

*You can always count on a truly original writer to find new variations on a well-worn theme, to make exhausted soil bloom again. And when that original writer happens to be Robert Sheckley, you can count on something else too: the courage to tackle a theme most modern writers would consider completely played out by now—something like *Life After Death*, for instance, and someone like a nasty little character named Edmond Moran Archer, who is quite sure that nothing waits beyond the grave. So when he drops dead one day—bad heart, you know—and suddenly learns that everything waits beyond the grave, his first reaction is just what you'd expect: he begins to laugh out loud. And as it turns out, that's just about the last thing that a dead man should do.*

# WHAT A MAN BELIEVES

By **ROBERT SHECKLEY**

Illustrator: **HENRY C. PITZ**

YOU must forgive me," Mr. Archer said, his lips peeled back in a grin. "I shouldn't be smiling—smirking." He laughed out loud, high-pitched. "But it'll take a moment. I just hadn't expected—even on my death-bed—"

"Of course," the man behind the desk said. He smiled encouragingly. In the tremendous room there was only Mr. Archer, the desk he stood before, and the man who sat behind it. The ceiling of the room was a soaring, limitless arch as far above Archer's head

as the blue sky had seemed when he was alive. The walls were misty, far-away things. And in the center of it all, there he was—Edward Moran Archer.

"A very usual reaction, I assure you," the man behind the desk said, looking down at the lapels of his suit to give Archer time to straighten his face.

"We make allowances for it. Your present age of sophistication is wary of anthropomorphisms, such as this. People are no longer raised in the belief of a heaven and a hell; they view such

things as convenient fictions for the preachers and writers. Naturally, when they die and find themselves catapulted into the one or the other, the reaction is hysteria. Some cry. Others laugh."

"I see," Mr. Archer said. He had himself under control now, but a grin was still tugging at the corners of his broad mouth. "Well, I haven't been a particularly good chap. Broke a number of the ten commandments, including the more serious ones. Where's your fire and brimstone?" He pursed his lips, because the grin was threatening to crack any moment. Imagine! After all, he was going to be burned in a good old-fashioned hell of the sort his grandfather had described in such loving detail. But he still couldn't take it seriously. The situation was so bizarre, so basically humorous.

"Do you *want* fire and brimstone?" the man behind the desk asked.

"Not particularly," Mr. Archer said. "Is there any choice?"

"Of course!" the man told him, looking very un-diabolical in his neat gray business suit, with his smoothly combed hair. "Free will is manifest in the universe—even here. You have many alternatives to choose among."

"Different punishments?" Archer asked. "A choice of the thumbscrews or the iron maiden?"

The rack or the hot irons?"

"All those come under a single category," the man behind the desk said. "Allow me to show you."

Instantly, Archer discovered himself to be a disembodied intellect. He was in a small, low-ceilinged room. The only light was provided by smoking torches, which threw jagged streaks of red and yellow across the stone walls.

*Poesque*, Archer thought, and complimented himself on his coolness.

In the center of the room was a tableau. A man, a single rag wrapped around his loins, was stretched across a great wheel, his body drawn tight as a taut bowstring. His tormenters, motionless, were on either side of him. One held a hot iron, a bare fraction of an inch from the flesh. Another was tightening an iron boot to his foot while still another had his hand on the lever that moved the wheel; and all were frozen in mid-action.

The faces of the tormenters were hooded and dark; the man's agonized face was turned to the ceiling, and all Archer could see was the white line of his jaw and corded neck. He strained his eyes to catch a movement, but for long seconds could make out none. Then he noticed that, imperceptibly, the rack was being drawn tighter; the boot was being



screwed on the foot, the steaming iron coming closer, searing the flesh by degrees so gradual as to be imperceptible.

The scene vanished.

"Not laughing now?" the man behind the desk asked in a friendly tone.

Archer shook his head.

"We show that scene first. There's nothing like a little good old-fashioned torture to sober a man up. Of course, they say that no physical torment can compare to the psychological, and I believe it is true. Still, for those who can't stand the others, we *do* have the torture chambers."

"You said there were other choices?" Archer asked. He caught himself shuddering. Physical torture—it had always terrified him. Ever since he had been a little boy. Even the thought of being hurt—a splintered arm, a blasted leg . . . .

"Of course there are others," the man said. "And you may choose any one of them. Allow me to present the selection."

Archer's mind was immediately in space, moving in on the side of a mountain. He came in closer, and saw a dot on the white stone face. The dot resolved itself into a man.

Standing beside him in spirit, Archer watched him climb. He moved slowly, carefully, up the sheer face of the cliff. There was barely a handhold on the smooth

rock, hardly a single roughness to give purchase. Like a giant ant, the man struggled on.

Looking up, Archer could see that the top of the mountain was wreathed in mist. There was mist below, covering the bottom. Between the two mists was sheer, bare rock, and the climbing man.

The man moved upward, and Archer saw that he *must* move up, or slip down. And once started, there would be nothing to break the descent.

Would he fall, Archer wondered, watching him cling to the rock, scrambling for a grip. Or would he win through to the top? Archer watched, and felt a surge of sympathy grow within him. "Beat them!" he shouted through silent lips. "Get there!"

And the scene vanished.

"A variation," the man behind the desk said. "On the theme of Sisyphus. But instead of a stone, the man pulls himself."

"What happens when he reaches the top?" Archer asked, feeling better already. The mountain was a far better alternative to the torture, he thought, leaning against the desk.

"To tell you the truth," the man said, "It has never been definitely established that the mountain *has* a top. Although I suppose it has."

"No top?" Archer breathed. He stood erect, suddenly. "You mean that the man will just climb

—and climb—for all eternity?”

“I never said it had no top. I just mentioned that it has never been definitely established. As for climbing and climbing, he will climb, yes. Unless he wishes to let go, in which case he will fall. And eternity is one of your sophistications which I, personally, have no belief in. There is no proof of it.”

The next scene was a boat on an ocean. The water was gray, and the waves were gray, with no whitecaps. In front of the little boat was a wall of gray mist; behind it and on all sides was gray water, stretching as far as the eye could see.

There was a man in the mastless little boat, sitting at the helm, staring into the mist. The boat moved gently, over the gray waves, into the mist which retreated in front of it.

“Pleasant, eh?” the man behind the desk asked, when the scene disappeared. “Romantic, isn’t it? A ship at sea, the mysterious water.”

“I suppose the ocean has no end?” Archer said wryly, feeling he had caught on to the place.

“I don’t know,” the man said. “The ocean undoubtedly has an end somewhere. But it is entirely possible that the boat is moving in gigantic circles.”

“And he’ll never find out,” Archer said.

“He expects to,” the man told him. “If he has faith, he thinks that just beyond the wall of mist may be the shore. A mile, a dozen miles, a hundred miles. Or only a few yards.”

“Show me more,” Archer said. “I’m catching on.”

There was a small, well-lighted room with a closed door in one wall. A conveyor belt ran through an opening, across the room, and out another opening. A man stood in front of the belt, putting bolts in the mechanisms that rode past. His work wasn’t difficult; every second a part would come by, he would slip a bolt into it, and wait for the next.

“The influence of the machine age,” the man said. “It suits some.”

“When the last bolt is in, he’s finished?”

“Right.”

“But,” Archer said, “The conveyor belt is endless. And someone—some other victim, perhaps, has the job of taking out the bolts; at a different part of the belt.” Archer permitted himself a sour smile. He had the place figured out, exactly as he had figured out every place he had ever been in his life; every place except the hospital, that is, where no amount of money would give him a new heart.

“Why doesn’t he go through that door?” Archer asked. “Is it locked?”

"No, there are no locked doors here. But he must not leave his work. The door is there when he is finished."

"The old anticipation game," Archer said. "Keep them hoping, keep them thinking it's going to be all right in the end. Clever devils!"

"It may well be," the man behind the desk said. He looked at the lapels of his suit until Archer had stopped smiling. "But I, personally, don't know."

There were other things; ingenious things, amazing things, even terrifying things. Archer saw the choice of the ancients: a clearing in a forest where a man could stand, sword in hand. Then, through the trees, a gigantic wolf would bound forth. With one sweep—evidently he was in practice—the man would cut down the wolf. Mortally wounded, the animal would drag itself away. The man would stand, sword poised, listening. Some barely perceptible sound—the rustle of a twig, the pounding of a heart—would give the warning, and he would turn at the instant another wolf leaped through the trees from a different point. And cut him down, and wait for another.

"It would be amusing," Archer said, "If it were the same wolf, over and over again."

"But it may not be," the man

reminded him. "There may well be a number of foes to kill—a hundred, a thousand, a million. He may someday reach the end of them, and be able to continue through the forest to his destiny."

"Or he may not," Archer said sardonically. "Especially if it is the same wolf. As you and I know."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "That is not my concern. Faith, or the lack of it, is not for me. You have seen—choose!"

Psychological torture, Archer mused. Wasn't it always that way? Wasn't hell just another way of keeping the other fellow anticipating, hoping, waiting? So that was how it was. Well then.

But what idiot, he wondered, would choose the torture chamber? A masochist, perhaps? A man like himself, who saw through the eternity of anticipation? Oh, no!

The mountain? Strenuous, to say the least. And so stupid, as was the conveyor belt. The swordsman's lot was a little better, but who wanted to spend eternity stabbing wolves? With the possibility that one might be a trifle careless, and get bitten in the process.

The others were no better.

"I believe the boat is the best thing," Archer said. "So if you haven't any—"

Instantly he was in a small boat, sailing over a gray sea, into a mist.

Damn! There were some more questions he wanted to ask. Well, no matter; he might as well settle down to spend eternity comfortably.

After a while he looked over the boat. There was nothing to see. No ropes, no rudder, no provisions. Just a wooden hull and himself. There was enough room to lie down, though, and he did so. Perhaps he could sleep.

With a gray, expressionless sky over him, the gray sea under him, and the gray boat on all sides, Archer slept.

He awoke, to find the same sea and sky, the same boat and mist.

He wasn't hungry or thirsty. Reaching down with his hand, he felt the water. It was real water. He tasted it. Salt. An ocean of tears? He settled down to wait.

Time passed, and he reviewed his situation. Anticipation was the key to the torture, he was sure. For all eternity he was supposed to peer into the mist, waiting, expecting the shore to come any minute, dark against the gray water. But he resolved not to think of it. It was absurd to hold hopes in this place.

Perhaps he should have chosen something else, he thought, after a time. There was no denying that the boat ride was monotonous. At least, lopping off



heads or putting in bolts he would have something to do.

Archer reviewed his life. He went over it in minute detail, reliving every moment, stretching it out. Grimly he reviewed the steps that had brought him here, the many crossroads in his life. He thought about everything, the good, the bad and the indifferent.

In a way, he was glad that many decisions had brought him to this place. It gave him much to think about.

Time passed, unnoticed on the sea, the advancing boat, the retreating mist.

Thought ran on.

Time passed, and Archer lay or sat or stood in the boat, feeling as human as ever, except that he was never hungry or thirsty. But bored!

So much time passed that it seemed as though eternity must be starting over again. Archer had exhausted every thought, every combination and permutation of thought that he was capable of. And nothing changed in the gray boat, or on the gray sea, or in the gray mist.

Time passed.

Slowly . . . .

**TIME PASSED!**

"This is too much," Archer said out loud again. He had been talking aloud for some time.

"I can't stand this," he repeated. For the ten millionth time he speculated on what was in the water. What dangers? What horrors?

Time passed.

"But I think I can go overboard." After thinking about it for the billionth time, Archer lowered himself over the side of the boat into the gray sea. He had long considered how it would feel, the water lapping around him, the thoughts it would bring, and the thoughts *they* would bring.

For a moment it was wonderful. He paddled, keeping himself up in the water, watching the boat continue without him. Then something happened.

Ahead, the mists parted. The boat cleaved through them, and there was the shore, long and dark on the horizon. Archer could make out trees, a beach. The boat sped on, and grounded itself. Archer saw the shapes of other boats, and thought he glimpsed people.

"There was an end!" he gasped. "The boat wasn't going in circles!" And the climber—Archer knew that he had reached the top of his mountain, if he had the courage to go on long enough. And the worker had placed his last bolt, and the swordsman killed his last wolf.

All, a test of faith! Faith, in hell!

He struck out for the shore, but the water was like thick jelly, weighing down his arms and legs, keeping his head below the surface. He took one last, despairing look at the shore, and began to sink.

Of course he couldn't drown. Not once dead. All he could do was sink, and sink, and sink. To where? To the bottom.

And what would be waiting for him on the bottom? Why, for those without faith or hope—

The torture chamber, of course.