

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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hail to the king

by . . . *Edward Ludwig*

The Devil's throne wasn't vacant exactly. A ghost sat there waiting to be filled out—by just the right shade of hellish purple!

MR. SCRATCH stepped onto the dais and raised his hands as if in a benediction. "Quiet, please!" he cried.

The murmuring continued, deep-boweled and sullen.

"Quiet!" he shouted into the amphitheatre which was illumined by flaming torches set in human skulls. "We must choose our King!"

There was a turning of monstrous heads, a swishing of pointed tails, a blinking of fiery eyes. At last silence fell upon the sea of devils.

Mr. Scratch wrinkled his nose as a wisp of smoke bearing the odor of charred flesh drifted past his nostrils. Then he smiled beneficently at his audience.

There were black devils and red devils and white devils, and devils with tails and horns and wings. There were invisible devils and devils in human form. There were also devils the size of mastodons and devils the size of pinheads.

"We are here," intoned Mr. Scratch, "to select a King." He indicated the vacant Throne of Flame

There's a fine literary flavor about this small yarn which we liked immensely the instant we set eyes on it. Out of the revolving spindle of flame on our desk where it reposed arose the ghosts of Edgar Allan Poe, Hawthorne, Algernon Blackwood and even Kit Marlowe (he who died in a tavern brawl so long ago!) —glorious masters of the macabre all. Indeed, we'd probably be tempted to add Edward Ludwig's name to the list, if we thought for a moment he'd approve!

behind him. "As you know, each of us was born out of mankind's fear and shaped by its imagination. Unfortunately, perhaps, the human species has usually considered us as a single entity called Satan. It failed to realize that each interpretation of this entity resulted in a different diabolic creation.

"Now, which of all the imagined devils of mankind is the greatest? Which, of all those in man's legends, myths, writings, songs, should be our King? Our selection, of course, should be unanimous. Nominations?"

Mephistopheles stepped forward, tail switching, his naked flesh shining like fresh blood. "What devil is more famous than I? I and my counterparts have been in plays, books, even operas. Millions of humanity have shuddered beneath my gaze."

"I'm quite familiar with the story of *Faust*. But are you the Mephistopheles of Marlowe or Goethe or of an opera?"

Indignation flooded the grotesque features. "I'm Marlowe's, of course. You may remember my little trick of restoring Helen of Troy to life. If any other devil can equal—"

"No, no," murmured Mr. Scratch. "There are too many of you. I'm afraid we'd always be getting you mixed up. Am I not right?"

The assemblage nodded agreement.

A towering, flame-eyed creature

pushed its way through a cluster of John Collier devils.

"And who are you?" asked Mr. Scratch.

"I am Sammael, first of all Hebrew devils. By virtue of my antiquity, I hereby claim the Throne of Flame."

"Oh, Heaven," swore Mr. Scratch. "You're old stuff. No one even remembers you any more. Who's next?"

A small personage, humanly shaped and clad in a tight-fitting swallow-tailed coat and black knee-britches, rose jauntily out of a mass of delegates from *Frightening Fiction Quarterly*. He paused dramatically to sniff at a golden snuff-box with his long, hooked nose.

Then, smoothing his mustachios, he declared, "The office of Kingship of the Devils, noble gentlemen, is one that requires a precise measure of dignity. Created by that master of the macabre, Edgar A. Poe, and featured in his immortal *The Devil in the Belfry*, I—"

The devils burst into raucous laughter.

Flushing, Poe's ludicrous Lucifer retreated into a group of grinning incubuses and disappeared behind a row of assorted Beelzebubs.

Next came fierce Asmodeus. "Surely I am your logical King. I was born in antiquity, appearing first in the Apocrypha. Yet my name has endured—"

He was interrupted by an Algernon Blackwood devil: "How about that escapade with the witch-

demon Sarah—the gal who disposed of her seven husbands on their wedding nights? Really, a devil of such dubious taste in his amours would hardly qualify as King.”

After a time, Mr. Scratch sighed. With a blood-filled pen, he checked name after name on his list of nominees.

He mused, “We’ve decided against Dante’s Dis because to look upon a three-headed King for all eternity would be most monotonous. Milton’s Lucifer is out—for to wade through that medieval verse to learn of his exploits would indeed be dreary. The devils of Hawthorne, Beerbohm, de Maupassant, Ben Jonson, and Cotton Mather are disqualified. How about Pluto of the ancient Romans?”

“Ridiculous,” spat an Arabian Djinn, swirling up out of his bottle. “The guy actually gave wealth to those who worshipped him. Who ever heard of a true devil giving anything away?”

Mr. Scratch checked off the name, then hesitated. “Seth of the Egyptians—hmmmm. Body of an ass, ears and nose of a jackal. No, definitely not.”

He went on: “And we’ve eliminated the devils of John Masefield, H. G. Wells, Anatole France, and Fredric Brown. Any more nominations?”

No answer.

“Well, then.” His eyes glittered slyly. Stroking his chin-beard, he stepped to one side of the dais. His

handsome black boots mirrored the glow of the flames.

“We seem to have reached an *impasse*, and yet we *must* choose a King.” He cleared his throat suggestively. “Therefore I humbly suggest a truly modern devil, one whose exploits have not only been recorded and re-recorded in literature, but who has also appeared extensively in the cinema and who is being seen, perhaps at this very moment, in ten million television screens. I refer, of course, to the star of Mr. Benet’s *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. This devil has shown his superior leadership by the mere fact of his conducting this selection.”

He bowed from the hips, then straightened, smiling. “In short, I suggest myself.”

An aura of indecision seemed to hover over the amphitheatre. Then a snort of disgust sounded in the front row.

A Russian devil reeking of vodka and borscht exploded, “Should we have a King who was mercilessly humiliated by that mere mortal, Daniel Webster?—a devil who to this day dares not set foot in the state of New Hampshire? *Nyet*, I say. *Nyet!*”

Mr. Scratch appeared to wilt into a limbo of despondency. “Then who, *who* should be our King?”

“Me,” piped a thin, shrill voice.

A spindly-legged, purple-fleshed creature ambled down a smoky aisle. He was the size of a small,

somewhat undernourished child, and was humanly shaped save for his two immense ears and his huge eyes that were like blood-veined saucers.

"Who are *you?*" grumbled Mr. Scratch.

"Elmer."

"Never heard of you. Who created you?"

"I was created in 1956 by Homer L. Thwaitwhistle of Triple Rivers, Arkansas. The bit of literature describing my career was titled *The Case of the Pernicious Penguin and the Very Nude Young Lady*, or *The Adventures and Misadventures of Nell in the Maelstrom of Iniquity.*"

"Never heard of it."

"Of course not. It's unpublished. It was rejected some thirty-seven times, after which Mr. Thwaitwhistle resumed his position as a grocery store clerk."

Mr. Scratch sneered. "Who ever heard of a purple devil? Why in Heaven did he make you purple?"

"Probably because I was born in a purple passage. But actually I'm not a devil at all—"

"Not a devil!" burst Mr. Scratch.

"Throw him out!" roared Marlowe's Mephistopheles.

"One moment, please," said Elmer. "I'm not a devil, and that's exactly why I should be your King. I am, as Mr. Thwaitwhistle described me, a biological synthesis of *fear*. Editors have called me unconvincing, but nevertheless here I am—the only such presence, I believe, in your midst, and possibly the only one ever imagined. You said yourself that you were born out of man's fear. Therefore, without that fear, none of you would exist. In other words, without *me* none of you would exist."

The saucer-like eyes roamed the scowling, fiery faces.

"Any objections?"

Silence.

The King of the Devils ascended his Throne of Flame.