

# fantasy

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# THE DEMONS

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

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There's an old saying among wizards that it takes a demon to catch a demon. But you can't depend on anything nowadays. It's getting to the point where you can't even trust your best fiend.

*Ebel*

Walking along Second Avenue, Arthur Gammet decided it was a rather nice spring day. Not too cold, just brisk and invigorating. A perfect day for selling insurance, he told himself. He stepped off the curb at Ninth Street.

And vanished.

"Didja see that?" A butcher's assistant asked the butcher. They had been standing in front of their store, idly watching people go by.

"See what?" the butcher, a corpulent, red-faced man, replied.

"The guy in the overcoat. He disappeared."

"Yeh," the butcher said. "So he turned up Ninth, so what?" The butcher's assistant hadn't seen Arthur turn up Ninth, down Ninth, or across Second. He had seen him disappear. But should he insist on it? You tell your boss he's wrong, so where does it get you? Beside, the guy in the overcoat probably *had* turned up Ninth. Where else could he have gone?

But Arthur Gammet was no longer in New York. He had thoroughly vanished.

Somewhere else, not necessarily on Earth, a being who called himself Neelsebub was staring at a pentagon. Within it was something he hadn't bargained for. Neelsebub fixed it

with a bitter stare, knowing he had good cause for anger. He'd spent years digging out magic formulas, experimenting with herbs and essences, reading the best books on wizardry and witchcraft. He'd thrown everything into one gigantic effort, and what happened? The wrong demon appeared.

Of course, there were many things that might have gone amiss. The severed hand of the corpse—it just *might* have been the hand of a suicide, for even the best of dealers aren't to be trusted. Or the line of the pentagon might have been the least bit wavy; that was very significant. Or the words of the incantation might not have been in the proper order. Even one syllable wrongly intoned could have done it.

Anyhow, the damage was done. Neelsebub leaned one red-scaled shoulder against the huge bottle in back of him, scratching the other shoulder with a dagger-like fingernail. As usual when perplexed, his barbed tail flicked uncertainly.

At least he had a demon of some sort.

But the thing inside the pentagon didn't look like any conventional kind of demon. Those loose folds of gray flesh, for example . . . But then, the historical accounts were notoriously

inaccurate. Whatever kind of supernatural being it was, it would have to come across. Of that he was certain. Neelsebub folded his hooved feet under him more comfortably, waiting for the strange being to speak.

Arthur Gammet was still too stunned to speak. One moment he had been walking to the insurance office, minding his own business, enjoying the fine air of an early spring morning. He had stepped off the curb at Second and Ninth—and landed here. Wherever *here* was.

Swaying slightly, he made out, through the deep mist that filled the room, a huge red-scaled monster squatting on its haunches. Beside it was what looked like a bottle, but a bottle fully ten feet high. The creature had a barbed tail and was now scratching his head with it, glaring at Arthur out of little piggish eyes. Hastily, Arthur tried to step back, but was unable to move more than a step. He was inside a chalked area, he noticed, and for some reason was unable to step over the white lines.

"So," the red creature said, finally breaking the silence. "I've finally got you." These weren't the words he was saying; the sounds were utterly foreign. But somehow, Arthur was able to understand the thought behind the

words. It wasn't telepathy, but rather as though he were translating a foreign language, automatically, colloquially.

"I must say I'm rather disappointed," Neelsebub continued when the captured demon in the pentagon didn't answer. "All our legends say that demons are fearful things, fifteen feet high, with wings and tiny heads and a hole in the chest that throws out jets of cold water."

Arthur Gammet peeled off his overcoat, letting it fall in a sodden heap at his feet. Dimly, he could appreciate the idea of demons being able to produce jets of cold water. The room was like a furnace. Already his gray tweed suit was a soggy, wrinkled mass of cloth and perspiration.

And with that thought came acceptance—of the red creature, the chalk lines he was unable to cross, the sweltering room—everything.

He had noticed in books, magazine and motion-pictures that a man, confronted by an odd situation, usually mouthed lines such as, "Pinch me, this can't be true," or, "Good God, I'm either dreaming, drunk or crazy." Arthur had no intention of saying anything so palpably absurd. For one thing, he was sure the huge red creature wouldn't appreciate it; and for another, he knew he wasn't dreaming, drunk or crazy.

There were no words in Arthur Gammet's vocabulary for it, but he knew. A dream was one thing; this was another.

"The legends never mentioned being able to peel off your skin," Neelsebub said thoughtfully, looking at the overcoat at Arthur's feet. "Interesting."

"This is a mistake," Arthur said firmly. The experience he had had as an insurance agent stood him in good stead now. He was used to meeting all kinds of people, unraveling all kinds of snarled situations. This creature had, evidently, tried to raise a demon. Through nobody's fault he had gotten Arthur Gammet, and was under the impression that *he* was a demon. The error must be rectified at once.

"I am an insurance agent," he said. The creature shook its tremendous horned head. Its tail swished from side to side unpleasantly.

"Your other-world functions don't concern me in the slightest," Neelsebub growled. "I don't care, really, what species of demon you are."

"But I tell you I'm not a—"

"Won't work!" Neelsebub howled, glaring angrily at Arthur from the edge of the pentagon. "I know you're a demon. And I want *drast!*"

"Drast? I don't think—"

"I'm up to all your demoniac tricks," Neelsebub said, calming himself with obvious effort. "I know—and you know—that when a demon is conjured, he must grant one wish. I conjured you, and I want *drast*. Ten thousand pounds of it."

"Drast . . ." Arthur began uncomfortably, standing in the corner of the pentagon furthest from the tail-lashing monster.

"Drast, or voot, or hakatinny, or sup-der-ooop. It's all the same thing."

It was speaking of money, Arthur Gammet realized. The slang terms had been unfamiliar, but there was no mistaking the sense behind them. Undoubtedly, *drast* was what passed for currency in its country.

"Ten thousand pounds isn't much," Neelsebub said with a cunning little smile. "Not for *you*. You ought to be glad I'm not one of those fools who ask for immortality."

Arthur was.

"And if I don't?" he asked.

"In that case," Neelsebub replied, a frown replacing the little smile, "I'll be forced to conjure you again—inside the bottle." Arthur looked at the green bottle, towering over Neelsebub's head. It was wide at its misty base, tapering to a slim neck. If the thing ever got him in, he would never be able to squeeze

out through that neck. *If* the thing could get him in. And Arthur was fairly sure it could.

"Of course," Neelsebub said, his smile returning, more cunning than ever, "There's no reason for heroic measures. Ten thousand pounds of the old super-oop isn't much for you. It'll make me rich, but all you have to do is wave your hand." He paused, his smile becoming ingratiating.

"You know," he went on softly, "I've really spent a long time on this. Read a lot of books, spent a pile of voot." His tail lashed the floor suddenly, like a bullet glancing off granite. "Don't try to put something over on me!" he shouted.

Arthur found that the force rising from the chalk extended as high as he could reach. Gingerly, he leaned against the invisible wall, and, finding that it supported his weight, rested against it.

Ten thousand pounds of drast, he thought. Evidently the creature was a sorcerer, from God-knows-where. Some other planet, perhaps. The creature had tried to conjure a wish-granting demon, and had gotten him. It wanted something from him—or else the bottle. All very unreasonable, but Arthur Gammet was beginning to suspect that most wiz-

ards were unreasonable people.

"I'll try to get your drast," Arthur said, feeling that he had to say something. "But I'll have to go back to the—ah—underworld to get it. That handwaving stuff is out."

"All right," the monster said to him, standing at the edge of the pentagon and leering in. "I trust you. But remember, I can call you any time I want. You can't get away, you know, so don't even try. By the way, my name is Neelsebub."

"Any relation to Beelzebub?" Arthur asked.

"Great-grandfather," Neelsebub replied, looking suspiciously at Arthur. "He was an army man. Unfortunately, he—" Neelsebub stopped abruptly, glaring angrily at Arthur. "But you demons know all about that! Be-gone! *And bring that drast!*"

Arthur Gammet vanished again.

He materialized on the corner of Second Avenue and Ninth Street, where he had first vanished. His overcoat was at his feet, his clothes filled with perspiration. He staggered for a moment to hold his balance—since he had been leaning against the wall of force when Neelsebub had vanished him—picked up his overcoat and hurried to his apartment. Luckily, there had

been only a few people around. Two housewives gulped and walked quickly away. A nattily dressed man blinked four or five times, took a step forward as though he wanted to ask something, changed his mind and hurried off toward Eighth Street. The rest of the people either hadn't seen him or just didn't give a damn.

In his two-room apartment Arthur made one feeble attempt to dismiss the whole thing as a dream. Failing miserably, he began to outline his possibilities.

He could produce the drast. That is, perhaps he could if he found out what it was. The stuff Neelsebub considered valuable might be just about anything. Lead, perhaps, or iron. Even that would stretch his meagre earnings to the breaking-point.

He could notify the police. And be locked up in an asylum. Forget that one.

Or, he could not produce the drast—and spend the rest of his life in a bottle. Forget that one, too.

All he could do was wait until Neelsebub conjured him again, and find out then what drast was. Perhaps it was common dirt. He could get that from his uncle's farm in New Jersey, if Neelsebub could manage the transportation.

Arthur Gammet telephoned the

office and told them he was ill, and that he expected to be ill for several days. After that he fixed a bite of food in his kitchenette, feeling quite proud of his good appetite. Not everyone faced with the strong possibility of being shut up in a bottle could have tucked away a meal that well. He tidied up the place, and changed into a light Palm Beach suit. It was four-thirty in the afternoon. He stretched out on the bed and waited. Along about nine-thirty he disappeared.

"Changed your skin again," Neelsebub commented. "Where's the drast?" His tail twitched eagerly as he hurried around the pentagon.

"It's not hidden behind me," Arthur said, turning to look at Neelsebub. "I'll have to have more information." He adopted a nonchalant pose, leaning against the invisible lines that radiated from the chalk. "And I'll have to have your promise that once I produce it you'll leave me alone."

"Of course," Neelsebub answered cheerfully. "I can only ask for one wish anyhow. Tell you what, I'll swear the great oath of Satanas. That's absolutely binding, you know."

"Satanas?"

"One of our early presidents," Neelsebub said with a reverential air. "My great grandfather Beelzebub served under him. Un-



fortunately—oh, well, you know all that."

Neelsebub swore the great oath of Satan, and very impressive it was. The blue mists in the room were edged in red when he was done, and the outlines of the huge bottle shifted eerily in the dim light. Arthur was perspiring freely, even in his summer suit. He wished he were a cold-producing demon.

"That's it," Neelsebub said, standing erectly in the middle of the room, his tail looped around his wrist. There was a strange look in his eyes, a look of one recalling past glories.

"Now what sort of information do you want?" Neelsebub began pacing the floor in front of the pentagon, his tail dragging.

"Describe this drast to me."

"Well, it's soft, heavy—"

That could be lead.

"And yellow."

Gold.

"Hmm," Arthur said, staring at the bottle. "I don't suppose it's ever gray, is it? Or dark brown?"

"No. It's always yellow. With sometimes a reddish hue."

He was positive.

Still gold. Arthur contemplated the red-scaled monster in front of him, pacing up and down with ill-concealed eagerness. Ten thousand pounds of gold. That would

come to . . . No, better not think of it. Impossible.

"I'll need a little time," Arthur said. "Perhaps sixty or seventy years. Tell you what, I'll call you as soon as—"

Neelsebub interrupted him with a huge roar of laughter. Arthur had tickled his rudimentary sense of humor, evidently, because Neelsebub was hugging his haunches, screaming with mirth.

"Sixty or seventy years!" Neelsebub shouted, and the bottle shook, and even the lines of the pentagon seemed to waver. "I'll give you sixty or seventy minutes! Or the bottle!"

"Now just a minute," Arthur said, from the far side of the pentagon. "I'll need a little—hold it!" He had just had an idea, and it was undeniably the best idea he had ever had. More, it was his own idea.

"I'll have to have the exact formula you used to get me," Arthur said. "Must check with the main office to be sure everything is in order."

The monster raved and swore, and the air turned black and purple; the bottle rang in sympathetic vibration with Neelsebub's voice, and the very room seemed to sway. But Arthur Gammet stood firm. He explained to Neelsebub, patiently, seven or eight times, that it would do no good

to bottle him, since he would never get his gold that way. All he wanted was the formula, and certainly that wouldn't—

Finally he got it.

"And no tricks!" Neelsebub thundered finally, gesturing at the bottle with both hands and his tail. Arthur nodded feebly and reappeared in his room.

The next few days he spent in a frenzied search around New York. Some of the ingredients of the incantation were easy to fill—the sprig of mistletoe, for example, from a florist, and the sulphur. Graveyard mold was more difficult, as was a bat's left wing. What really had him stumped for a while was the severed hand of the murdered man. He finally procured one from a store that specialized in filling orders for medical students. He had the dealer's guarantee that the body to which the hand belonged had died a violent death. Arthur suspected that the dealer was trying to humor him, but there was really very little he could do about it.

Among other things, he bought a large bottle. It was surprisingly inexpensive. There were really compensations for living in New York, he decided. There seemed to be nothing—literally *nothing* one couldn't buy.

In three days he had all his

materials, and at midnight of the third night he arranged them on the floor of his apartment. The light of a three-quarters full moon was shining in the window—the incantation had been vague as to what phase it should be—and everything seemed to be in order. Arthur drew the pentagon, lighted the candles, burned the incense, and started the chant. He figured that, by following directions carefully, he should be able to conjure Neelsebub. His one wish would be that Neelsebub leave him strictly alone. He couldn't see how that would fail.

The blue mists spread through the room as he mumbled the formula, and soon he could see something growing in the center of the pentagon.

"Neelsebub!" he cried. But it wasn't.

The thing in the pentagon was about fifteen feet high when the incantation was finished. It had to stoop almost to the ground to fit under Arthur's ceiling. It was a fearful-looking thing, with wings and a tiny head and a hole in its chest.

Arthur Gammet had conjured the wrong demon.

"What's all this?" the demon asked, shooting a jet of ice water out of his chest. The water splashed against the invisible

walls of the pentagon and rolled to the floor. It must have been pure reflex, because Arthur's room was pleasantly cool.

"I want my one wish," Arthur said. The demon was blue and impossibly thin; his wings were vestigial stumps. They flapped once or twice against his bony chest before he answered.

"I don't know what you are or how you got me here," the demon said. "But it's clever. It's undeniably clever."

"Let's not chatter," Arthur replied nervously, wondering how soon Neelsebub was going to conjure him again. "I want ten thousand pounds of gold. Also known as drast, hakatinny, and the old sup-der-oop." At any moment, he thought, he might find himself inside a bottle.

"Well," the cold-producing demon said. "You seem to be laboring under the mistaken impression that I'm—"

"You have twenty-four hours."

"I'm not a rich man," the cold-producing demon said. "Small businessman. But perhaps if you give me time—"

"Or the bottle," Arthur said. He pointed to the large bottle in one corner, then realized it would never hold fifteen feet of cold-producing demon.

"The next time I conjure you I'll have a bottle big enough," Arthur said. "I didn't think

you'd be so awkwardly tall."

"We have stories about people disappearing," the demon mused. "So *this* is what happens to them. The underworld. Don't suppose anyone would believe me, though."

"Get that drast," Arthur said. "Begone!"

The cold-producing demon was gone.

Arthur Gammet knew he could not afford more than twenty-four hours. Even that was probably cutting it too thin, he thought, because one could never tell when Neelsebub would decide he had had enough time. There was no telling what the red-scaled monster would do, if he were disappointed a third time. Arthur found that, toward the end of the day, he was clutching the steam pipe. A fine lot of good that would do if he were conjured! But it was nice to have something solid to grasp.\*

It was a shame also, he thought, to have to impose on the cold-producing demon that way. It was pretty obvious that the demon wasn't a real demon, any more than Arthur was. Well, he would never use the bottle on him. It would do no good if Neelsebub weren't satisfied.

Finally he mumbled the incantation again.

"You'll have to make your pen-

tagon wider," the cold-producing demon said, stooping uncomfortably inside. "I haven't got room for—"

"Begone!" Arthur said, and feverishly rubbed out the pentagon. He sketched it again, this time using the area of the whole room. He lugged the bottle—the same one, since he hadn't found one fifteen feet high—into the kitchen, stationed himself in the closet, and went through the formula again. Once more the thick, twisting blue mists gathered.

"Now don't be hasty," the cold-producing demon said, from within the pentagon. "I haven't got the old sup-der-ooop yet. There's a tie-up, and I can explain everything." He beat his wings to part the mist. Beside him was a bottle, fully ten feet high. Within it, green with rage, was Neelsebub. He seemed to be shouting, but the bottle was stoppered. No sound came through.

"Got the formula," the demon said, "out of the library. Could have knocked me over when the thing worked. Always been a hard-headed businessman, you know. Don't like this supernatural stuff. But, you have to face facts. Anyhow, I got hold of

this demon here—" He jerked a spidery arm at the bottle—"But he wouldn't come across. So I bottled him." The cold-producing demon heaved a deep sigh when Arthur smiled. It was like a reprieve.

"Now, I don't want you to bottle me," the cold-producing demon went on, "because I've got a wife and three kids. You know how it is. Insurance slump and all that, I couldn't raise ten thousand pounds of drast with an army. But as soon as I persuade this demon here—"

"Never mind about the drast," Arthur said. "Just take the demon with you. Keep him in storage. Inside the bottle, of course."

"I'll do that," the blue-winged insurance man said. "And about that drast—"

"Forget it," Arthur said warmly. After all, insurance men have to stick together. "Handle fire and theft?"

"General accident is more my line," the insurance man said. "But you know, I've been thinking—"

Neelsebub raved and swore inside the bottle while the two insurance men discussed the intricacies of their profession.

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