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## ROUSSEAU'S BITTER PRAYER

### I. Shazzam

"So there I was, walking towards Vincennes to visit Diderot, when — glancing at the copy of the *Mercure de France* I had taken along — I happened to notice the subject proposed by the Dijon Academy as a prize essay for the following year: 'Has the revival of the arts and sciences done more to corrupt or to purify morals?' The moment I read these words . . . (Shazzam!) . . . I beheld another world and became another man." (O.C., I, 1135; my translation) Such, more or less, is the way Rousseau describes the occasion for the first of the six discourses that are the theme of this volume.

Unfortunately, Rousseau does not give us an explicit statement of the characteristics of the other world he "saw and felt" under his Bodhi tree; rather, he contrasts that world with the one we already know — with a social system which is inherently contradictory and institutions whose abuses render us wicked and miserable, though we are naturally good and happy. Likewise, he tells us that he "scattered" what he remembered of "the host of great truths" comprising the illuminatory experience in three principal works — the *First Discourse*, the *Discourse on Inequality* and *Émile*; yet he does not indicate what these truths are, nor to which world they apply. (I, 1135-1136) Well, not to worry! for Rousseau supplies us with the fundamental truths or guiding principles of "another world" (than the one we know) in the following prayer:

Almighty God, thou who holds all spirits in thy hands, deliver us from the enlightenment and fatal arts of our forefathers, and give back to us ignorance, innocence, and poverty, the only goods that can give us happiness and are precious in thy sight.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Roger D. and Judith K. Masters, trs., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The First and Second Discourses*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), p. 62.

Now by claiming that "ignorance, innocence, and poverty are the *only* goods that can give us happiness," Rousseau implies that these three principles, and only these, would yield a social system free from contradiction and institutions capable of rendering us happy and virtuous. While by claiming that "ignorance, innocence, and poverty are the *only* goods that are precious in God's sight," Rousseau utilizes the Lawgiver's "recourse to the intervention of heaven" (III, 383), in order to sanction and even to sanctify these, and again only these, three principles as the guiding principles of a well-formed social order.

At the same time, Rousseau's prayer explicitly identifies enlightenment as something from which we should seek to be delivered, along with "the fatal arts of our forefathers" — not least, the art of pleasing or "civility"; consequently, two of the guiding principles of the world we know are not only indicated in the prayer but are rather obviously to be understood as the contraries of ignorance and innocence respectively. And the contrary of poverty — that is, luxury — should be no less apparent to any one who has read the *First Discourse* up to the point where Rousseau gives this prayer.

My contention, then, is simply that as much of "the host of great truths" as Rousseau was able to remember and subsequently "scatter" among his major writings are quite neatly gathered in his prayer, where the "host" is reduced to precisely these two sets of contrary principles: ignorance, innocence, and poverty — as the guiding principles of another world; enlightenment, the art of pleasing, and luxury — as the guiding principles of the world we know. But further, each of these sets of contrary principles is grounded in a more basic vision of society — respectively, the non-acquisitive and the acquisitive. Thus, the "indescribable confusion" which Rousseau claims (I, 1135) to have experienced on the road to Vincennes was very quickly resolved into alternative conceptions: of society as it is, and of society as it might be — if, that is, *we* were to pray efficaciously.

For the prayer is intended more for us than for Rousseau, since he not only "beheld another world," but also "became another man" — presumably a person who seeks (in the

midst of the world as it is) to live in accordance with the principles of ignorance, innocence, and poverty. And though none of us may have had anything comparable to Rousseau's "Shazzam experience," he urges each of us to say this prayer and to adopt the principles it advocates; otherwise, in acquiescing to the contrary, and inherently contradictory, principles of the acquisitive society, each of us will earn the title of Rousseau's Fool — viz., any person who rejects the possibility of establishing a well-ordered, non-acquisitive society.<sup>2</sup>

Before we begin to pray, however, we need a much clearer notion of what we are praying for, of the import of the principles we should entreat God to restore to us as well as those from which we beseech Her to deliver us. To this end, I offer — in the next section — a preliminary account of both sets of principles: preliminary, that is, since I limit myself here to those insights which Rousseau "scattered" among his six *Discourses*.

## II. What to Pray for — and Against

The constitutive principles of that other world Rousseau saw and felt under his Bodhi tree and of the world we know form but two short lists:

### *Non-Acquisitive Society*

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Ignorance  
Innocence  
Poverty

### *Acquisitive Society*

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Enlightenment  
Art of Pleasing  
Luxury

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2. Cf. *First Discourse, loc.cit.*, p. 62: "... unless they (viz., the descendants of the eighteenth century) be more foolish than we (viz., Rousseau and his contemporaries), they will raise their hands to heaven and say (the prayer) with bitterness of heart. . . . In addition to David's Fool, who says "there is no God," and Hobbes' Fool, who says "there is no justice," we now confront Rousseau's Fool, who says in effect "there is no hope." But even those who believe that there is still hope for human kind must recognize that it is rather slim; though they pray most sincerely, they also pray with "bitterness of heart."

My exposition of these principles, however, will proceed in reverse order.

### A. Poverty/Luxury

Just as Rousseau would have us appeal to the God to give us back poverty, so — in that segment of his *First Discourse* which he wrote immediately following his illuminatory experience — he imagines Fabricius, restored to life after Rome had acquired a "pompous appearance," also addressing the Gods (though Rousseau calls this speech a soliloquy):

Gods . . . what has become of those thatched roofs and those rustic hearths where moderation and virtue used to dwell? What disastrous splendor has succeeded Roman simplicity? . . . Madmen, what have you done? . . .<sup>3</sup>

Now Plutarch informs us that Caius Fabricius was "an honest man and a good soldier, but extremely poor"; yet he was as uninterested in the prospect of personal aggrandizement as he was committed to public service.<sup>4</sup> How different is Chrysophilus, the young man to whom Rousseau writes in the *Discourse on Wealth*, who aspires to fortune (as his name signifies) in order to alleviate the misery of the poor but who fails to recognize that "in the rank in which heaven has placed him, it is possible to live modestly without meanness and to exercise virtue without a struggle."<sup>5</sup>

From these contrasting portraits, it should be apparent that Rousseau identifies poverty with material conditions of life that are austere and modest, yet sufficient to enable every individual to satisfy his/her essential material needs. But in addition, it should be evident — from his praise of Fabricius' noble soul and criticism of Chrysophilus' intentions — that

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3. *First Discourse*, *loc. cit.*, p. 45.

4. Cf. John Dryden, tr., *Plutarch: The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.) pp. 481-482.

5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discours sur les richesses," in Michel Launay, ed., *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), vol. 2, p. 329.

Rousseau correlates an attitude of contentment, of genuine satisfaction with poverty in the sense just indicated. Fabricius is not in the least tempted by Pyrrhus' offer of gold since, though poor, he is able to satisfy his essential needs and is perfectly satisfied to forego the non-essential "needs" which such gold might enable him to satisfy. For Rousseau, then, "poverty" comprises both austere material conditions of life and a normative principle which limits the structure and scope of a person's desires to such conditions.

Of course, the rusticity and simplicity to which "Fabricius" alludes, and the modest life-style Rousseau commends to Chrysophilus, would permit a more complex structure of desires, and more appealing ways of satisfying essential needs, than the nascent individual's enthusiasm for and satisfaction by a diet of acorns, a bed among tree roots, and the like. For, as Rousseau suggests in the *Discourse on Political Economy*,

... providing for the public needs is an ... essential duty of the government. This duty is not, it should be apparent, to fill the granaries of private individuals and dispense them from working, but rather to maintain abundance within their reach so that to acquire it, work is always necessary and never useless.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the kind of austerity involved in Rousseau's notion of poverty is even consistent with moderate abundance, and consequently with a relatively complex and more extensive set of desires.

What, then, of luxury? As Rousseau explains to Chrysophilus, though "a rich benefactor *seems* to be an agent of the divinity on earth, and the imitator of Providence," Chrysophilus — who desires to become wealthy in order to

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6. Roger D. Masters, ed., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), p. 224. Cf. also the (Discourse on) *Luxury, Commerce and the Arts* (III, 523-524): "With regard to abundance, I do not understand by this word a situation in which a few individuals are glutted with everything while the rest of the population must appeal to them for its subsistence at whatever price they choose to set, nor this other hypothetical and impossible situation (at least for its continuance), in which everyone would find ready-to-hand without either work or difficulty whatever satisfies all his needs, but that (situation) in which all things necessary for life are found gathered in the country in such quantity that each can, with his labor, easily accumulate all that is necessary for his preservation."

be such a benefactor — has not considered "what he would do in enriching himself":<sup>7</sup> that is, how he will avoid compromising this ideal, or abandoning it altogether, in the process of accumulating wealth. Not least, Rousseau asks his friend,

What limits will you find in the nature of things where you might reasonably say: This is enough? Alas! If you want to be in a state to repair all of the evils that will form your fellow-creatures, if you want to wait until your power is extended as far as our misery, I see you, insatiable and hard to the end of your days, accumulating incessantly for want of having enough to distribute, and dying weighed down with gold, with years, and with avarice, without ever having found the time or the means to do good to anyone.<sup>8</sup>

As with poverty, then, luxury involves both material conditions of life — viz., conditions in which non-essential "needs" are added to the essential and legitimate ones<sup>9</sup> — and also an associated principle regarding the structure and scope of a person's desires. But since the latter, in the case of luxury, is a principle of unlimited and insatiable acquisitiveness, rather than a principle of limitation, it involves a practical or volitional contradiction, in Kant's sense: for, while one can consistently *think* of acting in accordance with the principle of insatiable acquisitiveness as if it were a universal law of nature (such that everyone would *necessarily* act in this way), one cannot *will* that this principle become such a law of nature.<sup>10</sup> Now Rousseau may be mistaken in assuming that "(it is) impossible to enrich

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7. *Discourse on Wealth, loc. cit.*, pp. 327-328.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

9. Cf. *Political Economy, loc. cit.*, p. 228. "If one examines how the needs of a State grow, this will often be found to happen in about the same way as it does for private individuals, less by true necessity than by an expansion of frivolous desires, and often expenses are increased solely to provide a pretext for increasing income. Thus the State would sometimes profit from not being rich, and such apparent wealth is basically a greater burden than poverty itself would be."

10. Lewis White Beck, tr., *Immanuel Kant: Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1959), pp. 41-42.



oneself without contributing to the impoverishment of others,"<sup>11</sup> though were this true it would reveal a practical contradiction between Chrysophilus' goal and the principle which he plans to adopt in order to reach that goal. But Rousseau supplies Chrysophilus with other, perhaps more cogent, grounds for regarding his principle as a *practical* contradiction: how will he overturn the habits of hardness and callousness required to accumulate wealth? How can he guarantee that he will not die before beginning to distribute his fortune to the needy? How will he determine the point at which he should shift from accumulation to distribution — that is, how will he know when his fortune is sufficient to his purpose? and of course, how can he possibly guarantee that his acquisitiveness will have the desired outcome, given the vicissitudes of "fortune?"<sup>12</sup>

For these reasons, then, Rousseau warns his friend that the principle of unlimited acquisitiveness is inherently contradictory, so that Chrysophilus would be *foolish* to adopt such a principle to govern his life. So too, Fabricius identifies those Romans who have replaced the principle of poverty (desires limited to essential needs) with the principle of luxury (unlimited acquisitiveness and the continual creation of new "needs") as madmen.

## B. Innocence/"Civility"

Again, Rousseau supplies contrasting portraits which reveal the import of these contrary principles:

... savage man and civilized man differ so much in the bottom of their hearts and inclinations that what constitutes the supreme happiness of one would reduce the other to despair. . . (As for) the true cause of all these differences: the savage lives within himself; the sociable man,

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11. *Discourse on Wealth, loc. cit.*, p. 328.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-14 *passim*. On the last of these points, cf. also *Discourse on Luxury, Commerce and the Arts* (III, 521): "It can happen unexpectedly from such revolutions in society (e.g., the inflation or deflation in the value of currency, etc.) that the same man would find himself rich and poor alternately without having increased or decreased his fortune."

always outside of himself, knows how to live only in the opinion of others; and it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence.<sup>13</sup>

Somewhat earlier in the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau says that "living within oneself" involves

... the advantage of constantly having all of one's strength at one's disposal, of always being ready for any event, and of always carrying oneself, so to speak, entirely with one.<sup>14</sup>

This description, which is applied to the nascent individual, concerns primarily the strength and vigor of the body; but it could also be applied to a person whose faculties and moral sensibility have been developed, and would then concern strength and vigor of soul as well. But this is precisely the quality which distinguishes the hero: "it is the constant ability to act vigorously; it is exhibited in mastering one's passions and vanquishing one's prejudices; and it energizes the other virtues — notably, courage, justice, wisdom (or prudence), and temperance." (II, 1273)

Indeed, the principle of innocence comprises the foundation of Rousseau's ethic of virtue. For, the individual who cultivates innocence — that is, who establishes self-reliance or "character" (*qua* moral strength) as a strong disposition — is thereby enabled to cultivate the other traits of character or virtues: honesty, benevolence, the cardinal virtues, and so on. Rousseau is not altogether clear about this: at one point he identifies virtue with strength of soul;<sup>15</sup> at another he implies that strength of soul is the source of the virtues. (II, 1272) But I would suggest that, given the portrait of the nascent individual, innocence is to be understood as strength of soul or self-reliance and that such moral strength does (or at least can) energize the various virtues.

Civility, or the art of pleasing, however, has just the opposite effect: "One no longer dares to appear as he is. . . and

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13. *Discourse on Inequality, loc. cit.*, pp. 178-179.

14. *Discourse on Inequality, loc. cit.*, p. 107.

15. *First Discourse, loc. cit.*, p. 37.

one will never know well those with whom he deals. . . . What a procession of vices must accompany this uncertainty!"<sup>16</sup> But this art is not only deleterious in its effects, it is also inherently contradictory — when adopted as a guiding principle. For the object of "civility" is not so much "to give credit where credit is due" as "to incline each individual to have a greater esteem for himself than for anyone else" while at the same time expecting others to acknowledge that one is to be preferred to themselves, that one is deservedly "the most highly considered."<sup>17</sup> And further, to the extent that self-esteem (*qua amour-propre*) is a function of one's reputation, and requires that one "live only in the opinion of others," how can one ever hope to please oneself? In other words, *amour-propre* is to be satisfied by means of civility, one pleases others in order to please oneself; yet the goal of *amour-propre* — the absolute and universal preference of all for oneself — is practically unattainable by this means, and civility, so far as it is in the service of *amour-propre*, is thus inherently contradictory. Still, as sociable, civilized folk, we are inevitably caught up in the process of seeking to achieve self-esteem by pleasing others, and this process too is a form of acquisitiveness.

### C. Ignorance/Enlightenment

Here we must consider Rousseau's self-portrait as contrasted with that of (almost) Every person. For Rousseau claims to be "an honorable man who knows nothing," and even "praises ignorance," yet fears "the enlightenment of the assembly that listens to me."<sup>18</sup> But here Rousseau simply assumes the persona of Socrates, and commands ignorance *qua* Socratic wisdom. The principle of ignorance, like the principle of poverty, requires a recognition of human limitation: epistemic humility is as necessary to the well-formed social order as austerity. Indeed, Rousseau suggests

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16. *First Discourse*, pp. 37-38.

17. *Discourse on Inequality*, *loc. cit.*, pp. 222 and 149.

18. *First Discourse*, *loc. cit.*, p. 34.

that "the reciprocal refutation of philosophical systems would benefit society by enabling us to follow the salutary path from error to ignorance, and to acknowledge the latter in good faith." (III, 516)

What, then, of enlightenment, which Every person regards as desirable? Surely,

... it is a grand and beautiful sight to see man emerge from obscurity somehow by his own efforts; dissipate, by the light of his reason, the darkness in which nature had enveloped him; rise above himself; soar intellectually into celestial regions . . . .<sup>19</sup>

Well, not quite so grand and beautiful; for

... behold how luxury, licentiousness, and slavery have in all periods been punishment for the arrogant attempt we have made to emerge from the happy ignorance in which eternal wisdom had placed us.<sup>20</sup>

There certainly seems to be an inconsistency in these two accounts of the human quest for knowledge; but I would suggest that it lies within each rather than between them. In the second, Rousseau identifies as arrogance "the attempt to emerge from ignorance," while in the first, we emerge by "rising above ourselves and soaring intellectually into celestial regions." But mightn't such "intellectual soaring" likewise constitute a form of arrogance, especially if — as I suspect — Rousseau is alluding here to the story of Daedalus and Icarus? Specifically, Rousseau condemns the presumptuous epistemic acquisitiveness so characteristic of modernity, but particularly of the Enlightenment: that is, the belief that absolute knowledge, complete understanding is humanly attainable. For his contemporaries shared with Descartes the belief that "there can be nothing so remote that we cannot reach to it, nor so recondite that we cannot discover it." <sup>21</sup> The principle of enlightenment, then, is contiguous with the principles of luxury and "civility" since

19. *First Discourse, loc. cit.*, p. 35.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

21. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, trs., *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), Vol. I, p. 92.

it is yet another variety of acquisitiveness which seeks to overturn human limitations. Insofar, this principle too is inherently contradictory: omniscience is not humanly possible, and anyone who presumes otherwise is arrogant (*qua* hybristic); more, he is a fool.

### III. Rousseau's Fool and Ilsebil

One final portrait, — of Rousseau's Fool, for whom

... it is first of all a question of providing for the necessary, and then for the superfluous; next come delights, then immense wealth, and then subjects, and then slaves; he does not have a moment of respite. What is most singular is that the less natural and urgent the needs, the more the passions augment, and, what is worse, the power to satisfy them; so that after long prosperity, after having swallowed up many treasures and desolated many men, my hero will end by ruining everything until he is the sole master of the universe. Such in brief is the moral picture, if not of human life, at least of the secret pretensions of the heart of every civilized man.<sup>22</sup>

In aspiring to great wealth, Rousseau's Fool accepts the principle of luxury; in seeking to have others become his subjects and slaves, and thereby accord him a position of preeminence, he embraces the principle of "civility" in order to realize, *per impossibile*, the object of his *amour-propre*; and in attempting to augment his power, even to the point of becoming "the sole master of the universe," he adopts the principle of enlightenment (which, following Bacon's dictum, connects knowledge with power, and omniscience with omnipotence). Thus Rousseau's Fool paradigmatically, and consummately, embodies the three basic principles of acquisitiveness; but in his insatiable quest — for absolute knowledge, preferential esteem and wealth — he "will end by ruining everything."

Now assuming that this is as much a portrait of the acquisitive society as of the acquisitive individual, it constitutes half of Rousseau's illuminatory experience, with the other half comprising a vision of the non-acquisitive society and individual ("another world, another man") — whose

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22. *Discourse on Inequality*, *loc. cit.*, p. 195.

guiding principles of ignorance, innocence and poverty were incorporated in Rousseau's prayer. However, Rousseau may have been rather presumptuous in thinking that "the host of great truths," which have been reduced to these guiding principles and their contraries and which he apprehended under his Bodhi tree, were a unique revelation, an inspiration reserved to him alone. For much the same analysis of these sets of contrary principles can be found in a fairy tale, "The Fisherman and His Wife" (see Appendix); consequently, at least the cognitive dimension of Rousseau's illuminatory experience replicates what has long been a part of folk wisdom.

Briefly, Ilsebil, the fisherman's wife, displays each of the three forms of acquisitiveness: instead of being content with the nice cottage and garden which could satisfy "every possible (i.e., essential) *need*," she desires "to live in a big castle with everything one could *wish* for"; instead of cultivating self-reliance, she wants to be esteemed by others and so desires to be King, then Emperor and even Pope; and finally, instead of accepting the limitations of human understanding and power, she insists on becoming Lord of the Universe, in order "to cause the sun and moon to set and rise." Of course, like Rousseau's Fool, she ends by ruining everything; the magic flounder, who had granted Ilsebil's previous boons, refuses to make her Lord of the Universe and sends her (and her husband) back to the miserable little hovel. Thus, her pattern of inordinate desires yields misery, whereas her husband realized that they could "live very happily in the nice cottage." This is, he implicitly embraces the principles of ignorance, innocence and poverty as "the only goods that can give us happiness."

In addition, the increasingly disturbed conditions of sea and sky which accompany each of Ilsebil's new demands reveals the increasing displeasure of the trans-human order (frequently symbolized by nature in fairy tales) at her insatiable acquisitiveness. Rousseau likewise implies that the principles of acquisitiveness, from which we should seek deliverance, are anything but "precious in God's sight."

As for Ilsebil's husband, though he recognizes that the cottage symbolizes the material, psychological and epistemic

conditions which are optimal, and though with the fulfillment of his wife's escalating desires he questions whether she is really "better off," he nevertheless does her bidding: despite his better judgment and against his will, he becomes part of the process of insatiable acquisitiveness and suffers the same fate as Ilsebil. But insofar as the principles of acquisitiveness dominate a given society, even those who would much prefer to live in accordance with the contrary principles of ignorance, innocence and poverty will find it difficult, if not impossible, to do so. And this is why anyone who shares the fisherman's understanding but who lives in an acquisitive society is not much better off than Rousseau's Fool: the non-fool says the prayer "with bitterness of heart"; Rousseau's Fool rejects the prayer altogether; but the practical consequences are the same — universal misery. It is surely a bitter prayer.

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## Appendix

### *The Fisherman and His Wife (from Grimm's Fairy Tales)*

There was once a fisherman who lived with his wife in a miserable little hovel close to the sea. He went to fish every day, and he fished and fished, and at last one day as he was sitting looking deep down into the shining water, he felt something on his line. When he hauled it up, there was a big flounder on the end of the line.

The flounder said to him, "Listen, fisherman, I beg you not to kill me. I am no common flounder. I am an enchanted prince! What good will it do you to kill me? I shan't be good to eat. Put me back into the water and leave me to swim about."

"Ho! Ho!" said the fisherman. "You need not make so many words about it. I am quite ready to put back a flounder that can talk." And so saying, he put back the flounder into the shining water and it sank down to the bottom, leaving a streak of blood behind it. Then the fisherman got up and went back to his wife in the hovel.

"Husband," she said, "have you caught anything today?"

"No," said the man. "All I caught was one flounder. And he said he was an enchanted prince, so I put him back into the water."

"Did you not wish for anything then?" asked the good wife.

"No," said the man. "What was there to wish for?"

"Alas," said his wife, "isn't it bad enough always to live in this wretched hovel? You might at least have wished for a nice clean cottage. Go back and call him! Tell him I want a pretty cottage. He will surely give us that."

"Alas," said the man, "what am I to go back there for?"

"Well," said the woman, "it was you who caught him and let him go again. He will certainly do that for you. Be off now."

The man was still not very willing to go, but he did not want to vex his wife and at last he went back to the sea.



He found the sea no longer bright and shining, but dull and green. He stood by it and said:

"Flounder, flounder in the sea,  
Prythee, hearken unto me:  
My wife, Ilsebil, must have her own will,  
And sends me to beg a boon of thee."

The flounder came swimming up and said. "Well, what do you want?"

"Alas," said the man, "I had to call you, for my wife said I ought to have wished for something as I caught you. She doesn't want to live in our miserable hovel any longer. She wants a pretty cottage."

"Go home again then," said the flounder. "She has her wish fully."

The man went home and found his wife no longer in the old hut, but a pretty little cottage stood in its place and his wife was sitting on a bench by the door.

She took him by the hand and said, "Come and look in here. Isn't this much better?"

They went inside and found a pretty sitting room, a bedroom with a bed in it, a kitchen, and a larder furnished with everything of the best in tin and brass and every possible need. Outside there was a little yard with chickens and ducks and a little garden full of vegetables and fruit.

"Look!" said the woman. "Is not this nice?"

"Yes," said the man, "and so let it remain. We can live here very happily."

"We will see about that," said the woman. With that they ate something and went to bed.

Everything went well for a week or more, and then the wife said, "Listen, husband, this cottage is too cramped and the garden is too small. The flounder could have given us a bigger house. I want to live in a big stone castle. Go to the flounder and tell him to give us a castle."

"Alas, wife," said the man, "the cottage is good enough for us. What should we do with a castle?"

"Never mind," said his wife. "You just go to the flounder and he will manage it."

"No, wife," said the man. "The flounder gave us the cottage. I don't want to go back. As likely as not he'll be angry."

"Go, all the same," said the woman. "He can do it easily enough and willingly into the bargain. Just go!"

The man's heart was heavy and he was very unwilling to go. He said to himself, "It's not right." But at last he went. He found the sea was no longer green: it was still calm, but dark violet and gray. He stood by it and said:

"Flounder, flounder in the sea,  
Prythee, hearken unto me:  
My wife, Ilsebil, must have her own will,  
And sends me to beg a boon of thee."

"Now what do you want?" said the flounder.

"Alas," said the man, half scared, "my wife wants a big stone castle."

"Go home again," said the flounder. "She is standing at the door of it."

Then the man went away thinking he would find no house; but when he got back he found a great stone palace, and his wife was standing at the top of the steps waiting to go in. She took him by the hand and said, "Come in with me."

With that they went in and found a great hall paved with marble slabs, and numbers of servants in attendance who opened the great doors for them. The walls were hung with beautiful tapestries and the rooms were furnished with golden chairs and tables, while rich carpets covered the floors and crystal chandeliers hung from the ceilings. The tables groaned under every kind of delicate food and the most costly wines. Outside the house there was a great courtyard, with stables for horses and cows, and many fine carriages. Beyond this there was a great garden filled with the loveliest flowers and fine fruit trees. There was also a park half a mile long, and in it were stags and hinds and hares, and everything that one could wish for.

"Now," said the woman, "is not this worth having?"

"Oh, yes," said the man, "and so let it remain. We will live in this beautiful palace and be content."

"We will think about that," said his wife, "and sleep upon it."

With that they went to bed.

Next morning the wife woke up first. Day was just dawning, and from her bed she could see the beautiful country around her. Her husband was still asleep, but she pushed him with her elbow and said, "Husband, get up and peep out of the window. See here, now, could we not be King over all this land? Go to the flounder. We will be King."

"Alas, wife," said the man, "why should we be King? I don't want to be King."

"Ah," said his wife, "if you will not be King, I will. Go to the flounder. I will be King."

"Alas, wife," said the man, "why do you want to be King? I don't want to ask the flounder."

"Why not?" said the woman. "Go you must. I insist I will be King."

So the man went, but he was quite sad because his wife would be King.

"It is not right," he said. "It is not right."

When he reached the sea, he found it dark, gray, and rough, and evil-smelling. He stood there and said:

"Flounder, flounder in the sea,  
Prythee, hearken unto me:  
My wife, Ilsebil, must have her own will,  
And sends me to beg a boon of thee."

"Now what does she want?" said the flounder.

"Alas," said the man, "she wants to be King now."

"Go back. She is King already," said the flounder.

So the man went back, and when he reached the palace he found that it had grown much larger and a great tower had been added with handsome decorations. There was a sentry at the door and numbers of soldiers were playing drums and trumpets. As soon as he got inside the house he found everything was marble and gold, and the hangings were of velvet with great golden tassels. The doors of the salon were thrown wide open, and he saw the whole court assembled. His wife was sitting on a lofty throne of gold and diamonds. She wore a golden crown and carried in one hand a scepter of

pure gold. On each side of her stood her ladies in a long row, every one a head shorter than the next.

He stood before her and said, "Alas, wife, are you now King?"

"Yes," she said. "Now I am King."

He stood looking at her for some time, and then he said, "Ah, wife, it is a fine thing for you to be King. Now we will not wish to be anything more."

"No, husband," she answered, quite uneasily, "I find that time hangs very heavy on my hands. I can't bear it any longer. Go back to the flounder. King I am, but I must also be Emperor."

"Alas, wife," said the man, "why do you now want to be Emperor?"

"Husband," she answered, "go to the flounder. Emperor I will be."

"Alas, wife," said the man, "Emperor he can't make you, and I won't ask him. There is only one emperor in the country, and Emperor the flounder cannot make you. That he can't."

"What?" said the woman. "I am King, and you are but my husband. To him you must go and that right quickly. If he can make a king, he can also make an emperor. Emperor I will be, so go quickly."

He had to go, but he was quite frightened. And as he went he thought, "This won't end well. Emperor is too shameless. The flounder will make an end of the whole thing."

With that he came to the sea, but now he found it quite black and heaving up from below in great waves. It tossed to and fro and a sharp wind blew over it, and the man trembled. So he stood there and said:

"Flounder, flounder in the sea,  
Prythee, hearken unto me:  
My wife, Ilsebil, must have her own will,  
And sends me to beg a boon of thee."

"What does she want now?" said the flounder.

"Alas," he said, "my wife wants to be Emperor."

"Go back," said the flounder. "She is Emperor."

So the man went back, and when he got to the door he found that the whole palace was made of polished marble, with alabaster figures and golden decorations. Soldiers marched up and down before the doors, blowing their trumpets and beating their drums. Inside the palace, counts, barons, and dukes walked about as attendants, and they opened to him the doors, which were of pure gold.

He went in and saw his wife sitting on a huge throne made of solid gold. It was at least two miles high. She had on her head a great golden crown set with diamonds three yards high. In one hand she held the scepter, and in the other the orb of empire. On each side of her stood the gentlemen-at-arms in two rows, each one a little smaller than the other, from giants two miles high down to the tiniest dwarf no bigger than my little finger. She was surrounded by princes and dukes.

Her husband stood still and said, "Wife, are you now Emperor?"

"Yes," said she. "Now I am Emperor."

Then he look at her for some time and said, "Alas, wife, how much better off are you for being Emperor?"

"Husband," she said, "what are you standing there for? Now I am Emperor, I mean to be Pope! Go back to the flounder."

"Alas, wife," said the man, "what won't you want next? Pope you cannot be. There is only one Pope in Christendom. That's more than the flounder can do."

"Husband," she said, "Pope I will be, so go at once! I must be Pope this very day."

"No wife," he said, "I dare not tell him. It's no good. It's too monstrous altogether. The flounder cannot make you Pope."

"Husband," said the woman, "don't talk nonsense. If he can make an emperor, he can make a pope. Go immediately. I am Emperor, and you are but my husband, and you must obey."

So he was frightened and went, but he was quite dazed. He shivered and shook and his knees trembled.

A great wind arose over the land, the clouds flew across the sky, and it grew as dark as night. The leaves fell from the

trees, and the water foamed and dashed upon the shore. In the distance the ships were being tossed to and fro on the waves, and he heard them firing signals of distress. There was still a little patch of blue in the sky among the dark clouds, but towards the south they were red and heavy, as in a bad storm. In despair, he stood and said:

"Flounder, flounder in the sea,  
Prythee, hearken unto me:  
My wife, Ilsebil, must have her own will,  
And sends me to beg a boon of thee."

"Now what does she want?" said the flounder.

"Alas," said the man, "she wants to be Pope!"

"Go back. Pope she is," said the flounder.

So back he went, and he found a great church surrounded with palaces. He pressed through the crowd, and inside he found thousands and thousands of lights. And his wife, entirely clad in gold, was sitting on a still higher throne with three golden crowns upon her head, and she was surrounded with priestly state. On each side of her were two rows of candles, from the biggest as thick as a tower down to the tiniest little taper. Kings and emperors were on their knees before her, kissing her shoe.

"Wife," said the man, looking at her, "are you now the Pope?"

"Yes," she said. "Now I am Pope."

So there he stood gazing at her, and it was like looking at a shining sun.

"Alas," he said, "are you better off for being Pope?"

At first she sat as still as a post, without stirring. Then he said, "Now, wife, be content with being Pope. Higher you cannot go."

"I will think about that," said the woman, and with that they both went to bed. Still she was not content and could not sleep for her inordinate desires. The man slept well and soundly, for he had walked about a great deal in the day. But his wife could think of nothing but what further grandeur she could demand. When the dawn reddened the sky she raised herself up in bed and looked out of the window, and when she saw the sun rise she said, "Ha! Can I not cause the

sun and the moon to rise? Husband!" she cried, digging her elbow into his side, "wake up and go to the flounder. I will be Lord of the Universe."

Her husband, who was still more than half asleep, was so shocked that he fell out of bed. He thought he must have heard wrong. He rubbed his eyes and said, "Alas, wife, what did you say?"

"Husband," she said, "if I cannot be Lord of the Universe, and cause the sun and moon to set and rise, I shall not be able to bear it. I shall never have another happy moment."

She looked at him so wildly that it caused a shudder to run through him.

"Alas, wife," he said, falling on his knees before her. "The flounder can't do that. Emperor and Pope he can make, but this is indeed beyond him. I pray you, control yourself and remain Pope."

Then she flew into a terrible rage. Her hair stood on end. She kicked him and screamed, "I won't bear it any longer. Now go!"

Then he pulled on his trousers and tore away like a madman. Such a storm was raging that he could hardly keep his feet. Houses and trees quivered and swayed, and mountains trembled, and the rocks rolled into the sea. The sky was pitchy black. It thundered and lightened, and the sea ran in black waves mountains high, crested with white foam. He shrieked out, but could hardly make himself heard:

"Flounder, flounder in the sea,  
Prythee, hearken unto me:  
My wife, Ilsebil, must have her own will,  
And sends me to beg a boon of thee."

"Now what does she want?" asked the flounder.

"Alas," he said, "she wants to be Lord of the Universe."

"Now she must go back to her old hovel," said the flounder, "and there she is!" So there they are to this very day.