

The Omniscient Alien

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ABSTRACT: A psychological version of THE LADY OR THE TIGER?

(Originally: Sun Aug 4, 1996.) JK: This Gedanken-Experiment is not due to me; I heard/read it somewhere. The embellishments on the story are mine.

The Omniscient Alien

Sipping your breakfast coffee, there is a knock at the door. "May I come in?" says the humanoid alien as he breezes past you in your doorway, carrying a large red box under his right tentacle and a small green box under his left.

"My that coffee smells good!" he hints, as he places the boxes on the table. "My Master has sent me here to make you an offer," he continues, interrupting your attempt to speak. "In the red box is one million dollars, or else it is empty. You may have it..."

"Fine," say you, reaching for the large box, "thanks for stopping by and if there's ever anything else I can do for you—"

"...OR, you may accept *both* boxes", he continues.

"What's in the green one?", you ask suspiciously.

"One thousand dollars."

"For sure?"

"Wonderful idiom, you Americans. Yes, 'For sure!'"

"Fine. I'll take both boxes—"

"I've traveled across the Galaxy to make you this offer. Wouldn't you even like to know the conditions of the experiment?"

"What experiment?!"

"My Master is a human psychologist and has been observing you from afar for millions of years."

"Me personally, or the whole human race?"

"For millions of years, the whole human race. You personally, only for about the last 25 years..."

"What—"

"...and has based this experiment in human greed..."

"Hey! Wait just one darn minu—"

"...upon his observations", continued the alien imperceptibly. "Studying you, he has made a prediction as to whether you will take both boxes, or accept only the red one. If he felt that you would take both, he left the red box empty. However, if he predicted that you would

modestly take only the red, he placed one million dollars in it."

"Hmmm. What's done is done...I can't lose by taking both, so—"

"My conscience", interrupts the alien (gesturing vaguely in the direction of his abdomen), "bids me inform you that my Master has done this experiment some two hundred times with humans. Humans of most sexes, races, colors and religions. Nearly half did decide as you have. They uniformly received only a thousand dollars—the red box was each time empty. The *un*gree-, uh, *other* half asked only for the red box, and were rewarded—since my Master's predictions were always correct..."

"Ok, I'll take just the red—"

"...of course, this has been a long trip and my Master was suffering from a cold when he made his decision and sealed these boxes some three years ago. Perhaps your character has changed...?"

"You're right! Give me them *both*—!"

"...or, then again, perhaps not."

"I'll tell you what. You give a me a *hint* as to which way your 'Master' decided, and I'll make it worth your while, eh? One tentacle washes the other, ya know what I mean?"

"My Master does not confide in me his decisions", the alien replies stiffly, "it would invalidate the experiment. You must now tell me your decision or I will take the boxes and leave. Oh!, yes —thank you— I would like another cup of coffee!"

TO TAKE ONE, OR BOTH —THAT IS THE QUESTION...

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