

The Devil's Debt

By James Platt

Somewhere about the Middle Ages—somewhere in a medieval town—there lived a man who walked always on the shady side of the way. None of his neighbours could have assigned a reason why he should only tread where the lapse of time leaves no trace on the dial, yet so it was. None had ever seen him in sunshine.

This man was known by the name of Porphyro, though we may reasonably doubt if it was given to him in baptism. For he belonged to a class that baptised toads by night at their Sabbaths in mockery of the baptism of babes by day. In a word, Porphyro was a wizard, and for one circumstance (which will presently be mentioned) was perhaps better known among his like than any practiser of the Black Art before or since.

There was, and likely enough still is, in Europe a University of the occult sciences, buried underground, carved out of the roots of mountains, far from the hum of men. Here taught weird professors—eerie, eldritch, elflocked. Here came weird students to tread the intoxicating winepress of magical study. Your true wizard is set apart from birth by some particularity which bespeaks his vocation. To the University came representatives of every class which felt this call. Here was the demoniac and the stigmatic, the abortion and the albino, the hermaphrodite and the changeling, the hag-ridden and the pixy-led, sleepwalker, Cesarean, Sunday-child, seventh son, and he that is born with the caul. This motley crew was of as many hues as there are ends of the earth. Many tongued as Mithridates, all wrote their notes by common consent in the *lingua angelorum*.

The University boasted a laboratory of at least a hundred paces in length and proportionately broad and high. A mock sun gave it cold light by day, and a mock moon by night. Here experiments in exorcism were conducted, of course under the strictest supervision of the principals. Here the students learned that the ghosts of dead men (having always some of the old Adam that was unpurged from them), are easier to call back to us than elemental spirits can be wrenched from their eternal spheres. The most trivial task (and therefore that of the junior classes), was to re-incarnate some suicide, set in four cross roads, whose soul still hovered like a noxious gas about the only body where it could hope to find toleration. The pupils were very properly forbidden to incur the danger of repeating these experiments in private. Nevertheless something of the kind went on under the nose. As a rule the novices (and these were after all the lucky ones), ignominiously failed in their attempts to storm the outworks of hell. They knew how to call spirits from the vasty deep, but the spirits refused to come when they did call them. One youth, however, boasted that he had raised the devil, or at any rate, a devil. He described him to his bosom friends as nearly as follows:

‘A great and full stature, soft and phlegmatic, of colour like a black obscure cloud, having a swollen countenance, with eyes red and full of water, a bald head, and teeth like a wild boar.’

One of the listeners, doubtless jealous, attempted to cheapen this success of his companion, by remarking that an exorcist, if worth his salt, should be able to make the spirit appear in what guise he chose.

‘Then, by the belt of Venus,’ swore a third, ‘I would command it to appear as a lovely girl, with longer hair and smaller feet than any on this top which the Almighty set spinning and dubbed earth.’

Another poor fellow appears to have been so inflamed with the suggestion of this rustler, that he tried to bring it into the sphere of practical politics. He was never seen alive again. Not answering to his name at the roll-call next morning, his bedroom was visited, and a thin trickle of blood found oozing under the door. One of the search party put a pistol to the lock and fired. The door flew open. A cry burst from all present, and some of the youngest, covering their faces with their hands, fled. The body of the devoted wretch who had played with unholy fire, was scattered parcel meal about the room. The lopped limbs were twisted round into spirals as if boneless. One of stronger stomach than the rest of the onlookers, and who examined them more closely, declared that the bone had melted and run out under some incredible heat. One of the teachers opined that if the demon had only breathed upon the bone, it would have been enough to fuse it. There were no more experiments in students' rooms.

Apart from such accidental deaths, the Academy paid a regular yearly rent of one living soul to hell, and woe unto teachers and taught had they lapsed into arrear one day. The victim who was to suffer, that the rest might live and learn, was selected in the following traditional manner. The whole of the pupils toed a line at one extreme end of the hall, and, at a given signal, raced to the opposite door. There was, as may be imagined, a terrible struggle to pass through the hangings. The last to cross the threshold was hugged to hell by the awaiting fiend. It was on such an occasion that Porphyro earned the unique distinction, alluded to above, of having successfully cozened the Prince of Darkness himself. Strain as he might, he was the last to touch the winning post. His competitors, who now breathed themselves in safety in the lobby, had given him up for lost. But no piercing shriek of dissolution stabbed the air, no fiendish laughter made horrible the echoes. Instead, voices were heard, until presently their comrade rejoined those who had already mourned him. Amid a scene of the wildest excitement, he was dragged into the light. Something unprecedented must obviously have occurred. His hair had turned snowy white. Those fell back who looked first into his eyes, for they saw in them reflected the face of hell himself. The tale which Porphyro told them was in substance this, that when he arrived last at the curtains, and already felt the breath of punishment upon his cheek, there occurred to him one loophole of escape. He turned desperately at bay, like hunted quarry, and roundly told the scrutineer that all he could claim by the letter of his bond was Porphyro's shadow. That was the last living thing which passed out of the lists; and not Porphyro, who proceeded it. Strange as it may seem, after a few heated words, the justice of this quibble was acknowledged by the father of all such juggleries. He bore off the shadow with a sort of smile, that was more terrible than men's frown, and lo and behold! when the schoolfellows, with one accord, looked down at the feet of him who had so miraculously escaped the infernal maw, they saw that Porphyro was, as he ever afterwards remained, shadowless. And now our readers can guess why our hero walked away on the shady side of the way.

Nothing had ever been known (even in circles like this) so successfully daring as this piece of evasion. Round and round the whole round globe, by means only known to wizards, the news sped very fast to all the wizard world. It was proclaimed at every Sabbath, from Blockula to the Brocken. The Lapland witch whispered it to the Finland witch, as they sat tying up wind after wind in knots for their seafaring customers. The Druids of Carnac knew it, and the Persian devil-worshippers. The Shamans of Siberia made a song of it and beat their magic drums thereto. The magicians of Egypt pictured it in their mirrors of ink. The African Obi men washed their great fetish in the blood of a thousand virgins, and sent it as a present over the desert sands, to Porphyro. Even the medicine men heard of it, in the heart of

an undiscovered continent, and emblazoned it upon the walls of their medicine lodge. Everyone foresaw a brilliant career for Porphyro. They fully expected him to disembowel hell. The reverse was what really happened. Instead of swinging himself at once to the top round of the ladder, he showed no disposition to trouble himself at all. He opened a private office in the town referred to at the beginning of our story, and carried on a private business in magic of the whitest kind. For him no monster evocations, with a million demons at his beck and call, like the Sicilian whom Benvenuto Cellini employed to conjure for him in the Coliseum. Porphyro refused in the most stiff-necked manner to exorcise on any terms for anyone. He confined himself solely to pettyfogging business, such as writing talismans, and reckoning magic squares, drawing horoscopes, and casting schemes of geomancy, poisoning rivals for lovers, or close-fisted relatives for spendthrift heirs. Need we state in black and white the reason (concealed from everyone else), why he held his hand from higher things? Oh, the humiliation of it! He was afraid! Yes, Porphyro was afraid, even he, who had plucked a hair from the devil's beard: for that very reason he was afraid. He had saved his soul alive, losing only a shadow of little moment to him, but in return, he had incurred the eternal enmity of one whose grudge had once shaken the high heavens. The general adversary of all mankind was first and beyond all things most ferociously Porphyro's adversary. Unhappy Porphyro, who had already given seisin to hell, Porphyro with one half of him already in the living devil's clutch, who never slept but he dreamed of the tortures his poor shadow suffered at the hands of those that lovingly work evil! Tortures, which were but foreshadowings of his own! No wonder Porphyro dared not invoke even the least of spirits. He knew too well that the mightiest of them would appear with no greater calling than a word.

But there was one antidote which wrestled with the nightshade in his cup, one star of the right colour appeared above his horizon. There was a woman in his town (one only for him), a princess and the ward of a king, an exquisite beauty. From the first time he saw her, he loved her with a passion which reproached his meaner self. She fed upon his sighs, without knowing that the air she breathed was full of them. In any case, he would never have dared to speak to her. It was sufficient daily bread to him to see her move. He hung upon her footsteps. He kept pace with her in her rides, running ever in the shadow because he himself had no shadow to call his own. Yet he forgot while looking at her this one great fact of his life. Even in his dreams she presently held his hand while he suffered. And he dreamed of her thus till he set his teeth in his pillow. Gradually her little mouth sucked up all the breath of his body. He wrote poems about his princess and swallowed them. Often he took no other food for days. He made philtres which would infallibly have caused her to love him, had he not ruthlessly thrown them all away as soon as made. He constructed an image of her in wax, and worshipped it five times daily. It was this which wrought his downfall. Certain of his clients (they had not paid him) denounced him as a sorcerer. Without notice he received a domiciliary visit from the authorities. Apart from other evidence which the house contained, the wax image of the princess was discovered, and he was at once charged with intending to make away with her life. Oh, the irony of fate—he who would have cheerfully laid down his own for her! Being forcibly removed from his house, the secret he had so long kept was discovered, and this shadowlessness, though accounted for in a hundred ways, all wide of the truth, was added at once to the long list of crimes in his indictment. At the preliminary examination, he would confess nothing. He was accordingly imprisoned pending the preparation of tortures to shake his resolution. With the aid of these refinements he might be made to confess anything, even that he had attempted the life of his best beloved. The scaffold

loomed before him. And oh, that her name should be bandied about in such context.

Meanwhile Porphyro sat, body and soul in darkness. He saw none but the jailer, who brought him food once daily, with a finger ever on his lips. Rats there were, and such small deer, but with these he could hold no converse, although in his youth he had met with men who professed to teach their languages. Porphyro was fain to chatter constantly to himself that he might have no time to think. He played his school games over again, rehearsed his school tasks to imaginary masters, held imaginary conversations with clients and with his parents long dead, and with his princess who was more than parent, and more than dead to him. He wooed her in a thousand ways; now as an emperor, raising her to his level; now as the meanest of her grooms, to whom she sweetly condescended; now he was a soldier, better used to red lips of wounds than red lips which wound; now he was a scholar, who forgot all wisdom save hers; now he was a miser, who came like Jupiter in a shower of gold. Thus riotous reigned carnival before his coming Lent.

And now comes the strangest part of all this strange eventful history. He fancied once or twice that he was replied to as he spoke. Again and again he groped all over the blind prison, and felt no one. Yet there was of a surety a tongue which answered him. And the weirdness of it was that, turn though he might, it always spoke from behind him. Again he searched the litter of the dungeon, and again without result. The voice was at first unintelligible, like the murmur of the sea, yet with a cadence which soon struck his ear as strangely familiar. He had heard it only once before, but it had been in that cock-pit underground where he had fought a main which had coloured his whole life. He was bound up with the memory of it like a poor prisoner whom men fetter to a corpse. It was the still small voice which dominates the brawl of hell.

His hair could grow no whiter, else it had done so. He listened with all his ears and began to catch syllables and afterwards words, till at last he made out that the Tempter was proposing terms of peace with him.

Right well knew Porphyro (none better) the price that must be paid for such a truce. His soul must feed the quick of hell. It seemed hard to yield up at last that immortal henchman which he had once so gloriously saved from these same talons. Yet what chance had he? On the one hand, if he maintained his feud with the Evil One, the halter was weaving which must strangle love and life. On the other part, if he surrendered his soul to the Exile, he could at any rate make what terms he pleased. And there were terms he pictured himself exacting which made ultimate payment of the highest price seem easy to the blood which had once stood face to face with Satan, and given him better than he gave. Porphyro still continued to argue *pro* and *con*, though his decision was a foregone conclusion. At last he formulated his demands to the spirit. He must marry the Princess. He must be her husband, were it but for a single night.

The walls of the dungeon suddenly became bright with a kind of phosphorescent glow. Porphyro (still alone, or, at any rate, he seemed so) saw a table standing in front of him, bearing a bond already drawn and the materials for signing it. The terms set forth were those he had himself proposed. He signed, sealed, and delivered it, and was plunged into darkness again as his finger left the parchment. A sense of infernal laughter pervaded the air, though nothing was to be heard. Porphyro fell full length to the ground in a fainting fit.

When he recovered his jailer was standing over him, come (as he thought) to bring him food, but he was soon disabused of any such notion by the man himself. He, who had refused on all prior occasions to hold converse with his prisoner, now spoke voluntarily to

tell him the sands of his captivity had run out. At first the dazed cage bird (who had forgotten for the moment his compact) believed that he was on the point of expiating his crimes, real and imaginary, upon the scaffold. But the jailer, not without difficulty, made it clear to him that all captives received pardon on the joyous occasion of the marriage of their Princess, which was fixed for that day. Then Porphyro remembered all, and swooned again.

When he revived, our hero was sitting in the open air upon the steps which led from the jail. He caught the smell of oxen roasting whole in the market-place. The sky was red with the fires. The streets as far as he could see them, were paved with flowers and decorated with triumphal arches. The citizens were bustling about in holiday attire. Music seemed to be playing everywhere. Occasionally some exuberant person fired off a gun. Porphyro rubbed his eyes and wondered whether this could really be his wedding day. He had faith in the boundless powers of the banner under which he had enrolled himself. And yet was it possible? But his faith was amply justified. An equerry suddenly rode up, parting the spectators to right and left, leading a spare horse magnificently caparisoned, and followed in the distance by a brilliant retinue. He doffed his cap to Porphyro and sprang to the ground, and with a profound obeisance, said in tones of deep respect:

'I trust your Highness has recovered from your indisposition. I have brought the horse as your Highness commanded.'

Porphyro dimly understood that some potent influence was at work on his behalf. With the assistance of his squire he took to the saddle. The latter then, with another bow, remounted his own horse, scattered a handful of gold to each side to break up the crowd, and with the rest of the train (which had caught up to them) they galloped to the Cathedral. Porphyro noted with stupid surprise that all the fountains spouted wine, whereto certain of the citizens, judging by the hiccups which mingled with their cheers, had already applied themselves, not wisely but too well. But our hero was in a state of so great fog himself as to feel his heart warm more towards these than to the soberer ones, whose salutations he clumsily returned. By the time the Cathedral was reached, he was rolling in his saddle. He could not have dismounted without help. The incense made him dizzy. He could not get the ringing of the bells out of his ears. The candles danced before his eyes. Of all the service he heard one word, and that was uttered by one who stood beside him, and whom alone he saw (and that through a mist) of all that gay assembly. It was the Princess. He pressed her hand as if he would never part with it.

The service over, he had no idea how, or in what order they reached the castle, and the banquet which followed was more or less of a blank to him. The wines, of which he partook liberally, could make him no more drunk, nor all the compliments of all the fulsome speeches (had he heard them) raise by one degree his pride. He soared empyrean high in the thought that he had won the right to crush into one cup, one moment, all the eternal delirium of all the heavens.

That moment of fruition had come at last. Porphyro stood in that holy of holies, his princess's chamber. A guard of soldiers was ranged along the four walls of this dainty nest. Each leaned with one arm upon a pike, while with the other hand he held aloft a blazing torch. Great personages were also present, both courtiers and noble dames, and at last the bride herself was brought in by her women. While complimentary discourse passed from mouth to mouth, Porphyro longed with his whole bartered soul to be alone with her. He was burning with internal fire which he could hold in little longer. At last he approached one that appeared to act as master of the ceremonies.

‘When is this rigmarole going to end?’ he muttered between his teeth.

‘Whenever your Highness pleases to draw your sword and lay it in the middle of the bed, the Princess will take up her place upon one side of it, while you occupy the other,’ was the reply.

Porphyro started. He surely recognized that voice. The official kept his face averted, but it was undoubtedly the demon.

‘What mean you be this gabble of naked swords between me and her?’ thundered Porphyro, unheeding who might hear. ‘Damned posture master, is she not my wife?’

‘Your wife yes, but only be letters of procuracy,’ and there was a note of triumph in that voice.

‘God of the Judgement! What is that you say?’

‘I say you must be dreaming not to remember that you are only temporarily united to the Princess in your character of proxy for his Imperial Majesty, the Holy Roman Emperor.’

‘Alas the while! Then I am dreaming, indeed!’

‘These soldiers,’ continued the demon, ‘will remain here all night. These ladies and gentlemen will also attend here till morning, to entertain you and your bride of an hour through your somewhat tedious spell of lying fully dressed together.’

‘Death and the Pit! Is this true?’

‘True as death, assured as the pit. Tomorrow you will sheathe your sword, and depart from her for ever.’

Porphyro pressed his hands to his temples. He thought his brain would burst. He saw it all now. He was the dupe of the fiend who had once been his dupe. His place in this pageant had been contrived with infernal subtlety, only to wring the uttermost pang from his heart strings. He who sups with the devil (they say) must needs have a very long spoon. No help was possible. The Evil One was reaping his revenge. And now he was assured his victim had at last grasped the situation, he threw off the mask, and showed himself in his true colours. He raised his eyes for the first time from the ground, those brimming lakes of bottomless hate which Porphyro had fronted once before in the underground hall. It was his turn now to quail.

‘Ha! ha!’ laughed the fallen angel. ‘By mine ancient seat in Heaven (and that is an oath I never lightly take as you may guess), confess, have I not bested you, friend Porphyro? He laughs best who laughs the last; is it not so?’

‘But what about that bond registered between us in Hell’s chancery?’ cried Porphyro, in a voice which would have melted triple brass.

‘Your bond,’ shrieked Beelzebub. ‘Do you remind me of your bond; you who once outfaced me that a bond should be read by the letter, and not by the spirit? I have come round to your views, and I now fling word back in your teeth. You have had your bond to the letter, and now go and kill yourself, for there is nothing more for you to do.’

Porphyro bent like a broken reed. He had found his over-mastering fate. His hopes were ash. He breathed in gasps. He staggered to the window, and threw open the casement. A great pitiful star looked in, but to his eyes it appeared red and bloodshot. He turned round again to the room. He wished to see once more before he died that mistress of his soul for whose sake he had flung it away. But the figure of his master had swelled, and was swelling so rapidly in size that it seemed to fill every available corner of the room. Porphyro raised his hands to heaven, and called upon his lady’s name. Three times he called it, and then sprang out of the window. The Princess who had grasped nothing of what had passed, ran to the

shutter, and looked out just in time to hear the splash of his body as it fell into the moat. It was the first sign of interest in him which she had shown.