



THE DEVIL'S FUNERAL

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Collected Stories

Chapter

The Devil's Funeral

I felt myself lifted up from my bed by hands invisible and swiftly borne down the ever-narrowing avenue of Time. Each moment I passed a century and encountered new empires, new peoples, strange ideas, and unknown faiths. So at last I found myself at the end of the avenue, at the end of Time, under a blood-red sky more awful than the deepest black.

Men and women hurried to and fro, their pale faces reflecting the accursed complexion of the heavens. A desolate silence rested upon all things. Then I heard afar a low wail, indescribably grievous, swelling and falling again and blending with the notes of the storm that began to rage. The wailing was answered by a groan, and the groaning grew into thunder. The people wrung their hands and tore their hair, and a voice, piercing and persistent, shrieked above the turmoil, "Our lord and master, the Devil, is no more! Our lord and master is no more!" Then I, too, joined the mourners who bewailed the Devil's death.

An old man came to me and took me by the hand. "You also loved and served him?" he asked. I made no reply, for I knew not wherefore I lamented. He gazed steadfastly into my eyes. "There are no sorrows," he said, meaningly, "that are beyond utterance." "Not, then, like your sorrow," I retorted, "for your eyes are dry, and there is no grief behind their pupils." He placed his finger on my lips and whispered, "Wait!"

The old man led the way to a vast and lofty hall, filled to the farthest corner with a weeping crowd. The multitude was, indeed, a mighty one, for all the people of every age of the world who had worshiped and served the Devil were assembled there to do for him the last offices for the dead. I saw there men of my own day and recognized others of earlier ages, whose faces and fame had been brought down to me by art and by history; and I saw many others who belonged to the later centuries through which I had passed in my night progress down the avenue of Time. But as I was about to inquire concerning these, the old man checked me. "Hush," he said, "and listen." And the multitude cried with one voice, "Hark and hear the report of the autopsy!"

From another apartment there came forth surgeons and physicians and philosophers and learned faculties of all times charged to examine the Devil's body and to discover, if they could, the mystery of his existence. "For," the people had said, "if these men of science can tell us wherein the Devil was the Devil, if they can separate from his mortal parts the immortal principle which distinguished him from ourselves, we may still worship that immortal principle to our own continued profit and to the unending glory of our late lord and master."

With grave looks upon their countenances, and with reluctant steps, three delegates advanced from among the other sages. The old man beside me raised his hand to command perfect silence. Every sound of woe was at the instant suppressed. I saw that one was Galen, Paracelsus another, and Cornelius Agrippa the third.

"Ye who have faithfully served the master," said Agrippa in a loud voice, "must listen in vain for the secret which our scalpels have disclosed. We have lain bare both the heart and the soul of him who lies yonder. His heart was like our own hearts, fitly formed to throb with hot passions, to shrink with hatred, and to swell with rage. But the mystery of his soul would blast the lips that uttered it."

The old man hurriedly drew me a little way apart, out of the throng. The multitude began to surge and sway with furious wrath. It sought to seize and rend to pieces the learned and venerable men who had dissected the Devil, yet refused to publish the mystery of his existence. "What rubbish is this you tell us, you charlatan hackers and hewers of corpses?" exclaimed one. "You have discovered no mystery; you lie to our faces." "Put them to death!" screamed others. "They wish to hoard the secret for their own advantage. We shall presently have a triumvirate of quacks setting themselves up above us, in place of him whom we have worshiped for the dignity of his teachings, the ingenuity of his intellect, the exalted character of his morality. To death with these upstart philosophers who would usurp the Devil's soul."

"We have sought only the Truth," replied the men of science, soberly, "but we cannot give you the Truth as we found it. Our functions go not further." And thereupon they withdrew.

"Let us see for ourselves," shouted the foremost in the angry crowd. So they made their way into the inner apartment where the Devil's body lay in state. Thousands pressed after them and struggled in vain to enter the presence of death that they, too, might discover the true essential quality of the departed. Those who gained entrance reverently but eagerly approached the massive bier of solid gold, studded with glistening stones, and resplendent with the mingled lustre of the emerald, the chrysolite, and jasper. Dazzled, they shrank back with wild faces and bewildered looks. Not a man among them dared stretch forth his hand to tear away the bandages and coverings with which the surgeons had veiled their work.

Then the old man who with me had silently witnessed the tumultuous scene drew himself up to a grand height and said aloud: "Worshippers of the Devil, whose majesty even in death holds you subject! It is well that you have not seized the mystery before the time. A variety of signs combine to inspire me with hope that that which has sealed the lips of the men of science may yet be revealed through faith. Let us forthwith pay the last sad tribute to our departed lord. Let us make to his memory a sacrifice worthy of our devotion. My art can kindle a fire which consumes weighty ingots of gold as readily as it burns tinsel paper, and which leaves behind no ashes and no regrets. Let every man bring hither all the gold, whether in coin, or in plate, or in trinkets, that he has earned in serving the Devil, and every woman the gold that she has earned, and cast it into the consuming fire. Then will the funeral pyre be worthy of him whom we mourn."

"Well said, old man!" cried the Devil worshippers. "Thus we will prove that our worship has not been base. Build you the pyre while we go to fetch our gold."

My eyes were fixed upon the face of my companion, but I could not read the thoughts that occupied his brain. When I turned again the vast hall was empty of all save him and me.

Slowly and laboriously we built the funeral pile in the centre of the apartment. We built it of the costly woods that were at hand, already sprinkled by devout mourners with the choicest spices. We built the pile broad and high, and draped it with gorgeous stuffs. The old man smiled as he prepared the magic fire that was to consume the gold which the Devil worshippers had gone to fetch. Within the pyre he left an ample space for their sacrifice.

Together we brought forth the Devil's body and placed it carefully in position at the top of the pile. Thunders rolled in the lofty space above our heads, and the whole building shook so terribly that I expected it to fall, crushing us between roof and pavement. Crash came after crash of thunder, nearer and nearer to the pyre. Lightnings played close around us--around the old man, the Devil's corpse, and me. Still we waited for the multitude, but the multitude returned not.

"Behold the obsequies!" said the old man at last, thrusting his lighted torch into the midst of the pile. "You and I are the only mourners, and we have not a single ounce of gold to offer. Go you now forth and bid all the Devil worshippers to the reading of the last will and testament. They will come."

I hastened forth to obey the old man's command, and speedily the funeral hall was thronged again. This time the Devil worshippers brought their gold, and every man sought to make excuse for his tardiness at the pyre. The air was thick with explanations. "I tarried only," said one, "to be

sure that I had gathered all--all to the very last piece of gold in my possession." "I have fetched," said another, "the laborious accumulations of fifty years, but I cheerfully sacrifice it all to the memory of our dear lord." A third said, "See, I bring all of mine, even to the wedding ring of my dead wife."

There was a contention among the Devil worshipers to be first to cast treasure into the fire. The charmed flames caught up the gold, and streamed high above the corpse, casting upon every eager face in the vast room a fierce yellow glare. Still the fire was fed by hands innumerable, and still the old man stood beside the pyre, smiling strangely.

The Devil worshipers now cried out with hoarse voices: "The will! The will! Let us hear the last testament of our dead lord!"

The old man opened a roll of asbestos paper and began to read aloud, while the hubbub of the great throng died away into silence and the angry roar of the consuming flames subsided into a dull murmur. What the old man read was this:

"To my well-beloved subjects, the whole world, my faithful worshipers and loyal servitors, greeting, and the Devil's only blessing, a perpetual curse!

"For as much as I am conscious of the approach of the Change that hunts every active existence, yet being of sound mind and firm purpose, I do declare this to be my last will, pleasure, and command as to the disposal of my kingdom and effects.

"To the wise I bequeath folly, and to the fools, pain. To the rich I leave the wretchedness of the earth, and to the poor the anguish of the unattainable; to the just, ingratitude, and to the unjust, remorse; and to the theologians I bequeath the ashes of my bones.

"I decree that the place called hell be closed forever.

"I decree that the torments, in fee simple, be divided among all my faithful subjects, according to their merit, that the pleasure and the treasure shall also be divided equitably among my subjects."

Thereupon the Devil worshipers shrieked with one accord: "There is no God but the Lord Devil, and he is dead! Now let us enter into our inheritance."

But the old man replied, "Ye wretched! The Devil is dead, and with the Devil died the world. The world is dead."

Then they stood aghast, looking at the pyre. All at once the gold-laden flames leaped into a blazing column to the roof and expired. And forth from the red embers of the Devil's heart there crept a small snake, hissing hideously. The old man clutched at the snake to crush it, but it slipped through his hands and made its way into the midst of the crowd. Judas Iscariot caught up the snake and placed it in his bosom. And when he did so, the earth beneath us began to quiver as if in the convulsion of death. The lofty pillars of the funeral chamber reeled like giants seized

with dizziness. The Devil worshipers fell flat upon their faces; the old man and I stood alone. Crash followed quick on crash on every side of us, but it was not this time the concussions of thunder. It was the hopeless sound of the tumbling of man's structures and fabrics and the echo from the other worlds of this world's crack of doom. Then the stars began to fall, and the fainter lights of heaven came down upon us like a driving sleet of frozen fire. And children died of terror, and mothers clasped their dead babes to their own cold breasts and hurried this way and that for shelter that was never found. Light became black, fire lost its heat in the utter disorganization of Nature, and a whelming flood of chaos surged from the womb of the universe and swallowed up the Devil worshipers and their dead world.

Then I said to the old man as we stood in the void, "Now there is surely no evil and no good; no world and no God."

But he smiled and shook his head, and left me to wander back unguided through the centuries. Yet as he disappeared I saw that high over the ruins of the world a rainbow of infinite brightness stretched its arch.