

The Printer's Devil

By Anonymous

As I was sitting in my armchair and preparing an essay on the Devil in literature, sleep overpowered me; the pen fell from my hands, and my head reclined upon the desk. I had been thinking so much about the Devil in my waking hours, that the same idea pursued me after I had fallen asleep. I heard a gentle rap at the door, and having bawled out as usual, "Come in," a little gentleman entered, wrapped in a large blue cloth cloak, with a slouched hat, and goggles over his eyes. After bowing and scraping with considerable ceremony, he took off his hat, and threw his cloak over the back of a chair, when I immediately perceived that my visitor was no mortal. His face was hideously ugly; the skin appearing very much like wet paper, and the forehead covered with those cabalistic signs whose wondrous significance is best known to those who correct the press. On the end of his long hooked nose there seemed to me to be growing, like a carbuncle, the first letter of the alphabet, glittering with ink and ready to print. I observed, also, that each of his fingers and toes, or rather claws, was in the same manner terminated by one of the letters of the alphabet; and as he slashed round his tail to brush a fly off his nose, I noticed that the letter Z formed the extremity of that useful member. While I was looking with no small astonishment and some trepidation at my extraordinary visitor, he took occasion to inform me that he had taken liberty to call, as he was afraid I might forget him in the treatise which I was writing—an omission which he assured me would cause him no little mortification. "In me," says he, "you behold the prince and patron of printers' devils. My province is to preside over the hell of books; and if you will only take the trouble to accompany me a little way, I will show you some of the wonders of that world." As my imagination had lately been much excited by perusing Dante's *Inferno*, I was delighted with an adventure which promised to turn out something like his wonderful journey, and I readily consented to visit my new friend's dominions, and we sallied forth together. As we pursued our way, my conductor endeavoured to give me some information respecting the world I was about to enter, in order to prepare me for the wonders I should encounter there. "You must know," remarked he, "that books have souls as well as men; and the moment any work is published, whether successful or not, its soul appears in precisely the same form in another world; either in this domain, which is subject to me, or in a better region, over which I have no control. I have power only to exhibit the place of punishment for bad books, periodicals, pamphlets, and, in short, publications of every kind."

We now arrived at the mouth of a cavern, which I did not remember to have ever noticed before, though I had repeatedly passed the spot in my walks. It looked to me more like the entrance to a coalmine than anything else, as the sides were entirely black. Upon examining them more closely, I found that they were covered with a black fluid which greatly resembled printer's ink, and which seemed to corrode and wear away the rocks of the cavern wherever it touched them. "We have lately received a large supply of political publications," said my companion; "and hell is perfectly saturated with their maliciousness. We carry on a profitable trade upon the earth, by retailing this ink to the principal political editors. Unfortunately, it is not found to answer very well for literary

publications, though they have tried it with considerable success in printing the London *Quarterly* and several of the other important reviews.”

The cavern widened as we advanced, and we came presently into a vast open plain, which was bounded on one side by a wall so high that it seemed to reach the very heavens. As we approached the wall I observed a vast gateway before us, closed up by folding doors. The gates opened at our approach, and we entered. I found myself in a warm sandy valley, bounded on one side by a steep range of mountains. A feeble light shone upon it, much like that of a sick chamber, and the air seemed confined and stifling like that of the abode of illness. My ears were assailed by a confused whining noise, as if all the litters of new-born puppies, kittens with their eyes unopened, and babes just come to light, in the whole world, were brought into one spot, and were whelping, mewling, and squalling at once. I turned in mute wonder to my guide for explanation; and he informed me that I now beheld the destined abode of all still-born and abortive publications; and the infantine noises which I heard were only their feeble wailing for the miseries they had endured in being brought into the world. I now saw what the febleness of the light had prevented my observing before, that the soil was absolutely covered with books of every size and shape, from the little diamond almanac up to the respectable quarto. I saw folios there. These books were crawling about and tumbling over each other like blind whelps, uttering, at the same time, the most mournful cries. I observed one, however, which remained quite still, occasionally groaning a little, and appeared like an overgrown toad oppressed with its own heaviness. I drew near, and read upon the back, “*Resignation, a Novel.*” The cover flew open, and the title-page immediately began to address me. I walked off, however, as fast as possible, only distinguishing a few words about “the injustice and severity of critics;” “bad taste of the public;” “very well considering;” “first effort;” “feminine mind,” &c. &c. I presently discovered a very important-looking little book, stalking about among the rest in a great passion, kicking the others out of the way, and swearing like a trooper; till at length, apparently exhausted with its efforts, it sunk down to rise no more. “Ah ha!” exclaimed my little diabolical friend, “here is a new corner; let’s see who he is; and coming up, he turned it over with his foot so that we could see the back of it, upon which was printed “*The Monikins, by the Author of, &c. &c.*” I noticed that the book had several marks across it, as if some one had been flogging the unfortunate work. “It is only the marks of the scourge,” said my companion, “which the critics have used rather more severely, I think, than was necessary.” I expected, after all the passion I had seen, and the great importance of feeling, arrogance, and vanity the little work had manifested, that it would have some pert remarks to make to us; but it was so much exhausted that it could not say a word. At the bottom of the valley was a small pond of a milky hue, from which there issued a perfume very much like the smell of bread and butter. An immense number of thin, prettily bound manuscript books were soaking in this pond of milk, all of which, I was informed, were *Young Ladies’ Albums*, which it was necessary to souse in the slough, to prevent them from stealing passages from the various works about them. As soon as I heard what they were, I ran away with all my speed, having a mortal dread of these books.

We had now traversed the valley, and, approaching the barrier of mountains, we found a passage cut through, which greatly resembled the Pausilipo, near Naples; it was closed on the side towards the valley, only with a curtain of white paper, upon which were

printed the names of the principal reviews, which my conductor assured me were enough to prevent any of the unhappy works we had seen from coming near the passage.

As we advanced through the mountains, occasional gleams of light appeared before us, and immediately vanished, leaving us in darkness. My guide, however, seemed to be well acquainted with the way, and we went on fearlessly till we emerged into an open field, lighted up by constant flashes of lightning, which glared from every side; the air was hot, and strongly impregnated with sulphur. "Each department of my dominions," the Devil, "receives its light from the works which are sent there. You are now surrounded by the glittering but evanescent coruscations of the more recent novels. This department of hell was never very well supplied till quite lately, though Fielding, Smollett, Maturin, and Godwin, did what they could for us. Our greatest benefactors have been Disraeli, Bulwer, and Victor Hugo; and this glare of light, so painful to our eyes, proceeds chiefly from their books." There was a tremendous noise like the rioting of an army of drunken men, with horrible cries and imprecations, and fiend-like laughing, which made my blood curdle; and such a scrambling and fighting among the books, as I never saw before. I could not imagine at first what could be the cause of this, till I discovered at last a golden hill rising up like a cone in the midst of the plane, with just room enough for one book on the summit; and I found that the novels were fighting like so many devils for the occupation of this place. One work, however, had gained possession of it, and seemed to maintain its bold with a strength and resolution which bade defiance to the rest. I could not at first make out the name of this book, which seemed to stand upon its golden throne like the Prince of Hell; but presently the whole arch of the heavens glared with new brilliancy, and the magic name of *Vivian Grey* flashed from the book in letters of scorching light. I was much afraid, however, that *Vivian* would not long retain his post; for I saw *Pelham* and *Peregrine Pickle*, and the terrible *Melmoth* with his glaring eyes, coming together to the assault, when a whirlwind seized them all four and carried them away to a vast distance, leaving the elevation vacant for some other competitor. "There is no peace to the wicked, you see," said my Asmodeus. "These books are longing for repose, and they can get none on account of the insatiable vanity of their authors, whose desire for distinction made them careless of the sentiments they expressed and the principles they advocated. The great characteristic of works of this stamp is action, intense, painful action. They have none of that beautiful serenity which shines in Scott and Edgeworth; and they are condemned to illustrate, by an eternity of contest here, the restless spirit with which they are inspired."

While I was looking on with fearful interest in the mad combat before me, the horizon seemed to be darkened, and a vast cloud rose up in the image of a gigantic eagle, whose wings stretched from the east to the west till he covered the firmament. In his talons he carried an open book, at the sight of which the battle around me was calmed; the lightnings ceased to flash, and there was an awful stillness. Then suddenly there glared from the book a sheet of fire, which rose in columns a thousand feet high, and filled the empyrean with intense light; the pillars of flame curling and wreathing themselves into monstrous letters, till they were fixed in one terrific glare, and I read—"BYRON." Even my companion quailed before the awful light, and I covered my face with my hands. When I withdrew them, the cloud and the book had vanished, and the contest was begun again—"You have seen the Prince of this division of hell," said my guide.

We now began rapidly to descend into the bowels of the earth; and, after sinking some thousand feet, I found myself on terra firma again, and walking a little way, we came to a gate of massive ice, over which was written in vast letters—"My heritage is despair." We passed through, and immediately found ourselves in a vast basin of lead, which seemed to meet the horizon on every side. A bright light shone over the whole region; but it was not like the genial light of the sun. It chilled me through; and every ray that fell upon me seemed like the touch of ice. The deepest silence prevailed; and though the valley was covered with books, not one moved or uttered a sound. I drew near to one, and I shivered with intense cold as I read upon it—"Voltaire." "Behold," said the demon, "the hell of infidel books; the light which emanates from them is the light of reason, and they are doomed to everlasting torpor." I found it too cold to pursue my investigations any farther in this region, and I gladly passed on from the leaden gulf of Infidelity.

I had no sooner passed the barrier which separated this department from the next, than I heard a confused sound like the quacking of myriads of ducks and geese, and a great flapping of wings; of which I soon saw the cause. "You are in the hell of newspapers," said my guide. And sure enough, when I looked up I saw thousands of newspapers flying about with their great wooden back-bones, and the padlock dangling like a bobtail at the end, flapping their wings and hawking at each other like mad. After circling about in the air for a little while, and biting and tearing each other as much as they could, they plumped down, head first, into a deep black-looking pool, and were seen no more. "We place these newspapers deeper in hell than the Infidel publications," said the Devil; "because they are so much more extensively read, and thereby do much greater mischief. It is a kind of pest of which there is no end; and we are obliged to allot the largest portion of our dominions to containing them."

We now came to an immense pile of a leaden hue, which I found at last to consist of old worn-out type, which was heaped up to form the wall of the next division. A monstrous u, turned bottom upwards (in this way) formed the arch of a gateway through which we passed; and then traversed a draw-bridge, which was thrown across a river of ink, upon whose banks millions of horrible little demons were sporting. I presently saw that they were employed in throwing into the black stream a quantity of books which were heaped up on the shore. As I looked down into the stream, I saw that they were immediately devoured by the most hideous and disgusting monsters which were floundering about there. I looked at one book, which had crawled out after being thrown into the river; it was dripping with filth, but I distinguished on the back the words—*Don Juan*. It had hardly climbed up the bank, however, when one of the demons gave it a kick, and sent it back into the stream, where it was immediately swallowed. On the back of some of the books which the little imps were tossing in, I saw the name of—*Rochester*, which showed me the character of those which were sent into this division of the infernal regions.

Beyond this region rose up a vast chain of mountains, which we were obliged to clamber over. After toiling for a long time, we reached the summit, and I looked down upon an immense labyrinth built upon the plain below, in which I saw a great number of large folios, stalking about in solemn pomp, each followed by a number of small volumes and pamphlets, like so many pages or footmen watching the beck of their master. "You behold here," said the demon, "all the false works upon theology which have been written since the beginning of the Christian era. They are condemned to wander about to all

eternity in the hopeless maze of this labyrinth, each folio drawing after it all the minor works to which it gave origin." A faint light shone from these ponderous tomes; but it was like the shining of a lamp in a thick mist, shorn of its rays, and illuminating nothing around it. And if my companion had not held a torch before me, I should not have discerned the outlines of this department of the Infernal world. As my eye became somewhat accustomed to the feeble light, I discovered beyond the labyrinth a thick mist, which appeared to rise from some river or lake. "That," said my companion, "is the distinct abode of German Metaphysical works, and other treatises of a similar unintelligible character. They are all obliged to pass through a press; and if there is any sense in them, it is thus separated from the mass of nonsense in which it is imbedded, and is allowed to escape to a better world. Very few of the works, however, are found to be materially diminished by passing through the press." We had now crossed the plain, and stood near the impenetrable fog, which rose up like a wall before us. In front of it was the press managed by several ugly little demons, and surrounded by an immense number of volumes of every size and shape, waiting for the process which all were obliged to undergo. As I was watching their operations, I saw two very respectable German folios, with enormous clasps, extended like arms, carrying between them a little volume, which they were fondling like a pet child with marks of doting affection. These folios proved to be two of the most abstruse, learned, and incomprehensible of the metaphysical productions of Germany; and the bantling which they seemed to embrace with so much affection, was registered on the back—"Records of a School." I did not find that a single ray of intelligence had been extracted from either of the two after being subjected to the press. As soon as the volumes had passed through the operation of yielding up all the little sense they contained, they plunged into the intense fog, and disappeared for ever.

We next approached the verge of a gulf, which appeared to be bottomless; and there was dreadful noise, like the war of the elements, and forked flames shooting up from the abyss, which reminded me of the crater of Vesuvius. "You have now reached the ancient limits of hell," said the demon, "and you behold beneath your feet the original chaos on which my domains are founded. But within a few years we have been obliged to build a yet deeper division beyond the gulf, to contain a class of books that were unknown in former times." "Pray, what class can be found," I asked, "worse than those which I have already seen, and for which it appears hell was not bad enough?" "They are American reprints of English publications," replied he, "and they are generally works of such a despicable character, that they would have found their way here without being republished; but even where the original work was good, it is so degenerated by the form under which it re-appears in America, that its merit is entirely lost, and it is only fit for the seventh and lowest division of hell."

I now perceived a bridge spanning over the gulf, with an arch that seemed as lofty as the firmament. We hastily passed over, and found that the farthest extremity of the bridge was closed by a gate, over which was written three words. "They are the names of the three furies who reign over this division," said my guide. I of course did not contradict him; but the words looked very much like some I had seen before; and the more I examined them, the more difficult was it to convince myself that the inscription was not the same thing as the sign over a certain publishing house in Philadelphia.

"These," said the Devil, "are called the three furies of the hell of books; not from the mischief they do there to the works about them, but for the unspeakable wrong they did

to the same works upon the earth, by re-printing them in their hideous brown paper editions." As soon as they beheld me, they rushed towards me with such piteous accents and heart-moving entreaties, that I would intercede to save them from their torment, that I was moved with the deepest compassion, and began to ask my conductor if there were no relief for them. But he hurried me away, assuring me that they only wanted to sell me some of their infernal editions, and the idea of owning any such property was so dreadful that it woke me up directly.