

Pamfret and Peace

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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PAMFRET WAS HAPPY. TO BE BACK in the world again, to feel once more that old sense of incompleteness—what could be more delightful? He laughed aloud as he recollected how Satan had warned him that the earth might not prove so attractive after all.

For Pamfret was no ordinary mortal. In 1910 he had died, and as he had done some things and left undone some others, he had been sent with slight ceremony to the land of darkness. Of his existence there we have no knowledge, save that he found it somewhat darker and a great deal more interesting than he had imagined. Nor do we know the exact nature of the service he rendered the Prince; but it was an important one, and Satan rewarded him with ten years more of life. Pamfret was wildly grateful, and almost incurred the Prince's displeasure by his eagerness to return to the world above. Once there he forgot everything but the joy of mortality.

He was considerably surprised when he found that the world had gotten as far as 1970. Sixty years! Everything, of course, was changed. But he felt that just to be alive was enough. It was really very silly of Satan to give him that vial, he thought—as if there were any chance of his wishing to return before the ten years ended.

It was noon of his first day. As he walked along Fifth Avenue and noted the many changes and additions, the absence of old landmarks and the encroachments of commercialism, he experienced little of that feeling of unreality he had expected. After all, it was only natural that there should be changes. The world does not stand still. At Forty-second Street he stopped at the library, and felt a strange pleasure in renewing old acquaintances on its shelves. Two blocks farther on he was delighted to find that Sherry's had remained faithful to its old corner, and congratulated himself that he had not yet lunched.

He passed through the outer hall into the dining room on the left, intending to find a table near the orchestra, but found that the place formerly set aside for the musicians had been rearranged and furnished for diners. When he had found a seat and summoned a waiter, „Is there no orchestra?“ he asked.

The waiter looked surprised. „Certainly not.“

„Why certainly?“

„But it would cause disagreement. Some people like music and some do not. But Monsieur is jesting?“

Pamfret could see no joke. But at least they still had a menu. „Bring me some clams.“

„Yes, sir.“

„And some cold turkey with jelly.“

„Yes, sir.“

„And—have you any alligator pears?“

„No, sir.“

„Well, then Salad Macédoine, and a pot of coffee.“

„Yes, sir,“ and the waiter hurried away.

„That waiter has no imagination,“ thought Pamfret. „He had not a single suggestion to offer.“ And he leaned back in his chair the better to watch the crowd.

There was a curious air of calm about the room. Everyone was talking, but no one seemed at all interested in what anyone said. There was no animation, nothing of piquancy in either face or gesture. „What stupid people!“ said Pamfret to himself.

Seated at the next table were a man and a girl. „I don't care to go,“ the girl was saying. „I adore opera but I hate plays.“

„I have heard that this is a very good play, and I shall go,“ said the man.

„Very well, then I shall return home. Goodby,“ and she rose to go.

„Oh, are you finished?“ asked the man. „All right. Goodby.“

Pamfret was astonished. „The girl is pretty and the man is a fool,“ he declared; but the arrival of his waiter with a plate of clams put a stop to his soliloquy.

Three o'clock found Pamfret seated in the grandstand at the Polo Grounds. It was a day of glorious sunshine, and promised still more glorious sport. The old rivalry between New York and Chicago had been heightened by time, and the Cubs were even now battling with the Giants for first place. Pamfret felt a joyous

excitement. He turned to his nearest neighbor. „The Giants are really the stronger team, aren't they?“ he queried.

„That is a matter of opinion,“ replied his neighbor.

„Are you from Chicago?“

„No.“

Pamfret subsided.

At three-thirty the game was called. „Now there'll be something doing,“ thought Pamfret.

The first inning passed quickly. The play was snappy, but there were no runs made, and there was no applause. In the second inning Chicago's batters were soon disposed of. The first man up for New York drew a base on balls, and then—the next batter hit a triple to left, scoring the runner. The crowd was silent. Pamfret clapped his hands furiously.

An usher approached and handed Pamfret a printed card. Pamfret turned it over and read as follows:

INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONGRESS.
COMMITTEE ON ATHLETICS.

Rule 19. It shall be unlawful for a spectator at any athletic game to show preference to any contestant by any manner of applause or derision.

Pamfret was so bewildered that he forgot to watch the game. So that was the cause of this curious silence. He wondered what was the penalty, and decided, inasmuch as he was not disturbed further, that a warning was considered sufficient for a first offense.

Then he heard the crack of the bat against the ball, and looked just in time to see the little leather sphere bound against the left field fence and roll back onto the field. The runner tore wildly around the bases, while the crowd uttered not a sound. On past second he dashed, and rounded third just as the ball was being returned by the fielder. He flew down the home stretch with the speed of an arrow, and reached the plate the merest fraction of a second before the ball landed in the catcher's mitt.

„Out!“ called the umpire.

„Robber!“ shrieked Pamfret. „Thief! Robber!“

The crowd gazed at Pamfret in dismay. Again the usher approached and handed him a card. Pamfret, partially realizing what he had done, took it in a rather shamefaced manner, and read:

INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONGRESS.
COMMITTEE ON ATHLETICS.

Rule 26. It shall be unlawful for a spectator at any athletic game to show either approval or disapproval of any decision of the umpire or referee. Penalty: ejection from the grounds.

A silver gong sounded somewhere under the grandstand. Pamfret looked up. The entire mass of spectators was standing, each with bowed head and arm raised, pointing with outstretched finger to the outer gates. On the field each player had stopped still in his position and turned to point. Pamfret was confused; he wanted to laugh; but the air of solemnity about the whole proceeding forbade it. There could be no doubt about the meaning of this universal gesture, and he descended from the grandstand and started across the field toward the gates. As he arrived there, he turned and looked back. Thirty thousand fingers were pointing at him in a sort of contemptuous scorn. As he passed through the gates he heard the silver gong ring out as before.

„What the devil,“ he thought, as he boarded a downtown car, „is the world coming to? Or rather, what has the world come to? I don't believe I'm going to have such a good time after all“; and he sighed for the day when a close decision meant tears and threats unsurpassed even in Hell.

He began to long for someone to talk to—loneliness assailed him. A baby in the arms of a woman opposite him began to cry, and on a signal from the conductor the woman arose and left the car at the next corner. The man seated next to him—an awkward-looking man with a beard—was engaged in conversation with his neighbor on the other side. „The English,“ he was saying, „are a wonderful people.“

„The Americans,“ replied the other, „are a very wonderful people.“

„The English,“ said the bearded man, „are great artists.“

„The Americans are a race of geniuses.“

„The British Empire is indissoluble.“

„America is the Land of Freedom.“

„England is the greatest country in the world.“

„Rule 142,“ said the American, calmly. „No comparisons allowed in an argument.“

„I beg your pardon,“ said the Englishman.

But Pamfret was already on his feet. He had always hated the English. „Argument!“ he shouted. „Argument! Do you call that an argument? Tell him he lies!“

„Rules 207, 216, and 349,“ said the Englishman and American in unison. „No contradictions, no personalities, and no loud talking.“

The conductor touched Pamfret on the arm and signalled him to leave the car. Pamfret's first impulse was to throw him through a window; this continual restraint was becoming irksome. But he thought better of it, and besides, they had reached Sixty-sixth Street. He alighted at the next corner, and started south on Central Park West.

At Sixty-fifth Street was a restaurant, and he stopped for dinner. The room was crowded; but finally Pamfret found a table over against the wall, sat down and called a waiter, who seemed a little worried as he caught sight of him.

„Table d'hôte?“ asked Pamfret.

„Yes, sir.“

„Very well. Make the selection yourself,“ and the waiter hurried away, still with the worried look on his face.

A man and woman entered the restaurant and walked straight to the table where Pamfret was sitting. They seemed surprised on seeing him seated there,

looked around in a disconcerted manner, and finally sat down on a small divan placed against the wall. Pamfret thought he understood. He got up from his chair and bowed to the man.

„I beg your pardon, sir, but is this your table?“

The man nodded. „Yes—that is, we—we had it reserved,“ he answered.

„Well, then,“ said Pamfret, „I wouldn't think of appropriating it. The waiter should have told me. Of course you will take it?“

„But surely you know that would be against the law,“ exclaimed the other, horrified. „We couldn't.“

„But that is exactly what I do not know,“ said Pamfret. „At least,“ he added, „I trust you will allow me to share it with you?“

The man looked at the woman inquiringly. She nodded. Pamfret found another chair, and all three sat down at the table together. The waiter appeared with a plate of soup, and seeming relieved to find the couple seated, took their order.

„I am surprised—“ began the man.

„Of course you are,“ interrupted Pamfret. „But I really don't know the first thing about these beastly—these laws. The truth is—I have lived nearly all my life in China, where everything is different.“

„But I thought the peace laws were universal.“

„They are, they are,“ Pamfret replied hastily. „But I was alone most of the time—er—scientific explorations, you know. Besides they do this sort of thing better in China. There is no—“

„Rule 142. No comparisons,“ interrupted the woman.

There was silence for a while. Finally Pamfret tried again.

„Those broiled mushrooms were delicious,“ he declared. „Don't you think so?“

„I beg your pardon, but I'm afraid I can't answer you,“ replied the man. „Rule 207, you know. No contradictions.“

Pamfret was becoming desperate. He had given his head so many bumps against this immovable wall of Peace that he was unable even to think. Silence, he decided, was his only refuge.

As the dessert came on he heaved a sigh of relief, and foolishly ventured a question.

„You know,“ he said, „I have been out of the world for a number of years, and I hope you won't mind if I ask you a question. How long has this peace thing been in power?“

„Really,“ answered the man, „you amaze me. Discussion of history is strictly forbidden.“

Pamfret could stand it no longer. He threw a bill on the table; took up his hat and stick and rushed wildly out of the restaurant.

A car was passing the door. Pamfret ran to the next corner ahead of it and waved his cane at the motorman. The car went by without stopping, and as it passed the conductor tossed a card out of the window. It fell on the pavement at Pamfret's feet. He picked it up and read:

INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONGRESS.
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION.

Rule 96. The motorman or engineer of a public vehicle shall ignore signals to stop for passengers, if such signals are boisterous or agitated, or made in any but a thoroughly peaceful manner.

Pamfret tore the card in a dozen pieces. „Well, of all the—“ he began, then he was silent. He was afraid to talk even to himself where there was a chance of being overheard. He wanted to be alone, to have time to consider this strange, this impossible world to which he had been so eager to return. He started to walk downtown, intending to get a room in the first hotel he saw.

At Sixty-first Street he noticed a magnificent white marble building set back some fifty feet from the street, facing Central Park. It was flanked by four minarets, each one bearing at the top a marble group representing a winged angel destroying a warrior's sword. Over the entrance, in heavy raised letters, was the inscription HALL OF PEACE.

„So this is where they do it,“ thought Pamfret, as he gazed at the inscription. „I'd like to blow the d—d thing up.“ Then he noticed that the main doors were open, and passing over the outer flagstones with an odd feeling of fear, he went inside.

The interior was very similar to that of a cathedral, with the exception that there were no stained glass windows. Immense columns of marble rose on every side, while the vaulted roof seemed to reach to the skies. At the farther end was an altar, on which was set the figure of the winged angel destroying the warrior's sword. The group was of ebony. Below, on the pedestal, were inscribed the words of the Poet:

*„And therefore, to our weaker view,
O'erlaid with black, staid Wisdom's hue.“*

Around the altar rail below the figures men and women were kneeling. Pamfret, as he gazed, felt a feeling of mingled disgust and awe sweep over him. „Of course,“ he said to himself, „it is really very funny. But somehow it impresses one.“ And he turned to leave.

A half-hour later found him seated in his room at the Hotel Pax, reading a book. He had found it lying on the table when he entered the room. It was covered in black leather and lettered in gold with the title, *Book of Peace*. „By all the Gods!“ exclaimed Pamfret. „Here's their bible!“

It was little more than a book of rules, with photographs and biographies of the founders of the great Congress and a short exposition of the philosophy of the new World Religion. Everything, it seemed, was under the domination of this all-powerful Congress.

Pamfret, mentally disturbed as he was, found a great deal of amusement in the rules of the Committee on Courtship, while he found that the Committee on Domesticity had made the family a farce and the home a tomb. The Committee on Sleep—but Pamfret could go no further. He was completely exhausted. His head fell forward till his chin rested on his breast. Awakening with a start, he undressed and went to bed.

He dreamed of Peace, Peace with the body of an angel and a horrible grinning skull for a head. Through rivers and valleys, over steep hills and deep bogs and

marshes this frightful thing pursued him, until at last he saw before him in the middle of a desert, the beautiful Hall of Peace. With a final burst of strength he reached the portal, and entering the marble vault, approached the altar and knelt before it. The ebony angel on the pedestal put together the pieces of the broken sword of the warrior, and raised it to strike. Pamfret raised his arm to ward off the blow; and just as the sword was descending with the speed of lightning, he awoke.

Someone was knocking on the door of his room. Pamfret, still shaking with the fear of his dream, called out, „Who is it?“

„In the name of the International Peace Congress and the Committee on Sleep, I ask that this door be opened,“ came a voice.

„What the devil have I done now?“ thought Pamfret. „Disturbed the peace of my bedcovers, I suppose.“

„In the name of the International Peace—“ began the voice again.

„Oh, shut up!“ said Pamfret under his breath, and crossed to the door and opened it. „What do you want?“ he demanded.

The intruder eyed Pamfret serenely. He was dressed in white from head to foot, with a silver shield bearing the symbol of the angel and warrior on his breast. On his cap in gold letters was the word „PEACE.“

„What do you want?“ Pamfret repeated.

„You were talking in your sleep,“ answered the Man in White. „Violation of Rule 34. Come.“

„Come where?“ asked Pamfret.

„You are pretending.“ But noting the blank look on Pamfret’s face, he added, „To the Hospital for Talkers and Snorers.“

„My God!“ exclaimed Pamfret, and burst out laughing. „You don’t mean to say that—“

„Ignorance is no excuse,“ the Man in White interrupted.

„But I have to dress.“

„Well, I’ll wait outside. You have five minutes.“

Pamfret walked over to the chair by the window and sat down. He would have liked to have had time to think it all over, this grotesque, mad world that seemed to have lost its senses since he had left it sixty years before. As the scenes and events of the day passed through his mind he knew not whether to laugh or cry. Of course it was all very ludicrous, but—

„Time is up,“ called the Man in White through the door.

Pamfret crossed over to the closet where his coat was hanging and took from the inside pocket a small vial filled with a green liquid. Then he lay down on the bed and drank the liquid to the last drop. „Satan knew what he was about, after all,“ he murmured, and closed his eyes.

When the Man in White entered, the room was empty.

