



The Beggar on O'Connell Bridge, Ray Bradbury

The Beggar on O'Connell Bridge

"A fool," i said. "that's what i am."

"Why?" asked my wife. "What for?"

I brooded by our third-floor hotel window. On the Dublin street below, a man passed, his face to the lamplight.

"Him," I muttered. "Two days ago . . ."

Two days ago, as I was walking along, someone had hissed at me from the hotel alley. "Sir, it's important! Sir!"

I turned into the shadow. This little man, in the direst tones, said, "I've a job in Belfast if I just had a pound for the train fare!"

I hesitated.

"A most important job!" he went on swiftly. "Pays well! I'll—I'll mail you back the loan! Just give me your name and hotel."

He knew me for a tourist. It was too late, his promise to pay had moved me. The pound note crackled in my hand, being worked free from several others.

The man's eye skimmed like a shadowing hawk.

"And if I had two pounds, why, I could eat on the way."

I uncrumpled two bills.

"And three pounds would bring the wife, not leave her here alone."

I unleafed a third.

"Ah, hell!" cried the man. "Five, just five poor pounds, would find us a hotel in that brutal city, and let me get to the job, for sure!"

What a dancing fighter he was, light on his toes, in and out, weaving, tapping with his hands, flicking with his eyes, smiling with his mouth, jabbing with his tongue.

"Lord thank you, bless you, sir!"

He ran, my five pounds with him.

I was half in the hotel before I realized that, for all his vows, he had not recorded my name.

"Gah!" I cried then.

"Gah!" I cried now, my wife behind me, at the window.

For there, passing below, was the very fellow who should have been in Belfast two nights ago.

"Oh, I know him," said my wife. "He stopped me this noon. Wanted train fare to Galway."

"Did you give it to him?"

"No," said my wife simply.

Then the worst thing happened. The demon far down on the sidewalk glanced up, saw us and damn if he didn't wave!

I had to stop myself from waving back. A sickly grin played on my lips.

"It's got so I hate to leave the hotel," I said.

"It's cold out, all right." My wife was putting on her coat.

"No," I said. "Not the cold. Them."

And we looked again from the window.

There was the cobbled Dublin street with the night wind blowing in a fine soot along one way to Trinity College, another to St. Stephen's Green. Across by the sweetshop two men stood mummified in the shadows. On the corner a single man, hands deep in his pockets, felt for his entombed bones, a muzzle of ice for a beard. Farther up, in a doorway, was a bundle of old newspapers that would stir like a pack of mice and wish you the time of evening if you walked by. Below, by the hotel entrance, stood a feverish hothouse rose of a woman with a mysterious bundle.

"Oh, the beggars," said my wife.

"No, not just 'oh, the beggars,'" I said, "but oh, the people in the streets, who somehow became beggars."

"It looks like a motion picture. All of them waiting down there in the dark for the hero to come out."

"The hero," I said. "That's me, damn it."

My wife peered at me. “You’re not afraid of them?”

“Yes, no. Hell. It’s that woman with the bundle who’s worst. She’s a force of nature, she is. Assaults you with her poverty. As for the others—well, it’s a big chess game for me now. We’ve been in Dublin what, eight weeks? Eight weeks I’ve sat up here with my typewriter, studying their off hours and on. When they take a coffee break I take one, run for the sweet-shop, the bookstore, the Olympia Theatre. If I time it right, there’s no handout, no my wanting to trot them into the barbershop or the kitchen. I know every secret exit in the hotel.”

“Lord,” said my wife, “you sound driven.”

“I am. But most of all by that beggar on O’Connell Bridge!”

“Which one?”

“Which one indeed. He’s a wonder, a terror. I hate him, I love him. To see is to disbelieve him. Come on.”

The elevator, which had haunted its untidy shaft for a hundred years, came wafting skyward, dragging its ungodly chains and dread intestines after. The door exhaled open. The lift groaned as if we had trod its stomach. In a great protestation of ennui, the ghost sank back toward earth, us in it.

On the way my wife said, “If you held your face right, the beggars wouldn’t bother you.”

“My face,” I explained patiently, “is my face. It’s from Apple Dumpling, Wisconsin, Sarsaparilla, Maine. ‘Kind to Dogs’ is writ on my brow for all to read. Let the street be empty, then let me step out and there’s a strikers’ march of freeloaders leaping out of manholes for miles around.”

“If,” my wife went on, “you could just learn to look over, around or through those people, stare them down.” She mused. “Shall I show you how to handle them?”

“All right, show me! We’re here!”

I flung the elevator door wide and we advanced through the Royal Hibernian Hotel lobby to squint out at the sooty night.

“Jesus come and get me,” I murmured. “There they are, their heads up, their eyes on fire. They smell apple pie already.”

“Meet me down by the bookstore in two minutes,” said my wife.

“Watch.”

“Wait!” I cried.

But she was out the door, down the steps and on the sidewalk.

I watched, nose pressed to the glass pane.

The beggars on one corner, the other, across from, in front of, the hotel, leaned toward my wife. Their eyes glowed.

My wife looked calmly at them all for a long moment.

The beggars hesitated, creaking, I was sure, in their shoes. Then their bones settled. Their mouths collapsed. Their eyes snuffed out. Their heads sank down.

The wind blew.

With a tat-tat like a small drum, my wife’s shoes went briskly away, fading.

From below, in the Buttery, I heard music and laughter. I’ll run down, I thought, and slug in a quick one. Then, bravery resurgent . . .

Hell, I thought, and swung the door wide.

The effect was much as if someone had struck a great Mongolian bronze gong once.

I thought I heard a tremendous insuck of breath.

Then I heard shoe leather flinting the cobbles in sparks. The men came running, fireflies sprinkling the bricks under their hobnailed shoes. I saw hands waving. Mouths opened on smiles like old pianos.

Far down the street, at the bookshop, my wife waited, her back turned. But that third eye in the back of her head must have caught the scene: Columbus greeted by Indians, Saint Francis amidst his squirrel friends with a bag of nuts. For a terrific moment I felt like a pope on St. Peter’s balcony with a tumult, or at the very least the Timultys, below.

I was not half down the steps when the woman charged up, thrusting the unwrapped bundle at me.

“Ah, see the poor child!” she wailed.

I stared at the baby.

The baby stared back.

God in heaven, did or did not the shrewd thing wink at me?

I’ve gone mad, I thought; the babe’s eyes are shut. She’s filled it with beer to keep it warm and on display.

My hands, my coins, blurred among them.

“Praise be!”

“The child thanks you, sir!”

“Ah, sure. There’s only a few of us left!”

I broke through them and beyond, still running. Defeated, I could have scuffed slowly the rest of the way, my resolve so much putty in my mouth, but no, on I rushed, thinking, The baby is real, isn’t it? Not a prop? No. I had heard it cry, often. Blast her, I thought, she pinches it when she sees Okeemogo, Iowa, coming. Cynic, I cried silently, and answered, No—coward.

My wife, without turning, saw my reflection in the bookshop window and nodded.

I stood getting my breath, brooding at my own image: the summer eyes, the ebullient and defenseless mouth.

“All right, say it.” I sighed. “It’s the way I hold my face.”

“I love the way you hold your face.” She took my arm. “I wish I could do it, too.”

I looked back as one of the beggars strolled off in the blowing dark with my shillings.

““There’s only a few of us left,”” I said aloud. “What did he mean, saying that?”

““There’s only a few of us left.”” My wife stared into the shadows. “Is that what he said?”

“It’s something to think about. A few of what? Left where?”

The street was empty now. It was starting to rain.

“Well,” I said at last, “let me show you the even bigger mystery, the man who provokes me to strange wild rages, then calms me to delight. Solve him and you solve all the beggars that ever were.”

“On O’Connell Bridge?” asked my wife.

“On O’Connell Bridge,” I said.

And we walked on down in the gently misting rain.

Halfway to the bridge, as we were examining some fine Irish crystal in a window, a woman with a shawl over her head plucked at my elbow.

“Destroyed!” The woman sobbed. “My poor sister. Cancer, the doctor said, her dead in a month! And me with mouths to feed! Ah, God, if you had just a penny!”

I felt my wife’s arm tighten to mine.

I looked at the woman, split as always, one half saying, “A penny is all she asks!,” the other half doubting: “Clever woman, she knows that by her underasking you’ll overpay!,” and hating myself for the battle of halves.

I gasped. “You’re . . .”

“I’m what, sir?”

Why, I thought, you’re the woman who was just back by the hotel with the bundled baby!

“I’m sick!” She hid in shadow. “Sick with crying for the half dead!”

You’ve stashed the baby somewhere, I thought, and put on a green instead of a gray shawl and run the long way around to cut us off here.

“Cancer . . .” One bell in her tower, and she knew how to toll it. “Cancer . . .”

My wife cut across it. “Beg pardon, but aren’t you the same woman we just met at our hotel?”

The woman and I were both shocked at this rank insubordination. It wasn’t done!

The woman's face crumpled. I peered close. And yes, by God, it was a different face. I could not but admire her. She knew, sensed, had learned what actors know, sense, learn: that by thrusting, yelling, all fiery-lipped arrogance one moment, you are one character; and by sinking, giving way, crumpling the mouth and eyes, in pitiful collapse, you are another. The same woman, yes, but the same face and role? Quite obviously no.

She gave me a last blow beneath the belt. "Cancer."

I flinched.

It was a brief tussle then, a kind of disengagement from one woman and an engagement with the other. The wife lost my arm and the woman found my cash. As if she were on roller skates, she whisked around the corner, sobbing happily.

"Lord!" In awe, I watched her go. "She's studied Stanislavsky. In one book he says that squinting one eye and twitching one lip to the side will disguise you. I wonder if she has nerve enough to be at the hotel when we go back?"

"I wonder," said my wife, "when my husband will stop admiring and start criticizing such Abbey Theatre acting as that."

"But what if it were true? Everything she said? And she's lived with it so long she can't cry anymore, and so has to play-act in order to survive? What if?"

"It can't be true," said my wife slowly. "I just won't believe it."

But that single bell was still tolling somewhere in the chimney-smoking dark.

"Now," said my wife, "here's where we turn for O'Connell Bridge, isn't it?"

"It is."

That corner was probably empty in the falling rain for a long time after we were gone.

There stood the graystone bridge bearing the great O'Connell's name, and there the River Liffey rolling cold gray waters under, and even from

a block off I heard faint singing. My mind spun in a great leap back to December.

“Christmas,” I murmured, “is the best time of all in Dublin.”
For beggars, I meant, but left it unsaid.

For in the week before Christmas the Dublin streets teem with raven flocks of children herded by schoolmasters or nuns. They cluster in doorways, peer from theater lobbies, jostle in alleys, “God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen” on their lips, “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” in their eyes, tambourines in hand, snowflakes shaping a collar of grace about their tender necks.

It is singing everywhere and anywhere in Dublin on such nights, and there was no night my wife and I did not walk down along Grafton Street to hear “Away in a Manger” being sung to the queue outside the cinema or “Deck the Halls” in front of the Four Provinces pub.

In all, we counted in Christ’s season one night half a hundred bands of convent girls or public-school boys lacing the cold air and weaving great treadles of song up, down, over and across from end to end of Dublin. Like walking in snowfall, you could not walk among them and not be touched. The sweet beggars, I called them, who gave in turn for what you gave as you went your way.

Given such example, even the most dilapidated beggars of Dublin washed their hands, mended their torn smiles, borrowed banjos or bought a fiddle and killed a cat. They even gathered for four-part harmonies.

How could they stay silent when half the world was singing and the other half, idled on the tuneful river, was paying dearly, gladly, for just another chorus?

So Christmas was best for all; the beggars worked—off key, it’s true, but there they were, one time in the year, busy.

But Christmas was over, the licorice-suited children back in their aviaries, and the beggars of the town, shut and glad for the silence, returned to their workless ways. All save the beggars on O'Connell Bridge, who, all through the year, most of them, tried to give as good as they got.

"They have their self-respect," I said, walking my wife. "I'm glad this first man here strums a guitar, the next one a fiddle. And there, now, by God, in the very center of the bridge!"

"The man we're looking for?"

"That's him. Squeezing the concertina. It's all right to look. Or I think it is."

"What do you mean, you think it is? He's blind, isn't he?"

These raw words shocked me, as if my wife had said something indecent.

The rain fell gently, softly upon graystoned Dublin, graystoned riverbank, gray lava-flowing river.

"That's the trouble," I said at last. "I don't know."

And we both, in passing, looked at the man standing there in the very middle of O'Connell Bridge.

He was a man of no great height, a bandy statue swiped from some country garden perhaps, and his clothes, like the clothes of most in Ireland, too often laundered by the weather, and his hair too often grayed by the smoking air, and his cheeks sooted with beard, and a nest or two of witless hair in each cupped ear, and the blushing cheeks of a man who has stood too long in the cold and drunk too much in the pub so as to stand too long in the cold again.

Dark glasses covered his eyes, and there was no telling what lay behind. I had begun to wonder, weeks back, if his sight prowled me along, damning my guilty speed, or if only his ears caught the passing of a harried conscience. There was that awful fear I might seize, in passing, the glasses from his nose. But I feared much more the abyss I might

find, into which my senses, in one terrible roar, might tumble. Best not to know if civet's orb or interstellar space gaped behind the smoked panes.

But, even more, there was a special reason why I could not let the man be.

In the rain and wind and snow, for two solid months, I had seen him standing here with no cap or hat on his head.

He was the only man in all of Dublin I saw in the downpours and drizzles who stood by the hour alone with the drench mizzling his ears, threading his ash-red hair, plastering it over his skull, rivuleting his eyebrows, and purling over the coal-black insect lenses of the glasses on his rain-pearled nose.

Down through the greaves of his cheeks, the lines about his mouth, and off his chin, like a storm on a gargoyle's flint, the weather ran. His sharp chin shot the guzzle in a steady fauceting off in the air, down his tweed scarf and locomotive-colored coat.

"Why doesn't he wear a hat?" I said suddenly.

"Why," said my wife, "maybe he hasn't got one."

"He must have one," I said.

"Keep your voice down."

"He's got to have one," I said, quieter.

"Maybe he can't afford one."

"Nobody's that poor, even in Dublin. Everyone has a cap at least!"

"Well, maybe he has bills to pay, someone sick."

"But to stand out for weeks, months, in the rain, and not so much as flinch or turn his head, ignore the rain, it's beyond understanding." I shook my head. "I can only think it's a trick. That must be it. Like the others, this is his way of getting sympathy, of making you cold and miserable as himself as you go by, so you'll give him more."

"I bet you're sorry you said that already," said my wife.

“I am. I am.” For even under my cap the rain was running off my nose.
“Sweet God in heaven, what’s the answer?”
“Why don’t you ask him?”
“No.” I was even more afraid of that.

Then the last thing happened, the thing that went with his standing bareheaded in the cold rain.

For a moment, while we had been talking at some distance, he had been silent. Now, as if the weather had freshened him to life, he gave his concertina a great mash. From the folding, unfolding snake box he squeezed a series of asthmatic notes which were no preparation for what followed.

He opened his mouth. He sang.

The sweet clear baritone voice which rang over O’Connell Bridge, steady and sure, was beautifully shaped and controlled, not a quiver, not a flaw, anywhere in it. The man just opened his mouth, which meant that all kinds of secret doors in his body gave way. He did not sing so much as let his soul free.

“Oh,” said my wife, “how lovely.”

“Lovely.” I nodded.

We listened while he sang the full irony of Dublin’s Fair City where it rains twelve inches a month the winter through, followed by the white-wine clarity of Kathleen Mavourneen, Macushlah, and all the other tired lads, lasses, lakes, hills, past glories, present miseries, but all somehow revived and moving about young and freshly painted in the light spring, suddenly-not-winter rain. If he breathed at all, it must have been through his ears, so smooth the line, so steady the putting forth of word following round belled word.

“Why,” said my wife, “he could be on the stage.”

“Maybe he was once.”

“Oh, he’s too good to be standing here.”

“I’ve thought that often.”

My wife fumbled with her purse. I looked from her to the singing man, the rain falling on his bare head, streaming through his shellacked hair, trembling on his ear lobes. My wife had her purse open.

And then, the strange perversity. Before my wife could move toward him, I took her elbow and led her down the other side of the bridge. She pulled back for a moment, giving me a look, then came along.

As we went away along the bank of the Liffey, he started a new song, one we had heard often in Ireland. Glancing back, I saw him, head proud, black glasses taking the pour, mouth open, and the fine voice clear:

“I’ll be glad when you’re dead
in your grave, old man,
Be glad when you’re dead
in your grave, old man.
Be glad when you’re dead,
Flowers over your head,
And then I’ll marry the journeyman. . . .”

It is only later, looking back, that you see that while you were doing all the other things in your life, working on an article concerning one part of Ireland in your rain-battered hotel, taking your wife to dinner, wandering in the museums, you also had an eye beyond to the street and those who served themselves who only stood to wait.

The beggars of Dublin, who bothers to wonder on them, look, see, know, understand? Yet the outer shell of the eye sees and the inner shell of the mind records, and yourself, caught between, ignores the rare service these two halves of a bright sense are up to.

So I did and did not concern myself with beggars. So I did run from them or walk to meet them, by turn. So I heard but did not hear, considered but did not consider:

“There’s only a few of us left!”

One day I was sure the stone gargoyle man taking his daily shower on O'Connell Bridge while he sang Irish opera was not blind. And the next his head to me was a cup of darkness.

One afternoon I found myself lingering before a tweed shop near O'Connell Bridge, staring in, staring in at a stack of good thick burly caps. I did not need another cap, I had a life's supply collected in a suitcase, yet in I went to pay out money for a fine warm brown-colored cap which I turned round and round in my hands, in a strange trance.

"Sir," said the clerk. "That cap is a seven. I would guess your head, sir, at a seven and one half."

"This will fit me. This will fit me." I stuffed the cap into my pocket.

"Let me get you a sack, sir—"

"No!" Hot-cheeked, suddenly suspicious of what I was up to, I fled.

There was the bridge in the soft rain. All I need do now was walk over—
In the middle of the bridge, my singing man was not there.

In his place stood an old man and woman cranking a great piano-box hurdy-gurdy which racheted and coughed like a coffee grinder eating glass and stone, giving forth no melody but a grand and melancholy sort of iron indigestion.

I waited for the tune, if tune it was, to finish. I kneaded the new tweed cap in my sweaty fist while the hurdy-gurdy prickled, spanged and thumped.

"Be damned to ya!" the old man and old woman, furious with their job, seemed to say, their faces thunderous pale, their eyes red-hot in the rain. "Pay us! Listen! But we'll give you no tune! Make up your own!" their mute lips said.

And standing there on the spot where the beggar always sang without his cap, I thought, Why don't they take one fiftieth of the money they make each month and have the thing tuned? If I were cranking the box, I'd want a tune, at least for myself! If you were cranking the box, I answered. But you're not. And it's obvious they hate the begging job, who'd blame them, and want no part of giving back a familiar song as recompense.

How different from my capless friend.

My friend?

I blinked with surprise, then stepped forward and nodded.

“Beg pardon. The man with the concertina . . .”

The woman stopped cranking and glared at me.

“Ah?”

“The man with no cap in the rain.”

“Ah, him!” snapped the woman.

“He’s not here today?”

“Do you see him?” cried the woman.

She started cranking the infernal device.

I put a penny in the tin cup.

She peered at me as if I’d spit in the cup.

I put in another penny. She stopped.

“Do you know where he is?” I asked.

“Sick. In bed. The damn cold! We heard him go off, coughing.”

“Do you know where he lives?”

“No!”

“Do you know his name?”

“Now, who would know that!”

I stood there, feeling directionless, thinking of the man somewhere off in the town, alone. I looked at the new cap foolishly.

The two old people were watching me uneasily.

I put a last shilling in the cup.

“He’ll be all right,” I said, not to them, but to someone, hopefully, myself.

The woman heaved the crank. The bucketing machine let loose a fall of glass and junk in its hideous interior.

“The tune,” I said, numbly. “What is it?”

“You’re deaf!” snapped the woman. “It’s the national anthem! Do you mind removing your cap?”

I showed her the new cap in my hand.

She glared up. "Your cap, man, your cap!"

"Oh!" Flushing, I seized the old cap from my head.

Now I had a cap in each hand.

The woman cranked. The "music" played. The rain hit my brow, my eyelids, my mouth.

On the far side of the bridge I stopped for the hard, the slow decision: which cap to try on my drenched skull?

During the next week I passed the bridge often, but there was always just the old couple there with their pandemonium device, or no one there at all.

On the last day of our visit, my wife started to pack the new tweed cap away with my others, in the suitcase.

"Thanks, no." I took it from her. "Let's keep it out, on the mantel, please. There."

That night the hotel manager brought a farewell bottle to our room.

The talk was long and good, the hour grew late, there was a fire like an orange lion on the hearth, big and lively, and brandy in the glasses, and silence for a moment in the room, perhaps because quite suddenly we found silence falling in great soft flakes past our high windows.

The manager, glass in hand, watched the continual lace, then looked down at the midnight stones and at last said, under his breath,

"There's only a few of us left."

I glanced at my wife, and she at me.

The manager caught us.

"Do you know him, then? Has he said it to you?"

"Yes. But what does the phrase mean?"

The manager watched all those figures down there standing in the shadows and sipped his drink.

"Once I thought he meant he fought in the Troubles and there's just a few of the I.R.A. left. But no. Or maybe he means in a richer world the begging population is melting away. But no to that also. So maybe,

perhaps, he means there aren't many 'human beings' left who look, see what they look at, and understand well enough for one to ask and one to give. Everyone busy, running here, jumping there, there's no time to study one another. But I guess that's bilge and hogwash, slop and sentiment."

He half turned from the window.

"So you know There's Only a Few of Us Left, do you?"

My wife and I nodded.

"Then do you know the woman with the baby?"

"Yes," I said.

"And the one with the cancer?"

"Yes," said my wife.

"And the man who needs train fare to Cork?"

"Belfast," said I.

"Galway," said my wife.

The manager smiled sadly and turned back to the window.

"What about the couple with the piano that plays no tune?"

"Has it ever?" I asked.

"Not since I was a boy."

The manager's face was shadowed now.

"Do you know the beggar on O'Connell Bridge?"

"Which one?" I said.

But I knew which one, for I was looking at the cap there on the mantel.

"Did you see the paper today?" asked the manager.

"No."

"There's just the item, bottom half of page five, Irish Times. It seems he just got tired. And he threw his concertina over into the River Liffey. And he jumped after it."

He was back, then, yesterday! I thought. And I didn't pass by!

"The poor bastard." The manager laughed with a hollow exhalation.

"What a funny, horrid way to die. That damn silly concertina—I hate them, don't you?—wheezing on its way down, like a sick cat, and the

man falling after. I laugh and I'm ashamed of laughing. Well. They didn't find the body. They're still looking."

"Oh, God!" I cried, getting up. "Oh, damn!"

The manager watched me carefully now, surprised at my concern. "You couldn't help it."

"I could! I never gave him a penny, not one, ever! Did you?"

"Come to think of it, no."

"But you're worse than I am!" I protested. "I've seen you around town, shoveling out pennies hand over fist. Why, why not to him?"

"I guess I thought he was overdoing it."

"Hell, yes!" I was at the window now, too, staring down through the falling snow. "I thought his bare head was a trick to make me feel sorry. Damn, after a while you think everything's a trick! I used to pass there winter nights with the rain thick and him there singing and he made me feel so cold I hated his guts. I wonder how many other people felt cold and hated him because he did that to them?"

So instead of getting money, he got nothing in his cup. I lumped him with the rest. But maybe he was one of the legitimate ones, the new poor just starting out this winter, not a beggar ever before, so you hock your clothes to feed a stomach and wind up a man in the rain without a hat."

The snow was falling fast now, erasing the lamps and the statues in the shadows of the lamps below.

"How do you tell the difference between them?" I asked. "How can you judge which is honest, which isn't?"

"The fact is," said the manager quietly, "you can't. There's no difference between them. Some have been at it longer than others, and have gone shrewd, forgotten how it all started a long time ago. On a Saturday they had food. On a Sunday they didn't. On a Monday they asked for credit. On a Tuesday they borrowed their first match.

Thursday a cigarette. And a few Fridays later they found themselves, God knows how, in front of a place called the Royal Hibernian Hotel.

They couldn't tell you what happened or why. One thing's sure though: they're hanging to the cliff by their fingernails. Poor bastard, someone must've stomped on that man's hands on O'Connell Bridge and he just gave up the ghost and went over. So what does it prove? You cannot stare them down or look away from them.

You cannot run and hide from them. You can only give to them all. If you start drawing lines, someone gets hurt. I'm sorry now I didn't give that blind singer a shilling each time I passed. Well. Well. Let us console ourselves, hope it wasn't money but something at home or in his past did him in. There's no way to find out. The paper lists no name."

Snow fell silently across our sight. Below, the dark shapes waited. It was hard to tell whether snow was making sheep of the wolves or sheep of the sheep, gently manteling their shoulders, their backs, their hats and shawls.

A moment later, going down in the haunted night elevator, I found the new tweed cap in my hand.

Coatless, in my shirtsleeves, I stepped out into the night.

I gave the cap to the first man who came. I never knew if it fit. What money I had in my pockets was soon gone.

Then, left alone, shivering, I happened to glance up. I stood, I froze, blinking up through the drift, the drift, the silent drift of blinding snow. I saw the high hotel windows, the lights, the shadows.

What's it like up there? I thought. Are fires lit? Is it warm as breath? Who are all those people? Are they drinking? Are they happy?

Do they even know I'm HERE?

The End