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Can such beauty be?

***The trick, you see, is to find
work for the Devil's idle hands!***

By JEROME BIXBY

ON March 11, 1929, while tottering barefoot over a vast expanse of white-hot coals in everlasting efforts to reach a sparkling stream of clear, cold water that really wasn't there, the damned soul of Mrs. Elbert M. Trumbull abruptly stiffened in its tracks and turned its eyes upward. A look of wonder and expectation replaced that of hopeless suffering. The soul emitted a sound that unmistakably smacked of glee, and shot upward, seeming to dwindle in size rather more than could be

accounted for by its rapid ascent to, and through, the roof of Hell.

The demon who reported the matter to His Illustrious Foulness was understandably incoherent. Damned souls simply did not fly away through the roof of Hell. They stayed, and screamed, and suffered endlessly. The thing was without precedent—and Hell was in a bad way if this set one now.

HIS Illustrious Foulness blew his stack. He swore and stamped and kicked his bronze

Illustrated by KOSSIN

throne. He committed the reporting demon, and all those fiends and demons who had been on duty at the Area of Torment in question, to six months in solitary, with only holy water to drink and a Bible for recreation. They left, wailing.

Then he put in a call to Heaven.

"Just what," he roared, the instant the connection was made, "is going on up there? One of my souls just escaped, and the circumstances reek of reincarnation! It was observed to shrink to baby-size, just as it flew through the roof. Damn it all, you know it's strictly against policy for any of my souls to be reincarnated!"

The cherubim at the Heavenly Switchboard put his call through to the Recording Angel, who claimed no knowledge of the matter. The Devil's strong language soon caused the Angel to hang up in a huff, after first informing His Illustrious Foulness that no slightest attempt would conceivably ever be made by anyone in Heaven to have reincarnated any soul from the nether realm; that such lost souls scarcely qualified for the honor, and that in any case no one named Mrs. Elbert M. Trumbull was or ever had been scheduled for it; that the Devil had blessed "well better look around for another explanation.

Grumbling, the Devil ordered a triple-check on the incident, which

revealed nothing. The soul had simply vanished—perhaps Earthward, to resume mortal form, though, on the basis of the evidence, reincarnation seemed not to be the answer. At any rate, there was no possibility of tracing the soul.

If it *had* been reincarnated, then it was quite beyond grasp till the incarnation was over; while if the Recording Angel had been leveling and the soul had not been reincarnated, then not even God knew where it could be, and certainly the Devil could not bother scouring the Universe for it.

Snarling, he took the obvious step of rendering Hell even more escapeproof than it had been—by doubling the guards and turning up the fires along the boundaries—and tried to forget the whole thing.

MONTHS passed. The offending demons and fiends were released from solitary, with time off for bad behavior. They returned to their guard duties, which you may be sure they performed with utmost care, wanting no more of that holy water. They were seen to swizzle extraordinary amounts of lava during the next few weeks, as if wishing to rid themselves of a good taste.

Years passed. Souls came and sorrowfully entered into eternal torment. Demons howled, and

thrust red-hot pitchforks at *derrières*. Fires flamed, and sulphur stank.

The Devil sat his throne and ruled his realm with magnificent cruelty, and amused himself off-hours by researching a project that had interested him for some centuries—that of traveling through Time.

In the back of his infernal mind was the notion of someday returning to the Original Battleground, forearmed with hindsight as it were, licking the pants off the Heavenly Hosts and pulling a switch on history.

On July 2, 1953, something happened that had not happened for a Hell of a long time: a mortal drew the right sort of star, inside the right sort of circle, with the right sort of chalk, and said the right sort of gobbledegook.

His Illustrious Foulness was plucked like a guppy from the middle of an important ways-and-means conference and whisked up to the mortal plane to consult there with some brave mortal who evidently had reason to barter its soul.

NIGHTTIME, fog, a glistening London street. Big Ben struck eleven.

“Good Heavens,” a young man’s voice said. “Can such beauty be?”

The yellow glow of the street-light, made hazy by the fog, showed

that she was indeed beautiful. Also, hardly of the highest intellectual caliber. Her eyes, as she turned them in the direction of the young man, had all the depth and animation of a wax-work Elizabeth’s.

“Was you addressin’ me, gov-nor?” she said.

“Indeed I was . . . Please forgive me, miss—I know it’s not proper, but I spoke without thinking. Oh, I *do* beg your pardon, but you are the loveliest woman I have ever seen. Rome, Cairo, Vienna, Paris—never have I seen such exquisite beauty!”

Her beautiful face broke into a beautiful smile, a discouragingly suspicious smile, an encouragingly stupid smile. “Ga’rn. You toffs ’re all alike, comin’ around with your fancy talk and tryin’ to get a girl to forget her good ways. Ga’rn, or I’ll yell f’r a bobby.”

The young man, whose name was Peter Trumbull—of the Boston and Long Island Trumbulls, filthy rich—said, “Oh, no, I beg of you. Don’t do that. I have no intention of bothering you, really. I’ll go on, as you wish, in just a moment. I assure you that I am not the sort of man who goes around at night accosting strange young ladies . . . especially young ladies of such obvious breeding and respectability as yourself, if I may say so.”

The stupid, beautiful smile.

"Well-I-I, now, I guess you may, at that. Now, off with you, or—"

"Oh, but first let me *really* look at you. Please—one full picture of your loveliness to take away with me into the night. Come here, child—here below the streetlight."

TAKING her elbows, Peter Trumbull steered her into the illumination. He peered into her face, noted the full and wonderfully formed lips, the skin smooth as new cream, the blue eyes with their luscious tones of gray and green, the soft yellow hair upon which trembled tiny beads of moisture caught from the fog. With practiced eye he analyzed the expression on her face right down to the last millimetrical nuance. It was pleased, it was flattered—and still wary. And without a doubt she hadn't a brain in her head. Not much will power, either. She had come along readily enough to stand under the light. Without being obvious about it, he dropped his eyes, and saw a bosom so full and shapely, even under her rather shabby coat, as to curl his fingers into iron hooks.

Now he closed his eyes, as if transported by the vision of her beauty. Apparently drawn by magnets more potent than any mortal male could resist, his hands touched her cheeks, pressed tenderly.

"My Heavens," he whispered,

and with his eyes still shut, swayed a little. "You're ten times lovelier than I thought. You remind me of my dear old mother—none as lovelier than she—though I've only seen her portraits, poor thing, she departed this world as I entered. Oh, would *I* could paint a portrait—were a painter, a sculptor, even a photographer. Seized with inspiration as I am at this divine moment, I would take you to my flat and—"

"Now, guvnor," she said, cheeks moving like satin beneath his thrilled fingertips. "I can still 'oller for that bobby, you know—"

"Oh, no. I would *paint* you, my child, and, as I said, seized with inspiration as I am, I'm sure it would be one of the masterpieces of all time!"

At last she simpered. *About time*, he thought.

"Well, now, be that as it may, guvnor, I really oughter go—"

JUST another moment," he said, pressing the cheeks lightly and noting with satisfaction that she stayed . . . these dumb ones were usually good hypnotics. "Alas, my dear, I am *not* an artist, though God knows my father saw to it that I had enough instruction to make me a dozen. I am only—" he spread his hands eloquently, brought them back instantly to her cheeks—"only a man. A lonely man, in this strange land, on this

strange street—a man who in this brief moment has been swept, nay, borne aloft! into an enchanted fairyland, where the fog and the dark are no more, before the shining sun of your loveliness.”

The smile again.

A moment's silence.

“You're American, ain't you? You talk like one.”

She'd ventured a word! *She'll give*, he thought.

“Yes,” he said. “Over on a short stay, and now that I've seen you . . . an unforgettable one.”

Her name, she told him over tea and cakes in a joint off the Circus, was Mary Dingle. He told her that it was a beautiful name, as singularly beautiful as its owner. The smile. She lived southside, but had been born in Liverpool. *How* had Liverpool allowed such a fair flower to escape? The smile. She worked in a shoe factory. *What!* Not an actress, a showgirl . . . at the very least a model? The smile.

When they got to the door of his flat, she hung back a little, the smile now uncertain, eyes a little glazed by his flow of flattery.

But she simply *must* come in and meet Sis. It would be dreadfully disappointing for Sis to hear all about such an interesting and exciting person and never get to meet her. The smile.

Sis wasn't home, naturally. Naturally . . . Sis didn't exist.

Wouldn't Mary wait to meet Sis? . . . Sis must have just stepped out for a second.

Well-l-l . . . s'pose so.

A drink in the meantime?

Another?

Another?

Let's relax on the couch.

Another?

Oh, come, let's do the bottle.

YOU really remind me most amazingly of my mother . . . how beautiful she was. How beautiful *you* are. Poor dear mother, marrying senile old father. Must've been after his money, you know. Really a wonder he ever manufactured me, at his age. Don't you think it must be frightful to be senile?

He had to explain what senile meant, as he'd hoped he might. This he did in a roundabout fashion, beginning with youth and its clean and wholesome glories of the flesh, so stifled by meaningless mores, and ending with senility and all one had lost in that abysmal and inevitable state, and how short life was, really, and live while you may.

Well, gunvor . . . I wouldn't rightly know if it was awful or not. I s'pose it . . . I mean, I've 'ad no experience in such . . . I mean . . . S'pose I oughter go, maybe I could meet your sister some other . . .

One more moment, then . . .

Let me drink one last sip of your beauty. You have such beautiful hair . . . Let me touch it . . . And those sweet little shell-like ears . . . You know, this really isn't like me at all, but I—I'm tempted to—I *will*—I can't stop myself—I'll nibble that ear!

She trembled like a twig in a gale, and then like a twig in a hurricane, and objected for a second to progressively more wondrous enterprises he undertook, and then Peter Trumbull achieved his heart's desire.

What strategem to adopt afterwards? Obviously, the Oh-God-what-have-I-done, can-you-forgive-me one. He wept. So, she had stopped her own weeping and was consoling him. He moaned he was sorry. How could he have done it? That's all right, she said: you didn't mean any 'arm, it just 'apened, that's all.

When she left, it was considerably elevated by her efforts to pull him through the emotional crisis he had brought upon himself by so impetuously abusing her, and with all the vague feelings of tenderness and understanding and Acceptance of Fate that a girl like her feels when a man like him has worked his wiles, and with the promise that they would meet tomorrow in the park.

Not on your sweet life, Peter Trumbull thought as he went to sleep with a happy little smile:

tomorrow I'm on the boat and on my way back to good old Boston, and so long, Mary.

WHEN Peter didn't meet her in the park the next day, or the day after that, Mary Dingle went to his flat and was informed of his departure to America. Feeling quite wronged, but not too desperately unhappy (Granny had warned about men) she went about her business.

Several months later, the encounter was compounded by discovery of her interesting condition.

What was a poor girl to do? Her salary was barely enough to keep her roofed and fed, with a pound a week going off to Granny in Liverpool. So it was hardly possible to fly to America in pursuit of the father-to-be. Besides, thinking it all over, even her limited powers of calculation were sufficient to tell her that Peter Trumbull was just the type to brush her off should she appear at his doorstep with a bundle.

Oh, the dog, she thought, the dirty dog. 'E's done me proper, and now 'e's gone so I can't get 'im to do me right.

Now Mary Dingle was, in more than one respect, an unusual girl. Her beauty, for one thing. For another, she was extremely determined, though never about much of anything you or I would think

important. And, within the framework of her small array of knowledge and limited mental prowess, she was resourceful. The few data that managed to seep through the stony barriers which fate had placed about her brain were used with fair sense and often with shrewdness.

Probably the most unusual thing about her was that she had managed to include an interest in the occult.

Granny was solely responsible for this. Granny was a mysterious old woman—a little potty, if the truth be known—and the tales she had told Mary as a child had stuck. Tales of leprechauns, of druids, of vampires and werewolves and a demon or two, and the lot of them sworn to be true—indeed, to be personal experiences—and perhaps they were, who can say?

Granny had had books, also old and mysterious, and she had often read to Mary from them, and when Mary had come to London the books had come with her, as Granny was getting too old to read, and getting religion, besides. Now it was Mary's custom to peruse them and think upon their revelations, particularly on weekends, on the supposition that they contained a great deal that one should know about life. They were among her earliest recollections, you see, and so little had been added to those subsequently, that few distinctions

had been drawn between fact and fancy to make anything at all appear unlikely.

WE almost always take recourse to the familiar. So, as Mary Dingle's interesting condition developed—and her concern as to her fate—she thought to appeal to the occult powers to help her out.

Half-measures wouldn't do. Mary decided to enlist the aid of the Devil himself. Books came out, and the ritual was gotten down pat, and the plan of coercion was formulated.

Mary drew the right sort of star, in the right sort of circle, with the right sort of chalk, and said the right sort of gobbledegook.

The Devil appeared, a sheaf of smoking asbestos paper in one hand. Without looking up, he read on: “—and it is therefore evident that stricter measures must be taken with the souls on Level B-1956399, if discipline is to be—”

He paused, startled, sniffed the air, looked up and saw Mary Dingle cringing back against the bureau. His glowing eyes widened. He snorted sulphurous smoke. He looked down and saw the starred circle.

“Well, by the heartwarming screams of a flayed thing,” he said, scowling. “Called me right up, didn't you, child? That took nerve!”

“Y-y-yes, guvnor.”

“H’m. London, I suppose.” His eyes narrowed, and two beams of bright, hard, red light struck out and passed through Mary’s own eyes and seemed to scrape the back of her skull.

She closed her eyes. “Don’t you try nothin’ funny, now, guvnor. I’ve read about your tricks, and you won’t get anywhere.”

The Devil sighed, a sound like a file on glass. “All right, child. I’m hooked, fair and square. What can I do for you?”

She told him about Peter Trumbull and her interesting condition.

THE Devil smiled slyly. “Ah,” he said, “I see no reason to help you, child. You’ve nothing to offer me. You cannot barter your soul, for your sin has made it mine already!” And he laughed a very cruel laugh, and lashed his tail.

“I know that,” Mary said. “But I’ll give you a reason, right enough, all right. You’re in that circle, guvnor, and there you stay until you ’elp me! I can keep you there as long as I like!”

The Devil’s jaw dropped. “You wouldn’t!”

“I would.”

“It’s never been done!”

“I’ll do it.”

The Devil studied her closely for a moment, frowning. “Yes, indeed, I suppose you could. But it

wouldn’t help you at all with your problem, would it? And I assure you that your entire lifetime, even if you chose to spend it beside this circle in which you have trapped me, would be no more than a flickering instant to me.”

“Oh, I know that too. But I’ll just bet you wouldn’t like waitin’, even my lifetime. You’ve got too much to do. I’ve read ’ow busy you are, and things in ’ell would be in a fine state if you was to take fifty years off. Besides, I wouldn’t just sit ’ere. Don’t you think it! I’d borrow some money and rent this ’ole ’ouse and *charge admission*—’ow would you like *that* guvnor?”

The Devil considered, rubbing his jaw with his tail. “H’m. It’s an ingenious threat,” he said at last. “No, I shouldn’t like that at all. It would be humiliating beyond endurance. Then, too, I’d be driven out of my mind by people trying to destroy me—technological age, and all that.” He scowled at Mary, and she retreated a step. “All right! What do you want?”

“Peter Trumbull. I want ’im back, so ’e can do right by me.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

YOU’RE really rather fortunate, you know,” the Devil mused. “Your immortal soul is already mine, or will be when you



CAN SUCH BEAUTY BE?

die; yet here you are in a position to bargain with me for anything you wish to have during your mortal existence. Unusual, to say the least."

"I only want Peter Trumbull. I got to 'ave him. I'm a respectable girl, and 'e's done me proper, and now I got to 'ave 'im. Get 'im back for me . . . or 'ere you'll stay."

"H'm," said His Illustrious Foulness. He closed his eyes and was silent a moment. He seemed somehow in communication. Then he smiled evilly. "I'm afraid that's quite impossible. Your Peter Trumbull fell overboard from the ship that was taking him back to America. He's been in Hell for some months now."

"Oh," Mary wailed. "That's gone and done it! Now my poor baby will be born without no father, and I'll be the disgrace of my family, and I'll walk the rest of my life 'angin' my 'ead, and—" She paused and narrowed her beautiful eyes at the Devil. "Now, look 'ere, you just *do* somethin'— You got powers. You do somethin' about this, guvnor, or I'll—"

"But it's impossible," the Devil snapped. "What can I do? Peter Trumbull is dead. No one returns from Hell. And I have important business to attend to. If you'll please release me, I'll be gone."

Mary Dingle sat down on the edge of the bed and folded her arms. "Do somethin'!"

"But—"

"Oh, I know 'ow to persuade you, all right." Mary picked up the Bible she'd put on the bed and started to read. The Devil shuddered and shrank back until his tail touched a portion of the starred circle. There was a flash, and a snapcrackle, and he yelped in pain.

"Do somethin'," Mary said. "—'And after these things I 'eard a great voice of much people in 'eaven, sayin' 'Alleluja; Salvation, and glory, and 'onor, and power, unto the Lord our God'—do somethin', guvnor, or you'll be mighty sorry."

THE Devil gnashed his teeth, and sparks flew. "Oh, I'll enjoy the moment I get my hands on you! I'll develop several horrible punishments that till now I've only contemplated!"

"Be that as it may, you do somethin' right now about Peter, or else! I guess my soul is lost anyway, so I want to live a fine old life while I got-it. Peter Trumbull's rich, and that don't 'urt any!"

"But I tell you, it's utterly impossible to return a soul from Heli! Only once has a soul escaped, and the incident is still a complete mys—" The Devil was suddenly very still for a moment. His jaw dropped. "Trumbull? Trumbull?" He spat flaming sulphur, which fell to the carpet and

commenced to eat a hole. "TRUMBULL is the young man's name?"

"Peter Trumbull," she said calmly. "I want to 'ave Peter Trumbull . . . and 'is money."

The Devil stared at her with his malevolent and crafty expression and said slowly, "Ah, now I begin to understand something that happened quite some time ago. Yes, indeed, I *do* understand." He looked up at the ceiling and began to grin a fiendish grin.

"Don't you try nothin' funny, now, guvnor," Mary said nervously.

"Oh, no. Not at *all*. I wouldn't *think* of it. Why, I'm going to grant your wish, child. It's absolutely necessary that I do, for many reasons, some of which you wouldn't understand."

"Best reason is I've got you 'ere, ain't it? Now you get busy—"

"Oh, yes, that's a good one. A very good one. But a better one is that, in a sense, I've *already* done it. So now I must *do* it. Ah, yes, I must have done—or must do now—what I'm about to do—because I once did."

Mary bit her lovely lip.

"Since what happened," the Devil went on, "*did* happen, I must now *make* it happen. Badness sakes, I just hope no word of this seeps up to my Brother—it might alert him to the fact that I'm meddling with Time. *Now*—" he

stretched up to his full height and flapped his tail about so menacingly that Mary flipped backwards across the bed with a muffled scream—"you want to have Peter Trumbull?"

"Y-yes."

"And you want the Trumbull millions?"

"Y-yes."

Whisht!

MARY DINGLE, unremembering, found herself in bed in a big, lovely home on Long Island, in America. Here she had lived for two years (she thought). Ever since '24, when she'd married old Trumbull for his dough (she thought).

Her loving, doddering husband, Elbert M. Trumbull, was just phoning his private physicians, looking pleased and proud. This was the day! This would show those idiots who'd diagnosed false pregnancy! He'd show them, by God, that a Trumbull was good to the very end! He'd given his lovely young wife a child (he thought), and labor was commencing.

Actually, all these thoughts, and many, many more, had been instantaneously implanted in their minds by His Illustrious Foulness, in the brief instant he'd spent on Long Island before returning to Hell. Actually, Mary Dingle had just appeared out of thin air in the palatial home of old Trumbull, the

bachelor, and he'd been flabbergasted before the Devil fixed things up.

Actually, they weren't married. Actually, no doctors had examined her, or diagnosed her condition one way or the other. Actually, the entire complex situation as it appeared to its protagonists had been fabricated by the Devil and implanted in Mary's mind, and in old Elbert's, and in the doctors', and in the minds of everyone even remotely connected with Elbert and his lovely young "wife." So no one was ever the wiser.

All the paraphernalia necessary to Mary's role in the quasi-situation—clothing, toilet articles, the marriage certificate, her own birth certificate, even a portrait or two by the very best artists . . . just about everything that accumulates as a person lives a life—had been created and put in their proper places by His Illustrious Foulness. So, in an unreal sense, the situation was real; and that seems good enough for most people anyway.

Thus, for a few hours, "Mrs. Elbert M. Trumbull" enjoyed the Trumbull wealth. Small good it did her, though. And later that day, as she had so fervently wished, she had Peter Trumbull. He weighed six pounds, seven ounces. Then, from complications, she died. Old Elbert wept and mourned, and Mary Dingle, by reason

of her peculiar sins, went to Hell faster and with more of a pratfall at the end of the trip than anyone in the memory of the receiving demon.

The Devil, quite naturally, never achieved his desire to practice advanced punishments upon her. For the date of her arrival was January 27, 1926, and she was just another soul, and His Illustrious Foulness would have no notion for some time hence that she was anything at all out of the ordinary.

So three years passed, and Mary's damned soul vanished with a gleeful sound to be born in Liverpool, and the Devil swore and puzzled, and Mary grew up, went to London, walked a foggy street and met Peter Trumbull, shortly after which the Devil was himself summoned to London, where, as you have read, he recognized the Time circuit for what it must be, and chuckling with fiendish mirth sent Mary back to bear her own lover-to-be, who was twenty-seven years later to become his own father, and so on around and around.

AFTER leaving Long Island and returning to 1953, the Devil mused on his way back to Hell. Obviously there was nothing to be done about Mary Dingle, short of going back though Time again and multiplying her torments during her three-year stay. And doing so

wasn't worth the risk, for it might, in some way, warn the Heavenly Hosts that he was fooling around with Time and might be planning, as he certainly was, eventually to return after centuries of preparation and start the great battle all over again and this time win it. Enough risk had been taken already, though it had been quite necessary: the girl had had him on the spot, and moreover, the wheels of Time had obviously demanded that he move as he had to account for the hitherto inexplicable disappearance of the soul of Mrs. Elbert M. Trumbull.

MARY DINGLE all things considered, got off damned easy, to put it literally. It goes to show that while no one bests the Devil, some may get the better of him. Three years in Hell is hardly enough to discourage even the smallest of sins. And though Mary certainly hadn't very much time to enjoy her life as Mrs. Trumbull, she had lived a fairly pleasant if abbreviated life as plain Mary Dingle, or would, and besides, she'd never really wanted much out of life, or wouldn't. So we will leave her going around and around in Time, and it is better not to puzzle on that.

For the next six hundred years the Devil took pains to see that Peter Trumbull got the very worst Hell had to offer, thus trying to

work off a part of his irritation at the whole affair. However, Peter was one of the most unrepentant and unregenerate scoundrels ever to enter the place, and at last, in a moment of utter fury before which discretion fled, the Devil informed him that he was his own father (expecting the news to shatter the man, in accordance with prevailing Earthly notions on such matters). Far from being shattered, or even fazed, Peter laughed long and loud, and spread the story around so that eventually it reached the ears of a small and unobtrusive demon who, beneath false horns and tail, was in reality a spy from Above.

So at the end of those six hundred years, when at last the Devil felt equipped to sally into the past and do battle with his Brother, the Heavenly Hosts were forewarned, and succeeded in ambushing him and stranding him in a parallel time continuum, where he probably wanders still.

. . . And soon Satan will return to be thus trapped, and Hell should go to pot without his rulership, and the world should be a pretty wonderful place without his dastardly influence, and . . .

Good Heavens! Can such beauty be?

