

BY THESE PRESENTS

by

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The devil smiled uneasily at James Fenwick.

"It's very irregular," he said. "I'm not at all sure -"

"Do you want my soul or don't you?" James Fenwick demanded.

"Naturally I do," the devil said. "But I'll have to think this over. Under the circumstances I don't exactly see how I could collect."

"All I want is immortality," Fenwick said, with a pleased smile. "I wonder why no one has ever thought of this before. In my opinion it's foolproof. Come, come, now, make up your mind. Do you want to back out?"

"Oh no," the devil said hastily. "It's just that - Look here, Fenwick. I'm not sure you realise - immortality's a long time, you know."

"Exactly. The question is, will it ever have an end? If it does, you collect my soul. If not -" Fenwick made an airy gesture. "I win," he said.

"Oh, it has an end," the devil said, somewhat grimly. "It's just that right now I'd rather not undertake such a long-term investment. You wouldn't care for immortality, Fenwick. Believe me."

Fenwick said, "Ha."

"I don't see why you're so set on immortality," the devil said a little peevishly, tapping the point of his tail on the carpet.

"I'm not," Fenwick told him. "Actually, it's just a by-product. There happen to be quite a number of things I'd like to do without suffering the consequences, but -"

"I could promise you that," the devil put in eagerly.

"But," Fenwick said, lifting his hand for quiet, "the deal would obviously end right there. Played this way, I get not only an unlimited supply of immunities of all kinds, but I get immortality besides. Take it or leave it, my friend."

The devil rose from his chair and began to pace up and down the room, scowling at the carpet. Finally he looked up.

"Very well," he said briskly. "I accept."

"You do?" Fenwick was aware of a slight sinking feeling. Now that it actually came to the point, maybe ... He looked uneasily toward the drawn blinds of his apartment. "How will you go about it?" he asked.

"Biochemically," the devil said. Now that he had made up his mind he seemed quite confident. "And with quantum mechanics. Aside from the internal regenerative functions, some space-time alterations will have to be

made. You'll become independent of your external environment. Environment is often fatal."

"I'll stay right here, though? Visible, tangible - no tricks?"

"Tricks?" The devil looked wounded. "If there's any trickery, it seems to me you're the offender. No indeed, Fenwick. You'll get value received for your investment. I promise that. You'll become a closed system, like Achilles. Except for the heel. There will have to be a vulnerable point, you see."

"No," Fenwick said quickly. "I won't accept that."

"It can't be helped, I'm afraid. You'll be quite safe inside the closed system from anything outside. And there'll be nothing inside except you. It is you. In a way this is in your own interest." The devil's tail lashed upon the carpet. Fenwick regarded it uneasily. "If you wish to put an end to your own life eventually," the devil went on, "I can't protect you against that. Consider, however, that in a few million years you may wish to die."

"That reminds me," Fenwick said. "Tithonus. I'll keep my youth, health, present appearance, all my faculties -"

"Naturally, naturally. I'm not interested in tricking you over terms. What I had in mind was the possibility that boredom might set in."

"Are you bored?"

"I have been, in my time," the devil admitted.

"You're immortal?"

"Of course."

"Then why haven't you killed yourself? Or couldn't you?"

"I could," the devil said bleakly. "I did ... Now, the terms of our contract. Immortality, youth, health, etc, etc, invulnerability with the single exception of suicide. In return for this service, I shall possess your soul at death."

"Why?" Fenwick asked with sudden curiosity.

The devil looked at him sombrely. "In your fall, and in the fall of every soul, I forget my own for a moment." He made an impatient gesture. "This is quibbling. Here." He plucked out of empty air a parchment scroll and a quill pen.

"Our agreement," the devil said.

Fenwick read the scroll carefully. At one point he looked up.

"What's this?" he asked. "I didn't know I was supposed to put up surety."

"I will naturally want some kind of bond," the devil said. "Unless you can find a co-guarantor?"

"I'm sure I couldn't," Fenwick said. "Not even in the death house. Well,

what kind of security do you want?"

"Certain of your memories of the past," the devil said. "All of them unconscious, as it happens."

Fenwick considered. "I'm thinking about amnesia. I need my memories."

"Not these. Amnesia is concerned with conscious memories. You will never know the structure I want is missing."

"Is it - the soul?"

"No," the devil said calmly. "It is a necessary part of the soul, of course, or it would be of no value to me. But you will keep the essentials until you choose to surrender them to me at death. I will then combine the two and take possession of your soul. But that will no doubt be a long time from now, and in the meantime you will suffer no inconvenience."

"If I write that into the contract, will you sign?"

The devil nodded.

Fenwick scribbled in the margin and then signed his name with the wet red point of the quill. "Here," he said.

The devil, with a tolerant air, added his name. He then waved the scroll into emptiness.

"Very well," he said. "Now stand up, please. Some glandular readjustment is necessary." His hands sank into Fenwick's breast painlessly, and moved swiftly here and there. "The thyroid ... and the other endocrines ... can be reset to regenerate your body indefinitely. Turn around, please."

In the mirror over the fireplace Fenwick saw his red visitor's hand sink, softly into the back of Fenwick's head. He felt a sudden dizziness.

"Thalamus and pineal," the devil murmured. "The space-time cognition is subjective ... and now you're independent of your external environment. One moment, now. There's another slight ..."

His wrist twisted suddenly and he drew his closed hand out of Fenwick's head. At the same time Fenwick felt a strange, sudden elation.

"What did you do then?" he asked, turning.

No one stood behind him. The apartment was quite empty. The devil had disappeared.

It could, of course, have been a dream. Fenwick had anticipated this possible scepticism after the event. Hallucinations could occur. He thought he was immortal and invulnerable now. But this is, by common standards, a psychotic delusion. He had no proof.

But he had no doubt, either. Immortality, he thought, is something tangible. An inward feeling of infinite well-being. That glandular readjustment, he thought. My body is functioning now as it never did

before, as no one's ever did. I am a self-regenerating, closed system which nothing can injure, not even time.

A curious, welling happiness possessed him. He closed his eyes and summoned up the oldest memories he could command. Sunlight on a porch floor, the buzzing of a fly, warmth and a rocking motion. He was aware of no lack. His mind ranged freely in the past. The rhythmic sway and creak of swings in a playground, the echoing stillness of a church. A piano-box clubhouse. The roughness of a washcloth scrubbing his face, and his mother's voice ...

Invulnerable, immortal, Fenwick crossed the room, opened a door and went down a short hallway. He walked with a sense of wonderful lightness, of pure pleasure in being alive. He opened a second door quietly and looked in. His mother lay in bed asleep, propped on a heap of pillows.

Fenwick felt very happy.

He moved softly forward, skirting the wheelchair by the bed, and stood looking down. Then he tugged a pillow gently free and lifted it in both hands, to lower it again slowly, at first, toward his mother's face.

Since this is not the chronicle of James Fenwick's sins, it is clearly not necessary to detail the steps by which he arrived, within five years, at the title of the Worst Man in the World. Sensational newspapers revelled in him. There were, of course, worse men, but being mortal and vulnerable they were more reticent.

Fenwick's behaviour was based on an increasing feeling that he was the only permanent object in a transient world. "Their days are as grass," he mused, watching his fellow Satanists as they crowded around an altar with something unpleasant on it. This was early in his career, when he was exploring pure sensation along traditional lines, later discarded as juvenilia.

Meanwhile, perfectly free, and filled with that enduring, delightful sense of well-being, Fenwick experimented with many aspects of living. He left a trail of hung juries and baffled attorneys behind him. "A modern Caligula!" said the New York News, explaining to its readers who Caligula had been, with examples. "Are the shocking charges against James Fenwick true?"

But somehow, he could never quite be convicted. Every charge fell through. He was, as the devil had assured him, a closed system within his environment, and his independence of the outer world was demonstrated in many a courtroom. Exactly how the devil managed things so efficiently Fenwick could never understand. Very seldom did an actual miracle have to happen.

Once an investment banker, correctly blaming Fenwick for the collapse of his entire fortune, fired five bullets at Fenwick's heart. The bullets ricocheted. The only witnesses were the banker and Fenwick. Theorising that his unharmed target was wearing a bulletproof vest, the banker aimed the last bullet at Fenwick's head, with identical results. Later the man tried again, with a knife. Fenwick, who was curious, decided to wait and see what would happen. What happened was that eventually the banker went mad.

Fenwick, who had appropriated his fortune by very direct means, proceeded to increase it. Somehow, he was never convicted of any of the capital charges he incurred. It took a certain technique to make sure that the crimes he committed would always endanger his life if he were arrested for them, but he mastered the method without much difficulty and his wealth and power increased tremendously.

He was certainly notorious. Presently he decided that something was lacking, and began to crave admiration. It was not so easy to achieve. He did not yet possess enough wealth to transcend the moral judgements of society. That was easily remedied. Ten years after his bargain with the devil, Fenwick was not perhaps the most powerful man in the world, but certainly the most powerful man in the United States. He attained the admiration and the fame he thought he wanted.

And it was not enough. The devil had suggested that in a few million years Fenwick might wish to die, out of sheer boredom. It took only ten years for Fenwick to realise, one summer day, with a little shock of unpleasant surprise, that he did not know what he wanted to do next.

He examined his state of mind with close attention. "Is this boredom?" he asked himself. If so, not even boredom was unpleasant. There was a delightful, sensuous relaxation about it, like floating in a warm summer ocean. In a sense, he was too relaxed.

"If this is all there is to immortality," he told himself, "I might as well not have bothered. Pleasant, certainly, but not worth bartering my soul for. There must be things that will rouse me out of this somnolence."

He experimented. The next five years witnessed his meteoric fall from public favour as he tried more and more frantically to break through that placid calm. He couldn't do it. He got no reaction from even the most horrific situations. What others saw with shock and often with horror had no meaning to Fenwick.

With a sense of smothered desperation under the calm he saw that he was beginning to lose contact with the race of man. Humans were mortal, and more and more they seemed to recede into a distance less real than the solid earth underfoot. In time, he thought, the earth itself would become less solid, as he watched the slow shiftings of the geologic tides.

He turned at last to the realm of the intellect. He took up painting and he dabbled in literature and in some of the sciences. Interesting - up to a point. But always he came before long to a closed door in the mind, beyond which lay only that floating calm which dissolved all interest out of his mind. Something was lacking in him ...

The suspicion was slow in forming. It floated almost to the surface and then sank again under the pressure of new experiments. But eventually it broke free into the realm of the conscious.

Early one summer morning Fenwick roused out of a sound sleep and sat straight up in bed as if an invisible hand had pulled him out of slumber.

"Something is missing!" he told himself with great conviction. "But what?"

He meditated. "How long has it been gone?" He could not say - at first. The deep, ineradicable calm kept lulling him and it was hard to follow the thought. That calm in itself was part of the trouble. How long had he had it? Obviously, since the day of his pact. What caused it? Well, he had been assuming all these many years that it was simply the physical well-being of perfectly and eternally functioning bodily mechanisms. But what if this were really something more? What if it were an artificially induced dulling of the mind so that he would not suspect a theft had been committed?

A theft? Sitting up in bed among heavy silk sheets, with the June dawn pale outside the windows, James Fenwick suddenly saw the outrageous truth. He struck his knee a resounding blow under the bedclothes.

"My soul!" he cried to the unheeding dawn. "He swindled me! He stole my soul!"

The moment the idea took shape it seemed so obvious Fenwick could not understand why it had not been clear from the first. The devil had cunningly and most unfairly anticipated the pay-off by seizing his soul too soon. And if not all of it, then the most important part. Fenwick had actually stood before the mirror and watched him do it. The proof seemed obvious. For something was very definitely missing. He seemed to stand always just inside a closed door in the mind that would not open for him because he lacked the essential something, the lost, the stolen soul ...

What good was immortality, without this mysterious something that gave immortality its savour? He was helpless to enjoy the full potentialities of eternal life because he had been robbed of the very key to living.

"'Certain memories of the past,' is it?" he sneered, remembering the devil's casual description of the thing he wanted for surety. "Never miss them, eh? And all the time it was something out of the very middle of my soul!"

Now he remembered episodes out of folklore and mythology, people in legend who had lacked souls. The Little Mermaid, the Seal Maiden, someone or other in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - a standard situation in myth, once you considered the question. And those who lacked the souls always yearned to get one at any cost. Nor was it, Fenwick realised, simply ethnocentric thinking on the part of the author. He was in the unique position of knowing this yearning for a soul to be quite valid.

Now that he was aware of his loss, the queer, crippling inward lack tormented him. It had presumably tormented the Little Mermaid and others. Like him, they had had immortality. Being extrahuman they had probably possessed this curious, light-headed, light-hearted freedom which even now interposed a cushion of partial indifference between Fenwick and his loss. Were not the gods supposed to spend their days in just this simple-minded joy, laughing and singing, dancing and drinking endlessly, never weary, never bored?

Up to a point it was wonderful. But once you began to suspect that something had been removed, you lost your taste for the Olympian life and began at all costs to crave a soul. Why? Fenwick couldn't say. He only knew.

At this moment the cool summer dawn shimmered between him and the window, and the devil stood before James Fenwick.

Fenwick shuddered slightly.

"The bargain," he said, "was for eternity."

"Yes," the devil said. "Only you can abrogate it."

"Well, I don't intend to," Fenwick told him sharply. "How did you happen to show up at just this moment?"

"I thought I heard my name called," the devil said. "Did you want to speak to me? I seemed to catch a note of despair in your mind. How do you feel? Bored yet? Ready to end it?"

"Certainly not," Fenwick said. "But if I were it's because you swindled me. I want a word with you. What was it you took out of my head in your closed hand the day of our pact?"

"I don't care to discuss it," the devil said, lashing his tail slightly.

"Well, I care," Fenwick cried. "You told me it was only a few unimportant memories I'd never miss."

"And so it was," the devil said, grinning.

"It was my soul!" Fenwick said, striking the bedclothes angrily. "You cheated me. You collected my soul in advance, and now I can't enjoy the immortality I bought with it. This is an out-and-out breach of contract."

"What seems to be the trouble?" the devil asked.

"There must be a great many things I'd enjoy doing, if I had my soul back," Fenwick said. "I could take up music and become a great musician, if I had my soul. I always liked music, and I have eternity to learn in. Or I could study mathematics. I could learn nuclear physics and who knows, with all the time and money and knowledge in the world at my command, there's no limit to the things I could achieve. I could even blow up the world and rob you of all future souls. How would you like that?"

The devil laughed politely and polished his talons on his sleeve.

"Don't laugh," Fenwick said. "It's perfectly true. I could study medicine and prolong human life. I could study politics and economics and put an end to wars and suffering. I could study crime and fill up Hell with new converts. I could do anything - if I had my soul back. But without it - well, everything is too - too peaceful." Fenwick's shoulders sagged disconsolately. "I feel cut off from humanity," he said. "Everything I do is blocked. But I'm calm and carefree. I'm not even unhappy. And yet I don't know what to do next. I -"

"In a word, you're bored," the devil said. "Excuse me if I don't show enough sympathy for your plight."

"In a word, you swindled me," Fenwick said. "I want back my soul."

"I told you exactly what it was I took," the devil said.

"My soul!"

"Not at all," the devil assured him. "I'm afraid I shall have to leave you now."

"Give me back my soul, you swindler!"

"Try and make me do it," the devil said with a broad grin. The first ray of the morning sun shimmered in the cool air of the bedroom, and in the shimmer the devil dissolved and vanished.

"Very well," Fenwick said to the emptiness. "Very well, I will."

He wasted no time about it. Or at least, no more time than his curious, carefree placidity enforced.

"How can I bring pressure on the devil?" he asked himself. "By blocking him in some way? I don't see how. Well, then, by depriving him of something he values? What does he value? Souls. All souls. My soul. Hm-m-m." He frowned pensively. "I could," he reflected, "repent ..."

Fenwick thought all day about it. The idea tempted him, and yet of course in a way it was self-defeating. The consequences were unpredictable. Besides, he was not sure how to go about it. To undertake a lifetime of good deeds seemed so boring.

In the evening he went out alone and walked at twilight through the streets, thinking deeply. The people he passed were like transient shadows reflected on the screen of time. They had no significance. The air was sweet and calm, and if it had not been for this sense of nagging injustice, the aimless inability to use the immortality he had paid so high for, he would have felt entirely at peace.

Presently the sound of music penetrated his rapt senses and he looked up to find himself outside the portal of a great cathedral. Shadowy people went up and down the steps. From within deep organ music rolled, the sound of singing emerged, occasional waves of incense were sweet on the air. It was most impressive.

Fenwick thought, "I could go up and embrace the altar and shout out my repentance." He put his foot on the bottom step, but then he hesitated and felt that he could not face it. The cathedral was too impressive. He would feel like such a fool. And yet -

He walked on, undecided. He walked a long way.

Again the sound of music interrupted his thinking. This time he was passing a vacant lot upon which a large revival tent had been pitched. There was a great deal of noise coming out of it. Music pounded wildly through the canvas walls. Men and women were singing and shouting inside.

Fenwick paused, struck by hope. Here at least he could do his repenting without attracting more than a passing glance. He hesitated briefly and then went in.

It was very noisy, crowded and confused inside. But before Fenwick an aisle stretched between benches toward an altar, of sorts, with several highly excited people clustered under the arms of an even more highly excited speaker in an improvised pulpit.

Fenwick started down the aisle.

"How should I phrase this?" he wondered, walking slowly. "Just 'I repent'? Is that enough? Or something like, 'I have sold my soul to the devil and I hereby repudiate the bargain'? Are legal terms necessary?"

He had almost reached the altar when the air shimmered before him and the crimson outlines of the devil appeared very faintly, a mere three-dimensional sketch upon the dusty air.

"I wouldn't do this if I were you," the pale image said.

Fenwick sneered and walked through him.

At this the devil pulled himself together and appeared in full form and colour in the aisle, blocking Fenwick's way.

"I wish you wouldn't create scenes like this," the devil said pettishly. "I can't tell you how uncomfortable I feel here. Kindly don't be a fool, Fenwick."

Several people in the crowd cast curious glances at the devil, but no one seemed unduly interested. Most probably thought him a costumed attendant, and those who knew him for what he was may have been accustomed to the sight, or perhaps they expected some such apparition in such a place at such a time. There was no disturbance.

"Out of my way," Fenwick said. "My mind is made up."

"You're cheating," the devil complained. "I can't allow it."

"You cheated," Fenwick reminded him. "Try and stop me."

"I will," the devil said, and reached out both taloned hands.

Fenwick laughed.

"I am a system enclosed within itself," he said. "You can't harm me. Remember?"

The devil gnashed his teeth.

Fenwick brushed the crimson form aside and went on.

Behind him the devil said, "Oh, very well, Fenwick. You win."

Relieved, Fenwick turned. "Will you give me back my soul?"

"I'll give you back what I took as surety," the devil said, "but you won't like it."

"Hand it over," Fenwick said. "I don't believe a word you say."

"I am the father of lies," the devil said, "but this time -"

"Never mind," Fenwick said. "Just give me back my soul."

"Not here. I find this very uncomfortable," the devil told him. "Come with me. Don't cringe like that. I merely want to take you to your apartment. We need privacy."

He lifted his crimson hands and sketched a wall around himself and Fenwick. Immediately the pushing crowds, the shouting and tumult, faded and the walls of Fenwick's sumptuous apartment rose around them. Slightly breathless, Fenwick crossed the familiar floor and looked out the window. He was indubitably home again.

"That was clever," he congratulated the devil. "Now give me back my soul."

"I will give you back the part of it I removed," the devil said. "It was not in violation of the contract, but a bargain is a bargain. I think it only fair to warn you, however, that you won't like it."

"No shilly-shallying," Fenwick said. "I don't expect you to admit you cheated."

"You are warned," the devil said.

"Hand it over."

The devil shrugged. He then put his hand into his own chest, groped for a moment, murmuring, "I put it away for safekeeping," and withdrew his closed fist. "Turn around," he said. Fenwick did so. He felt a cool breeze pass through his head from the back ...

"Stand still," the devil said from behind him. "This will take a moment or two. You are a fool, you know. I expected a better entertainment or I'd never have troubled myself to go through this farce. My poor stupid friend, it was not your soul I took. It was merely certain unconscious memories, as I said all along."

"Then why," Fenwick demanded, "am I unable to enjoy my immortality? What is it that stops me at the threshold of everything I attempt? I'm tired of living like a god if I have to stop with immortality only, and no real pleasure in it."

"Hold still," the devil said. "There. My dear Fenwick, you are not a god. You're a very limited mortal man. Your own limitations are all that stand in your way. In a million years you could never become a great musician or a great economist or any of the greats you dream of. It simply isn't in you. Immortality has nothing to do with it. Oddly enough -" And here the devil sighed. "Oddly enough, those who make bargains with me never do have the capability to use their gifts. I suppose only inferior minds expect to get something for nothing. Yours is distinctly inferior."

The cool breeze ceased.

"There you are," the devil said. "I have now returned what I took. It was, in Freudian terms, simply your superego."

"Superego?" Fenwick echoed, turning. "I don't quite -"

"Understand?" the devil finished for him, suddenly smiling broadly. "You will. It is the structure of early learning built up in your unconscious mind. It guides your impulses into channels acceptable to society. In a word, my poor Fenwick, I have just restored your conscience. Why did you think you felt so light and carefree without it?"

Fenwick drew breath to reply, but it was too late.

The devil had vanished. He stood alone in the room.

Well, no, not entirely alone. There was a mirror over the fireplace and in the mirror he met his own appalled eyes in the instant the superego took up again the interrupted function of the conscience.

A terrible smashing awareness struck down upon Fenwick like the hand of a punishing God. He knew now what he had done. He remembered his crimes. All of them. Every last terrible, unforgivable, immutable sin he had committed in the past twenty years.

His knees buckled under him. The world turned dark and roared in his ears. Guilt was a burden he could hardly stagger under. The images of the things he had seen and done in the years of his carefree evil were thunder and lightning that shook the brain in his skull. Intolerable anguish roared through his mind and he struck his hands to his eyes to blot out vision, but he could not blot out memory.

Staggering, he turned and stumbled toward his bedroom door. He tore it open, reeled across the room and reached into a bureau drawer. He took out a revolver.

He lifted the revolver, and the devil came in.

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