

THE SAME TO YOU DOUBLED



ROBERT SHECKLEY

Robert Sheckley is a writer who is constantly pursuing the unknown in his writing, making his reader rethink the most ordinary situations. He has written almost twenty novels, and has collaborated with such authors as Harry Harrison and the late Roger Zelazny. He was the fiction editor of *Omni* magazine from 1980 to 1982 and has also written many television and radio plays. A winner of the Jupiter Award, he lives in Oregon. "The Same to You Doubled" is a wish-fulfillment story with the unusual twist he is known for.



In New York, it never fails, the doorbell rings just when you've plopped down onto the couch for a well-deserved snooze. Now, a person of character would say, "To hell with that, a man's home is his castle and they can slide any telegrams under the door." But if you're like Edelstein, not particularly strong on character, then you think to yourself that maybe it's the blonde from 12C who has come up to borrow a jar of chili powder. Or it could even be some crazy film producer who wants to make a movie based on the letters you've been sending your mother in Santa Monica. (And why not; don't they make movies out of worse material than that?)

Yet this time, Edelstein had really decided not to answer the bell. Lying on the couch, his eyes still closed, he called out, "I don't want any."

"Yes you do," a voice from the other side of the door replied.

"I've got all the encyclopedias, brushes, and waterless cookery I need," Edelstein called back wearily. "Whatever you've got, I've got it already."

"Look," the voice said, "I'm not selling anything. I want to give you something."

Edelstein smiled the thin, sour smile of the New Yorker who knows that if someone made him a gift of a package of genuine, unmarked \$20 bills, he'd still somehow end up having to pay for it.

"If it's *free*," Edelstein answered, "then I *definitely* can't afford it."

"But I mean *really* free," the voice said. "I mean free that it won't cost you anything now or ever."

"I'm not interested," Edelstein replied, admiring his firmness of character.

The voice did not answer.

Edelstein called out, "Hey, if you're still there, please go away."

"My dear Mr. Edelstein," the voice said, "cynicism is merely a form of naïvete. Mr. Edelstein, wisdom is discrimination."

"He gives me lectures now," Edelstein said to the wall.

"All right," the voice said, "forget the whole thing, keep your cynicism and your racial prejudice; do I need this kind of trouble?"

"Just a minute," Edelstein answered. "What makes you think I'm prejudiced?"

"Let's not crap around," the voice said. "If I was raising funds for Hadassah or selling Israel bonds, it

would have been different. But, obviously, I am what I am, so excuse me for living."

"Not so fast," Edelstein said. "As far as I'm concerned, you're just a voice from the other side of the door. For all I know, you could be Catholic or Seventh-Day Adventist or even Jewish."

"*You knew*," the voice responded.

"Mister, I swear to you—"

"Look," the voice said, "it doesn't matter, I come up against a lot of this kind of thing. Good-bye, Mr. Edelstein."

"Just a minute," Edelstein replied.

He cursed himself for a fool. How often had he fallen for some huckster's line, ending up, for example, paying \$9.98 for an illustrated two-volume *Sexual History of Mankind*, which his friend Manowitz had pointed out he could have bought in any Marboro bookstore for \$2.98?

But the voice was right. Edelstein had somehow known that he was dealing with a goy.

And the voice would go away thinking, *The Jews, they think they're better than anyone else*. Further, he would tell this to his bigoted friends at the next meeting of the Elks or the Knights of Columbus, and there it would be, another black eye for the Jews.

"I do have a weak character," Edelstein thought sadly.

He called out, "All right! You can come in! But I warn you from the start, I am not going to buy anything."

He pulled himself to his feet and started toward the door. Then he stopped, for the voice had replied, "Thank you very much," and then a man had walked through the closed, double-locked wooden door.

The man was of medium height, nicely dressed in a gray pinstripe modified Edwardian suit. His cordovan boots were highly polished. He was black, carried a briefcase, and he had stepped through Edelstein's door as if it had been made of Jell-O.

"Just a minute, stop, hold on one minute," Edelstein said. He found that he was clasping both of his hands together and his heart was beating unpleasantly fast.

The man stood perfectly still and at his ease, one yard within the apartment. Edelstein started to breathe again. He said, "Sorry, I just had a brief attack, a kind of hallucination—"

"Want to see me do it again?" the man asked.

"My God, no! So you *did* walk through the door! Oh, God, I think I'm in trouble."

Edelstein went back to the couch and sat down heavily. The man sat down in a nearby chair.

"What is this all about?" Edelstein whispered.

"I do the door thing to save time," the man said. "It usually closes the credulity gap. My name is Charles Sitwell. I am a field man for the Devil."

Edelstein believed him. He tried to think of a prayer, but all he could remember was the one he used to say over bread in the summer camp he had attended when he was a boy. It probably wouldn't help. He also knew the Lord's Prayer, but that wasn't even his religion. Perhaps the salute to the flag . . .

"Don't get all worked up," Sitwell said. "I'm not here after your soul or any old-fashioned crap like that."

"How can I believe you?" Edelstein asked.

"Figure it out for yourself," Sitwell told him. "Consider only the war aspect. Nothing but rebellions and revolutions for the past fifty years or so. For us, that means an unprecedented supply of condemned Americans, Viet Cong, Nigerians, Biafrans. Indonesians, South Africans, Russians, Indians, Pakistanis, and Arabs. Israelis, too, I'm sorry to tell you. Also, we're pulling in more Chinese than usual, and just recently, we've begun to get plenty of action on the South American market. Speaking frankly, Mr. Edelstein, we're overloaded with souls. If another war starts this year, we'll have to declare an amnesty on venial sins."

Edelstein thought it over. "Then you're really not here to take me to hell?"

"Hell, no!" Sitwell said. "I told you, our waiting list is longer than for Peter Cooper Village; we hardly have any room left in limbo."

"Well . . . Then why are you here?"

Sitwell crossed his legs and leaned forward earnestly. "Mr. Edelstein, you have to understand that hell is very much like U.S. Steel or ITT. We're a big outfit and we're more or less a monopoly. But, like any really big corporation, we are imbued with the ideal of public service and we like to be well thought of."

"Makes sense," Edelstein said.

"But, unlike Ford, we can't very well establish a foundation and start giving out scholarships and work grants. People wouldn't understand. For the same reason, we can't start building model cities or fighting pollution. We can't even throw up a dam in Afghanistan without someone questioning our motives."

"I see where it could be a problem," Edelstein admitted.

"Yet we like to do something. So, from time to time, but especially now, with business so good, we like to distribute a small bonus to a random selection of potential customers."

"Customer? Me?"

"No one is calling you a sinner," Sitwell pointed out. "I said *potential*—which means everybody."

"Oh . . . What kind of bonus?"

"Three wishes," Sitwell said briskly. "That's the traditional form."

"Let me see if I've got this straight," Edelstein said. "I can have any three wishes I want? With no penalty, no secret ifs and buts?"

"There is one but," Sitwell said.

"I knew it," Edelstein said.

"It's simple enough. Whatever you wish for, your worst enemy gets double."

Edelstein thought about that. "So if I asked for a million dollars—"

"Your worst enemy would get two million dollars."

"And if I asked for pneumonia?"

"Your worst enemy would get double pneumonia."

Edelstein pursed his lips and shook his head. "Look, not that I mean to tell you people how to run your business, but I hope you realize that you endanger customer goodwill with a clause like that."

"It's a risk, Mr. Edelstein, but absolutely necessary on a couple of counts," Sitwell said. "You see, the clause is a psychic feedback device that acts to maintain homeostasis."

"Sorry, I'm not following you," Edelstein answered.

"Let me put it this way. The clause acts to reduce the power of the three wishes and, thus, to keep things reasonably normal. A wish is an extremely strong instrument, you know."

"I can imagine," Edelstein said. "Is there a second reason?"

"You should have guessed it already," Sitwell said, baring exceptionally white teeth in an approximation of a smile. "Clauses like that are our trademark. That's how you know it's a genuine hellish product."

"I see, I see," Edelstein said. "Well, I'm going to need some time to think about this."

"The offer is good for thirty days," Sitwell said, standing up. "When you want to make a wish, simply state it—clearly and loudly. I'll tend to the rest."

Sitwell walked to the door. Edelstein said, "There's only one problem I think I should mention."

"What's that?" Sitwell asked.

"Well, it just so happens that I don't have a worst enemy. In fact, I don't have an enemy in the world."

Sitwell laughed hard, then wiped his eyes with a mauve handkerchief. "Edelstein," he said, "you're really too much! Not an enemy in the world! What about your cousin Seymour, who you wouldn't lend five hundred dollars to, to start a dry-cleaning business? Is he a friend all of a sudden?"

"I hadn't thought about Seymour," Edelstein answered.

"And what about Mrs. Abramowitz, who spits at the mention of your name, because you wouldn't marry her Marjorie? What about Tom Cassidy in apartment 1C of this building, who has a complete collection of Goebbels' speeches and dreams every night of killing all of the Jews in the world, beginning with you? . . . Hey, are you all right?"

Edelstein, sitting on the couch, had gone white and his hands were clasped tightly together again.

"I never realized," he said.

"No one realizes," Sitwell said. "Look, take it easy, six or seven enemies is nothing; I can assure you that you're well below average, hatewise."

"Who else?" Edelstein asked, breathing heavily.

"I'm not going to tell you," Sitwell said. "It would be needless aggravation."

"But I have to know who is my worst enemy! Is it Cassidy? Do you think I should buy a gun?"

Sitwell shook his head. "Cassidy is a harmless, half-witted lunatic. He'll never lift a finger, you have my word on that. Your worst enemy is a man named Edward Samuel Manowitz."

"You're sure of that?" Edelstein asked incredulously.

"Completely sure."

"But Manowitz happens to be my best friend."

"Also your worst enemy," Sitwell replied. "Sometimes it works like that. Goodbye, Mr. Edelstein, and good luck with your three wishes."

"Wait!" Edelstein cried. He wanted to ask a million questions; but he was embarrassed and he asked only, "How can it be that hell is so crowded?"

"Because only heaven is infinite," Sitwell told him.

"You know about heaven, too?"

"Of course. It's the parent corporation. But now I really must be getting along. I have an appointment in Poughkeepsie. Good luck, Mr. Edelstein."

Sitwell waved and turned and walked out through the locked solid door.

Edelstein sat perfectly still for five minutes. He thought about Eddie Manowitz. His worst enemy! That was laughable; hell had really gotten its wires crossed on that piece of information. He had known Manowitz for twenty years, saw him nearly every day, played chess and gin rummy with him. They went for walks together, saw movies together, at least one night a week they ate dinner together.

It was true, of course, that Manowitz could sometimes open up a big mouth and overstep the boundaries of good taste.

Sometimes Manowitz could be downright rude.

To be perfectly honest, Manowitz had, on more than one occasion, been insulting.

"But we're *friends*," Edelstein said to himself. "We *are* friends, aren't we?"

There was an easy way to test it, he realized. He could wish for \$1,000,000. That would give Manowitz \$2,000,000. But so what? Would he, a wealthy man, care that his best friend was wealthier?

Yes! He would care! He damned well would care! It would eat his life away if a wise guy like Manowitz got rich on Edelstein's wish.

"My God!" Edelstein thought. "An hour ago, I was a poor but contented man. Now I have three wishes and an enemy."

He found that he was twisting his hands together again. He shook his head. This was going to need some thought.

In the next week, Edelstein managed to get a leave of absence from his job and sat day and night with a pen and pad in his hand. At first, he couldn't get his mind off castles. Castles seemed to *go* with wishes.

But, on second thought, it was not a simple matter. Taking an average dream castle with a ten-foot-thick stone wall, grounds and the rest, one had to consider the matter of upkeep. There was heating to worry about, the cost of several servants, because anything less would look ridiculous.

So it came at last to a matter of money.

I could keep up a pretty decent castle on \$2000 a week, Edelstein thought, jotting figures down rapidly on his pad.

But that would mean that Manowitz would be maintaining two castles on \$4000 a week!

By the second week, Edelstein had gotten past castles and was speculating feverishly on the endless possibilities and combinations of travel. Would it be too much to ask for a cruise around the world? Perhaps it would; he wasn't even sure he was up to it. Surely he could accept a summer in Europe? Even a two-week vacation at the Fontainebleau in Miami Beach to rest his nerves.

But Manowitz would get two vacations! If Edelstein stayed at the Fontainebleau, Manowitz would have a penthouse suite at the Key Largo Colony Club. Twice.

It was almost better to stay poor and to keep Manowitz deprived.

Almost, but not quite.

During the final week, Edelstein was getting angry and desperate, even cynical. He said to himself, I'm an idiot, how do I know that there's anything to this? So Sitwell could walk through doors; does that make him a magician? Maybe I've been worried about nothing.

He surprised himself by standing up abruptly and saying, in a loud, firm voice, "I want twenty thousand dollars and I want it right now."

He felt a gentle tug at his right buttock. He pulled out his wallet. Inside it, he found a certified check made out to him for \$20,000.

He went down to his bank and cashed the check, trembling, certain that the police would grab him. The manager looked at the check and initialed it. The teller asked him what denominations he wanted it in. Edelstein told the teller to credit it to his account.

As he left the bank, Manowitz came rushing in, an expression of fear, joy and bewilderment on his face.

Edelstein hurried home before Manowitz could speak to him. He had a pain in his stomach for the rest of the day.

Idiot! He had asked for only a lousy \$20,000. But Manowitz had gotten \$40,000!

A man could die from the aggravation.

Edelstein spent his days alternating between apathy and rage. That pain in the stomach had come back, which meant that he was probably giving himself an ulcer.

It was all so damned unfair! Did he have to push himself into an early grave, worrying about Manowitz?

Yes!

For now he realized that Manowitz was really his enemy and that the thought of enriching his enemy was literally killing him.

He thought about that and then said to himself, Edelstein, listen to me; you can't go on like this, you must get some satisfaction!

But how?

He paced up and down his apartment. The pain was definitely an ulcer; what else could it be?

Then it came to him. Edelstein stopped pacing. His eyes rolled wildly and, seizing paper and pencil, he made some lightning calculations. When he finished, he was flushed, excited—happy for the first time

since Sitwell's visit.

He stood up. He shouted, "I want six hundred pounds of chopped chicken liver and I want it at once!"

The caterers began to arrive within five minutes.

Edelstein ate several giant portions of chopped chicken liver, stored two pounds of it in his refrigerator and sold most of the rest to a caterer at half price, making over \$700 on the deal. The janitor had to take away seventy-five pounds that had been overlooked. Edelstein had a good laugh at the thought of Manowitz standing in his apartment up to his neck in chopped chicken liver.

His enjoyment was short-lived. He learned that Manowitz had kept ten pounds for himself (the man always had had a gross appetite), presented five pounds to a drab little widow he was trying to make an impression on and sold the rest back to the caterer for one third off, earning over \$2000.

I am the world's prize imbecile, Edelstein thought. For a minute's stupid satisfaction, I gave up a wish worth conservatively \$100,000,000. And what do I get out of it? Two pounds of chopped chicken liver, a few hundred dollars and the lifelong friendship of my janitor!

He knew he was killing himself from sheer brute aggravation.

He was down to one wish now.

And now it was *crucial* that he spend that final wish wisely. But he had to ask for something that he wanted desperately—something that Manowitz would *not* like at all.

Four weeks had gone by. One day, Edelstein realized glumly that his time was just about up. He had racked his brain, only to confirm his worst suspicions: Manowitz liked everything that he liked. Manowitz liked castles, women, wealth, cars, vacations, wine, music, food. Whatever you named, Manowitz the copycat liked it.

Then he remembered: Manowitz, by some strange quirk of the taste buds, could not abide lox.

But Edelstein didn't like lox, either, not even Nova Scotia.

Edelstein prayed: Dear God, who is in charge of hell and heaven, I have had three wishes and used two miserably. Listen, God, I don't mean to be ungrateful, but I ask you, if a man happens to be granted three wishes, shouldn't he be able to do better for himself than I have done? Shouldn't he be able to have something good happen to him without filling the pockets of Manowitz, his worst enemy, who does nothing but collect double with no effort or pain?

The final hour arrived. Edelstein grew calm, in the manner of a man who had accepted his fate. He realized that his hatred of Manowitz was futile, unworthy of him. With a new and sweet serenity, he said to himself, I am now going to ask for what I, Edelstein, personally want. If Manowitz has to go along for the ride, it simply can't be helped.

Edelstein stood up very straight. He said, "This is my last wish. I've been a bachelor too long. What I want is a woman whom I can marry. She should be about five feet, four inches tall, weigh about 115 pounds, shapely, of course, and with naturally blond hair. She should be intelligent, practical, in love with me, Jewish, of course, but sensual and fun-loving—"

The Edelstein mind suddenly moved into high gear!

"And *especially*," he added, "she should be—I don't know quite how to put this—she should be the *most*, the *maximum*, that I want and can handle, speaking now in a purely sexual sense. You understand what I mean, Sitwell? Delicacy forbids that I should spell it out more specifically than that, but if the matter must be explained to you . . ."

There was a light, somehow *sexual* tapping at the door. Edelstein went to answer it, chuckling to himself. Over twenty thousand dollars, two pounds of chopped chicken liver and now this! Manowitz, he thought, I have you now: Double the most a man wants is something I probably shouldn't have wished on my worst enemy, but I did.