

An Interview with Satan on the Eve of His Retirement

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He didn't look at all as I had expected. I traversed the quiet room and found a portly older gentleman, immaculately and rather formally dressed – a finely spun woolen Navy blue suit, slightly lighter blue tie, starched collar and cuffs. He seemed quite comfortable and turned a kindly, inviting smile towards me as I advanced.

"You seem surprised," he purred. His voice was light and easy on the ears. "You didn't expect horns and a tail, did you?" he chuckled.

He grasped my hand warmly and offered me a seat opposite. It was dusk and we looked out, from our chairs on the balcony, over a quiet harbor. The gentle clatter of voices from the nearby dining room, the hardly discernible knocks of snooker balls from another direction – these were the cushioning sounds over which our conversation took place. I hardly knew where or how to begin, I confess, but he helped me along.

"So, my friend, I suppose you wish to understand why I am withdrawing from the field?" he asked.

His smile broadened and his eyes, far from piercing, met my own, wide with inquiry.

"Yes," I replied, half gulping the word.

My host motioned for drinks and the shadow of a waiter fluttered our way, and then returned with expensive Scotch, neat. I was absorbed by the golden glow of our sniffers, a way perhaps of covering my befuddlement. You see, the Satan of my imagination was a wild sharp fierce creature – yet the being here before me, about whose perfidy so much has been written, was positively benign and ... and comforting, like an avuncular banker about to approve a loan. The mildly fleshy cheeks, his cheer, his reassuring gravity – I was speechless.

“My work is done,” Satan continued. “There’s nothing left for me to do.”

The drink helped me to regain composure, so I felt more myself and could respond.

“All these years,” I said, “the effort you’ve expended ...”

He interrupted me with a laugh.

“Effort, you say? No, there was hardly any effort at all. You see, sloth is of one of my vices – one of my pleasures, actually. I needed to *do*” – and here he emphasized the word – “virtually nothing. An intimation here, a word in someone’s ear, that was enough. *They*” – and again he added stress – “did everything I could have wished for, and with far greater speed.

Except for a little trouble I had with that fellow from Nazareth who – give Him credit – very cleverly rebuffed my blandishments, it was all so very easy.

Where would you like me to start? With Eve? Poor woman, I would have offered Adam that first bite of the apple, but I could never have relied on his persuading his consort. So I cosseted her and the rest, as you are so fond of saying, is history.

The killings, the conquests, the idolatries, the rivalries, the hypocrisies, the betrayals, and the endless line of fire-breathing prophets sent to make things right ... I needed only to watch – and to admire. Although I have no little appreciation of my own strategic wiles, I daresay I lacked the imagination for deception that your species has shown, the infinite ways of lying. Really, I take my hat off to you and your kind.”

“But ... but why now?” I blurted out, “why are you retiring? Have you achieved your goals? Have your goals been met? What are your goals? Are we so bereft of hope?”

I was agitated, bumbling, and nearly leaped out of my armchair in consternation.

“Calm down, sir, calm down,” Satan replied. “Let me tell you a parable.”

He eyed me as I slumped back, bewildered.

“Two men stood at the top of a high snowy mountain on a clear and sunny day. A small village lay below at its foot. The villagers had done nothing, really, to distinguish themselves, except for a tendency towards moderation and occasional benevolence. The men, both of whom had mild personal grievances with the townspeople, argued over which way might be best to destroy the settlement. One proposed setting an avalanche in motion, an avalanche that would engulf the town utterly and entirely. The other man listened intently, and they agreed to meet in the darkness before dawn to watch the spectacle. However, during the night the second man visited the village elder, told him about the terrible plan and its perpetrator, adding moreover, to his great dismay, that the elder’s wife was his lover and that her family and their allies intended to vacate the village secretly during the night and return after their enemies had been vanquished. The elder quietly gathered his forces, discovered and executed the man who had plotted his downfall, confronted his blameless wife and had her put to the knife when she refused to confess her duplicity, whereupon a feud broke out which, in the end, resulted in the death of every man, woman and child.”

I was silent as Satan, after a small sip of his spirit, resumed.

“The avalanche would have been more cataclysmically exciting, perhaps, but wasn’t it far better to have the villagers destroy themselves and, ironically, to do so on the basis of a deception? Just a word or two,” he continued cheerily, “that was all. The rest was in their hands.”

The waiter appeared and refilled my vessel.

“The most difficult part,” Satan continued, “was time, simply waiting for the instruments of power to catch up with the human proclivity towards destruction. And now, as you most assuredly can see, that time has arrived. You have succeeded in penetrating and marshaling the forces of the atomic nucleus, you have divined the secrets of the human genome, you have created an electromagnetic web of such potency that nothing can ever be private again, and your leaders, in their quest for transhuman immortality, will sacrifice as many lives and as much blood as they feel they need to achieve their illusionary aims. This so-called virus, the global coordination necessary to shut down your little world, your mania for injecting, for force, for cruelty and division, and the immense concentration of power in the hands of the few ... it has only one end. In the past, your murder and mayhem were, shall we say, limited, localized. But no longer.”

With that he finished his drink, adjusted his cuffs with their sparkling links, rose and bowed.

“I like a good game of snooker,” he said.

But before he set off toward the tables, he took my hand, warmly.

“Time was all I needed,” he whispered, “a little time. And as for progress, which also requires time, what will you remember most about your cherished 20th century? Which genocide? And what will your Corona Wars have crowned? A most fitting end after so much misery achieved in the guise of goodness. Well, I’ve won my wager, and, to quote from His very own book – which I know by heart, by the way – even He knows that there is a time to lose.”

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