

Down Satan

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Down, Satan! Circumstances had made Gregorius rich beyond all calculation. He owned fleets and palaces; stallions; cities. Indeed he owned so much that to those who were finally charged with enumerating his possessions—when the events of this story reached their monstrous conclusion—it sometimes seemed it might be quicker to list the items Gregorius did not own.

Rich he was, but far from happy. He had been raised a Catholic, and in his early years—before his dizzying rise to fame—he'd found succor in his faith. But he'd neglected it, and it was only at the age of fifty-five, with the world at his feet, that he woke one night and found himself Godless.

It was a bitter blow, but he immediately took steps to make good his loss. He went to Rome and spoke with the Supreme Pontiff; he prayed night and day; he founded seminaries and leper colonies. God, however, declined to show so much as His toenail. Gregorius, it seemed, was forsaken.

Almost despairing, he took it into his head that he could only win his way back into the arms of his Maker if he put his soul into the direst jeopardy. The notion had some merit.

Suppose, he thought, I contrive a meeting with Satan, the Archfiend. Seeing me in extremis, would not God be obliged to step in and deliver me back into the fold? It was a fine plot, but how was he to realize it? The Devil did not just come at a call, even for a tycoon such as Gregorius, and his researches soon proved that all the traditional methods of summoning the Lord of Vermin—the defiling of the Blessed Sacrament, the sacrifice of babes—were no more effective than his good works had been at provoking Yahweh. It was only after a year of deliberation that he fell upon his master plan. He would arrange to have built a hell on earth—a modern inferno so monstrous that the Tempter would be tempted, and come to roost there like a cuckoo in a usurped nest.

He searched high and low for an architect and found, languishing in a madhouse outside Florence, a man called Leopardo, whose plans Mussolini's palaces had a lunatic grandeur that suited Gregorius's project perfectly. Leopardo was taken from his cell—a fetid, wretched old man—and given his dreams again. His genius for the prodigious had not deserted him.

In order to fuel his invention the great libraries of the world were scoured for descriptions of hells both secular and metaphysical. Museum vaults were ransacked for forbidden images of martyrdom. No stone was left unturned if it was suspected something perverse was concealed beneath.

The finished designs owed something to de Sade and to Dante, and something more to Freud and Krafft-Ebing, but there was also much there that no mind had conceived of before, or at least ever dared set to paper.

A site in Northern Africa was chosen, and work on Gregorius's New Hell began. Everything about the project broke the records. Its foundations were vaster, its walls thicker, its plumbing more elaborate than any edifice hitherto attempted. Gregorius watched its slow construction with an enthusiasm he had not tasted since his first years as an empire builder.

Needless to say, he was widely thought to have lost his mind. Friends he had known for years refused to associate with him. Several of his companies collapsed when investors took fright at reports of his insanity. He didn't care. His plan could not fail. The Devil would be bound to come, if only out of curiosity to see this leviathan built in his name, and when he did, Gregorius would be waiting.

The work took four years and the better part of Gregorius's fortune. The finished building was the size of half a dozen cathedrals and boasted every facility the Angel of the Pit could desire. Fires burned behind its walls, so that to walk in many of its corridors was almost unendurable agony. The rooms off those corridors were fitted with every imaginable device of persecution—the needle, the rack, the dark—that the genius of Satan's torturers be given fair employ. There were ovens large enough to cremate entire families; pools deep enough to drown generations. The New Hell was an atrocity waiting to happen; a celebration of inhumanity that only lacked its first cause.

The builders withdrew, and thankfully. It was rumored among them that Satan had long been watching over the construction of his pleasure dome. Some even claimed to have glimpsed him on the deeper levels, where the chill was so profound it froze the piss in your bladder. There was some evidence to support the belief in supernatural presences converging on the building as it neared completion, not least the cruel death of Leopardo, who had either thrown himself or—the superstitious argued—been pitched through his sixth-story hotel window. He was buried with due extravagance.

So now, alone in hell, Gregorius waited.

He did not have to wait long. He had been there a day, no more, when he heard noises from the lower depths. Anticipation brimming, he went in search of their source, but only found

the roiling of excrement baths and the rattling of ovens. He returned to his suite of chambers on the ninth level and waited. The noises came again; again he went in search of their source; again he came away disappointed.

The disturbances did not abate, however. In the days that followed scarcely ten minutes would pass without his hearing some sound of occupancy. The Prince of Darkness was here, Gregorius could have no doubt of it, but he was keeping to the shadows. Gregorius was content to play along. It was the Devil's party, after all. His to play whatever game he chose.

But during the long and often lonely months that followed, Gregorius wearied of this hide-and-seek and began to demand that Satan show himself. His voice rang unanswered down the deserted corridors, however, until his throat was bruised with shouting. Thereafter he went about his searches stealthily, hoping to catch his tenant unawares. But the Apostate Angel always flitted away before Gregorius could step within sight of him.

They would play a waiting game, it seemed, he and Satan, chasing each other's tails through ice and fire and ice again. Gregorius told himself to be patient. The Devil had come, hadn't he? Wasn't that his fingerprint on the door handle? His turd on stairs? Sooner or later the Fiend would show his face, and Gregorius would spit on it.

The world outside went on its way, and Gregorius was consigned to the company of other recluses who had been ruined by wealth. His Folly, as it was known, was not entirely without visitors, however. There were a few who had loved him too much to forget him—a few, also, who had profited by him and hoped to turn his madness to their further profit—who dared the gates of the New Hell. These visitors made the journey without announcing their intentions, fearing the disapproval of their friends. The investigations into their subsequent disappearance never reached as far as North Africa.

And in his folly Gregorius still chased the Serpent, and the Serpent still eluded him, leaving only more and more terrible signs of his occupancy as the months went by.

It was the wife of one of the missing visitors who finally discovered the truth and alerted the authorities. Gregorius's Folly was put under surveillance, and finally—some three years after its completion—a quartet of officers braved the threshold.

Without maintenance the Folly had begun to deteriorate badly. The lights had failed on many of the levels, its walls had cooled, its pitch pits solidified. But as the officers advanced through the gloomy vaults in search of Gregorius they came upon ample evidence that despite its decrepit condition the New Hell was in good working order. There were bodies in the ovens, their faces wide and black. There were human remains seated and strung up in many of the rooms, gouged and pricked and slit to death.

Their terror grew with every door they pressed open, every new abomination their fevered eyes fell upon.

Two of the four who crossed the threshold never reached the chamber at its center.

Terror overtook them on their way and they fled, only to be waylaid in some choked passageway and added to the hundreds who had perished in the Folly since Satan had taken residence.

Of the pair who finally unearthed the perpetrator, only one had courage enough to tell his story, though the scenes he faced there in the Folly's heart were almost too terrible to bear relating.

There was no sign of Satan, of course. There was only Gregorius. The master builder, finding no one to inhabit the house he had sweated over, had occupied it himself. He had with him a few disciples whom he'd mustered over the years. They, like him, seemed unremarkable creatures. But there was not a torture device in the building they had not made thorough and merciless use of.

Gregorius did not resist his arrest. Indeed he seemed pleased to have a platform from which to boast of his butcheries. Then, and later at his trial, he spoke freely of his ambition and his appetite; and of how much more blood he would spill if they would only set him free to do so. Enough to drown all belief and its delusions, he swore. And still he would not be satisfied.

For God was rotting in paradise, and Satan in the abyss, and who was to stop him? He was much reviled during the trial, and later in the asylum where, under some suspicious circumstances, he died barely two months later. The Vatican expunged all report of him from its records. The seminaries founded in his unholy name were dissolved.

But there were those, even among the cardinals, who could not put his unrepentant malice out of their heads, and—in the privacy of their doubt—wondered if he had not succeeded in his strategy. If, in giving up all hope of angels—fallen or otherwise—he had not become one himself.

Or all that earth could bear of such phenomena.