The State of Wrath

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The man I wished to punish had already returned my money. This put me in a difficulty. While he retained it, I could explain precisely what justice required; after he gave it back, my requirements became less definite, though no less pressing. I wanted him to understand. He said that he understood. I wanted him to acknowledge the wrong. He acknowledged it. Something was still missing, and I began to suspect that he would have to be unhappy before I could tell him what it was.

My landlord had charged me for replacing a lock which had ceased to turn. I had reported its stiffness twice. He said, in the presence of another lodger, that people were careless with things they did not own. When I reminded him of my reports, he repeated that a lock did not break of itself. I paid, since I needed a door that would lock, and disputed the charge. The locksmith subsequently showed him the worn part. My landlord then returned the money and, before the same lodger, said that he had blamed me unfairly. He made no excuse. I had prepared for several excuses and was left with nothing to answer.

I received the correction civilly. Anyone present might have supposed that I had borne the original offense with considerable restraint. Indeed, I was pleased that the lodger should witness my restraint; he had now seen us both under unfavorable conditions. My landlord had been unjust, whereas I had merely found the consequences of his injustice insufficiently disagreeable to him. The money lay in my hand. I counted it, although I had no reason to doubt the amount.

There had been a wrong. I insist upon this, partly because it is true and partly because I have discovered how much can be sheltered behind a true statement. Anger had helped me resist a false charge. Without it I might have paid and called my silence peace, while privately adding the payment to an account of grievances. But he had now withdrawn the charge and corrected

the accusation. My anger, which had known what to do while he refused to listen, now had to find employment after obtaining what I had demanded.

It found employment readily enough. A man who could accuse a tenant without inquiry must have done so before; the ease of his apology might indicate practice; perhaps the locksmith's evidence had merely made further resistance inconvenient. These possibilities were not absurd. Neither were they things I knew. I gave them the attention usually reserved for evidence and gave the evidence the attention usually reserved for an interruption.

We readily recognize wrath when a man breaks what he will afterward have to purchase. The quieter forms do not oblige him to visit a shop. He can retain his furniture and lose the distinction between what happened and what would be gratifying to believe. I remembered my landlord's words exactly. I could reproduce the pause before he said them, the position of his hand, even the lodger's movement toward the stairs. I was less exact about the apology. It was brief, and there seemed little to be gained by dwelling on it.

I do not think the difference between anger and wrath can be settled by the volume of a voice. A loud protest may have a definite purpose and cease when its purpose is achieved. A patient man may require another person's guilt to remain available for years. Nor does the possession of reasons settle the matter. I had reasons. I went over them whenever my resentment weakened, rather as a man tends a fire which he complains is making the room unbearable.

What I desired from him exceeded the correction of his judgment. He had to know what it was to be spoken to as he had spoken to me. This seemed an excellent educational principle until I considered who would enjoy teaching it. I could imagine the lesson in detail: his embarrassment, my measured words, the lodger discovering whom he ought to respect. I found it harder to imagine an occasion on which my landlord learned the same thing kindly from someone else. That would have accomplished the instruction while depriving me of nearly everything I wanted from it.

The following morning I heard him laughing downstairs. I do not know what occasioned the laughter. For a moment it seemed to show that he had taken the matter lightly. Yet what length of unhappiness would have proved that he took it seriously? An hour would have been too little; a week would have been ridiculous. I had appointed myself to inspect a suffering for which I could prescribe no honest measure. Meanwhile, whatever had been said downstairs was apparently amusing. I stood at the top of the stairs, listening longer than I needed to.

One may be urged to forgive by a person who chiefly wants the conversation to become pleasant again. I distrust that convenience. An injury can leave losses which repayment does not reach, and an apology does not entitle its maker to renewed confidence on demand. My landlord's admission did not require me to enjoy his company. It required, at least, that I cease describing him to myself as a man who would never admit an error. I could remain wary of his judgments without denying that he had corrected this one.

But I had grown attached to the simpler description. It made future encounters easy. Whatever he did could be referred to what I already knew, and I need never again risk being surprised in his favor. There was a peculiar security in having been wronged: I could approach him bearing a fact against which his present conduct would always arrive too late. To relinquish this advantage did not mean forgetting the charge. It meant allowing the next thing he did to count, even if it counted against my settled opinion of him.

At the next payment of rent, he made an error in my favor while adding the charge for fuel. It was an ordinary error in addition, readily corrected. I saw it before he passed me the receipt. For a little while I considered the trouble he had caused me, which the returned money had not compensated. There had been the locksmith, the argument, the time spent attending to a charge that should never have been made. My calculations became remarkably generous as soon as I was to receive the compensation. I had previously asked him to confine himself to the actual bill.

I might have raised those expenses with him. Some could fairly have been discussed. But accepting an unnoticed mistake would have spared me the possibility that he might distinguish a just claim from an excessive one. I should receive my judgment in full, without having to state it. Then, if I regretted the concealment, his earlier conduct would be ready to explain why an otherwise honest man had found himself behaving dishonestly. He would have supplied both the money and the excuse.

I pointed out the error. He checked the sum, thanked me, and took back the receipt to alter it. I had not become less angry before speaking; I was not much less angry afterward. The correction had nevertheless been made. While he wrote, I considered telling him how easily I might have remained silent. He would then have owed me something beyond the rent. I watched him finish the figure instead.

He asked whether there was anything else. I looked once more at the receipt. The amount was correct. I said there was nothing else and paid it. He was already putting away the rent book when I left.