**$1.98**

by

Arthur Porges

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*“I can think of no greater bargain.”*

That morning Will Howard was taking a Sunday stroll through the woods, a pleasure which lately had been shared and intensified by Rita Henry. Not even the bright sun, the bracing air, the unique song of a canyon wren, could lighten Will’s dark thoughts. Right now she was out riding with Harley Thompson at an exclusive country club. Will couldn’t blame her. Harley was six feet two, a former Princeton tackle; ruggedly handsome, full of pleasant small talk; the young-executive-with-a-big-future. And he, Will Howard, a skinny, tongue-tied fellow—

At that moment he felt something tug feebly at one trouser cuff, and looked down to see a tiny field mouse pawing frantically at the cloth. Gaping, Will studied the palpitating animal, completely baffled by such strange behavior on the part of so timid a creature. Then the springy, leaping form of a weasel, implacable, fearless even of man, appeared on the trail.

Quickly Will scooped the terrified rodent into one palm. The weasel stopped, making a nasty, chikkering sound, eyes red in the triangular mask of ferocity that was its face. For a heartbeat it seemed about to attack its giant opponent, but as Will stepped forward, shouting, the beast, chattering with rage, undulated off the path.

“You poor little devil,” Will addressed the bright-eyed bit of fur in his hand. A crooked smile touched his lips. “You didn’t have a chance—just like me and Thompson!” Stooping, he deposited it gently in the underbrush. Then he stared, his jaw dropping. In place of the mouse, there appeared suddenly a chubby, Buddha-like being, some two inches tall. Actually, as measurement would have revealed, it stood precisely one and ninety-eight hundredths inches.

In a voice which although faint was surprisingly resonant, the figure said: “Accept, O kindly mortal, the grateful thanks of Eep, the God. How can I reward you for saving me from that rapacious monster?”

Will gulped, but being an assiduous reader of Dunsany and Collier, he recovered promptly. “You— you’re a god!” he stammered.

“I am indeed a god,” the being replied complacently. “Once every hundred years, as a punishment for cheating in chess, I become a mouse briefly—but no doubt you’ve read similar accounts to the point of excessive boredom. Suffice it to say, you intervened just in time. Now I’m safe for another century—unless, of course, I succumb to temptation again and change a pawn to a bishop. It’s hard to resist,” he confided, “and helps one’s end game immensely.”

Will thought of Harley Thompson, the heel that walked like a man. The fellow who laughed at fantasy, who ribbed him for reading the *Magazine of Not-Yet but Could-Be*. Well he knew that behind Thompson’s personable exterior was a ruthless, self-seeking, egotistical brute. Rita could never be happy with a man like that. Here was a chance to gain his first advantage over Harley. With the help of a grateful god, much could be achieved. That Dunsany knew the score, all right. Maybe three wishes—but that was tricky. Better let the god himself choose . . .

“You mentioned a—a reward,” he said diffidently.

“I certainly did,” the god assured him, swinging on a dandelion stem and kicking minute bare feet luxuriously. “But, alas, only a small one. I am, as you see, a very small god.”

“Oh,” Will said, rather crestfallen. Then brightening: “May I suggest that a *small* fortune—?” Truly the presence of an immortal was sharpening his wits.

“Of course. But it would have to be exceedingly small. I couldn’t go above $1.98.”

“Is that all?” Will’s voice was heavy with disappointment.

“I’m afraid it is. We minor gods are always pinched for funds. Perhaps a different sort of gift—”

“Say,” Will interrupted. “How about a diamond? After all, one the size of a walnut is actually a small object, and—”

“I’m sorry,” the god said regretfully. “It would have to be tiny even for a diamond. One worth, in fact, $1.98.”

“Curse it!” Will groaned. “There must be something small—”

“There should be,” the little god agreed good-naturedly. “Anything I can do, up to $1.98, just ask me.

“Maybe a small earthquake,” Will suggested, without much enthusiasm. “I could predict it in advance. Then perhaps Rita—”

“A small earthquake, yes,” Eep replied. “I could manage that. But it would be the merest tremblor. Doing, I remind you, damage only to the amount of $1.98.”

Will sighed. “You sound like a bargain basement,” he protested.

“Of course,” the god mused aloud, as if sincerely seeking a solution, “by taking the money in a different currency—say lira—it would *seem* like more; but the value would actually be the same.”

“I give up,” Will said. Then, in a more kindly voice, Eep looked embarrassed, “Don’t feel bad. I know you’d like to help. It’s not your fault that money’s so tight.” Glumly he added: “Maybe you’ll think of something yet. I’m selling now, or trying to—I’m not much of a salesman. Once the client sold *me* his office furniture. But if you could arrange a good sale—”

“It would bring in only $1.98.”

“That wouldn’t be easy,” Will told him, smiling wryly. “Right now I’m handling diesel locomotives, office buildings, and abandoned mines. And I’m vice-president in charge of dry oil wells.”

“Any luck so far?” the little god demanded, kicking a grasshopper, which soared off indignantly.

“I almost sold an abandoned copper mine to a wealthy Californian for an air-raid shelter, but Thompson nosed me out—again. He showed him how one gallery in another mine could be made into the longest—and safest-bar in the world. It killed my sale; the man bought Thompson’s mine for $67,000. That infernal Harley!” he exclaimed. “I wouldn’t mind his getting the supervisor’s job instead of me; I’m no good at giving orders, anyhow. Or his stealing my best customers. Even his lousy practical jokes. But when it comes to Rita—! Just when she was beginning to know I’m alive,” he added bitterly.

“Rita?” the god queried.

“Rita Henry—she works in our office. A wonderful girl. So sweet, so—alive, and with the most marvelous greenish eyes—”

“I see,” Eep said, thumbing his nose at a hovering dragonfly.

“That’s why I could use a little help. So do what you can, although it can’t help much with a ceiling of-”

“—$1.98,” the god completed his sentence firmly. “I shall spend the afternoon and evening here contemplating the place where my navel would be if I were not supernatural. Trust the Great (although small) God Eep. Farewell.” He walked into the grass.

Much too depressed for any amusement, Will spent the evening at home, and at eleven went gloomily to bed, convinced that a mere $1.98 worth of assistance, even from a god, was unlikely to solve his problem.

In spite of such forebodings, he was tired enough from nervous strain to fall asleep at once, only to be awakened half an hour later by a timid rapping at the apartment door.

Blearily, a robe over his pajamas, he answered it, to find Rita standing on the threshold. She gave him a warm smile that was bright with promise.

“Rita!” he gasped. “Wha—?”

One finger on her lips, she slipped in, closing the door softly behind her. Then she was in his arms, her lips urgent, her body melting.

“Rita,” Will murmured, “at last . . .”

She gazed up at him. Was there just a hint of puzzlement, of bewilderment in those green eyes? “Something just seemed to force me . . . I had to come . . .” She took his hand and led him to the bedroom. There, in the warm darkness, he heard the whispery rustle of silk. “I had to come,” Rita said again. “We’re just right for each other . . . I know . . .”

The bed creaked and, on reaching out one yearning hand, Will touched skin like sun-warmed satin.

The next morning, when she picked up the wispy panties from the floor where they had been tossed in flattering haste, a scrap of paper dropped from the black nylon.

Wondering, Will picked it up. It was a newspaper clipping. Someone had written in the margin in a tiny, flowing script: “A gratuity from the grateful (up to $1.98) God Eep.”

The clipping itself, a mere filler, read: “At present prices, the value of the chemical compounds which make up the human body is only $1.98.”

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