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The Stranger from Kurdistan

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Author of "The Rajah's Gift"

YOU claim that demonoltry went out of existence at the end of the Middle Ages, that devil-worship is extinct? . . . No, I do not speak of the Yezidis of Kurdistan, who claim that the Evil One is as worthy of worship as God, since, by virtue of the duality of all things, good could not exist without its antithesis, evil; I speak rather of a devil-worship that exists today, in this twentieth century, in civilized, Christian Europe; secret, hidden, yet nevertheless quite real; a worship based upon a sacrilegious perversion of the ritual of the church. . . How do I know? That is aside from the question; suffice it to say that I know that which I know."

SO HIGH was the tower of Semaxii that it seemed to caress the very stars; so deep-seated were its foundations that there was more of its great bulk beneath the ground than there was above. Bathed in moonlight was its crest; swathed in sevenfold veils of darkness was its ponderous base. Old as the pyramids was this great pile of granite which took its name from the ruined city, of equal antiquity, sprawled at its base.

A dark form approached, advancing swiftly through the gloom-drenched ruins, a darkness among the shadows, a phantom that moved with sinister certitude.

Suddenly the shadow halted, and in its immobility became a part of the surrounding darkness. Other and lesser forms passed, slinking silently to the cavernous entrance of Semaxii, there vanishing in its obscure depths. And all were unaware of the form that had regarded them from its vantage point.

A cloud parted. A ray of moonlight fought its way through the Cimmerian shadows, dissolving all save one, the darkest; and this darkest one it revealed as the tall form of a man wrapped in a black cape, and wearing a high silk hat.

Another rift in the clouds; more light, which now disclosed the features as well as the form of the shadowy stranger; haughty features with a nose like the beak of a bird of prey; the cold, pitiless eye of an Aztec idol; thin lips drooping in the shadow of a cynical smile; a man relentless in victory and magnificent in defeat.

"The fools have all assembled to pay tribute to their folly; seventy-seven of them who will tonight adore their lord and master . . . and with what rites? . . . It is long since I have witnessed. . ."

He paused in his reflections to count the strokes of a bell whose sound crept softly across the wastelands.

"Little of my last night remains; however, let me waste it well."

So saying, he gathered his cape about him, and swiftly strode to the entrance of the tower.

"Halt!" snapped a voice from the gateway.

The ray of an electric torch bit the darkness and fell full upon the stranger's face.

"Halt, and give the sign."

"Who am I to give, or you to receive?" answered the stranger, as if intoning an incantation or reciting a fixed formula.

"Pass on."

And thus the stranger passed the outer guard of the shrine of demonastry, the holy of holies where Satan received the homage of his vassals. Past the outer guard was the stranger, but far from the sanctuary wherein the Black Mass was celebrated, wherein the Lord of the World was worshipt with blasphemous rites.

A thousand steps of icy granite, winding in endless succession like the coils of a vast earthworm, led to the foundations of the tower. And at intervals, sheeted and hooded warders halted the stranger and demanded sign and password; and each in turn, as he received a sign, shrank and dropped his gaze before the hard, inscrutable eye of the stranger.

Down, down to the very basements of the earth; and then he found himself before a door guarded by two masked figures garbed in vermilion. Again there was an exchange of signs, after which the two vermilion figures bowed low as the door opened to admit him to the vaulted sanctuary where the Devil was that night to be invoked.

The stranger doffed his high hat, then, after a courtly bow to the assemblage, strode up the aisle and seated himself on one of the brazen stools that were placed, row after row, like the pews of a chapel. Once seated, he gazed about him, taking stock of his surroundings.

The black altar before him, with its crucifix bearing a hideously caricatured Christ, received but a passing glance; nor was any more attention accorded to the walls and vaulted ceiling whose grotesquely obscene carvings leered at him through the acrid, smoke-laden air like the distorted fancies of a perverted brain. Nor yet, apparently, did he note the acolyte who was trimming the black candles at the altar, nor did he seem to wonder that the floor beneath his feet was sprinkled with powdered saf-

ron. It was the company itself that he studied, observing with interest the old roués and young sybarites, male and female, the seventy-seven who had assembled to adore Satan, their lord and master.

In the main, the seventy-seven were persons of wealth and distinction, who, having tried and found wanting every field of human endeavor and achievement, had sought thrills in the foulness and degradation of the medieval rites of devil-worship; rakes whose jaded appetites sought satiation in the orgies that followed the celebration of the Black Mass; atheists who, deeming passive atheism an inadequate form of rebellion, found expression in a ritual whose sacrilegious satisfied their iconoclastic desires.

Attendants bearing trays made their way among the seventy-seven, offering them glasses of wine and small amber-colored pastils. These last the worshipers either swallowed or else dissolved in their wine and drank.

THE stranger turned to the initiate who occupied the stool at his side.

"Tell me, brother, the nature of the rites to be celebrated here to-night."

The initiate eyed him narrowly as he sipped his wine.

"What do you mean?"

"Why," began the stranger blandly, "I am a foreigner, and I fancied that the ritual here may be different than it is in my native land. I must confess," he continued, "that I am puzzled to see an altar and a crucifix in this shrine devoted to the worship of the Evil One."

The initiate stared at him in amazement.

"It must be a curious rite that you witnessed. Do you not know that we have a priest who celebrates the mass, and then..."

"A priest?" interrupted the stranger. "The mass? Why..."

"Surely; if not a priest, if not a mass, how could the arch-enemy become incarnate in the bread which we, the worshipers of Satan, defile and pollute as a tribute to our lord and master? Surely you must be a foreigner from some heathen land not to know that only an ordained priest of the church can cause the miracle of transubstantiation to take place. But tell me, who are you?"

"You would be amazed," replied the stranger, smiling enigmatically, "if you knew who I am."

Then, before the initiate could continue his queries, a gong sounded, thinly, rather as the hiss of a serpent than as the clang of bronze; a panel of the vault opened, admitting the vermilion-robed, misshapen bulk of the priest. Following him were nine acolytes, likewise robed in vermilion, and bearing censers fuming with an overpoweringly heavy incense. As they marched slowly down the aisle, they raised their voices in a shrill chant. The seventy-seven sank to their knees, heads bowed.

The high priest halted before the altar, bowed solemnly, then, with the customary gestures and phrases, went through the ritual of the mass, the kneeling acolytes making the responses in Latin. He then descended to the bottom step of the altar and began his invocation of Satan.

"Oriflamme of Iniquity, thou who guidest our steps and givest us strength to endure and courage to resist, receive our petitions and accept our praise; Lord of the World, hear the prayers of thy servants; Father of Pride, defend us against the hypocrisies of the favorites of God! Master, thy faithful servants implore thee to bless their iniquities which destroy soul and conscience alike; power, glory and riches they beg of thee, King of the Disinherited, Son who battles with the inexorable Father: all this we ask of thee, and more, Master of Deceptions, Rewarder of Crime,

W. T.—3

Lord of Luxurious Vice and Monumental Sin, Satan, thee whom we adore, just and logical god!"

The high priest rose, faced the altar and crucifix bearing its life-sized mockery of a caricatured Christ, and in shrill, malignant accents cried out his blasphemies: "And thou, thou in my office as priest I compel to descend into this host, to become incarnate in this bread, Jesus, filcher of homage, thief of affection! Harken! From the day that the virgin gave thee birth thou hast failed in thy promises; the ages have wept in awaiting thee, mute and fugitive god! Thou wert to redeem mankind, and thou hast failed; thou wert to appear in glory, and thou liest asleep; thou who wert to intercede for us with the Father, hast failed in thy mission, lest thy eternal slumber be disturbed! Thou hast forgotten the poor to whom thou hast preached! Thou who hast dared punish by virtue of unheard-of laws, we would hammer upon thy nails, bear down upon thy crown of thorns, draw blood anew from thy dry wounds! And this we can do, and this we will do, in violating the repose of thy body, profaner of magnificent vice, accursed Nazarene, idle king, sluggish god!"

"Amen," came the hoarse response of the seventy-seven through the stifling, incense-laden air.

The priest, having once more ascended the altar steps, turned and with his left hand blessed the worshipers of Satan. Then, facing the Crucified One, in a solemn but mocking tone he pronounced, "*Hoc est enim corpus meum.*"

At these words the seventy-seven, crazed as much by the drugged wine and amber-hued pastils as by the sacrilegious madness of the ceremony, groveled upon the saffron-sprinkled floor, howling and moaning, overcome by a demoniac frenzy. The priest seized the consecrated bread, spat up-

on it, subjected it to unmentionable indignities, tore it to pieces which he offered to the worshipers of Satan, who crept forward to receive this mockery of a communion.

THE first of that mad group of devil-worshippers rose to his knees and was about to receive his portion when there came a startling interruption.

"Fools, cease this mockery!"

It was the stranger's voice, a voice whose arrogant note of command, ringing through that vaulted chapel like the clear, cold peal of destruction, silenced the frenzied devotees, so that not a breath was audible. The acolytes stood transfixed at the altar. The high priest alone retained command of himself; but even he was momentarily abashed, shrinking before the flaming, fierce eye of the stranger.

Yet the priest quickly recovered himself.

"Who are you," he snarled, "to interrupt the sacrifice?"

The seventy-seven, though still speechless, had recovered from the complete paralysis that their faculties had suffered. They saw the stranger confronting the high priest on the altar steps; they heard his voice, in reply, rich, sonorous, majestic:

"You, the high priest of Satan, and ask me who I am? I am Ahriman, whom the Persians feared; I am Malik Taus, the white peacock whom men worship in far-off Kurdistan; I am Lucifer, the morning star; I am that Satan whom you invoked. Behold, I have returned in mortal form to meet and defy my adversary."

He pointed to the crucifix, then continued, "And a worthy adversary he is. Nor think that yonder simulacrum is the Christ I have sworn to overthrow. Fools! Besotted beasts, think you that it is serving me to deride a foe who has held me at bay these countless ages? Think you to serve

me by this mummery? This very mass which you have celebrated, though in derision and in defiance of him, acknowledges his divinity; and though in mockery, you have nevertheless accepted him in taking this bread as his body. Is this serving me, your lord and master?"

"Impostor!" shrieked the high priest, his face distorted with rage; "impostor, you claim to be Satan?"

That high-pitched scream stirred the seventy-seven from their inertia, aroused them again to their frenzy. Gibbering and howling, they leapt to their feet and closed in on the stranger.

But at that instant a cloak of elemental fire, the red, blinding flame of a thousand suns, enshrouded Satan's form, and from it rang that same clear, cold voice, "Fools! Madmen! I disown and utterly deny you!"

ONCE again in the ruins at the foot of the Tower of Semaxii was the dark stranger, Satan as he had revealed himself to his followers. He seemed to be alone, yet he was speaking, as if with someone facing him.

"Nazarene," he said, "on that day wherein I challenged you to meet me with weapons and on ground of your own choosing to do battle for the empery of the world, I was foolish and knew not whereof I spoke."

He paused, lowered his eyes for a moment, as if to rest them from the strain of gazing at an awful and intolerable radiance, then continued: "You they crucified; me they would have torn in pieces, their lord and master; both of us they have denied. I wonder whose folly is the greater, yours in seeking to redeem mankind, or mine in striving to make it my own."

And with these words Satan turned, his haughty head bowed, and turning, disappeared among the ruins.