

The Two-Centimeter Demon

By Issac Asimov

I met George at a literary convention a good many years ago, and was struck by the peculiar look of innocence and candor upon his round middle-aged face. He was the kind of person, I decided at once, to whom you would give your wallet to hold while you went swimming.

He recognized me from my photographs on the back of my books and greeted me gladly, telling me how much he liked my stories and novels which, of course, gave me a good opinion of his intelligence and taste.

We shook hands cordially and he said, "My name is George Bitternut." "Bitternut," I repeated, in order to fix it in my mind. "An unusual name."

"Danish," he said, "and very aristocratic. I am descended from Cnut, better known as Canute, a Danish king who conquered England in the early eleventh century. An ancestor of mine was his son, born on the wrong side of the blanket, of course."

"Of course," I muttered, though I didn't see why that was something that should be taken for granted. "He was named Cnut for his father," George went on, "and when he was presented to the king, the royal Dane said, 'By my halidom, is this my heir?'" "'Not quite,' said the courtier who was dandling little Cnut, 'for he is illegitimate, the mother being the launderwoman whom you--'" "'Ah,' said the king, 'That's better.' And Betternut he was known from that moment on. Just that single name. I have inherited that name in the direct male line except that the vicissitudes of time have changed the name to Bitternut." And his blue eyes looked at me with a kind of hypnotic ingenuousness that forbade doubt.

I said, "Would you join me for lunch?" sweeping my hand in the direction of the ornate restaurant that was clearly intended only for the fat-walleted. George said, "Don't you think that that bistro is a bit garish and that the lunch counter on the other side might--" "As my guest," I added. And George pursed his lips and said, "Now that I look at the bistro in a better light, I see that it has a rather homelike atmosphere. Yes, it will do." Over the main course, George said, "My ancestor Betternut had a son, whom he named Sweyn. A good Danish name." "Yes, I know," I said, "King Cnut's father's name was Sweyn Forkbeard. In modern times, the name is usually spelled Sven." George frowned slightly and said, "There is no need, old man, to parade your knowledge of these things. I accept the fact that you have the rudiments of an education." I felt abashed. "Sorry."

He waved his hand in grand forgiveness, ordered another glass of wine and said, "Sweyn Betternut was fascinated by the young women, a characteristic all the Bitternuts have inherited, and he was very successful with them, I might add--as we have all been. There is a well-attested tale that many a woman after leaving him would shake her head admiringly and say, 'Oh, what a Sweyn that is.' He was an archimage, too." He paused, and said abruptly, "Do you know what an archimage is?" "No," I lied, not wishing to parade my knowledge offensively yet again. "Tell me."

"An archimage is a master magician," said George, with what certainly sounded like a sigh of relief. "Sweyn studied the arcane and hidden arts. It was possible to do it then, for

all that nasty modern skepticism had not yet arisen. He was intent on finding ways of persuading the young ladies to behave with that kind of gentle and compliant behavior that is the crown of womanhood and to eschew all that was froward and shrewish." "Ah," I said, sympathetically. "For this he needed demons, and he perfected means for calling them up by burning certain sweet shrubs and calling on certain half-forgotten names of power." "And did it work, Mr. Bitternut?" "Please call me George. Of course it worked. He had demons in teams and shoals working for him for, as he often complained, the women of the time were mule-headed and obstinate who countered his claim to be the grandson of a king, with unkind remarks about the nature of the descent. Once a demon did his thing, however, they could see that a natural son was only natural."

I said, "Are you sure this is so, George?" "Certainly, for last summer I found his book of recipes for calling up demons. I found it in an old English castle that is in ruins now but that once belonged to my family. The exact shrubs were listed, the manner of burning, the pacing, the names of power, the intonations. Everything. It was written in Old English--Anglo-Saxon, you know--but I am by way of being a linguist and ---"

A certain mild skepticism made itself felt. "You're joking," I said. His glance was haughty. "Why do you think so? Am I tit-tering? It was an authentic book. I tested the recipes myself." "And got a demon." "Yes, indeed," he said, pointing significantly to the breast pocket of his suit coat. "In there?"

George touched the pocket and seemed on the point of nodding, when his fingers seemed to feel something significant, or perhaps failed to feel something. He peered inside.

"He's gone," he said with dissatisfaction. "Dematerialized. --But you can't blame him, perhaps. He was with me last night because he was curious about this convention, you know. I gave him some whiskey out of an eyedropper and he liked it. Perhaps he liked it a little too much, for he wanted to fight the caged cockatoo in the bar and began squeaking opprobrious names at it. Fortunately he fell asleep before the offended bird could retaliate. This morning he did not seem at his best and I suppose he has gone home, wherever that might be, to recover."

I felt a touch rebellious. Did he expect me to believe all this? "Are you telling me you had a demon in your breast pocket?" "Your quick grasp of the situation," said George, "is gratifying." "How big was he?" "Two centimeters." "But that's less than an inch." "Perfectly correct. An inch is 2.54 centimeters." "I mean, what kind of a demon is two centimeters tall?" "A small one," said George, "but as the old saying goes, a small demon is better than no demon." "It depends on his mood."

"Oh, Azazel--that's his name--is a friendly demon. I suspect he is looked down upon his native haunts, for he is extraordinarily anxious to impress me with his powers, except that he won't use them to make me rich, as he should out of decent friendship. He says his powers must be used only to do good to others."

"Come, come, George. Surely that's not the philosophy of hell." George put a finger to his lips. "Don't say things like that, old man. Azazel would be enormously offended. He says that his country is kindly, decent, and highly civilized, and he speaks with enormous

respect of his ruler whom he won't name but whom he calls merely the All-in-All." "And does he indeed do kindnesses?" "Whenever he can. Take the case of my goddaughter, Juniper Pen--" "Juniper Pen?" "Yes. I can see by the look of intense curiosity in your eye that you wish to know the story and I will gladly tell it to you."

Juniper Pen [said George] was a wide-eyed sophomore at college when the tale I tell you opened--an innocent, sweet girl fascinated by the basketball team, one and all of whom were tall, handsome young men.

The one of the team upon whom her girlish fancies seemed most fixed was Leander Thomson, tall, rangy, with large hands that wrapped themselves about a basketball, or anything else that was the size and shape of a basketball, which somehow brings Juniper in mind. He was the undoubted focus of her screaming when she sat in the audience at one of the games.

She would speak to me of her sweet little dreams, for like all young women, even those who were not my goddaughters, she had the impulse to confide in me. My warm but dignified demeanor invited confidence.

"Oh, Uncle George," she would say, "surely it isn't wrong of me to dream of a future with Leander. I see him now as the greatest basketball player in the world, as the pick and cream of the great professionals, as the owner of a long-term, large-sized contract. It's not as if I ask for much. All I want out of life is a little vine-covered mansion, a small garden stretching out as far as the eye can see, a simple staff of servants organized into squads, all my clothing arranged alphabetically for each day of the week, and each month of the year, and--"

I was forced to interrupt her charming prattle. "Little one," I said, "there is a tiny flaw in your scheme. Leander is not a very good basketball player and it is unlikely that he will be signed up for enormous sums in the salary."

"That's so unfair," she said, pouting. "Why isn't he a very good basketball player?"

"Because that is the way the universe works. Why do you not pin your young affections on someone who is a good basketball player? Or, for that matter, on some honest young Wall Street broker who happens to have access to inside information?" "Actually, I've thought of that myself, Uncle George, but I like Leander all by himself. There are times when I think of him and say to myself, Is money really all that important?" "Hush, little one," I said, shocked. Women these days are incredibly outspoken. "But why can't I have the money too? Is that so much to ask?"

Actually, was it? After all, I had a demon all my own. It was a little demon, to be sure, but his heart was big. Surely he would want to help out the course of true love, in order to bring sweetness and light to two souls whose two hearts beat as one at the thought of mutual kisses and mutual funds.

Azazel did listen when I summoned him with the appropriate name of power.--No, I can't tell you what it is. Have you no sense of elementary ethics? -- As I say, he did listen but with what I felt to be a lack of that true sympathy one would expect. I admit I had

dragged him into our own continuum from what was an indulgence in something like a Turkish bath, for he was wrapped in a tiny towel and he was shivering. His voice seemed higher and squeakier than ever. (Actually, I don't think it was truly his voice. I think he communicated by telepathy of some sort, but the result was that I heard, or imagined I heard, a squeaky voice.)

"What is basket ball?" he said. "A ball shaped like a basket? Because if it is, what is a basket?" I tried to explain but, for a demon, he can be very dense. He kept staring at me as though I were not explaining every bit of the game with luminous clarity. He said, finally, "Is it possible for me to see a game of basket- ball?"

"Certainly," I said. "There will be a game tonight. I have a ticket which Leander gave me and you can come in my pocket." "Fine," said Azazel. "Call me back when you are ready to leave for the game. Right now, I must finish my zymjig," by which I suppose he meant his Turkish bath--and he disap- peared.

I must admit that I find it most irritating to have someone place his puny and parochial affairs ahead of the matters of great moment in which I am engaged--which reminds me, old man, that the waiter seems to be trying to attract your attention. I think he has your check for you. Please take it from him and let me get ahead with my story.

I went to the basketball game that night and Azazel was with me in my pocket. He kept poking his head above the edge of the pockt in order to watch the game and he would have made a questionable sight if anyone had been watching. His skin is a bright red and on his forehead are two nubbins of horns. It is fortunate, of course, that he didn't come out altogether, for his centimeter-long, muscular tail is both his most prominent and his most nauseating feature.

I am not a great basketball aficionado myself and I rather left it to Azazel to make sense out of what was happening. His intel- ligence, although dmonic rather than human, is intense. After the game he said to me, "It seems to me, as nearly as I could make out from the strenuous action of the bulky, clumsy and totally uninteresting individuals in the arena, that there was excitement every time that peculiar ball passed through a hoop." "That's it," I said. "You score a basket, you see." "Then this protege of yours would become a heroic player of this stupid game if he could throw the ball through the hoop every time?" "Exactly."

Azazel twirled his tail thoughtfully. "That should not be diffi- cult. I need only adjust his reflexes in order to make him judge the angle, height, force--" He fell into a ruminative silence for a moment, then said, "Let's see, I noted and recorded his personal coordinate complex during the game. . . Yes, it can be done. --In fact, it is done. Your Leander will have no trouble in get- ting the ball through the hoop."

I felt a certain excitement as I waited for the next scheduled game. I did not say a word to little Juniper because I had never made use of Azazel's demonic powers before and I wasn't en- tirely sure that his deeds would match his words. Besides, I wanted her to be surprised. (As it turned out, she was very surprised, as was I.)

The day of the game came at last, and it was the game. Our local college, Nerdsville Tech,

of whose basketball team Leander was so dim a luminary, was playing the lanky bruisers of the A1 Capone College Reformatory and it was expected to be an epic combat.

How epic, no one expected. The Capone Five swept into an early lead, and I watched Leander keenly. He seemed to have trouble in deciding what to do and at first his hands seemed to miss the ball when he tried to dribble. His reflexes, I guessed, had been so altered that at first he could not control his muscles at all.

But then it was as though he grew accustomed to his new body. He seized the ball and it seemed to slip from his hands-- but what a slip! It arced high into the air and through the center of the hoop.

A wild cheer shook the stands while Leander stared thoughtfully up at the hoop as though wondering what had happened. Whatever had happened, happened again--and again. As soon as Leander touched the ball, it arced. As soon as it arced it curved into the basket. It would happen so suddenly that no one ever saw Leander aim, or make any effort at all. Interpreting this as sheer expertise, the crowd grew the more hysterical.

But then, of course, the inevitable happened and the game descended into total chaos. Catcalls erupted from the stands; the scarred and broken-nosed alumni who were rooting for Capone Reformatory made violent remarks of a derogatory nature and fistfights blossomed in every corner of the audience.

What I had failed to tell Azazel, you see, thinking it to be self-evident, and what Azazel had failed to realize was that the two baskets on the court were not identical; that one was the home basket and the other the visitors' basket, and that each player aimed for the appropriate basket. The basketball, with all the lamentable ignorance of an inanimate object, arced for whichever basket was nearer once Leander seized it. The result was that time and again Leander would manage to put the ball into the wrong basket.

He persisted in doing so despite the kindly remonstrances of Nerdsville coach, Claws ("Pop") McFang, which he shrieked through the foam that covered his lips. Pop McFang bared his teeth in a sigh of sadness at having to eject Leander from the game, and wept openly when they removed his fingers from Leander's throat so that the ejection could be carried through.

My friend, Leander was never the same again. I had thought, naturally, that he would find escape in drink, and become a stern and thoughtful wino. I would have understood that. He sank lower than that, however. He turned to his studies.

Under the contemptuous, and even sometimes pitying, eyes of his schoolmates, he slunk from lecture to lecture, buried his head in books, and receded into the dank depths of scholarship. Yet through it all, Juniper clunk to him. "He needs me," she said, her eyes misting with unshed tears. Sacrificing all, she married him after they graduated. She then clunk to him even while he sank to the lowest depth of all, being stigmatized with a Ph.D. in physics.

He and Juniper live now in a small co-op on the upper west side somewhere. He teaches physics and does research in cosmology, I understand. He earns \$60,000 a year and is

spoken of in shocked whispers, by those who knew him when he was a respectable jock, as a possible candidate for the Nobel Prize.

Juniper never complains, but remains faithful to her fallen idol. Neither by word nor deed does she ever express any sense of loss, but she cannot fool her old godfather. I know very well that, on occasion, she thinks wistfully of the vine-covered mansion she'll never have, and of the rolling hills and distant horizons of her small dream estate.

"That's the story," said George, as he scooped up the change the waiter had brought, and copied down the total from the credit-card receipt (so that he might take it off as a tax-deduction, I assume). "If I were you," he added. "I would leave a generous tip."

I did so, rather in a daze, as George smiled and walked away. I didn't really mind the loss of the change. It occurred to me that George got only a meal, whereas I had a story I could tell as my own and which would earn me many times the cost of the meal.

In fact, I decided to continue having dinner with him now and then.