



through the unsettling and rather unpleasant experience of the tasting session now seemed worth it.

As they rose to leave, the restaurateur came across to ask how they had enjoyed

it. After telling him what he was hoping to hear and thanking him profusely, they thought to ask him about the latecomers and the fact that they didn't participate in a tasting session.

"They are return customers." He replied.

"They underwent such a session when they first came here, and as we keep a record of everyone's favourite dish there's no need for them to go through it again."

"Do you mean to say that they were served the same dish tonight as they were served their first night here?"

"Yes, that's right. In fact whenever they return, no matter how many times that may be, we always serve them the same dish."

"But wouldn't they perhaps want something different from time to time?"

"It's as I explained earlier. Our aim is to serve people with the best meal they've ever had, and we can do that only if we give them their favourite dish. So we're not prepared to ever serve them anything other than that one."

"But aren't they going to become tired of the same meal all the time?" the couple asked, astonished.

"Well. That's just it. They aren't having it all the time. We do not make a further reservation for a customer unless their return date is at least a year after their previous visit. In that way there will be no problem with the patron being overfamiliar at all with their favourite meal, and once again, at its end, they will be able to say that it was the best meal they've ever eaten. If you should wish to now make a reservation, so we see you again here a year from today, we can accommodate you at reception on your way out. Thank you for coming and I'm delighted you enjoyed so much your visit



with us this evening. I very much look forward to seeing you again. Good Night."

The couple did indeed book a reservation on the

way out. They returned on the same date the following year and every subsequent year for many years to come. And wonderfully, each time it proved again to be the best meal they've ever had.

ooOoo

This little story came to me as a kind of response to a question someone asked me over coffee after an S.A.A. talk a few months back. The question was to do with spirits in hell and if they ever eventually leave there. Swedenborg gives us what's perhaps a unique idea of hell where the inhabitants are there willingly and that it's not the kind of prison that it is usually portrayed as being. This makes us think that should they so desire, these spirits would be free to leave whenever they want.

For herself my coffee-time companion felt that surely the expansive endlessness of eternity would see them eventually having a change of heart, and thus in the far-distant future they will want leave hell. For myself, I wasn't so sure. In fact, although I recall having briefly held the same opinion as her some time ago, I had given up on having some definitive answer to the question. Swedenborg is quite adamant that those on dying who find their home in hell will be there forevermore. But the thought that this is to be the ultimate fate of anyone sounds so awful it can be hard to accept that it's really as simple and straightforward a matter as that. Surely in an enlightened theology, such as Swedenborg's, there would be more mercy or compassion than that seems to allow for.

But just being asked the question got me really thinking about the matter again, and when doing this in the days following