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a FATE worse than . . .

By ROBERT H. ROHRER

Illustrator SUMMERS

*In a world ruled routinely by Satan, to
whom do you go in order to sell your soul?*

PRIESTLEY put the worst thing he could think of into the offering plate: an old shoe. True, it wasn't half as bad as Mrs. Schultz's can of worms or Mr. Thomas' phornographic photographs, but then Priestley didn't feel very imaginative today, and the Unreverend Mr. Blakely's sermon wasn't as peppy as it usually was, either. In fact, the sermon was rather dull; it ran over the same old ground on the dangers of peace and light: "Are your children going around with beatific smiles on their faces? Show them the Way, before it is too late; before their souls have been lost irrideemably in the grasp of Goodness and Mercy, and they are Blessed for eternity!" A sermon as stereotyped as that didn't deserve anything worse than an old shoe.

Priestly leaned against the back of the pew and decided that this was the last time he would

come to Black Mass for a long time. After all, he'd been a good Satanist for all his life; he deserved a rest. And . . .

Don't kid yourself, Priestley, he scowled. It's because of what you're going to do today that you don't want to come to Mass again; don't try to deny it.

The Unreverend Mr. Blakely drew his sermon to a close. The choir boomed out with a deep-toned hymn concerning the carnal joys of murder, after which the malediction was pronounced and the congregation dismissed.

Priestley walked slowly down the church steps onto the sidewalk, his head bowed, his face knotted in a frown. Was what he was about to do right?

No. There was no doubt that what he was about to do was definitely *not* right; and, moreover, it was dangerous. But a man had to have money if he were to live, and Priestley had no money

whatsoever; in a world such as his own, only the strong had money, and he wasn't of the strong.

He reached the street corner. An old lady carrying a load of packages in her arms was standing there; Priestley grinned, sneaked up behind her, and gave her a shove with his foot. When the old lady turned around and began to throw expletives at him, he picked her up and stuffed her into a plastic DCS can, head down.

Mean. He must be mean today. Meaner than he'd ever been before. Because today he was going to have to stand up to someone greater and more terrible than anyone else he'd ever known.

When he reached his flat he closed the door and bolted it behind him. Then he walked to the north wall of the room, pulled a large volume from a bookshelf, opened it, and put it on the floor.

Finally he rolled back the rug, drew a pentagon in chalk on the floor, and dropped to his knees



before the book. From this he began to read a chant in monotone, moving his arms in rhythm to his voice.

The chant ended. Slowly a pink haze formed over the pentagon; the pink color changed to a modest white, and the haze resolved itself into a tall, austere figure clad in billowing robes. From its back protruded a pair of willow-like, feathery wings.

"Yes?" said the figure, in a soft, gentle voice.

Priestley looked up, and shrank back. "My Satan," he said in a strangled voice, "you're wonderful! You're more wonderful than I ever imagined you could be!" He hid his eyes and repressed a shudder.

"My dear man, it is my business to do good and wonderful," said the figure. "And I am certain that you did not call me here merely to disparage my character. What do you want?"

"Uh," Priestley began dazedly, still stricken with awe by the thing in the pentagon. "I want three wishes . . ."

The angel stopped him there. "Hold it, my son. You get only two wishes nowadays, you know."

Priestley's eyebrows raised. "What?!" he said. "Lucifer bless it to heaven! Why can't I have three any more?"

"Price of living," said the angel. "We can't afford more than two wishes. And besides, we're

relatively new to this business."

Priestley caught a fly in his hand and began to pull its wings off. "Uh-huh. That N-bomb war that knocked off all the Christians in 2304 and left only a group of Santanists who'd been trying to dig to Hell and were 2000 feet underground at the time of the explosions sort of put you angels at a disadvantage, what? I can see that you'd have trouble—what with not knowing any of the tricks of the trade, as Satan did. . . ."

"Oh, Satan was quite generous," said the angel. "He sold us his entire stock of wish-granting material for only thirty second-rate souls. Quite generous."

"Ah-ha," said Priestley. "Then you can make a man immortal?"

"Well—moderately," said the angel with a dubious look.

"What do you mean, 'Moderately?' " asked Priestley. "I want to be immortal; that's my first wish. I've already knocked off one wish because you're so tightfisted. Now what's this about moderate immortality?"

DUE to the small number of customers that partonize us, we have added a small loophole—for our own protection, you understand—to the old eternal-life rat race."

"Loophole?" said Priestley suspiciously. "What do you think I am, a complete idiot?"

"Now, hold on," said the angel. "You will be immortal, will be virtually indestructable, and will feel no pain; but there must be a certain substance—one of our choice—with which you can be killed. We will take no direct steps to bring about your death by the use of this substance—that will be left completely to chance. All you will have to do will be to keep away from it for the rest of eternity, and you'll be in the clear. Of course if you should happen to die, you know what the payment for the wishes is . . ."

"Of course I know what it is," said Priestley.

The angel nodded, and grinned. "If you die, you will join our Angel Choir, and be led away to eternal bliss. . . ."

Priestley had to hold back another shudder. He couldn't let *that* happen. "Assuming that I accept the terms of the first wish," he said, "my second wish is for a money-pouch that automatically refills itself when emptied."

"Greedy, aren't you?" said the angel. "Very well—I have here"—he produced a leather purse, bound in leather thongs—"an 18th-century model, one that was used by a little old pirate who opened it only on Mondays. . . ."

"Never mind the spiel, that'll do," said Priestley, snatching the pouch from the angel. He inspected the thongs and outside

material closely, and then sighed. "Good—no metal," he said, and smiled thinly at the angel. "I'll be generous; I accept the terms of the first wish, and choose for the substance involved—any metal you can name!" He threw back his head and laughed at his own shrewdness.

ONE hundred years before, in 26th century, all metals had been replaced entirely by plastic materials: cars, missiles, planes, motors, and even money, were all made of various forms of plastic; all metals had been buried as "hot" after the N-bomb war. No solid metal was left on the surface of the earth.

Priestley stopped laughing. "And don't try to pull any abstract shenanigans, like killing me with small particles of iron that might be floating around in the air, either," he said.

"No, no, I assure you, my son," said the angel. "An amount of metal sufficient to kill a normal man will be needed to kill you. What do you think I am, some sort of cheat? We're Good up there, you know.

"Our bargain is already on record in the Heavenly Ledgers, and goes into effect as of now. Your soul for two wishes." He looked upward. "*Pax vobiscum*, my son—and good luck."

Priestley blinked. The pentagon was empty.

BLESSED angel. He sounded so divinely confident—and how could he be? There was no metal left within 3000 feet of the surface of the earth—and Priestley wasn't about to go digging around for any. So why that canny smile on the angel's beatific face?

Priestley scowled and left the apartment. He had a purse that would cough up money endlessly, and he was going to use it.

On the way to the bar he kicked a cup from a blind man's hand, grabbed a peppermint stick from a five-year-old, and knocked a load of packages from an old lady's hands.

When the old lady turned to face him, he recognized her; but this time she was holding a plastic disintegrator in her hand. "I'm sick and tired of your pushing me around," she gritted, gesturing expressively with the gun.

"Now—wait a minute," Priestley began—and then stopped. What was he about to crawl for? He was immortal! He stepped forward, a smile coming to his lips. "Okay, granny," he said. "Shoot."

Granny shot. The force of the disintegrator beam knocked Priestley into the street. He was propelled to the edge of an open manhole; there he teetered for a split second and fell through.

He landed on the slick, mirror-

polished plastic surface of a sewer pipe. Picking himself up, he looked around to get his bearings. He was in a small division of the sewer, with shining plastic walls on either side of him; he saw that the pipes in those walls had been closed. The sewer was out of use.

Something fell past his face. He looked up, squinted confusedly for a moment, and then realized that the money-pouch had been caught on the edge of the manhole when he fell through. Its leather thongs had burst, and it was pouring money into the narrow confines of the sewer section.

Priestley looked at the money, and screamed.

The bag had originally belonged to an 18th century pirate, as the angel had said.

And in the 18th century, money had been made largely of gold.

And gold, unfortunately, was a metal.

The doubloons poured endlessly out of the unemptiable sack, streaming down over Priestley, slowly filling the sewer section. Within a matter of minutes, he knew, he would be crushed to death. He staggered back, dazed, and screamed again as his reflection loomed up at him from one side of the sewer pipe.

Wings were beginning to sprout from his shoulderblades.

THE END