

The Thief and the Roller Derby Queen: An essay on the importance of formal education

Eric Flint

The problem, in a nutshell, was that he had a lousy formal education. It didn't help, of course, that he suffered from delusions of grandeur. But if he'd stayed in school, he would have taken enough tests to realize that he was a dunce.

Being a dunce is okay, but you have to know your limitations. If you choose thieving as a profession, shoot for hubcaps instead of the Crown Jewels. For sure, don't try to steal from Satan. But that's exactly what he did.

Why did he do it? Well, partly because he was an egomaniacal dunce. But, mostly, he did it because of his girlfriend.

So it's time to introduce her: Loretta Minisci. Twenty-two years old; five feet, ten inches tall; raven-black hair; brown eyes; beautiful; shapely; and possessed of an all-consuming passion to become the greatest witch who ever lived. *Her* problem, in a nutshell, is that while she was incredibly bright she didn't have any higher education either. And despite what you may have heard, it really takes a lot of book learning to be a great witch—much less the greatest witch who ever lived.

So, she was frustrated. Her spells never seemed to work quite the way they should (when they worked at all). And she couldn't use a lot of spells, because the really good spells are written in arcane languages, bizarre runes, and the like. You really need a Ph.D. to work through that kind of stuff, and she was a high-school dropout.

The worst of it, from Loretta's point of view, was that she wasn't able to summon demons. She tried, once, but the affair went badly. She followed all the instructions in the grimoire, including the part about being naked while you do the incantation. That last was a piece of cake, for her, because she made her living as an exotic dancer in between roller derby matches. But because her education wasn't up to snuff, she didn't quite understand what a pentacle is. Stumbling through the words in the grimoire, Loretta made the word out to be *tentacle*.

So there she was, when the demon materialized, surrounded by a pile of fried calamari.

"That stuff's like rubber," complained the demon. Then, ogling Loretta: "But what a babe!"

Things didn't go as badly as they might, because Loretta was used to fending off the advances of lustful males. And even though she wasn't wearing her roller derby pads, she still had a mean knee and a really vicious elbow smash. But it was sticky for a while, and she was always afraid to summon demons thereafter.

But what kind of great witch can't summon demons?

She brooded about the problem for several weeks. Then she decided that what she needed was a piece of brimstone. It's not clear where she got that idea. It's not in the literature, that's for sure. But Loretta had a tendency to invent her own recipes, which was one of the reasons her boyfriend insisted on eating out. (The other reason is that he felt a great thief should eat in fine restaurants, even if he couldn't read the menu.)

Now, mind you, fooling with recipes is no big deal when it comes to cooking. But it's really not a good idea when you're dealing with the underworld.

Loretta was just as stubborn as she was smart and good-looking. Once she got something in her head, that was that. Right off she started pestering her boyfriend to go to Hell with her and steal a piece of brimstone. She didn't actually know what brimstone was, but she remembered from her Sunday school days (which were a long way back) that there was lots of it in Hell.

The thief refused, at first, so Loretta withheld her affections (as they say). Eventually, he gave in. Loretta thought it was because he was terminally horny, but the truth is that the more he thought about the job, the more it appealed to his vanity. He liked to call himself the Cat, but his friends called him the Pussy (which, among his crowd, didn't have the same connotation at all).

"I'll show 'em," he muttered to himself. And he went to Loretta and agreed to do the job. "*Provided* you can get us into Hell."

"That's easy!" she exclaimed.

And it was. Any half-educated witch can get into Hell. The trick, of course, is getting back out.

Even then, she botched it. Loretta still hadn't figured out what a pentacle was, so when they arrived in Hell they were surrounded by fried calamari. Naturally, the smell drew every imp within range, because imps love seafood and there's a real shortage of it in the Pit of Damnation.

That's probably what saved them, for the moment, because the imps were so busy gobbling down the calamari that they didn't think to grab the trespassers until Loretta and the thief were on the lam.

Still, things looked bad.

Loretta and the thief were trying to make their escape across a field of ice. The thief was grouching and complaining the whole time because he'd dressed for what he thought Hell would be like, and sneakers and a bathing suit just didn't cut it. Loretta didn't hear him, however, because after the first five seconds she had skidded completely out of sight. *She'd* come to Hell in her roller derby outfit. (Damn what the book said; she wasn't about to deal with demons stark naked again.) And while the knee and elbow pads kept her from getting too badly scraped up, her roller skates were completely useless. Although, as it happens, they're probably all that saved her.

But we'll get to that in a moment. First, let's reexamine the moral of the tale.

The problem? *Lack of formal education*. Both Loretta and her boyfriend had gotten their ideas about Hell from watching TV evangelists late at night when there wasn't anything else on the tube. And the truth of it is that televangelists have the silliest ideas about Hell, as well as everything else. That doesn't hurt *them*, of course, since they always go to Heaven because God likes them even if they are a lot of con artists. (He's willing to forgive a pious scam. And it's not even a scam, anyway, because God favors faith a long way over brains so even the jerks who send in their money get to Heaven.)

But it was tough on Loretta and the thief. If they'd read Dante's *Inferno*, of course, they'd have known that Hell was a frigid wasteland.

Again: *lack of formal education*. Because if you trace it all back, you find that the preachers from whom they'd gotten their ideas were a poorly educated bunch themselves. Their ideas of Hell they'd gotten from the only book they'd ever read, which is the Bible. And while the Holy Book was accurate enough at the time it was written, you've got to stay abreast of the literature in your field. Satan does. Once the Devil read Dante's description of Hell in the *Inferno* he redecorated the whole place. Calls it Renaissance Chic.

Loretta got out okay due to blind luck. As it happens, the ice fields of Hell are almost frictionless. That's because the coefficient of— Never mind. No point going into the physics here. (The kind of people who'd buy a book like this—I haven't even seen the cover yet, but I'll guarantee it's covered with half-nekkid women wearing S&M gear—wouldn't follow it anyway.) (Oh, sure. Tell me it'll be on the coffee table when the guests arrive. Along with your leather-bound copy of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.)

Like I said, frictionless. Two great roller-derby-queen-type strides into it and she was off her skates—*wham!*—right on her ass, sailing across Hell. Loretta steered herself as best she could, using her knee and elbow pads, but within five minutes she reached the Wall. (Yes, Hell has a boundary. It's flexible, of course. Depends, any given day or night, on the precise equation between damned souls and saved souls but, again, we'll skip the math. See reasoning above.)

She hit the Wall feetfirst. Anybody else would have broken their ankles. But Loretta was a roller derby queen, and she knew just how to handle collisions. Next thing you know, she was skating up the Wall making her getaway. (Gravity works differently in Hell. Just trust me.) The Wall is infinite, of course, but she was saved by divine intervention. Once she got high enough to be noticed, an angel came and took her back home. Sports fan, he claimed, even though Loretta thought he was a regular in the club where she did her dancing, hiding his face at one of the back tables along with all the televangelists. Maybe not.

For the thief, on the other hand, things didn't go as well. At first, he was full of confidence. He always liked to brag to his friends that he'd never been caught. His friends always said that was because he never managed to actually steal much of anything. And it was true that he was better at the getaway part of the job than he was at the actual getting. (Which, when you think about it, kind of defeats the whole purpose of being a thief in the first place, but he was never smart enough to figure that out.)

The thief took one look at Loretta flying off and decided to try a different route. So he plunged into a snowdrift. Bright guy, like I said.

Soon enough, the thief was floundering around in the snow, freezing his ass off. He didn't get far, of course. After they finished gorging themselves on the calimari, the imps set off in hot pursuit. They had no trouble tracking him. They didn't even bother following his footsteps, they just followed the smell of suntan lotion. Imps know exactly what sun block smells like, because all surfers go to Hell.

(Yes, *all* of them. It's not that God has anything in particular against the sport. It's just that He hates the music of the Beach Boys, and He tends to overreact.)

(Hey, it's true, He does. Read the Bible. A little hanky-panky in Sodom and Gomorrah? BRONZE AGE

HIROSHIMA. Eat the wrong fruit? LIVE BY THE SWEAT OF YOUR BROW, CHILDREN BORN IN SORROW, PMS—the whole nine yards. Violate the building code? ALL LANGUAGES CAST INTO CONFUSION; MILLENNIA OF TRIBAL WARFARE. Eat shellfish? LOCUSTS. Jaywalk? SEVEN LEAN YEARS. Don't recycle? PLAGUE. Do this, ETERNAL DAMNATION; do that, ETERNAL DAMNATION. Strict is one thing. That Guy's into leather.)

Back to the story.

After they caught him, the imps straightaway hauled him up before the Prince of Darkness. The whole thing moved way faster than the thief expected, being, as he was, accustomed to the pace of the criminal justice system. Naturally, the dummy tried to cop a plea. (This is what's called "unclear on the concept.") The devils immediately convulsed with laughter.

"Wrong court, chump!" they howled.

The Prince of Darkness wasn't at all what the thief expected. No horns, no cloven hooves, no barbed tail. Just an ordinary-looking fellow, middle-aged, dressed in a navy blue Brooks Brothers suit. With a red power tie, naturally. He was sitting in an executive swivel chair on a raised mound in the very center of Hell, eating lunch off a TV tray. Around him, as far as the eye could see, stretched a horde of sinners squatting naked on the ice.

No, Satan didn't look like much, but the thief wasn't fooled for a minute. He wasn't bright, but he'd kicked around a lot. The Devil's lunch was the first tip-off. What you call a *real* power lunch: Satan was tearing the leg from a roasted baby and devouring it like a wolf.

"Unbaptised toddler." He burped. "My favorite."

That was bad enough. Then the thief spotted the tasseled Gucci loafers and the Rolex and knew he was really in deep trouble.

"I want a lawyer!" he cried. "Is there a lawyer anywhere around?"

Satan's minions started howling again. Two thirds of the horde of sinners scrambled to their feet. In less than a minute, a gigantic brawl erupted on the field of ice, millions of naked attorneys battling each other over the fee.

Eventually a wizened old character fought his way through the mob.

"Corporate lawyers," he sneered. "Punks."

"I'll take your case," he announced, extending his hand. "I'm Clarence Darrow."

Ignorant as he was, the thief had heard of Clarence Darrow. (Defense lawyers were of interest to him, given his profession.)

"But—you're famous! What are you doing here? You're supposed to be a good guy."

Darrow shrugged. "God's got a different opinion. At first I thought it was because of the Scopes trial. But then I found out it was really the Leopold and Loeb case that ticked Him off. The Lord views the insanity plea as a Personal affront, seeing as how He made man in His own image."

Clarence Darrow really was a great defense lawyer. Right off he entered a plea of not guilty on grounds of mental incapacity, arguing that only a moron would think of going to Hell to steal brimstone. Satan immediately agreed with him, but pointed out that Hell was the assigned eternity for imbeciles.

"It's not fair," admitted the Lord of Flies, "but I don't set the rules. God does. And you know how He feels about retards."

So then Darrow changed the plea to not guilty on the grounds that there was no crime involved anyway, seeing as how there wasn't any brimstone in Hell to steal in the first place. "It's like charging a man in a desert with trying to steal water," he argued.

This led to a long wrangle. The Devil responded that intent is as important as action in assessing a crime. That developed into a discussion of the metaphysical priority of mind vs. matter, which Darrow would have lost in a minute if he were in Heaven where (it goes without saying) Mind comes a long way before Matter. But he was a canny old lawyer, and he knew that Satan placed great store in things of the flesh.

Eventually, the Devil admitted the plea. The thief started to breathe easy, but not for long, because Satan right away charged him with trespassing.

"That's just a misdemeanor!" squealed the thief, before Darrow could shut him up.

"You dummy," growled the lawyer.

Sure enough, the Prince of Darkness and all his satanic subordinates were glaring at the thief like—well, like devils. "*A misdemeanor!*" bellowed Satan. He shredded what was left of the two-month-old sinner and hurled the hideous gobbets at the thief.

"Let me give you a taste of the punishment reserved for trespassers," he snarled.

The next instant the thief found himself transported into a realm of Hell that is so horrible and gruesome that even Dante couldn't bring himself to describe it. At the time, the thief thought it was for an eternity, but when he was hauled back Satan glanced at his Rolex and said: "How'd you like *that* thirty seconds?"

The thief was shaking all over. Tight-lipped, Darrow leaned over and whispered in his ear: "They're real big on the territorial imperative down here, stupe. From now on, keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking."

That said, Darrow went right back on the offensive, entering a plea of not guilty on the grounds that there were no signs posted informing the unwary traveler that Hell was private property.

The Devil spluttered. "What are you talking about, you lousy shyster? I don't need signs—everybody knows I own this place!"

Bingo. Jackpot. *Clarence Darrow for the defense!*

Because, naturally, as soon as God heard the Devil say that (He hears everything, of course) He blew His stack and intervened. Which was exactly what Darrow had counted on—winning on appeal to a Higher Court.

A great Presence manifested Itself.

NO YOU DON'T, BUM. I OWN THIS PLACE. I MADE IT, DIDN'T I? YOU JUST COLLECT THE RENT. (You can't put quotation marks around God's dialogue. He's unlimitable. First offense gets a

rain of toads.)

Satan tried to squawk about jurisdiction, but that's really a flimsy argument when you're dealing with the Lord Almighty, Creator of the Universe. The Devil's usually a lot smarter than that, but he was caught off guard. In the end he irritated God so much that the Lord Above changed the terms of the lease.

FROM NOW ON, BUM, YOU DON'T GET THE UNBAPTISED BABES. (And that's how Limbo got created, in case you ever wondered.)

Satan gibbered with rage, which is an absolutely terrifying thing to see unless you happen to be God. After the display had gone on for a while, God got impatient.

ARE YOU FINISHED? IF NOT, I'LL CREATE A BIB TO CATCH THE DROOL.

Satan clamped his jaws shut.

THAT'S BETTER. NOW. WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT, ANYWAY?

God already knew what it was all about, of course. He's omniscient. But He gets some kind of weird kick out of acting dumb. (Always been like that. Remember the time, early on, when He was wandering through the Garden of Eden? Silly. A full-grown Supreme Being, acting like a Kid playing tag: "Yoo-hoo! Adam, where are you?")

Before the Devil could open his mouth, Darrow started talking. It was a great closing argument, too.

Then God announced His decision. He found in favor of the defendant on the grounds that while he was guiltier than sin the whole thing tickled the Lord's fancy. But the thief didn't get off scot-free, because God sentenced him to ten years in Purgatory before he would be released back to earth.

"What for?" whined the thief.

BECAUSE YOU'RE AN IDIOT.

Then God smote the Devil with a bolt of lightning. Contempt of court.

Finally, He glowered at Darrow. (Actually, God's immaterial. It was more that the whole Universe took on a sense of all-pervading GLOWER, aimed at Darrow.)

YOU RAT. YOU LOUSE.

The old man was a plucky character, you've got to hand it to him. "What did I do—besides win another defense case?"

THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT, DARROW. AS YOU WELL KNOW. MAN IS GUILTY OF ORIGINAL SIN, SO HOW CAN HE BE INNOCENT? YOUR WHOLE LIFE WAS AN AFFRONT TO ME, AND YOU'RE *STILL* DOING IT!

Darrow sneered. "So damn me to Hell, then."

God was silent. After all, what could He say? It's the ultimate problem in penal science, when you think about it. How do you punish a lifer who's already dead?

In the end, of course, Darrow caught it from the Devil after God left. Satan was purely furious about the whole affair.

"You're promoted," snarled the Prince of Darkness, and he gave Darrow the premier spot in Hell, on the ninth level. Satan even added a fourth mouth to his clone (which, contrary to Dante, isn't actually the Devil himself) so that Clarence Darrow could join Cassius, Brutus and Judas Iscariot as a chewee.

But Darrow wasn't fazed. Right away he introduced himself to his neighbors.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," said Judas.

"It was temporary insanity!" cried Cassius. "Caused by eating junk food. Shakespeare's my witness. He said himself I had `a lean and hungry look.'"

"I had a warped childhood," whined Brutus. "Too much privilege."

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As for the thief, he had ten years to think over the course of his life. Ten *long* years, because Purgatory is a doctor's waiting room. And he never got any time off for good behavior because he screwed up. (Tried to steal a six-year-old copy of *Sports Illustrated*. Wasn't even the swimsuit issue.)

But eventually, he served the time, and was materialized back in Loretta's cellar.

And found that the cellar was now the TV room of a very large and muscular truck driver who immediately beat him to a pulp. Partly for trespassing, but mostly because he materialized in front of the TV set in the last ten seconds of the Super Bowl with the go-ahead field goal on its way. The truck driver had four friends with him, too. Raiders fans.

A few days later, when the thief got out of the hospital, he went looking for Loretta. It took him weeks, but eventually he tracked her down to a very fancy house in a very nice part of town.

His tongue was practically hanging out as he rang the doorbell. Ten years' abstinence, you understand.

Loretta was there, all right. She even opened the door wearing her roller derby queen gear, all the way down to the knee and elbow pads. That had him salivating immediately. He'd always loved that outfit! I've got to tell the truth, now that we're getting to the end of the story. That thief was a warped, depraved, degenerate, kinky sicko. The only books he ever bought had covers just like this one.

Alas. She wasn't Loretta Minisci, stripper, would-be witch, anymore. She was still a roller derby queen—the roller derby queen, in fact—but she was also Mrs. Loretta White, Ph.D. (Harvard—*summa cum laude*, *Phi Beta Kappa*, the whole shot). It turns out that a week after she got back from Hell she met a chemist at the supermarket and while they were chatting in the cashier's line he explained to her that brimstone was just another word for sulfur, which, (hey, what do you know?) he happened to have a lot of in his laboratory and before they even got there she'd fallen in love with the mousy little guy and one thing led to another and ten years later she'd not only earned her Ph.D. in chemistry but had been able to apply her talent for witchcraft to revolutionize the entire science, and, no, she'd love to talk (*How have you been, anyway? Still stealing?*) but she had to catch a plane for the Olympics where she was going to win the gold medal—she'd gotten the sport internationally recognized just last year, *isn't that great?*—before she had to catch another plane to Stockholm to accept the Nobel Prize. *Bye*.

The thief went berserk at that point and tried to force his affections upon her (as they say). But that's really not the best seduction technique to use on a roller derby queen. A few knees and elbows later, Loretta was off to catch her plane and the thief went back into the hospital for a few more days.

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Things went downhill from there.

He started thieving again, but the truth is that it's a young man's game and he was over the hill. Ten years out of practice, too. So he got caught. Hubcaps, believe it or not. He tried to steal them off a slow-moving car in the inaugural parade—yeah; Limo One. Sent up for three years. (Would have been way more—assassination attempts get twenty, easy—except the psychiatrist informed the court that the thief didn't know the names of any presidents since Abraham Lincoln led the war of independence against George Washington III.)

After he got out, he lasted on the streets for six weeks before he was sent back to prison. Stealing hubcaps, again. In the pits, at the Daytona 500. Five years. No time off for good behavior because they caught him trying to steal—never mind. You wouldn't believe it.

The next time he got caught he was a three-time loser and so they sent him up for life in the toughest prison in the state. He survived six, count `em, six hours. After finding himself with two cellmates wearing "Aryan Nation" tattoos and reading weird books about women in armor, he got into a religious discussion in which he explained that he had met Satan personally and could assure them that the Devil was a white man.

* * *

So there he was, back again, a thief in Hell.

"I want Darrow!" he cried.

But the Devil just laughed at him. "Not this time, chump. You've already been convicted. No trial. No rights. No appeals. And I've been waiting for this day to come."

Satan rubbed his hands together with glee. It sounded like a rattlesnake. "Boy," snickered the Lord of Flies, "have I got plans for you."

And he did, too. Grotesque plans. Horrible plans. Indescribable plans. The worst thing you could imagine.

He made the thief listen to one performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* (which, of course, lasts for eternity).

It all goes to show the importance in the modern world of getting a formal education.

Although, now that I think about it, maybe it wouldn't have made much difference in the thief's case. Ignorance can be fixed. Stupid is forever.