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Title: Satan and the Comrades

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Release Date: February 22, 2010 [EBook #31349]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Barbara Tozier and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SATAN AND THE COMRADES

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It is not always easy to laugh at Satan, or take pleasure in his antics. But when the Prince of Darkness goes on a vacation or holds a mirror up to human nature at its most Luciferian chuckles are certain to arise and follow one another in hilarious profusion. Here is a yarn contrived by a craftsman with ironic lightning bolts at his fingertips, as mordantly compelling as it is jovial and Jovian. If you liked SATAN ON HOLIDAY, and were hoping for a sequel you can now rejoice in full measure, for Ralph Bennett has provided that longed-for delight.

SATAN AND THE COMRADES

by ... Ralph Bennett

Lucifer wasn't sure that just the right improvements had been made in Hell. So he used a dash of sulfur with Satanic skill.

NICK felt almost good-humoredly buoyant after his year's holiday as a college boy. About a second after leaving Earth he slowed his traveling speed down to the medium velocity of light by shifting from fifth dimension to fourth. Though still a million miles above the wastes of Chaos and twice that distance from the gates of Hell, his X-ray eyes were quick to discern a difference in the road far below him.

Sin and Death had built that broad highway eons before. On leaving Hell, presumably forever to carry on their work among men, they had done a mighty good job of the original construction. But time had worked its ravages with the primrose-lined path, and it was not surprising that on starting his sabbatical leave, Nick had ordered his chief engineer to repair the road as a first step in his plan to modernize Hell.

Apparently, old Mulciber had done a bang-up job, and Nick roared in laughter at evidences of the engineer's genius and those of wily Belial, the handsome court wag. The Propaganda Chief had added advertising at numerous new roadhouses along the way, and unwary shades traveling hellward gazed at beautiful scenes of lush vegetation instead of a dreary expanse like the Texas Panhandle. This "devilish cantraip sleight" also changed the raw Chaos climate to a steady 72°F and gave off a balmy fragrance of fruits and flowers.

Ten thousand drachmas, a fictitious unit of currency established by foxy old Mammon, was the flat fee for use of the road. Blissfully unaware of this "Transportation Charge," or how it would be paid, numerous phantom pilgrims were sliding down the steeper hills—and having a swell time. Their shouts of glee reached Nick's largish ears despite the lack of air as mortals know it. Clever old Mulcie had installed freezing plants here and there to surface the road with glare ice.

Nick poised above a party of phantom men and girls sliding downhill on their *derrieres* and ending in a heap at the bottom. A nice change from traveling under their own power. Their maximum speed while swift and incomprehensible to mortals, seemed relatively slow to one of Hell's old timers. Only Nick and his best scout, Cletus, could move at thought speed—"Click-Click Transportation."

Drifting on, a pleased smile on his red, bony face, Nick paused several times to read Belial's welcomings.

"Die and see the original Naples in all its natural beauty," said one sign. "Try our hot sulphur springs and become a new soul." Gayest pleasures were promised to all and golfers had special attention. "Register with the pro at your favorite golf club so you can qualify. No charge for pro's services who'll teach you to break 80. Free lunch and drinks at all Nineteenth Holes."

No fool shade would wonder what he'd qualify for, nor suspect he'd have to shovel eighty million tons of coal and ashes before his handicap would be lowered enough to earn him a set of golf clubs or that the free lunch and drinks were chunks of brimstone, the sulphurous air and Styx River water which is always just below boiling point at 3,000°F.

Hell's thousand of new golf courses, gambling joints and bars would be available only after downtrodden souls had worked a millennia or two at common labor jobs. A shady deal, indeed, but all a part of Nick's master plan to get him and his legions back to Heaven.

By modernizing Hades he hoped to annoy "The Big Boss Upstairs" while diverting the attention of those two vigilant celestial watchers, Michael and Raphael, from the main idea. In a series of bold moves, known only to Nick and his Board or Inner Council, mankind would be wiped off the earth—and thus bring The BBU to time. Or so Nick hoped.

As a first step, he had spent a year as Pudzy, a college boy, studying electronics and modern skills of all kinds. He had enjoyed the holiday on Earth though it irked him to recall that he'd been obliged to do good here and there. The thought of these satanic lapses caused him to frown, but his jolly mood returned when he saw the familiar gates of Hell wide open in obedience to his whistle.

The whistle's high frequency waves also awakened Cerberus, the three-headed watch dog, besides actuating "The Dingus." This electronic device Nick had stolen to operate the three ponderous triple-fold gates of adamantine, brass and iron.

He slowed to supersonic speed, brought back his great red wings and made a neat three-point landing without injuring the needle-sharp dart at the end of his long, black tail. Still feeling jovial, he kicked all three of Cerberus's heads, then zoomed down through the tunnel to the north bank of the River Styx.

There he halted to view the ten-lane suspension bridge Mulciber had thrown across the steamy black water. Nick was wondering how the old genius had accomplished such a feat when a thick black wall dropped across the bridgehead.

"Cost you five thousand rubles to cross, mister," Charon called in a thick voice.

The old riverman who had ferried new shades across the earth-hell boundary for eons of time, had just returned after a year's vacation in Moscow.

He hid a bottle under his brimstone bench, then straightened a gaudy red tie as he weaved forward. A changed devil, Charon. His year in Redland had done more than put him into a natty summer suit. Although not very bright, he had unusual powers of observation. He liked to ape the odd speech of his customers, especially American prospectors. These truculent but harmless old timers worked at odd jobs around the nearby palace grounds, and in the ferryman they found a kindred spirit.

Nick eyed the loyal old fellow's red tie with amazement. "What, for St. Pete's sake, are you drinking, Char?"

"Vodka," Charon gasped. Recognizing the stern voice, he tried to focus his bleary eyes. "Scuse it, Your Majesty. I've come a long way and alone. Your substitute, Pudzy, gimme a bottle 'fore he returned to Ameriky, and it's durn cold up there in Musk-Cow, and so I took a few nips, and I felt so goldurned glad to git back I

polished off what was left, so I didn't recognize Your Majesty when you came zoomin' along, and if you'll sort of overlook—"

Nick patted the frightened old fellow's scrawny shoulder. "Better check in and sleep it off, Char."

"Gosh, stoppin' you!"

"You let everybody in till I tell you different. Forget the toll charge too, you old conniver."

"Yeah, and look!" Chortling with glee, Charon tottered back to his station and put one hand across the beam of a photo-electric eye. The ponderous gate slid silently upward. "It weighs fifteen hundred tons, Mulcie says, and I don't even push a button."

"You still smell like a Communist, Char," Nick said, sniffing the good sulphurous air. "How come you're on the job as bridgekeeper if you've just returned from Moscow?"

"Orders from Beelzebub, and it's nigh a half hour by now since this fella came across the bridge. I'm sauntering home, friends with everybody, I am—"

"What fellow?"

Charon scratched his grisly thatch. "Come to think of it, I never see 'im afore this. I'm standing back there, looking down at my old skiff and wondering about my job, when this fella comes up. 'This is for you, Charon,' he says, and held out your official incombusterible letterhead with the cross-bones and dripping blood—"

"Yeah, yeah. What does this stranger look like? What's his name? Who signed the paper?"

"Beelzebub signed it. I guess I know the John Henry of your Number Two devil even if I am a dumb ferryman." Perhaps sensing he had blundered, Charon almost wept. "This paper appoints me head bridge-tender from now to the *end* of eternity, and, bein' worried about my job, I hopped right to it. You're the first—"

"Which way did he go? What's he look like?"

Charon almost said "Thataway," as he shook his head and pointed a trembling finger to the distant shore. "Lemme see. He wore neat clothes about like mine, and he zoomed off like the upper crust shades do when in a hurry—which ain't often. He has mean little eyes, sort of pale blue, is built wide and short, and talks American good as I do. Now't I think of it, he had an impederment in his speech, and he smelt like a bed of sweet peas."

"Very good, indeed." Scanning the paper, Nick smiled as he recognized a forgery of the Beelzebub signature. He drew out his pen which writes under fire as well as water, and scribbled "Nick," then put the document into the eager hands. "This gives you the job forever—or till I revoke the appointment."

"Boyd-dumb-deals!" Charon shouted. "Boss, you oughta hear about my adventures in Redland. I had a real gabfest with the new Premier, Andrei Broncov, and his Minister of Culture, Vichy Volonsky."

Nick grinned sardonically. "I heard a little about the most recent changes in the Kremlin. Are my old sidekicks well? And are they having any particular trouble since liquidating the old gang?"

"How come you call that fat crumb, Broncov, your sidekick?" Charon frowned, trying to collect his wits in the dread presence. "He didn't ask about you. He took me for an illegitimate son of Joe Stalin's, so how would he know you and I are pals? I bought this red tie and hired a sleeping dictionary to catch onto the language better, and—"

"Your dictionary probably spilled things to the MVD."

"Not while my gold held out. Anyhow, those punks are way overrated. Tricky, maybe, and they lie good. They'd rather bump you off than eat breakfast."

"Purge is the word. The old comrades Broncov threw out a month ago now fully understand its meaning. How is the comrade?"

"Gosh, boss, I'm sick of hearing that word. They say it just before they knife you. Broncov's been busy, all right. Since taking over the Number One job he's been sending a lot of his best friends down this way. To keep Joe Stalin company, he told me. He looks fat even if Bill Shakespeare says this new lot—"

"I suppose he and his pals plied you with liquor," Nick said.

"They tried to drink me under the table." Charon cut a laugh in half. "Gosh, I durn near forgot. Y'know what the sidewinder, Bronco, babbled 'fore he passed out? Top drawer stuff. Only he and this Vichy Volonskyvich know about it. Seems Bronco learned, somehow, about your taking a vacation, so he's been torturing a lot of his friends into confessing they plotted agin 'im. He promised them an easy death if they'd carry on down here. How you like that?"

"The fools. What's his plan?"

"I ain't sure I got it all as his tongue got thicker from the vodka. But I learned Hell's full of comrades who've sworn to their god, Lee-Nine, they'll toss you to the wolves. They aim to pull Joe Stalin off his clinker-picking job and make him secretary here."

"Go on," Nick urged in ominous tones. "How?"

"They've swiped some new secret weapon and figure to obliterate you and every devil in authority so things will be organized nice and cozy when they finally get here. The Dumb—"

"Good report, Char." The new weapon did not bother Nick much, but from his

profound studies of atom smashing he decided anything can happen these days even to a top devil. He continued briskly: "Hereafter, sniff all your customers and make sure they don't *smell* like a Red. You know the aroma by now—sweet peas with an underlying stink—so keep your nose peeled. When you spot a comrade, radio-phone the guard. Those lads will know what to do you can bet your last ruble."

II

THE ROUSING welcome home Nick received as he climbed the hill to his great palace would have warmed his heart if he'd owned one.

"Thanks, boys and girls," he intoned in his best golden voice. "It's swell to be back among you. I haven't time for a speech now, but tune in to Channel Thirteen tomorrow evening for my fireside chat."

He wanted to take off for Moscow immediately, but decided to start the war by calling The Board. Also, the boys would be hurt if he didn't inspect what they'd done during his absence. After a hasty, Russian-style dinner of caviar, cabbage and cold horse with a gold flagon of vodka, he ordered Azazel, Flag Bearer and Statistician Chief, to call a meeting in the throne room.

Little Cletus waylaid his big boss. The scout among the celestials looked like a chubby cherub what with his dimpled cheeks and curly black hair, but he'd proved to be the trickiest imp south of the pearly gates. Knowing that Raphael had cajoled the little imp into revealing something of the improvements in Hades, Nick suspected treachery by one of his most trusted scouts.

"I hear you've been seeing Raphael!" he barked.

"Aw, I told 'im a pack of lies," Cletus scoffed. "Maybe Rafe figured out something; he's a smart apple. I told 'im everybody here is hot and unhappy like you ordered me to say if they ever caught me. I said our air-conditioning system goes haywire and that we were ripping out a thousand old boilers and coolers. Stuff like that."

"Don't lie to me, you ornery little brat. Okay to anybody else but not to me. I happened to hear Rafe talking to Mike, and they're wise to my plan of making Hell attractive."

"Well, hell," Cletus protested, "they saw Mulcie's gangs fixing the road. If Rafe and them extra-extrapopulated that dope to figure out the truth, why blame me?"

"We'll forget it," Nick said, vastly relieved to believe his scout had not betrayed him. "I have a job for you. I'm going to Moscow and I want your help. Light out as soon as you can. Requisition as much gold as you can handle by the usual translation method, and include a sack of polished diamonds and rubies. I'll tell Mammon it's okay when I arrange for my own supply."

"Okay, boss. Where do we meet? And what am I supposed to look like, and do?"

"Make yourself bellhop size and register at the Droshky Hotel as Prince Navi from Baghdad with fifty Persian oil wells to sell. Let 'em see your gold and jewels. And, remember, you'll account for any dough you toss away to women and bribes. Get going!"

Nick could see into the *near* future, at least, and he chuckled after Cletus vanished through the wall. "The little devil doesn't know what's in store for him."

In the throne room, sage old Beelzebub sat at the right of His Majesty's chair; huge Moloch with his evil grin and snaggle teeth, at the left. Tall, prissy Azazel, always acting important, planted Satan's flag and then sat down at a table opposite wide-shouldered Mulciber and handsome Belial. Charter members all of the original organization booted out of Heaven some eighteen million years ago when Nick's first but not last rebellion flopped.

After the customary ritual of renewing their vow to get back to Heaven, the gang sat down. Nick rapped the arm of his throne and glared at Chemos, the lustful one.

"Cheme," he said, "if you will quit flirting with Astarte, The Board will take up business."

Belial snickered when the culprits' red faces grew even redder, and after a wink at the court wit, Nick went on: "I intend to take off for Moscow after a quick look about with Mulcie and Belial. Incidentally, my compliments on the good work you did on the road."

"Egad, boss," Moloch complained, "why can't you stay home more and line things up for us?"

"Time enough—" Nick sniffed, scowled, then pointed toward a thick pillar near the rear of the big room. "I smell an interloper. Thammuz, Dagon, drag 'im up here! Beel, I fancy he's the one who forged your signature."

Beelzebub rose in anger when a shadowy figure darted for the door. The intruder moved as fast as any wraith but the two former gods were too quick for him. A brief struggle, then they dragged the eavesdropper before the throne where they held him upside down.

"It's the Paperhanger!" Beelzebub roared.

"I guessed that from Charon's description," Nick said calmly. "He's siding with the Reds again—Smell him? Stand up, Adolf, and hear your sentence!"

"I didn't do a thing, Your Majesty," Hitler began, but the hot, glowing eyes were

too much to face. His knees buckled and he sank, groveling, on the floor. "Didn't I send you millions of customers?" he wailed. "Haven't I done a good job of sweeping out and collecting garbage? Have a heart, Nick. I came in here to sweep, and how would I know about this private conference?"

"You talk about hearts?" Nick flared. "You hung around to listen. You forged Beelzebub's signature on my official paper, then put Charon in charge of the bridge, thinking he's too dumb to report any Commies coming here."

"I can prove—"

"You get the same chance at that which you gave people in Berlin. Down the chute with him, boys!"

The chute, connecting with a main one leading down to the burning lake, has a flap which Belial gleefully lifted. Since shades have no mass worth mentioning, the long duct acts like a department store vacuum tube.

"Oh, my beloved emperor, forgive me," Adolf yelled as he felt the suction. "I only wanted to organize a counter-revolution against the Communists and—"

"Ratting on your pals again, eh?" Nick sneered. "You stay in the burning lake a thousand earth years. You'll have plenty of time and company for your plotting. Let 'im rip!"

"No! I'll be forgotten—"

"No one remembers you now except as a dung heap." Nick turned a thumb downward, and the screeching shade vanished.

"Like a paper towel in a gale," Belial said as he let the flap clang shut. "How'd that creep get a job where he could snoop?"

"My fault," Beelzebub admitted. "He's a smooth talker. I saw him not long after you left, Your Majesty, when I went out to inspect the garbage incinerator. He had shaved off his dinky mustache and changed the color of his eyes, but I recognized him."

"It's okay, Beel." Nick patted the heavy shoulder of his top assistant. "The punk did us a left-handed favor in bringing things to a head." He told of how Charon had discovered the Red plot, then outlined his general plan.

"Those Commies can't stand ridicule," Nick summed up. "While I'm gone I want every Communist son tossed into the burning lake. Alarm all guards and tell them how to identify them—the fragrance of sweet peas with an underlying stink. No one in the USSR has used up a cake of soap in twenty years, and the perfume they add can't quite cover the BO."

"Must be a lot of Commies here," Mulciber commented. "How many guards have we, Azzy?"

Azazel, Statistics Chief, glanced at a roll of incombustible microfilm, and cleared his throat. He liked being called upon, and since he had the history of every shade while on Earth, he was the second most feared devil in Hades.

"After promoting the last batch who qualified for better jobs during the minimum millennium at common labor," Azazel said, "and adding—"

"Never mind the commercial!" grouchy Moloch roared. "Boss, how do we know all our guards are to be trusted?"

"We don't," Nick said. "When did we ever trust anybody? But our system of checkers, checkers checking the checkers, super-checkers on up to charter members, hasn't failed yet."

"If His Eminence, The Corpse-Snatcher, is satisfied," Azazel said, smoothing his sleek black hair, "I shall answer Prince Mulciber's polite question. We now have on the guards' roll exactly thirteen million four hundred—"

"That's close enough." Plainly pleased with his title, Moloch grinned at the big engineer. "Mulcie, why not build a chute straight up into Moscow? Save the boss trouble. He could take along a few gorillas and toss all those troublemaking stinkers straight into a hot bath."

Nick joined in the laughter. "Trouble with that, Molly, The BBU wouldn't stand for it. Only Death can give the final sting, and even he has to wait for the call. Our game is to play it cagey, stick by the few rules The BBU laid down, and stay out of trouble."

"How do you aim to handle those fellas?" Belial asked.

"Tell you after I do it." Nick guessed the fun-loving Propaganda Chief wanted to go along, but decided Cletus would be a better assistant in a plan already formulated. A boon companion, Belial, for any nefarious project. True, he had the quickest wit of the lot, but had worked over-long in the advertising racket, and many of his schemes resembled those of a hen on a hot griddle.

Nick turned to the secretary. "If you have all this down, Asta, I'll consider a motion to adjourn."

III

IT WAS AN hour short of midnight and snowing in Moscow when Nick landed in the printing room of Pravda, the official Red journal. As he had calculated, several sample newspapers had been run off.

Vichy Volonsky, a short, roundheaded man, had held up the rest of the issue while

he studied the content through his nose-glasses. Editor Blochensk and the mechanics anxiously awaited the great man's verdict. An unfavorable one meant the concentration camp for everybody. As Minister of Culture, Volonsky previewed all news personally when not running errands for Andrei Broncov at a meeting of the Inner Council.

The Number Two ranking man in the Kremlin clique frowned most frighteningly, then, moved by an odd compulsion, walked into a sound-insulated telephone room. He closed the door and stared at it stupidly while looking through the invisible Nick.

"Why did I come in here?" he said. "There's only the usual bilge in the sheet, nothing to telephone the fat slob about. Yet something made me."

"I did," Nick said, suddenly visible. "When I finish, Pravda will never be the same again. Lie down, Vichy!"

Volonsky opened his mouth, but Nick wiggled a finger, and no yell came out. In the wink of an eye, he squeezed out the Minister's shade and took its place.

"Pretty cramped and smelly quarters," Nick told himself, "but do or die for good old Hades."

"What? Who are you?" Volonsky's phantom teeth chattered. "You must be Nick, himself."

"Russia's patron saint till you amateurs took over. I have business with your boss. I mean Andrei Broncov. Not that it matters, but who conceived the idea of deposing Satan? Talk, *mujik*, and tell the truth. All of it."

"Blame Broncov, not me," Volonsky pleaded. "It was his scheme to kill off several thousand loyal party comrades. They got a choice: Be tortured to death, or die quickly and work for a revolution in Hell as soon as they arrived. Naturally—"

"I've heard enough, rat." Nick spat contemptuously, and a puff of gray smoke spread rapidly over walls, ceiling and floor. "That will hold you," he jeered, and opened the door. Aping the Minister's important waddle, he walked over to the great press.

Editor Blochensk stared with fear-bulged eyes. "Anything—anything wrong, Your Excellency comrade?" he asked shakily.

"Nothing I can't fix."

"Oh!" The editor clutched his throat. "Thank—uh—uh—"

"Never mind, I know Who you mean." Muttering words in Hell's silent language, Nick walked completely around the press. "It's perfect, Blochy. Don't let the content worry you. It's part of The PLAN. Roll out your papers and deliver them fast. Don't question anything. Orders from—you know."

Only minutes ahead of the new Volonsky, Cletus had entered the lobby of the Droschky Hotel on Red Square. The cherubic scout had obeyed orders and made himself bellhop size, large size. He didn't exactly resemble the one in the cigarette ad but he had the kid's twinkle in his dark eyes. And he had already latched onto a luscious blonde; or, more likely, Nick concluded, the reverse.

Having just registered as a Persian prince, Cletus again clanked down a large sack of gold pieces and a smaller one of jewels. "Put these diamonds and rubies into your best safe," he ordered in perfect Russian.

The clerk's eyes began popping, so did the blonde's and those of a score of spectators, including four hard-faced MVD boys.

"And I'll take care of you, Honey-Navi," the blonde said.

"Ah, you just love me for my two billion dollars," the imp retorted, and winked at her. As did Nick, Cletus could plainly see the twist operated on the MVD payroll as well as in her own interests.

"I'm selling out my fifty oil wells," he announced, "and I've come to town to see the head man, whoever he is today. I thought I'd let you dumb *mujiks* bid for the wells before I practically give them to Super-San Oil company for a measly two hundred million dollars."

"Of course, Prince Navi," the clerk said loudly. He nodded toward the four tough lads who, likewise, had not yet noticed the great Volonsky.

Nick rapped on the counter with his six-carat diamond ring. "How about a little service here, comrade?"

"One moment, comrade," the clerk said nervously.

"What you mean, one moment?" Nick roared. "I haven't flown all the way from New York to have a two-bit clerk tell me to wait. I represent Super-San Oil and I'm here to meet a Persian Prince Navi."

"Quiet, Amerikaner, till—Oh, Your Excellency Comrade Vychy Volonsky!" The mouth of the astonished clerk fell open. Then, fearful of making a wrong move in the Red game of dirty politics, he failed to guess why the great one should act as a miserable capitalist. "A thousand pardons, Your Excellency Comrade. What can I do for the beloved comrade? I didn't recognize you—"

"Hush, fool!" Nick looked toward Cletus just then gazing into the blonde's blue eyes.

The four MVD agents went into a quick huddle, then the one with a broken nose bowed to the fake Volonsky. "If Your Excellency Comrade will step aside with us, we'll explain this fool's mistake."

"Put him in the can and question him tomorrow," Nick snarled. "Anybody can see he's working for the filthy capitalists."

"Of course, Your Excellency Comrade." Broken nose and his three pals escorted

Nick to a chair beside a column. "I'm Lieutenant Putov of the MVD," he whispered. "We picked up this Prince Navi the instant he entered, and have been watching him."

"Skip the commercial," Nick said, almost laughing as he gave Moloch's favorite expression. "How come you didn't spot him at one of our airports?"

"He must have landed on an abandoned field in his private plane, Your Excellency Comrade." Lieutenant Putov glanced at the other three equally worried looking plug-uglies. "He's a prince, all right. Look at the gold and jewels he tossed to the clerk, several million dol—I mean, several billion rubles. We haven't checked his story, but he claims he's here to sell fifty Persian oil wells."

"I know *that*, idiot. Our spies in Baghdad advised us yesterday. That's why I pretend to be with the stinking Super-San—Wggh!"

"What are Your Excellency Comrade's wishes?"

"Get him away from that blonde before she ruins our plans."

"Ah, that's Nishka, one of us." Astonishment widened Putov's watery blue eyes. "Have you forgotten the night you and she drank—"

"You talk too much, Putov." Nick flapped a hand. "Get a car to take me and the prince to the Kremlin. Hurry it! Comrade Andrei Broncov and I have a Council meeting at midnight. You three, bring the prince to me here."

Cletus and Nishka had withdrawn to a sofa in an alcove off the lobby. Without effort, Nick could see them and hear the female agent saying: "How do I know you have all that money, Navi-Honey? I'll bet you brought gilt lead and fake jewels just to impress me."

"No, but I've been to America," Cletus bragged, knowing well his boss would be listening. "So be nice and I'll prove they're real. I've been everywhere but this lousy place. I even lived in Egypt."

"Talk some Egyptian for me," Nishka wheedled.

"I've forgotten most of it," Cletus said, cannily dodging the trap. "But I once made a study of the ancient language." He ripped out a stream of what had once been his native tongue. Then, partly at least to test Nishka's knowledge, he added in English, "How's for looking at my room before we go out on the town?"

"Wha-at? Why, you bad boy!" The girl winked at her three fellow agents coming toward them in a crablike walk, then spoke in Cletus' ear: "It's the LAW, Navi-Honey, but don't let them worry you. Little Nishka will stay with you—to the limit."

Cletus leered at her and rose to accompany the MVD to the front of the lobby. He and Nick put on an act, then went to the street followed by a chattering crowd.

Once inside the sleek car Putov had conjured up, Nick said: "The heap is wired so we'll talk only in Hell language."

IV

IT WASN'T FAR to the grim walls of the Kremlin, and as the big car purred across the snowy, radio-stricken square, Nick gave Cletus the main points of his plan. Obviously warned, the police gave a snappy salute and let the car enter the courtyard. A few moments later, Hell's emissaries were zooming through long corridors and up to the second floor; walking the last fifty yards.

Six husky guards armed with sub-machine guns opened the great doors to the Premier's private study. "He's been asking for you," a huge guard whispered.

"He would, the brainless pup," Nick snarled, reading the big fellow's thoughts. A Volonsky man called Gorkzy. "Don't announce us."

Inside the great room, at a desk almost large enough for a roller skating rink, Andrei Broncov appeared to be studying a document. True executive, he went on reading till Nick coughed.

"Your Excellency Comrade Broncov, I have brought Prince Navi. Where is the rest of the Council?"

"Ah!" Broncov's plump face widened in a smile for Cletus. "This is an honor, Your Highness. I trust you will pardon my preoccupation with affairs of state. They're in a mess—as are all capitals when the old order departs. I supposed you'd be announced." Andrei Broncov glared at the pseudo Volonsky and whispered in a dialect, "The Council is waiting below, fool."

"Nuts," Cletus said. "Talk English, will you? I can hardly understand your outlandish language. Or, speak Persian."

"My knowledge of your native tongue is not good, but I'm quite at home in English or Amerikaner. A Russian invented—"

"Yeah, he knows," Nick cut in. "Forget the malarkey, Bronco. This lad is here on business and has no time for our phoney hooptedo. From his grandfather, the old Shah, he inherited fifty of the richest oil wells in Asia, and he's giving us a chance to bid on them instead of carrying on a, quote, cold, unquote, war, and steal—"

"I understand," Broncov said through his big teeth. His lips tightened in his rage over Volonsky's direct speech, but he managed to say fairly suavely: "Your Highness, we appreciate your giving us a chance to buy your wells. Surely, a banquet is in order."

"No, I want to get out of this place. It's too cold."

Nick peered over his Volonsky nose-glasses. "How much, kid? No fooling."
"Volonsky!" Broncov barked. "Mind your speech. I'll handle this little deal. You're excused."

"Uh-uh." Nick grinned. "I stay for *my* cut."

"You both look like a couple of crooks to me," said the young prince. "I want two hundred million dollars—in gold."

Broncov's hand shook as he reached for a row of buttons. "How about a bit of tea and cakes, or, perhaps something stronger before we discuss this matter with the Council? They're waiting just below us, and I'd like to present the deal already consummated."

"Got any Old Style Lager around?" Cletus asked.

"We have some good Bavarian beer, a stock we—ah—bought some time ago."

"I've heard how much you paid the Heinies. The beer I want is made in Wisconsin, USA, so I think I'll fly over there tonight. Super-San Oil keeps begging me to visit their country. Offered me two hundred million for my wells but only half in gold. I want all gold, and I won't discuss any other terms."

"Bungler!" Broncov whispered in dialect. "Why didn't you get him drunk, first? Without oil we can't carry on this cold war or kid the peasants much longer. Where in hell could we get even two hundred dollars in gold?"

"Go to hell and find all you want," Nick said with a wicked grin.

"I understood what you high-binders said," Cletus put in. "My cousin told me before I left home Communist clucks don't savvy Saturday from Sunday. Everybody knows you top boys have stolen everything not nailed down, and have stashed it away against the time your own people kick out Communism for good."

"Oh, come, Prince Navi, I don't understand how such an evil story started. Our people wouldn't dare—"

"Wouldn't they?" Cletus laughed nastily. "We have spies too, and we know your common herd would settle for anything else. Most of them want their church and their Tsar back, bad as he was."

"Bah! The capitalist press started that myth."

"Why, Bronco," Nick protested, "you can read that story in Pravda, 'The Organ of Truth.'" The fake Minister of Culture cleared his throat to keep from laughing when the glowering Premier began thinking of various ways to torture unsympathetic comrades. In silent Hell language, Nick added: "Good work, Cleet. I'll take it from here."

"Lies put out by the war mongerers of Wall Street," Broncov shouted. He continued raving, but Nick no longer listened.

Sounds outside the window told him time had begun pressing. He shook the hat he'd been carrying. "Gold, is it you want, Prince Navi? You think we have none? How about this?"

A glittering gold piece tinkled on the floor and rolled toward the amazed Red Premier. Puffing, he bent over and scooped up a newly minted coin the size of the American gold eagle. "It's a new issue—I—never mind. We have lots more where this came from, haven't we, comrade Vychy?"

"I'll say," Nick said. "Watch!"

Gold pieces continued falling from the hat, one by one, then in a steady stream. Stunned, Broncov clutched his throat, muttering: "It can't be true. Miracles don't happen."

He watched in silence while his Minister of Culture made a pile of gold coins four feet high. When the floor timbers began creaking, Nick made another similar heap; then, others, till the thick walls began bulging inward.

"Stop!" Broncov cried. "A couple of tons is enough." Eyes now popping, he waved his arms as the floor sagged under fifty times that weight. "There's the two hundred million for you, Prince. The rest is for—us. We'll sign the papers in another room."

Ignoring frightened cries, Nick made more piles of gold next to the windows. Outside on Red Square, people were running in all directions, shouting and waving newspapers. A cannon roared. A hundred or more machine guns began rattling. Plainly, the bullets were not fired at any one, for the people were laughing and weeping, singing and dancing.

"Come here and have a look, Bronco," Nick suggested.

"It's—a trick, a revolution," Broncov panted. "Damn you, Volonsky, you started it." He snatched a heavy revolver from his desk and fired it at Nick without warning.

The false Volonsky laughed when five of the slugs bounced off the invisible shield around him. A sixth bullet splintered the window glass. The other five returned and struck the raging Red boss, cutting his face and arms enough to bring streams of blood. He dashed for the door but collided with the six guards who burst into the room.

Broncov wiped off some of the blood running into his eyes well enough to see all six waving copies of Pravda. "What's going on here?" he screamed.

"Read about it in Pravda," bellowed Gorkzy, the huge guard. "It always prints the truth—you've taught us."

"What truth?" quavered the Premier. "Put down those guns!"

"Oh, no. Pravda says you were shot trying to escape, and for once it really told the truth." Implacably, the big guard brought up his Tommy-gun and let it rattle.

The stricken Red leader took two steps backward and fell to the floor as the other

five guns opened up on him in a hell's chatter of death. His falling weight added the last straw to the overstrained floor timbers. They gave way in a roar, and a hundred tons of yellow gold streamed downward in a cataclysmic wave of wealth and death to the Council members below.

Poised on air, Nick and Cletus became invisible to mortal eyes. "That wraps it, Cleet. Let's see how the boys take it."

The six guards were peering down into the ruin below, and at some of the fortune still clinging to the slanting floor.

"Great Nicholas!" Gorkzy yelled. "Gold!"

"Just like Pravda says," howled another man. "Listen! It says: 'Volonsky and the mysterious Persian prince have disappeared. Broncov executed by heroic guards. All members of the once-feared Inner Council crushed almost beyond recognition when floor crashed upon them from the weight of the gold brought by the prince.'"

"And look at this!" roared the big Gorkzy. "'All soldiers and police throw down their arms. Refuse to shoot the people shouting they want their Tsar and church back. Satellite countries freed of the odious Communist yoke. Concentration camps, collective farming, and slave labor abolished. All spies and saboteurs recalled to Moscow for trial and punishment. Ivan, the Tsar, to issue proclamation.'"

"What Tsar?" The six stared stupidly at one another.

One man picked up a shiny gold piece and tested it with his teeth. "The Bolsheviks murdered the old goat and all his family. How can this be?"

"He probably left plenty of bastards," another man hazarded.

"I get it," Gorkzy shouted. "Prince Navi is a grandson. His name is N-a-v-i—Ivan spelled backward. Why, the smart little devil! And now he's here some place to reign over us."

"Oh, no," Cletus protested as he and Nick slithered through the wall. "You aren't going to make me rule over these dopes, boss. Have a heart. It's cold here, and the whole country stinks."

"That's your punishment, m'lad, for letting Raphael and Michael catch onto you. You can't prowl around Heaven just now so you'll have to work here in Hell's Rear Annex for a while. Look!" Nick thumbed one of the gold pieces. "Your image stamped on all of them. Also 'Ivan—Tsar. In God We Trust.'"

"Okay," Cletus said, shuffling a little, then brightening. "Anyhow, I'll have Nishka."

"Not if the common folks find out she worked for the MVD." As if to punctuate Nick's prophesy, a dozen bombs exploded inside police headquarters.

"Heck!" Cletus shrugged resignedly. "Well, lend me that hat, and conjure up a couple million tons of soap—not perfumed."

Roaring with laughter, Nick promised to spread soap over the entire country, then watched the little imp zooming back and forth across Red Square—sprinkling the snowy pavement with Ivan-Tsar pieces of gold.

The Satanic laughter lasted till Nick had whizzed half way across Chaos. "That caper," he told himself gleefully, "will fool The BBU about my plan. Or, will it? Great Hades! I did a *good* deed."

A million miles above the wastes of Chaos, he remembered he still wore Volonsky whose shade would still be imprisoned in the Pravda room. Nick shucked out of his unpleasant quarters, halted to watch the thing spinning downward.

"Cheer up, Vych," he laughed. "Next century I'll gather up what's left and give it back to you—maybe."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SATAN AND THE COMRADES ***

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