

God and Mr. Slatterman

by Mike Resnick

So God, He decides to give it His best shot, and He says, "Thou hast made mockery of My name for the last time!"

And Mr. Slatterman, he pretends he doesn't even notice that the craps table is missing and all the people have vanished, and he looks God full in the eye, and he says, "I didn't take your name in vain, especially if you're who I think you are, and besides, if you will just take the trouble to check the record you will find that my precise words were 'Baby needs a new pair of shoes!'"

And God glares at him, and says, very stentorously, "How darest thou speak to Me in such a tone of voice!"

And Mr. Slatterman, whose eyes are all squinched up because of how bright the Almighty is, he comes right back bold as you please, and says, "Well, just you be careful about who you go around of accusing of things they didn't rightly do, and what's more, I don't think I believe in you."

"What you believe is of no import," said God, Who has a feeling that He is not getting His point across. "You have repeatedly broken My Sabbath and disobeyed My laws that I gave unto Moses. Thou are an abomination unto My sight!"

"Now just hold it right there!" snaps Mr. Slatterman. "Bartenders got a right to live too, you know, and if you weren't so all-fired anxious to make everyone suffer the tortures of the damned, or at least as close an approximation as the Internal Revenue Service can whip up on short notice, then maybe I wouldn't be so damned busy on your day off, and could even get in a little golf."

Now, this really rankles God, and suddenly He's not just pretending to be mad anymore, and He bellows, "Thou art -- "

"I don't want to put you off or anything," interrupts Mr. Slatterman, who is feeling just a little bit disoriented, "but could you kind of go a little easy on the 'Thee' and 'Thou' bit?"

God, He stared at Mr. Slatterman and utters a tired little sigh, and after He gets His composure back He starts again. "Bernard Slatterman," He says in His best Sunday go-to-meeting voice, "you have squandered your life in pursuit of earthly pleasures, and your immortal soul stands in serious danger of being damned to everlasting perdition."

"That's better," said Mr. Slatterman, the dizziness starting to subside. "And considering who you are and all, you can call me Bernie."

"Do you not understand what I am saying to you?" demands God in stentorian tones.

"Seems to me that this is all beside the point, inasmuch as I'm already dead," says Mr. Slatterman. "And while we're on the subject, you picked a mighty cruel and unfeeling moment to take me off that mortal coil."

"You are not dead."

Mr. Slatterman resists the urge to curse, and settles for a disapproving scowl instead. "Do you mean to stand there and tell me, bold as brass, that you just plucked me out of that game on a whim, with three Big Ones riding on the roll and me just about to dish up a natural six?"

"It will be a seven," rumbles God harshly.

"Four and three or five and two?" demands Mr. Slatterman promptly.

"Six and one," replied God, Who feels Himself definitely losing control of the conversation.

"I don't believe it," says Mr. Slatterman.

"I never lie," says God, drawing Himself up to His full height, which is considerable.

"Well, that's a hell of a note!" exclaims Mr. Slatterman. "How can you do something like that to a nice guy like me, who never did anybody any harm, and is fashioned in your own image to boot?"

And God, Who wishes He had made Man a little more like a horned toad or maybe a koala bear so He would stop hearing that excuse over and over again, He says, "You are not as much in My image as some, and now that I come to reflect upon it, I cannot recall having created you at all."

And Mr. Slatterman, he gets that old predatory look around his eyes, and he says, "Well, make up your mind. Did you create me or didn't you?"

"Well, yes, of course I did," says God, backing off a bit. "I just said I couldn't remember doing it."

"I thought so!" says Mr. Slatterman triumphantly. "You got to get up pretty early in the morning to put one over on Bernie Slatterman!" He scratches his head while God just stares at him. "Where were we now?" he mutters. "Oh, yeah, I remember. Why do you have it in for me? Why aren't you giving this warning to killers and bigamists and corporate lawyers and other degenerates?"

"Because they are all predestined to serve in the fiery pits of hell, while you have the germ of Redemption within your soul."

Mr. Slatterman gives God a kind of skeptical look. "You sure this ain't all because you need some expert advice on the right kind of wine to buy?" he asks.

"It is because you are flesh of My flesh and spirit of My spirit, and I have unbounded love and compassion for all of My children." God pauses. "It can get to be quite a strain at times," He admits.

Then Mr. Slatterman, he gets a look on his face like God has just said something a little bit off-color, and he takes a couple of steps backward. "Let's you and my try to keep this here love and compassion under wraps while we talk a little business," he says. "Especially the love," he adds meaningfully.

"You have an exceptionally vile mind," says God disgustedly.

"Yeah?" shoots back Mr. Slatterman. "Well, I didn't molest no virgin or have no out-of-wedlock baby." Then he lowers his voice and says, kind of confidentially, "Someday you got to tell me how you did it. You see, there's this girl that comes by the tavern every Saturday night who insists that she's saving it for her wedding night, and -- "

"Enough!" screams God, Who is getting a little puffy around the face and wondering how He'd got all the way from talking about Mr. Slatterman's soul to discussing a very personal incident that had happened a long time ago, when He was a lot younger and more impetuous.

Anyway, Mr. Slatterman, he shrugs and looks like he expected this kind of reaction all along, and he says, "Well, okay, if you're going to be like that about it -- but don't you go asking me for no free advice on how to mix drinks. After all, fair is fair."

God concludes that He's really getting a little old for this kind of thing, but decides to take one last crack at it, so He says, "Listen to me, Bernard Slatterman. Your soul is at risk, and I am giving you a chance to redeem it."

"You make Heaven sound kind of like a pawn shop," says Mr. Slatterman.

"Heaven is absolute perfection," says God sternly. "I made it."

Mr. Slatterman looks kind of dubious. "Well, the one don't necessarily lead to the other," he says. "You made Phoenix, Arizona, too, and you probably had more than a little to do with the Chicago White Sox."

"Oh, ye of little faith," mumbles God, Who realizes that this is a pretty feeble things to say, but He is having more and more difficulty trying to get a handle on the conversation.

"You mind if I smoke?" asks Mr. Slatterman, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a pack of Camels.

God nods His head absently, and Mr. Slatterman lights up. Then, remembering his manners, he offers a cigarette to God.

"Certainly not!" said the Almighty, and Mr. Slatterman shrugs and puts the pack back in his pocket.

"So," he says, deciding that maybe God isn't such a bad guy after all, and has probably just been working too hard, "you've got a nice spread, have you?"

"I beg your pardon?" says God, puzzled.

"Heaven," explains Mr. Slatterman. "That is what we're talking about, isn't it?"

Now God. He figures it's easier to answer Mr. Slatterman than to keep trying to steer the talk back on track, and besides, He's not sure that Mr. Slatterman's soul is worth all that much more effort anyway, so He says, "Paradise is magnificent."

"Big place?" continues Mr. Slatterman.

"Vaster than the mind of Man can possible imagine," says God, with a touch of justifiable pride.

"Yeah? How many acres do you keep in cash crops?" asks Mr. Slatterman.

God looks bewildered. "None," He says, with the uneasy feeling that He has lost touch with the mainstream of Modern Thought.

"It's all pasture, then?" says Mr. Slatterman, whose face clearly implies that this is a pretty inefficient set-up.

"The landscape of Heaven is a pastoral wonderland," explains God defensively.

Mr. Slatterman frowns. "Well, I'm sure it's pretty as all get-out," he says. "But soybeans are up thirty percent this year."

"If I want soybeans, I can create soybeans," says God with just a trace of petulance.

Mr. Slatterman looks unimpressed. "Yeah," he says, "but you still got to harvest and process them. How much do you pay your help?"

"The cherubim toil for free," says God wearily, wondering how much longer this will go on.

"For free?" repeated Mr. Slatterman, and even God can see, one businessman to another, that Mr. Slatterman is very impressed. "Do the authorities know about this?"

God sighs heavily. "I _am_ the authority," He says.

Mr. Slatterman nods his head. "Right," he says. "I forgot about that." His cigarette goes out and he lights up another. "What about the Devil?" he asks.

God just stares at him, kind of confused. "I give up," He says at last. "What _about_ the Devil?"

"Well," says Mr. Slatterman, "old Satan's toiling in the pits of Hell, isn't he? And _you_ created Hell, didn't you? Seems to me like it's a mighty valuable little piece of real estate." He pauses long enough for God to catch up with his train of thought. "So how much rent are you charging him?"

Suddenly God grins. "Well, by Myself!" He exclaims. "I never thought of that!" Then His face falls. "But what use have I for money?"

"None," agrees Mr. Slatterman. "So what we got to do is set up a kind of barter system. He's using something _we've_ got, so it's only fair that _we_ use something _he's_ got."

"We?" repeats God, arching a bushy eyebrow.

"Right," says Mr. Slatterman, nodding his head. "As in you and me. Now, what has Lucifer got that we need."

"Nothing," says God, feeling just a bit overwhelmed by the speed as which decisions seem to be getting themselves made.

"Wrong," says Mr. Slatterman triumphantly. "What he's got is manpower -- or soulpower, if you prefer."

God takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. "I have no need for _any_ type of power. I am the Creator."

Mr. Slatterman smiles. "Just my point. You've spread yourself too thin. You ought to stick to upper-level management and leave the mundane chores to someone else. Why, the second I got here, wherever _here_ is, I said to myself, I said, 'Bernie, maybe you hadn't ought to mention it, since you're just a guest of limited duration and uncertain standing in the community, but the face of the matter is that God's looking just a little bit peaked around the edges. Poor guy's probably been working too hard.' That's what I said."

God confesses that He's feeling a little overburdened these days.

Mr. Slatterman nods his head sympathetically, and says, "Sure you are, and perfectly understandable it is, too. I mean, hell, being God is probably even harder than being a good bartender, and I'll bet you don't have an awful lot of fringes, either." He looks around for a chair and one magically appears, so he sits down, and then another chair pops out of nowhere in particular, and God joins him. "Now," he continues, leaning forward, "I'll be happy to help in an advisory capacity, but what you really need is a good contract lawyer who's had some experience in labor negotiations."

"You have someone in mind, no doubt," suggests God dryly.

"Well, truth to tell, there's no one better qualified for this little job than my brother-in-law Jake."

"Jacob Wiseman's soul is already earmarked for perdition," says God sternly.

"He hasn't cheated me out of any money, has he?" demands Mr. Slatterman suddenly.

"That is perhaps the only sin of which he is not guilty."

Mr. Slatterman looks relieved, and he says, "Then we got no problem that I can see."

The Almighty shakes His head. "I told you: his soul is damned for all eternity."

"Look," says Mr. Slatterman reasonably, "people who are bound for Heaven can sell their souls to Satan, can't they? So why can't Jake, who's bound for Hell, sell his soul to you in exchange for his services?"

God looks like He is considering the idea, which is certainly a novel concept and worthy of a little serious thought, and Mr. Slatterman leans back comfortably in his chair. "Of course," he adds, "I'll expect a little something for putting the two of you together."

"Your immortal soul, for example?" suggests God knowingly.

Mr. Slatterman smiles. "Well, that too, I suppose -- but what I really had in mind concerns that friendly little game of chance that you're going to be sticking me back down in when we're all through here."

God looks at him with extreme distaste. "Gambling is a sin," He points out.

Mr. Slatterman shrugs. "Yeah," he says, "but considering all the overdue bills I got sitting on my desk, and all the people who'll go hungry if I don't pay them, I'd say that gambling and losing is a lot worse sin than gambling and winning." He shoots a quick look at God out of the corner of his eye. "Of course," he adds with forced nonchalance, "we can call the whole thing off if your conscience is going to bother you all that much."

God stares at him long and hard. "If find it difficult to believe that you are really one of My creations," He remarks at last.

Mr. Slatterman, he frowns and says, "You're not going to go all metaphysical on me again, are you?"

God sighs. "No, I suppose not," He says in resignation.

"Good," says Mr. Slatterman with a smile. "Then do I get to roll my six?"

God considers His long, perfect fingers for a moment and decides that it really is time to start thinking about a vacation, and that maybe He has even found Himself a short-term replacement. After all, the man seems forceful and decisive, and he certainly knows his own mind, and of course he will be able to work closely with Jacob Wiseman on the delicate negotiations that God has already decided are long overdue.

"Will a pair of threes be sufficient," asks the Almighty, "or would you prefer a two and a four?"

-- The End --