

# Told Under Oath

Lord Dunsany

People often talk of Satan, but it's very seldom you meet a man who has actually seen him. I was once on my way south from one of the world's greatest lures, the sea, to a lure that to me is even greater, the desert. All the way between lies land that the Arabs think is arable — whatever view an English farmer might take of it — land that becomes more and more inhospitable to man and his crops until, through a narrow pass in a wall of mountains, you come suddenly on the blue calm of the Sahara. I was in a car going southward from Algiers, and the ages seemed to be queerly mixed up, with my hired motor passing camels among marble fragments of the Roman empire, fallen in ruin where Rome had ruined Carthage.

Toward evening we stopped for tea, my chauffeur and I, at a French *estaminet* in a little village, and it was there that I met the man who had seen Satan. The room in the inn was small, and he sat at the next table to mine. I did not guess his nationality, for the French colonials and the Arabs are equally brown under that sun. I thought at first that he was an Arab, because he had a certain far look in his eyes that they have; but he turned out to be an Englishman. He surprised me when I asked him if he knew how far it was to El Kantara, below whose crags I intended to spend the second night of my journey, and he answered in perfect English. Then I saw that the look in his eyes that had made me think him an Arab, whose eyes can see so clearly over the desert and discern their paradise as clearly beyond it, came not from gazing where the Arabs gazed, but from some strange story he had. Of this I somehow felt sure. And strange it certainly was. I determined to get it, but how I was going to do so I didn't know.

I asked him if he could tell me the distance to El Kantara, and he told me. After a short conversation he asked me if I would give him a lift in my car for the five or six kilometers to his house. This of course I agreed to and off we started on our silent drive. All during the journey he seemed to sit brooding over that story of his, as though he had something to tell which he never thought of sharing with any chance acquaintance, if with anybody at all. The brief twilight was fading over those barren lands and, when the careless driver nearly ran over a dog, I blurted out, "The devil!" My silent companion winced, a slight wince but unmistakable, a little key to the mystery of his past, what may be called a clue, by those whose business it is to work out clues. But a clue to what? Not surely to any actual association with Satan. That was a wild guess. But I had only guesses to guide me; nor did it seem so wild, as it would here, in that strange land with night coming down on the waste. After that wince he dropped back again into his impassivity, and his gaze was still far from me.

All men must be mysterious to one who has only just met them, but about this man there seemed some especial mystery, and I determined to trace it. Having nothing to guide me but that strange guess that had come to me in the twilight, I could only trust to it as though it were

accurate evidence. If that were wrong I had no clue at all, so I treated my guess as though it were right. "It's queer how often we mention the devil," I said, "as I did just now. But very few men have ever seen him."

"Very few," said my companion.

"In fact nobody ever has," I went on.

"Perhaps not," he answered.

I laughed at that. A laugh directed toward the story a man won't tell will more often draw it forth than argument will. He sat perfectly silent in the dying twilight as our car purred down the road and began to meet beetles droning by, and I sat silent too. Then he said, "I have seen him."

"That," I said at once, "is most interesting."

"I don't think that is the word for it," he replied.

"But it is," I said, and waited for him to go on. But I got no more. We sat in dead silence but for the sound of the car. And then I told him, "I write articles sometimes about the fauna of different countries, and I feel sure it would interest such readers as I have if you would tell me what the devil was like."

"I doubt it," he said.

"But I am sure it would, if it were true," I answered.

"It's true enough," he said.

"Then I know it would interest them," I insisted. "Things that are true always do."

He was silent again, but not now, as I could somehow see even in that dim light, from determination not to tell me what I was so curious to hear.

He had rather the air of a man who was turning back to old thoughts. While he seemed to think, I added, "I only want what is true. If you really have seen the devil, I know it would interest my readers."

"Satan," he said. "Satan is what he is called, you know."

"Well, Satan," I said.

“I can tell your readers one thing,” he said then, “and that is that they’ll never get anything from him.”

That, I explained, was not quite what I wanted. Any readers that I may have do not require moral lessons from me. But anything true, anything that has really happened in this wide world of which we know so little, would probably be of interest. He was silent again for a while, as silent as the calm of the evening. A beetle hit the wind-screen and exploded, and this seemed to disturb his reverie. “I will tell you,” he said.

“That would be very kind of you,” I replied. “I know that your story will be interesting, if it is really true. I only mention that because so many people have written stories of Satan. But I don’t want fiction. My readers have had enough of that.”

“It is perfectly true,” he answered.

“I only write about fauna that have been actually seen,” I repeated. “Will you give me a solemn assurance that your story of Satan will be the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

“I will give you my oath,” he said.

I got out my notebook and pencil. “Then I should like to give your story, if I may, to my readers.”

“Certainly,” he said. And he swore a most solemn oath.

“Well, that,” I said, “is good enough for me, and should be for them.”

“They have my oath,” he answered.

“Quite so,” I said. “That is all I want for them.”

“I met him at a cocktail party,” he said.

“Who?” I asked.

“Satan,” he said.

“How was he dressed?” I asked.

“Like everybody else,” he said. “He looked quite ordinary. In fact I should never have

recognized him if it hadn't been that I was not drinking any cocktails, which seemed in some odd way to be disappointing him. He sidled up to me without any introduction. It was what he said that told me he was the devil."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He said, 'Is there anything that you want?' " replied my companion.

"I've often heard people say that," I told him.

"It was the way he said anything that told me, and the way his eyes looked at the time, a wide and faraway look. I saw that he meant *anything*."

"Anything?" I repeated.

"Anything at all," he replied.

"And what did you ask?" I said.

"We stop here," he called out.

We were before a square house with white walls and a flat roof, a little way back from the road, and behind the house was what looked like a poultry yard, guarded also by four white walls, high as those of the house. I naturally thought that he would ask me in; but he did not. The driver, seeing we wished to talk, lighted a cigarette and strolled away from the car, till he was one of many dim forms with shapes of rocks and of bushes that Earth was gathering slowly into one dusk. Then my companion told me his name, which I have not yet told my readers, partly because I cannot be sure that it really was his name. Kelston, he said it was. "Are you married?" I asked.

"To some extent," he replied.

And from that I gathered that his wives were Arabs and lived in the Arab way and would not expect a visitor at that hour, or at any time. So we sat and spoke in the car.

"I should explain," he said, "that I had been persuaded to join a club out in the country in very pleasant surroundings. But it was a golf club, and golf was not a game at which I was particularly proficient. In fact I wasn't any good at it at all. But I felt that I had to play, and that was where the trouble began. I felt that the other members were laughing at me. Funny what trifles start men on what courses. They didn't even laugh openly; and, if I hadn't felt that they were doing it, I should never have asked what I did of the devil. My golf was bad. I told you that. But they needn't have laughed at me. And I don't think I am wrong

in saying they did so.

“Well, when I was asked that extraordinary question and looked into the fellow’s eyes and saw who he was, I said to myself, ‘Now it’s my turn to laugh.’ And what I asked was to be able to go once around that golf course, doing every hole in one. They could laugh at that if they wanted to, and then go round the course and see what they could do themselves. Bogey was 94, but we would see what Satan could do. ‘But certainly,’ he said, the moment I made my request. Then he vanished, or left the party, I can’t say which; and I was left with my odd power.

“For I had it; it worked. Only one round, of course; that was all I had asked. And it was all I wanted. They have an annual competition at that club for a prize of £100, and I knew it was coming on soon. I entered for it, and the secretary smiled; but he took my name and my fee, which was £5.

There is not much more to tell. I was going round with one of their best players. I should explain that we all went round once, unless there was a tie, and the one who did best took the £100. I did the first hole in one. There were cheers, shouting, and good-natured laughter; because of course my doing that was really very funny to them, knowing nothing about Satan. They sent back to the clubhouse for a bottle of champagne for me. That is a custom of our club when a hole is done in one. But it doesn’t often happen. They insisted on my drinking a glass of it when it came, which would not have been very good for my golf in the ordinary way. But they made my opponent drink one too, as well as my caddy, which might have evened it up, had it been ordinary golf. But I had the devil on my side, and of course I did the next hole in one also. That produced sheer astonishment; the worst player in the club doing that twice. After a while they just said, ‘Well, there it is. He has done it.’ By which they meant that it was a fact that they had to accept, however unlikely it seemed; and they offered me another bottle of champagne. We were farther from the clubhouse now, and I was able to persuade them to leave that to the end of the round, and they said they would. At the third hole nothing was said. And after that the whole crowd dropped off, and no single onlooker but my caddy saw me do the fourth hole in one, nor the fifth, nor any of the rest. Needless to say, I did all the rest in one; you can’t beat Satan. There was nothing to prevent my opponent from seeing it if he had taken the trouble to look, but he seemed to have lost all interest.

“Then you won,” I said.

“Of course,” he replied.

“But I thought you said,” I rejoined, “that you never got anything from Satan.”

“You shall hear,” he said. “I had a nice house with a lawn in front of it and a garden behind,

and I lived in a decent country. I got this from him instead: these bare white walls and this godforsaken country.”

“But how?” I asked.

“I was going to tell you,” he said. “I won the tournament, as I told you, and came back to the clubhouse. Nobody spoke. The committee had a meeting. I don’t know what they said. I had tea by myself at a table. I didn’t see any more bottles of champagne. And then a servant came to me and said that the secretary wished to see me. ‘What about?’ I asked. The servant did not know: the secretary wished to see me. Well, I went to the secretary’s office and found him sitting at his desk. As he sat there quite silent, I said, ‘Well, I won the tournament.’”

“And all he said was, ‘Yes.’ Nothing more.

“‘You wanted to see me,’ I said after a bit.

“‘Yes,’ he said again.

“‘May I ask what about?’

“‘I wanted to stress,’ said he, ‘that this is a gentleman’s club.’

“‘Is that all you wanted to say?’ I asked.

“‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that it is a club for gentlemen.’

“‘I see,’ I said.

“‘The £100 will be paid you,’ said the secretary. ‘But after that it is the wish of the committee that you should resign from the club.’

“‘You think I made the score by unfair means,’ I said.

“‘I think nothing,’ he answered. ‘I have only stated that it is a club for gentlemen. The £100 will be paid you.’

“‘If you had any doubts you could have watched me,’ I said.

“‘We don’t do that here,’ he replied.

“He then gave me the check, but I would have been better off if he hadn’t. It made my crime

worse. Nobody believed that I hadn't cheated. The story spread and I was regarded everywhere as a man who had stolen £100. That is to say, I was so regarded at first. But as time went on there is no doubt that the rumored sum grew larger, and I have strong grounds for believing that before the end of the year it was generally credited by all the people I knew, and by how many that I did not know there is no saying, that I had cheated that golf club out of £1000. Some even said that I had done it at cards. Not that that should really have made it any worse; but it seemed worse to those that believed it. And, mind you, I couldn't go up to anyone and say, 'I never cheated at cards.' That announcement would only have made matters still worse.

"I welcomed the sight of strangers, for it was only they who, when we passed in the street, did not look away from me at their watches, or at shop-windows on the opposite side from the one by which I approached. Had there been a legal charge, the thing would have come to some head. But there was none; only that glacial air frozen on all faces, as though everyone that I knew were on some vast jury that had found me guilty. And as there had been no sentence, there could be no appeal.

"Things were like this for weeks. Not even the boldest explorers stay at the North Pole forever; and I who have felt it can tell you that spiritual chill, combined with a sense of injustice, can be worse than anything that the thermometer can record. So out of this spiritual frost I pulled up my tent pegs and, with that sense of injustice of which I spoke urging me like a strong north wind, I went south till I came where no one could have heard of my expulsion from that golf club or would have cared if they had."

"And I may tell my readers," I said, "that your story is perfectly true?"

"Haven't I sworn to you?" he replied. "Do you know any solemn oath than the one that I swore by?"

"No," I admitted.

"After all," he said, "I am an English gentleman, even if they did turn me out of their golf club."

"Oh, certainly," I assured him, for I could see that he was. "And I will assure my readers of that when I tell your story. But I haven't got it all yet. I have only half. The devil's half. May I ask what about your half?"

"What do you call my half?" he asked.

“The devil gave you that wonderful round of golf,” I said. “What did you give him for it? He always demands his more-than-fair price, as far as I’ve ever read. You didn’t let him have your immortal soul in exchange?”

“No, no! Certainly not,” he replied. “I am not such a fool as that. I wouldn’t give up that for a round of golf.”

“Then what?” I asked.

“He extorted from me,” said Kelston, “my power of ever speaking the truth again.”

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