

AT THE BACK TABLE

or

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB

A Short Story

by

Frank Paine

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By Frank Paine

It was a gray, dark, dull, drizzling day at about 6:00 P.M. that afternoon in the Stuyvesant Town (“Stuy Town” to the locals) section of New York City. A man walked south on the sidewalk of Avenue C until he reached the intersection at 15th Street. He was well-dressed, but not expensively, in a brown business suit, white shirt (buttons, not cuff links), plain brown necktie, dark brown overcoat, dark brown shoes recently polished, and no hat. He was a tall, thin figure, with a pale face, brown eyes, and neatly combed brown hair. Coming from another part of the city, he seemed definitely out of place in this environment, for here, the buildings were old, low, and dirty, reflecting the type of business carried on there. His head and eyes flickered from side to side as if he was looking for a particular house. Which he was...

At the 15th Street intersection, he turned to his right, shifting his gaze across to the other side of the street. It appeared that he had found what he was looking for: a low, red brick building with a dirty white sign over the door, which said “JOE’S BAR”. Those familiar with the area knew that this sign was a front, for behind the bar was what used to be called a “house of ill repute.” The curtains in the bar were drawn, giving a dark, somber aspect to it, but through the door could be seen the dim lights which surrounded the bar.

He crossed the street and entered the building. It was a small, whitewashed room, very cheaply furnished with dark brown wooden chairs and tables, but clean. To the right as he entered was the long wooden bar,

behind which stood the fat, red-faced barkeep, whose back was reflected in a mirror as he wiped the counter. He had blue eyes, and his scraggly gray hair looked oily, and unkempt. He was wearing a dirty white t-shirt, and a dirty white apron over dark blue slacks. And there was no way to avoid the body odor that came off him. To his right at the back of the room in the left-hand corner was a door which led back to the “house”, but otherwise there was no break in the expanse of the wall, not even a picture or poster. The remainder of the room was filled with the wooden tables and chairs, and next to the door to the “house” was a juke box.

All the tables were in use, some by lone men, and some with men and their paid company. Other couples were dancing to the soft music which emanated from the juke box.

The man walked to the bar. “Give me a bottle of bourbon, Joe, and a glass,” he ordered.

The fat barkeep stopped wiping long enough to fetch the desired things. “Pay now,” he said.

“Hunh?” the man answered. “You’ve never asked for payment up front before. Why now?”

“New policy,” Joe replied.

“OK. How much?”

“For that bourbon, \$25.00, plus tax.”

With a feeling of reluctance, the man passed across a credit card, and signed the chit. “Oh,” he added. “I’d like a girl at 9:00 P.M.”

Joe picked up his telephone, dialed an extension, and spoke into it. "Two girls at 9:00 P.M. for Mr. Wolf and one other guy." And hung up.

"No, Joe, I only want one girl."

"There's another guy that wants one at 9:00," Joe replied.

"Oh," said Wolf.

He picked up his bottle and glass, and scanned the room for, looking for a table not in use. But, all were in use. Then his eye lit on a table in the back of the room, in the dimly lit corner opposite the door to the "house". That table had one person sitting alone at that table, a man bent over so that Wolf couldn't see his face. Wolf walked over to that table. "Mind if I join you at this table?" he asked.

The man looked up, and Wolf could then see his face. It was a strange face, both fleshy but stressed in appearance, with a trace of wrinkles, though he couldn't have been more than thirty-five or forty years old. His hair was disheveled and red; so red, in fact, that it hardly contrasted with his facial coloring (unshaved). He was short, say seven inches over five feet tall, and overweight, dressed in a wrinkled and threadbare pair of blue trousers, and a well-worn white dress shirt which he wore without buttoning the cuffs. A black overcoat hung on the back of his chair. In front of him were two bottles, one of them empty, and the other, holding red wine, drawn down about a third. He obviously had a head start in his drinking.

"Why not?" the man responded. "You're absolutely free."

"Thanks," Wolf said, seating himself and pouring a drink. "I'm David Wolf," he introduced himself, and reached out to shake hands.

The other man ignored Wolf's hand, but responded, "I'm Henry Lamb."

"But," Wolf said, "we're not absolutely free."

"What do you mean?" the other queried. "You can either do something or not do it, as you please."

"No! We've got to obey the Law. At least if we don't want to get into trouble. I don't particularly relish having the Lord on my back." He poured, and took a large swallow of bourbon.

"What Law?"

The Law of Moses."

"Oh, that! I read it once. But, man, don't you see that we're so free that we're sick of our own freedom? In fact, we're so sick of our freedom that we've created a God and Law to be our master; we need a master because we need to escape the judgement of all other men; because we are the first to condemn ourselves, and we need to spread out our condemnation to all men." He re-filled his wine glass from the bottle in front of him.

"But God exists!" Wolf interjected. "I am that I am," he said to Moses. He created the universe, and it is He that will redeem us from our sins, through the Messiah. He was the beginning, and He will be the end." And having just finished a glass of his whisky, he poured another glassful, tossed it off, and re-filled it again.

Lamb swallowed the rest of his glass of wine, and poured another. He hesitated, taking several more swallows, and then said, plaintively, "But can't you see that there is no absolution or blessing? Everything is simply added up by the men of the world, and it comes out something like, [his words were

now slurring a bit] ‘You’re a drunk, a homosexual, or a liar.’ Just like that. There is no such thing as innocence or absolution, because every man is guilty.” He took another swallow of his red wine. “The only solution to this guilt is slavery. You people are all so guilty that you need a God breathing down your neck so that you think you’re not free. The freedom has made you guilty.” And he took another swallow, slurping the wine, and not really tasting it.

Wolf looked alarmed at this, and hurriedly took another large swallow of his bourbon. And also beginning to slur, he replied, “But it was God that created man and the universe! In his own image! God was the beginning, and god will be the end. Isaiah ‘saw’ Him, and He ‘spoke’ to Moses and Job. Judgement of the wicked is by God in another world, and He cannot be unjust because he is omnipotent.” And took another large swallow of whisky.

Lamb became very upset at that. He slurped two more swallows of his wine, and motioned to the barkeep for another bottle. “You sound like a God damned rabbi,” he said. “How could that be? There’s sooooo [drawing the word out deliberately] much evil in the world. If God is omnipotent, then he’s responsible for all that evil. Any act considered morally wrong by the world, if it is done by God, must be morally right, because He ‘can do no wrong.’

Two more slurps. “So, no! Every man is judged by every other man, here on earth. Come down to earth, man! God is only omnipotent because you have made him so. Even that would not make him just. The bad things in the universe must be attributed to God as well as the good things. Why, the very fact that you assign Him the quality of moral righteousness, the moral righteousness approved by the world, i.e. men, proves that He is a figment of your imagination; for if He were truly omnipotent, all acts, right or

wrong, would have to be attributed to Him. And how much relief from guilt could this God give you! None!” While Lamb was proclaiming all this, the barkeep delivered his next bottle of wine to the table, opened it, and held out his hand for money. By this time, Lamb’s vision was blurry, and he struggled to see which denomination of money was in his hand. Joe got impatient, reached forward, and took a \$20 bill from him; and then returned to his station behind the bar, having assumed that he could keep any change.

Wolf, who had a full glass of bourbon in front of him, took a full two minutes to drink it. In a simpering voice, he responded, “But these men actually spoke to God!” And he poured himself another glass of the brown liquor.

“How do you know?” asked Lamb.

“It’s written in the Scriptures.” He was almost in tears.

“But who wrote the Scriptures? Men! Men who were trying to find some master to enslave them, who were trying to find some relief from their freedom-guilt and the judgement of men.” He picked up his wine bottle, filled his glass, emptied it, and filled it again.

“But they actually talked, or communicated with God! You can’t get around that.” Wolf had tears running down his face now.

“Well,” said Lamb, “remember that those men were also artists. They would put that in because, first, they actually believed it; and second, it made the whole business more plausible; that is, it made a more unified work of art.” His eyes were tearing up now. After a short pause, he observed, reaching out his hand in an effort to give comfort, “I’m sorry to be making this

so hard for you, but it's very easy to say, 'The commandments come from God'; or 'So sayeth the Lord.'"

"But you can't get around the fact that the men were writing for a religious purpose." Wolf was clearly very distraught at this point. Having emptied his glass, he refilled it, and began sipping from it. His hand shook, so he had to hold the glass in both hands.

"Of course they were! That's exactly what I am saying," said Lamb. "They were trying to enslave themselves, and they were trying to free themselves from freedom-guilt, and from the judgement of other men. It's so sad," he cried. And tears were flowing down his face as well. "They were free and had to shift for themselves; and since they didn't really want freedom or its judgements, they asked to be watched over by God. That's how you became a chosen people. Those men invented some laws, hence the Law. But they actually believed all the while, in sin, never in grace. Grace is what you want. You want relief from your freedom-guilt, and He can't give it." He patted Wolf's hand, reached over to the bourbon bottle, and poured another drink for Wolf. Then he poured more wine for himself, and continued, "There is too much contradiction in the world. There is suffering and injustice everywhere, and it must be attributed to God. What use is He?"

"The Messiah will come to judge and save us," said Wolf, speaking very quietly and slowly.

"You poor guy," Lamb answered. "You are already judged by your fellow men. You can't seem to get through your head, can you?" he asked wistfully. "And you'd really like to be saved, wouldn't you? But, man, there is

no absolution or remission of your sins. The world is very matter-of-fact, and the men in it judge and do not absolve.”

“But the universe and man were created by God; man was to have dominion over all the earth.” Wolf wept, as he continued, “Man fell when he ate the fruit of the tree of good and evil. There is no health in him—that’s moral health, not physical health. But, in time, maybe not too long now, the Messiah will redeem us. That is the test of our purpose on earth, to choose between good and evil; and eventually we will be judged. That’s what man is, a creature who must choose whether or not to obey the Law, and who must be judged as to whether he succeeded in obeying the Law.”

“You really believe that stuff, don’t you?” Lamb asked, somewhat impatiently. He rubbed his head. “My head hurts,” he added, “from listening to you.”

“Red wine can do that sometimes,” Wolf responded.

“Not with me,” said Lamb. “Look,” he continued, “I agree that man is born to be judged, but not by the Messiah.” He drained his wine glass. Wolf’s bottle of bourbon was empty by this time. “Let’s order another bottle each.”

“OK. I’m paying.”

“Oh! Thanks!”

The barkeep brought their bottles, opened them, took Wolf’s money, and then returned to the bar.

They each poured a glass, more than a little shakily. “If you want to know,” Lamb went on, “It’s a joke to judge, because we’re all guilty. No man is innocent, so no man can judge his fellow men from a standpoint of

righteousness. You're not a rabbi, are you?" Wolf shook his head. "Well, if the Jews aren't righteous, I'd like to know where the Hell their doctrine of righteousness comes from. 'Brotherhood of man!' What a joke! Judge and be judged! You can't possibly condemn somebody without immediately judging yourself." He rubbed his head again. "My head really hurts!" he added.

"Look, Lamb, are you getting wise with me?"

"I don't like righteousness!"

Wolf started to rise. "You want to step out...?"

"Hey! Cut it out!" Lamb responded.

"Well—you're the one who was getting hot over it."

"Judging again!" He reached across the table, and poured Wolf a drink. "Have a drink." He started to nod.

Wolf sat down, and there was an extended moment of silence. Most of the couples in the room had disappeared through the door to the "house", but a few were still dancing to the harsh, lethargic music from the juke box; and the two men were unaware of the change.

"Sorry I got mad," Wolf finally apologized. There was another short silence, as each consumed another glass of their chosen beverages. "How about you, though?" Wolf continued. "Don't you actually have some sort of belief even though you profess not to?"

Yet again, Lamb rubbed his head. "I feel like shit," he said. "Bad headache."

“Me too,” Wolf replied.

“What do you mean by that, Wolf?”

“Don’t you really believe in disbelief?”

“Not exactly. I’m really what is usually called an existential atheist. I don’t believe in God because he of no use to me. But, I actually do follow a policy for my own comfort.” He took a large swallow of wine.

“What’s that policy?” Wolf copied Lamb’s swallow.

“We all love ourselves and use other people for our own comfort and benefit. I follow that policy, but in a slightly different way from most people. I do what I like, and occasionally I ‘confess’ my ‘sins’ to somebody, and make myself righteous, so that I can be a judge. And I feel more comfortable because I can enjoy my nature and the repentance itself. It makes me feel like a God, and I absolve nobody. It’s not perfect, but it helps; it’s about all I can do to alleviate the suffering, injustice, guilt, and judgement that are all over the place.”

Wolf was horrified. “Bbbbb-but that’s selfish!”

“Aren’t we all? Have another drink.” They both helped themselves to whiskey and wine.

“Bbbbb-but, it goes against the Law.” His tears began to flow again.

“Didn’t I just finish telling you that I don’t believe in the Law?” And his tears began to flow again.

“I just can’t understand how you cannot believe in the Law!” said Wolf, clearly in agony.

“It’s surprisingly easy. Man, can’t you realize that this Law is an invention of your own, something that you only pretend to obey, and that it is only an attempt to create an artificial slavery for yourself?”

“I guess it’s just one of those things I can’t conceive of.” Wolf slurped some more whiskey. “It just doesn’t make any sense to me. The Scriptures are the Word!” His tears continued to flow, as he buried his head on his arms, on the table, while muttering, “Can’t conceive! Can’t conceive!”

And Lamb slurped more wine. “But for God’s sake, they’re not the Word! As the Word, they’re just a figment of your imagination! I just can’t conceive of such a blind belief.” He bent over his glass, resting his head in his hands, staring at the bottom of his glass, and muttered, “Can’t conceive! Can’t conceive!”

At 9:00 P.M. on the dot, two girls emerged from the “house”, and went to the table that Wolf and Lamb occupied. Both men were asleep, heads on the table, and right arms stretched out to each other. Their hands touched, just barely.

THE END