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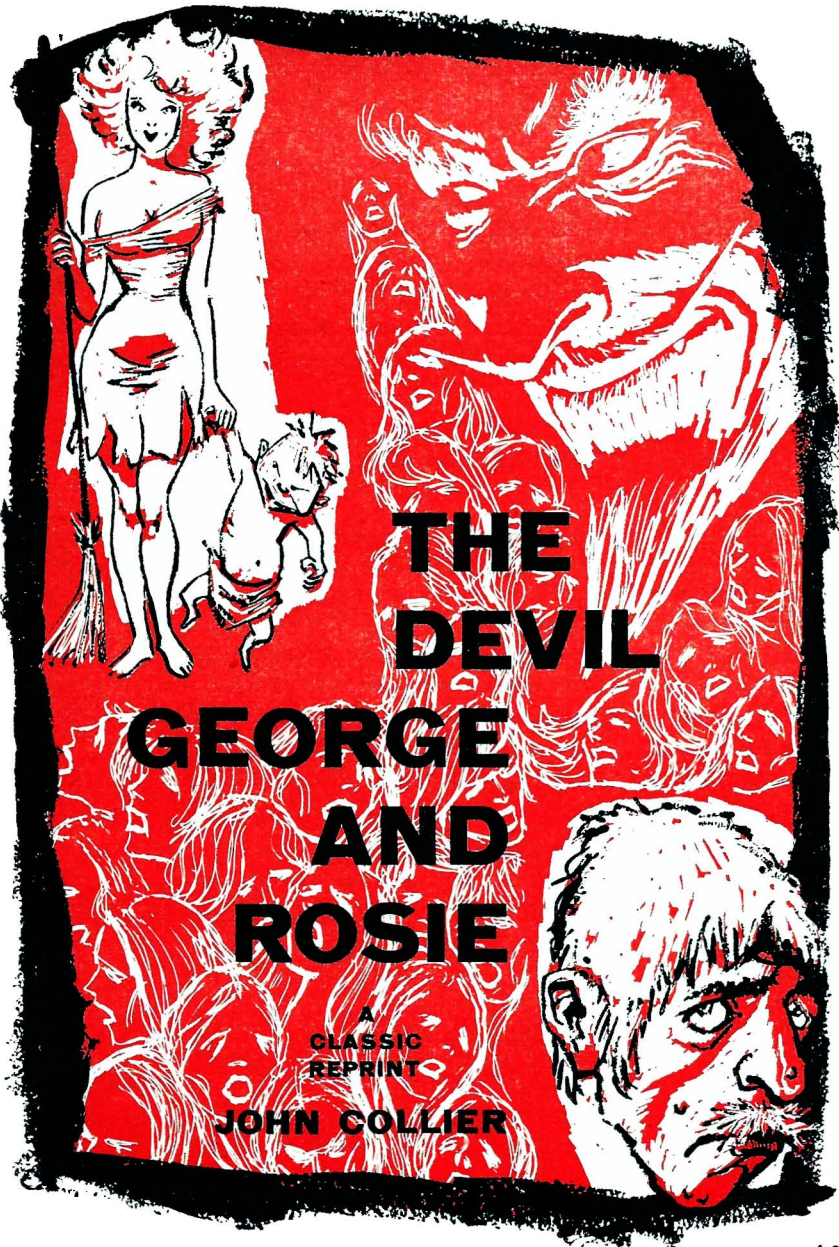
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**THE
DEVIL
GEORGE
AND
ROSIE**

A
CLASSIC
REPRINT

JOHN COLLIER



THE DEVIL GEORGE AND ROSIE

It seems a great pity that Mark Twain wasn't able to stick around this mortal coil long enough to read the stories of the one man who is most able to fill his literary shoes. We mean, of course, John Collier, an Englishman with a masterful gift for uninhibited humor and a strong impulse toward outright blasphemy. Of him, Time has made the pungent analysis: "[He] is as crazy as a hoot owl. But perched on the gnarled limb of satire, he blinks down with dry wisdom at a world much crazier than he."

We are proud to present here John Collier at his best.

THERE was a young man who was invariably spurned by the girls, not because he smelt at all bad, but because he happened to be as ugly as a monkey. He had a good heart, but this soured it, and though he would grudgingly admit that the female kind were very agreeable in shape, size, and texture, he thought that in all other respects they were the most stupid, blind, perverse, and ill-

natured bitches that had ever infested the earth.

He expressed this view very forcefully, and on all possible occasions. One evening he was holding forth to a circle of his cronies: it was in the Horseshoe Bar, at the bottom of the Tottenham Court Road. He could not help noticing that his remarks attracted the interest of a smart and saturnine individual seated at

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the next table, who had the rather repulsive look of a detective dressed up in evening clothes for the purpose of spying on a night-club.

Our friend was in no wise abashed by this scrutiny, but continued to say exactly what girls were, and what they did whenever they got the chance. He, who had least evidence for it of any man in the world, seemed to think they were unduly inclined to lasciviousness. "Or else," said he, "in the other extreme, they are mercenary prudes, or sadistical Dianas, whose delight it is to kindle the fires of Hell in a man's bosom and elsewhere, and triumphantly to describe his agonies to their little friends. I speak of the fires of Hell—I wish they existed in reality, so that these harpies and teasers might be sent there, and I myself would go willingly, if only I could watch them frizzle and fry."

With that, he got up and went home. You may imagine his astonishment, when he had climbed the high stairs to his poor student's room, to find the dark and cynical stranger, who had been watching him in the bar, now standing very much at his ease upon the hearth-rug. At the very first glance, he realized this was none other than the Devil himself, in whom for many years he had had no belief at all. "I cannot easily describe," said that worthy,

with the easy air of a man of the world, "the pleasure it gives me to meet one of such insight and intelligence as Mr. George Postlethwaite."

George made several sorts of protest, but the Devil smiled and bowed like an ambassador. In the end he had buttered up George to some effect, and carried him off to supper in a little restaurant in Jermyn Street. It must be admitted, he stood a superb bottle of wine.

"I was vastly intrigued," said he, "by the views I heard you expressing earlier this evening. Possibly, of course, they were born of a mere passing petulance, pique, wounded vanity—call it what you will."

"The devil take me if they were!" cried George.

"Splendid!" said his companion. "We are getting on like a house on fire. Now, my dear chap, my little difficulty is this. The domain over which I have the honour and pleasure to preside was designed originally on the most ample scale, but, nevertheless, certain recent tendencies are fast rendering its confines too narrow, and its supervision too onerous, for one who is not as young as he was."

"Sorry to hear that," said George.

"I could cope with the increase of the population of this planet,"

said the Devil. "I might have coped even with the emancipation of women. But unfortunately the two are connected, and form a vicious circle —"

"I see exactly what you mean," said George.

"I wish I had never invented that particular sin," said the Devil. "I do indeed. There are a thousand million women in the world at this moment, and, with one or two negligible exceptions, every single one of them is damned."

"Fine!" said George.

"Very fine indeed," said the Devil, "from the artistic point of view. But consider the pressure on space, and the ceaseless strain of organization."

"Squeeze 'em in!" cried George with enthusiasm. "Pack 'em tight. That's what I say."

"They would then imagine themselves at a party," replied his new friend, "and that would never do. No, no. Everyone who comes to me must have individual attention. I intend to open a new department. The site is chosen. The builders are at work. All I need is a superintendent of iron personality."

"I should like to know a little about the climate, salary, and prospects," said George, in a business-like tone.

"The climate, much like that of Oxford Street on a summer afternoon," replied the Devil.

"The salary is power, and the prospects are infinite. But if you are interested, my dear fellow, allow me to show you over the place. In any case, I should value your opinion on it."

No sooner said than done. They sank into the bowels of the earth, and came out in a suburb of Sydney, N.S.W.

"Here we are, then!" cried George.

"No, no," said the Devil. "Just a little farther on."

They proceeded with the speed of rockets to the northeast corner of the universe, which George now perceived to be shaped exactly like a pint of beer, in which the nebulae were the ascending bubbles. He observed with alarm a pair of enormous lips approaching the upper rim of our space. "Do not be alarmed," said the Devil. "That is a young medical student called Prior, who has failed his exam three times in succession. However, it will be twenty million billion light years before his lips reach the glass, for a young woman is fixing him with her eye, and by the time he drinks all the bubbles will be gone, and all will be flat and stale."

"Poor fellow!" cried our hero. "Damn these women!"

"Do not pity him," said the Devil very tolerantly. "This is his fifth pint, and he is already as

drunk as a lord, and closing time draws near. What's more, our destination is at hand."

George saw that they were nearing what is sometimes called a "fish" in this considerable pint of beer. As they approached it, he saw it was a dark star of gigantic proportions, about which circled a satellite many hundred times larger than the earth.

"That satellite," said his conductor, "is the spot I am proposing to colonize with my new department. We will go straight there, if you have no objection."

George assenting, they landed in a sterile and saturnine country, close by a palace of black basalt, which covered about a square mile of ground.

"That's a snug-looking box!" observed our hero.

"Merely a pioneer's hut," said his companion. "My future overseer will have to rough it there until something better can be fixed up for him."

George, however, noticed a prodigious number of barrels being run down into a cellar on the hinder side of this palace. What's more, he saw several groups of fiends, who should have been at their work, squatting in one of the unfinished galleries, with cards in their hands.

"You actually play poker here?" said he, in tones of the liveliest satisfaction.

"We are connoisseurs of every

pleasure," replied the Devil, with a smile. "And when we play cards, everyone has an excellent hand."

He showed George a number of masterly pictures; some of them were a little indecent. There were also very splendid kitchens, already staffed with cooks; kennels, stables, falconries, gun rooms, music rooms, grand halls, little cosy rooms, rooms devoted to every sort of pastime, and gardens laid out rather like those of Versailles, only very much larger. There was a whole cellar full of fireworks of every description. Not only these, but there were a number of other delights, of a nature entirely new to the visitor. There was an observatory, for example, from which the behaviour of any young woman in the world could be closely inspected. "This is really a very interesting device," murmured our hero.

"Come!" said the fiend. "We must not stay here all day. Doubtless you will want to see the rest of your domain."

"Yes, indeed," said George. "Show me where the prisoners are to be confined. I suppose that now and then I can have one hauled up for special admonishment."

The Devil then flew with him over the whole surface of the planet, which, once they were

clear of the palace and its lands, proved to have an aspect not unlike that of the Great West Road, where it approaches London. On every hand, rows of cells were being run up. To add the final refinement of misery, they were designed exactly like houses in a modern building project. Imitation husbands, who could neither speak nor hear, were planted in armchairs with their feet on the mantelpieces. The wardrobes were full of unfashionable garments. Small imps disguised as children were already rehearsing by dozens in all the upper rooms. The peculiar property of the walls was to translate the noise of those next door into the sound of a party going on, while the windows were so designed as to make the dowdiest passer-by appear to be arrayed in the very latest mode.

Vast bunion factories belched smoke among the crazy villas; lorry-loads of superfluous hair clattered along the streets. George was shown the towering gasometers of the halitosis works, and a number of other things I do not dare imagine. He saw a great concourse of fiends being instructed in door-to-door salesmanship; others were being fitted out as relations-in-law, rent-collectors, and bailiffs. He himself made two suggestions that were immediately put into force: one was for a stocking ladderer, and

the other for an elastic that would break in the middle of any crowded thoroughfare.

As a final encouragement, the Devil took him over to the mainland of Hell itself, which is girdled by the Styx as Saturn by his ring. Charon's vast liner had just come to dock, and our hero had the pleasure of seeing a multitude of film stars, baby blondes, unfaithful wives, disobedient daughters, frivolous typists, lazy serving-maids, wantons, careless waitresses, cruel charmers, naggers, sirens, clogs, unpunctual sweethearts, bridge-playing grandmas, extravagant helpmeets, mischief-making gossips, tantalizers, female novelists, crazy debutantes, possessive mothers, neglectful mothers, modern mothers, unmarried mothers, would-be, should-be, in fact all who could be, mothers; they were all there, as naked as your hand, and they filed down the gangway, some weeping, some brazen, and some in attitudes of affected modesty.

"This is a magnificent sight," remarked our hero.

"Well, my dear sir," said the Devil, "are you the man for the job?"

"I will do my best!" cried George enthusiastically.

They shook hands on it. All the little details were arranged. Before evening George was installed as principal vassal of all the

Devil's host, and overlord of a planet populated only by women and fiends.

It must be admitted he enjoyed himself with a vengeance. Every day he would go out, having donned his cap of invisibility, and regale himself upon his subjects' endeavours to cope with the hardships he had designed for them. Sometimes he would hold up the ceaseless self-dirtying of plates, put the children to sleep, and amuse them with the prospect of a matinee. He saw to it, though, that they had to queue up for the cheap seats, and arranged for it to rain. In the end, he would announce that the show was postponed.

He had a thousand other ways of tantalizing them; I shall not enumerate them all. One of the best was to send for any newly arrived young thing who was reported to be vain of her beauty, and give her the impression for an hour or two that she had made a conquest of him, and then (as far as was possible) undeceive her.

When the day's work was done, he sat down to cards with his principal officers, and sure enough everyone had a good hand, but his was the best. They drank like champions; the Devil was constantly sending over the choicest delicacies from Hell; the word "fine" was continually upon our hero's lips, and the time passed like lightning.

One day, toward the end of the second year, our potentate had just got through his levee, and was refreshing himself with a stroll on a little private terrace which he much affected, when word was brought to him that the senior port official desired an audience. Our hero was the easiest fellow in the world to approach, never stood upon his dignity: "Send the old chap along here," said he. "And, hi! Bring a bottle and a couple of glasses back with you when you come."

The fact is, George dearly loved a chat with these old petty officers, who occasionally brought him reports of diverting little incidents at the Ellis Island of Hell, or scraps of gossip concerning the irrelevant affairs of the world, such as sometimes strayed in among Charon's cargo, as lizards or butterflies travel to Covent Garden among the bananas.

On this occasion, however, the harbour-master's face bore an extremely worried expression. "I'm afraid, sir," he said, "I've got a little irregularity to report."

"Well, we all make mistakes sometimes," said George. "What's the trouble?"

"It's like this here, sir," replied the old salt. "Young gal come along o' the last cargo — seems as if she didn't ought to be here at all."

"Oh, that'll be all right," cried George. "Bound to be. It's under-

stood we take the whole issue in these days. She's a woman, and that's enough. What's on her charge-sheet, anyway?"

"Lot o' little things, sir, what don't amount to much," replied the honest fellow. "Fact is, sir, it ain't added up." And he pursed his lips.

"Not added up?" cried George in amazement.

"That's how it is, sir," said his subordinate glumly. "This young gal *ain't properly dead.*"

George was absolutely bowled over. "*Whew!*" said he. "But this is serious, my man."

"It *is* serious, sir," said the old chap. "I don't know what's to be done, I'm sure."

A score of fine legal points were involved. George dispatched an S.O.S. for one of the leading casuists of Hell proper. Unfortunately, they were all engaged in committee, on some fine point concerning an illuminated address which was being prepared for the saviours of Germany. George therefore had nothing but precedent to go on, and precedent made it clear that a mortal must sin in such and such a way, die in such and such a condition, be checked in, checked out — it was as complicated as a case in Court Leet under a Statute of Ed. Tert. Rex., that statute being based on precedents from the Saxon and Norman codes dually and differ-

ently derived from a Roman adaptation of a Graeco-Egyptian principle influenced prehistorically by rites and customs from the basin of the Euphrātes or the Indus. It was quite like an income-tax form. George scratched his head in despair.

What made it all the worse was, the Devil himself had given him a most serious warning against the least infringement of protocol. "This is," he had said, "little better than mandated territory. We have built up step by step, and with incredible ingenuity, a system under which we live very tolerably, but we have only done it by sailing devilishly near the metaphysical wind. One single step beyond the strict legal limits, and I am back on my red-hot throne, in that pit whose bottomlessness I shall heartily envy. As for you —"

George, therefore, had every incentive to caution. He turned over a large number of volumes, tapped his teeth: in the end he knew not what to make of it. "Send the young person in to me," said he.

When she arrived, she proved to be no more than seventeen years of age. I should be telling a downright lie if I said she was less beautiful than a peri.

George was not a bad fellow at heart. Like most of us, he was capable of tyranny upon the fea-

tureless mass, but when he came to grips with an individual his bark was a good deal worse than his bite. Most of the young women he had had up for admonishment had complained of little except his fickleness.

This young girl was ushered into his presence; the very lackeys who brought her in rolled their eyes till the whites flickered like the Eddystone Lighthouse. She was complete in every particular, and all of the highest quality; she was a picture gallery, an anthology of the poets, a precipitation of all that has ever been dreamed of love: her goodly eyes like Saphyres shining bright, her forehead ivory white, her cheeks lyke apples which the sun hath rudded, her lips lyke cheryes charming men to byte, her brest lyke to a bowle of creame uncrudded, her paps lyke lyllies budded, her snowie neck lyke to a marble towre; and all her body like a pallace fayre, ascending up, with many a stately stayre, to honours seat and chastities sweet bowre.

Her name was Rosie Dixon. Moreover, she gained enormously in contrast to her surroundings, by the mere fact of being alive. It was as though a cowslip were to bloom miraculously between the dark and sterile metals of the Underground; as if its scent were wafted to one's nostrils on the nasty, sultry, canned sirocco of

that region. It is no exaggeration to say that she was as good as she was beautiful. It is true her pretty face was a little blubbered with tears. "My dear," said George, taking her hand, "there is no reason for you to cry in that fashion. Don't you know the good old saying, 'Never holler before you're hurt'?"

"Pray, sir," cried she, having taken a long dewy peep at his monkey-phiz, and seeing a vast amount of good nature there. "Pray, sir," said she, "tell me only, where am I?"

"Why, in Hell, to be sure," said he, with a hearty laugh.

"Oh, thank goodness!" cried she. "I thought I was in Buenos Aires."

"Most of 'em think that," said our hero, "owing to the liner. But I must say you are the first who has shown any gratification on learning otherwise."

They had a little more conversation of this sort; he questioned her pretty closely as to how she came to be stowed away on Charon's vessel. It appeared that she was a shopgirl who had been much tormented by her workmates; why, she could not say. However, she had to serve a young man who came in to buy some stockings for his sister. This young man had addressed to her a remark that brought her soul fluttering to her lips. At that very moment, the cruellest of her en-

vious colleagues had manoeuvred to pass behind her, and had bestowed on her a pinch so spiteful, so sudden, and so intensely and laceratingly agonizing, that her poised soul was jolted from its perch. It had spread its wings and borne off her swooning body as a woodcock bears off its young. When she had regained her senses, she was locked in one of the narrow staterooms of a vast ship, stewarded by what she took to be black men, and resounding with the hysterical laughter and screams of captives of her own sex, all of whom seemed to think they were on the way to Buenos Aires.

George was very thorough. He minutely examined what little evidence she had to offer. "There is no doubt," said he at length, speaking in tones of the greatest sympathy, "that you have received a very cruel pinch. When your tormentor comes into my hands, I myself will repay it a hundredfold."

"No, no," said she. "She did not mean so much harm. I'm sure she is a good girl at heart. It is just her little way."

George was overcome with admiration at this remark, which, however, caused a tremor to pass through the whole of the vast black palace. "Upon my word!" said he. "I can't keep you here. You will bring the whole place

crashing about my ears. I dare not put you in one of our punishment cells, for, if I did so against your will, all our system of home rule would be snatched away from us, and we should return to the crude discomforts of primitive times. That would be intolerable. There is a museum over on the mainland that would make your blood run cold."

"Could you not send me back to earth," said she.

"No woman has ever left this place alone!" cried he in despair. "My position is so delicate I dare not make an innovation."

"Do not take on so," said she. "I cannot bear to think of so kind a gentleman being plunged into fiery torments. I will stay voluntarily, and perhaps then no fuss will be made. I hope it will not be terribly painful."

"You adorable creature!" cried he. "I must give you a kiss for that. I believe you have solved the difficulty."

She gave him back his kiss, as sweetly and purely as you can possibly imagine. "This is terrible," he cried in great anguish of spirit. "I cannot bear to think of you undergoing the miseries of this place. My dear, good girl —"

"I don't mind," said she. "I have worked in a shop in Oxford Street."

He gave her a pat or two, and signed up a form for her: "Re-

manded in custody at own request."

"It is only temporary, after all," he said. "Otherwise I would not permit it."

Very well, she kept a stiff upper lip, and was carted off to a hateful box as cruelly equipped as any of the others. For a whole week George kept his head, reading love lyrics to distract his mind. At the end, he could put the matter behind him no longer. "I must go," said he, "and see how she is getting on."

In Hell, all the officials travel with incredible speed. In a very few minutes George had passed over a couple of continents, and was tapping at the mean front door of poor Rosie's little habitation. He had not chosen to put on his cap of fern-seed virtue, or perhaps he never thought of it. Anyway, she came to the door with three or four of the imps hanging about her apron-strings, and recognized him at once. He observed that she was wearing the drab and unfashionable garments provided by the authorities, in which her appearance was that of a rose in a jam-pot.

What raised an intolerable burden from his heart was the fact that the superfluous hair had obviously failed to take root upon her living flesh. He found on inquiry that she had used it to stuff a pillow with, which she had

placed behind the head of the snoring imitation husband who gracelessly sprawled before the fire. She admitted a little tuft flourished on the bruise, where she had been pinched.

"No doubt it will fall off," said our hero scientifically, "when the tissues resume their normal condition. These things were designed to flourish upon carrion only, whereas you—" and he smacked his lips.

"I hope it will fall off," said she, "for scissors will not cut it. And since I promised some to the eldest of these toddlers, to make him a false mustache of, no more has arrived."

"Shall I try to cut it off?" said our hero.

"No, no," said she, with a blush. "He has stopped crying now. They were all very querulous when first I came here, but now they are improved out of all knowledge."

While she spoke, she busied her fingers with a succession of little tasks. "You seem to be terribly busy," complained George.

"Forgive me," said she, with a smile, "but there is such a terrible lot to do. Still, it makes the time pass."

"Do you never," said he, "wish to go to the matinee?"

"That would never do," she replied. "Supposing *he* should wake up" (pointing to the imitation husband) "and call for his

tea. Besides, I have plenty of entertainment. The people next door seem always to have a party; it does me good to hear them laugh and sing. What's more, when I'm cleaning the windows, as needs doing rather often, I see girls going by, dressed more beautifully than you can possibly imagine. I love to see people in pretty clothes."

"Your own are not very attractive," said George in a melancholy tone.

"They are plain enough," said she, with a laugh. "But I'm far too busy to think about that. All I could wish is that they were of slightly stronger materials. The stockings laddered so often I've had to give up wearing them. And whenever I go out shopping—Still, you don't want to hear all this."

George was so devoured by remorse that he had not the spirit to ask an interesting question. "Goodbye," said he, pressing her hand.

She gave him the sweetest glance; he felt it no more than his duty to offer her an encouraging kiss. At once the doors began to bang, the fire belched smoke, the imps opened their mouths to yell.

"No, no," said she, with just so much of inexpressible regret as to soften the cruelty of it. And she pointed to the dummy husband before the fire.

"Don't worry about him!" cried our hero. "He's only a dummy." With that, he gave the image a kick, capsizing it into the hearth.

"Well, if he's not a real husband," said Rosie, "I suppose there is nothing wrong in it." And with that she gave George a kiss, which he found altogether delightful, except that, as it increased the high esteem in which he held her, so also it increased his misery in having placed her in such a predicament.

When he got home, the poor fellow could neither eat nor sleep. He called up a few of his officers to pass away the night at poker, but though he held four straight flushes in succession, he could take no pleasure in it. In the morning, the telephone bell rang. George's was the only instrument on the planet which did not go wrong as soon as one began to speak; on this occasion he would willingly have surrendered the advantage. The Devil was at the other end, and he was in a towering rage. He made no bones about accusing our hero of downright morality.

"You curse and swear very well," said the victim in an injured tone. "All the same, it was not my fault she came here. I clearly see she may prove a disintegrating influence if I keep her, but, if I may not send her

back, I don't see what else I can do."

"Why, tempt her, you idiot!" replied the Devil. "Have you never tempted woman before?"

"As far as I know, no," said George frankly.

"Well, do so now," said the Devil in a quite silky tone, which nevertheless caused blue sparks to crackle from the instrument. "Once we get possession of her soul, there will not be much fuss made about her body. I leave the matter in your hands entirely. If you fail me, there are one or two ancient institutions over here which I shall take pleasure in re-viving entirely for your benefit."

George detested the idea of tempting this singularly good and beautiful young girl; however, the prospect was not so unredeemably repulsive as that of immersion in boiling brimstone. He took a glass or two, to stifle what regrets he had, and sent for Rosie to attend him in a silken pavilion, which he had had rigged up among the groves and fountains which surrounded his citadel. He considered this fabric to be preferable to blocks of black basalt, in the event of some disruptive phrase of hers bringing the roof about their ears.

It was not very long before she arrived, although it seemed so. Heaven knows how she preserved her radiant health in the nasty

grey air of Hell's outer suburbs, but she looked fresh and bright as ever, and seemed to glow through her cheerless wrappings as a peach glows through tissue paper. Nevertheless, George was naturally a slow starter, especially when his conscience was involved. He certainly greeted her very warmly, but if all the scientists in the world had had these hugs and kisses in a test tube, they could not have separated one atom of sin out of them, for they were as simple and natural as could possibly be desired.

I admit the simple and natural is as good a beginning as any other. George, however, proceeded only to the offer of a cup of tea, which is not sinful except at the University. They began to chat; he was unable to resist telling her of his joys and sorrows in the neighbourhood of the Tottenham Court Road, and the reason for this was that he wished her to know everything about him. She herself was no less frank. It is impossible to describe the emotion with which George heard that she had become an orphan at the age of fourteen, and had since then lived with an old aunt, who was inclined to severity. The moments passed like flowers of that precious, edelweiss joy which blooms on the brink of the abyss.

The light began to fade; the

warbling of blackbirds and thrushes now sank into a stillness from which soon arose the diviner strains of the nightingale. In this far, wild corner of the garden, the effect was a little Chinese, with a profusion of willow trees, which now turned blue in the dimming air. Our young people, seated at the entrance of the tent, found their tongues falling idle, and sat in a divine languor which, like another silence, a silence of the soul, permitted the first faint notes of a new music to become audible in their hearts.

Their fingers interlocked. The moon, which in those parts is of gigantic size, being no other than Hell itself, rose behind the shadowy trees. "They say," said Rosie in a dreamy voice, "that those marks on it are craters."

One person's dream may well be another's awakening. George was at once galvanized into activity. "Come," said he. "It is time we began dinner. It's my birthday, so there's lots of champagne."

He hoped by these words to inveigle the simple girl into making a feast of it. However, he started under a handicap, for he was already as drunk as a lord on the very sound of her voice. A man's true nature appears when he is in that condition: George was prepared to jeopardize his whole future for an amorous

whim. His brain reeled under the onslaught of a legion of virtuous thoughts. He even conceived the notion of suggesting to the Devil that it should be the dummy husband who should be cast into the boiling brimstone, and that he should take the useless effigy's place, but from this act of madness the thought of the imps restrained him.

The remembrance of his master brought him back to Hell for a moment. "My dear," said he, patting her hand, "how would you like to be a film star?"

"Not at all," said she.

"What?" said he.

"Not at all," said she.

"Oh! said he. "Well! Well! Well!"

He had a diamond necklace in his pocket, ready to tempt her with, but could not restrain himself from hanging it unconditionally about her neck, he was so delighted by this answer of hers.

She was pleased, even more than by the gift itself, by the spirit in which it was given. She thought George the kindest and the best of men, and (whether it was the wine or not, I'll not say) she would have even stuck to it that he was handsome.

Altogether, the meal went off as merry as a marriage bell. The only drawback was that George could see no signs of a fitting sequel. Some would say the brim-

stone was a sequel sufficiently appropriate, but that was not George's idea at all. In fact, when he had played all his cards in this half-hearted fashion, he was suddenly overcome by a hideous prevision of his fate, and could not repress a most alarming groan.

"What is it, my dear?" cried Rosie, in the tenderest of voices.

"Oh, nothing," said he, "nothing at all. Only that I shall burn forever if I fail to seduce you."

"That is what the young man said at the stocking counter," said she in dismay.

"But I mean, in brimstone," said he dolorously, "and that, I assure you, is altogether a different proposition from love, whatever the poets may say."

"You are right," said she, in a happier voice than seemed entirely fitting, "love is altogether different from brimstone," and with that she squeezed his hand.

"I fear it will give me no peace in which to remember you," said he, positively photographing her with his eyes.

"You shall not go there," said she.

"He said I must!" cried George.

"Not," said she, "if — if it will save you to —"

"To what?" cried George.

"To seduce me," faltered Rosie.

George protested very little; he was altogether carried away by

the charming manner in which she expressed herself. He flung his arms about her, and endeavoured to convey, in one single kiss, all his gratitude for her kindness, his admiration for her beauty, his respect for her character, and his regret that she should have been orphaned at the age of fourteen and left to the care of an aunt who was a little inclined to severity. This is a great deal to be expressed in one single kiss; nevertheless, our hero did his best.

Next morning, he had to telephone his report to the Devil. "I'll hold your hand," said Rosie.

"Very well, my darling," said he. "I shall feel better so."

His call was put through like lightning. The Devil, like thunder, asked him how he had got on.

"The young woman is seduced," said George, in a rather brusque tone.

"Excellent!" returned his master. "Now tell me exactly how it happened."

"I thought," said George, "that you were supposed to be a gentleman."

"I am inquiring," said the Devil, "in a strictly professional capacity. What I wish to get at is her motive in yielding to your almost subtle charm."

"Why?" cried George. "You don't think that splendid girl would see me frizzling and frying in a lake of boiling brimstone?"



STONE

"Do you mean to say," cried the Devil in a terrifying voice, "that she has sacrificed her virtue merely to save you from punishment?"

"What other inducement," asked our hero, "do you imagine would have been likely to prevail?"

"You besotted fool!" cried his master, and proceeded to abuse him ten times more roundly than before.

George listened in fear and rage. When he had done cursing him, the Devil continued in a calmer voice, "There is only one thing to be done," said he, "and you may consider yourself very fortunate that you (you worm!) are needed to play a part in it. Otherwise, you would be frizzling before sunset. As it is, I see I must give the matter my individual attention, and the first step is that you must marry the girl."

"By all means," replied our hero briskly.

"I shall send you a bishop to perform the ceremony," continued the fiend, "and next week, if I am better of my present fit of gout, I shall require you to present me to your wife, and I myself will undertake her temptation."

"Temptation to what?" asked George, in a tone of great anxiety.

"To that sin to which wives are peculiarly fitted," replied the

Devil. "Does she like a waxed mustache?"

"Oh, dear! He says," whispered George to Rosie, "do you like a waxed mustache?"

"No, darling," said Rosie. "I like a bristly, sandy one, like yours."

"She says she likes a bristly, sandy one, like mine," said George, not entirely without complacency.

"Excellent! I will appear in one yet bristlier and sandier," replied the fiend. "Keep her by you. I have never failed yet. And, Postlethwaite —"

"Oh, yes, yes," said George. "What is it now?"

"Be discreet," said the Devil, in a menacing tone. "If she gets wind of my intentions, you shall be in the brimstone within an hour."

George hung up the receiver. "Excuse me, my dear," he said. "I really must go and think over what I have just heard."

He walked out among his groves of willows, which were then all freshened by the morning dew, and resounding with the songs of birds. It was, of all the mornings of his life, that on which he would most have appreciated his first cigarette, had it not been for his conversation with the Devil. As it was, he did not bother to light one. "The thing is," he said to himself, "he must

either succeed or fail. In the latter case his fury will be intolerable; in the former case mine will be."

The problem seemed to defy solution, and so it would have done, had it not been that love, whose bemusing effects have been celebrated often enough in song and story, has another and an ungratefully neglected aspect, in which the mind receives the benefits of clarifying calm. When the first flurry of his perturbation had passed, our hero found himself in possession of a mind as cool and unclouded as the sea-strand sky of earliest dawn. He immediately lit his cigarette.

"After all, we have some days to go," he murmured, "and time is entirely relative. Consider, for example, that fellow Prior, who is at this very moment about to drink up the universe, and who will still be arrested in the act of doing so long after all our little lives have passed away. On the other hand, it is certainly not for me to deny that certain delightful moments can take on the aspect of eternity. Besides, we might always escape."

The thought had entered his mind as unostentatiously as, no doubt, the notion of writing *Paradise Lost* entered Milton's — "H'm, I'll write *Paradise Lost*." "Besides, we might always escape." Just a few words, which, however, made all the difference. All that remained, in one case as

in the other, was to work out the little details.

Our hero was ingenious. What's more, he was assisted in his reflections by the hoarse cry, like that of a homing swan, of Charon's siren. It was the hour when that worthy, having cast loose from the quays of Hell, where he dropped his male cargo, turned his great ship towards George's planet. It came into sight, cleaving the morning blue, flashing in the beams of the local sun, leaving behind it a wake like that of a smoke-trailing aeroplane, only altogether better. It was a glorious sight. Soon George could see the women scampering up and down the decks, and hear their cry: "Is that Buenos Aires?"

He lost no time. Repairing to his palace, and seating himself in the most impressive of the salons, he sent forth a messenger to the docks, saying, "Bid the skipper come up and have a word with me."

Charon soon came stumping along in the wake of the messenger. He might have been inclined to grumble, but his eyes brightened at the sight of a bottle George had on his desk. This contained nothing less than the Old Original Rum of Hell, a liquor of the fieriest description, and now as rare as it is unappreciated.

"Skipper," said George, "you and I have got on well enough

hitherto, I believe. I have to ask you a question, which may seem to reflect a little on your capacities. However, I don't ask it on my own behalf, you may be sure, and in order to show my private estimation of you as a friend, as a man, and above all as a sea-dog of the old school, I am going to ask you to do me the favour of taking a little tippie with me first."

Charon was a man of few words. "Aye! Aye!" said he.

George then poured out the rum. When Charon had wet his whistle, "The chief," said George, "is in a secret fury with you over Mrs. Soames of Bayswater."

"Avast," said Charon, with a frown.

"Has it slipped your memory that I mentioned her to you on two previous occasions?" continued our hero. "She is now a hundred and four, and as cross as two sticks. The chief wants to know why you have not brought her along months ago." As he spoke, he refilled Charon's glass.

"Avast," said that worthy again.

"Perhaps," said George, "among your manifold onerous duties, his express commands concerning one individual may have seemed unworthy of your attention. I'm sure I should have forgotten the matter altogether, had I such a job as yours. Still,

you know what he is. He has been talking of changes at the Admiralty; however, pay no attention to that. I have to visit the earth myself on important business, and I find that the young woman you brought by such a regrettable mistake has had training as a hospital nurse. Between us, I assure you, we will shanghai the old geezer in a brace of shakes; the chief will find her here when he recovers from his gout, and foul weather between you will be entirely averted."

With that he poured the rest of the rum into the old salt's glass.

"Aye! Aye!" said that worthy.

George at once pressed the bell, and had Rosie ushered in, in a bewitching uniform. "To the ship, at once!" he cried.

"Aye! Aye!" cried Charon.

"I can take you back," whispered George to his beloved, "as long as you don't cast a glance behind you. If you do, we are lost."

"Depend upon me," she said. "I have too much to look forward to."

Very well, they got aboard. Charon believed all landlubbers were mad; moreover, he had long suspected machinations against him at headquarters, and was obliged to George for giving him word of them. George ordered a whole case of the admirable rum (the last case in existence) to be

placed in his cabin, lest Charon should remember that old Mrs. Soames had never been mentioned to him at all.

Amid hoots and exclamations in technical language the great ship left her moorings. George, on the pretext that he had to maintain constant communication with his chief, took over the wireless operator's cabin. You may be sure Satan was in a fury when he heard what had happened; but the only effect of that was that his gouty members became a thousand times worse inflamed, and grew still more so when he found it impossible to establish communication with the ship.

The best he could do was to conjure up, in the trackless wastes of space, such dumb images as might tempt Rosie to glance behind her. A Paris hat would bob up like a buoy on the starboard bow, and a moment later (so great was the speed of the ship) be tossing far astern. On other occasions, the images of the most famous film actors would be descried sitting on the silver planets of far constellations, combing their hair. She was exposed to a hundred temptations of this sort, and, what was crueller, she was subjected, by pursuant imps, to ceaseless tweakings of the hair, tuggings of the garments, sensations as of a spider down her back, and to all sorts of odious

familiarities, such as would be very offensive to describe! The devoted girl, holding fast to the forward rail of the boat-deck, never so much as flickered an eye.

The result of this devotion, coupled with George's vigilance at the earphones and Charon's drunkenness below, was that they soon heaved to in the latitudes of the earth. George and Rosie were set to slide at dizzy speed down an invisible rope, and they found themselves safely in bed beside the old centenarian, Mrs. Soames.

She was in a tearing rage when she found this young couple beside her. "Get out of here at once!" she cried.

"All right," they said, "we will."

The very next day I met them in Oxford Street, looking in the windows of the furniture shops, and George acquainted me with the whole story.

"And you say," said I, "that the universe is really a vast pint of beer?"

"Yes," said he. "It is all true. To prove it, I will show you the very place where Rosie was pinched by the envious young woman."

"The very place?" I cried.

"Yes," said he. "It was in that shop over there, at the counter to the right as you go in, just at the end of the stockings, and before the beginning of the lingerie."