### To the Victor

Isaac Asimov

I don't often see my friend George, but when I do I make it a practice to ask after this small demon he claims he can call up.

“A bald and aged science fiction writer,” he would say to me, “has stated that any technology sufficiently advanced beyond the customary would seem like magic. And yet, my small friend Azazel is no extraterrestrial oddity, but a bona fide demon. He may only be two centimeters high, but he can do amazing things. — How did you find out about him?”

“By listening to you.”

George drew his face into vertical disapproving lines and said sepulchrally, “I never discuss Azazel.”

“Except when you're talking,” I said. “What's he been doing lately?”

George fetched a sigh from the region of his toes and expelled it, fairly beer-laden, into the unoffending atmosphere. “There,” he said, “you touch a bit of sadness within me. My young friend, Theophilus, is a little the worse for our efforts, mine and Azazel's, although we meant well.” He lifted his mug of beer to his face and then went on.

My friend Theophilus [said George], whom you have never met for he moves in circles rather higher than the sordid ones you frequent, is a refined young man who is a great admirer of the graceful lines and divine carriage of young women — some­thing to which I am fortunately immune — but who lacked the capacity to inspire reciprocation in them.

He would say to me, “I can't understand it, George. I have a good mind; I am an excellent conversationalist: witty, kind, rea­sonably good-looking —”

“Yes,” I would reply, “you do have eyes, nose, chin, and mouth all in the usual places and in the usual number. I'll go that far.”

“— and incredibly skilled in the theory of love, although I haven't actually been given much chance to put it into practice, and yet I seem to be unable to attract attention from these de­lightful creatures. Observe that they seem to be all about us, and yet not one makes the slightest attempt to scrape up an acquain­tance with me, although I sit here with the most genial expres­sion on my face.”

My heart bled for him. I had known him as an infant when, as I recall, I had once held him, at the request of his mother, who was breast-feeding him to repletion, while she rearranged her dress. These things form a bond.

I said, “Would you be happier, my dear friend, if you *did* attract attention?”

“It would be paradise,” he said, simply.

Could I deny him paradise? I put the matter to Azazel, who as usual was sulky about it. “Couldn't you ask me for a diamond?” he said. “I can manage you a good half-carat stone of the first water by rearranging the atoms in a small piece of coal — but irresistibility to women? How do I do that?”

“Couldn't you rearrange some atoms in him?” said I, trying to be helpful. “I want to do *something* for him, if only out of regard for his mother's awesome nutritional equipment.”

“Well, let me think. Human beings,” said Azazel, “secrete pheromones. Of course, with your modern penchant for bathing at every opportunity and for drenching yourselves in artificial scent, you are scarcely aware of the natural way of inspiring sentiment. I can, perhaps, so rearrange your friend's biochemical makeup as to cause the production of unusual quantities of an unusually effective pheromone when the sight of one of the un­gainly females of your repellent species impinges upon his ret­ina.”

“You mean he'll stink?”

“Not at all. It will scarcely surface as a conscious odor but it will have its effect en the female of the species in the form of a dim and atavistic desire to come closer and to smile. She will probably be stimulated to form answering pheromones of her own and I presume that everything that follows will be auto­matic.”

“The very thing, then,” I said, “for I am certain that young Theophilus will give a good account of himself. He is an up­standing fellow with drive and ambition.”

That Azazerel's treatment was effective I discovered when I next stumbled upon Theophilus. It was at a sidewalk café.

It took me a moment to see him, for what initially attracted my attention was a group of young women distributed in circu­lar symmetry. I am, fortunately, unperturbed by young women since I have reached the age of discretion, but it was summer and they were, one and all, dressed in a calculated insufficiency of clothing which I — as is suitable in a man of discretion — dis­creetly studied.

It was only after several minutes during which, I remember, I noted the strain and tension placed upon a button that kept a particular blouse closed, and speculated whether — But that is neither here nor there. It was only after several minutes that I noted that it was none other than Theophilus who was at the center of the circular arrangement and who seemed to be the cynosure of these summery women. No doubt the gathering warmth of the afternoon accentuated his pheromonic potency.

I made my way into the ring of femininity and, with fatherly smiles and winks and an occasional avuncular pat of the shoul­der, sat down at a chair next to Theophilus, one which a win­some lass had vacated for me with a petulant pout. “Theophilus, my young friend” I said, “this is a charming and inspiring sight.”

It was then I noticed that there was a small frown of appalling sadness upon his face. I said with concern, “What is wrong?”

He spoke through motionless lips in a whisper so low I scarcely heard him. “For God's sake, get me out of here.”

I am, of course, as you know, a man of infinite resource. It was the work of a moment for me to rise and say, “Ladies, my young friend here, as the result of a fundamental biologic urge, must visit the men's room. If you will all sit here, he will be right back.”

We entered the small restaurant and left by the rear door. One of the young ladies, who had biceps that bulged in a most un­lovely manner, and who had an equally unlovely streak of suspi­cion in her, had made her way around to the rear of the restau­rant, but we saw her in time and managed to make it to a taxi. She pursued us, with appalling fleetness, for two blocks.

Secure in Theophilus's room, I said, “Clearly, Theophilus, you have discovered the secret of attracting young women. Is not this the paradise you longed for?”

“Not quite,” said Theophilus, as he slowly relaxed in the air-conditioning. “They protect each other. I don't know how it happened but I suddenly discovered, some time ago, that strange young women would approach me and ask if we had not met in Atlantic City. I have never,” he added with indignation, “been in Atlantic City in my life.

“No sooner had I denied the fact, when another would ap­proach and claim that I had just dropped my handkerchief and that she would like to return it, and then a third would come up and say, 'How would you like to get into the movies, kid?' “

I said, “All you have to do is pick out one of them. I would take the one who offered to get you into the movies. It's a soft life, and you'd be surrounded by soft starlets.”

“But I can't pick out *any* of them. They watch each other like hawks. As soon as I seem to be attracted to any one of them, all the rest turn on her and start pulling her hair and pushing her out. I am as womanless as ever I was, and in the old days I at least didn't have to stare at them as they heaved their bosoms at me.”

I sighed in sympathy and said, “Why not set up an elimina­tion tournament? When surrounded by ladies, as you were just now, say to them, ‘Dear ones, I am profoundly attracted to each and every one of you. Therefore I will ask you to line up in alphabetical order so that each one of you may kiss me in turn. The one who does so with the most refined abandon will be my guest for the night.’ The worst that can happen will be that you will get a lot of eager kissing.

“Hmm,” said Theophilus. “Why not? To the victor belong the spoils, and I would love being spoiled by the appropriate victor.” He licked his lips and then pursed them and made practice kisses in the air. “I think I could manage. Do you think it would be less wearing if I insisted on hands-behind-the-back while kiss­ing?”

I said, “On the whole I think not, Theophilus my friend. You should be willing to exert some effort in this cause. I suspect that no-holds-barred would be the better rule.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Theophilus, never one to cling to his view in the face of advice from one who could recall copious experience in such matters.

It was about this time that I had to venture out of town on business and it was not until a month had passed that I met Theophilus again. It was in a supermarket and there he was pushing a cart that was moderately filled with groceries. The look on his face smote me. It was a hunted one, as he looked this way and that.

I came up to him and he ducked, with a strangled cry. Then he recognized me and said, “Thank God — I was afraid you were a woman.”

I shook my head. “Still that problem? You did not hold the elimination tournament, then?”

“I tried. That was the problem.”

“What happened?”

“Well —” He looked this way and that, then moved to one side to peer down an aisle. Satisfied that the coast was clear, he spoke to me in a soft and hurried tone, like one who knew that discre­tion was necessary and that time was limited.

“I arranged it,” he said. “I had them fill out applications, complete with age, brand of mouthwash used, references — all the usual — and then I set the date. I had arranged to hold the tour­nament in the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria, with an ample supply of lip salve, and with the services of a profes­sional masseur plus a tank of oxygen to keep me in shape. The day before the tournament, however, a man came to my apart­ment.

“I say a man, but to my dazzled eyes, he seemed more like an animated heap of bricks. He was seven feet tall and five feet broad with fists the size of steamshovels. He smiled, revealing fangs, and said, ‘Sir, my sister is one of those who will compete in the tournament tomorrow.’ ”

“ ‘How pleased I am to hear that,’ I said, eager to keep the discussion on a friendly plane.

“ ‘My *little* sister,’ he said, ‘a delicate flower on the rough ancestral tree. She is the apple of the eye of my three brothers and myself, and not one of us could bear the thought of her being disappointed.’ ”

“ ‘Do your brothers resemble you, sir?’ I asked.

“ ‘Not at all,’ he said, sorrowfully. ‘As a result of childhood illness, I have been stunted and wizen all my life. My brothers, however, are fine figures of men who stand this high.” He lifted his hand to a point about eight and a half feet above the ground.

“ ‘I am sure,’ I said fervently, ‘your charming sister will have an excellent chance.’

“ ‘I am delighted to hear that. Actually, I am gifted with second sight in compensation, I think, for my unfortunate puniness of physique, and somehow I am certain that my little sister will win the competition. For some strange reason,’ he went on, ‘my little sister has taken a girlish liking to you, and my brothers and myself would feel lower than hound dogs if she were disap­pointed. And if we were ’ ”

“He grinned even more fangily than before and slowly cracked the knuckles of his right hand, one by one, making a sound like that of thigh bones breaking. I had never heard a thigh bone break but a sudden surge of second sight told me that was what the sound was like.”

“I said, ‘I have a feeling, sir, that you may be right. Do you have a photograph of the damsel for reference?’ ”

“ ‘Oddly enough,’ he said, ‘I have.’ He produced one in a frame and for a moment I must admit my heart sank. I didn't see how she could possibly win the competition.

“And yet there must be something to second sight, for despite the odds against her the young lady won a clear victory. There was a near approach to a riot when that fact was announced, but the winner herself cleared the room with marvelous celerity and ever since we have been, unfortunately — or, rather, *fortunately*—inseparable. In fact, there she is, hovering over the meat counter. She is a great eater of meat —sometimes cooked.”

I saw the maiden in question and at once recognized her as the one who had chased our taxi for two blocks. Clearly a deter­mined young woman. I admired her rippling biceps, her sturdy gastro­cnemii, and her strong eyebrow ridges.

I said, “You know, Theophilus, it may be possible to decrease your attraction to women to its former insignificant level.”

Theophilus sighed. “I wouldn't feel safe. My fiancee and her amply designed brothers might misinterpret her loss of interest. Besides, there are compensations. I can, for instance, walk any street in the city at any hour of the night, no matter how intrinsi­cally dangerous that might be, and feel totally secure if she is with me. The most unreasonable traffic policeman is sweetness itself if she chances to frown upon him. And she is both outgoing and innovative in her demonstrations of affection. No, George, I accept my fate. On the fifteenth of next month, we will marry and she will carry me over the threshold of the new home which her brothers have supplied us. They have amassed a fortune in the car-compacting business, you see, because of their low over­head; they use their hands. It's just that sometimes I long —”

His eyes had wandered, involuntarily, to the fragile form of a fair young woman who was strolling down the aisle toward him. She happened to look at him even as he looked at her, and a tremor seemed to course over her being.

“Pardon me,” she said shyly, her voice a musical lilt, “but didn't you and I meet in a Turkish bath recently?”

Even as she said that there was the sound of firm footsteps from behind us and we were interrupted by a wrathful baritone. “Theophilus, my sweet,” it said, “are you being annoyed by this —floozy?”

Theophilus's light-of-love, her forehead tightened into a mag­nificent frown, bore down upon the young lady, who shrank in upon herself in obvious terror.

I quickly interposed myself between the two women — at con­siderable risk to myself, of course, but I am well known to be as brave as a lion. I said, “This sweet child is my niece, madam. Having spied me from a distance, she had hastened in this direc­tion to imprint a chaste kiss upon my forehead. That this also carried her in the direction of your dear Theophilus was a com­plete, but inevitable, coincidence.”

It distressed me that the ugly streak of suspicion I had noted in Theophilus's lovely lady on our first meeting now evidenced itself again. “Oh, yeah?” she said, in a tone utterly lacking in that bon­ho­mie I would have liked to find. “In that case, let me see you leave. Both of you. Right now.”

On the whole, I felt it wise to do so. I linked arms with the young lady and we walked away, leaving Theophilus to his fate.

“Oh, sir,” said the young lady, “that was terribly brave and quick-witted of you. Had you not come to my rescue I must surely have suffered assorted scratches and contusions.”

“Which would have been a shame,” I said gallantly, “for a body such as yours was surely not made for scratches. Or for contusions, either. Come, you mentioned a Turkish bath. Let us seek one together. In my apartment, as it happens, I have one — or at least an American bath, which is virtually the same thing.” After all, to the victor —