The Newest Animal

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John Everyman stood quite still and tried to decide where he was and how he came to be there. The mist hung in an impenetrable wall around him, blotting out everything except a small section of pavement beneath his feet. He felt that he should not have come out into this impossible fog. He should have stayed at home or at the office or wherever he had been before blundering out. That was another matter that bothered him. He could not seem to remember whether he was on his way home from the office or on his way to the office from home.

John Everyman glared at the mist which eddied around him in opaque suspension. He felt there was no excuse for its giving him so much trouble. As his fury mounted, he began to condemn the mist to eternal damnation; but he had no sooner started than the mists rolled back. Before him was a wide marble stairway which went upward for what seemed about a city block. At the top stood a large stone building.

John Everyman was amazed. He thought that he knew the city well, but here was something he had not seen. He started up the steps, and as he climbed he studied the building at the top. It was designed along classical lines with large marble columns across the front and a low but massive stone gable above. But there was something wrong. The columns were twisted in various ways and some leaned at a very noticeable angle. The gable above was askew, and the stones were ill-fitting and irregularly placed.

John Everyman climbed the last of the steps and went to a huge wooden door, which was placed behind the two columns nearest the center. He knocked on the door and it swung slowly inward.

A voice said, “Enter, John Everyman.”

He went in. Just inside the door were two men dressed in long white robes. Arched across the chest of the robes were bright blue letters. The lettering on one of the men’s robes spelled out HONOURABLE DIRECTOR; the other, HONOURABLE OVERSEER.

John Everyman said, “Pardon me, but the weather outside....”

The Director said, “Yes, there is always the mist when you come here, isn’t there?”

“Oh, but I’ve never been here before.”

“Oh yes, many times, John Everyman. You see, this is
the Temple of Human Judgment to which everyone comes quite often during his lifetime."

"Well, if you say so, Mr. Director. But I don’t seem to remember it."

"Oh, your memory will be all right now." The Director turned to the Overseer and said, "Honourable Overseer, take John Everyman to the preparation room."

The Overseer said, "Yes, Honourable Director. This way, John Everyman."

The Overseer led the way to a small door. Then he said, "You will find everything you need in here. When you are ready, you may go right on through the other door into the courtroom."

John Everyman went into the room. It was small and had no furniture except a table, which stood in the center. On the table were a black robe and a long, white wig. He looked at the robe. There was a label sewn on the inside which read: "Property of John Everyman, Self-Appointed Judge of His Fellowmen." He put on the robe and the wig and went through the other door.

John Everyman found himself looking out over a vast courtroom from behind a high judge's bench. There was a gavel lying on the heavy, scarred wood. He picked it up and rapped the bench. A door to the left opened and a short, fat man came out and walked toward the bench. He looked up nervously.

John Everyman said, "State your name and business to the court."

The short, fat man said, "I am Rodney Higbee, your employer at the offices of Higbee and Higbee, your Honour."

John Everyman said, "Ah yes, Mr. Higbee. Let me see now. I believe I have judged you an incompetent nincompoop, incapable of directing the business processes of a Parchesi game, much less those of a large office. Yes. That is what I have judged. So be it."

The short, fat man said, "Yes, your Honour," and returned to the door on the left.

John Everyman rapped again. A well-dressed woman came out of the door and walked to the bench. She looked up and smiled.

John Everyman said, "State your name and business to the court."

The woman said, "My name is Mrs. John Everyman, your Honour, and my business should be self-explanatory."
John Everyman said, "Don't be flippant with the court, Madam."

"I'm sorry, your Honour, but I don't think you have a right to. . . ."

"Silence, Madam! Surely you weren't about to suggest an abridgement of my right to judge. The court will hear no more of that. Let us get on with the case. Your case, Madam, is very interesting. I had previously judged you in a different light. But finally I have judged that you are extravagant, that you have an unnecessarily high esteem for your mother, that you are overly fond of inviting the Joneses over for dinner, and that you have a misplaced sense of humor. These things I have judged. So be it."

The woman turned and walked back toward the door.

John Everyman rapped again and a young man wearing a cab driver's cap came up to the bench.

John Everyman said, "State you name and business to the court."

The young man said, "I'm Horace Beasley, your Honour. I'm the cab driver that beat you to a parking place downtown a couple of days back."

John Everyman said, "Ah yes, I didn't have much trouble deciding your case. I have judged you to be the offspring of a canine and a definite menace to the safety of the public. That is what I have judged. So be it."

John Everyman walked back into the little room and replaced the robe and wig on the table. He went out into the hall where the Director and the Overseer were waiting.

The Director said, "Ah, John Everyman, you have finished."

"Yes, Mr. Director."

John Everyman looked around the hall. The walls were crooked and the ceiling sloped in odd contours. He said, "Mr. Director, I would like to ask, if you don't mind, why it is that this building, which is so great and elaborate and expensive, seems to be built so haphazardly."

The Director said, "Well, you see, John Everyman, this building wasn't included in the original architectural plan of things. It is a by-product of man's power to reason, if you see what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Well, no matter. Anyway this building is still under construction, you might say."

"I see."

"Do you see this block which is going to be the base of
a new column? In time it will reach to the ceiling."
"Yes, I see it, Mr. Director, and if you don't mind my saying so, it seems a bit warped."
"Precisely. This block was placed while you were presiding on the bench."
"I think it is very poor workmanship, Mr. Director."
"Yes, the near corner is warped toward opinion and the far corner leans toward bigotry and lack of consideration."
"I'm not sure I understand."
"Probably not. The explanation is understood by very few of those who come here."
"But I'm sure it must all be very interesting."
"Yes, interesting and important too, John Everyman."
"Oh yes. Important, of course. Perhaps the next time I come here we can talk it over again. Then, perhaps, I'll understand."
"Perhaps."
"Good-bye, Mr. Director."
"Good-bye, John Everyman."

The Director walked over to where the Overseer was leaning against a column. He said, "Honourable Overseer, do you think it possible that the Great One could have—well, I don't know exactly how to phrase it—could have, shall we say, erred just a bit?"

The Overseer said, "You have a very interesting question, Honourable Director. I would hesitate to think that the Great One could have—as you say—erred, and yet..."

"Precisely. This newest animal starts one to wondering, does he not?"