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The Unbeliever

by Robert Silverberg

*Back in the middle Fifties, when your editor was at the helm of several science fiction magazines, and other types, he was visited one day by two young science-fictioneers — one an author who had appeared a few times, the other a leading “fan”, who had appeared only in fan magazines — who announced beamishly that they had formed a collaborating team, and were about to make millions writing science fiction. To put it mildly we were skeptical. To put it still more mildly, we were wrong — so far as one half of that team is concerned. The published works of Robert Silverberg, of which no end is yet in sight, overflowed the traditional five foot shelf several years ago, and if he has not literally made millions, the exaggeration is not a great one. The theme here present is a favorite one with writers of fiction, but one which never quite grows stale, for the variations are endless, as are the variations in specific human behavior — without which there would be no fiction worth reading. While *The Devil and his adventures* and misadventures with corrupt humans requires some traditional assumptions, the author here presents one basic premise all his own, and a revelation you will not have encountered before.*

“HE DOESN'T believe in me,” His Eminence said.

“It must be very frustrating,” I agreed. I know how he covets the kind of soul that resists.

“Mephisto, you have no idea. Steiner's committed enough sins

to put him away for two eternities, but I don't have any legal hold on him. Oh, if I could get him down here.”

“You don't stand much chance, Your Eminence,” said Beelzebub, entering the throne-

room suddenly. "At last word he's completely unshakable in his determination not to believe in you. In fact, he's so sure that there are no powers of evil that he's organized a Thirteen Club which specializes in defying superstitions."

I could see that made Satan angry. "I'm going to get that man. No mortal has ever given me so much trouble before, and I'll fix him for it."

"Bet you don't get him," Beelzebub said. I've always envied him for the casual way in which he talks to His Eminence.

"You don't think so, eh?"

I wanted to suggest Faust, but a few millenia on this job have taught me caution. Anyway, I knew the job was going to fall on me — I always get stuck with the dirty work — and I stood there in waiting.

His Eminence smiled. "Mephisto, my lad — you've always been my favorite. I've always saved you for the choicest jobs."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I want you to get me Steiner. I don't care how you do it, but I want you to make that man believe in me. And as soon as he admits his belief, we've got him. Go, quickly — and don't come back till you've got him."

I didn't like the tone of his voice, and I was pretty glad I hadn't mentioned the Faust episode after all. I backed away, not liking the malicious smile on Beelzebub's face, and head-

ed for Earth by the shortest route. I would have to hurry; if anything should happen to Steiner before I got to him, we'd lose him. He wouldn't exactly go to The Enemy, but we wouldn't get him either.

Finding Steiner was fairly easy. I tracked him to the city he lived in — New York and I were old friends — and stopped off at his bank in the guise of a poor laborer looking for a loan. I didn't get far enough to see Steiner; some third assistant clerk refused my request. Then I took the form of a disgruntled depositor wanting to make a complaint, and they neatly shunted me out a side exit after a short chat with the Assistant Manager. Finally I reappeared as Steiner's wife, and then I had no trouble. They conducted me to his office with greasy courtesy, and there his pretty young secretary — his dossier told me what he'd been up to with her — told me that he'd gone home to prepare for a club meeting.

I couldn't stand wearing that woman's body much longer, so I dissolved it as soon as I got outside the bank and headed for Steiner's home.

I came through the door and noted a rack from which hung thirteen open umbrellas. The meeting was under way, then. I floated into the main room.

There were thirteen of them: a college kid with a crewcut; a

sturdy white-haired old man also wearing a crewcut; two writers (both scheduled for us, I know); a gaunt, sixty-ish spinster; and a group of thoroughly commonplace middle-aged men. I spotted Steiner quickly — he was plump, cheerful-looking, smooth-faced, middle-aged, comfortable. I extended a tentative exploring thought toward him and found a solid wall of skepticism. This was going to be rough, but I had a plan.

I let my mind roam through those of the assembled thirteen. The college kid showed the most surface bravado, but underneath it he was plenty worried. As for the others, a little undercurrent of fear brushed through their minds, and it was coupled, in the spinster's mind, with the hope that something exciting would happen.

I searched a little more diligently and found the weak spot I was looking for. He was a new member named Sam Arnold — a businessman friend of Steiner's — who had come to the meeting more out of curiosity than anything else. He would be easy to use: in his mind I found a very real fear of hell, and the mental picture he had of our domain was considerably more terrifying than the actuality. He was my man.

I sat down on the floor to watch the proceedings. My curiosity was aroused — say, my professional interest.

They were milling around, busily breaking superstitions as fast as they could think of them, in a selfconscious sort of way. The college kid came up to two of the businessmen and offered them cigarettes, and lit them — three on a match. They seemed to delight in defying the superstition, but I detected uneasiness underneath.

There was a black cat who wandered right through me as I sat on the floor. As the cat passed through me he arched his back. It's always amazed me how cats can detect our presence and most humans can't.

The gaunt woman kept trying to catch the cat and rub his fur the wrong way, but the cat was a clever one and kept eluding her.

I continued to rove through the minds of the gathering as all this was going on. Twelve minds were emanating subtle waves of fear and doubt, but one — Steiner's — was calm and unshakable in its belief that evil had no power over him.

At exactly 7:13 the dinner bell rang and the guests moved to the dining room, passing under a ladder which stood on the costly rug outside the dining-room door in order to enter. I decided to wait till the end of the meal before making my move.

There was a long table, with six seats on one side, five on the other, one at each end.

Steiner sat at one end of the table and put the newcomer Sam Arnold at the other. Fine; he was playing right into my hands.

They sat down, lifted their salt-shakers, and spilled salt. I picked up an underlying feeling of embarrassment from one well-bred member.

Then the waiters — crosseyed, of course — brought out little mirrors and distributed them. Steiner took his in his left hand and rapped it sharply with his knife, cracking it neatly. All followed suit.

Then they dug into the meal, and it must have been a good one, for they ate calmly, almost forgetting the nature of their gathering. That black cat kept wandering back and forth and picking up scraps Steiner dropped for him.

After the dessert Steiner stood up.

He spoke for a few moments on the growing spread of trisk-aidekaphoby — he meant “-phobia,” not “-phoby,” but no one corrected him — and hoped that the publicity which their club was getting would help to combat the spread of superstition. They applauded.

“Fellow superstition-haters,” he said, “this meeting has been a great success.” He consulted a card. “The next time we will be together will be on the next Friday the Thirteenth, which falls in May.”

I sensed that this was the

windup, and I went around behind Sam Arnold's chair. I detected a strong feeling of relief coming from Arnold; he was glad it was all over and that he had survived it. He was a coward; it sickened me, and I was glad I'd picked him.

Steiner began to recite as I readied myself. I wasn't paying close attention, but I caught some of it.

“*Thy be hallowed.*” Steiner finished, “*Heaven in art which father our.*” Then he sat down, amid much approving laughter.

I materialized in the silly, traditional form.

I CAME IN a thunderclap, using the sound effects of the groaning of the damned, and lifted that miserable little Sam Arnold out of his chair before he knew what was going on. I carried him off in a hurry, not forgetting to leave a trail of sulphur behind me, and, since his time had not yet come, I deposited him at the edge of the city. Then I returned.

The assembled members of the Thirteen Club were in a little huddled heap, recovering. All the superstitions they had so nicely repressed had flooded to the front of their minds, and they were a dazed lot.

The college student was kneeling near the door, examining in a shocked way the rug, where the prints of my cloven hooves had been burned into the nap.

The others crouched behind the table, in terror.

Slowly the shock wore off and they became able to move. They left in a hurry, looking warily at the footprints in the rug and at the scorched walls. They were absolutely silent, and I examined their minds and found abject, groveling fear. None of them would ever go under a ladder again, or even near one.

Which, I suppose, was a logical reaction. I waited till they were all gone and then turned to Steiner.

He was sitting calmly at the head of the table, watching them go. The Thirteen Club had been dissolved in a hurry, and had just one member left. The others all disappeared through the door and doubtlessly were dashing madly down the streets away from the house. He spat out one word.

"Cowards!"

I probed him. He meant it.

That man was still firm in his belief that evil had no power over him.

I thought of his dossier — one forgery, ten blackmailings, eleven seductions, a whole host of minor sins, and the determination not to let anything change him; he was ticketed for us, all right. But he held tightly to his skepticism; there was no room for us in his mind.

I materialized again.

"You see the power of Hell?" I asked.

"Nonsense," Steiner said. "Hell is a mere superstition inherited from the primitive Norse, and you're a hallucination."

I frowned. This was not the reaction I wanted.

"You still don't fear us, Steiner? You've sinned grievously, you know. You've been a law unto yourself for fifty years, and now your punishment awaits you."

"There's no punishment awaiting me," Steiner said. "If you want, punish those poor sheep who ran away. That's where your power lies. I won't be frightened. You can't touch me."

His Eminence wasn't going to like this. He didn't want me back without Steiner's soul, and it didn't look as if I was going to get it. But I had more than one trick in my bag.

I summoned lightning and it struck Steiner's house three times. Flames began to lick through the structure, and I helped them along. Steiner sat with his hands folded at the long table, paying no attention as the flames grew closer and closer.

Finally I had to drag him out into the street, since I couldn't let his body be destroyed while he still refused to believe in us.

He was the most steadfast skeptic I've ever seen. There's

not one who won't break down sooner or later — the most convinced atheist will eventually succumb to our propaganda. But not Steiner.

He stood in the street and watched his house burn down, and I looked in his mind and saw he believed it was still all hallucination. I flashed a thought down to His Eminence.

"He won't give in," I said. "I've done all I can, and he still won't believe in you. He thinks I'm a hallucination. He thinks all this is a joke."

"I want that soul," Satan said. "Do your best, and then do better than that."

We don't argue with His Eminence. I longed to look deep into Steiner, behind the skepticism of his conscious mind, and see what it was that really motivated him. But that tends to damage the soul, and His Eminence disapproves of receiving such damaged goods.

I went through a repertoire of pyrotechnics, flashing lightning, darkening the sky, appearing in my most terrifying incarnations. Steiner remained adamant and just a little bored. There could be all sorts of hallucinations.

I was nearing the end of my rope. About all I could do now was show him Hell. So I reached into Sam Arnold's mind for his conception of Hell — it was so terrifying that it even frightened me a little — and

brought it into existence right there in the street. It was a first-rate illusion.

Steiner stood right on the brink of the abyss, looking straight down at the plight of the damned and at His Eminence sitting on his throne, the bestial embodiment of evil. I saw a rather unflattering representation of myself at Satan's right hand, and Beelzebub on the left.

Cries of pain rose from the roasted and simmered until they were blacked husks and then were restored and roasted all over again. Steiner watched amusedly.

"You can't seriously think this disturbs *me*, do you?"

I wondered what was behind Steiner. We once had a case of an arch-sinner who believed, for a while, that he was Satan himself; but that notion collapsed when he was confronted with the real thing.

Did Steiner think so? I wondered.

I went around behind Steiner and tried to push him into the Pit. That usually arouses some terror; but not in him. He let me push him, and he went forward and stood in the air over the abyss, firm in the belief that he was still on the sidewalk.

Which he was.

I cursed. "Steiner, your soul is black," I said. "I'm here to get it. You're going to be burned."

"You have no hold on me."

It didn't matter what I did; he just charged it off as a hallucination.

I had just one weapon left.

I revealed Hell as it actually is.

He looked, and laughed.

For a moment I was unable to believe it. Total failure I had been assigned the task of bringing this unbeliever to heel — and, unfortunately, we have no grasp over an utter and complete unbeliever.

In despair, I threw my mind at his, determined to probe the depths of that conscienceless brain, to wallow in its muck, looking for the weak spot in his armor that would enable me to deliver him to Satan.

And I was thrown back with a rude jolt. My mind was parred by the unexpected rebuff; it was like hitting a stone wall nose-first.

"No mortal could have done that," I said weakly.

"Poor demon," Steiner said. His voice was pitying. "What makes you think you can pull me off to your puny flames? You have no power over me, Mephisto."

Feebly I said, "No — it's impossible. You can't be from Above — not with all your sins. No one from Up There could carry on the way you have on Earth. Yet . . ."

"Yet I remain out of your jurisdiction." Steiner chuckled heavily, enjoying my discomfort. "Obviously I'm not mortal, else your mental thrust would have penetrated. And you're correct in your assumption that I'm not from On High. But why is your thinking so hopelessly black-and-white?"

He smiled scornfully. "Tell your master Satan that he's not the only Devil in the universe, and that he can expect equally discourteous treatment from my men if he ever chooses to spend his vacation on my home planet."

"Your home planet?" I repeated dizzily. "Does that mean . . ."

"You spoiled a nice restful vacation for me," Steiner said. "I won't forget that quickly."

"Who are you?" My voice was dry and strained.

Steiner smiled cheerfully. "I'm the Archfiend of Arcturus," he said, and vanished.

