

THE DEVIL YOU DON'T

Curlene Dimpleby was in the shower when the doorbell rang.

"Damn!" Curlene said. She did one more slow revolution with her face upturned to the spray, then turned the big chrome knobs and stepped out onto the white nylon wall-to-wall, just installed that week. The full length mirror, slightly misty, reflected soft curves nicely juxtaposed with slimness. She jiggled in a pleasant way as she toweled off her back, crossed the bedroom and pulled on an oversized white terry cloth robe. She padded barefoot along the tiled hall. The bell rang again as she opened the door.

A tall, wide, red-haired young man stood there, impeccably dressed in white flannels, a blue blazer and a fancy but somewhat tarnished pocket patch, and white buck shoes. He jerked his finger from the pushbutton and smiled, presenting an engaging display of china-white teeth.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry, Ma'am," he said in a voice so deep Curlene imagined she could feel it through the soles of her feet. "I, uh . . . I thought maybe you didn't hear the bell." He stopped and blushed.

"Why, that's perfectly charming," Curlene said. "I mean, that's perfectly all right."

"Uh . . . I . . . came to, um, fix the lights."

"Golly, I didn't even know they were out." She stepped back and as he hesitated, she said, "Come on in. The fuse box is in the basement."

The big young man edged inside.

"Is, ah, is Professor Dimpleby here?" he asked doubtfully.

"He's still in class. Anyway, he wouldn't be much help. Johnny's pretty dumb about anything simple. But he's a whiz at quantum theory . . ." Curlene was looking at his empty hands.

"Possibly I'd better come back later?" he said.

"I notice," Curlene said reproachfully, "you don't have any tools."

"Oh-" This time the blush was of the furious variety. "Well, I think I'll just-"

"You got in under false pretenses," she said softly. "Gee, a nice looking fella like you. I should think you could get plenty of girls."

"Well, I-"

"Sit down," Curlene said gently. "Want a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks, I never tr-I don't care for . . . I mean, I'd better go."

"Do you smoke?" She offered a box from the coffee table.

He raised his arms and looked down at himself with a startled expression. Curlene laughed.

"Oh, sit down and tell me all about it."

The large young man swallowed.

"You're not a student, Mr. . . . ?" Curlene urged.

"No-not exactly." He sat gingerly on the edge of a Danish chair. "Of course, one is always learning."

"I mean, did you ever think about going up to a coed and just asking her for a date?"

"Well, not exactly-"

"She'd probably jump at the chance. It's just that you're too shy, Mr?"

"Well, I suppose I am rather retiring, Ma'am. But after all-"

"It's this crazy culture we live in. It puts some awful pressures on people. And all so needlessly. I mean, what could be more natural-"

"Ah-when are you expecting Professor Dimpleby?" the young man cut in. He was blushing from neat white collar to widow's peak now.

"Oh, I'm embarrassing you. Sorry. I think I will get some coffee. Johnny's due back any time."

The coffee maker was plugged in and snorting gently to itself. Curlene hummed as she poured two cups, put them on a Japanese silver tray with creamer and sugar bowl. The young man jumped up as she came in.

"Oh, keep your seat." She put the tray on the ankle-high coffee table.

"Cream and sugar?" She leaned to put his cup before him.

"Yes, with strawberries," the young man murmured. He seemed to be looking at her chin. "Or possibly rosebuds. Pink ones."

"They are nice, aren't they?" a booming male voice called from the arched entry to the hall. A tall man with tousled gray hair and a ruddy face was pulling off a scarf.

"Johnny, hi; home already?" Curlene smiled at her husband.

"The robe, Curl," Professor Dimpleby said. He gave the young man an apologetic grin. "Curl was raised in Samoa; her folks were missionaries, you know. She never quite grasped the concept that the female bosom is a secret."

Curlene tucked the robe up around her neck. "Golly," she said. "I'm sorry if I offended, Mr?"

"On the contrary," the young man said, rising and giving his host a slight bow. "Professor Dimpleby, my name is, er, Lucifer."

Dimpleby put out his hand. "Lucifer, hey? Nothing wrong with that. Means 'Light-bearer.' But it's not a name you run into very often. It takes some gumption to flaunt the old taboos."

"Mr. Lucifer came to fix the lights," Curlene said.

"Ah-not really," the young man said quickly. "Actually, I came to, er, ask for help, Professor. Your help."

"Oh, really?" Dimpleby seated himself and stirred sugar into Curlene's cup and took a noisy sip. "Well, how can I be of service?"

"But first, before I impose on you any further, I need to be sure you understand that I really am Lucifer. I mean I don't want to get by on false pretenses." He looked at Curlene anxiously. "I would have told you I wasn't really an electrician, er, Mrs.-"

"Just call me Curl. Sure you would have."

"If you say your name's Lucifer, why should I doubt it?" Dimpleby asked with a smile.

"Well, the point is-I'm the Lucifer. You know. The, er, the Devil."

Dimpleby raised his eyebrows. Curlene made a sound of distressed sympathy.

"Of course the latter designation has all sorts of negative connotations," Lucifer hurried on. "But I assure you that most of what you've heard is grossly exaggerated. That is to say, I'm not really as bad as all that. I mean, there are different kinds of, er, badness. There's the real evil, and then there's sin. I'm, ah, associated with sin."

"The distinction seems a subtle one, Mr., ah, Lucifer-"

"Not really, Professor. We all sense instinctively what true evil is. Sin is merely statutory evil-things that are regarded as wrong simply because there's a rule against them. Like, ah, smoking cigarettes and drinking liquor and going to movies on Sunday, or wearing lipstick and silk hose, or eating pork, or swatting flies-depending on which set of rules you're going by. They're corollaries to ritual virtues such as lighting candles or spinning prayer wheels or wearing out-of-date styles."

Dimpleby leaned back and steepled his fingers. "Hmmm. Whereas genuine evil . . . ?"

"Murder, violence, lying, cheating, theft," Lucifer enumerated. "Sin, on the other hand, essentially includes anything that looks like it might be fun."

"Come to think of it, I've never heard anything in praise of fun from the anti-sin people," Curl said thoughtfully.

"Nor from any ecclesiastic with a good head for fund-raising," Dimpleby conceded.

"It's all due to human laziness, I'm afraid," Lucifer said sadly. "It seems so much easier and more convenient to observe a few ritual prohibitions than to actually give up normal business practices."

"Hey," Curlene said. "Let's not wander off into one of those academic

discussions. What about you being," she smiled, "the Devil?"

"It's quite true."

"Prove it," Curlene said promptly.

"What? I mean, er, how?" Lucifer inquired.

"Do something. You know, summon up a demon; or transform pebbles into jewels; or give me three wishes; or-"

"Gosh, Mrs. Dimpleby-"

"Curl."

"Curl. You've got some erroneous preconceptions-"

"When they start using four-syllable words, I always know they're stalling," Curl said blandly.

Lucifer swallowed. "This isn't a good idea," he said. "Suppose somebody walked in?"

"They won't."

"Now, Curl, you're embarrassing our guest again," Dimpleby said mildly.

"No, it's all right, Professor," Lucifer said worriedly. "She's quite right. After all, I'm supposed to be a sort of, ahem, mythic figure. Why should she believe in me without proof?"

"Especially when you blush so easily," Curl said.

"Well . . ." Lucifer looked around the room. His eye fell on the aquarium tank which occupied several square feet of wall space under a bookcase. He nodded almost imperceptibly. Something flickered at the bottom of the tank. Curl jumped up and went over. Lucifer followed.

"The gravel," she gasped. "It looks different!"

"Diamond, ruby, emerald, and macaroni," Lucifer said. "Sorry about the macaroni. I'm out of practice."

"Do something else!" Curl smiled in eager expectation.

Lucifer frowned in concentration. He snapped his fingers and with a soft plop! a small, dark purple, bulbous-bellied, wrinkle-skinned creature appeared in the center of the rug. He was some forty inches in height, totally naked, extravagantly male, with immense feet.

"Hey, for crying out loud, you could give a guy a little warning! I'm just getting ready to climb in the tub, yet!" the small being's bulging red eye fell on Lucifer. He grinned, showing a large crescent of teeth. "Oh, it's you, Nick! Howza boy? Long time no see. Anything I can do for ya?"

"Oops, sorry, Freddy." Lucifer snapped his fingers and the imp disappeared with a sharp plopp!

"So that's a demon," Curl said. "How come his name is Freddy?"

"My apologies, Curl. He's usually most tastefully clad. Freddy is short for something longer."

"Know any more?"

"Er . . . " He pointed at Curl and made a quick flick of the wrist. In her place stood a tall, wide, huge-eyed coal-black woman in swirls of coarse, unevenly dyed cloth under which bare feet showed. Cheap-looking jewelry hung thick on her wrists, draped her vast bosom, winked on her tapered fingers and in her ears.

Lucifer flicked his fingers again, and a slim, olive-skinned girl with blue-black hair and a hooked nose replaced the buxom Sheban queen. She wore a skirt apparently made from an old gauze curtain and an ornate off-the-bosom vest of colored beads. A golden snake encircled her forehead.

Lucifer motioned again. The Egyptian empress dissolved into a nebulous cloud of pastel-colored gas in which clotted star-dust winked and writhed, to the accompaniment of massed voices humming nostalgic chords amid an odor of magnolia blossoms. Another gesture, and Curl stood again before them, looking slightly dazed.

"Hey, what was that last one?" she cried.

"Sorry, that was Scarlett O'Hara. I forgot she was a figment of the imagination. Those are always a little insubstantial."

"Remarkable," Dimpleby said. "I'll have to concede that you can either perform miracles or accomplish the same result by some other means."

"Gee, I guess you're genuine, all right," Curlene exclaimed. "But somehow I expected a much older man."

"I'm not actually a man, strictly speaking, Ma'am-Curl. And agewise, well, since I'm immortal, why should I look middle-aged rather than just mature?"

"Tell me," Curlene said seriously. "I've always wondered: what do you want people's souls for?"

"Frankly, Ma'am-Curl, that is-I haven't the remotest interest in anyone's soul."

"Really?"

"Really and truly; cross my heart. That's just another of those rumors they started."

"Are you sure you're really the Devil and not someone else with the same name?"

Lucifer spread his hands appealingly. "You saw Freddy. And those are noodles in the fish tank."

"But-no horns, no hooves, no tail-"

Lucifer sighed. "That idea comes from confusing me with Pan. Since he was a jolly sort of sex-god, naturally he was equated with sin."

"I've always wondered," Curlene said, "just what you did to get evicted from Heaven."

"Please," Lucifer said. "It . . . all dates back to an incident when I was still an angel." He held up a forestalling hand as Curl opened her mouth. "No, I didn't have wings. Humans added those when they saw us levitating, on the theory that anything that flies must have wings. If we were to appear today, they'd probably give us jets."

"Assuming you are, er, what you claim to be," Dimpleby said, "what's this about your needing help?"

"I do," Lucifer said. "Desperately. Frankly, I'm up against something I simply can't handle alone."

"I can't imagine what I could do, if you, with your, ah, special talents are helpless," Dimpleby said perplexedly.

"This is something totally unprecedented. It's a threat on a scale I can't begin to describe.

"Well, try," Curl urged.

"Stated in its simplest terms," Lucifer said, "the, ah, plane of existence I usually occupy-"

"Hell, you mean," Curl supplied.

"Well, that's another of those loaded terms. It really isn't a bad place at all, you know-"

"But what about it?" Dimpleby prompted. "What about Hell?"

"It's about to be invaded," Lucifer said solemnly. "By alien demons from another world."

2

It was an hour later. Lucifer, Curlene, and Professor Dimpleby were comfortably ensconced behind large pewter mugs of musty ale at a corner table in the Sam Johnson Room at the Faculty Club.

"Well, now," Dimpleby said affably, raising his tankard in salute, "alien demons, eh? An interesting concept, Mr. Lucifer. Tell us more."

"I've never believed in devils," Curlene said, "or monsters from another planet either. Now all of a sudden I'm supposed to believe in both at once. If it weren't for that Freddy . . ."

"Granted the basic premise, it's logical enough," Dimpleby said. "If earthly imps exist, why not space sprites?"

"Professor, this is more than a bunch of syllogisms," Lucifer said earnestly. "These fellows mean business. They have some extremely potent powers. Fortunately, I have powers they don't know about, too; that's the only way I've held them in check so far-"

"You mean-they're already here?" Curlene looked searchingly about the room.

"No-I mean, yes, they're here, but not precisely here." Lucifer clarified. "Look, I'd better fill in a little background for you. You see, Hell is actually a superior plane of existence-"

Curlene choked on her ale in a ladylike way.

"I mean-not superior, but, ah, at another level, you understand. Different physical laws, and so on-"

"Dirac levels," Dimpleby said, signaling for refills.

"Right!" Lucifer nodded eagerly. "There's an entire continuum of them, stretching away on both sides; there's an energy state higher on the scale than Hell-Heaven, it's called, for some reason-and one lower than your plane; that's the one Freddy comes from, by the way-"

"Oh, tell me about Heaven," Curlene urged.

Lucifer sighed, "Sometimes I miss the old place, in spite of . . . but never mind that."

"Tell me, Mr. Lucifer," Dimpleby said thoughtfully, "how is it you're able to travel at will among these levels?" As he spoke he pulled an envelope from his pocket and uncapped a ballpoint. "It appears to me that there's an insurmountable difficulty here, in terms of atomic and molecular spectral energy distribution; the specific heat involved . . ." he jotted busily, murmuring to himself.

"You're absolutely right, Professor," Lucifer said, sampling the fresh tankard just placed before him. "Heat used to be a real problem. I'd always arrive in a cloud of smoke and sulphur fumes. I finally solved it by working out a trick of emitting a packet of magnetic energy to carry off the excess."

"Hmmm. How did you go about dissipating this magnetism?"

"I fired it off in a tight beam; got rid of it."

"Beamed magnetism?" Dimpleby scribbled furiously. "Hmmm. Possibly . . ."

"Hey, fellas," Curlene protested. "Let's not talk shop, OK?" She turned a fascinated gaze on Lucifer. "You were just telling me about Heaven."

"You wouldn't like it, Curl," he said, almost curtly. "Now, Professor, all through history-at least as far as I remember it, and that covers a considerable period-the different energy states were completely separate and self-sufficient. Then, a few thousand years back, one of our boys-Yahway, his name is-got to poking around and discovered a way to move around from one level to another. The first place he discovered was

Hell. Well, he's something of a bluenose, frankly, and he didn't much like what he found there: all kinds of dead warriors from Greece and Norway and such places sitting around juicing it and singing it, and fighting in a friendly sort of way."

"You mean-Valhalla really exists?" Curlene gasped. "And the Elysian Fields?"

Lucifer made a disclaiming wave of the hand. "There've always been humans with more than their share of vital energy. Instead of dying, they just switch levels. I have a private theory that there's a certain percentage of, er, individuals in any level who really belong in the next one up-or down. Anyway, Yahway didn't like what he saw. He was always a great one for discipline, getting up early, regular calisthenics-you know. He tried telling these fellows the error of their ways, but they just laughed him off the podium. So he dropped down one more level, which put him here; a much simpler proposition, nothing but a few tribesmen herding goats. Naturally they were impressed by a few simple miracles." Lucifer paused to quaff deeply. He sighed.

"Yes. Well, he's been meddling around down here ever since, and frankly-but I'm wandering." He hiccuped sternly. "I admit, I never could drink very much without losing my perspective. Where was I?"

"The invasion," Dimpleby reminded him.

"Oh, yes. Well, they hit us without any warning. There we were, just sitting around the mead hall taking it easy, or strolling in the gardens striking our lutes or whatever we felt like, when all of a sudden-" Lucifer shook his head bemusedly. "Professor, did you ever have one of those days when nothing seemed to go right?"

Dimpleby pursed his lips. "Hmmm. You mean like having the first flat tire in a year during the worst rainstorm of the year while on your way to the most important meeting of the year?"

"Or," Curlene said, "like when you're just having a quick martini to brace yourself for the afternoon and you spill it on your new dress and when you try to wash it out, the water's turned off, and when you try to phone to report that, the phone's out, and just then Mrs. Trundle from next door drops in to talk, only you're late for the Faculty Wives?"

"That's it," Lucifer confirmed. "Well, picture that sort of thing on a vast scale."

"That's rather depressing," Dimpleby said. "But what has it to do with the, er, invasion?"

"Everything!" Lucifer said, with a wave of his hands. Across the room, a well-fleshed matron yelped.

"My olive! It turned into a frog!"

"Remarkable," her table companion said. "Genus *Rana pipiens*, I believe!"

"Sorry," Lucifer muttered, blushing, putting his hands under the table.

"You were saying, Mr. Lucifer?"

"It's them, Professor. They've been sort of leaking over, you see? Their influence, I mean." Lucifer started to wave his hands again, but caught himself and put them in his blazer pockets.

"Leaking over?"

"From Hell into his plane. You've been getting just a faint taste of it. You should see what's been going on in Hell, Proffefor-I mean Proffessor-I mean-"

"What has been going on?"

"Everything has been going to Hell," Lucifer said gloomily. "What I mean to say is," he said, making an effort to straighten up and focus properly, "that everything that can go wrong, does go wrong."

"That would appear to be contrary to the statistics of causality," Dimpleby said carefully.

"That's it, Professor! They're upsetting the laws of chance! Now, in the old days, when a pair of our lads stepped outside for a little hearty sword-fighting between drinks, one would be a little drunker than the other, and he'd soon be out of it for the day, while the other chap reeled back inside to continue the party. Now, they each accidentally knee each other in the groin and they both lie around groaning until sundown, which upsets everybody. The same for the lute players and lovers: the strings break just at the most climactic passage, or they accidentally pick a patch of poison ivy for their tryst, or possibly just a touch of diarrhea at the wrong moment, but you can imagine what it's doing to morale."

"Tsk," Dimpleby said. "Unfortunate-but it sounds more disconcerting than disastrous, candidly."

"You think so, Professor? What about when all the ambrosia on hand goes bad simultaneously, and the entire population is afflicted with stomach cramps and luminous spots before the eyes? What about a mix-up at the ferry, that leaves us stuck with three boat-loads of graduated Methodist ministers to entertain overnight? What about an ectospheric storm that knocks out all psionics for a week, and has everyone fetching and carrying by hand, and communicating by sign-language?"

"Well-that might be somewhat more serious . . . "

"Oh-oh!" Curlene was pointing with her nose. Her husband turned to see a waiter in weskit and knee-pants back through a swinging door balancing a tray laden with brimming port glasses, at the same moment that a tweedsy pedagogue rose directly behind him and, with a gallant gesture, drew out his fair companion's chair. There was a double oof! as they came together. The chair skidded. The lady sat on the floor. The tray distributed its burden in a bright cascade across the furs of a willowy brunette who yowled, whirled, causing her fox-tail to slap the face of a small, elaborately mustached man who was on the point of lighting a cigar. As the match flared brightly, with a sharp odor of blazing wool, the tweedsy man bent

swiftly to offer a chivalrous hand, and bumped by the rebounding waiter, delivered a smart rap with his nose to the corner of the table.

"My mustache!" the small man yelled.

"Dr. Thorndyke, you're bleeding on my navy blue crepe!" the lady on the floor yelled. The waiter, still grabbing for the tray, bobbed it and sent it scaling through an olde English window, through which an indignant managerial head thrust in time to receive a glass of water intended for the burning mustache.

Lucifer, who had been staring dazedly at the rapid interplay, made a swift flick of the fingers. A second glass of water struck the small man squarely in the conflagration; the tweedsy man clapped a napkin over his nose and helped up the Navy blue crepe. The waiter recovered his tray and busied himself with the broken glass. The brunette whipped out a hanky and dabbed at her bodice, muttering. The tension subsided from the air.

"You see?" Lucifer said. "That was a small sample of their work."

"Nonsense, Mr. Lucifer," Dimpleby said, smiling amiably. "Nothing more than an accident-a curiously complex interplay of misadventures, true, but still-an accident, nothing more."

"Of course-but that sort of accident can only occur when there's an imbalance in the Randomness Field!"

"What's that?"

"It's what makes the laws of chance work. You know that if you flip a quarter a hundred times it will come up heads fifty times and tails fifty times, or very close to it. In a thousand tries, the ratio is even closer. Now, the coin knows nothing of its past performance-any more than metal filings in a magnetic field know which way the other filings are facing. But the field forces them to align parallel-and the Randomness Field forces the coin to follow the statistical distribution."

Dimpleby pulled at his chin. "In other words, entropy."

"If you prefer, Professor. But you've seen what happens when it's tampered with!"

"Why?" Dimpleby stabbed a finger at Lucifer and grinned as one who has scored a point. "Show me a motive for these hypothetical foreign fiends going to all that trouble just to meddle in human affairs!"

"They don't care a rap for human affairs," Lucifer groaned. "It's just a side-effect. They consume energy from certain portions of the trans-Einsteinian spectrum, emit energy in other bands. The result is to disturb the R-field-just as sunspots disrupt the earth's magnetic field!"

"Foey," Dimpleby said, sampling his ale. "Accidents have been happening since the dawn of time. And according to your own account, these interplanetary imps of yours have just arrived."

"Time scales differ between Hell and here," Lucifer said in tones of

desperation. "The infiltration started two weeks ago, subjective Hell-time. That's equal to a little under two hundred years, local."

"What about all the coincidences before then?" Dimpleby came back swiftly.

"Certainly, there have always been a certain number of non-random occurrences. But in the last two centuries they've jumped to an unheard-of level! Think of all the fantastic scientific coincidences, during that period, for example-such as the triple rediscovery of Mendel's work after thirty-five years of obscurity, or the simultaneous evolutionary theories of Darwin and Wallace, or the identical astronomical discoveries of-

"Very well, I'll concede there've been some remarkable parallelisms." Dimpleby dismissed the argument with a wave of the hand. "But that hardly proves-

"Professor-maybe that isn't what you'd call hard scientific proof, but logic-instinct-should tell you that Something's Been Happening! Certainly, there were isolated incidents in Ancient History-but did you ever hear of the equivalent of a twenty-car pile-up in Classical times? The very conception of slapstick comedy based on ludicrous accident was alien to the world until it began happening in real life!"

"I say again-foeey, Mr. Lucifer." Dimpleby drew on his ale, burped gently and leaned forward challengingly. "I'm from New Hampshire," he said, wagging a finger. "You've gotta show me."

"Fortunately for humanity, that's quite impossible," Lucifer said. "They haven't penetrated to this level yet; all you've gotten, as I said, is the spill-over effect-" he paused. "Unless you'd like to go to Hell and see for yourself-

"No thanks. A faculty tea is close enough for me."

"In that case . . ." Lucifer broke off. His face paled. "Oh, no," he whispered.

"Lucifer-what is it?" Curlene whispered in alarm.

"They-they must have followed me! It never occurred to me; but-" Lucifer groaned, "Professor and Mrs. Dimpleby, I've done a terrible thing! I've led them here!"

"Where?" Curlene stared around the room eagerly.

Lucifer's eyes were fixed on the corner by the fire. He made a swift gesture with the fingers of his left hand. Curlene gasped.

"Why-it looks just like a big stalk of broccoli-except for the eyes, of course-and the little one is a dead ringer for a rhubarb pie!"

"Hmmm," Dimpleby blinked. "Quite astonishing, really." He cast a sidelong glance at Lucifer. "Look here, old man, are you sure this isn't some sort of hypnotic effect?"

"If it is, it has the same effect as reality, Professor," the Devil whispered

hoarsely. "And something has to be done about it, no matter what you call it."

"Yes, I suppose so-but why, if I may inquire, all this interest on your part in us petty mortals?" Dimpleby smiled knowledgeably. "Ah, I'll bet this is where the pitch for our souls comes in; you'll insure an end to bad luck and negative coincidences, in return for a couple of signatures written in blood . . ."

"Professor, please," Lucifer said, blushing. "You have the wrong idea completely."

"I just don't understand," Curlene sighed, gazing at Lucifer, "why such a nice fellow was kicked out of Heaven . . ."

"But why come to me?" Dimpleby said, eyeing Lucifer through the sudsy glass bottom of his ale mug. "I don't know any spells for exorcising demons."

"Professor, I'm out of my depth," Lucifer said earnestly. "The old reliable eye of newt and wart of toad recipes don't faze these alien imps for a moment. Now, I admit, I haven't kept in touch with new developments in science as I should have. But you have, Professor: you're one of the world's foremost authorities on wave mechanics and Planck's law, and all that sort of thing. If anybody can deal with these chaps, you can!"

"Why, Johnny, how exciting!" Curlene said. "I didn't know matrix mechanics had anything to do with broccoli!" She took a pleased gulp of ale, smiling from Lucifer to her husband.

"I didn't either, my dear," Dimpleby said in a puzzled tone. "Look here, Lucifer, are you sure you don't have me confused with Professor Pronko, over in Liberal Arts? Now, his papers on abnormal psychology-

"Professor, there's been no mistake! Who else but an expert in quantum theory could deal with a situation like this?"

"Well, I suppose there is a certain superficial semantic parallelism-

"Wonderful, Professor: I knew you'd do it!" Lucifer grabbed Dimpleby's hand and wrung it warmly. "How do we begin?"

"Here, you're talking nonsense!" Dimpleby extracted his hand, used it to lift his ale tankard once again. "Of course," he said after taking a hearty pull, "if you're right about the nature of these varying energy levels-and these, er, entities do manage the jump from one quantum state to the next-then I suppose they'd be subject to the same sort of physical laws as any other energetic particles . . ." He thumped the mug down heavily on the tabletop and resumed jotting. "The Compton effect," he muttered. "Raman's work . . . The Stern-Gerlack experiment. Hmmm."

"You've got something?" Lucifer and Curlene said simultaneously.

"Just a theoretical notion," he said off-handedly, and waved airily to a passing waiter. "Three more, Chudley."

"Johnny," Curlene wailed. "Don't stop now!"

"Professor-time is of the essence!" Lucifer groaned.

"Say, the broccoli is stirring around," Curlene said in a low tone. "Is he planning another practical joke?"

Lucifer cast apprehensive eyes toward the fireplace. "He doesn't actually do it intentionally, you know. He can't help it; it's like, well, a blind man switching on the lights in a darkroom. He wouldn't understand what all the excitement was about."

"Excuse me," Dimpleby said. "Ale goes through me pretty rapidly." He rose, slightly jogging the elbow of the waiter pouring ice water into a glass at the next table. The chill stream dived precisely into the cleavage of a plump woman in a hat like a chef's salad for twelve. She screamed and fell backward into the path of the servitor approaching with a tray of foaming ale tankards. All three malt beverages leaped head-first onto the table, their contents sluicing across it into Lucifer's lap, while the overspill distributed itself between Dimpleby's hip pockets.

He stared down at the table awash in ale, turned a hard gaze on the fireplace.

"Like that, eh?" he said in a brittle voice. He faced the Devil, who was dabbing helplessly at his formerly white flannels.

"All right, Lucifer," he said. "You're on! A few laughs at the expense of academic dignity are fine-but I'm damned if I'm going to stand by and see good beer wasted! Now, let's get down to cases. Tell me all you know about these out-of-town incubi . . . "

3

It was almost dawn. In his third floor laboratory in Prudfrock Hall, Professor Dimpleby straightened from the marble-topped bench over which he had been bent for the better part of the night.

"Well," he said, rubbing his eyes, "I don't know. It might work." He glanced about the big room. "Now, if you'll just shoo one of your, ah, extra-terrestrial essences in here, we'll see."

"No problem there, Professor," Lucifer said anxiously. "I've had all I could do to hold them at bay all night, with some of the most potent incantations since Solomon sealed the Afrit up in a bottle."

"Then, too, I don't suppose they'd find the atmosphere of a scientific laboratory very congenial," Dimpleby said with a somewhat lofty smile, "inasmuch as considerable effort has been devoted to excluding chance from the premises."

"You think so?" Lucifer said glumly. "For your own peace of mind, I suggest you don't conduct any statistical analyses just now."

"Well, with the clear light of morning and the dissipation of the alcohol, the rationality of what we're doing seems increasingly questionable-but

nonetheless, we may as well carry the experiment through. Even negative evidence has a certain value."

"Ready?" Lucifer said.

"Ready," Dimpleby said, suppressing a yawn. Lucifer made a face and executed an intricate dance step. There was a sharp sense of tension released-like the popping of an invisible soap-bubble-and something appeared drifting lazily in the air near the precision scales. One side of the instrument dropped with a sharp clunk!

"All the air concentrated on one side of the balance," Lucifer said tensely.

"Maxwell's demon-in the flesh?" Dimpleby gasped.

"It looks like a giant pizza," Curlene said, "only transparent."

The apparition gave a flirt of its rim and sailed across to hover before a wall chart illustrating the periodic table. The paper burst into flame.

"All the energetic air molecules rushed to one spot," Lucifer explained. "It could happen any time-but it seldom does."

"Good lord! What if it should cause all the air to rush to one end of the room?" Dimpleby whispered.

"I daresay it would rupture your lungs, Professor. So I wouldn't waste any more time, if I were you."

"Imagine what must be going on outside," Curlene said. "With these magical pizzas and broccoli wandering loose all over the place!"

"Is that what all those sirens were about?" Dimpleby said. He stationed himself beside the bread-board apparatus he had constructed and swallowed hard.

"Very well, Lucifer-see if you can herd it over this way."

The devil frowned in concentration. The pizza drifted slowly, rotating as if looking for the source of some irritation. It gave an impatient twitch and headed toward Curlene. Lucifer made a gesture and it veered off, came sailing in across the table.

"Now!" Dimpleby said, and threw a switch. As if struck by a falling brick, the alien entity slammed to the center of the three-foot disk encircled by massive magnetic coils.

It hopped and threshed, to no avail.

"The field is holding it!" Dimpleby said tensely. "So far . . . "

Suddenly the rippling, disk-shaped creature folded in on itself, stood on end, sprouted wings and a tail. Scales glittered along its sides. A puff of smoke issued from tiny crocodilian jaws, followed by a tongue of flame.

"A dragon!" Curlene cried.

"Hold him, Professor!" Lucifer urged.

The dragon coiled its tail around itself and melted into a lumpy black sphere covered with long bristles. It had two bright red eyes and a pair of spindly legs on which it jittered wildly.

"A goblin?" Dimpleby said incredulously.

The goblin rebounded from the invisible wall restraining it, coalesced into a foot-high, leathery-skinned humanoid with big ears, a wide mouth, and long arms which it wrapped around its knees as it squatted disconsolately on the grid, rolling bloodshot eyes sorrowfully up at its audience.

"Congratulations, Professor!" Lucifer exclaimed. "We got one!"

4

"His name," Lucifer said, "is Quilchik. It's really quite a heart-rending tale he tells, poor chap."

"Oh, the poor little guy," Curlene said. "What does he eat, Mr. Lucifer? Do you suppose he'd like a little lettuce or something?"

"His diet is quite immaterial, Curl; he subsists entirely on energies. And that seems to be at the root of the problem. It appears there's a famine back home. What with a rising birth rate and no death rate, population pressure long ago drove his people out into space. They've been wandering around out there for epochs, with just the occasional hydrogen molecule to generate a quantum or two of entropy to absorb; hardly enough to keep them going."

"Hmm. I suppose entropy could be considered a property of matter," Dimpleby said thoughtfully, reaching for paper and pencil. "One can hardly visualize a distinction between order and disorder as existing in matterless space."

"Quite right. The curious distribution of heavy elements in planetary crusts and the unlikely advent of life seem to be the results of their upsetting of the Randomness Field, to say nothing of evolution, biological mutations, the extinction of the dinosaurs just in time for Man to thrive, and women's styles."

"Women's styles?" Curlene frowned.

"Of course," Dimpleby nodded. "What could be more unlikely than this year's Paris modes?"

Lucifer shook his head, a worried expression on his regular features. "I had in mind trapping them at the entry point and sending them back where they came from; but under the circumstances that seems quite inhumane."

"Still-we can't let them come swarming in to upset everything from the rhythm method to the Irish Sweepstakes."

"Golly," Curlene said, "couldn't we put them on a reservation, sort of, and have them weave blankets maybe?"

"Hold it," Lucifer said. "There's another one nearby . . . I can feel the tension in the R field . . . "

"Eek!" Curlene said, taking a step backward and hooking a heel in the extension cord powering the magnetic fields. With a sharp pop! the plug was jerked from the wall. Quilchik jumped to his large, flat feet, took a swift look around, and leaped, changing in mid-air to the fluttering form of a small bat.

Lucifer threw off his coat, ripped off his tie and shirt. Before the startled gaze of the Dimplebys, he rippled and flowed into the form of a pterodactyl which leaped clear of the collapsing white flannels and into the air, long beak agape, in hot pursuit of the bat. Curlene screeched and squeezed her eyes shut. Dimpleby said, "Remarkable!" grabbed his pad and scribbled rapidly. The bat flickered in mid-air and was a winged snake. Lucifer turned instantly into a winged mongoose. The snake dropped to the floor and shrank to mouse form scuttling for a hole. Lucifer became a big gray cat, reached the hole first. The mouse burgeoned into a bristly rat; the cat swelled and was a terrier. With a yap, it leaped after the rat, which turned back into Quilchik, sprang up on a table, raced across it, dived for what looked like an empty picture frame-

A shower of tiny Quilchiks shot from the other side of the heavy glass sheet. Lucifer barely skidded aside in time to avoid it, went dashing around the room, barking furiously at the tiny creatures crouched behind every chair and table leg, squeezing in behind filing cabinets, cowering under ashtrays.

"Lucifer, stop!" Curlene squealed. "Oh, aren't they darling!" She went to her knees, scooped up an inch-high manikin. It squatted on her palm, trembling, its head between its knees.

"By Jimini," Dimpleby said. "It went through a diffraction grating, and came out centuplets!"

5

"The situation is deteriorating," Lucifer groaned, scooping up another miniature imp, and dumping it back inside the reactivated trap. "It was bad enough dealing with one star-sprite. Now we have a hundred. And if any one of them escapes . . . "

"Don't look now," Dimpleby said behind his hand to the Devil, now back in human form and properly clad, "but I have an unch-hay the magnetic ield-fay won't old-hay em-they."

"Eye-way ott-nay?" Lucifer inquired.

"Ecause-bay . . . " Dimpleby broke off. "Well, it has to do with distribution of polarity. You see the way the field works-

"Don't bother explaining," Lucifer said. "I wouldn't understand anyway. The real question is-what do we do now?"

"Our choice seems limited. We either gather up all these little fellows and dump them back where they came from, and then hunt down the others and

do likewise, which is impossible, or we forget the whole thing, which is unthinkable."

"In any event," Lucifer said, "we have to act fast before the situation gets entirely out of hand."

"We could turn the problem over to the so-called authorities," Dimpleby said, "but that seems unwise, somehow."

Lucifer shuddered. "I can see the headlines now: devil loose on college campus!"

"Oh, they've already worked that one to death," Curlene said. "It would probably be more like: prof and mate in three way sex romp."

"Sex romp?"

"Well, Mr. Lucifer did reappear in the nude." Curlene smiled. "And a very nice physique, too, Mr. Lucifer."

Lucifer blushed. "Well, Professor, what do we do?" he asked hastily.

"I'll flip a coin," Curlene suggested. "heads, we report the whole thing, tails, we keep it to ourselves and do the best we can."

"All right. Best two out of three."

Curlene rummaged in her purse and produced one of the counterfeit quarters in current production from the Denver mint. She tossed it up, caught it, slapped it against her forearm, lifted her hand.

"Tails," she said in a pleased tone.

"Maybe we'd better report it anyway," Dimpleby said, nibbling a fingernail and eyeing the tiny creatures sitting disconsolately inside the circle of magnets.

"Two out of three," Curlene said. She flipped the coin again.

"Tails again," she announced.

"Well, I suppose that settles it . . . "

Curlene tossed the coin up idly. "I guess it's definite," she said. "Tails three times in a row."

Dimpleby looked at her absently. "Eh?"

"Four times in a row," Curlene said. Lucifer looked at her as if about to speak. Curlene flipped the coin high.

"Five," she said. Dimpleby and Lucifer drew closer.

"Six . . . "

"Seven . . . "

"Eight . . . "

"Oh-oh," Dimpleby said. He grabbed for the desk drawer, pulled out a dog-eared deck of cards, hastily shuffled and dealt two hands. Cautiously, he peeked at his cards. He groaned.

"Four aces," he said.

"Four kings here," Curlene said.

"Here we go again," he said. "Now no one will be safe!"

"But Johnny," Curlene said. "There's one difference . . . "

"What?"

"The odds are all mixed up, true-but now they're in our favor!"

6

"It's quite simple, really," Dimpleby said, waving a sheet of calculations. "When Quilchik went through the grating, he was broken up into a set of harmonics. Those harmonics, being of another order of size, resonate at another frequency. Ergo, he consumes a different type of energetic pseudo-particle. Instead of draining off the positive, ah, R-charges, he now subsists on negative entropy."

"And instead of practical jokes, we have miraculous cures, spontaneous remissions, and fantastic runs with the cards!" Curlene cried happily.

"Not only that," Dimpleby added, "but I think we can solve their food-supply problem. They've exhausted the supply of plus entropy back on their own level-but the original endowment of minus R remains untapped. There should be enough for another few billion years."

Lucifer explained this to the Quilchiks via the same form of instantaneous telepathy he had employed for the earlier interrogation.

"He's delighted," the Devil reported, as the tiny creatures leaped up, joined hands, and began capering and jigging in a manner expressive of joy. "There's just one thing . . . " A lone manikin stood at the edge of the table, looking shyly at Curlene.

"Quilchik Seventy-eight has a request," Lucifer said.

"Well, what does snookums-ookums want?" Curlene cooed, bending over to purse her lips at the tiny figure.

"He wants to stay," Lucifer said embarrassedly.

"Oh, Johnny, can I have him?"

"Well-if you'll put some pants on him-"

"And he'd like to live in a bottle. Preferably a bourbon bottle, one of the miniatures. Preferably still full of bourbon," Lucifer added. "But he'll come out to play whenever you like."

"I wonder," Dimpleby said thoughtfully, "what effect having him around

would have on our regular Saturday night card game with those sharpies from the engineering faculty?"

"You've already seen a sample," Lucifer said. "But I can ask him to fast at such times."

"Oh, no, no," Dimpleby protested. "Hate to see the little fellow go hungry."

"Mr. Lucifer," Curlene asked. "I hope I'm not being nosy-but how did you get the scar on your side that I saw when you had your shirt off?"

"Oh, ah, that?" Lucifer blushed purple. "Well, it, ah-"

"Probably a liver operation, judging from the location, eh, Lucifer?" Dimpleby said.

"You might call it that," Lucifer said.

"But you shouldn't embarrass people by asking personal questions, Curl," Dimpleby said sternly.

"Yes, dear," Curl said. "Lucifer-I've been wanting to ask you: What did a nice fellow like you do to get kicked out of Heaven?"

"Well, I, uh," Lucifer swallowed.

"It was for doing something nice, wasn't it?"

"Well-frankly, I thought it wasn't fair," Lucifer blurted. "I felt sorry for the poor humans, squatting in those damp caves . . . "

"So you brought them fire," Curlene said. "That's why you're called Lucifer."

"You're mixed up, Curl," Dimpleby said. "That was Prometheus. For his pains, he was chained to a rock, and every day a vulture tore out his liver, and every night it grew back . . . "

"But it left a scar," Curlene said, looking meltingly at Lucifer.

The Devil blushed a deep magenta. "I . . . I'd better be rushing off now," he said.

"Not before we share a stirrup cup," Dimpleby said, holding up the Old Crow bottle from the desk drawer. Inside, Quilchik, floating on his back with his hands folded on his paunch, waved merrily, and blew a string of bubbles.

"Luckily, I have a reserve stock," Dimpleby muttered, heading for the filing cabinet.

"Er, Lucifer, how can we ever thank you?" Curlene sighed, cradling the flask.

"Just by, uh, having all the fun you can," Lucifer said. "And I'll, er, be looking forward to seeing you in Hell, some day."

"I'll drink to that," Dimpleby said. He poured. Smiling, they clicked glasses and drank.