussing many topics, which shifted from our favorite things in general to politics, eventually to our religious preferences, which I admitted I was not an active member of any church, and had never taken much consideration to it.

“But of course, you must believe in SOMETHING?” He asked, with a look of curious disbelief. Though I had no answer, he quickly dropped the subject, perhaps deciding it was inappropriate for the time.

After several courses, he prompted me to walk with him for a time, which I, in hindsight, mistakenly agreed to. And so we left the diner, where he insisted on paying as “the meanest of acts to mark a moment of our meeting, which I am certain will grow to be a wonderful friendship and alliance.”

Along our walk, I am not entirely sure how, he managed to let escape my situation of unemployment, which he was not pleased with.

“How can such a man as yourself be without offers for work from across the country?” He exclaimed, with a look of utter horror that businesses were not flocking to have me work for them. “That will not do! No friend of mine shall be in want for employment, no, no, that will simply not suffice.”

I made a somewhat feeble attempt to explain that I was not in want of anything, and that I was quite capable of managing my own affairs. It was difficult to do, for I did not want to be unkind to Mr. Lantas, for he was well spoken and at least seemed to me to mean well, and in the end I failed to push this upon him adequately.

“Do not worry, friend,” he said with his hand on my shoulder, looking into my eyes with a mesmerizing force of determined consolation. “I know you do not NEED my assistance, however I have the DESIRE to give it. You certainly wouldn’t decline me this pleasure of aiding you, would you? I assure you, you will earn any position based solely upon your own merit, I will simply hold the door.” He placed his free hand to his chest, over his heart, as he spoke the last sentences. He spoke with a crisp and imperative voice, each word, each syllable, clearly and perfectly spoken, separate from each other, yet flowing in an awkwardly beautiful way.

I was unsure of what to say to this, though he certainly made me feel much more comfortable, in all consideration, and I thanked him graciously for his kindness. We soon parted ways, and I weaved my way home.

Upon the arrival at my apartment, I felt an exuberance of joy and pleasure with my newfound friend. What were the chances of meeting such a gentleman as Mr. Lantas? So gracious and determined to help a man who he had just met!

Good fortune was certainly upon me, and for, I think, the first time in my life I said a prayer of thanks for the encounter. I felt the odd glow in my chest that many have spoken of, which I had never really felt before, and along with it a sudden and unexplainable distaste for Mr. Lantas that I did not understand. I ignored it; assuming it to be only a quirk of my mind, a cynicism that rose from his strangeness.

The day was, at this time, getting late, and so I entered my home, and soon went on to a restless sleep. I was haunted through the night by, though not nightmares, unpleasant dreams in which I frequently awoke, unable to sort reality from the illusion of sleep with much success.

When I awoke the next day, I was half convinced that I had dreamt the previous day, and Mr. Lantas was most definitely a figment of imagination, a spectral design of my mind. But that was soon proven to be incorrect, for he called on me before midday, sending a messenger to my abode, which I should have thought odd he so rapidly knew where I lived.

"Hello, I have a message from a Mr. Lantas," the messenger boy said with a tone of boredom. He cleared his throat and read from a small piece of paper, "I do hope this time to be of convenience for you, and sincerely apologize if it is not. Though please recall our conversation yesterday, as I have made well on my assurances. If it is your desire, please meet with me at the diner at one for lunch to further discuss any inquiries you may have. Signed, Mr. Lantas."

I tipped the boy, who did not appear in any rush to leave without, and excitedly awaited the time. I left early, to arrive at the diner promptly, where Mr. Lantas was already sitting in a window booth, with a glass of water, talking to another well-dressed man, laughing heartily. He saw me as I passed. He smiled, and with great enthusiasm waved. He stood as I entered and rushed to shake my hand, and with his hand on my back, he walked me to the booth and introduced me to his colleague, Mr. Lance Virgil, who owned a large import business.

Mr. Lantas motioned for me to sit next to him, across from Mr. Virgil, and insisted that we first ordered prior to discussing the major topic of the day. After a few minutes of discussion of the menu, which he again for some reason found such fascination with the items, he ordered the same, fricassee chicken.

Soon after the waitress took our menus, Mr. Virgil asked me, "What is it that you did previously?"

"I was in banking, sir."

"Ah, yes, I'd imagine you took a tumble at the end of October. Terrible thing, certainly, it has affected us as well, we've had some large layoffs unfortunately, however our mutual colleague here speaks quite highly of you. Very determined and intelligent."

And so we sat and discussed his business, and, true to his word, Mr. Lantas made little effort to promote me further, allowing me to conduct the interview without his further involvement. We were at the diner for an hour or so, when Mr. Virgil said with a smile, "We would certainly have a place for you in our higher divisions. Would you be able to start this week?"

And here, Mr. Lantas finally cut in, "Now, Lance, don't be so quick to steal him from the streets! I have several others interested in my friend here as well, and it would simply be unfair for them to be unable to make their cases, give him time to review all of the options at his disposal first!"

Mr. Virgil looked slightly taken aback for a moment, clearly displeased with how Mr. Lantas had suddenly decided to conduct the interview, and I feel perhaps used much more leverage than he let me know to prepare these interviews.

Over the next several days, Mr. Lantas continued to call on me to introduce me to various other prospective employers, all of which took a rapid and sudden interest in having me come aboard, despite, in most cases, a clear lack of experience in the fields.

I ultimately took the position Mr. Virgil offered, who was quite pleased and paid me more than originally offered to compensate for some of the other offers. He seemed determined to ensure I work for him, and stayed there. And so later that week I arrived for my first day, where

the business was explained more fully. I found myself catching on to the work quickly; the few men who were above me (I was placed rather high in the company management, operating the financial aspects of the division handling the importation of European products) were quite impressed with my rapid progress.

I did not see Mr. Lantas for several weeks after starting work. I began to miss him initially, however as time wore on I felt the same feelings of dislike towards him begin to grow in me. Again, I quashed these as rapidly as I realized them, reminding myself of all he had done for me. He was truly a great friend to me, and I had absolutely no reason to dislike or distrust him.

He arrived later that December on a particularly cold and snowy day. The precipitation built up on my office windows as it was thrown chaotically to and fro, down the vacant New York streets. He wore a heavy and long black wool coat and a dark gray homburg, which my assistant moved to take for him.

"Can I offer you coffee or tea, sir?"

Mr. Lantas thought for a moment. "Yes, some tea would be lovely. With just a little sugar, and cream if you have it, thank you!" My assistant quickly ran off to fetch a cup and saucer as Mr. Lantas came towards my office and knocked on the open doorway.

I stood as he approached and held my hand out to shake his. "How have you been? It's been several weeks since I last heard from you!"

As Mr. Lantas reached out his hand, I felt a sudden and strong aversion to touch him, and withdrew my hand slightly, but quickly stopped myself. He noticed, I could tell. His eyes had a flash of anger, his smile faltered for just an instant, but returned to the friendly glow that I had always been used to after only a moment. He took off his gloves and grasped my hand firmly.

"Yes, I apologize, I have been away on business. I, too, have work that calls for my time frequently! Though I have been quite well, thank you. I hope you can say the same?"

"I can. Thank you, again, for your kindness and assistance in my time of need. I am quite grateful that you sat next to me on that train."

"As am I! But more grateful that I had decided to stop into the diner, at just the right moment!"

"Come, please sit!" He followed me to my office, where I pulled a chair for him, and grabbed another from the near wall, not wanting to have the desk separate us. After all he had done, I felt I must be humble; I did not desire to make it appear that I was superior to him here by taking my usual position. My assistant arrived with his tea, and quickly left back to his post.

"So tell me, has the position been satisfactory?" He asked.

"Of course! Mr. Virgil is wonderful, thank you for providing me such opportunities."

"I did only a small part," he laughed, "however for that token you are quite welcome, and needn't mention it again! What kind of a friend would I be if I had not?" He said, talking loudly as usual. "Not much of one!" He answered himself, nodding his head and holding his cup high in a solo toast.

"So what brings you about? Is there something specific you wish to discuss, or is this a simple friendly call?"

"Some of both, I suppose. I will only be in town for a short time, and I thought that perhaps you would join me for Christmas dinner? I hate to dine alone, and I will admit that I have few

real... friends, here, beyond yourself. Of course, if you have other arrangements, I completely understand; perhaps your family is coming?”

“Oh no, I haven’t any plans. In fact, I had almost forgotten that it is that time of year! We’ve been quite busy, and I am still getting used to my position and the nuances of the business. I would be honored to join you.”

“Very good! I’ll leave you to your work; I’ll send message when I have managed the reservation!” He said excitedly. He had finished his tea rather quickly, and looked around clearly awkwardly for a place to set it as he stood.

I held out my hand to take it from him, and handed it to my assistant as I walked him out of the building. I felt so foolish for the sudden urges of fear I felt for him, though the glint in his eyes in that moment frightened me, even as I walked back to my office. It wasn’t a mere anger, it was an outrage that I had never before seen, let alone such a rapid change.

I accomplished little more work that day, and left to home early. I couldn’t get the image out of my head of that instantaneous flash, and it consumed me. I was afraid of him, terrified, of Mr. Lantas, of what he could do if I angered him. I began to question who he even was; I had no idea, it had never really occurred to me that I know almost nothing about him. What he did for work, how he knew these people, where he even lived. I had assumed it to be in the city, however from the way he often spoke it seemed he travelled quite frequently, performing whatever his tasks may have been, and didn’t seem to have a real home. I didn’t know what his capacity was; he had more or less handed me a new, great life, better than my previous, with what appeared to be almost no effort. How hard would it be to take that away, and more?

On Christmas day, I arrived at a small restaurant where Mr. Lantas' had bid me to. My fear of him had since subsided, rationalized that I must have been mistaken in my perception of him. In the preceding days, though I had little contact with him, he had given no further signs for me to carry on my unsubstantiated dislike for him. He never made an aggressive move or statement to me, however there was still some level of rumination of his capabilities to do harm.

When I arrived at the restaurant, a waiter held the door for me. I walked inside, and he led me down a short hall to a much larger room, where Mr. Lantas was already seated at a large table. Only two chairs were placed for seating, directly across from each situated in the middle of the table.

"Ah, you've arrived! I have made special arrangements for tonight; I felt this to be as good of a time as any for celebration! It is, after all, the time to celebrate the birth of our Lord's son!"

He stood and gave me a hug, waiting for me to have pulled my chair out before retaking his seat. The waiter had vacated the room quickly, shutting the large French doors behind him, leaving the two of us to talk humbly of mild issues.

When the food came, several waiters entered and placed trays of meats and vegetables and fruits and salads across the table. Far more than the two of us could possibly eat. Our chatter died down as we ate, without much more than occasional comments on how extremely well prepared the meal was.

"It is unfortunate to see so much go to waste," Mr. Lantas said. "I shall have to ensure that it is placed out for the homeless, perhaps taken to the shelter before the night's end. I imagine that they feel a particularly harsh despair on this day. Perhaps at the very least it will lighten a few of their burdens for at least the night."

I had no response to this; it was kind of out of place, certainly unprovoked for neither of us had finished eating.

"Thank you for coming tonight," he said after realizing I was having difficulty responding. "There was, actually, one particular reason that I wished for you come out with me. I have a... a burden, a secret, of sorts, that I have the desire to tell someone, and have for a long period of time. Of course I do not mean to impose this upon you, it is, let's say, significant. I do not have many friends; my line of work typically does not allow for it, however I have felt a special attraction towards you in particular, ever since I met you, and I feel you are the person best suited to help me solve the dilemma posed by this secret. So I have made arrangements to ensure that our friendship is capable of being maintained, at some personal cost. It will come with a favor, though we will get to this later if you choose to listen to what I have to say in full. Would you be willing to do this for me?"

I sat for a minute unsure of how to respond; in my clumsy attempt to fully grasp what he had said, I made the utterance of "yes". I did not understand this to be the fatal mistake it became, how would I, after all?

Mr. Lantas smiled at me. Not as his typically, exaggerated self, but a slight upward flare of his lips, a truly honest and, perhaps, even grateful expression of his enlightenment at my acceptance of his request. "Let us finish eating, first, before we discuss my business. I do not wish for it to interfere with our date!"

And so we continued to eat, and happily talked of the minor events in our lives, exchanging bits of news that we had come across. I will say that, despite what soon took place, I

did greatly enjoy myself and the company of Mr. Lantas that night.

When we had both decided that we could not continue with the feast provided to us, the waiters came and took the trays and plates, with instructions to have them taken to the nearest shelter. He gave all of the staff an especially generous tip, even considering it to be Christmas and we the only patrons, and they thanked him more graciously than we did them, and brought us more to drink.

"Now, about my business... it is dark. I do not think you will fully believe me just yet, actually I expect you to scoff at the story I am about to tell you." I parted my lips for a response, but held his finger and said, "Please, do not interrupt." He smiled again, his genuine smile. He was not angry; I felt no fear from him on this occasion. "I am... I don't really know how to bring it up in a way that will not sound so ludicrous it is undoubtedly will. I apologize; I did not adequately prepare myself for this moment, as I was not entirely confident that you would agree to hear me. I have a darkness around me; I always have. It is my life: you see, when this world was created, I was there. I helped form it; indeed, I was - I am - an integral part of how this world operates. Though you once told me you had little faith, and I can feel it in you that you do not, I can assure you that there is a higher power; though the concept of 'God' that people have currently taken to is not wholly correct, and in some cases blatantly wrong, the general concept holds true. There are good and evil forces at war, fighting for the hearts and souls of men and women.

"It's difficult to explain, now that I think of it. There is a very vast amount of history; far longer than even your kind has existed. I have been here since before you rose, when the reptilian beasts roamed proud, though I had less involvement with them. They were more or less an interesting experiment, to be honest. Though I feel that He treats most things that way... suffice it to say that I am the evil of these forces. Does that make sense to you?"

I wasn't sure if he was joking, almost having to hold back a laugh. But in his eyes were sorrow and a sheer depression, desperation for understanding and acknowledgement that he spoke a truth few, if any, others could begin to understand; they glowed with a different light than I had seen before, twinkling with sorrow. "I'm sorry, but I do not entirely grasp what you are telling me. Are you saying you are like the Devil?" I could hardly believe that the words were even coming from his mouth; though Mr. Lantas often made jokes and fun, he had never done such without sarcasm. A simple and profound seriousness radiated from him, which I never doubted his capabilities to do, however the topic he spoke of seemed to be so absurd, a complete fantasy that simply wasn't capable of being true, that I was, for a time, more convinced that it was yet another joke, but one that was being taken queerly far and with an unappreciable amount of effort.

"Ah, yes, there you go. I suppose that concept will suffice; though I do not think it does justice to really enforce the meaning of that. I am not a snake that fools women into sin; that is not what I do. Nor am I entirely sure where that arose; I believe it to be a game. We have played those before, to see what happens, to see how people react, however that was a long time ago, and I regret the misfortune and torture that were forced onto them! Alas, I cannot take back what I have done; I do not carry that power. I am not much more significant than any other man alive, a slow attrition has reduced me to slightly more than merely mortal. I do not lead you astray; in fact I try to help people. As much as I can. But, to better yourselves sometimes it is sometimes

necessary to take a step away from God - to step towards me to improve your life, to improve yourself. With that step away, what is often provided you can take that step back, and several more.

"But that is, well, disliked, for I am a representative of that which is *not* God-like, that which is not good for the entirety, but that which is good only for you. Do not be afraid, for you have done nothing that will be judged aggressively when the time comes! That blame will fall to me, I assure you, all of the blame will fall to me, I have accepted it already.

"But, of course, my story is much longer than that. I wished to explain so much more! But I already can see you are losing interest and belief, which I did expect. Please, do not depart just yet, but give me just another few minutes! There is one thing in particular you must understand: what I am is not bad or good, it simply is. I ensure there are options, and provide you with them when you have none. When man was created, I had pushed for there to be only 'good', that people would live here in harmony, like a second Heaven. But I was rejected for his true son, who made the proposition that you must have a choice, for we already had a Heaven. You, like everyone else, chose to come here to test yourselves, to be brought into a world with nothing, and see what you can create, to see what could be accomplished when you don't have the answers and look how far humanity has come! I was skeptical of the plausibility of success, I thought how could that be, certainly they will never be able to! However, I am a loyal servant, and I respected my Lord's decision, and I asked to be made what I am, to be the force of option, to be the one that would tell you to step back and help yourself, rather than help humanity, to be the antagonist of the plan. Clearly, I have been wrong, but this is an eternal position and so thankless that I have grown disparate and sorrowful, and I have begun to grow content with despair. I wish to return to where I came, after so many centuries here on this world, to my home.

"And this, my friend, is where I make a very difficult request of you: I wish for you take my position and help me return. Please, my friend, help me end this misery. Will you do this for me? Will you accept my burden? It is no light task, I know, and understand your rejection, however I wish for you to ponder it for some time before you make your decision. This must be your decision, and yours alone."

With that, he stood and bowed his head towards me, and took his leave with an assurance that my response would speak nothing of my friendship. I sat a quarter of an hour at least, unsure of what I had just heard. I was unable to even make competent thought towards the matter. After some time, with my mind circulating from being blank to filled with incomplete and incomprehensible thoughts, my eyes began to droop with fatigue, and my muscles fell to aches, I stood and began the short journey to my home.