

THE ANGEL THAT TROUBLED THE WATERS

(A short play by Thornton Wilder)

The Pool — A vast gray hall with a hole in the ceiling open to the sky. Broad stone steps lead up from the water on its four sides. The water is continuously restless and throws blue reflections upon the walls. The sick, the blind and the malformed are lying on the steps. The long stretches of silence and despair are broken from time to time when one or another groans and turns in his rags, or raises a fretful wail or a sudden cry of exasperation at long continued pain. A door leads out upon the porch where the attendants of the sick are playing at dice, waiting for the call to fling their masters into the water when the angel of healing stirs the pool. Beyond the porch there is a glimpse of the fierce sunlight and the empty streets of an oriental noonday.

Suddenly the ANGEL appears upon the top step. His face and robe shine with a colour that is both silver and gold, and the wings of blue and green, tipped with rose, shimmer in the tremulous light. He walks slowly down among the shapeless sleepers and stands gazing into the water that already trembles in anticipation of its virtue.

(A new invalid enters.)

THE NEWCOMER

Come, long-expected love. Come, long-expected love. Let the sacred finger and the sacred breath stir up the pool. Here on the lowest step I wait with festering limbs, with my heart in pain. Free me, long-expected love, from this old burden. Since I cannot stay, since I must return into the city, come now, renewal, come, release.

(Another invalid wakes suddenly out of a nightmare, calling: "The Angel! The Angel has come. I am cured." He flings himself into the pool, splashing his companions. They come to life and gaze eagerly at the water. They hang over the brink and several slide in. Then a great cry of derision rises: "The fool! Fool! His nightmare again. Beat him! Drive him out into the porch." The mistaken invalid and his dupes drag themselves out of the water and lie dripping disconsolately upon the steps.)

THE MISTAKEN INVALID

I dreamt that an angel stood by me and that at last I should be free of this hateful place and its company. Better a mistake and this jeering than an opportunity lost.

(He sees the NEWCOMER beside him and turns on him plaintively.)

Aie! You have no right to be here, at all events. You are able to walk about. You pass your days in the city. You come here only at great intervals, and it may be that by some unlucky chance you might be the first one to see the sign. You would rush into the water and a cure would be wasted. You are yourself a physician. You have restored my own children. Go back to your work and leave these miracles to us who need them.

THE NEWCOMER

(Ignoring him; under his breath.)

My work grows faint. Heal me, long-expected Love; heal me that I may continue. Renewal, release; let me begin again without this fault that bears me down.

THE MISTAKEN INVALID

I shall sit here without ever lifting my eyes from the surface of the pool. I shall be the next. Many times, even since I have been here, many times the Angel has passed and has stirred the water, and hundreds have left the hall leaping and crying out with joy. I shall be the next.

THE ANGEL

(Kneels down on the lowest step and meditatively holds his finger poised above the shuddering water.)

Joy and fulfillment, completion, content, rest and release have been promised.

THE NEWCOMER

Come, long-expected Love.

THE ANGEL

(Without turning makes himself apparent to the NEWCOMER and addresses him.)

Draw back physician, this moment is not for you.

THE NEWCOMER

Angelic visitor, I pray thee, listen to my prayer.

THE ANGEL

Healing is not for you.

THE NEWCOMER

Surely, surely, the angels are wise. Surely, O, Prince, you are not deceived by my apparent wholeness. Your eyes can see the nets in which my wings are caught; the sin into which all my endeavours sink half-performed cannot be concealed from you.

THE ANGEL

I know.

THE NEWCOMER

It is no shame to boast to an Angel of what I might yet do in Love's service were I but freed from this bondage.

THE MISTAKEN INVALID

Surely the water is stirring strangely today! Surely I shall be whole.

THE ANGEL

I must make haste. Already the sky is afire with the gathering host, for it is the hour of the new song among us. The earth itself feels the preparation in the skies and attempts its hymn. Children born in this hour spend all their lives in a sharper longing for the perfection that awaits them.

THE NEWCOMER

Oh, in such an hour was I born, and doubly fearful to me is the flaw in my heart. Must I drag my shame, Prince and singer, all my days more bowed than my neighbour?

THE ANGEL

(Stands for a moment in silence.)

Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve. Draw back.

(He swiftly kneels and draws his finger through the water. The pool is presently astir with running ripples. They increase and a divine wind strikes the gay surface. The waves are flung upon the steps. The MISTAKEN MAN casts himself into the Pool, and the whole company lurches, rolls, or hobbles in. The servants rush in from the porch. Turmoil. Finally, the no longer MISTAKEN INVALID emerges and leaps joyfully up the steps. The rest, coughing and sighing, follow him. The ANGEL smiles for a moment and disappears.)

THE HEALED MAN

Look, my hand is new as a child's. Glory be to God! I have begun again. *(To the NEWCOMER.)* May you be the next, my brother. But come with me first, an hour only, to my home. My son is lost in dark thoughts. I—I do not understand him, and only you have ever lifted his mood. Only an hour... my daughter since her child has died, sits in the shadow. She will not listen to us...

THE END