

THE EFFICIENCY EXPERT, OR: HOW SATAN GOT HIS GROOVE BACK

by Graham Towers

“Since I brought you here on contract, you won’t be subject to the unceasing torment that’s visited on the other souls. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” said Ableman, of Ableman’s Efficiency Experts, as he stepped around the giant slugs that were endlessly poking a teenager with sticks. Ableman gestured at some nearby pointed arches. “Nice stone-work. Is it original?”

“No, I had it done a couple hundred years ago. I don’t see any reason to change it; Gothic style just seems to work down here.”

They walked in silence for a moment. “My next question. Did I die?”

“Not at all, I arranged for you to be knocked into a coma. You’re here on a work permit. You’ll be returned to New York when the job is complete. To continue the tour, if you’ll look to

the right, you'll see the profligates—”

“Profligates?”

“Spendthrifts. They're being chased and mauled by ferocious dogs.”

“Where?”

“There, beyond the Chains of Hellfire.”

“Hm.”

Satan paused. “What?”

Ableman tapped his pen against his chin. “What does wasting money have to do with being mauled by dogs?”

“It's a symbol.”

“Of?”

A brief silence. “Look, I don't have to explain the symbol to you, all right?”

Ableman said nothing, but made a note on his pad.

Satan scratched his head with his iron scepter. “Listen, there are a thousand allegorical punishments down here. They can't all be perfect, high-functioning pieces of irony. Sometimes you have to be okay with the broad strokes.”

“No, no, it's fine. It's just you had the Wrathful brawling with each other. Makes perfect sense. You had the Sullen lying by themselves submerged in the River of Souls. I get that. Mauling people with dogs because they're loose with cash just isn't as good.”

Satan bristled and rose to his full height: 6'4" in cloven hoofs. “You'd best tread carefully, or you may find yourself down here for all eternity some day.”

Ableman sighed. “It's my job to notice these things. You brought me down here; there must be some things you want changed. You want my help or not?”

The Lord of Hell deflated slightly. “I do, yes.” He turned to leave. “And stay away from Cerberus. Only one of his heads knows ‘sit.’” He sulked off as Ableman began inventory on the pitchfork shed.

If any of his minions had asked, Satan wouldn't be able to articulate why, exactly, he had brought the efficiency expert to Hell. The truth was that the Satan of today was a far cry from Heaven's brightest angel who, once upon a time, had rivaled God. Millennia of ruling over the ever-increasing numbers of the damned had taken its toll. Creating new punishments for sins that hadn't even existed a few hundred years ago was a persistent challenge (Satan didn't know what texting was, or why it was sinful to do it while driving, but some of the recent inductees had requested particularly gruesome sentences for those transgressors).

He couldn't remember the last time he'd personally tortured anybody, and he no longer bothered coming up with new punishments, telling himself that if lava enemas were good enough for the sinners of yore, they were good enough for the sinners of today. But he knew that wasn't the real reason. He'd simply lost his edge. God's near-equal had been reduced to a bored, puzzled bureaucrat. Bringing in Ableman was a last half-hearted gesture by a fading star.

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Ableman got to work. His first order of business was reimagining the physical layout of Hell. “Concentric circles? Utterly impractical.” By his logic, if you were being punished for eternity for the crime of Lust and needed to speak to your Chief Torment Daemon, did it make any sense to walk half the circumference of Hell to do it? It took some weeks of demolition and reconstruction, but Ableman soon got the Inferno on an orderly grid system, complete with a main thoroughfare and branching avenues.

“Everyone thinks it's great,” Snake Daemon said. Satan had been receiving reports from

lesser daemons, preferring not to deal with the efficiency expert directly. “From Lust to Heresy in ten minutes! Unbelievable.”

Satan dismissed him and paced in his office cave. He was impressed, but also embarrassed by the thought of the untold aeons in which he could have fixed Hell’s problems only to have Ableman whip the place into shape in less than a month. How could he have ever thought concentric circles were a good idea?

The grid system was just the beginning. Ableman finally canned Charon, the obnoxious ferryman who was the sole method of transport from the land of the living. He built a bridge over the river Styx, allowing for far more rapid ingress. Charon sulked and threw himself in the river, joining the ranks of the Sullen under the waters he used to skim over.

*A fucking bridge, Satan thought. I could have been rid of Charon years ago.*

But when Snake Daemon brought the news that all the Tormentors had been exiled into Malebolge, one of the deepest pits of Hell, Satan knew Ableman had gone too far. He had Snake Daemon summon the human before him only to be told: “Actually, Boss, he asked me if you wouldn’t mind stopping by *his* office.”

*The nerve!* He was Satan! Prince of Darkness, Lord of the Flies, and the Baddest Bitch in Town. Satan stormed out toward Ableman’s office, reluctantly noting that the trip down the newly paved thoroughfare was both scenic and direct. The efficiency expert had set up quarters with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the River of Fire. Satan smashed the door open, and stopped in his tracks: Ableman’s office was *bigger* than his. It was clean and spartan, with white walls and an onyx desk, its legs made of neatly stacked skulls. On the desk was a miniature Zen sand garden.

“Satan, thank you for coming by. Please, take a seat.”

Satan paused, as his rage mixed with envy over the well-appointed office, both emotions quickly giving way to confusion. He was there to separate Ableman from his spine, but he had trouble remembering why. It seemed easier, then, just to move his tail out of the way and sit in the chair across the desk from the calmly waiting mortal.

“I know you must have some questions about the Tormentors moving into that not-so-nice place.”

“YOU’LL PAY FO—“

Ableman held up a finger: *ah ah ah*. “I’ll explain in a minute. But first: all the residents of Hell did what, exactly, on Earth?” When Satan didn’t answer, he went on. “They sinned against God. The same guy *you* sinned against. And you’re what, *punishing* them? They’re on your side, boychik.”

Satan’s claws scratched deep grooves in the arms of the chair, but he said nothing. He’d been Lord of Hell for so long that tormenting the damned had always just been a given. Didn’t it seem like something that would piss off God? He hadn’t thought about it recently. And it didn’t really matter if it was God’s will or not: Satan tortured people because he loved to torture. Or at least he used to.

“When I take a case, I’m not working for a client; I’m working to fix a system. On Earth, in America, the systems I fixed were all capitalist in nature. My job was to minimize cost and waste and maximize profit. But I have no particular allegiance to capitalism or any other system, not in principle. The goal for me is to see what the system *wants* to be, and help it excel. Take this place: here, there’s no cost or profits, just wasted resources. No one gets hungry—”

“Except for Tantalus!” Satan interjected, embarrassed at the glee he felt in correcting Ableman.

“Right, except for Tantalus. No one gets hungry and no one produces goods. This isn’t a capitalist society at all, this is an opportunity for an honest-to-G—, I mean, a real utopia.”

“*Dystopia!*” Satan thundered.

“One man’s *dys* is another man’s *u*. Anyhow, this is all to explain why I moved the sadists. They’re all off in that unreachable pit, taking turns tormenting each other instead of bothering the other people. Makes sense. Now, the question is, what do you do with the souls who have all that freed-up time now that they’re not being pitchforked half to death? Well, I have some ideas I think you’ll like when you see them. I want three more weeks. Why don’t you take some time off? When you come back it’ll be a nice surprise.”

Satan stood and made a show of knocking his chair over, but Ableman didn’t even seem to notice. He needed time to think over everything the consultant had said. He muttered, “*Your mother’s* a nice surprise,” under his breath and stormed out, half-heartedly smashing a vase with his scepter.

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Ableman’s next idea was to turn the residential areas of Hell into something resembling his desk’s sand garden. The newly non-tormented provided all the free labor he could want, and they were so grateful they did anything he asked without question. They built pagodas, crushed rock to make sand for Zen gardens, and made little semi-circular footbridges that arched gracefully over the lava features.

“Is it strictly within my purview? Not really, but the people need something to do, and I thought it’d be nice. Isn’t it nice?”

Satan secretly agreed, though he refused to give him the satisfaction. He merely snorted smoke out of his nostrils as he wondered how Ableman managed to keep his hair perfectly

coiffed in Hell's unbearable heat.

After the Zen gardens were complete, Ableman began holding nightly lectures for the damned, explaining the writings of Marcus Aurelius and going over the basics of meditation.

He started a book-sharing collective ("Just call it a library," Satan pleaded impotently.) No one used it much, as Hell had only one *Enchiridion Daemoniacus*, three copies of the *Necronomicon* (one bound in the skin of the mad poet Abdul Alhazred, two paperback), and a dozen untouched copies of *The Secret*.

It was Ableman's lecture series that was finally his undoing. One night Satan walked up to his condo, only to find Snake Daemon coiled up on his porch.

"There's something I think you should see, Boss." Snake Daemon led the way to the amphitheater (formerly the Flaying Arena) where the lectures were held. On the way, Snake Daemon explained that he'd been going to the lectures at the behest of his partner, Wolf Beast. Satan hadn't known Snake Daemon was gay, but he congratulated himself on playing it cool as Snake Daemon continued: he'd been attending the series to deal with what Wolf Beast called his "miraculous ability to bring up the past" at every chance. He went just often enough to placate his partner, but then he grew alarmed by the quickly changing tenor of Ableman's lectures. What had started out as self-help had become more akin to rabble-rousing. Satan was peeved Snake Daemon had gone to the lectures in the first place, but decided to let it go.

Arriving at the amphitheater, they found seats at the back and listened. Ableman was quite the orator, pounding the lectern and addressing individual souls by name: "You, Janice, are being punished for *eternity* for cheating on your husband. Was it wrong of you? Was it bad? Yes. But not 'roast on a spit for eternity' bad. It's time to shake up the system." His speech ended, and he bowed to a standing ovation. Satan looked around him: far from the cowed and weary souls

he'd presided over since the Fall, these faces around him were proud, determined, almost *happy*. If he wasn't careful, he was going to have a popular revolt on his hands.

"See? I was right" Snake Daemon said. "Hey Boss...why are you smiling?"

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That night (there was no real night in Hell, though Ableman had instituted regular periods of rest that everyone had taken to calling "night") Satan marched toward the efficiency expert's home. For the first time in a thousand years, he felt the old wiliness creep back into his heart. If he was being honest, he actually liked most of the changes the expert had implemented. But he could not allow Ableman's star to rise over his: it was *his* kingdom, and it was time to reclaim it.

Satan crept into Ableman's home, which (*goddammit, are you kidding me*) had a better view of the Lava Wastes than Satan's own condo. He steeled his resolve and walked into the efficiency expert's bedchamber. It had been a long time since he punished anyone personally by hand, and he felt his adrenaline spike. He raised his iron scepter high into the air and brought it crashing down onto Ableman's head, expecting Ableman to disappear from Hell forever and wake up back in his hospital bed in Queens. But he was still there. Satan backed away as Ableman screamed and grabbed his head.

"What is your problem?! Holy Hell, that smarts!" Ableman clutched his head and rocked back and forth on his bed.

Satan slid to the ground, dumb-founded. *What was it that went wrong?*

"A novel way to wake someone, I grant you, but while I have you here, there are some—*ow, you really pack a wallop*—things we could stand to go over. The Lusties, for example, you really think it makes sense to keep them all together? Now that they're not being tormented, they don't get a thing done all day except to knock boots from here to eternity. What I suggest—"

But Satan was crouching in the corner, trembling in fear as he suddenly realized what must have happened on Earth. The Ableman next-of-kin, perhaps grown impatient waiting for the patriarch to regain consciousness, had pulled the plug. Ableman was dead, and he was in Hell, and Satan was stuck with him forever.

His mind raced while Ableman prattled on. The fear that seized him, this must be what all the souls of Hell had felt for millennia. Satan was wracked with anguish and despair. In Ableman, he had accidentally found the perfect punishment for himself. He looked out on an eternity of meekness and self-doubt. And yet, if Ableman was truly dead and with him in Hell, then the efficiency expert was finally one of his own subjects, under Satan's power... forever. In a single, brilliant moment of clarity, Satan rose to his hoofs, torment-free and ready to take back his kingdom.

“Also and again: the Heretics. If anything, those guys are your cheerleaders; why you ever punished them in the first place is beyond me. First thing, we need to—”

Ableman never finished that sentence. Or any sentence ever, for that matter. Satan grabbed him by the neck and flung him, not out the open window, but through the bedroom wall and watched through the new Ableman-shaped hole as the efficiency expert landed a thousand yards away out on the Lava Wastes. He didn't die, of course, but Satan's heart lifted as he watched Ableman hot-foot it toward the nearest river. Satan laughed (when was the last time he'd *laughed?*), as he thought of all the long, torment-filled millennia to come. He had a fresh subject on which to try out cutting-edge punishments. He was feeling creative; he wanted to dust off all his old torture gear and find new uses for it. Smiling, he watched Ableman escape the Lava Wastes and jump into the river, realizing too late it was the River of Fire.

Satan left the efficiency expert's home with a lightness of step he hadn't felt since, if he was being honest, right before the War in Heaven. As soon as Ableman made it back to non-flaming land, Satan would seal his lips and put him in one of the lesser-visited rings of Hell. Oops—grids of Hell, he meant.

*Some of Ableman's changes were not so bad*, he thought as he unlocked the gate on the Tormentor's paddock and declared Open Season on all the souls of Hell. *I'll keep the grid layout*. This he thought as he walked down the main thoroughfare amid the wailing of the once-again-tormented dead. He reached his condo in the center of Hell. The grid he would keep, certainly. He would also keep the Zen garden, with its little bridges and quiet expanses of raked sand. It was pleasant there. He found it soothing.

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