ACT ONE

Two ELIZABETHANS *passing the time in a place without any visible character.*

They are well dressed—hats, cloaks, sticks and all.

Each of them has a large leather money bag.

GUILDENSTERN'S *bag is nearly empty.*

ROSENCRANTZ'S *bag is nearly full.*

The reason being: they are betting on the toss of a coin, in the following manner: GUILDENSTERN *(hereafter "*GUIL*") takes a coin out of his bag, spins it, letting it fall.* ROSENCRANTZ *(hereafter "*ROS*") studies it, announces it as "heads" (as it happens) and puts it into his own bag. Then they repeat the process. They have apparently been doing this for some time.*

The run of "heads" is impossible, yet ROS *betrays no surprise at all—he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel a little embarrassed at taking so much money off his friend. Let that be his character note.*

GUIL *is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it—his character note.*

GUIL *sits.* ROS *stands (he does the moving, retrieving coins).* GUIL *spins.* ROS *studies coin.*

ROS: Heads.

> *He picks it up and puts it in his bag. The process is repeated.*

> Heads.

Again.

Heads.

Again.

Heads.

Again.

Heads.

GUIL (*flipping a coin*): There is an art to the building up of suspense.

ROS: Heads.

GUIL (*flipping another*): Though it can be done by luck alone.

ROS: Heads.

GUIL: If that's the word I'm after.

ROS (*raises his head at* GUIL): Seventy-six—love.

GUIL *gets up but has nowhere to go. He spins another coin over his shoulder without looking at it, his attention being directed at his environment or lack of it.*

Heads.

GUIL: A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability. (*He slips a coin over his shoulder as he goes to look upstage.*)

ROS: Heads.

GUIL, *examining the confines of the stage, flips over two more coins as he does so, one by one of course.* ROS *announces each of them as "heads."*

GUIL (*musing*): The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted, is something to do with the proposition that if six monkeys (*he has surprised himself*) . . . if six monkeys were . . .

ROS: Game?

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GUIL: Were they?

ROS: Are you?

GUIL (*understanding*): Game. (*Flips a coin.*) The law of averages, if I have got this right, means that if six monkeys were thrown up in the air for long enough they would land on their tails about as often as they would land on their——

ROS: Heads. (*He picks up the coin.*)

GUIL: Which even at first glance does not strike one as a particularly rewarding speculation, in either sense, even without the monkeys. I mean you wouldn't *bet* on it. I mean *I* would, but *you* wouldn't. . . . (*As he flips a coin.*)

ROS: Heads.

GUIL: Would you? (*Flips a coin.*)

ROS: Heads.

Repeat.

Heads. (*He looks up at* GUIL—*embarrassed laugh.*) Getting a bit of a bore, isn't it?

GUIL (*coldly*): A bore?

ROS: Well . . .

GUIL: What about the suspense?

ROS (innocently): What suspense?

Small pause.

GUIL: It must be the law of diminishing returns. . . . I feel the spell about to be broken. (*Energizing himself somewhat. He takes out a coin, spins it high, catches it, turns it over on to the back of his other hand, studies the coin—and tosses it to* ROS. *His energy deflates and he sits.*)

Well, it was an even chance . . . if my calculations are correct.

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ROS: Eighty-five in a row—beaten the record!

GUIL: Don't be absurd.

ROS: Easily!

GUIL (*angry*): Is that *it*, then? Is that all?

ROS: What?

GUIL: A new record? Is that as far as you are prepared to go?

ROS: Well . . .

GUIL: No questions? Not even a pause?

ROS: You spun them yourself.

GUIL: Not a flicker of doubt?

ROS (*aggrieved, aggressive*): Well, I won—didn't I?

GUIL (*approaches him—quieter*): And if you'd lost? If they'd come down against you, eighty-five times, one after another, just like that?

ROS (*dumbly*): Eighty-five in a row? *Tails?*

GUIL: Yes! What would you think?

ROS (*doubtfully*): Well . . . . (*Jocularly.*) Well, I'd have a good look at your coins for a start!

GUIL (*retiring*): I'm relieved. At least we can still count on self-interest as a predictable factor. . . . I suppose it's the last to go. Your capacity for trust made me wonder if perhaps . . . you, alone . . . (*He turns on him suddenly, reaches out a hand.*) Touch.

> ROS *clasps his hand.* GUIL *pulls him up to him.*

GUIL (*more intensely*): We have been spinning coins together since—— (*He releases him almost as violently.*) This is not the first time we have spun coins!

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ROS: Oh no—we've been spinning coins for as long as I remember.

GUIL: How long is that?

ROS: I forget. Mind you—eighty-five times!

GUIL: Yes?

ROS: It'll take some beating, I imagine.

GUIL: Is *that* what you imagine? Is that it? No *fear?*

ROS: Fear?

GUIL (*in fury—flings a coin on the ground*): Fear! The crack that might flood your brain with light!

ROS: Heads. . . . (*He puts it in his bag.*)

> GUIL *sits despondently. He takes a coin, spins it, lets it fall between his feet. He looks at it, picks it up, throws it to* ROS, *who puts it in his bag.*

> GUIL *takes another coin, spins it, catches it, turns it over on to his other hand, looks at it, and throws it to* ROS, *who puts it in his bag.*

> GUIL *takes a third coin, spins it, catches it in his right hand, turns it over onto his left wrist, lobs it in the air, catches it with his left hand, raises his left leg, throws the coin up under it, catches it and turns it over on the top of his head, where it sits.* ROS *comes, looks at it, puts it in his bag.*

ROS: I'm afraid——

GUIL: So am I.

ROS: I'm afraid it isn't your day.

GUIL: I'm afraid it is.

> *Small pause.*

ROS: Eighty-nine.

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GUIL: It must be indicative of something, besides the redistribution of wealth. (*He muses.*) List of possible explanations. One: I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past. (*He spins a coin at* ROS.)

ROS: Heads.

GUIL: Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times. . . . (*He flips a coin, looks at it, tosses it to* ROS.) On the whole, doubtful. Three: divine intervention, that is to say, a good turn from above concerning him, cf. children of Israel, or retribution from above concerning me, cf. Lot's wife. Four: a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually (*he spins one*) is as likely to come down heads as tails and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does. (*It does. He tosses it to* ROS.)

ROS: I've never known anything like it!

GUIL: And a syllogism: One, he has never known anything like it. Two, he has never known anything to write home about. Three, it is nothing to write home about. . . . Home . . . What's the first thing you remember?

ROS: Oh, let's see. . . . The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?

GUIL: No—the first thing you remember.

ROS: Ah. (*Pause.*) No, it's no good, it's gone. It was a long time ago.

GUIL (*patient but edged*): You don't get my meaning. What is the first thing after all the things you've forgotten?

ROS: Oh I see. (*Pause.*) I've forgotten the question.

GUIL *leaps up and paces.*

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GUIL: Are you happy?

ROS: What?

GUIL: Content? At ease?

ROS: I suppose so.

GUIL: What are you going to do now?

ROS: I don't know. What do you want to do?

GUIL: I have no desires. None. (*He stops pacing dead.*) There was a messenger . . . that's right. We were sent for. (*He wheels at* ROS *and raps out:*) Syllogism the second: One, probability is a factor which operates within natural forces. Two, probability is not operating as a factor. Three, we are now within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. Discuss. (ROS *is suitably startled. Acidly.*) Not too heatedly.

ROS: I'm sorry I—What's the matter with you?

GUIL: The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear. Keep tight hold and continue while there's time. Now— counter to the previous syllogism: tricky one, follow me carefully, it may prove a comfort. If we postulate, and we just have, that within un-, sub- or supernatural forces *the probability is* that the law of probability will not operate as a factor, then we must accept that the probability of the *first* part will not operate as a factor, in which case the law of probability *will* operate as a factor within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. And since it obviously hasn't been doing so, we can take it that we are not held within un-, sub- or supernatural forces after all; in all probability, that is. Which is a great relief to me personally. (*Small pause.*) Which is all very well, except that——(*He continues with tight hysteria, under control.*) We have been spinning coins together since I don't know when, and in all that time (if it *is* all that time) I don't suppose either of us was more than

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a couple of gold pieces up or down. I hope that doesn't sound surprising because its very unsurprisingness is something I am trying to keep hold of. The equanimity of your average tosser of coins depends upon a law, or rather a tendency, or let us say a probability, or at any rate a mathematically calculable chance, which ensures that he will not upset himself by losing too much nor upset his opponent by winning too often. This made for a kind of harmony and a kind of confidence. It related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature. The sun came up about as often as it went down, in the long run, and a coin showed heads about as often as it showed tails. Then a messenger arrived. We had been sent for. Nothing else happened. Ninety-two coins spun consecutively have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times . . . and for the last three minutes on the wind of a windless day I have heard the sound of drums and flute. . . .

ROS (*cutting his fingernails*): Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard.

GUIL: What?

ROS (*loud*): Beard!

GUIL: But you're not dead.

ROS (*irritated*): I didn't say they *started* to grow after death! (*Pause, calmer.*) The fingernails also grow before birth, though *not* the beard.

GUIL: *What?*

ROS (*shouts*): Beard! What's the matter with you? (*Reflectively.*) The toenails, on the other hand, never grow at all.

GUIL (*bemused*): The toenails never grow at all?

ROS: Do they? It's a funny thing—I cut my fingernails all the

time, and every time I think to cut them, they need cutting. Now, for instance. And yet, I never, to the best of my knowledge, cut my toenails. They ought to be curled under my feet by now, but it doesn't happen. I never think about them. Perhaps I cut them absent-mindedly, when I'm thinking of something else.

GUIL (*tensed up by this rambling*): Do you remember the first thing that happened today?

ROS (*promptly*): I woke up, I suppose. (*Triggered.*) Oh—I've got it now—that man, a foreigner, he woke us up——

GUIL: A messenger. (*He relaxes, sits.*)

ROS: That's it—pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters—shouts—What's all the row about?! Clear off!—But then he called our names. You remember that—this man woke us up.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: We were sent for.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: That's why we're here. (*He looks round, seems doubtful, then the explanation.*) Travelling.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS (*dramatically*): It was urgent—a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his very words: official business and no questions asked—lights in the stable-yard, saddle up and off headlong and hotfoot across the land, our guides outstripped in breakneck pursuit of our duty! Fearful lest we come too late!!

Small pause.

GUIL: Too late for what?

ROS: How do I know? We haven't got there yet.

Rosencrantz
&
Guildenstern
Are
Dead

by Tom Stoppard

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