

## To Beat the Devil

So, You Want to Weasel Out of Your Satanic Bargain, Do You? Uh-Oh...

By Jerry James

*I ain't sayin' I beat the devil / But I drank his beer for nothin'*

— Kris Kristofferson, “To Beat the Devil”



*One, Two, Three Times the Devil*

*Walter Huston as Mr. Scratch in “The Devil and Daniel Webster;” Ray Walston as Mr. Applegate in “Damn Yankees;” and Peter Cook as George Spiggott in “Bedazzled.”*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that as soon as you’ve sold your soul to the Devil, your next thought must be, “How do I get out of this?”

Because whether he’s called Satan, Mephistopheles, Beelzebub, Old Nick or any of the pseudonyms used by the characters seen above, one thing is certain: You and the Devil now have a contract, usually signed in your own blood. (Yes, Satan invented paperwork.) Said contract requires him to grant your heart’s desire—although perhaps not quite in the way you anticipated. In exchange, he will inevitably return one day to claim your immortal soul. For all eternity.

That being understood, most of our tales of men *in extremis* (and they’re almost always men) deal with those who succeed in evading Satan’s snare, either through judicious use of their own wits or through an outside agency’s intercession. It’s also useful to have a heaping helping of luck, for even the cleverest may find himself outsmarted. With a one-way ticket to Hell.

Although playing games for keeps is usually associated with Death—chess in Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*; gin rummy in Woody Allen’s *Death Knocks*—Satan will occasionally consent to gamble for one’s soul, perhaps in a poker game. But beware. He’ll cheat. Every time.

Where did this all come from? When did it begin? And how did Medieval Christianity, a religion based on miracles, evolve into one based on magic, in Paul Carus’ memorable formation?

## Origins



*The Pentagram*

The name “Satan” is said to be derived from the Egyptian god Set (or Seth). The idea of a universe of two competing forces goes back to the Persians, where Zoroaster postulated the good Ahura Mazda in eternal struggle with the evil Ahriman.

However, it took Judaism to invent the Satan of the Old Testament. In the Book of Job, he’s *the* Satan. It’s a job title, as if he were the Prosecuting Attorney.

Over the centuries, Christianity refined this, inventing such devices as the Seal of Solomon, represented by the Pentagram (above). The Seal gave one power over 72 demons, each with its own narrow specialty. Choose wisely. If one wants a ’65 Corvette, it might not be useful to summon Amdusias, the Demon of Uprooting Trees.

## The First

Theophilus (Latin: “Friend of God”) was an archdeacon of Adana in modern-day Turkey, c. 500 CE. He was elected bishop, but modestly declined the post. However, when the new bishop relieved him of his archdeaconate, Theophilus, miffed, sought out the Devil. This is the first extant example of a man signing a demonic contract in blood. The pact restored him to the bishopric in exchange for his soul.

Many years later, Theophilus began to reconsider the deal and prayed to the Virgin Mary for help. After he fasted for 40 days, she appeared, chastised him and promised aid. After an additional 30-day fast, Mary reappeared with news of success.

Theophilus awoke a Christlike 3 days later with the bloody contract on his chest. He took it to the legitimate bishop and begged forgiveness. After the bishop burned the contract, Theophilus joyfully expired, later to be canonized as St. Theophilus the Penitent. He does not seem to have been made the patron saint of anything.



*Theophilus Makes a Deal*

But be warned. Seeking divine intervention doesn’t always work. Sir Roland Alston hoped to evade Hell by hiding in All Saints Church. Five long gouges in the stone floor show where Satan dragged him out.

## The Famous

The real Johann Georg Faust (c. 1480-1541) was a scholar of the German Renaissance. A primitive scientist, he made his living as an itinerant magician. He is said to have died in an explosion, the result of an experiment gone wrong. But to others, it was obvious that the Devil had come to collect Faust’s soul in person. This was an ideal jumping-off point for the Faust legend, later to be used by Goethe, Gounod and many others over the centuries.



*Faust Summons Mephistopheles*

The scholar Erasmus feared where this legend might lead. Those who sought witches often ended up burning women.

But first came Christopher Marlowe, who wrote *Doctor Faustus* shortly before his death in 1593. Marlowe's Faustus (Latin: Favored) is a Doctor of Theology, who, bored with science, wishes to learn magic.

Conjuring up Mephistopheles, Faustus signs away his soul for 24 years of the demon's services, which include procuring Helen of Troy. When the time is up, devils drag Faustus down to Hell, even after he offers the scholar's most terrible sacrifice: "I'll burn my books!" But he left his name, forever attached to the Faustian bargain.

### **The Clever & The Too Clever**

The British love outwitting Old Nick. John, nicknamed "Everafraid," avoided giving up his soul, even though he'd sworn to do so whether his body was buried inside or outside the church—because he was buried *under the church wall*. Jack O'Kent traded Satan a bridge for the first soul to cross it. Then, he tossed over a bone. Alas, poor dog!

Others are too clever by half. Science fiction of the early 1960s gives us the man who wishes to be irresistible to women—turned into a baby; the miser who wants to be the richest man in the world—turned into a potentate, yearly given his weight in gold

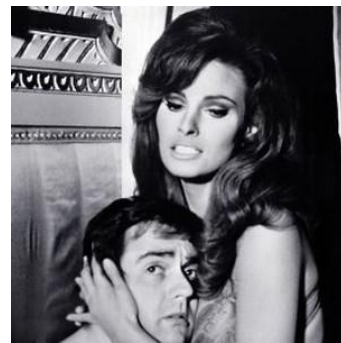
but losing his extremities to leprosy; and the student who needs help with math—whose poorly drawn pentagram leads to his immediately being devoured by demons.



*David Wayne in "Escape Clause"*

Then there's Walter (David Wayne) in "Escape Clause," an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Walter barter for the ability to choose when he will die, only to be sentenced to life in prison. The guard who finds his body remarks, "Poor devil." No, poor Walter.

### **The Graced**



*Dudley Moore in "Bedazzled"*  
*Raquel Welch as Lust*

If you aren't clever enough to evade Satan, you may still escape through the unfathomable gift of God's Grace, which can take many forms.

Jabez Stone benefits from being represented at the trial for his soul by his fellow New Hampshireman, the eloquent Daniel Webster. Webster is successful, even against the wickedest jury Mr. Scratch can seat. Joe

Boyd defeats both the Devil and those Damn Yankees through the love of two women. One of them is his wife. The other is Lola, Mr. Applegate's minion. Lola happily gets what she didn't think Lola wanted.

Things are a bit more complicated for Stanley Moon (Dudley Moore), the hero of *Bedazzled*. A short-order cook, he is too shy even to speak to Margaret, the waitress he admires. George Spiggott offers Moon 7 wishes for his soul. Of course, each of them comes with a catch, usually involving Spiggott's staff, the 7 Deadly Sins. But God is playing his own game, and in the end, Moon both burns his contract and finds the courage to successfully approach Margaret.

### The Musical



*Robert Johnson*

Although the Devil has been known to engage in musical contests, especially in the South and especially on the fiddle—as Charlie Daniels attests in “The Devil Went Down to Georgia”—Satan is better known for tempting musicians to sell their souls in exchange for extraordinary talent. Perhaps the best known of these stories is the tale of Bluesman Robert Johnson. Around 1935, Johnson was a Mississippi guitar player of indifferent talent, notable

only for his desire to engage in sexual congress with every woman he met, when he disappeared. Upon his reappearance a couple of years later, Johnson could play Blues guitar like... well, like the devil! This miraculous transformation was attributed to his having sold his soul at the crossroads.

True or not, Johnson's career lasted only a few more years before he was poisoned by a jealous husband. (Hound dogs will be hound dogs, with or without Satan.) His recording career was even shorter—just 7 months. His legend lives on, despite those like Scott Ainslie, who said, “If learning to play the guitar was that easy, we would all play guitar, and I'll just meet you in hell.”

### The Incredibly Stupid



Homer Simpson is the exemplar of this category and a fitting place for us to end. It is Homer, after all, who sells his soul to the Devil for a donut. Upon meeting his fate, he is condemned to eat donuts for all eternity. “Oh, wow,” says Homer. “Is this Heaven?” Cursing his error, Satan sends him back to Springfield, there to eat even more donuts. In our dealings with the Devil, may we all be as fortunate as Homer.

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