

Daniel And The Devil

By Eugene Field

Daniel was a very wretched man. As he sat with his head bowed upon his desk that evening he made up his mind that his life had been a failure. "I have labored long and diligently," said he to himself, "and although I am known throughout the city as an industrious and shrewd business man, I am still a poor man, and shall probably continue so to the end of my days unless--unless--"

Here Daniel stopped and shivered. For a week or more he had been brooding over his unhappy lot. There seemed to be but one way out of his trouble, yet his soul revolted from taking that step. That was why he stopped and shivered.

"But," he argued, "I *must* do something! My nine children are growing up into big boys and girls. They must have those advantages which my limited means will not admit of! All my life so far has been pure, circumspect, and rigid; poverty has at last broken my spirit. I give up the fight,--I am ready to sell my soul to the Devil!"

"The determination is a wise one," said a voice at Daniel's elbow. Daniel looked up and beheld a grim-visaged stranger in the chair beside him. The stranger was arrayed all in black, and he exhaled a distinct odor of sulphur.

"Am I to understand," asked the stranger, "that you are prepared to enter into a league with the Devil?"

"Yes," said Daniel, firmly; and he set his teeth together after the fashion of a man who is not to be moved from his purpose.

"Then I am ready to treat with you," said the stranger.

"Are you the Devil?" asked Daniel, eyeing the stranger critically.

"No, but I am authorized to enter into contracts for him," explained the stranger. "My name is Beelzebub, and I am my master's most trusted agent."

"Sir," said Daniel, "you must pardon me (for I am loath to wound your feelings), but one of the rules governing my career as a business man has been to deal directly with principals, and never to trust to the offices of middle-men. The affair now in hand is one concerning the Devil and myself, and between us two and by us two only can the preliminaries be adjusted."

"As it so happens," explained Beelzebub, "this is Friday,--commonly called hangman's day,--and that is as busy a time in our particular locality as a Monday is in a laundry, or as the first of every month is at a book-keeper's desk. You can understand, perhaps, that this is the Devil's busy day; therefore be content to make this deal with me, and you will find that my master will cheerfully accept any contract I may enter into as his agent and in his behalf."

But no,--Daniel would not agree to this; with the Devil himself, and only the Devil himself, would he treat. So he bade Beelzebub go to the Devil and make known his wishes. Beelzebub departed, much chagrined. Presently back came the Devil, and surely it was the Devil this time,--there could be no mistake about it; for he wore a scarlet cloak, and had cloven feet, and carried about with him as many suffocating smells as there are kinds of brimstone, sulphur, and assafoetida.

The two talked over all Daniel's miseries; the Devil sympathized with Daniel, and ever and anon a malodorous, gummy tear would trickle down the Devil's sinister nose and drop off on the carpet.

"What you want is money," said the Devil. "That will give you the comfort and the contentment you crave."

"Yes," said Daniel; "it will give me every opportunity to do good."

"To do good!" repeated the Devil. "To do good, indeed! Yes, it's many a good time we shall have together, friend Daniel! Ha, ha, ha!" And the Devil laughed uproariously. Nothing seemed more humorous than the prospect of "doing good" with the Devil's money! But Daniel failed to see what the Devil was so jolly about. Daniel was not a humorist; he was, as we have indicated, a plain business man.

It was finally agreed that Daniel should sell his soul to the Devil upon condition that for the space of twenty-four years the Devil should serve Daniel faithfully, should provide him with riches, and should do whatsoever he was commanded to do; then, at the end of the twenty-fourth year, Daniel's soul was to pass into the possession of the Devil, and was to remain there forever, without recourse or benefit of clergy. Surely a more horrible contract was never entered into!

"You will have to sign your name to this contract," said the Devil, producing a sheet of asbestos paper upon which all the terms of the diabolical treaty were set forth exactly.

"Certainly," replied Daniel. "I have been a business man long enough to know the propriety and necessity of written contracts. And as for you, you must of course give a bond for the faithful execution of your part of this business."

"That is something I have never done before," suggested the Devil.

"I shall insist upon it," said Daniel, firmly. "This is no affair of sentiment; it is strictly and coldly business: you are to do certain service, and are to receive certain rewards therefor--"

"Yes, your soul!" cried the Devil, gleefully rubbing his callous hands together. "Your soul in twenty-four years!"

"Yes," said Daniel. "Now, no contract is good unless there is a quid pro quo."

"That's so," said the Devil, "so let's get a lawyer to draw up the paper for me to sign."

"Why a lawyer?" queried Daniel. "A contract is a simple instrument; I, as a business man, can frame one sufficiently binding."

"But I prefer to have a lawyer do it," urged the Devil.

"And I prefer to do it myself," said Daniel.

When a business man once gets his mind set, not even an Archimedean lever could stir it. So Daniel drew up the bond for the Devil to sign, and this bond specified that in case the Devil failed at any time during the next twenty-four years to do whatso Daniel commanded him, then should the bond which the Devil held against Daniel become null and void, and upon that same day should a thousand and one souls be released forever from the Devil's dominion. The Devil winced; he hated to sign this agreement, but he had to. An awful clap of thunder ratified the abominable treaty, and every black cat within a radius of a hundred leagues straightway fell to frothing and to yowling grotesquely.

Presently Daniel began to prosper; the Devil was a faithful slave, and he served Daniel so artfully that no person on earth suspected that Daniel had leagued with the evil one. Daniel had the finest house in the city, his wife dressed magnificently, and his children enjoyed every luxury wealth could provide. Still, Daniel was content to be known as a business man; he deported himself modestly and kindly; he pursued with all his old-time diligence the trade which in earlier days he had found so unproductive of riches. His indifference to the pleasures which money put within his reach was passing strange, and it caused the Devil vast uneasiness.

"Daniel," said the Devil, one day, "you're not getting out of this thing all the fun there is in it. You go poking along in the same old rut with never a suspicion that you have it in your power to enjoy every pleasure of human life. Why don't you break away from the old restraints? Why don't you avail yourself of the advantages at your command?"

"I know what you 're driving at," said Daniel, shrewdly, "Politics!"

"No, not at all," remonstrated the Devil. "What I mean is fun,--gayety. Why not have a good time, Daniel?"

"But I am having a good time," said Daniel. "My business is going along all right, I am rich. I 've got a lovely home; my wife is happy; my children are healthy and contented; I am respected,--what more could I ask? What better time could I demand?"

"You don't understand me," explained the Devil. "What I mean by a good time is that which makes the heart merry and keeps the soul youthful and buoyant,--wine, Daniel! Wine and the theatre and pretty girls and fast horses and all that sort of happy, joyful life!"

"Tut, tut, tut!" cried Daniel; "no more of that, sir! I sowed my wild oats in college. What right have I to think of such silly follies,--I, at forty years of age, and a business man too?"

So not even the Devil himself could persuade Daniel into a life of dissipation. All you who have made a study of the business man will agree that of all human beings he is the hardest to swerve from conservative methods. The Devil groaned and began to wonder why he had ever tied up to a man like Daniel,--a business man.

Pretty soon Daniel developed an ambition. He wanted reputation, and he told the Devil so. The Devil's eyes sparkled. "At last," murmured the Devil, with a sigh of relief,--"at last."

"Yes," said Daniel, "I want to be known far and wide. You must build a church for me."

"What!" shrieked the Devil. And the Devil's tail stiffened up like a sore thumb.

"Yes," said Daniel, calmly; "you must build a church for me, and it must be the largest and the handsomest church in the city. The sittings shall be free, and you shall provide the funds for its support forever."

The Devil frothed at his mouth, and blue fire issued from his ears and nostrils. He was the maddest devil ever seen on earth.

"I won't do it!" roared the Devil. "Do you suppose I'm going to spend my time building churches and stultifying myself just for the sake of gratifying your idle whims? I won't do it,--never!"

"Then the bond I gave is null and void," said Daniel.

"Take your old bond," said the Devil, petulantly.

"But the bond you gave is operative," continued Daniel. "So release the thousand and one souls you owe me when you refuse to obey me."

"Oh, Daniel!" whimpered the Devil, "how can you treat me so? Have n't I always been good to you? Have n't I given you riches and prosperity? Does no sentiment of friendship--"

"Hush," said Daniel, interrupting him. "I have already told you a thousand times that our relations were simply those of one business man with another. It now behooves you to fulfil your part of our compact; eventually I shall fulfil mine. Come, now, to business! Will you or will you not keep your word and save your bond?"

The Devil was sorely put to his trumps. But when it came to releasing a thousand and one souls from hell,--ah, that staggered him! He had to build the church, and a noble one it was too. Then he endowed the church, and finally he built a parsonage; altogether it was a stupendous work, and Daniel got all the credit for it. The preacher whom Daniel installed in this magnificent temple was severely orthodox, and one of the first things he did was to preach a series of sermons upon the personality of the Devil, wherein he inveighed most bitterly against that person and his work.

By and by Daniel made the Devil endow and build a number of hospitals, charity schools, free baths, libraries, and other institutions of similar character. Then he made him secure the election of honest men to office and of upright judges to the bench. It almost broke the Devil's heart to do it, but the Devil was prepared to do almost anything else than forfeit his bond and give up those one thousand and one souls. By this time Daniel came to be known far and wide for his philanthropy and his piety. This gratified him of course; but most of all he gloried in the circumstance that he was a business man.

"Have you anything for me to do today?" asked the Devil, one morning. He had grown to be a very meek and courteous devil; steady employment in righteous causes had chastened him to a degree and purged away somewhat of the violence of his nature. On this particular morning he looked haggard and ill,--yes, and he looked, too, as blue as a whetstone.

"I am not feeling robust," explained the Devil. "To tell the truth, I am somewhat ill."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Daniel; "but as I am not conducting a sanitarium, I can do nothing further than express my regret that you are ailing. Of course our business relations do not contemplate any interchange of sympathies; still I'll go easy with you to-day. You may go up to the house and look after the children; see that they don't smoke cigarettes, or quarrel, or tease the cat, or do anything out of the way."

Now that was fine business for the Devil to be in; but how could the Devil help himself? He was wholly at Daniel's mercy. He went groaning about the humiliating task.

The crash came at last. It was when the Devil informed Daniel one day that he was n't going to work for him any more.

"You have ruined my business," said the Devil, wearily. "A committee of imps waited upon me last night and told me that unless I severed my connection with you a permanent suspension of my interests down yonder

would be necessitated. While I have been running around doing your insane errands my personal business has gone to the dogs--I would n't be at all surprised if I were to have to get a new plant altogether. Meanwhile my reputation has suffered; I am no longer respected, and the number of my recruits is daily becoming smaller. I give up,--I can make no further sacrifice."

"Then you are prepared to forfeit your bond?" asked Daniel.

"Not by any means," replied the Devil. "I propose to throw the matter into the courts."

"That will hardly be to your interest," said Daniel, "since, as you well know, we have recently elected honest men to the bench, and, as I recollect, most of our judges are members in good standing of the church we built some years ago!"

The Devil howled with rage. Then, presently, he began to whimper.

"For the last time," expostulated Daniel, "let me remind you that sentiment does not enter into this affair at all. We are simply two business parties co-operating in a business scheme. Our respective duties are exactly defined in the bonds we hold. You keep your contract and I'll keep mine. Let me see, I still have a margin of thirteen years."

The Devil groaned and writhed.

"They call me a dude," whimpered the Devil.

"Who do?" asked Daniel.

"Beelzebub and the rest," said the Devil. "I have been trotting around doing pious errands so long that I 've lost all my sulphur-and-brimstone flavor, and now I smell like spikenard and myrrh."

"Pooh!" said Daniel.

"Well, I do," insisted the Devil. "You've humiliated me so that I hain't got any more ambition. Yes, Daniel, you've worked me shamefully hard!"

"Well," said Daniel, "I have a very distinct suspicion that when, thirteen years hence, I fall into your hands I shall not enjoy what might be called a sedentary life."

The Devil plucked up at this suggestion. "Indeed you shall not," he muttered. "I'll make it hot for you!"

"But come, we waste time," said Daniel. "I am a man of business, and I cannot fritter away the precious moments parleying with you. I have important work for you. Tomorrow is Sunday; you are to see that all the saloons are kept closed."

"I sha'n't--I won't!" yelled the Devil.

"But you must," said Daniel, firmly.

"Do you really expect me to do *that*?" roared the Devil. "Do you fancy that I am so arrant a fool as to shut off the very feeders whereby my hungry hell is supplied? That would be suicidal!"

"I don't know anything about that," said Daniel; "I am a business man, and by this business arrangement of ours it is explicitly stipulated--"

"I don't care what the stipulations are!" shrieked the Devil. "I'm through with you, and may I be consumed by my own fires if ever again I have anything to do with a business man!"

The upshot of it all was that the Devil forfeited his bond, and by this act Daniel was released from every obligation unto the Devil, and one thousand and one souls were ransomed from the torture of the infernal fires.